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Victor Azar has thrived amid turmoil in Mideast, Bert Caldwell says.

## Capitalist has ventured for peace

[Bert Caldwell](#)  
The Spokesman-Review  
March 17, 2005

Renewed peace in the Middle East will be a grand thing, says Victor Azar. But he'll be staying home in Spokane to nurture what he hopes will be a grander reconciliation among all people.

Victor and sister Viola own Azar's Food Services, the latest in a succession of ventures that has taken him from a family convenience store in Nevada to corporate banking in San Francisco to tourism promotion in Jordan and Israel.



Azar ()

The Azar family has survived its share of conflict. Name a Middle East flashpoint, and the Azars have lived there.

Born 50 years ago in Jordan, Azar has lived in Baghdad and Basra in Iraq; Beirut, Lebanon; and Ramallah, hotbed of the Palestinian Intifada, on the West Bank.

He recalls the Six-Day War of 1967 and the 1970 Black September civil war in Jordan. "You'd hear the first missiles come in the middle of the night," he says.



In Baghdad, the family witnessed two revolutions, including the July 1968 Baathist uprising



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that brought Saddam Hussein to power. His family lived behind the Palace of Hospitality, where they

could see lavish parties. They saw, too, the brutality.

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A neighbor who was a government minister was beaten in front of his own family and dragged out into the street. A Jewish friend was hanged publicly. Many bodies were left dangling for days. Because his father was a Christian minister and so considered an ambassador, an armored vehicle was kept parked in front of their home during the worst of the violence — until the authorities showed up on the Azar doorstep.

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As his father's Seventh Day Adventist congregation prospered, there were suspicions they harbored Jewish spies. His father was arrested by the security forces, but released. The family fled, only to be engulfed in the Black September conflict.

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Finally, in 1973, they arrived in Spokane, and a long association between the name Azar and the food business began. The family bought a convenience store at Nevada and Empire.

Victor Azar attended Eastern Washington University, earning undergraduate degrees in business and political science while helping with the family business. He added a master's in management science from Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, then went to work for PNC Financial Corp. developing electronic banking systems. In July 1988, he co-authored an article for the "Journal of Cash Management."

Wells Fargo hired him away that same year. He was vice president and senior product manager in Wells' wholesale banking division for three years.

But all was not well at home and, at the urging of his wife, they returned to Jordan. Azar shifted from banking automation in San Francisco to hospitality management in Amman. Using a hotel owned by his wife's family as a base, he morphed into promoter extraordinaire.

He opened the "Graffiti Rock N' Roll Club" featuring a rock band composed of former Iraqi soldiers and a Palestinian heavy-metal group. He organized Jordan's first rock concert as a benefit for a foundation created by Jordan's Queen Noor.

He helped the family get a prized contract to build a five-star hotel at Petra, the ancient "City of Stone" familiar to many from "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade." Rooms at the Petra Plaza, now a Marriott, were 95 percent booked for the first year before its opening in mid-1995.

That was due in large part to his groundbreaking work forging an alliance with a prominent Israeli tour operator. His November 1994 news conference with Udi Goldschmidt was covered by the Jerusalem Post. With the signing of an Israeli-Jordanian treaty, he said then, "The whole area will experience a boom."

Azar says he was moved by the relationships he established with Israelis, whom he had been taught to distrust. He personally guided officials from Hadassah, the Jewish women's organization, through Jordan, and did speaking tours with Israeli tourism officials.

The November 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a radical law student and subsequent terrorist attacks put an end to the high times. His relationship with his wife irreparably broken, Azar returned to Spokane in 1997.

Although he has settled back into the food business where he started 30 years ago, Azar stays enthusiastic not only about that work, but also about his ongoing efforts to promote world peace. He is in the process of launching a Web site, victorazar.com, that will be an umbrella for his business interests, as well as his causes.

"My heart is actually in talking about and making a difference in people's lives."

He signs off as "Peacemaker."

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