

UPF conference on Syria: Soft Power Approaches to Peace in Cyprus

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Larnaca, Cyprus -- UPF convened the conference, “Syria: Opening Lines of Communication and Soft Power Approaches to Peace,” in Cyprus from December 17 to 19, 2016.

Amidst the background of global despair and disbelief at the wholesale destruction that heralded the fall of Aleppo in Syria, UPF set modest goals for the conference, aware that doing the alternative would raise false hopes and effectively diminish the sense that anything can be done. Hence, the conference title, “Opening Lines of Communication.” The conference invitation affirmed: “For people to live in peace ...different factions...need to find the way to understand, accommodate and even respect each other. It is here that the search for a future for Syria has to begin...The conveners of this conference are hoping to establish an environment where agendas -- political, religious or other -- are set aside, while participants come to listen and communicate.”

Making a Bridge

The key element that made this conference unique was the participation of representatives from both sides of the Syrian Civil War, who engaged in real, respectful dialogue. Mr. Mohammed Habash was a member of the Syrian parliament when he launched the Syrian Peace Initiative in the early months of the crisis in 2011 as part of his effort to find a “third way.” As co-host of this conference, he shared: “Five years of meetings between the opposition and the regime have brought no reconciliation; only mutual recriminations...I believe that this can be considered the first time an international organization has brought together representatives of both the regime and the opposition. Please take this chance for the sake of our people who are being slain at this very moment. People will say that this is the first time we were able to make a bridge after all these years.”

The participants came from both inside and outside of Syria. Syrians living abroad came from Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and from Germany, Austria, Cyprus and the United Kingdom. Among them was a former ambassador of Syria to the UK, a former economic advisor to the prime minister of Syria, the former president of Damascus University, writers, academics, activists and businessmen, spanning opposition views from moderate to outspoken. From inside Syria came a member of the parliament and a representative of the government’s ministry of reconciliation; along with a speech that was read on behalf of the deputy chairman of an opposition party who was unable to get his visa in time. The international representation -- which was smaller than in previous UPF conferences, but included leaders, officials and journalists whose work relates to the Syrian crisis -- comprised a UN expert who has written four books on Syria; Austria’s former minister of defense; former Lebanese and Belgian ambassadors; journalists from Lebanon and Austria; and the head of a think tank from France.

Although the themes of the conference sessions gave ample room to cover Syria’s immediate past, the main thrust and focus of the sessions was intended to be forward-looking:

- “Syrian Voices – The Fears, Hopes and Visions of Syria’s Different Communities;”

- “Diplomacy – From Conflict to Common Interest: Finding International Common Ground for the Sake of Syria’s People and their Lives;”
- “Rebuilding Trust, Social Capital and the Role of Religion;”
- “Political Approaches: The Role of Parliamentarians and Other Representatives;” and
- “Reimagining Syria – Ideas for Changes that will Keep Syria’s Soul.”

There was no shortage of reminders of the desperately urgent need for a solution for Syria. Mr. Bachir Khoury, a Lebanese journalist spoke of the more than 250,000 Syrian children in Lebanon who are not enrolled in formal education and said that one-third of all Syrian children today have been born since March 2011. Mr. Khoury, who was born during the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted for more than fifteen years, said, “A post-war society is a traumatized one. The longer the conflict lasts, the more disastrous the consequences. In Syria, reconstruction must first start with a total halt of war and fighting.” Not many minutes later, Mr. Hussein Ragheb of the Syrian parliament reminded everyone that both sides are suffering: “You should see the suffering of those in Syria tortured by Daesh (ISIS).”



Syrian Voices

The voices of Syria we heard were loud, clear and varied. Mr. Alaa Tabbab, the chief editor of an opposition newspaper, based in Turkey, said that even a neutral observer of the crisis has to admit that the Syrian government has killed the Syrian people. What is happening in Syria is fundamentally a struggle between the people and the government. While the Syrian people have called for a true revolution, the regime has the responsibility to save the Syrian people by responding to this call -- which is addressed to the good people working in the government. He added that there really are good people in both camps, despite the black versus white scenario portrayed by the international community.

In a speech that was read on his behalf, Mr. Feras Nadim, deputy chairman of the Syrian Democratic Party, said the unrest that escalated into the conflict in Syria is the result of 40 years of oppression, corruption and ignorance, and the dominance of one single ruling party. As the government ignored the worsening situation, the opposition lost its capacity to play an active part. Now the country is paying a heavy price, yet the government is not responding suitably. We need a modern national state that provides equal rights and responsibilities. This is threatened by the intrusion of suspicious, undemocratic ideas which sow seeds of extremism of all kinds. “We believe that reconciliation is the backbone of any political solution in Syria and we are working to bridge the gap between members of the same family.”

Mr. Osama Kadi, president of the Syrian Economic Task Force and former advisor to the prime minister of Syria, pointed out that the unemployment and poverty figures from 2003, 2007 and 2011 confirm that Syria’s economic difficulties preceded the “revolution.” The main obstacle to investment in Syria is not corruption but the undereducation of workers. Different economic groups in Syria have very different perspectives on the current conflict. Unfortunately, economic freedom was never a priority in Syria. We should consider rebuilding Syria with an initiative similar to the Marshall Plan.

The Roots of Division

Mr. Mohammed Nafissa, who traveled to the conference from Germany but is from the Ghouta, outside of Damascus, where he lost both relatives and all his possessions, emphasized the commonalities between

the two sides. The only difference between the negotiating teams at the UN was over the question of whether the president of Syria and his regime should stay or go. However, each side believes the other does not represent the people. Mr. Nafissa continued, "War brings out the worst in us. For ideas, we need peace. We must have a ceasefire to stop irrational sectarian voices. Syria is a diverse country -- but the war was not caused by these differences. We need to find the spiritual and historical depth in people." We have to resist the urge to blame one party or another. The core issue we have to tackle -- in Syria and the Arab world -- is a cultural one. Our Arabic societies are living at a stage before the formation of a country; meaning, we, Arabs, are living as tribes and families. We have not yet reached a sufficient level of awareness of the rule of law, a law that respects rights and responsibilities. Ethnic, tribal and religious interests still dominate, and most people still consider the law to be a foreign imposed book; a book which, unlike the holy book, they feel justified to ignore, bend and violate without shame. Since the 1980s, all forms of civic activity have been repressed while free rein was given to all sorts of religious sects, resulting in the formation of religious enclaves and the justification of violence against others in the name of God. In the last century, Germany was infected by a cultural virus in the form of a racist ideology which caused two world wars. As Germany attempted to rebuild itself, the focus was on awareness and understanding of differences; Syria's situation gives us the opportunity to do the same -- to see, understand, discuss and come to terms with our differences -- a process that was never allowed in the past.

Mr. Mohamed Amir Nasher Neam, a Syrian writer who also traveled from Germany, said that Syria is no longer a place where different parts of society can live safely together. With the loss of historical and institutional guarantees, the state is unable to establish a direct relationship with the individual, finding itself reduced to relating through denomination, tribe or clan. The disadvantage of this is that while these groups work together in times of peace, they show their hidden, ugly faces when crises occur. Denominations have been allowed to slide into sectarianism, mainly as a result of political leaders exaggerating the differences between the denominations. This situation has been compounded by a superficial understanding of religion and leads to the destruction of diversity. The key to solving this is establishing the correct relationship between external religion (Sharia law which guides human behavior) and internal religion (the pure knowledge that gives the Sharia its deep transcendental meaning). Focusing only on the external leads to the kind of conservative view that encourages sectarianism. By balancing both these elements through the practice of one's religion can the slide into fundamentalism, on the one hand, or complete relativism, on the other, be prevented.



Geopolitics and Peace Processes

Dr. Emmanuel Dupuy, president of the Institute for European Perspective and Security Studies (IPSE), gave an overview of the shifting alliances that have been unfolding in recent months, the primary effect of which has been a shift in the center of action on Syria, away from Europe and the West in favor of Turkey, Russia and Iran, with even Arab allegiances shifting. He then drew a parallel between the current Syrian situation and the events that led to the seventeenth century Treaty of Westphalia, including a local uprising; the instrumentalization of religion (using religion or religious rhetoric as a tool to pursue political or other goals); the involvement of foreign insurgents and proxy actors; and the use mercenaries. Perhaps there will be something to learn from the making of the treaty itself: all the parties in the Eighty Years' War sat around one table, regardless of their crimes and responsibilities. The negotiations lasted for four years, at the end of which the parties found rules for the peaceful coexistence of religions and ensured the equality of power between large and small states and legal rights for each minority -- and the treaty was guaranteed by two big powers.

Many others spoke of successful peace processes that took years for an agreement to be reached: the five-year Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War; former Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky's 400 rounds of negotiations for peace in Austria; and new federal solutions in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Mr. Abdallah Bouhabib, founder of the Issam Fares Institute of the American University of Beirut and former ambassador of Lebanon to the U.S., drew on the experience of the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, where "peace need[ed] a mandated godfather," referring to the roles of Syria in 1977 and Saudi Arabia in the 1989 Taif Agreement. "We had had many short-lived ceasefires, but no godfather," he said. In Bosnia, the U.S. was the godfather, though, sadly, not in Iraq. In the end, "only Syrians can bring peace to Syria. You need to sit around a table and negotiate -- real negotiation, not lip-service. Continuously. There is no military solution."

Mr. Werner Fasslabend asked himself a question when he was the minister of defense for Austria: "When and how can I stop a war?" The simple answer is that, in most cases, peace comes when one side has reached its goal and the other realizes it cannot reach its. Syria today has regressed four decades, with school attendance rates now less than 50 percent. After analyzing the strategic errors of both the government and opposition and the current divisions that make up Syria, in particular the area around Idlib, he suggested: "The end is foreseeable. The longer the war lasts, the greater the influence from the outside." The opposition would be wiser not to stand aside while the government fights Daesh (ISIS). "Try to come together and establish a common Syrian way. Go into a process. Try to reach a common solution."

Mr. Robert Vandemeulebroucke, a former ambassador of Belgium, emphasized the need for a durable ceasefire, followed by a durable peace. Showing a map of a dismembered Syria, he focused on the process of negotiating a durable peace, referring to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, endorsing a road map for a peace process in Syria, and analyzing negotiable and non-negotiable points and areas of general agreement.

Mr. Thabet Abbarah, a Syrian businessman who lives in Cyprus, proposed a pragmatic approach. "We need a solution that addresses reality, not agendas. Military force is not a solution, but a political solution takes time. Instead of asking for a ceasefire -- which won't happen we should try to limit the war to certain areas, allowing peace in other areas, together with the return of refugees and the rebuilding of the economy and society in those areas."



Studies, Proposals and a National Conference

Mr. Jamal Karsli, originally from Aleppo, has lived in Germany for the past 30 years, where he has served as a member of the parliament. He and Mr. Talal Jasem, another Syrian who now lives in Germany, presented a peace plan for Syria. The plan was built on months of research they carried out. They visited and interviewed Kurds, Turkmen, Alawites -- and all the different groups that make up the Syrian people -- and studied different forms of government around the world, including such places as Nigeria and Pakistan, as well as the French and German parliamentary models. They believe their plan presents a just solution, but it does need to be preceded by a ceasefire. As Mr. Jasem pointed out, "Our study focuses on the future and how to solve minority problems." A key step is to organize a national conference involving the Kurdish party, Christians and all ethnic groups. They foresee the need for substantial time periods, measured in years, for each stage of the transition process. Mr. Karsli said, "The absence of freedom in

Syria led to what is happening now. All Syrians have to participate in this new government. We all have to sacrifice and forgive more. We are Syrians. We have to stop blaming others for what's happening in our county; we have to be responsible and recognize that we have a lot to do.”

Mr. Sami Khiyami, who now lives in Beirut, Lebanon, was the key negotiator between Syria and the European Union (2004-2012) and Syria's ambassador to the United Kingdom. He presented a substantial, detailed proposal as an alternative to the Syria peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland. This includes a detailed analysis of the situation in Syria and the reasons for the impasse in the talks, which can be largely attributed to the fact that the negotiators in Geneva represent roughly 15 percent each of the Syrian people, leaving 70 percent of the people unrepresented. The proposal outlines a process through which it will be possible to form a “constituent assembly,” a legislative and executive body to guide the country out of the crisis. It involves a multi-stage selection process combining international guarantees with Syrian ownership, with a view to obtaining gradual social harmony and sustainable peace.

Mr. Leo Gabriel from Austria expressed keen interest in organizing a national conference in Syria. Since 2012, his Peace in Syria initiative has been working with civil society and key Syrian figures, calling for dialogue. Their efforts have included taking a delegation to Syria in 2013 and meeting the whole range of opposition groups, before convening two “All Sides Consultations for Peace in Syria” in Austria. At those conferences, one Syrian, Dr. Aref Dalila, an economist and former dean of the Faculty of Economics of Damascus University, called for a large national assembly. This work continued with meetings to form the principles for a future constitution for Syria. Peace in Syria has future plans to meet in Greece or Cyprus to promote the idea of the national assembly. “We should work towards an assembly in Damascus,” Mr. Gabriel said.

Mr. Carsten Wieland from Geneva, where he serves on the UN team for Intra-Syrian Talks, spoke in a private capacity about the complexity of the situation in Syria. He emphasized that we should be referring to the Syrian conflict in the plural, as Syrian conflicts; it is about asymmetry, mediation design and international support, he said. In the face of the lack of progress in the UN talks -- where parties have not met since April 2016 -- he sees some encouragement in the growing support for a national conference, Syrian congress or constitutional conference. “All sections of the Syrian community like it: Jamel Karsli and Talal Jasem, Sami Khiyami, Dr. Dalila ...” He suggested it might be helpful to look at and compare all the ideas for a national conference and even possibly convene based on a common concept. This might later be able to contribute to the process itself. “People are not that far apart from each other. There are some differences in the mechanism, some in the purpose of the conference -- but this can all be discussed, especially in the spirit of a conference like this where different ideas are present.” Later, during the discussion, he reminded everyone that trust-building is a big issue; that is, at present, Syrians are not the main players in the process; however, a national conference could increase Syrian ownership in the peace process.



One Syria

The theme of “One Syria” came up again and again, whether as a memory or as a goal.

Mr. Fahed Bacha, who lives in Cyprus and is the editor of Al Ayyam Syria, an online magazine, said: “I care totally for Syria -- not for one side.” Syria is not divided ethnically; the Syrian people have never been divided by factions. “I grew up in Aleppo and never heard Alawite or Shia or Druze; I never knew who was this religion or that. I studied in a French school and my best friends were Christian and Jewish,” Mr. Bacha added.

Mr. Said Al Omari reminded us that, despite the extremes that support the regime or the militants, the vast majority of Syrians believe in a moderate Islam.

Mr. Ismail Yassin, a former professor at Damascus University who is a Kurdish Syrian from Al-Qamishli in northeastern Syria, said, in the face of the internal divisions and the power-motivated interference from outside, “The only solution is the Syrian people, in all its shades, ethnic and religious... To correct this difficult reality is not just a fantasy. The path is possible. We need awareness, but we also need forgiveness and tolerance.”

Mr. Thabet Abbarah invited the entire conference group to a Syrian dinner at his restaurant in Nicosia. When he first opened the restaurant four years ago, he put a sign outside, saying: “Nobody who supports the Assad regime is allowed to enter.” This time, however, the two delegates from Syria enjoyed a wonderful meal together.

Mr. Hussein Ragheb from the Syrian parliament pointed to the extent of foreign intervention and manipulation behind the whole crisis. Where others blame the government for the crisis, he called for “a victory of the legitimate Syria,” saying that stability will not come without a political solution. “Therefore, we need a national dialogue that takes place in Damascus. Let’s come together to heal the wounds and rebuild Syria, a free country, in support of its citizens.” Mr. Kifah Elsayed, who also came from Syria, where he is active in the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and works with Syria’s ministry of reconciliation, heard and responded to many critical views. He said, “Of course our meeting is to look for a way out of the Syrian crisis which is about to enter its seventh year.” Responding to questions about the work of the reconciliation ministry, he explained the options that were given to the FSA (Free Syrian Army) fighters in Aleppo, and even offered to give the phone numbers of those who chose to move to Azaz, a city in northwestern Syria.

There are not many who win the respect of both sides. However, in response to one questioner, Mr. Kifah Elsayed, praised the questioner, calling him “one of the few [people who] the opposition and the allies (the government side) are in agreement.” He was speaking of Dr. Abdulghani Maa Bared, the former president of Damascus University. Dr Maa Bared emphasized the importance of forgiveness and acceptance of the other, and of the development of the many good initiatives that exist. Expressing his pleasure at seeing “the faces of this nation which can be a source of much hope for Syria’s future,” he recommended bringing together all the proposals that were made at the conference. His talk focused on efforts to help Syrian students in the academic vacuum created by the war, a situation that has been made more difficult by the decision of the Syrian government to cut off relations with European universities. As vice president for international relations of the Arab International University (AIU), Dr. Maa Bared established an association which worked with public and private universities. An AIU Facebook page guided hundreds of students through the process of obtaining scholarships in Germany, effectively providing undergraduate and postgraduate opportunities for many young Syrians, many of whom are now investing in ways to help Syrian refugees and rebuild Syria itself.



Closing on a High Note

A sense of deep commitment to peace and love for Syria permeated the entire closing session of the conference. The regional secretary general of UPF-Middle East renewed UPF’s promise to open all doors and facilitate real, living dialogue. Mr. Jamal Karsli said the detail of and high level of attendance at the conference had exceeded all his expectations and wanted to especially thank all those who are not Syrians

who have so much love for this country. Mr. Werner Fasslabend described the conference as one of the most fruitful he has attended in his life. “There is a will from both sides to end the bloodshed and enter a new phase of getting common Syrian ownership of common Syrian affairs. I felt the common Syrian spirit from all sides. You could feel there is the will not only to be Syrian but to build a new Syria. The way is open for a national dialogue. The time is ripe. Take this situation and continue immediately. Do not lose momentum.”

As if in response to this advice, Mr. Mohammed Habash announced that UPF had received two invitations during the conference to take this dialogue to Syria, and hastened to add that, while he wishes to respond positively to such an invitation, he does so not to get a plane ticket to Syria but to seek a solution for the 12 million displaced Syrians. Then, he came up with a surprise proposal: he called out one of the two translators, Ms. Heather Fraser Harris, from the translation booth, and suggested she lead a delegation of Syrian girls to visit Damascus and pave the way for future negotiations -- specifically related to bringing large numbers of Syrians back to live in newly safe areas in the country -- and a possible conference. As Ms. Fraser Harris spoke of her desire to return to the Damascus she loves, a conference made up almost entirely of men was moved to tears.

Mr. Emmanuel Dupuy read the conference statement and the regional president of UPF-Middle East, Mr. Umberto Angelucci, in his closing remarks, took everyone back to the world of the heart. Turning to Mr. Karsli beside him, he said: “This man lost 30 of his relatives, yet we see him here. He has overcome anger, hatred and resentment, and is investing everything to work for his people. I have seen foreigners come to nations under the guise of helping, but in reality they were there for the money. Here I have seen the opposite -- genuine concern for Syria and its people -- and I want to salute those of you who have come here with that spirit. Thank you all for being here. We will give everything to help Syria, but not just Syria; we have suffering brothers and sisters in many countries calling to us for our help.”

The conference closed with a sung recitation of the Koran and a prayer from a Catholic participant.



Statement on Syria

Preamble

The Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and stakeholders in the Larnaca International Leadership Conference (ILC) on “Opening Lines of Communication and Soft-Power Approaches to Peace” declare

1. that the suffering of the Syrian people is a global concern
2. that the war and violence in Syria must stop
3. that inclusive and just solutions for Syria are a top priority for peace-loving people

UPF and its partners in the Larnaca ILC affirm, in alignment with the Declaration on Global Ethic (1993 World Parliament of Religions), that peace between and within nations cannot be found without peace among religions and without implementation of a fair economic order that is based on business ethic. Furthermore, UPF and its partners confirm their dedication to seek solutions for Syria that incorporate the UPF Principles of Peace, to respect and integrate the voices of all Syrian people who express their will to

seek for an honest dialogue, to strive for the security of all people living in Syria, and pursue processes and solutions that are centered on the greater good and sovereignty of the Syrian nation.

Based on the proceedings and recommendations of the Larnaca ILC

- **We recognize** that the situation underlying the conflict in Syria is of immense complexity
- **We recognize** that a cessation of violence and initiation of a process to build new trust is of utmost urgency to avoid further traumatization of the Syrian people -- whether residents that have remained in their hometowns, internally displaced persons, or refugees in neighboring or distant jurisdictions -- and the entire Syrian nation
- **We recognize** that the process towards resolution of the situation must be led by the Syrian people and requires the support and active participation of the international community and global institutions
- **We acknowledge** that the economic, social and political roots of the current violence are multi-tiered, have been formed over decades, and need to be addressed in collaborative efforts of political and economic nature
- **We acknowledge** the special practical and ethical responsibility of religions to contribute to the process
- **We acknowledge** in light of power constellations at the end of 2016 that the time for action has arrived and that sincere and genuine dialogue must be part of any effective action and process
 - **We call** for honest, secure and mutually respectful dialogue that is understood not to be mere “lip-dialogue” prone for interruption upon the first sign of different views among dialoguing parties
 - **We call** for research into the social and economic situation of the people in all areas of Syria and for academic efforts of institutions and scholars inside and outside of Syria to study the circumstances of the present-day situation in and future options for Syria with utmost objectivity and develop proposals that have the potential to effect positive change
 - **We call** for opening doors and preparing secure ground for the return of as many Syrian people as possible
 - **We call** for initiation of consultations and interactions with the Syrian government, including but not limited to the Ministry for Reconciliation and the office of the President
 - **We call** for initiation of consultations and dialogue with all formal and unincorporated opposition groups that are ready to unconditionally accept to enter and maintain dialogue
 - **We call** for initiation, by way of a visit by an international and local joint-delegation to Damascus, of a process that aims at holding of a national convention
 - **We call** for the creation of a regional platform for security, as exemplified by the Helsinki Conferences for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which led to the creation of the OSCE and similar mechanisms for security cooperation and confidence building measures in other areas of the world

UPF and its partners resolve to develop and institutionalize the Syria Peace Initiative as an independent, multi-confessional civil society organization. This organization will invite participation of open-minded people who are ready to deal with any party or individual that is willing to engage in sincere dialogue, focus on Syria’s future and prepare for a process of national consultation involving all parties that are willing to make peace that is in compliance with the UPF Principles of Peace and the declaration for a global ethic. The Syria Peace Initiative will venture to engage in basic education, relief work, economic efforts and interaction with parties in Syria, neighboring countries, and around the world through delegations and volunteer work. It will monitor the development of peace in Syria and provide recommendations for taking forward the process of rebuilding the Syrian nation, spirit and body. Based on the proceedings and successful conclusion of the Larnaca ILC we furthermore confirm, in closing of this conference on December 19, 2016

- that dialogue between the government and opposition voices in Syria is possible
- that we can and must learn lessons from historic treaties such as the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which allowed the peaceful coexistence of religions and guaranteed peace
- that Syria has potential for a peaceful and productive existence for all its people