

ZAINAB SALBI

ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT & ARAB TV

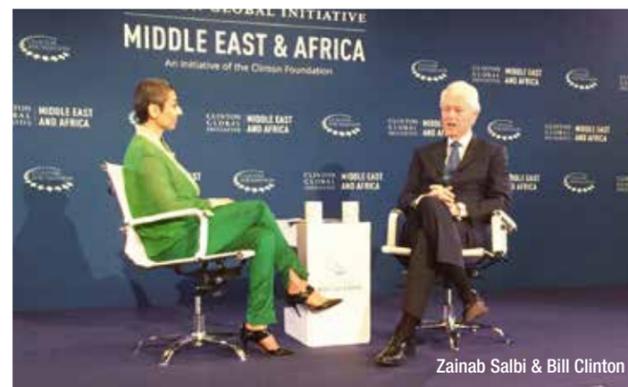
Zeinab Salbi is an inspiration to Arab women around the world. She is an Iraqi/American social entrepreneur, women's rights activist, author, and media commentator, who, at the tender age of 23, founded Women for Women International, a Washington-based development organization to help women survivors of war. She is currently the presenter of a new talk show *Nida'a* (The Calling), on The Learning Channel, TLC, on OSN. Most importantly, she is a woman of action who believes in the power of change and that tough situations only make you stronger. eniGma's Yosra Shohayeb got the chance to interview Salbi to find out about her history of activism and her plans for the future.

You founded Women for Women International at a very young age, why?

When I learned about the rape of women and the concentration camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I felt a responsibility to take an action. I did not know anything about Bosnia or its people; I just felt that as an Iraqi woman who knew what it means to live in war, it was my human responsibility to help others in conflict when I could. I was living in the US at the time and I had the opportunity to do something, so I did. That's when I founded Women for Women International. I was only 23-years-old with no experience, but I had the passion and commitment, and that was more than enough to get me going.

Do you feel you achieved your goal through it?

Yes, and much more. After 18 years of running Women for Women International, we reached out to more than 400,000 women in eight conflict areas. We distributed more than \$100 million in aid and loans through a comprehensive one-year program that provides financial aid to women in war on a monthly basis, as well as educational programs that teach



them their rights and vocational skills to help them get a job. After a year of training in our Safe Center for Women, we help our participants with job placement and income generating opportunities.

How did Women for Women International transform you?

The women I thought I was helping ended up helping me. They taught me so much about life through their humility and resilience. I developed a much deeper appreciation for the way women resist and keep life going in the midst of war. I learned to respect the knowledge and wisdom of those I thought were illiterate. I learned to appreciate the importance of beauty as a form of resistance and I learned that access to education is as important to access to resources; together they can lead to lasting change in a woman's life. The women I served ended up being my best teachers in life. They helped me reach my own healing and arrive to my peace, and the whole experience led me to a great sense of gratitude.

Can you share with us a story of how Women for Women International impacted women's lives?

Oh, but there are so many

stories. I wrote two books documenting these women's stories, "If You Knew Me You Would Care" and "The Other Side of War". It is hard to choose one story over another but if I have to, I would choose Zargouna, an Afghan woman around my age. Zargouna was married at the age of 6, pregnant at the age of 15, and widowed at the age of 16. She suffered public whipping from the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist political movement in Afghanistan, when they caught her walking to work with an open sandal. When Zargouna came to Women for Women International she had nothing. After a year of enrolling in the program, she took a loan to start a knitting business. Four years later, she was employing 150 women and had \$30,000 in her bank account in savings from her profit. When her daughter went to high school, Zargouna enrolled

By featuring different guests who are speaking honestly and truthfully about their stories, my hope is that *Nida'a* Show becomes a mirror reflecting the best of Arabs to the Arab world. Throughout my travels to conduct different interviews, I met the most amazing people who are loving, inspiring, courageous, and creative. When we put the guests together in each show, I feel the show is narrating a love story in the region, from the excitement to the struggle but all



Well, Oprah is my mentor and friend and I have the deepest of respect and gratitude for all the love and support she has shown me throughout the years. Her teachings are for every individual to stay true to their voice and not to imitate anybody else. It is with that spirit that I am embarking on *Nida'a* Show. My goal is to stay true to myself and my voice and my dedication to featuring and highlighting women's voices. What I may be called as a result of that does not

matter. What matters is staying in truth.

What are your utmost hopes?

That women and men receive *Nida'a* with an open heart and continue to share their stories with me and my team in that same spirit.

What are you most passionate about?

I am always passionate about women's rights and the voices of the marginalized. This

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in school to learn how to read and write for the first time in her life. She makes me grateful that I had the privilege of meeting such a woman and being in service to her even if in the smallest of ways.

Tell us about your new show Nida'a. What's the idea behind it?

I left Women for Women International to start *Nida'a* Show. *Nida'a* is a one-hour high quality entertainment and current affairs Arabic talk show that discusses social and cultural issues impacting the daily life of women in the Arab world. The show is focused on acknowledging Arab women and the most beautiful of Arab men. It features the possibilities of change from within Arab culture and traditions and promotes building small bridges amongst Arabs women.

within the frame of love. I think we need this positive image and discussion in the region, particularly these days. Hope and love are the ultimate message of *Nida'a*.

What is the message you aim to send through it?

How do you feel about being called the Middle East Oprah?

Well my motto in life is to speak my truth, live the truth, and be the truth. That is the only advice I have for anybody and everybody. ■



has been my commitment in life since I was 15 years old and I don't plan on changing it anytime soon.

How do you feel about women's rights in the Middle East at the current moment?

It's complicated these days. All I can tell you is that I have hope as I meet amazing young women who are doing amazing things throughout the Arab world. They give me hope and I believe that we can reach a point one day where each individual can fulfill his/her full potential, whoever they are wherever they may be.

If you would give one single advice to women in the Middle East what would it be?

Well my motto in life is to speak my truth, live the truth, and be the truth. That is the only advice I have for anybody and everybody. ■