

In the last 18 months, my service with Global Ministries as a GMI (Global Mission Intern) has taken me to three different countries in the Middle East. It has been an exciting time, to be sure: each of these places brings its own distinct context. While the Levant (the historical term for the area composed of present-day Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan) is often considered a region consisting of common food, language & heritage, I have been delighted to discover many nuances as I explore my new assignment in Beirut. This latest revelation comes after a long line of experience leading to a single realization: in the Middle East, things are rarely as they seem.

The Lebanese are masterful at many things, but they especially know how to enjoy life when all signs would encourage them to stress. Two decades after a 15-year-long, tragic civil war, the country, and Beirut in particular, remain squarely in the process of reconstruction. It seems like every city block features the Beirut cliché: flashy skyscrapers flanking a regal 5-storey, Ottoman-styled, but bullet-ridden building. Recovery takes years whereas destruction takes days.

This observation can be applied to the region as a whole. I'm sure that watching the descent into chaos seems as uncontrollable regardless of where you are living in the world. At a recent conference for the Middle East Council of Churches, partners from around the world heard from a respected Muslim sheikh, a man whose career has been committed to Muslim-Christian dialogue. He reflected that the process to shape a person who was willing to co-habit with and seek to understand the other – be they Christian, Jewish, Druze, etc. – takes years of patient study, reflection, and engagement. But to create a suicide bomber, a person whose goal in life is to reach paradise through death, only days are needed. The journey to mend the lacerations and wounds of the Middle East will need decades of work, and will require a partnership between East and West, as well as endless patience and humility.

I have found patience and humility to be two of the most essential tools in my time abroad. I am especially challenged to dig for them when I teach lessons in Sabra, one of the areas of Beirut that has housed Palestinian refugees since 1948. The lessons are part of my assignment in Lebanon as the center where I teach is one of four community centers run by the JCC (Joint Christian Committee for Social Services in Lebanon) around the country. Spending time at the center has been a way for me to understand the plight of Palestinians in Lebanon so that I can more thoroughly convey the work of JCC during my work in the office. But while I ostensibly offer English and Sports activities, I have realized that my own goals are less concrete.

All of the children with whom I work are school-aged. But for various reasons, they have dropped out of school. Perhaps because of the lack of discipline in their academic life, the students struggle with weak attention spans. However, their respect for authority –especially a young foreign woman struggling to teach in Arabic – is weaker. Every class is a struggle to be understood and to make progress.

After a particularly disruptive lesson last week I felt drained and frustrated. I had hoped that our classes would become more peaceful as time went on, that the novelty of having a foreigner trying to communicate in Arabic would wear off. But it seemed that time had increased their willingness to misbehave and disrespect. As the students moved in and out of the room with no regard to my attempts at discipline, I became annoyed, closed my lesson plan, and declared class over. I wondered aloud on the point of me being there if they did not care to learn.

After struggling through the lesson, I had a clarifying reflection. Perhaps my goals of were missing the point; maybe my aims should be more basic. After this frustrating class, I came to the conclusion that perhaps I should spend less time insisting on precise English pronunciation and instead strive to build a relationship of respect with the students. In the remaining months, I will remind myself often to center my approach on humility and patience, knowing that perhaps I am not teacher, but learner.