

*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 #12  
TRIP REPORT  
May 14 - 25, 2012**

**Introduction**

Brian Cox, Tim Pownall, Michael Zacharia, Bassam Ishak, Dale Gavak, Alia Ismail and Clare Rice conducted a mission to the Middle East May 14 - 25, 2012 under the auspices of the PACIS Project in Faith-Based Diplomacy of the Straus Institute For Dispute Resolution of Pepperdine University Law School of Southern California and the International Center For Religion and Diplomacy of Washington DC.

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 Middle East region that promises a greater resonance with the Abrahamic faith communities of the Middle East.

**Trip Results**

**First Stop: Cairo**

In Cairo there were three objectives. The first objective was to conduct a conference for Syrian opposition leaders (from both inside and outside Syria) on national healing and reconciliation in Syria.

*“You have crystallized a vision in our hearts, that before was vague and unfocused, about the direction of the revolution toward national healing and reconciliation. Come over and help us with the young leaders of the revolution. Help us build a movement within a movement. Help us avoid civil war.”*

These words, spoken at the end of two and a half days together by one of the young leaders of the revolution from inside Syria captures the profound nature of a faith-driven process that enabled the softening of their hearts toward each other and the ability to engage in constructive joint problem solving about fundamental questions that must be resolved to avoid a post Assad civil war. The original goal of twenty participants swelled to as many as thirty six as word spread around the exile community of Cairo about the PACIS Project conference. There were key leaders from the Syrian National Council, the National

Coordinating Committee, the Revolutionary Command Council and the Free Syrian Army as well as Bedouin tribal leaders. Major groups represented included Alawite, Sunni Muslim, Christian, Secular, Druze, Baathists, Salafis, Kurds, Assyrians and Arabs.

The seven presentations of the Faith-Based Reconciliation process were designed to guide them through a process of transformative problem solving around these basic questions:

1. What should be the role of God, faith and religion in the future Syrian state?
2. How do we create an intentional pluralistic community in the future Syria?
3. How do we address the hostility that groups in Syria have toward each other having been pitted against each other by the regime?
4. How do we create a just political culture in Syria that shares power and privilege among all groups?
5. How do we foster a spirit of personal and political forgiveness between those who benefited from the regime and those who suffered under the regime?
6. How do we heal the wounds of our history as Syrians so that we can embrace the future and not be mired in the past?

This structured Learning Conversation utilized carefully framed questions to empower the participants to solve their own problems rather than the PACIS Project imposing its ideas upon them. We created a conceptual structure and a lexicon for them to engage in transformative problem solving. Each presentation was followed by vigorous discussion in five small groups and then a sharing of the results with the plenary session.

Two key features enabled them to move to a new level of sharing with each other. On the first day they shared their life journeys with each other in the small groups and realized that they hardly knew each other. On the final morning the plenary group self-selected into two groups: the majority (Sunni Muslims) and the minorities. Each group constructed a list of how they had received offense by the other group and a second list on how they had caused offense to the other group. The purpose of this exercise was to surface and heal antagonism by having each group share without comment or response by the other group. Many said that for the first time they had been able to speak openly and publicly about the hurt, humiliation and shame and be listened to by “the other.”

Bassam Ishak, a key member of the Syrian National Council and General Secretariat, was the organizer and coordinator of the conference. Brian Cox and Tim Pownall gave the presentations. Dale Gavlak and Clare Rice were the Prayer and Fasting team. Alia Ismail oversaw logistics of the conference. One special feature of this conference was the involvement of Next Generation Faith-Based diplomats in the persons of Alia Ismail and Clare Rice. This provided on-the-job field experience combined with mentoring by senior level PACIS Project leaders.

There were five strong invitations for follow-up to this conference:

1. Conducting a Faith-Based Reconciliation process for young leaders of the revolution from northern Syria in Turkey.
2. Conducting a Faith-Based Reconciliation process for young leaders of the revolution from southern Syria in Jordan.
3. Conducting a Faith-Based Reconciliation process for leaders from the Syrian National Council (outside) and the National Coordinating Committee (inside).
4. Conducting a Faith-Based Reconciliation process for Syrian exiles in Paris.
5. Conducting a Faith-Based Reconciliation process for Bedouin tribal leaders from within Syria. (There are over one million Bedouins in Syria.)

This follow-up will be coordinated through Bassam Ishak and will happen in mid to late July.

The second objective was to meet with the founder and the executive director of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies based in Cairo. The IKC was founded in 1988 by the eminent Egyptian political sociologist and human rights activist Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim as a non-governmental organization dedicated to advocating and promoting democracy, human rights and civil freedoms in Egypt and the Arab world.

Among its many activities, the IKC has built bridges to the whole network of former Al Qaeda militants that trained and fought in Afghanistan and have now returned to Egypt.

A strong relationship has been established between the PACIS Project and the IKC at this point. We are now in the area of exploring the nature of a cooperative venture.

The third objective was to meet with Anglican Archbishop Mouneer Anis in Cairo to continue discussion of the plight of Christians in Egypt and how the PACIS Project might contribute to creating better conditions for them. There is great concern in the Egyptian Christian community that their situation may become worse than it was under the Mubarak regime should the Muslim Brotherhood achieve dominance with state power. While the PACIS Project works with people of faith from all traditions, it does have a special concern for those who suffer as a result of exclusivist religious visions.

## **Second Step: Jerusalem**

In Jerusalem there were three objectives. The first objective was for the leaders of the PACIS Project: Brian Cox, Tim Pownall and Michael Zacharia to spend a day with the leaders of the Talking Peace Project; Dr. Alick Isaacs, Sharon Leshem – Zinger and Avinoam Rosenak. We met all day on May 22 at the Maiersdorf Faculty Club at Hebrew University on the Mount Scopus campus. Our time together was spent sharing information about our respective activities, building relationship and experiencing a demonstration by Sharon Leshem-Zinger of their methodology of psychodrama that is used with Israeli

religious leaders who are typically not involved in the peace process or in any consideration of reconciliation in Israel/Palestine. This was our third time together and the first time that all six of us had been together at the same time. A question by one of the PACIS Project leaders about whether they, the Jewish community and Israel has ever forgiven Christians and the church for the centuries of anti-Semitism that in part, made the Shoah (Holocaust) possible led to a deep and profound discussion about the nature of forgiveness from a Jewish, Christian and human perspective.

The six of us have come to a settled conviction that we have been brought together for a new initiative quite apart from our present activities, but that requires both our backgrounds and experience. The nature of that initiative has yet to emerge, but there are hazy contours that envision a Jerusalem-based entity that brings world leaders together in a context of faith and politics, that provides a different architecture for meeting together, that provides a safe space for the softening of their hearts and that enables even enemies to sit together in constructive joint problem solving. Such a dream is grounded in the Jewish biblical vision in the prophets of the restoration of Jerusalem to its rightful place as “a light to the nations” by being an icon of politics grounded in the sovereignty of God. As one Talking Peace Project leader stated, “Jerusalem should be to faith and politics what the city of Florence once was to culture.” It should be the one place where leaders can push away from the negotiating table and ask the deeper more profound question:

*“How does God ask me to live with my neighbor?”*

Our second objective was to meet with our partners from Musalaha/Holy Land Trust; Dr. Salim Munayer, Sami Awad and Awni Jubran. For the past six years we have cooperated on a three stage process with young Palestinian Christians and Muslims from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. The focus of our joint initiative is to empower young Palestinians with a forward looking vision focused on non-violence, healing and transformation as a replacement for a paradigm of victimization which keeps them mired in the present and past. It does not in any way ignore or minimize the suffering and injustice of Palestinians. On the contrary, it seeks to channel it in a new direction that brings hope and unity to a fractured community. Together we have trained three groups of young Palestinian leaders in the Desert Encounter/Faith-Based Reconciliation Process. It has now become a totally indigenous movement within Palestinian society with a Leadership Core Group and action committees. They have taken this vision into schools, social organizations and created a series for Palestinian television.

We also visited Dr. Bishara Awad, Alex Awad and faculty members of Bethlehem Bible College. They shared with us the results of the “Christ At The Checkpoint” conference in March. We shared with them a more complete picture of the PACIS Project as both the academic home of faith-based diplomacy as well as the various tracks of our Middle East project.

The third objective was to meet with our various friends and advisors both in Israel and Palestine to share the latest developments in our work and to seek their wise counsel. The nature of our work throughout the Middle East neighborhood is both complex and unusual. It puts us on a unique trajectory and, as such, requires great insight into navigating the walls of hostility and the sometimes exclusivist visions for the future Middle East. As

persons of faith it requires a humble spirit on our part that enables us to enter the worldviews of the communities that we seek to engage, to embrace them with an empathetic compassion while holding true to our own core values. People never feel safe to consider new attitudes and behaviors if the messengers to them are hostile and judgmental about them. We ourselves must embody a reconciling spirit if we are to have any credibility as agents of faith-based reconciliation, especially in the Middle East where there is a pervasive spirit of cynicism and suspicion about outsiders from the West.

## **Conclusion**

As a faith-based work, the PACIS Project now finds itself at the vortex of historical events unfolding in the Middle East whether in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel or Palestine. This is not an outgrowth of clever strategic planning but of patient and humble surrender to God's will and authority. For the leaders of the PACIS Project it has been a truly Abrahamic journey; one step at a time, trusting God at the deepest level of our beings. There is no question that we bring a wealth of skill and experience in the areas of religion, politics, diplomacy, business, conflict resolution and international cross cultural engagement. Nevertheless, this must take a back seat to prayerful engagement and direction with the God of Abraham who is the Father of all Jews, Christians and Muslims. Our focus goes beyond understanding the interests of communities, nations and states; to understanding the heart of God for the lands of the prophets. We truly believe that God is in the process of "unfreezing" the Middle East to create a new architecture for enemies to sit together and engage in constructive joint problem solving.

We are not the least bit naïve about the forces that we are engaging or their potential to unleash destructive behavior in the Middle East neighborhood. The Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamists to state power creates concern and suspicion in many circles particularly among U.S. State Department officials, Christians and Jews in the West and for the state of Israel. However, with God, things are not always what they seem on the surface or in the media. Under the surface there are new possibilities in the making that will create heretofore unthinkable alliances toward a dynamic of coexistence, particularly between the Islamic world and the West. The centuries old conflict for supremacy between Christianity and Islam with Jerusalem as Ground Zero has the very real possibility of an alternative paradigm. The "facts on the ground" from the standpoint of realpolitik analysis would seem to suggest a scenario in the making that is menacing both to the State of Israel and the United States. However, "facts under the ground" suggest a very different scenario is developing which provides a historic opportunity for people of faith from the three great Abrahamic traditions to take their place at the table with a spirit and process which honors God and brings politics and diplomacy where it rightfully belongs; under the sovereignty of God.