

## Globalizing the Canadian way

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**CAROL GOAR**

One of the most liberating discoveries immigrants make when they come to Canada is that old enmities don't matter here.

They can talk to people they shunned in their homeland. They can work and socialize with people their forebears spurned. They can reach across ethnic, racial and religious divides that once seemed unbridgeable.

Vahan Kololian, one of Toronto's most successful financiers, has lived that story. He has seen it happen on university campuses, in corporate boardrooms and in community groups. He has come to think of it as the Canadian way.

For years, the founder and managing partner of Terra Nova Partners, a private equity firm, wanted to find a way to replicate the formula internationally. If an Armenian like himself could get along with Turks in Canada, maybe they could help facilitate a dialogue in their ancestral lands. If Christians and Muslims could be friends here, maybe they could pass on what they'd learned.

Kololian joined international development groups, sponsored conferences and reached out to members of other diasporas. Everyone liked the idea. Plans were hatched and papers written. But the momentum always seemed to peter out.

A permanent focal point was needed, Kololian decided. But he didn't have the expertise to set up or run a think-tank.

Last fall, he met someone who did. Alidad Mafinezam had just returned to Canada after earning a PhD in public policy at Rutgers University in New Jersey. His specialty was think-tanks. His passion was applying the Canadian approach to diversity to deeply rooted ethnocultural conflicts. Like Kololian, he was an immigrant. But his roots were in Iran and he was a Muslim, whereas Kololian was Christian.

"This is perfect," Kololian said.

The two became partners. They created the Mosaic Institute. Kololian is the chair. Mafinezam is the research director.

The institute won't have its official launch until the fall, but its website, [www.mosaicinstitute.ca](http://www.mosaicinstitute.ca), is up and running.

Kololian is not looking for money. He intends to bankroll the think-tank himself until it is firmly established, has strong links with Canada's expatriate communities and is considered a credible voice on international issues.

"You don't take people's money until you know what you're going to do with it," Kololian said.

For the moment, the institute is housed in Terra Nova's corporate headquarters on the top floor of an upscale office tower at Yonge and Bloor. That is where Kololian and Mafinezam spent an hour recently discussing their vision and plans.

"This is an emerging field of academic research," Mafinezam said. "The scholarship has exploded in the past year or two.

"We want to put it into practice. And we think Canada is uniquely positioned to do that. While other countries are built on immigration, Canada doesn't require newcomers to shed their first identity. That gives them a sense of cultural freedom. It allows them to develop a positive notion of diversity.

"I see this place as a model to the world."

Kololian picked up the thread. "We have more than 100 ethnic communities in Toronto. Our aim is to bring together Canadians from lands in conflict – be it civil or cross-border – with us as facilitators. We get their input, we publish it and we hope our work finds its way into official and non-official channels. If we earn enough respect, it may filter into Canadian foreign policy.

"We're not out to build a large institution. We'll use existing networks to the largest possible extent. We'll use other think-tanks as partners. Our aim is to bring people together."

In time, Kololian hopes, Canadians from different sides of international conflicts will approach the Mosaic Institute, seeking a place to share their knowledge. "That will happen when they know we have no agenda, other than to gather and disseminate insight."

Individuals and groups with axes to grind will not be welcome. Both Kololian and Mafinezam know expatriates bent on fighting old battles and consider them an impediment to progress.

Nor are they interested in brilliant academic research with no practical application. They want to solve problems, not study them.

Both partners reject the notion that Canada is too small to make a difference in the world. "We don't recognize our capacity," Kololian said. "We underdeliver."

"Not having too much power actually helps you," Mafinezam added.

They're not promising headlines or dramatic breakthroughs. They just want to show that the Canadian way – making room for differences – can turn deadlock into dialogue.

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**Carol Goar's** column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.