

Interreligious and International Relations in the Middle East: *Toward Peace and Stability*

**Jerusalem,
December 19-22, 2013**

EXECUTIVE REPORT



Universal Peace Federation
Middle East Peace Initiative

“Interreligious and International Relations in the Middle East: Toward Peace and Stability”

Executive Report

By Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld

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THE Universal Peace Federation held an international conference in Jerusalem December 19-22, 2013 on the topic of Interreligious and International Relations in the Middle East: Toward Peace and Stability. On the backdrop of sunny winter days that followed a blizzard, some 45 scholars, religious leaders, diplomats, geopolitical experts and NGO activists from five continents and 22 countries converged from around the globe in search for optional solutions to the conflict in the Middle East. The discussions dealt with the current situation in the Middle East from broad perspectives and diverse angles.

Dr. Thomas Walsh, president of UPF International, noted that the conference marked the tenth anniversary of the Middle East Peace Initiative of UPF in Israel and Palestine, during which more than 50 international delegations visited Israel and Palestine. Dr. Walsh underscored the need for increased coordination among experts in international relations with experts in interreligious relations. Professor Eliezer Glaubach, a former elected member of the City Council of Jerusalem, expressed his gratitude as a citizen of Jerusalem for this initiative which brought to Jerusalem thousands of Ambassadors for Peace even in times of international isolation.

DR. THOMAS WALSH, PRESIDENT OF UPF INTERNATIONAL, NOTED THAT THE CONFERENCE MARKED THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE INITIATIVE OF UPF IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE, DURING WHICH MORE THAN 50 INTERNATIONAL DELEGATIONS VISITED ISRAEL AND PALESTINE.

The Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) supports peace efforts in the region through open dialogues, religious pilgrimages and peace tourism in Israel, Palestine and Jordan, thus offering both moral and economic support. Dr. Chang Shik Yang, Chairman of Universal Peace Federation International, who led numerous MEPI delegations, expressed his deepest hope that UPF and MEPI can make a significant contribution to bring peace to the Holy Land: “I have the greatest love and respect for all my Jewish, Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters. I want to see the day when we can live together in peace, harmony and cooperation, like one family; one family under God.”

HON. NADIA HILOU, A FORMER MEMBER OF THE ISRAELI PARLIAMENT, POINTED OUT THAT EVEN THOUGH 20 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE OSLO ACCORD, THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PEACE AGREEMENTS THAT WERE SIGNED ARE STILL THE BASIS FOR EVERY NEGOTIATION, TREATY AND PEACE INITIATIVE THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE EVER SINCE.

THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

Mr. Aamir Javed Sheikh from Norway, a former member of the Oslo parliament, gave a presentation about the political and diplomatic efforts that have been done to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the past last two decades. Hon. Nadia Hilou, a former member of the Israeli parliament, pointed out that even though 20 years have passed since the Oslo Accord, the principles of the peace agreements that were signed are still the basis for every negotiation, treaty and peace initiative that has taken place ever since. She noted that



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this agreement has been only partially fulfilled, since many unresolved issues remain. Interestingly, the unfulfilled aspects of the agreements were not related to issues of security and armed forces but rather to aspects of soft power domain: mistrust and suspicion, lack of sympathy and charged relations.

Dr. Willem Frederick van Eekelen, a member of the Netherlands Advisory Commission on European Integration, expressed his concern that the peace process is off track and voiced his fear that if something is not done soon to bring about a peace plan that both sides accept, the worst might happen and peace might be set back permanently.

Dr. Eldad J. Pardo from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem brought to the

discussion a broad viewpoint regarding key aspects that need to be considered when addressing the conflict in the Middle East. He focused on four main points: 1) The role of Iran in fomenting instability in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, and the danger posed by its ballistic missiles and nuclear project; 2) the perceived untrustworthiness of the US among her chief Middle Eastern allies; 3) the variety of types among the political entities in the Middle East; and 4) the challenge of education for peace in the region.

According to Dr. Pardo, the common denominator of the four areas is the religious dimension, a *sine qua non* in Middle Eastern politics. As a revolutionary religious country, Iran tries to force its hegemony over the largely Sunni Arab world unleashing wars and conflicts continuously. The US tries to find a way to collaborate with political Islam but fails to find the way to support the moderates. It did not support Iranian Muslim reformers in 2009, but allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to take over Egypt. Saudi Arabia, dismayed by the US abandonment of the pro-democracy groups in Egypt and support for Iran and Hezbollah in their aggressive stance *vis a vis* against the Syrian people, plays a problematic role in supporting Sunni militants.

“The Middle East, being a patchwork of ethnic and religious groups must,” said Dr. Pardo, “find its own politics – tribal, confessional and national – but should also respect both religion and basic human rights. The chief among them is the right to be alive.”

Finally, Dr. Pardo pointed out that education that perpetuates hostility is unfortunately widespread across the Middle East, not surprisingly leading to atrocities and bloodshed against helpless “others.” Such education and accompanying attitudes in the school systems remain cardinal stumbling blocks on the road to peace.

Based on his analysis of the situation, Dr. Pardo also suggested that a solution be sought on a regional basis, with much emphasis on the role of religion – mainly Islam, but also with respect for and involvement of the entire region’s religions. A *Shami* – Levantine – approach should be implemented, beginning with education for peace and love, and with much emphasis on the shared religious values and cultural heritage of the *Shami* peoples, confessions and ethnic groups. Heavy-duty security measures should accompany the lengthy educational and religious processes, which could guarantee a solid change for the better.

A suggestion for support from another angle was brought up by Prof. Quan Yi Zhang from Zhejiang Wanli University International Politics Department in the People’s Republic of China. Prof. Zhang suggested that China – as a country of a non-Abrahamic faith – can be a mediator and supporter in the Middle East conflict, since it has no burden from past connections with the region.

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THE NEED FOR “SOFT POWER”

When talking about areas of conflict and war, issues such as armed forces and politics are of great concern. Understanding the necessity for conventional discussions about hard power while realizing that the hard-power approach by itself cannot bring conflicts to an end, UPF is focusing on soft power approaches to peace.

ACCORDING TO PROF. ALIYEV, THE ROLE OF RELIGION IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY: “WITHOUT THE INNER SELF-CONTROL SYSTEM WHICH IS PECULIAR TO RELIGION, NO SOCIETY WITH ANY CHOSEN FORM OF GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE ENDURED AND MAINTAINED A BALANCE OF POWER.”



Prof. Rafiq Y. Aliyev, Director of IRSHAD Center of Islamic Studies in Azerbaijan, dedicated his presentation to the relationships among a governance system (power), civil society and religion. He argued that the governance system, civil society and religion are one integrated organism and should be treated and researched as such, not separately as has been done traditionally. One should consider their relationship in terms of interdependence and inter-cooperation. “Power, society and religion have never been truly hostile to one another,” said Prof. Aliyev, “On the contrary, their deep, invisible but evident relations existed over the centuries and continue to exist.” Without organic relations, the power structures, which are founded on society, would have collapsed. Society in turn gets the energy and strength necessary for its survival and maintenance from the ethical principles of religion.

According to Prof. Aliyev, the role of religion is as important as the

role of the governance system and the civil society: “Without the inner self-control system which is peculiar to religion, no society with any chosen form of government would have endured and maintained a balance of power.”

A different perspective and another aspect of soft power were added by Fr. Eliseo Mercado, convener of the National Peace Council in the Philippines. His argument was based on global warming and on the danger it poses to every human being around the world: “The great meltdown of the glaciers threatens the survival of the planet. No ifs and no buts. We are now all considered ‘endangered species’ threatened either by inundation or by hunger. At stake is not individual lives or single or group of nations but the entire planet! It calls for a new relationship – a new solidarity for all peoples across political and ideological boundaries, across cultures and religions.” Fr. Mercado suggested uniting the populations on the globe through activities and concerns for nature. Through working together and focusing on a common goal, enmities are forgotten and friendships can arise.

THE CRISIS IN SYRIA

One session in the conference was dedicated to the current crisis in Syria. UPF convened an important consultation on the crisis in Syria in Amman, Jordan, in October 2013, and produced the UPF “Amman Interfaith Statement” encouraging faith leaders to raise their voices in unison in calling for a resolution of the crisis. The speakers in this session built on the work accomplished in Jordan earlier this year and offered their thoughts on Geneva II and the way to resolve the crisis in Syria.

Most of the speakers proposed paths to bring the crisis to an end using the tools of soft power. Prof Quan Yi Zhang recommend setting up three committees, being composed of religious leaders, political elites and state officials, to handle conflicts from the grassroots, bureaucratic and system levels. He also suggested that UPF, as a non-governmental organization promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation, can play a unique role as a go-between in such an initiative.

Dr. Leo Gabriel, president of the Institute for Intercultural Research and Cooperation in Austria, said that a military solution for the Syrian conflict is neither possible nor desirable. His initiative is to convene a Conference of Civil Society on Syria to be held outside Syria, in Vienna. The participants of such a conference would be leading figures and activists close to the civilian population and not representatives of the hierarchies of political organizations. This implies that a variety

MOST OF THE SPEAKERS PROPOSED PATHS TO BRING THE CRISIS TO AN END USING THE TOOLS OF SOFT POWER. PROF QUAN YI ZHANG RECOMMEND SETTING UP THREE COMMITTEES, BEING COMPOSED OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS, POLITICAL ELITES AND STATE OFFICIALS, TO HANDLE CONFLICTS FROM THE GRASSROOTS, BUREAUCRATIC AND SYSTEM LEVELS. HE ALSO SUGGESTED THAT UPF, AS A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION PROMOTING INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION, CAN PLAY A UNIQUE ROLE AS A GO-BETWEEN IN SUCH AN INITIATIVE.



of sectors be represented at the conference, including religious confessions, educational and health-care institutions, different ethnicities (e.g., Kurds), women, workers and representatives from businesses both large and small from different parts of the country.

Ms. Patricia Raynaud Lalonde from the Institute for Prospective and Security Studies in Europe, based in France, talked about the Syrian crisis, which has sent 1,000,000 refugees to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and killed so many innocent people including women and children. As a participant in the UPF Amman conference, she reported about its recommendation to organize a Track 2 conference in Geneva in parallel with Geneva II to give voice to representatives of the Syrian civil society, women and religious leaders.

Dr. Mordechai Kedar from the Department of Arabic Literature in Bar Ilan University, Israel, claimed that in order to solve the crisis in Syria the root problem should be solved: “Much of the Middle East is made up of artificially constructed nation states. In many nations, such as Syria, there are multiple tribal and ethnic groups that would prefer to live independently rather than as one country under one regime.” This pattern is not unique to the Middle East and one can observe it in other places around the world such as in the former Yugoslavia, separatist factions in Spain, Canada, the UK, Sudan, etc.” According to Dr. Kedar, peace requires allowing various ethnic and religious groups to form their own nation states, perhaps along the lines of the United Arab Emirates or the Yugoslavia model. The illegitimate borders were drawn by colonial powers, and he suggested that

they should to be erased and replaced by new borders that will honor the culture of the local ethnic, tribal, religious and sectarian groups.

“MUCH OF THE MIDDLE EAST IS MADE UP OF ARTIFICIALLY CONSTRUCTED NATION STATES. IN MANY NATIONS, SUCH AS SYRIA, THERE ARE MULTIPLE TRIBAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS THAT WOULD PREFER TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY RATHER THAN AS ONE COUNTRY UNDER ONE REGIME.”

Rev. Dr. William A. McComish from Switzerland, president of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, noted a similarity between the Vietnam War and the war in Syria. The Vietnam War was a war between the capitalist world and communist world, while the war in Syria is a surrogate war between Shia and Sunni Islam. Dr. McComish



expressed his opinion about the importance of having a “track II” conference in Geneva in parallel to Geneva II. One its important aims would be the introduction of religious and spiritual discussions into what is going to be yet another political debate, a very masculine political debate. In his view, the “track II” conferences in Geneva should be a religious and spiritual conference that brings in other people, including women and religious people, who will not be part of the discussions between the big powers at Geneva.

THE SOFT POWER OF INTERFAITH

On Mt. Scopus, with its vistas of mosques, churches and the holy Jewish places in the old city of Jerusalem, there was no more appropriate place than this for interfaith discussions and exploring the potential for interreligious cooperation. While the roots of the conflict in the land of Israel and Palestine are complex and labyrinthine, one can only wonder what might be possible if relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims were vastly improved. Participants offered their wisdom on the relevance of interfaith cooperation for peace in Israel and Palestine.

Religion is an immanent part of the conflict; therefore, it is an immanent part of the solution.

Mr. George E. Stephan, the regional internal auditor of the Middle East Council of Churches Department of Services to Palestinian Refugees, based his appeal for peace on Christian values: “From a small grotto in Bethlehem a message of love, hope, justice and peace was spread all over the world. For us Christians, the Infant baby is the Prince of Peace and His message is one of reaching out with love, compassion, understanding and forgiveness. Indeed the need for a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a big challenge. And yet it the responsibility of each and every one of us to make peace through acknowledging the other and through seeing his story, his fear and his hope.... Despite injustices, we carry the message of Jesus Christ in our hearts, to overcome voices of hatred and despair. Despite the hardships we are facing, we have the obligation to look into the future with hope and with open eyes.”



Dr. McComish from Switzerland reported about the Geneva Spiritual Appeal. The document included a refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual power to justify violence, discrimination and exclusion, and a refusal to exploit or dominate others by means of strength, intellectual capacity or spiritual persuasion, wealth or social

status. It was signed in Geneva on United Nations Day in 1999 by religious leaders of many religions and people from civil society. This text, according to Dr. McComish, has become more important as years go on.

Rabbi Michael Melchior, a former Minister for Social Affairs and Diaspora in the Israeli government, talked about his involvement in the January 2002 conference in Alexandria, Egypt where, in the midst of the second Intifada, Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders gathered in a common interreligious effort for peace. They signed a declaration in which they called for putting an end to any kind of incitement and bloodshed in the name of religion.

Rabbi Melchior noted that traditional diplomacy, despite the good will of many from around the world, has failed to bring peace to the Middle East. The basic agreement has been on the table for a long time, and the will exists from both sides to reach a peaceful solution. "Why then," he asked, "are we not getting there? We must ask ourselves what went wrong in all the previous attempts." According to Melchior the concept has been wrong, since the efforts were made to attain a secular peace. All attempts excluded the religious element in hope they would disappear. But they didn't disappear and toppled down all peace efforts. He called for a religious peace and believes it would be successful because it is inclusive and not exclusive. It stems from the belief in one God and is built upon values and justice, and not upon interests. "Religious peace can support the political peace," he said.



Rabbi Melchior concluded his speech with an optimistic statement of belief that we are at a significant turning point. There are Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians who are ready to meet at the table to work towards a solution. Meetings such as this conference are important in that regard.

Rev. Chang Shik Yang, Chairman of the Universal Peace Federation International, talked about the vision of UPF founder,

Father Sun Myung Moon, who believed sincerely that the fate of the world was directly related to the unity of the Abrahamic religions. If religious division persists, then conflicts will prevail not only on the level of religious doctrines but also on the political and military levels. In other words, peace cannot be achieved on the political level until peace is achieved on the spiritual level. Thus, he believed that interfaith dialogue is absolutely needed as one of the major tools to create a stable and substantial foundation for peace.

It is not enough to teach the words of the holy scriptures; we must live according to them.

Mr. Emmanuel Chouraqui, a filmmaker from Beamlight in France, is a son of *André Chouraqui*, who translated the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Qur'an into French and was one of the first activists in Jerusalem in the field of interfaith understanding. Inspired by his father's legacy, Mr. Chouraqui shared his understanding that the holy scriptures ultimately convey one and the same message, which is, that humankind is one family whose members, created in the image of the Creator, should respect one another, love their neighbors as themselves, and forsake wars and violence of all kinds.

Sheik Shafayat Mohamed, principal of the Darul Uloom Islamic Institute in the US, called upon all religious people to apply their holy scriptures. "If we live according to our holy scriptures peace would be easily achieved," he claimed. "Jews and Muslims are brothers: offspring of Ishmael and Issac. They are family members. They should naturally love and respect one another," he said and referred to Rev. Sun Myung Moon's vision of "one family under God." Dr. Rouchdy Saleh Hassan from Egypt said that he is applying this attitude in his life. He stressed the need for unity among the Abrahamic religions and indicated that when asked about his own religious preference, he is often inclined to respond: "Abrahamic."

Dr. Michael W. Jenkins, a member of the UPF's MEPI Steering Committee, explored in depth the call to live according to the holy scriptures: scriptures teach that we should respect and love the other; external efforts are not effective if our hearts don't resonate with this value. "If I, as a Christian, go to a mosque and hug a sheikh and go to a synagogue and hug a rabbi, but come home and tell my wife that actually I don't really like this sheikh and the rabbi was not as polite to me as I expected him to be, then my external efforts would not bear meaningful fruits."

Religions and religious leaders should challenge themselves.

Rabbi Reuven Khaskin, an educator and tour guide from Israel, mentioned that religion is often used as the main driving force of hatred, animosity and conflict. If so, "How can we, religious leaders, bring that change, and bridge the gap of animosity and mutual distrust?" he asked. His answer was that while religious leaders represent different faiths and religious traditions, all share a common understanding that humankind was created in the



image of God. Rabbi Khaskin quoted the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth Lord Jonathan Sacks: “Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from



mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to re-make me in his.”

Rabbi Khaskin concluded his words with a commentary on the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush. “God could have appeared to Moses in the shape of a broad, tall tree. Instead God appeared to him in the shape of a tiny bush. Why is that so?” he asked.

The answer he gave was that God wants to teach us humility. God is present when we are humble enough to see him. If we are humble enough to accept the other and learn to know the other, then we meet God face to face.

Rev. Hjortur Magni Johannsson, head minister of the Free Lutheran Church in Iceland, commented on his disappointment with fundamentalism and religious extremism. He sees religious triumphalism, be it Jewish, Christian or Islamic, as an expression of insecurity. Pure religion should be about peaceful communication in love and respect. Religion should be about communicating with the “other” (as the philosopher Martin Buber defined the term), those who are on the other side of the wall.

In light of the challenges of fundamentalism and fanaticism, Rev. Johannsson suggested the need for new paradigms; new ways of understanding and living out our particularities in the midst of pluralism: “We need to be inclusive not exclusive, tolerant not judgmental, preferring compassion, and mercy rather than strict righteousness legalism or harsh punishment. All of this is summed up by Father Moon’s high and beautiful ideal of: ‘Living for the sake of others.’”

Rev. Johannsson challenged religious conceptions and institutions: “Perhaps this ideal will be reached by going beyond religion,” and supported this thought with words of Father Moon: “Nothing exists for its own sake. Religion, too, does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of love and peace. Once world peace is accomplished, there will be no further need for religion. The ultimate purpose of religion is to bring about the reality of a human community filled with love and peace.”

He appealed to people to come to the place where they see their faith not only as a part of our security system in life but go further and connect their faith with what it means to be human. When religion is being misused we need to seek God beyond the peculiarities and divisions of religion. Only there will our gaze turn toward the mystery of God, the mystery of life, the mystery of love and the mystery of being, of being human.

LEADERSHIP AND VISION

Several significant issues were discussed in the two and a half days of deliberations. The first issue, leadership, was brought up in the opening session by Hon. Ran Cohen, a former minister of the Israeli government. “What makes a good leader?” Hon. Cohen asked, and then replied: “The one who uplifts his people and opens for them new and better horizons.” He cited as an example the late Nelson Mandela and lamented the lack of visionary leadership in the Middle East at this time period: “The conflict in our region is so complicated that good and visionary leaders are absolutely needed in order to bring it to a good conclusion,” he said.

Hon. Bob McEwen, a former member of the US House of Representatives, responded to the question of effective leadership. He argued that an effective leadership is based on vision and ideas, and that every constructed object, such as a building, is an expression of a vision and a blueprint. Effective leadership must have a spiritual dimension that provides direction and guidance. Leadership that lacks vision and internal clarity will not be effective in achieving objectives.

The need for vision and understanding was strongly emphasized by Dr. Young Tack Yang, the regional chair of UPF-Middle East, who mentioned also the famous “I have a dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., longing for the day when nobody is a slave anymore and everyone would be treated equally regardless of their skin color.

“Am I wrong to have a dream that Israelis and Palestinians become one family in the Middle East, or that Judaism, Christianity and Islam become one?” asked Dr. Yang. Indeed we have different ideas and opinions, and yet if we can have a dream and ideal, such as peace and happiness for all human beings, then to make this dream a reality we would have no choice but to invest in and deepen our understanding of the other. In this way this common dream would bring us closer.



EDUCATION FOR PEACE

Fr. Joseph Saghbini, the auxiliary patriarchal vicar in the Greek-Melkite Catholic Patriarchate of Jerusalem, emphasized the misuse of religious values and talked painfully about children being educated to hate and become human bombs or gun carriers. Prof. Quan Yi Zhang related to the media ethics as an issue to be considered, since the media is often being used to fuel hatred and encourage feelings of resentment and the thirst for revenge. Regarding the crucial role of education for hate in the Middle East conflict, Dr. Eldad Pardo suggested that education for peace should be a part of any peace initiative.



Dr. Nodar Sarjveladze, chair of the Foundation for the Development of Human Resources in Georgia, raised a question regarding the rarity of cooperation between NGOs, religious leaders and interfaith associations in preventing and resolving conflicts. In his understanding, such cooperation is highly needed. He sees the roots of the problem in the insufficient coverage of the topic “peace and world religions” in the educational programs and curricula in the majority of countries. “It is strange that many societies place high value on peace and religion and yet the connection between peacebuilding and religion is rarely addressed in school systems.”

He suggested that students should be taught about the contribution to peacebuilding of religious values and traditions and that educational programs should include materials on religious narratives about peace and war, about the cultivation of the soul, including peace in our souls, peace in our families, peace in social groups, and peace in international relationships. “Having absorbed this information during their school years, young people will become more sensitive to religious aspects of conflict resolution, and will become more open to cooperation with religious representatives.”

Dr. Sarjveladze suggested that an educational program about “peace and world religion” should be developed by UPF and its experts, submitted to the UN, and from the UN be distributed to nations around the world.

UPF Interfaith Declaration on Peace in Syria

Jerusalem

December 19-22, 2013

Gathered in Jerusalem on December 19-22, 2013 for the Interfaith Consultation on “Interreligious and International Relations in the Middle East: Toward Peace and Stability” 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, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Canada, France, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Palestine, People’s Republic of China, Philippines, Switzerland, Taiwan, 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 123,000 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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Hon. Anne-Marie Vanderspeeten Lizin, Honorary Speaker, Senate of the Kingdom of Belgium

Mr. Michael Leonard McIntyre, President, Capital Region Interfaith Council, Canada

Prof. Dr. Rouchdy S. Saleh Hassan, Professor of Natural Resources, Tanta University, Egypt

Mr. Emmanuel Chouraqui, Filmmaker, Beamlight, France

Mr. Emmanuel Dupuy, President, Institute for Prospective and Security Studies in Europe, France

Ms. Patricia Raynaud Lalonde, Research Fellow, Institute for Prospective and Security Studies in Europe, France

Dr. Nodar Sarjeladze, Chair, Foundation for the Development of Human Resources, Georgia

Rev. Hjörtur Magni Johannsson, Head Minister, Free Lutheran Church, Iceland

Rt. Rev. Bishop Riah Hanna Abo El-Assal, Bishop, Anglican Church, Israel

Dr. Shuki Ben Ami, Writer and Journalist, Israel

Mr. Hod Ben Zvi, President, UPF-Israel

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Hon. Ran Cohen, Former Member of the Israeli Knesset

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Mrs. Rachel Glaubach, Secretary, Na'Amat Movement of Working Women and Volunteers, Israel

Mr. Akram Hilou, Social and Political Activist, Israel

Hon. Nadia Hilou, Former Member of the Israeli Knesset

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Rabbi Reuven Khaskin, Educator and Tour Guide, Israel

Mrs. Magi Koren, Director, Ministry of Education Adult Education Division, Israel

H.E. Dr. Haim Koren, Ambassador, Embassy of the State of Israel to Egypt

Rabbi Yaakov Luft, Jewish Philosophy Lecturer, Israel

Rabbi Michael Melchior, Former Minister for Social Affairs and Diaspora, Israel

Mr. Josef Nesher, Head of the Middle East Desk, The Voice of Israel-Arabic Services, Israel

Dr. Eldad Joseph Pardo, Lecturer and Research Fellow, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Mrs. Adi Sasaki, Director, UPF-Israel's Jerusalem Office for Peace and Security, Israel

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Ven. Michiake Kamioka, Chief Priest, Mishimi Shrine, Japan

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

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