

*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 #10  
TRIP REPORT  
March 6 – 14, 2012**

**Introduction**

Brian Cox and Tim Pownall conducted a mission to the Middle East March 6 – 14, 2012 under the auspices of the PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy of the International Center For Religion and Diplomacy of Washington DC and the Straus Institute For Dispute Resolution of Pepperdine University Law School of Malibu, California.

The PACIS Project, recipient of the 2011 Peacemaker Award from the National Association for Conflict Resolution, is a unique faith-based diplomatic initiative that brings a vital dimension to the peace process that promises a greater resonance with the Abrahamic faith communities of the Middle East.

**Trip Results**

**First Stop: Paris**

In Paris our sole objective was to meet with a key member of the Syrian National Council and Executive Committee for the purpose of relationship building and to explore the potential for a track two initiative focused on national healing and reconciliation in Syria. A Syrian friend and colleague joined us for this meeting. Our friend and colleague ended up in exile in Cairo and has become another key member of both the Syrian National Council and the General Secretariat. This movement represents the various strands of the Syrian opposition both within Syria and those in exile.

While in Paris we explored at length with our Syrian friend and colleague the possibility that God was calling him to play a role on the Syrian National Council as a voice and as a catalyst for national healing and reconciliation. The idea resonated deeply with his own sense of call and purpose.

## **Second Stop: Amman**

In Amman we met with the Muslim Brotherhood leadership to discuss the parameters of the next Faith-Based Reconciliation Process between American Evangelical Christian leaders and Muslim Brotherhood leaders from Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia.

The MB leadership proposed moving the base of operations from Amman to Cairo so as to fully involve the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Both the Jordanian MB leadership and the PACIS Project leadership agree that the Egyptian MB is the key to creating a genuine people movement within the worldwide network of the Muslim Brotherhood. Both partners are committed to that end goal. Hence, the next FBR Process will be scheduled in consultation with both the Jordanian and Egyptian MB when we make a joint visit with the Jordanian MB to Cairo in May. We are pointing toward a July FBR Process.

In our recruiting of American Evangelical leaders we will seek to penetrate four disciplines: politics, media, academics and religious leaders.

At our next meeting we hope to establish dates for a visit by MB leadership to Washington DC in Fall 2012. We also plan to discuss formation of a joint younger leaders (age 25 – 35) core group composed of American Evangelicals and Muslim Brotherhood.

While in Amman we also met with a leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood who was in exile to explore his perspective on the need for national healing and reconciliation. He strongly agreed with both the need and the faith-based approach to it by the PACIS Project.

## **Third Stop: Cairo**

In Cairo we met with the Anglican Archbishop to learn his perspective on the plight of Christians in Egypt. He spoke about the quiet bridgebuilding efforts among Coptic Orthodox, Latin Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians with Al Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he felt that, given the depth of problems, something more was needed. He expressed interest in the Faith-Based Reconciliation Process as a vehicle for improving the situation between Christians and Muslims in Egypt by softening hearts and engaging in constructive joint problem solving.

We met with a Damascus-based human rights lawyer and member of the Syrian National Council to explore this individual's perspective on the need for national healing and reconciliation in Syria as a key component of the Syrian National Council strategy. After two hours of discussion this person became convinced that PACIS leaders were seeing a critical dimension for Syria's future that would be needed to avoid atomization and civil war.

## **Fourth Stop: Jerusalem**

We met with the Executive Director of the Al Aqsa Mosque Waqf Administration to build relationship and explore the possibility of the PACIS Project and the Al Aqsa Mosque Waqf Administration cooperating to develop a model of Abrahamic Reconciliation in Jerusalem. Given the many previous attempts at peacemaking in the city of Jerusalem that had borne little tangible fruit for Palestinians, he expressed extreme skepticism about a new initiative. However, he was willing to continue the conversation on a future PACIS visit to Jerusalem.

We traveled to Ramallah to meet with a senior official at the Palestinian Negotiating Authority office. This conversation profoundly confirmed the thrust and direction of the PACIS Project initiative in the Middle East neighborhood. From the beginning the thrust of the PACIS Project initiative has been to prepare the leaders and people of Israel and the Arab nations to be asking the question:

*“What is God’s will for our neighborhood?”*

As a faith-based initiative the PACIS Project in cooperation with our indigenous partners can create the space for a public conversation in the societies of the Middle East on this very question.

From Ramallah we travelled to the Israeli Knesset for meetings with a prominent member of the Knesset and the Shas Party and his chief deputy, to learn more about the emerging Amshalem Movement and the possibility for developing a cooperative working relationship with them.

As an ultraorthodox rabbi and member of Israel’s Knesset from the Shas Party he has seen that forty years of preoccupation with national security issues and conflict with neighbors has led to deteriorating social conditions within Israeli society including increasing poverty, social inequity and an increasingly polarized society. He decries the lack of respect and the hostility that Israelis show toward each other; religious and secular, Ashkenazi and Sephardic, Likud and Peace Now. Quoting publicly from the Bible he reminds Israelis of their unique destiny to be a light to the nations. The rise of this sociopolitical movement is significant and is gaining traction in Israeli society. The need for a of paradigm change in Israel and the eight core values of faith-based reconciliation resonated deeply with them.

The next day we went to Mishkenot Shananin in Jerusalem to meet with the leadership of the Talking Peace Project. This group of courageous Israelis, people of faith, are quietly bringing to the table religious people who normally don’t sit together and whose voices have been unheard over the course of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Religious people are viewed by many Israelis as extremists and are normally considered part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The religious people have lost faith in politics as the way forward and ask if there isn’t a role for faith and hope in the future of the neighborhood. For the Talking Peace Project leadership the subject of paradigm change in Israel as a vehicle for empowering Israel to fulfill its unique destiny as “a light to the nations” of “tikkun olam bemalchut shaddai” resonates deeply with them.

This was our third meeting with the Talking Peace Project leadership and each time there is a stronger sense that we are being called to work together. The next steps are twofold: continued relationship and trust building and exploration of the nature and strategy of paradigm change within Israel.

## **Conclusion**

There is a “sea change” going on at the present time in the Middle East and it is not finished. The outcome of the Syrian revolution and a possible “Palestinian Spring” are yet to come. As people of faith, we see the hand of God in the whole panoply of events. We believe that God is creating space for people of faith and faith-based initiatives to take the lead in redefining the operant question in the Middle East to be: **“What is God’s will for our neighborhood?”** In short, it is a “kairos moment”, the fullness of time for the work of the PACIS Project.

People throughout the Middle East have lost faith in politics and politicians to bring about peace and stability in the region. This profound and pervasive sense of hopelessness is exacerbated by the growing spectre of religious extremism and militancy. People in all the Middle East societies are searching for a fresh moral vision.

At the same time leaders of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood are “chancing the arm” in reaching out to the PACIS Project because their souls are deeply troubled by the centuries of hostility between the Islamic world and the West. At great personal risk they sit down with American Evangelical leaders, many of whom are strong supporters of Israel. This, they say, is for their grandchildren, to create a paradigm change between the Islamic world and the West.

At the same time a middle aged Syrian leader who had to flee to exile in Cairo because he had become a target of the Assad regime weeps over his beloved Syria. Over forty years of autocratic and brutal rule by the Assad regimes has created a legacy of bitterness, brokenness and intense polarization among Syrians. Beneath the superficial unity imposed by a “strongman” are deep divisions among major constituencies: Alawite, Muslim Brotherhood, Christians, Druze, Salafis, secular Baathists and Kurds. He knows that if and when the “strongman” is removed by the current popular revolution that Syria will face the greatest danger; with the possibility of atomization, civil war and the settling of old scores between supporters of the regime and those who suffered under the regime. He knows in his soul that what is needed is a core of Syrian leadership who possess both the moral authority and the vision for national healing and reconciliation.

In essence, there is a cry throughout the Middle East for a paradigm change in the neighborhood. For the PACIS Project this is our calling. This is our mission. It is clear that we belong there and that Jerusalem, Israel/Palestine and the Middle East is prepared for the “work of the prophets.”