

UPF Middle East Conference on Syria - True Parents' Perspective

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Syria has gone through various stages of difficulty since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, of which it was a province, but none as horrific as at present. Since 2011, Syria has been a cauldron of warring factions fighting among trapped civilians. In August 2015, the UN Human Rights Council reported, "Civilians are suffering the unimaginable, as the world stands witness. Without stronger efforts to bring parties to the peace table, ready to compromise, current trends suggest that the Syrian conflict -- and the killing and destruction it wreaks -- will continue for the foreseeable future." We are pleased to bring you news of an effort to gather greater strength in the form of a December 17–19 UPF Middle East Conference on Syria.

"This was one of the most fruitful conferences I have attended in my lifetime." These were the words of Austria's former minister of defense during the final conference session.

At a time when the world had given up all hope for Syria, with repeated failures in UN negotiations and an intensified war leading to the destruction of Aleppo, UPF Middle East proposed a conference on Syria with the objective, "To bring True Parents' perspective to assist local and international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis." The conference title was Opening Lines of Communication and Soft Power Approaches to Peace.

The key element that made this conference stand out was the participation of both sides in a conference where real, respectful dialogue took place. Official dialogue in Geneva has made no progress; while other, smaller conferences have brought together different opposition groups but no representative of the government position. At this conference, participants from inside Syria included a Shia member of the Majlis al-Shaab (People's Assembly, the Syrian legislative branch) and a representative of the government's State Ministry for National Reconciliation Affairs. By the end of the conference, not only had UPF received two invitations to come to Syria to further the process of dialogue but three other groups in Europe were preparing separate visits to Syria in the coming month.

Our source of strength

That True Parents' foundation made this surprising progress possible is without doubt. UPF Middle East and the Syrian Peace Initiative, launched five years ago by Dr. Mohammed Habash, an ambassador for peace who then was a member of the Syrian People's Assembly, co-hosted the conference. Dr. Habash had attended the special forty-day workshop at the New Yorker Hotel in 1991, together with his future wife and her grandfather, the Grand Mufti of Syria.

This was designed as a small conference that would gather international experts and sons of Syria, from both inside the country and out. In all, forty-three of us partook, including staff members (mainly from our second generation, from five nations in the region, but also one young translator from London whose father is a peace ambassador in Germany).

We met in a relatively empty seaside hotel in Cyprus for just two days to take a first step in the direction

of peace. Participants included a UN expert from Germany who has written four books on Syria; former ambassadors from Belgium, Syria and Lebanon; a representative from Cyprus's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Syrians including the former president of Damascus University, businessmen, journalists, activists and a former economic advisor to the prime minister. In addition to the representative from the ministry and the legislator, another member of Syria's People's Assembly, who was unable to get his visa in time, sent a speech to be read out on his behalf.

Christian, Sunni and Shia were present.

In their reflections, participants noted the conference's calm atmosphere and the quality of the participants and contributions. Participants made at least five different substantial proposals, each of which will require study and follow up. Carsten Wieland, the UN expert [www.carsten-wieland.de] pointed out that at this conference -- and indeed elsewhere -- many diverse groups have called for a national conference on Syria and that the ideas presented are not very far apart from one another. He thought it might be helpful to get the proponents together and work on a common concept "in the spirit of a conference like this, where different opinions are present."



Breaking bread together

A Syrian businessman living in Cyprus generously hosted the entire conference in his restaurant in Nicosia for a wonderful Syrian dinner one evening. Four years ago, when he opened the restaurant, he put a sign outside, "No-one who supports the Syrian regime is allowed in." This time two from the government side joined us for dinner.

The climax of the conference came in the closing session. A sense of deep commitment to peace was present in presentations by both the UPF regional secretary-general and the regional president. Then, in the middle of his final remarks, after indicating his readiness to accept the invitation coming from those in Syria, co-host Mohammed Habash came up with a surprise proposal: Calling out one of the two translators, Heather Fraser Harris, from the translation booth, he proposed that 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 Heather spoke of her desire to return to the Damascus she loves, a conference made up almost entirely of men was moved to tears. Later, in addition to reflections from two participants, a conference statement was read out, proposing to develop the Syria Peace Initiative and pursue dialogue with all sides. We closed with a sung recitation of the Koran and a prayer from a Catholic participant. There is no doubt in my mind that this conference was God's way of giving some hope to the people of Syria and indeed all of us. Now we have to move quickly to build on this first step.