

Middle East Leadership Conference in Istanbul

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UPF-Turkey

Istanbul, Turkey - When international commentators discuss the changes unfolding in Arab countries, their consensus is their surprise. Assessments of what has become known as the “Arab Spring” have varied from the start of 2011, and ranged from enthusiastic support to general concerns over stability and worries over security and the potential radicalization of future governments in the region.



The past five months have seen much speculation over the change agents and communication channels that facilitated the regime changes through the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. But the point of general agreement was that these changes had come totally unexpectedly. Civil society organizations and human rights activists admitted their total surprise at the events, as did politicians and academics.

Another point of agreement was that development of the Arab societies has been long overdue. For the Universal Peace Federation’s Middle East chapter, the central issue of importance in relating to the Arab Spring, however, was the urgent search for unifying values.

In this spirit, UPF Middle East accepted the task put forward by the Arab Spring as an urgent mission for new efforts at interfaith leadership, spiritual orientation, and reconciliation.

Based on the foundations for active peace building laid in the Middle East in more than a decade of work by UPF and its sister organizations, UPF organized the Middle East Leadership Conference entitled “Divine Winds of Freedom: New Opportunities and New Responsibilities for the Middle East.”

This regional Leadership Conference for the region’s current and future Ambassadors for Peace, held at the beautiful Atakoy Sheraton Hotel in Istanbul from May 6 to 8, was organized at very short notice, but it was the result of a plan years in the making. As UPF-Middle East Secretary General David Fraser Harris reported, over two years had been spent debating the right time and place for this meeting.

The intense three-day schedule started with a very powerful opening session on May 6. Dr. Sang Jin Lee, Middle East Chair of UPF, declared that the people of the Middle East have to become owners of the peace process.



UPF President Dr. Thomas Walsh spoke about the vision of an Arab UN, and then Rev. Dr. Hyung Jin Moon, UPF International Chairman, imparted his message to the audience, speaking to them on a deep, spiritual level.

In the following session, the recent events that shook the entire Arab world were put into perspective, beginning with a young speaker from Egypt describing the timeline of the events from her personal experience and giving her take on the steps that she and other people in Arab countries now have to

undertake. Complementary to her energetic remarks, Mr. Taj Hamad, UPF Secretary General, provided insightful comments on the Arab Spring in a historic context.

The morning of the second day featured three sessions of interfaith dialogue in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three religions that have their origins in the Middle East, were represented.

The rationale for this series of three sessions was very specific, rooted in the realization that the Middle East has tremendous religious resources of understanding at its disposal. These religious identities need to interact constructively to reduce the tensions and frictions that have often led to bloodshed between communities due to misperceptions, fears, and prejudices.

A key element to these sessions was the attempt to address the regrettable underuse of religious insights and highly relevant ethical and moral perspectives in mapping the region's future.

To identify and illuminate shared waypoints on the Middle East's own roadmap to a brilliant future, UPF therefore invited speakers from the region's living faiths to elaborate on key subjects: first among these, freedom and liberation (as a core religious message and a precondition for development and new governance structures) was a topic addressed by representatives of the Jewish faith, whose very origins are inseparable from being a people led into freedom by the power of God's promise.

Building upon the certainty that God wills his believers to live in freedom, speakers representing the Christian faith shared their existential grasp and experience of forgiveness and grace, truth and righteousness as essential to improving the chances for peace in the Middle East – a daring vision at a time like this, as participants in the conference were fully aware of the constant flow of news of new victims in protests across the region, acts of violence and oppression, and geopolitical complexities affecting the countries.

The third morning session on May 7 was dedicated to the imperatives of delivering justice and instituting just authority, but in a specific context: namely affirmation of the divine as the author of the structures inherent in and the principles governing human existence.

Two representatives of Islam enlightened the participants with their insights into these essential components for developing the Arab Spring into a positive force and influence that will help improve the entire community of nations.

In the UPF perspective, the series of presentations from such a diverse group of speakers reinforced the value of religious experiences and insights informing best practices for dealing with the region's core concerns: they are of existential importance and can be applied to utmost benefit for the Middle East's development.

The sense of a common task and agreed-upon perspectives grew visibly among the participants in the Middle East Leadership Conference in the course of these exchanges as the 50 participants moved far beyond the appreciation of dialogue into a dimension of collaboration and joint purpose. All in all, the conference had speakers from Turkey, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, and Tunisia.

On the afternoon of May 7, eight people from the Middle East who lived and died for peace were honored during the Legacy of Peace event, in which a photograph of each person was displayed with a floral bouquet and a candle lit for each of them.



The persons commemorated in this ceremony included heroes of the historic fight for self-determination when parts of Arab North Africa were under European colonial control, as well as important pioneers in the political sphere who dared to sign treaties of peace and paid for this with their lives.

Among the honorees were religious leaders who had worked for the most important freedoms of relating to the creator and accepting divine truth without hating other faiths. And in an essential tribute to the women and men who risked their lives for the new future of freedom in Arab lands, Mr. Thomas Schellen, moderator of the event, commemorated the names of young people whose deaths had been defining moments in breaking the strangleholds of security apparatuses and opening the Arab Spring.

An excerpt from Rev. Moon's autobiography, *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, was also read at this time, reminding the participants of the infinite value of "a true life, [as] a life in which we abandon our private desires and live for the public good."

The May 7 evening program included the address by UPF Founder, Dr. Sun Myung Moon. He felt that he had an urgent message for Turkey and the Middle East, so a lot of effort was put into finding more people to attend the event. For more than three hours, he poured out his heart and shared his vision with the people of Istanbul and the Middle East.

May 8, the final day of the conference, focused on a roadmap for the future. After the first session, the participants were divided into three groups to discuss waypoints of collaboration, communication, and education in the Middle East. After the group discussions, a representative from each group was invited to share the results.

Communication is a key process for developing the work of UPF in the Middle East, the reporters from the communication session said, detailing point-by-point the results of the groups' discussion on ways to make communication among Ambassadors for Peace more efficient and consistent.

Education starts with the family, and it is important to fight against hate education and instead teach children to love and accept others. Collaboration is vital to make anything work, and one group came up with ten points of action, including a plan for raising funds locally and for the region. A common theme in all the group findings was the desire to develop the interaction of the Ambassadors for Peace and strengthen the regional activities of the UPF community.

A special gift awaited the participants in the final session, in which each one was given a copy of Rev. Moon's autobiography, *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, which had been brought over from London for that purpose. Everyone was invited to share their final thoughts on the conference and with that, it was concluded.