

*The PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy
of
The Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution of
Pepperdine University School of Law
and
The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*

**MIDDLE EAST MISSION #3
TRIP REPORT
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Introduction

Brian Cox, Tim Pownall and Michael Zacharia conducted a mission to the Middle East September 24 – October 22, 2009 to further the development of the Middle East Faith-Based Reconciliation Project.

The PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy of the International Center For Religion and Diplomacy of Washington DC and the Straus Institute of Pepperdine University Law School of Malibu, California has undertaken a track two faith-based diplomatic initiative to harness the transcendent power of religion to contribute to the peace process in the Middle East specifically as it relates to Israel/Palestine. In essence, we are bringing an innovative model of faith-based reconciliation as a religious framework for peacemaking that has borne tangible fruit in other intractable identity-based conflicts such as in Kashmir.

Trip Objectives and Results

Objective #1: To conduct a faith-based reconciliation seminar for Palestinian Christians and Muslims from Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala in cooperation with Musalaha and Holy Land Trust.

In 2005 ICRD entered into a partner relationship with Musalaha, a Jerusalem-based NGO with an established track record of working for reconciliation in Israel/Palestine. The focus of the project was to combine the methodologies developed by Salim Munayer (Desert Encounter) and Brian Cox (Faith-Based Reconciliation) to create a three stage process as a religious framework for peacemaking and conflict resolution that focused on changing hearts as a prelude to joint problem solving. The first stage of the project would focus on Palestinian Christians and Muslims. The second stage would include Israelis. The purpose of the project is to create genuine grass roots people movements in both Israel and Palestine as a means of socializing the Abrahamic values of Faith-Based Reconciliation in both societies as a new but ancient paradigm for the Middle East. The Holy Land Trust of Bethlehem under the leadership of Sami Awad has also become an active partner in this initiative.

The venue for the seminar was the Hotel Porto Bello in Antalya, Turkey. The seminar began on September 26 and concluded on September 29. There were 24 participants (12 Christians/ 12 Muslims). Sami Awad and Ayman Abuaita provided leadership of the Palestinian delegation and Awni Jubran coordinated the complex logistics. Participants from the previous group served as group leaders and facilitators. Sami Awad led the plenary discussions after each presentation and exercise. Raneen Al-Arja provided excellent translation in Arabic/English.

There were nine presentations:

- Introduction: The Journey of Reconciliation
- Reconciliation As A Moral Vision
- Building Bridges: The Principle of Pluralism
- Demolishing Walls of Hostility: The Principle of Inclusion
- Seeking the Common Good: The Principle of Social Justice
- Healing Relationships Between Individuals and Communities: The Principle of Forgiveness
- Facing the Truth About History: The Principle of Healing Collective Wounds
- Submission to God: The Principle of Sovereignty
- Conflict Resolution: The Principle of Peacemaking

The presentations were given by Brian Cox, Tim Pownall and Michael Zacharia in English with translation into Arabic. There were eleven exercises/activities:

- Life Journey Exercise
- Core Values Exercise
- Collective Identity Exercise
- Dialogue Exercise
- Hostility Analysis Exercise
- Privilege Analysis Exercise
- Broken Relationship Analysis Exercise
- Group Offense Exercise
- Historical Wounds Exercise
- Reconciliation Circle
- Closing Circle

Owing to the initial exhaustion of the group due to the long and complicated travel process (Bethlehem to Amman to Istanbul to Antalya) it took a day for the FBR process to gain traction. Once it did, there was passionate engagement in the small groups as they wrestled with the nature and implications of the eight Abrahamic core values for their own lives, their communities and as a fresh moral vision for Palestinian society.

Of particular challenge were the core values of forgiveness and the sovereignty of God. Both provoked very intense plenary discussion and caused the participants to wrestle in

their own hearts with the depth of their own faith and their willingness to balance forgiveness with the pursuit of justice.

During the Service of Reconciliation there were many acknowledgements of offenses, apologies to the other community and expressions of forgiveness between the Christian and Muslim communities. At one point there was a very dramatic reconciliation of two women who had been childhood friends and had become estranged three years earlier. They had not even been on speaking terms. This dramatic development was initiated by one of the Muslim members of the leadership team.

The next stage with Group II is the Joint Problem Solving Exercise to be held most likely in Jericho in May 2010.

Objective #2: To promote a faith-based reconciliation process between Syrian and U.S. religious leaders as a track two initiative to enhance the Middle East peace process.

One of the important tracks of the Middle East peace process is the Syrian/Israeli Track. In 2008 there were indirect talks between Syria and Israel mediated by the Turks. Those talks became stalled as a consequence of the Gaza War in 2008.

The Obama Administration has indicated its desire to take a different approach to the peace process that creates a better balance between our traditional friendship with Israel and the sensitivities of Arab nations. This creates a window of opportunity to develop a religious framework for peace involving senior level Syrian Muslim leaders and American Christian and Jewish leaders as a vehicle for softening hearts in the region. We traveled to Aleppo to meet with the Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheik Hassoun. After being formally received by him, we were escorted to the mosque for Jumma Prayer where over 2,000 worshippers were present. Toward the end of the prayer service the Grand Mufti asked Brian Cox to give a speech which consisted of three points:

1. Tim Pownall, Michael Zacharia and I were there not only as diplomats and professors but as people of faith who shared a common value with them of submission to God.
2. Faith-based diplomacy, which seeks to integrate religion and politics in the cause of peacemaking and reconciliation, includes a carefully constructed innovative process called “faith-based reconciliation” that invites God into the process with the specific intention of softening hearts.
3. There presently exists a window of opportunity in the Middle East peace process with the Obama Administration’s desire to take a different approach to the peace process which requires a transformed environment of softened hearts in the region to overcome a long standing climate of intense hostility in the region.

During our meeting with the Grand Mufti, we made a specific proposal to him which called for a series of faith-based reconciliation meetings between senior level Syrian Muslim leaders and American Christian and Jewish leaders. He promised his active support and proposed a specific idea for bringing the proposal to the attention of President Assad. We also sent this same proposal in a more informal way through a separate channel.

Objective #3: To promote a faith-based reconciliation process as a vehicle for a “neighborhood approach” to the Middle East peace process.

In Amman, Jordan we explored two options, the Moderation Assembly and the Jordan Coexistence Foundation as potential indigenous partners to collaborate on a three part process involving senior level Muslim religious leaders from Arab nations with Christian and Jewish religious leaders from the United States. One option focused specifically on participants from Middle East nations. The other option included participants from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. One option included Israelis in the beginning of the process. The other option included Israelis at a later stage. One option began with a single large group of 60 – 80 participants. The other option began with a small core group of 18 participants in the first stage with expansion to a Faith-Based Reconciliation Assembly of 30 – 50 participants.

The participants would engage in a three part process which would include:

1. Creating a reconciling spirit by utilizing the faith-based reconciliation process.
2. Developing a religious framework for peace in the Middle East.
3. Addressing the core issues of Jerusalem, refugees, borders and security as a track two contribution to the peace process.

We will continue to evaluate these options and determine whether and how to proceed further.

Objective #4: To engage movements and networks of political Islam in being a constructive part of the Middle East peace process and socializing the Abrahamic values of faith-based reconciliation in the Muslim world.

During the course of this mission we met with a number of leaders from various movements of political Islam and we discovered a surprising openness on their part to consider participation in a faith-based reconciliation process with the other parts of the Abrahamic family from the West. This open door to various movements of political Islam stems from the trust that has been built from previous encounters and from the perception on their part that a window of opportunity now exists with the Obama Administration’s desire for a different approach to the peace process.

Objective #5: To engage networks of political and religious leadership in Israel that are currently influencing major constituencies with regard to the Middle East peace process.

In Israel, meetings were conducted with leaders from the Haredim, Shas Party, Likud and the settlers movement. The purpose of these meetings was to build relationship, establish trust, learn about their perspectives from their own mouths and present the concept of “faith-based reconciliation” to them. These meetings included the Mayor of Bet Shemesh, a prominent Haredi journalist, an orthodox rabbi from a settlement and a Likud member of the Knesset. In all of these meetings there was a surprising openness to the concept of faith-based reconciliation and to a faith-based approach to the peace process. There was general agreement that there is a high level of hostility in the region, particularly toward the State of Israel that must be transformed if there is to be any hope of a negotiated settlement.

Objective #6: To develop a process of faith-based reconciliation as a vehicle for softening hearts and socializing Abrahamic core values in the city of Jerusalem.

Those who have been involved in high level negotiations from Camp David to the present have told us that the two most contentious and intractable core issues of the conflict have been Jerusalem and refugees. With regard to Jerusalem, it is vital to know the personalities, major players, demographic trends, political tensions, history (oral and written), theological worldviews, and the opportunities for faith to play a role. This is particularly important with the most contested part of Jerusalem: the Old City and the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary; what is called the “Holy Basin”.

The Middle East peace process must include the residents of Jerusalem in order to develop a sense of grassroots ownership by working with indigenous civic groups to establish Abrahamic reconciliation as one of the “facts on the ground” in Jerusalem. In the course of this mission our meetings gave us clear direction in terms of specific personalities to approach on future missions.

Objective #7: To follow up with the Parents Circle/Families Forum following the May 2009 faith-based reconciliation process in Talitha Cumi.

There was a meeting with most of the Board of Directors and top leadership of the Parents Circle in Tel Aviv. There was interest on both sides in continuing to cooperate together, but no final agreement on specifics. We shall continue to explore options.

Objective #8: To follow up with Musalaha and Holy Land Trust following the September 2009 faith-based reconciliation process in Antalya, Turkey.

There was a meeting in Bethlehem with the leadership core group at which there was a high level of enthusiasm about the progress of the project. We discussed strategies for working with each of the two existing groups, starting a third group and beginning to bring Israelis into the process.

The focus of Group I will be on activism; sharing the Abrahamic values of faith-based reconciliation in the local communities. This will begin with a project at Terra Sancta School with team members leading meetings at the school with students to present and discuss the eight core values. The focus of Group II will be on reinforcing the Abrahamic core values with eight sessions over sixteen weeks for further discussion about each core value. Next May 2010 we will complete the process with the Joint Problem Solving Exercise in Jericho. Musalaha and Holy Land Trust will recruit a Group III to begin with the Desert Encounter in spring 2010. We will also identify an “Israeli partner” and decide on the right strategy for bringing the sides together that leads to healing rather than a complete meltdown.

Objective #9: To utilize the faith-based reconciliation process to soften hearts and provide a transformed atmosphere for official negotiations in the Middle East peace process.

There was a meeting with Ambassador Uri Savir, the President of the Peres Peace Center in Tel Aviv and former chief Israeli negotiator at Oslo. We explored how our two entities might cooperate together. We agreed on three things. First, we will continue to explore together the role of faith in the Middle East peace process. Second, we will explore cooperation on developing a track two initiative to develop a religious framework for peace specifically with regard to the core issue of Jerusalem. Third, there will be PACIS Project participation in their ARA Pacis Initiative specifically by attending the conference in Rome in April 2010.

Objective #10: To explore publication of the book “Faith-Based Reconciliation: A Moral Vision That Transforms People and Societies” in Arabic and Hebrew.

Bassam Ishak and Brian Cox agreed on a detailed plan for his Damascus-based publishing company to handle the translation, publication and distribution of the book in Arabic. This will also include the design of an Arabic language website. Benny Levy and Brian Cox began discussions and exploration of translation, publication and distribution of the book in Hebrew.

This book is an important tool in our work of faith-based reconciliation in the Middle East. It provides a vehicle for introducing busy leaders to the concept, core values and methodology of faith-based reconciliation. It also stimulates thinking about the role of faith in the peace process by citing actual examples based on our experience in the field.

Concluding Reflections

In January 2010 we will reach the five year mark of the Middle East Faith-Based Reconciliation Project. During those five years we have established many of the essential ingredients for a strategic long term approach to the Middle East peace process that offers a unique faith-based approach with three long term goals in mind:

1. To utilize the faith-based reconciliation process as a vehicle to soften hearts in a region where there is a tremendous reservoir of hostility, particularly towards Israel.
2. To develop a religious framework for peace by engaging the Middle East neighborhood.
3. To address the core issue of Jerusalem from a track two faith-based perspective.

Over the course of five years we have established a foundation of strong relationships, developed mutual trust with indigenous partners, gained on site understanding of an extremely complex, multidimensional conflict situation, identified strategic entry points for intervention and gained “on the ground” experience in both Israel and the surrounding Arab nations.

Specifically, what have we accomplished in five years?

1. We now have potential and established indigenous partners in Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine.
2. We have conducted five faith-based reconciliation seminars since 2006 that have resulted in softened hearts and a transformed atmosphere between identity-based communities. We have learned that this process produces results in the Middle East conflict.
3. We have begun a nascent “people movement” in Palestine based on Abrahamic core values. Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala are the locus for this people movement among the next generation of Palestinian leaders.
4. We have weathered the inherent difficulties of bringing transformational work into the complexities of the Middle East conflict. As a result our work in these places is stronger than ever.
5. We have established a bridge to networks of political Islam in the world with an eye toward engaging them to become a constructive part of the Middle East peace process.
6. We have met and established our presence with top track one negotiators from Camp David, Oslo, Wye River and the 2008 Turkish mediated talks.
7. We have brought the concept of a faith-based approach to the Middle East peace process to the table with a growing circle of Arab and Israeli political and religious leaders. Our hope is to stimulate a conversation in Arab, Israeli and U.S. foreign policy and national security circles that will enable closer cooperation between track one and track two faith-based efforts.

PACIS Project Characteristics

The Middle East Faith-Based Reconciliation Project of the PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy comprises the following key elements:

1. The uniqueness of the faith-based reconciliation process

The faith-based reconciliation process is an innovative approach to diplomacy and peacemaking that has been developed over the past twenty years by Brian Cox who brings together a unique background in politics, theological and pastoral training, conflict resolution and international experience. This approach is defined by eight core values and by a deliberative process that focuses on creating a reconciling spirit between antagonists as a prelude to constructive joint problem solving.

As a methodology it is not a form of interfaith dialogue or a traditional conflict resolution model. It is a totally unique experience that causes participants to search the depths of their own being and to experience at the deepest level the heart of “the other” in a faith-based context. It is the reality of an ancient process reemerging in the twenty first century to address the deepest and most profound differences between communities. It is Abrahamic reconciliation!

2. The transformative impact of the faith-based reconciliation process on participants

This process leads to an actual change of hearts within and among the participants. This is a well developed and battle tested “hearts and minds” approach that has borne tangible fruit in some of the world’s roughest neighborhoods, including among former militant leaders in Kashmir.

Based on our experience in Kashmir and other situations of violent conflict we found that the key to resolving intractable identity-based conflict was not gifted peacemakers or creative solutions, but changed hearts.

3. It calls God into the process

As a genuinely faith-based approach it moves beyond scholarly theological engagement or interfaith dialogue to authentic Abrahamic reconciliation that welcomes the divine presence into the process as the source of changed hearts, relationships and situations. In the past we have seen results that far exceed human skill alone. The practitioners of faith-based reconciliation exercise an intentionality of bringing God into the process through such activities as prayer and fasting. This is particularly important in gaining the confidence of the Muslim world which is suspicious of secular initiatives that feel like an

imposition of Western values on an Islamic worldview that seeks to integrate faith and politics.

Based on our experiences in Sudan, Kashmir, Pakistan, India, Syria, Palestine and the American Muslim community we have discovered that the core values of faith-based reconciliation resonate deeply with pious Muslims and, for them, captures the real heart of an Islamic worldview. Many Muslim leaders have described Faith-Based Reconciliation as the alternative to political Islam because it engenders passionate commitment among young Muslims who have experienced it.

We have also discovered that the core values of faith-based reconciliation resonate deeply with pious Jews and, for them, captures the heart of the Abrahamic blessing of “tikkun olam” which was given first to the Jewish community to share with the world.

4. Paradigm change

We plan to utilize the faith-based reconciliation process with key senior level, civil society level and grassroots level leaders as a means of socializing the Abrahamic values of faith-based reconciliation in Middle East societies as a means of bringing about genuine social and paradigm change that provides a sustainable environment for peace. Primary shaping institutions in any society are the family, the school, the faith community, the media and internet and, in Israel, the military.

Based on our experience in Kashmir we found that it was not only necessary, but possible to influence the public conversation in the direction of reconciliation even with separatists and militant leaders. Initially people in a zone of violent conflict are hostile to the idea of reconciliation. However, wise, persistent and targeted intervention at all three levels of society (senior, middle and grassroots) can profoundly influence the moral vision of a community. Within a space of eight years in Kashmir ICRD played a significant role in influencing and shaping the public conversation about reconciliation both on the Indian and Pakistani sides of the Line of Control. It can be done and it must be done in the Middle East if there is to be any future that includes a sovereign Jewish state and a sovereign Palestinian state.

5. Track II Diplomacy

We plan to work with key indigenous allies to identify and engage both track one and influential track two actors in Israel and the Arab countries in a faith-based reconciliation process designed to soften hearts of those who will participate in or influence high level negotiations. Based on our experience in Kashmir we discovered that this process was very successful with high level

Kashmiri Muslim leaders from Pakistan and Kashmiri Hindu Pandit leaders from India when we brought them together in Kathmandu, Nepal.

In the U.S. and European national security and foreign policy establishments there is great skepticism about bringing religion into a sensitive process of high level negotiations in an intentional way as a means of actually enhancing the process. More often than not religion is viewed by many national security and foreign policy professionals as part of the problem either causing or contributing to the conflict. Others may welcome, albeit reluctantly, track two faith-based initiatives as bridgebuilding efforts with religious leaders or on the grassroots level. However, for a decidedly faith-based process to play a significant role at the highest levels of negotiation is a totally new concept.

This is the very idea that makes this process unique. The softening of hearts is even necessary with leaders at the highest levels of policymaking and negotiation. The faith-based process and its impact on the human heart has the potential to move the momentum of stalemated processes to a new level. Hence, we are proposing that faith-based reconciliation as a track two initiative be an intentional part of the track one process in the Middle East as a means of creating a reconciling spirit among the policymakers, negotiators and influencers so as to enhance the possibility of a successful outcome.

In the words of one high level U.S. State Department official after hearing a report of ICRD's work in Kashmir, "Well, nothing else has worked in Kashmir. We might as well give faith a chance."

6. Softening hearts of religious extremists

We plan to engage senior and middle level religious leaders from both Israel and the Arab nations in the Middle East from groups and movements who typically resist constructive problem solving and tend to undermine the peace process. Since the faith-based reconciliation methodology focuses on "changing hearts" as a prelude to joint problem solving, it was suggested that such a process is better suited to reaching such groups.

Based on our experience in Kashmir we spent a good deal of time in the beginning of our project cultivating relationships with Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist extremists. We even cultivated relationships with former militant leaders. Initially they were hostile to the whole idea of reconciliation, but curious. In time, many former militants or those influenced by militant ideology participated in the faith-based reconciliation process and their hearts were changed and their worldview and activities began to change in the direction of reconciliation.

7. Focus on Jerusalem

We plan to focus intensively on the city of Jerusalem to create a public conversation and foster a new but ancient moral vision for the city through private meetings with leaders, faith-based reconciliation seminars, civil society meetings, op-ed pieces in local publications, and presentations in schools, community organizations, synagogues and mosques. We believe that making a deep impact in Jerusalem will have a rippling effect throughout the region. Because of its unique nature as the “holy city” Jerusalem represents a strategic entry point for third party faith-based intervention.

8. Engaging the Middle East Neighborhood

We plan to engage leaders from the surrounding Arab states as well as the United States and former colonial powers because all are stakeholders in a conflict that causes the most significant amount of alienation between the Arab and Muslim world and the United States and Europe.

Over the past thirty years there has been a dramatic rise of religious extremism and militancy in the region that is being driven by intense theological convictions which contribute to exclusivist visions of the future as well as intense hostility toward a sovereign Jewish state in the region. Lack of theological sophistication by many earnest and sincere peacemakers in the region has led to analyses and forms of intervention that have failed to grasp the growing complexity of the conflict and the nature and influence of religious extremism and militancy on any possible future negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

This approach appears to dovetail with the strategic policy of the Obama Administration and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative to create a Middle East Regional Peace Process. It recognizes that a sustainable two state solution depends upon a transformation of the heart attitudes and relationships in the entire region, not just Israel/Palestine.