

*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 #9
TRIP REPORT
November 7 - 19, 2011**

Introduction

Brian Cox, Tim Pownall and Michael Zacharia conducted a mission to the Middle East November 7 – 19, 2011 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: Beirut

In Beirut our sole objective was to meet with the proposed translator of Brian Cox's book "Faith-Based Reconciliation: A Moral Vision that Transforms People and Societies." The book will be translated from English into Arabic. A former Straus Institute student, Alia Ismail had located a translator who is a professor, a translator of previous professional books and associated with the Lebanon Center For Permanent Civil Peace. After the book is translated and then carefully vetted by Alia Ismail, the Arabic edition will be published in Beirut by the Center For Permanent Civil Peace Press.

Second Stop: Amman

In Amman we met with the Muslim Brotherhood leadership to discuss three things: our trip together to Cairo, scheduling of the next faith-based reconciliation process in Amman and the timing of a possible Muslim Brotherhood reconciliation mission to Washington DC.

As we discussed the parameters of the next faith-based reconciliation process our partners wanted to expand participation in three directions. The first direction is to include broader representation from the Reform Coalition of Jordan. The second direction is to include Muslim Brotherhood leadership from Egypt. The third direction is to include three key constituencies in the United States: political leaders, academics and journalists. We have not yet established firm dates for the next faith-based reconciliation process, but hope to conduct three such gatherings in 2012.

From the feedback of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders we learned that this first experience with the faith-based reconciliation process moved them from strong skepticism to “softened hearts” and great enthusiasm for the process.

Third Stop: Cairo

Leaders from the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordan Reform Coalition accompanied us to Cairo. We met with the two top leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood/Freedom & Justice Party. After listening to the testimony of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood they expressed enthusiasm to have Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders participating in the next faith-based reconciliation process in Amman.

We met with a pastor from the largest Evangelical Church in Cairo located near Tahrir Square. He expressed great concern for the plight of Christians in Egypt if the Muslim Brotherhood wins a clear majority in the upcoming parliamentary elections. We have no way of knowing how widely or deeply this is felt by Christian leaders in Egypt.

In an unexpected turn of events we met with key Syrian opposition leaders twice to discuss the possibility of working with the Syrian National Council and Presidency to utilize the faith-based reconciliation process with the various strands of the opposition leadership so as to create a cohesive unity in the opposition to empower them to create a vision for a possible post-Assad Syria. The theme we discussed for the process was “Beyond Assad: Creating A Reconciling Vision For the Future of Syria.” One key leader of the opposition is very familiar with the faith-based reconciliation process and was on the phone promoting the idea to other key leaders in Paris and Istanbul. This possibility is one that should be thoroughly vetted by ICRD/PACIS Project officials before agreeing to move ahead.

Fourth Stop: Jerusalem

We met with Dr. Sami Awad in Bethlehem to discuss ideas for the joint PACIS Project/Musalaha Initiative with Palestinian Christians and Muslims in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. There have been three groups (30 each) that have been through the combined training of the Desert Encounter (Dr. Salim Munayer) and the Faith-Based Reconciliation Process. We were greatly encouraged to learn that there is a strong Christian/Muslim leadership core group and that they are actively teaching the eight core values of faith-based reconciliation in schools, social organizations and through a TV series on Palestinian TV. We discussed possible next steps which include

selecting and training a five or six person core group to conduct future faith-based reconciliation processes for Palestinians and translation of Brian Cox's book "Faith-Based Reconciliation: A Religious Framework For Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution" from English into Arabic.

We met twice with Issa Zboun from the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem in Bethlehem and received an extensive briefing on borders (checkpoints) and areas (A/B/C) within the West Bank as they have been delineated in the Arab/Israeli peace negotiations.

We met with two Israeli leaders, Eran Shafir, former CEO of Blue White Future in Israel and Dr. Alick Isaacs, Executive Director of the Talking Peace Project. These meetings focused on relationship building, exploring potential common vision and methodology and presenting one of the PACIS Projects' initiatives. The specific initiative focuses on the need to create a sustainable climate for a negotiated peace settlement on the grassroots level of Israeli society based on socializing the Abrahamic values of faith-based reconciliation. The PACIS Project will cooperate with an indigenous Israeli NGO to create a self-propagating and self-sustaining youth movement in Israel based on the core values of faith-based reconciliation that leads to a new and sustainable moral vision for Israel and changed hearts toward "the other." Such a process is already under way on the Palestinian side through the PACIS Project/Musalaha Initiative.

We met in Tel Aviv with our friend and key advisor, Gilead Sher who served as Israel's chief negotiator at Camp David in 2000. After listening carefully to the complex nature of PACIS Project's relationships and involvement in the Middle East he gave us wise counsel about our work so as to avoid misunderstanding by Israeli or American Jewish leaders about our efforts and intentions particularly with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. We also met in Jerusalem with another friend and key advisor, Marty Karp of the Jewish Federation, who gave us similar wise counsel.

We have been in conversation with the leadership of the Jerusalem Foundation, meeting several times at Mishkenot concerning a proposal for a joint initiative. The PACIS Project and the Jerusalem Foundation would cooperate to conduct a faith-based reconciliation process with the rabbinical students of Rabbi Yuval Cherlow. The focus of this initiative would be to empower Israel to recover the ancient vision of sharing the Abrahamic blessing of faith-based reconciliation with the nations as part of its vocation in the 21st century. Unfortunately, due to the absence of key persons during our time in Jerusalem it was not possible to meet this time.

We met with our usual coterie of Israeli and Palestinian friends and advisors who offered us wise counsel on the various PACIS Project initiatives. Our friends provide a reality check on our work since they must live with the results of our efforts. We met with an official from the U.S. Embassy in Amman and established contact with an official from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. In addition, we have maintained contact with officials from the U.S. State Department.

Conclusion

Our efforts to build a bridge to the Muslim Brotherhood causes a variety of reactions among Americans and Israelis, among Jews and Christians. Some understand it as a “God-given opportunity” to socialize the core values of faith-based reconciliation throughout the Muslim world via an unexpected source. Others question our wisdom and naiveté given the known aspirations of Islamist movements. A few have even thought our efforts to be dangerous and misguided, the equivalent of grabbing a tiger by the tail. Because this is a faith-based initiative we must be willing to step out into the unknown and trust the divine hand. The leaders of the PACIS Project bring a wealth of experience in faith-based diplomacy, the Muslim world and Islamist movements. Nevertheless, we realize that we are undertaking an initiative that has no precedent in history. There is no manual except the example of Abraham who took one step in faith at a time.

To build a bridge to the Muslim Brotherhood does not mean that we embrace their aspirations or seek to be an advocate for them in Washington DC. Indeed, we have starkly different views on a variety of theological, political and social issues. Our outreach to them simply embodies one of the unique teachings of Jesus to “love our enemy.” The relationship between the Islamic world and the West is colored by 1400 years of hostility. We believe that it is time for a “sea change” in that relationship so that we can engage in constructive problem solving not only in the Middle East but also in areas of friction between Christians and Muslims that affect minority religious communities. There is a struggle of various groups within the Muslim Brotherhood as to who will be its voice and what will be its real focus and approach. We believe it is important to be in relationship, building faith bridges with the group that is willing to explore faith-based reconciliation as a foundation for relations with the West as opposed to violence and terrorism.

During our time in Beirut, Amman, Cairo and Jerusalem there was a palpable sense that the PACIS Project is at the heart of the unfolding drama of history. When ICRD’s work began in Syria and Palestine in 2005 there was no way of foreseeing the constellation of forces that would come together to create a bubbling cauldron of change; the Arab Spring, the rise of Islamist movements in electoral politics, the complete stalemate of the Arab/Israeli peace process and the desire of Islamist movements to “chance the arm” toward the West. Could it be that out of all these swirling of events that the ground is being prepared for a “sea change” in Middle Eastern politics? God knows.