

Middle East Project

Facilitating Multicultural Citizen Diplomacy

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“Peace Café” Builds Bridges of Understanding

The Middle East Peace Civic Forum (initiator of the Middle East Project), Bethesda Jewish Congregation (BJC) and the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church (BHPC) held a peace café January 17 which drew almost 100 community members for an evening of honest, enlightening and at times provocative conversation. This was the first peace café for BJC and BHPC, which share a campus in Bethesda, Maryland. The twin congregations opened their doors to Jews, Christians, Muslims and others to come together to eat, listen, and share their thoughts regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a safe setting.



Participants gathered for an evening of learning and sharing.

Participants at the event discussed how Israeli and Palestinian civil societies and religious leaders are laying the groundwork for lasting peace.

After a short introduction by Matthew Lakenbach, Executive Director of the Middle East Peace Civic Forum, and a few words from Harriet Mayor Fulbright, Rabbi Sunny Schnitzer and chairman Joel Segal, attendees heard from

keynote speaker Andy Shallal. An Iraqi-American activist, restaurateur, and artist, Shallal has been hosting peace cafés at his restaurants, including Busboys and Poets, for several years.

“There is a real need to have a deeper conversation between people,” said Shallal. “In discussions about the Middle East, rather than listen to one another we often tend to reinforce what we already came to hear. Through dialogue, however, we can begin poking holes in the paradigm that we are stuck in until we get to a tipping point and reach a transformation.”

Shallal shared about a peace café participant during the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006 that showed the real faces of the reality in the Middle East. According to

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Shallal, while most individuals in the group expressed their distress regarding the devastation of Beirut and the suffering of its inhabitants, one woman spoke about the fears of her relative who lived in northern Israel and was in the range of the rockets shot by Hezbollah. The situation in Israel and Lebanon seemed unbalanced to many in the group, and they tended to dismiss her concerns.

The day after the peace café, this woman's brother was killed by one of those rockets. Sharing this in a subsequent peace café was a transformative moment for the group, as participants realized that people are getting killed, suffering, and have real fears and traumas, on both sides. In intractable conflicts, all sides end up as losers. Many of the group's members, regardless of their initial views, attended a memorial service held for the Israeli victim of the war.

Following Shallal's talk, participants began to dialogue in small groups. While some groups conversed on the value of dialogue, others talked about civil society's role in the Middle East peace process or shared their personal experiences and feelings with regard to the conflict. One group shared their perspectives on the "wall, security barrier, fence" separating Israelis and Palestinians, acknowledging that the words used to talk about the situation often become polarizing in and of themselves.



Andy Shallal listens to Rabbi Sunny Schnitzer

Next, Shallal moderated a larger conversation among all of the peace café participants. The atmosphere in the room was full of enthusiasm as people of different backgrounds and religious faiths openly talked about their connection to the conflict and about the dialogue process as a whole. The conversation gained momentum when Shallal began challenging the participants to consider the impact of controversial terms that are sometimes used to describe the

conflict.

Several individuals commented that they wanted to engage in a longer discussion in both small and large groups. At the end of the evening, with Mr. Shallal and Rabbi Schnitzer standing side by side on the stage, it became clear to all that there was a tremendous desire to come back for additional peace cafés. They were clear that the time had come to build relationships with those who may have very different perceptions and experiences, but surprising similarities as well. Said Rabbi Schnitzer, "we must truly receive the "other," because when we do, we realize that the other is us." – Anat Ben Nun

Middle East Project Holds Press Conference August 5 at the National Press Club

Unprecedented New Interfaith Alliance Calls on President

Obama, Israeli and Palestinian Leaders to Realize a Comprehensive Vision for Coexistence

Effective Diplomacy Hinges on Broad Civil Society and Interfaith Participation in a Multi-Track Diplomatic Process, Asserts Group



Israeli Peacemaker
Eliyahu McLean

The Middle East Project, an intercultural alliance of Jews, Christians, Muslims and others, held a press conference on Wednesday, August 5, to announce a high-level campaign calling for effective and sustained diplomacy to promote a comprehensive and permanent peace between Israelis, Palestinians, and their neighbors in the region.

Alliance members announced a push for introduction of a “Sense of the Congress” Congressional Resolution calling for effective and sustained multi-track diplomacy and civil society participation in the peace process.

An alliance of government, interfaith and civil society leaders based in Washington, DC and Israel and Palestine, the Middle East Project is a program of the Middle East Peace Civic Forum and its partners, including the Fulbright Center, Jerusalem Peacemakers and others. The Middle East Project facilitates effective diplomacy by engaging the policy community in Washington and beyond while building bridges to a broad alliance of peace leaders, both in Israel/Palestine and in the United States.



Noted activist Rev.
Marcia Dyson

Featured speakers include Harriet Fulbright, Marcia Dyson, Andy Shallal, and world renowned Israeli Orthodox Jewish peacemaker Eliyahu McLean. Mr. McLean is the cofounder of Jerusalem Peacemakers, a network of Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Druze religious leaders in Israel and Palestine. He cofounded the group along with Muslim Peace leader Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari. He discussed the importance of American leadership in advancing the peace process and articulated why grassroots, civil society and interfaith peacemakers on the ground in the region have so much to contribute to the peace process.”

Asked whether he is a left-winger or a right-winger, Mr. McLean asserts that “It takes two wings to fly. I think my message is heard because I try not just to approach what’s wrong, like some groups on the left that just criticize what’s wrong with Israeli policy, or those on the right that just criticize the attacks against Jews etc.,” declared McLean. “We’re taking a different approach, trying to show by positive example rather than negative. We show the example of the peace that we live and we hope can be lived on a larger scale. We live as a feeling of family.”

“One of the best ways to honor our common humanity and shared destiny is through the dedicated pursuit of reconciliation and peace among Israelis, Palestinians and their neighbors,” stated Harriet Mayor Fulbright, Honorary Chairman of the Board of the Middle East Peace Civic Forum. “While it is unfair to blame Israelis and Palestinians for all the region’s problems, the Middle East Project

believes that a fair, workable, and lasting framework for peace, justice and coexistence will be, among other things, an inspiration to the whole world," Fulbright concluded.

"Our mission is to provide opportunities for diverse and influential voices to contribute their ideas and advance the peace process," declared Matthew Lakenbach, Executive Director of the Middle East Peace Civic Forum. "We are building bridges among leading government, civil society and interfaith actors, primarily in the United States and in the Middle East, in an unremitting effort to reach a comprehensive peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians," asserted Lakenbach. "This effort is about creating a new vision for coexistence and unlocking the full possibility of peace in the Middle East," concluded Lakenbach.

The Middle East Project is currently engaging the U.S. Congress, the Obama Administration, civil society and religious leaders, the business community and others, in order to construct multiple venues for building consensus among the parties as well as to heal the traumas resulting from decades of tragic conflict. The alliance is planning a series of multi-track peace conferences, briefings and symposiums to raise the profile of the issue and to build an international movement—from grassroots to the highest levels of government—working for genuine and lasting peace.

[Click here to watch the press conference.](#)

"Peace is Possible – and Here's How," Declares Middle East Project



(L to R) MEP Board Member Abeer Pelon Kayed, Chairman Joel Segal, Partner Majid Alsayegh, Executive Director Matthew Lakenbach, Congressman John Conyers, Jazz Musician Bill Brower, International Chairman Ghassan Manasra, and Vice Chair Sam Rasoul

The Middle East Project held a Congressional Briefing on Thursday, May 14, outlining our strategy and our commitment to shift the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution away from enmity and blame and toward empathy and reconciliation.

Israeli Arab Sufi Sheikh and International Board Chairman Ghassan Manasra, Executive Director

Matthew Lakenbach, Former DC Congressman Walter Fauntroy and others addressed the audience of Congressmen, staffers and community members.

The briefing took place in the Cannon office building in the United States House of

Representatives.

Three Members of Congress participated, including John Conyers of Michigan, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee; Walter Jones of North Carolina; and Dennis Kucinich of Ohio.

"Martin Luther King Jr. gave us the courage to take on this issue," declared Congressman Conyers. "We are going to deal with this intractable problem," he asserted.



Former DC Delegate
Walter Fauntroy

Former District of Columbia Congressman Walter Fauntroy, a 20-year veteran of Congress who also worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, also addressed the audience. "We are not taking the temperature, we are setting the temperature," declared Mr. Fauntroy. "We are calling on members of Congress to tell the truth with love and to have the courage to speak out for peace," he announced.

Middle East Project Executive Director Matthew Lakenbach spoke about the urgency of Middle East peace and why the Middle East Project is the right vehicle to facilitate its realization. "We are not a blame movement, but a peace movement," asserted Lakenbach. "Now is the time for reconciliation in the Abrahamic family," he added.



Matthew Lakenbach and
Congressman John Conyers

Lakenbach also set forward the organization's strategy, which involves building as broad as possible a coalition of civil society and interfaith leaders and building a bridge to government officials, primarily in Washington, DC and in the Middle East.

Middle East Project International Chairman Ghassan Manasra, a Sufi Sheikh and distinguished thinker from Jerusalem and Nazareth, discussed the importance of including the voices of the people in the peace process. "The United States of America can play a very great role in resolving this problem," said Manasra. He noted that both Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, including many pro-peace religious leaders, felt that they needed someone in Washington to speak up and share about their ongoing work for coexistence. "That is why we created the Middle East Project," said Manasra.



Center for Religious
Tolerance Director
Andrea Blanch

Andrea Blanch, Executive Director of the Center for Religious Tolerance, an MEP partner organization, spoke about the impact of civil society and interfaith leaders on the hearts and minds of the people. She highlighted the role of women in building conditions conducive to sustainable coexistence, noting that "women, especially women of faith, are the greatest untapped source of power for peace in the Middle East. "

Avi Meyerstein, Executive Director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, or ALLMEP, spoke about the impact of interfaith dialogue and the necessity of carrying it

out on a grand scale.



ALLMEP Ex. Dir. Avi Meyerstein

Reverend Marcia L. Dyson, Middle East Project Ambassador at Large and noted social activist, spoke eloquently in the midst of a three-week fast in support of those who are suffering and underprivileged. "While we support self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians, our emphasis is not on territory because all of the land belongs to God," asserted Dyson. "This will take a long effort, but peace is possible because we are the one's we've been waiting for," concluded Dyson.



Noted activist and author Marcia L. Dyson

Salam (Sam) Rasoul, MEP Vice Chair and former candidate for Congress in Virginia's sixth district, spoke about the importance of creating a "civic forum" to allow multiple voices to be heard at the negotiating table in order to forge a just, lasting, and permanent peace agreement. "Let's start talking about some basic things," suggested Rasoul. "Do all people deserve running water? Most of us want peace, and by bringing all of the stakeholders together we can find solutions," Rasoul concluded.

Abeer Pelon Kayed, a Palestinian refugee born in the Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon who recently completed her PhD in Middle Eastern Studies, told her personal story of overcoming the effects of violence and statelessness to reconcile with her Jewish and Christian brothers and sisters and becoming a part of an interfaith organization. "We need the Middle East Project because people of good will, Jews, Christians and Muslims everywhere, are saying that enough is enough and now is the time to live in peace," declared Kayed.



Human rights leader Timothy Cooper

Renowned human rights leader Timothy Cooper spoke of the nexus between human rights, international law, and religious peacebuilding.

Joel Segal, Chairman of the Board, emphasized his belief in the unprecedented nature of the Middle East Project and the extraordinary opportunity represented by the organization.

Several other MEP Directors were in attendance as well, including Jane Swensen, Peter Boyle, Christine Warnke, and Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid. Shaykh Rashid is the Founder and Executive Director of Legacy International, another important MEP Partner.



Executive Director Matthew Lakenbach, Congressman John Conyers, and Abeer Pelon Kayed

Following



Harriet Fulbright and Ghassan Manasra

the reception, Marcia Dyson hosted an elegant reception at her home, where the distinguished guests included Christine Warnke, Harriet Fulbright, Congressman Conyers, Holly Shere and others.

The Middle East Project is a program of the Middle East Peace Civic Forum and its partners. Based in Washington, DC, and Jerusalem, we are the bridge between the grassroots, civil society and interfaith peacemakers in the Holy Land and the international diplomatic community. Copyright © 2009, [Middle East Peace Civic Forum]. All rights reserved.