

**The Prospects for Dialogue and  
Reconciliation in Syria:**  
*The Role of Religion in International Relations*

Amman, Jordan  
October 11-13, 2013

**EXECUTIVE REPORT**



Universal Peace Federation  
*Middle East Peace Initiative*

# “The Prospects for Dialogue and Reconciliation in Syria”

## Executive Report

*By David Fraser Harris  
Secretary General, UPF-Middle East*

**T**HE world is painfully aware of the horrific suffering in Syria and yet unable to find a way to end it. This UPF gathering was originally called as a small consultation, designed to facilitate in-depth discussion; it quickly doubled in size, eventually numbering more than 40 participants. A list of participants follows at the end of this report along with the full text of the resultant declaration. In addition, participants’ full papers will be made available in a coming UPF conference publication. This brief report will take a thematic approach, highlighting its strengths and special characteristics, which might be summarized as its diversity and the interdisciplinary approach; regional and international perspectives; religious/spiritual perspectives; NGO perspectives, and the points emphasized in the declaration.

### **DIVERSITY**

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“We lived in harmony for centuries, and then the West came and brought division. We also suffer from that... You’re faced with a choice: do you encounter diabolically, or do you choose to dialogue?” Probably the scholars, diplomats, religious and government leaders

***“THE WISDOM DRAWN FROM OUR DIVERSE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS PATHS HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN SOLVING CONFLICTS AT LARGE, AS WELL AS IN SYRIA,” WROTE H.E. NASSIR ABDULAZIZ AL-NASSER, UN HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS, IN A MESSAGE OF GREETING TO THE CONFERENCE.***

gathered in Amman did not expect to be listening to the words of a Hindu spiritual leader from Vrindaban, India. Yet, as Dr. Shrivatsa Goswami, Acharya of Sri Radharamana Temple, pointed out, India is now home to the second largest Muslim population in the world. At a conference where so many from the Middle East expressed dismay at the damaging effects of western intervention, such words provided both perspective and encouragement.

The participants came from 19 different countries; they were Arab and Kurd; Sunni and Shia Muslim; Catholic, Orthodox (Copt and

Syrian) and Protestant Christians; Jewish, Hindu and Mandeian; they included an advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, a former minister of defense of Austria, the honorary president of Belgium’s senate, a former ambassador for the Arab League, a former member



of the Syrian parliament, a former minister of foreign affairs, economy and information from Jordan, specialists in geopolitics, veterans in interfaith and advocates of education and women's rights. The presence of both religious and spiritual leaders, on the one hand, with academics, geopolitical experts, diplomats and NGO activists, on the other hand, created a very rich foundation for in-depth discussion that was grounded not only in the realm of religious ideas but also in historical realities of our very complex world.

One aspect of the diversity was the perception of the situation at various levels. Dr. Darrol Bryant, director of the Center for Dialogue and Spirituality in the World Religions at the University of Waterloo in Canada, expressed appreciation for "access to people from the region who can speak about what's going on there." Many commented that the crisis in Syria will only be solved if it is tackled at all levels: local, regional and global. We heard a Syrian accuse Russia of blocking the UN, and we heard an insightful Russian perspective. We heard Belgian and Russian and Syrian and Palestinian and Lebanese views on the fighters pouring into Syria. Dr. Hussein Hassouna from Egypt, former Ambassador of the Arab League to the US and the UN, told us: "The Syrian problem is an Arab one. It has to be solved by Syrians, with the Arabs, with international help."

Even as we heard differing religious perspectives and widely differing political ones, we also heard religion and government speaking to each other. Rev. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, President of the World Congress of Faiths, asked how the UN can be more effective in preventing genocide, examining how the international community enforces international law, and citing proposals from former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Dalai Lama. Dr. Thomas Walsh, President of UPF, looked at the resurgence of religion, noting the success of the Westphalian system in finding a nation-state solution to end wars of religion (rooted less in altruism than in a revulsion for the horror of war), but asking if the increasing acceptance of religion as factor in global affairs might not indicate that it is now time for religion to engage in a more constructive and dynamic way. Hon. Aslambek Aslakhonov, former member of the Russian Senate, explained that a corrupt

system in mosques (all jobs went to close relatives) provided an easy recruiting ground for extremists. Dr. Werner Fasslabend, former minister of defense of Austria, discussing how to build up civil society in such places as Syria, made it clear that religions will be the key to a functioning system: “They have the authority and the influence.” Prof. Emmanuel Dupuy, a geopolitical expert and interfaith consultant from France, pointed out that in government today people are linking faith and decision-making. Shrivatsa Goswami reminded us of Mahatma Gandhi’s words, “there is no department of life which can be divorced from religion,” adding that keeping religious institutions out of the UN is “like trying to keep the electricity away from the appliances.”



The atmosphere of dialogue that prevailed was in large part due to the substantial interfaith presence. One participant described it as a “tent of love,” while another told me, “You created a laboratory for dialogue!” One ambassador stated, “The merit of this meeting is that it opens minds.” The same ambassador, looking forward to Geneva II (a proposed UN-backed peace conference to take place in Geneva in late 2013 with the aim of stopping the Syrian civil war and organizing a transition period and post-war reconstruction), said: “We need to create the right climate to reach peace and reconciliation.” There was a sense that, at least to some extent, this was the function of our conference.

***THE ATMOSPHERE OF DIALOGUE THAT PREVAILED WAS IN LARGE PART DUE TO THE SUBSTANTIAL INTERFAITH PRESENCE. ONE PARTICIPANT DESCRIBED IT AS A “TENT OF LOVE,” WHILE ANOTHER TOLD ME, “YOU CREATED A LABORATORY FOR DIALOGUE!”***

### **REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Everyone spoke of the tragic destruction and bloodshed in Syria, all aware of the danger that it may spread as an escalating conflict throughout the region. H.E. Faisal El Fayed, former prime minister of Jordan, in the conference patron’s address read on his behalf, mentioned that the conflict started with a desire for freedom and dignity, but is now a regional conflict fed by different parties. It is important to find a consensus between regional and world powers, to respond to the ambitions of Syrians and preserve their unity, to move to a transitional period leading to an election with

all participating and to guarantee the rights of all minorities. He added that, if we are to face extremism, we must find a just solution to the Palestinian problem, which otherwise feeds tensions and the spread of terrorism.

Many from the region disapprove of the term “Arab Spring,” having witnessed the chaos that has resulted in many countries in the region. The Rt. Rev. Riah Abo El-Assal, former Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, said it was more of a “bloody autumn,” while Professor Kamel Abu Jaber, President of Jordan’s Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies, called it a “freezing season.” Like El-Assal, quite a few accuse the West and Israel of deliberately destabilizing their world, tracing such efforts to weaken the Arab nation back 100 years. Such people link the difficulties in the whole region to the lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Abu Jaber attended the Madrid conference in 1991 (an early attempt by the international community to start a peace process), but sees that things have gone backwards since: “the Israelis have become very adept at deflecting any peaceful solution.”

However others, including some of the Syrians present, see the Arab Spring as the expression of a genuine desire for freedom from repression, and the crisis in Syria as the result first of the violent response of the Syrian government, and then of the decision by some in opposition to take up arms. Some saw pre-crisis Syria as a haven for minorities (particularly Christians) and point to extremist Al Qaida-type attacks as evidence that outside factors threaten to destroy a beautiful country. Others claim that the extremist element is rejected by the majority of those in opposition. Sheikh Mohamad Ali al-Hajj, a Shia leader from Lebanon (whose religion is therefore closer to that of the Alawite leadership in Syria), strongly emphasized that this was not a religious crisis but the result of political repression: it is in the regime’s interest to have the Shia people on their side. He added that the Arab Spring was neither good nor bad – people’s natural desire for freedom has emerged differently in different parts of the region. Similarly, there was disagreement about the future, some predicting an extremist takeover and calling for a return to the way things used to be, others proposing an international force to supervise an end to the violence.

Dr. Mohammad Al Habash, Associate Professor at Abu Dhabi University and former member of the Syrian parliament, spoke of his country’s beauty and tradition



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of religious coexistence, and of his early attempts to find a third way as the crisis worsened. He gave detailed figures on the horrors of the war, pointing out that, with violence from both the regime and foreign fighters, those who suffer are the innocent, unarmed Syrians. He then called for a series of actions, beginning with disarmament and dialogue, and including urgent relief for refugees, participation in Geneva II and engagement with Iran. He added

that Syria needs international influence and protection. Dr. Ismail Yassin, a Kurdish Syrian, who as a lecturer at Damascus University had witnessed the brutal repression of a peaceful demonstration, echoed Habash's calls, adding the need to stop all foreign fighters and to spread a culture of peace.

Another important element is the absence of a culture for democracy. As Kamel Abu Jaber put it, "we are heirs to a political system of many centuries," referring to the Ottoman Empire. There was no university in Jordan and the only school was built after the Ottomans left. After centuries of popular illiteracy and authoritarian government, the change to democracy is going to be a slow process. Hussein Hassouna echoed this: "The process to democracy is very slow."

**INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Some of the international participants noted parallels to the difficulties faced by Syria and the Middle East. India's troubles with the West were referred to above. Dr. Paul

Mojzes, Dean of Religious Studies at Rosemont College, USA, drawing on the experience of his native Yugoslavia, pointed out that when a dictator is replaced, "the vacuum is filled by multifaceted conflicts that had been lurking under the surface. Forces that threaten to destroy the very society which they inhabit find a fertile soil to thrive."

Aslambek Aslakhonov, thankful for the chance to be in Jordan (where Chechens like himself who fled Russia centuries ago are now part of the royal guard), had



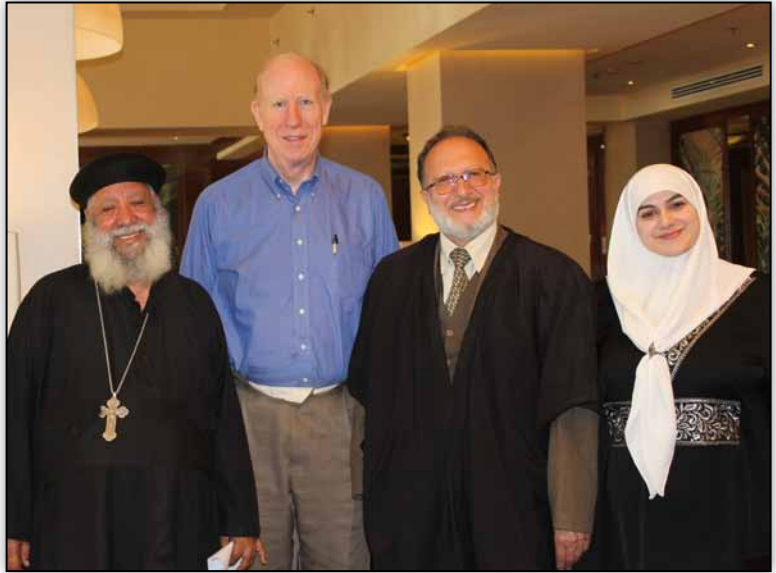
previously been assigned the task of understanding the situation of religious leaders in Russia, and had seen how defenseless they were in front of those who misused the name of Allah. On Syria, the divided opposition appeared to agree only on their dislike of Assad. He realized many participants did not agree with Russia's view, yet in both Iraq and Libya Russia could see what was coming, realizing that the real agenda behind both interventions was different from the stated one. This time, however, he perceived agreement on chemical weapons as a positive step, hopefully moving towards Geneva II. Russia will do as much as possible to guarantee a peaceful solution, in dialogue with all constructive forces.



Other participants presented proposals. Dr. Leonard Swidler, Professor of Religious Studies at Temple University, USA, recommended mobilizing soft power from below, building on the inevitable weariness of killing and pushing for an election. Hon. Anne-Marie Lizin, Honorary Speaker of the Belgian Senate, spoke of efforts to stop the flow of fighters into Syria: young Shia in Belgium, for example, procure visas to “do humanitarian work.” The ways to stop it are to have clear messages in the mosques and to stop the funding. She also commented from the viewpoint of international law on types of interventionism: “responsibility to protect” does not come with permission to change the system, and even then could only be justified if a state is internally illegitimate. In the current situation in Syria, the most vulnerable are those who have chosen to oppose but not to take up arms, since they are easily seen as traitors by both sides. She is strongly supportive of pushing for Geneva II, along with a parallel civil society conference. Emmanuel Dupuy is also strongly supportive of a Track 2 Geneva II, suggesting that we find someone to act as a liaison, providing necessary cross-fertilization between the two conferences.

Several participants provided a broader analysis of the crisis. Werner Fasslabend illustrated on a world map the areas of highest crisis potential. In the case of Syria, since there are three levels of actors, peace depends on bringing them together and finding a solution at all levels. Israel and Iran are the main actors, with Iran's “axis of resistance” made possible by the US invasion of Iraq. Syrian government brutality and the rebel decision to arm caused the current situation. Any attempt to divide the nation

into religious-based states would guarantee 100 years of instability. The solution should be an initiative from outside, agreed upon and executed by Syrians. Key to success will be a build-up of civil society. Emmanuel Dupuy emphasized that we are dealing with a human security problem. The crisis “is not only about religion. It’s geopolitics.” He pointed to a competition for leadership in the Muslim world (including such places as Nigeria, Indonesia and Iran) and to the roles of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Russia. Religion may be seen as the root cause of insecurity in some cases, but, through Track 2 diplomacy, it can also be part of the solution.



### **RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES**

Darrol Bryant defines the study of other religions as “learning how to walk in another’s moccasins.” Listening deeply to each other is the bread and butter of interfaith, but

was also fundamental to the success of our consultation. Leonard Swidler quoted Pope Francis’ three-word answer to a problem: “Dialogue. Dialogue. Dialogue.” Everything in our universe, starting from matter and energy, is in dialogue. We need each other. Dr Hamdi Murad, an Islamic scholar from Jordan, had set the bar very high in the opening session, telling us that God even dialogued with Satan, so who are we to refuse dialogue?

***“IF YOU BURN THE CHURCH, WE WILL COME AND PRAY WITH YOU IN THE MOSQUE. IF THEY BURN THE MOSQUE, WE WILL PRAY TOGETHER IN THE STREET.” THESE WORDS MELTED TENSIONS AND WON DEEP RESPECT FROM MUSLIMS IN EGYPT.***

Rabbi Joseph Abittan, director of the monotheistic religions council for the South of France, reminded us of the internal process that precedes reconciliation: internal peace empowers us, but the culture of peace begins within the home light of a loving family. Forgiveness is an act of strength. As the African saying goes, “If you think differently than me, you are twice my brother.” Dr. Emanuel Aydin, patriarchal delegate of the Syrian Orthodox church in Austria, reminded us that people will listen to men of God if they are transparent for God. Rev. Dr. Filotheos Farag, a bishop in the Coptic church in Sudan, asked us all to pray silently for one minute for Syria; several participants spoke of the importance of prayer. Dr. Ahmed Kanaan of Lebanon, Director of the



Mohammad Kanaan Foundation, quoted words of the prophet Mohammed condemning all killing, adding that those fighting in the name of religion don't know the reality of religion.

Mufti Abduljalil Sajid, chair of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony in the UK, reminded us of the Prophet's words that "evil is in the mind. Change the mind," going on to encourage us to love those we disagree with. Dr. Rouchdy Saleh, professor of natural resources at Tanta University in Egypt, cited a practical example of exemplary religious leadership. He spoke of Pope Tawadros of the Coptic church in Egypt, who, hearing of threats to churches, said: "If you burn the church, we will come and pray with you in the mosque. If they burn the mosque, we will pray together in the street." These words melted tensions and won deep respect from Muslims in Egypt.

Many spoke of *jihad*, rejecting violent and immoral distortions and misuse of this term. Abduljalil Sajid says it means "change yourself and then change others peacefully." Ismail Yassin said: "This conference is *jihad*. We are making an effort."

Others addressed religion's role to speak clearly to power. Hamdi Murad spoke for us all when he said we must raise our voice and give a clear message: "Stop the killing!" Marcus Braybrooke reflected with Kofi Annan on humanity's failure to stop the genocide in Rwanda. He then cited steps suggested by the Dalai Lama, which moved from the internal to the more practical, including "Disarm internally," "Strengthen international agreements," "Dismantle the arms industry," "Support the UN and its many agencies," and "Create a World Council of People."

Darrol Bryant insisted that "our focus should remain on the human suffering."

## NGO PERSPECTIVES

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"What can actually be done?" was the question troubling many of us. The Syrian participants emphasized the desperate need for help of both refugees in Jordan and the internally displaced in Syria. A special evening session was held where Amman-based aid agencies explained their projects in the hope that international participants will



be able to secure such help. This aid includes not only basics such as food, blankets and medicine, increasingly important as winter approaches, but also education for the children of refugees. Education was the key focus for many of us. Rev. Souheil Saoud, Executive Secretary of the board of education in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, spoke of the importance of education starting from elementary school, as the personality is shaped in its first few years. Sadly, we've been educating our children in violence, glorifying wars. After 17 years of civil war in Lebanon no one can agree on what the history books should include. We need books which emphasize peace treaties, not wars. We have to spread the culture of peace, starting from schools. Dr. Amer Al Hafi of Jordan's Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies emphasized the importance of teaching about one another's religions. "Sunnis teach badly about Shia and vice versa." We have to correct misconceptions in our own religion and deepen our understanding of mercy and tolerance. Dr. Ines Murzaku, professor of religion and chair of the department of Catholic Studies at Seton Hall University in the USA, wants to teach history better; 1000-year-old sources have wonderful examples of Christian-Muslim dialogue.



Ms. Patricia Lalonde is the managing director of MEWA (Mobilization for Elected Women Alternative) in France, which helps rebuild schools in Afghanistan. She made a passionate plea that we put women's rights at the center of our strategy, pointing out that women's rights do not affect only women. Leonard Swidler spoke of the vital importance of educating the children of Syrian refugees, especially the girls.

Mr. George Stephan is coordinator of the ACT Forum in Palestine (Action of Churches Together), whose goal is to create positive change in the lives of marginalized people. He emphasized the importance of giving hope to the Syrian refugees that they will soon be able to return to their homeland. His parents became refugees in 1948. He also spoke of an ACT Forum prayer vigil which will continue every month until a peaceful solution to the Palestinian problem is found.

## **THE DECLARATION**

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The declaration which resulted from our consultation had been circulated in draft form before we met. Adjustments and additions were made during our meeting and in particular during and as a result of our final session. It emphasizes the importance of the religious voice, calling upon religions to unite in search of a solution and to speak clearly against all forms of extremism. It calls for an immediate ceasefire, negotiations to release hostages and a swift move to a May 2014 election. It also calls for a range of soft power initiatives, particularly in the fields of education and relief. Finally it calls upon UPF and other NGOs to convene a Track 2 conference at the time of Geneva II.

# UPF Interfaith Declaration on Peace in Syria

Amman, Jordan

October 13, 2013

Gathered in Amman, Jordan, on October 11-13, 2013 for the Interfaith Consultation on “The Prospects for Dialogue and Reconciliation in Syria” sponsored by the Universal Peace Federation, we, the participants, being persons from a wide range of religious and spiritual backgrounds, professional fields, and from many nations – Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Egypt, France, India, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Lebanon, Monaco, Palestine, Russia, Sudan, Syria, UAE, UK, USA – committed to peace and human development for all, and,

**Acknowledging** that the conflict in Syria has escalated at an alarming rate, leaving more than 100,000 people dead, and more than 2 million refugees and nearly 4 million internally displaced persons, spawning a human disaster of enormous magnitude, and

**Recognizing** that on August 21, 2013, approximately 1400 men, women and children were killed as a result of chemical weapons, and,

**Realizing** that the world’s leading powers, including the permanent member states of the UN Security Council, find themselves at a critical juncture, that may lead to either a dramatic breakthrough in international cooperation, or to widespread and growing threats to human security, and,

**Applauding** the efforts made by King Abdullah II of Jordan with the Amman Message, Common Word, and the World Interfaith Harmony Week; Pope Francis calling for prayer, fasting and an end to the violence in Syria; as well as other worthy and outstanding initiatives, such as are being carried out by the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz’ International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Religions for Peace, the UNESCO’s Culture of Peace initiative, the UN’s Alliance of Civilizations, and other initiatives,

**We therefore,**

Support the United Nations and multilateral efforts to resolve the crisis through peaceful means.

**Call upon the United Nations and the major powers to recognize the importance of religious voices and religious leaders as allies in the effort to work out a peaceful resolution of the conflict.**

**Call upon leaders of the world's great faith traditions, especially Muslims, Jews, and Christians, and their respective leaders** to come together in the search for a solution that brings an end to the bloodshed in Syria.

**Call upon the various denominations and sects within particular religions** to work to overcome barriers and intra-religious divisions and disputes that stand in the way of cooperative action for peace in Syria, the region and the world.

**Call upon political leaders and civil society leaders, along with religious leaders and believers from all the faith traditions**, to come together in support of peace in Syria, offering humanitarian assistance as well as a wider range of “soft power” initiatives that may open a way for a sustainable peace, including but not limited to:

**Peace education programs**

**Education for refugee children**

**Educational programs that promote interfaith understanding**

**Empowerment of women through education and respect for the rights of women**

**Interreligious relief efforts**

**Promotion of a culture of peace**

**Fundraising for relief efforts to help the refugees**

**Call up the government of Syria and the opposition forces** to not only cooperate fully in the dismantling of chemical weapons, but to also bring a speedy end to the violence, by initiating an immediate cease-fire; to negotiate the release of hostages; and to come to an agreement to hold elections no later than May of 2014, with a commitment to abide by the results that are assured of legitimacy by objective international observers under supervision of the United Nations and major stakeholders.

**Call upon UPF, as well as other NGOs and faith-based organizations**, to convene – as a supplemental “Track II” consultative/advisory body that can support and augment the governmental deliberations and outcomes – an international interfaith, academic, civil society conference at the time of the Geneva II deliberations expected to be held this November.

**We emphasize** the point that, whereas governments naturally have their realm of responsibility in the area of peace and security, the religions should not be excluded from deliberations, neither by governments nor by their own hesitancy or resistance to interfaith cooperation. In addition, the religions must stand firmly against all forms of radical and violent extremism, while at the same time upholding their spiritual traditions, virtues, and good practices.

**In conclusion**, we also encourage UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, the General Assembly, and the Security Council to work with greater urgency to establish, with the support of the major faith traditions, a specialized interfaith agency, commission or council within the United Nations system made up of spiritual elders, leaders and clerics from a wide range of religious traditions.

# Universal Peace Federation *Middle East Peace Initiative*

## List of Participants

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Dr. Werner Fasslabend  
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Board Member, Middle East Peace Forum –  
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Executive Secretary of the Board of Education,  
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Director, Imam as-Sajad Seminary, Lebanon

Rabbi Joseph Abittan  
Director, Monotheistic Religions Council for  
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Father Joseph Saghbini  
Auxiliary Patriarchal Vicar, Greek-Melkite-  
Catholic Patriarchate, Palestine

Mr. George Emil Stephan  
Coordinator for Action by Churches Together,  
Department of Service to Palestine Refugees,  
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Mr. Konstantin Krylov  
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# UNIVERSAL PEACE FEDERATION



**The Universal Peace Federation** is a global network of individuals and organizations committed to dialogue, education and service. UPF programs engage leaders representing a wide range of fields and areas of interest, including government, civil society, religion, academia, the media, the arts, sports and the private sector.

Since its inaugural assembly in 2005 the UPF has seen remarkable growth and progress. UPF's Ambassadors for Peace are engaged worldwide in a determined effort to bring civil society solutions to critical global problems.

**The Universal Peace Federation** affirms a model of leadership and good governance guided by the principle of "living for the sake of others"; a model that balances in a mature way, both spiritual and secular perspectives, and one that functions collaboratively with representatives of inter-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, the private sector and civil society.

## **Founded:**

By Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon on September 12, 2005 in New York City

## **Motto:**

"True Love is the Ideal and the Guiding Principle of the Universal Peace Federation"

## **Status:**

ECOSOC  
(UPF is an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations  
We support and promote the work of the United Nations and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals)

## **Network:**

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