

Report by the February 2025 Community Conversation Ad Hoc Subcommittee

Ad hoc subcommittee members:

Samia Bano, Rebecca Rona, London McBride

Event Date: Feb 25, 2025

Time: 6pm to 9pm

Location: TBD

Preferred locations: B rooms in the Senior Center. Or the Rotunda Room or Auditorium in the Veterans Memorial Building.

Event Title:

Option 1:

Courageous Conversation: Sharing Our Tensions and Truths About The Middle East

Option 2:

Spark Healing Through Conversation: How the Middle East Crisis Affects Me

Purpose & vision:

For several months a group of community members has been lobbying the City Council to agendize and issue a resolution expressing support for a mutual and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Other community members have voiced strong dissent for this idea.

Community members with opinions across the spectrum on this issue have voiced feeling unheard, dismissed, dehumanized, like no one understands or cares for their pain and suffering, and many other difficult emotions.

Furthermore, the situation has been escalating with the community members feeling increasingly divided, frustrated and angry.

At the January 13th, 2025, City Council meeting, the City Council voted in favor of EHRAC convening a community conversation **where our community members can have a safe space to feel truly heard and take the first steps towards healing the divisions in our city.**

Members of the public have expressed differing opinions on what they would like to converse about at this community conversation. Given the very limited time that we have, we cannot realistically accommodate and address all the expressed needs by the community members. In addition, we must adhere to the direction provided to us by the City Council as to what the focus of this community conversation should be.

The Community Conversation WILL focus on:

- Addressing the frustration of feeling invisible/unheard, shock and pain of division, not being able to engage in a true dialogue at public City meetings, etc.
- Check-in for community members who feel strongly about this issue such that they can express what is really important to them about it and why, and what they really want others to know...
- Confronting and reducing/being aware of biases
- How to create safety and healing for everyone in the community
- How to create better personal relationships in the community and feel more compassion for each other
- Offer suggestions for next steps and resources

This Community Conversation IS NOT going to be/do.

- It will NOT be a debate about whether the city should or should not issue a ceasefire resolution
- It will NOT be a discussion on what the specific content of any proposed ceasefire resolution should or shouldn't be
- It will NOT be a direct discussion or debate about the details of the war, the history of the region, or trying to rehash what happened
- It will NOT be about trying to convince others, change people's minds, push an agenda
- It will NOT be about trying to reach an agreement
- It will NOT be group therapy

Event details:

Our ad hoc subcommittee is **recommending two professional, very skilled and experienced facilitators**, to facilitate this community conversation. One facilitator belongs to the Israeli-American community, and the other to the Palestinian-American community.

Please see their bios below.

Facilitator 1:

Zahra Sakkejha was born and raised in Toronto to Palestinian parents. Her father, born a refugee during the Nakba of 1948, and her mother, having grown up under occupation in East Jerusalem, raised her not to take for granted the privilege of living in a free society.

Growing up in Toronto, Zahra made many Jewish friends but noticed that conversations about Israel and Palestine were largely avoided. It wasn't until she moved to Los Angeles that she began to more deeply engage in political discourse with both Arabs and Jews.

In 2023, Zahra joined the **board of Tomorrow's Women**, a member organization of the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) that trains young Palestinian and Israeli women to be compassionate leaders. She led the organization's Strategic Planning effort in 2024 to provide culturally sensitive and sustainable direction during an unprecedented war.

When the most recent war broke out on and after October 7th, Zahra began community organizing with the newly established **LA Supporters of Standing Together**, a group of Los Angeles-based Palestinians, Israelis, and allies organizing against the occupation and for peace, equality, and social justice. In 2024, she started **Dialogue in the Diaspora**, a local dialogue circle bringing Palestinians and Jews together for facilitated conversations about Israel-Palestine. Zahra is also an incoming fellow to the NewGround Professional Change-Maker Program.

Zahra is proud of her Palestinian heritage, grateful for her Canadian privilege, and energized by her eternal optimism to promote authentic connection between Palestinians and Israelis to facilitate transformative understanding and practical partnership for the ultimate goal of achieving peace, justice, and equality in their homeland.

Facilitator 2:

Ben Ginsburg, Communications Director at **NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change**.

Ben Ginsburg is a Los Angeles native with a penchant for starting difficult conversations. While studying Communications and Economics at UC Davis, he was a student writer for the Cal Aggie Alumni Association and a program development intern at Hillel of Davis and Sacramento. After spending a year in the international school at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he discovered a passion for diving into the tangled complexities and intersections of politics, religion, culture, economics, etc. He then remembered that most people are uncomfortable talking about those things.

Ben is passionate about innovative storytelling as a vehicle for opening up these conversations in surprising ways. Besides his conventional writing, he has helped design game experiences to train teamwork and ideological discourse.

Convening a Support Team for the Facilitators

Since we expect that 100+ people may show up to participate in this community conversation.

In order to ensure that we are able to have the most civil discourse possible within a safe space for all our community members, we are **recruiting people to serve as a support team** for the two facilitators who will be leading the community conversation.

We are recruiting support team members who, as a group, will reflect the diversity of our community members and the stakeholder groups related to this issue, including people who don't have any personal affiliation with the Middle East/Israel/Palestine, but are interested in the situation from a humanitarian perspective.

NOTE: 7 members of EHRAC have already volunteered to serve in this role as needed.

Over the course of the community conversation, participants will be asked to convene in small groups of (ideally) 4-6, to allow every participant the opportunity to share their perspective, and also engage in deep listening.

The facilitators will provide specific directions that will need to be followed by all participants in these small groups.

One person from the **Facilitators' Support Team** will be present in each small group to help ensure that the directions given by the facilitators are followed.

Directions given by the facilitators will include things like:

- Speaking on specific prompts
- Adhering to specified time limits
- Adhering to agreed upon civil discourse guidelines, such as speaking from the “I”
- Utilizing particular tools or processes to aid with deep listening, etc.

In this context the Facilitators' Support Team will act as their group's timekeeper and provide gentle reminders to participants to follow the facilitators directions if/when any participant diverges from doing so.

If any participant refuses to follow the facilitator's directions or other challenges emerge within the small group, the Facilitators' Support Team member will be able to call one of the facilitators to step in and manage the situation.

The Facilitators' Support Team members will be **required to come 1 hour prior to the event starting**, (i.e. at 5pm on Tue, 2/25/25), and will **receive a brief training** at that time regarding the role they will be playing during the community conversation.

Proposed agenda & timeline:

-- Welcome/Introductions/Pledge of Allegiance/Roll Call of EHRAC members, etc. (5-10 mins-- Framing by Facilitators (5-10 mins)

Clarify the goals of the community conversation and set realistic expectations around what is and isn't possible in the time we have that evening (described in the event purpose and vision above).

Plus, strong framing of the rules and guidelines to be followed by all participants to allow for a courageous conversation/civil discourse to take place.

-- Sharing of courageous conversation tools (10 mins)

Facilitators describe 2-3 tools for courageous conversations, one for speaking, one for listening.

-- Silent reflection/journaling (5 mins)

Participants reflect/journal on the following prompts: what are the 2-3 most important things to you?

What do you really want people to know?

-- Modeling a conversation (20-45 mins)

The facilitators will engage in a courageous conversation themselves to **present a model** for how the participants can and will be encouraged to engage with each other.

Note: we are also considering the possibility of choosing 2 community members ahead of time and asking them to volunteer to engage in this model conversation.

-- BREAK: 10 minutes

-- Breakout groups led by Facilitators' Support Team (30-60 mins)

The participants are given the opportunity to engage in a facilitated courageous conversation with each other.

Possible prompts.

-- Why I've showed up today/what's at stake for me?

-- How do I think I'm being misunderstood? What do I want others to understand about me or my position?

-- What do I believe the city is doing right when it comes to creating more equity and better human relations?

-- What do I believe the city can do better to create more equity and better human relations?

-- Questions & facilitator wrap-up (30 minutes)

-- Takeaways & Next Steps (15 minutes)

Discussion led by the ad hoc subcommittee members

Proposed Event budget: Up to \$3000

\$1100 for Facilitator 1 (Zahra Sakkejha)

\$1100 for Facilitator 2 (Ben Ginsburg)

Upto \$800 in honorariums for people serving as members for the "Facilitators' Support Team"

(NOTE: Each person serving this role may be given up to \$100 honorarium. However, honorariums are NOT for any member of EHRAC who serves in this role)

Upto \$100 for light refreshments

We welcome community feedback on the various aspects of this report.