

## **Between Sharm El Sheikh and Damascus: Lessons and Journeys 2006**

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July 2006

### **IN THE SHADOW OF LEBANON**

Bearing witness to the destruction of this summer's war between Hezbollah and Israel while fruitlessly--so far--working at interventions, has been devastating to me and countless others who have poured their lives and careers into Middle East peacemaking. Nevertheless, it merely confirms to me that one day more and more governments and philanthropists will begin to understand and embrace the work that is described below, and the kind of heroic people described therein. There may be military necessities in human problems, but there are no military solutions. I imagine some fantasize longingly for 'the perfect war', World War II, where absolute military destruction, including 40 million dead, led to absolute peace, reconstruction, democracy and so forth. But the military destruction did not lead to peace. If, for example, there had not been thousands of civilians, policy makers, and military men intent on reconciliation with the Japanese and German people, if there had been instead retribution against every last war criminal, there would have never been real peace in Europe or Asia. In the end, we must engage the confusing, hard work of alliance building between wounded and fearful populations, with all the complexity that this entails. It would seem we still have much to learn. In that spirit I want to share what I learned in May of 2006, weeks before the current war.

### **LESSONS FROM THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM**

I spent seven amazing days in Syria at the end of May of 2006, concentrated on encounters and presentations in Damascus and Aleppo. The appalling turn of events in the Middle East in subsequent months, which involves Lebanon, Israel, Syria, and Iran, cannot diminish the revolutionary moments of conciliatory human encounters that we managed to create between civilizations. It is moments like these that are the only long-term alternatives to extremism, war, and solutions of force.

Before Syria I went to Sharm El-Sheikh where I attended the yearly Middle Eastern meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), and I would like first to describe some very important events that took place there. The Middle East version of the WEF is somewhat scaled down from Davos, but it is important as a gauge of what is happening in the elite encounter between the Middle East

and the rest of the world. Who comes and who does not is significant. For example, India had a huge presence in Davos, but it also sent very important industrialists to the Middle East. Japan continues to demonstrate its interest in improvements of conditions in the Middle East, including in Palestine. One begins to see here which global powers are more adventuresome, risk-taking, and positively engaged, and which ones fail to invest in the Middle East given the political environment and economic environment. I heard one major industrialist grumbling about how family businesses are notoriously inefficient on average and yet there were whole country contingents in attendance at WEF where everyone had the same last name! These are just a few of the imbalances that have been created by the world's overvaluing of oil, and the consequent undervaluing of what is referred to as human capital or social capital or what I like to refer to quaintly as 'human beings'.

### **EXEMPLARS OF A NEW MIDDLE EAST**

The truth is that in the three years that I have been in attendance at WEF I have seen some very interesting evolution in thinking. There is an enormous amount of discussion now about investment in youth and education, equality for women in the workplace, as well as teaching peace and tolerance to youth. Many will disagree, but, in my experience, where there is the smoke of rhetoric among pragmatic businessmen there is eventually the fire of paradigm shifts in activity. I can safely say that three years ago there was far more empty rhetoric and this time the discussion was backed up by exemplars, and impressive paradigms of new approaches.

WEF has also wisely engaged non-Arab Islamic nations, and nations also without a colonialist history in the region, such as Malaysia, Pakistan, and India (which has one of the largest Islamic populations in the world), and held them out as very traditional societies that nevertheless have enough examples of new thinking, new wealth, and bold approaches to education, to provide an imposing paradigm for the Arab world.

### **THE COUNCIL OF 100**

The most important activity of WEF is the weaving together of novel approaches to challenges and opportunities today that cuts across major divides religiously, culturally and politically. My reason for attendance is something called the Council of 100 which is a group dedicated to greater harmony and understanding between the Islamic world and the West. It was founded by Lord Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Prince Turki, now the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. In the three years that I have been in

attendance I have seen enormous progress. Initially there were a series of conversations that were beautiful and rhetorical. We know from theories of peacebuilding, especially religious peacebuilding, that a beautiful, positive frame is a necessary if perilous step in shifting human relations in a better direction. It is necessary because actions without a shared set of beautiful values and goals will likely falter and be endlessly focused on problems, blame, recriminations, re-dramatization of conflicts inside the group, and reenactment of enemy roles and symbols. The amount of toxic possibility in problem-centered conversation is endlessly creative. On the other hand, a beautiful vision without subsequent activity is likely to end up hollow and hypocritical, especially if it appears to be a self-serving defense of the status quo on a range of painful issues, from terrorism to the empowerment of women to reversing the effects of colonialism.

What has flowered in the last few years at the C-100 is a serious commitment to projects globally that are having a substantial impact on the attitudes and values of thousands of people. C-100 has put its substantial voice of approval behind projects as diverse as the Fez Music Festival where many substantial and transformative global discussions are taking place, all the way to Search for Common Ground's Common Ground News Service which, as usual for SCG, is superb, as well as some significant Islamic charities that have done path-breaking work in restoring the reputation of Islamic charity.

## **THE SAUDI ROLE**

WEF has also seen a fascinating evolution of Saudi engagement. I think that there are increasing signs of a vigorous effort of various Saudi influentials to engage the world with support of projects and educational initiatives that really are progressive. There is still a radical disjunction between how Saudis think outside Saudi Arabia and what they are able to do in their own culture. There are also various complaints from other Arabs and Muslims filtering back to me that Saudi efforts to be supportive of interfaith gatherings and education for tolerance are a public relations ploy to improve their tarnished image abroad. Even if that were true (and I have had brush-ups as an American with states that pour millions into public relations or public diplomacy as a way of changing their tarnished image) the interesting thing is that the more that people go from rhetoric to actual involvement in good project support across the globe the more it changes them for the better. And it works both ways--the more we engage the Saudis the more we understand the complexity of their society, the contradictory voices, the people of courage, the authentic love of traditional life that struggles with radical modern assaults on it, as well as persistent and radical forms of intolerance. All of this reflects the classic forms

of relationship building between civilizations that with hard work lead to more nuanced arguments, more subtle forms of engagement and disagreement. This is the foundation of positive change and the evolution of values that can be established in common.

## **PAKISTAN, MALYSIA, INDIA**

I was also impressed in Sharm El-Shiekh that the increasing pragmatism of WEF humanitarian projects are putting people at the table together who would not have had a reason to sit together a few years ago. There are people across enemy lines who are working with the poor, who are working on the education and globalization of positive relationships among youth, and there are people who are working on medicine as a form of peacemaking between enemy groups. I put some of those people together at the conference, I did it with great hesitation, and I discovered to my pleasant surprise how easy it was to make those quiet connections these days. I don't think this would have happened a few years ago. Mid-level actors have been doing this for a long time, but these people are, or work for, the wealthiest people in the world, and that represents an important paradigm shift. Some things in the Middle East are changing for the better, including the contagion of enlightened ideas.

One of the clever moves of the WEF was to introduce and highlight extraordinary people from Pakistan and Malaysia, to provide examples at the conference of major progress in Islamic countries in terms of investment in people, in job creation through revolving loan funds, in education, and the subsequent improvements in GDP as well as the amount of people, especially women, receiving better education and opportunities. There continue to be serious problems with the Arab world on these issues with GDP outputs being a shocking fraction of those in the rest of the world, with only Africa behind despite the massive oil wealth of the region, not to mention issues of literacy and women's equality. It was incredible to play a small part in this networking game to bring together the extraordinary individuals from these regions in order to create a synergy of new possibilities.

I made a personal plea to the Malaysian Prime Minister to become more involved in the Middle East and the Arab/Israeli conflict. He asked, with the charming guilelessness of the Malaysians, "Do you really think we can help?", and then said later, "I want to work with you." He was a hit at the conference with his soft-spoken ways. Based on what I learned from conversations in the past year with my colleague Imam Feisal Rauf, as well as a new friend Michael Vitikiotis, the Malaysians are engaged in a grand experiment of modernization for a consciously multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with a deliberate

effort to marry that daunting process to a moderate form of Islam. It has produced some extraordinary economic and educational results for them (Singapore kids are number one in math in the world, with the U.S. trailing way behind), but it is a difficult process of continuing to deal with extremist uses of Islam right on the margins. I am well aware that the results may not be satisfying to some minorities in Malaysia at this juncture, but I was impressed with the model and how they could be helpful in negotiating a modern nonviolent future for the Middle East, especially for how Mahmoud Abbas could manage to lead Palestine in the strange situation he finds himself in.

The interest in Malaysia at WEF demonstrates that role models that can be trusted, that are not tainted by arrogance or a colonialist history, are crucial as peoples recover from the deep wounds of history and struggle to move forward. I overheard a conversation in which leading Palestinians had said that they were not receiving any interesting models of leadership from the West, but were very interested in Indonesia and Malaysia. I think the Malays were surprised by how much people see that they could play a greater role on the world stage, but, in fact, we do need a much more crowded world stage with a variety of positive models for the future.

Speaking of non-Western models at the conference, the rise of India continues to astonish. More and more I am realizing that the land that gave birth to Gandhi, but also to dangerous ethnic and religious wars of the post-World War II period, is coming into its own not only financially but also at a deep level of cultural global leadership. Their models of flexibility and ingenuity are fast outpacing the rigidities and waste of Western models, especially with regard to energy policy and the style and range of employment and educational opportunities. I discovered, for example, a major industrial leader, Arun Patankar, whose ideas were bold, innovate, and full with insight. I was also impressed with one analyst, Sundeep Waslekar, who is one of the most sought after future strategists that I have ever seen operate. He is doing vital work for global leaders in terms of preventing violence and moving societies forward. We disagreed on his research about terrorism where he concluded that most extremism today is not religious. I have yet to be convinced of that, but I did share with him my increasing body of evidence that religious extremism is more often than not based on not just extreme readings of religion but heretical readings, despite their being well financed and popular.

## **THE EGYPTIAN CONTEXT**

Finally, the context of the conference in Egypt was strange, sad to say. The Egyptian people are extraordinary and creative, but they are not a happy people

today in any shape or form. Mrs. Mubarak was a hit at the conference, and her pioneering work in teaching peace to children and advocacy of women's equality was warmly received. She is articulate and strong, but her husband remains a mystery. That he has an old animosity to radical Islam, the kind that killed Sadat before his eyes, is understandable. That he believes that they are the greatest threat to the region is understandable, but it is unclear why he does not create an alliance with rather than incarcerate the extraordinary liberal reformers in Egypt. This is a group that could help him build a strong Egypt that is impervious to extremism, but he still prefers the authoritarian model of leadership that is leading to a dead end and strengthening the extremist alternative as 'the only game in town'. He seems to trust mostly the iron hand. But who am I from the United States to complain about leadership that lives with the illusion that the use of force is the only way to show leadership on the global stage today? What I can learn from seeing the response of Mubarak to what he went through, and to how George Bush has reacted is the following: Violence against powerful nations and leaders is a dangerous thing in terms of the long-term conflict spirals of actions and reactions. You hit a man like Sadat and there can be very long-term consequences. You hit a man like George Bush and the world is in for a rough ride for a long time.

## **A CHANGED SYRIA**

I flew from Sharm El-Sheikh to Syria with the expectation that I was walking into a place that was considerably more under stress and disappointment than when I had first started coming in 2003. The Damascus Spring was turning into the Damascus Fall without even the benefit of a summer. Key events had overarching significance: the world's condemnation of Syria after the Hariri assassination, the humiliating withdrawal of their security personnel to the heart of Syria, the U.N. investigations, the determination of the U.S. to push regime change, and the alliance of Khadam and the Muslim Brotherhood for regime change.

After further disappointments with Syrian outreach to the U.S. government, the Syrian government made it clear now that it would veer away from the West and toward Iran and militant groups, where it had had old and longstanding relationships through the decades. Security has been the number one concern considering the threat of regime change, and that has translated directly into a level of repression of the Opposition and reform voices that is a deep disappointment to the people of Syria. Everyone is afraid and frustrated.

## **A NEW FORM OF ENGAGEMENT**

Despite the atmosphere in Syria, Hind Kabawat and I were determined to focus on an approach to peacebuilding that is our own version of what my field calls 'positive peacebuilding', as well as a way of pushing relationships forward that involves Appreciative Inquiry. I mean by this a strategy of eliciting whatever one can from a situation in order to move cultures and peoples in conflict in a better direction, building on strengths of civilizations and sub-cultures, networks of trusted relationships, and not attacking anyone or anything. On the contrary, it is to build on the best of what is and take it further. In very difficult circumstances, that is precisely what we did, and we knew it would elicit criticism from some who rightly point out all of the gross injustices in plain view.

We continue to dance between those who want us to be more pro-government and those who want us to be more anti-government. Because we focus on the good will of people, in or out of government, and a positive approach to religion and patriotism alike we seem to keep building surprisingly good relationships with a wide range of people and institutions. This does not mean that I do not abhor support for violence in any form, and I support champions of human rights in local cultures. I do support them and I want them to be supported globally by those who authentically care about them and are not using them. Different tasks for different people.

I do take issue with Western approaches that too easily stimulate confrontation in such places, putting lives at risk, or forcing democratization when people in free, more prosperous societies do not understand the complexities of the atmosphere where people have to continue to live. Crass forms of democratization, such as elections, have been discredited of late because they can easily empower anti-democrats. There is such a fine line between the stimulation of courage and a push to recklessness, between encouragement of others and endangerment of their lives, between aid and imposition. There are lives at stake here for anyone who tries to stimulate authentic change. Balance is the key to wisdom, and often efforts at social change by privileged outsiders are unbalanced.

We have discovered our own balance in Syria by careful observation of a complicated set of insights that defy false impressions from the outside. I have never seen a single good reason to be fearful for my life in Syria, for example, despite the fact that I am a Jew and an American, and that everyone assumes I should be fearful. There may have been uses of anti-Semitism by some at various points, but it is not essential to the culture. On the other hand, at every moment I am painfully aware of the fragile relationships between people there, battered by the winds of history and politics, and the ease with which things

can slip back into conflicts between ethnic groups, and the subtle ways in which the darker side of relationships between Muslims, Christians, Sunnis and Shi'ites continue to reassert themselves through the concerns for survival of ethnic groups. The more oppressive people there are fearful for their future, but their victims are more justifiably fearful, no one certain what the future may bring. One thing everyone shares in common: even some of the most militant people there are searching for safety and security, like everyone else on the planet, and history has not given the Syrian people an easy way to trust each other and at the same time move forward with opening up the society. But wisdom would suggest that this is an opportunity, a way to discover needs that people share in common.

Syrians are battered by many forces, and those Americans who emphasize the virtue of threats, punishment, and regime change, may be well-intentioned in their desire to foster a democratic alternative, but I think they are doing more harm than good. In always focusing on threats and punishments, without any positive vision for or investment in the future of the Syrian people, they merely mirror what they claim is the threatening behavior of the Ba'athists. What kind of American model is that? I am convinced by hundreds of conversations that the replacement of traditional diplomacy with a cult of threats by the United States has made things worse. Pressure, yes, a cult of threats with no incentives, no. There are Syrians I respect who disagree with me, but I am quite certain that they are making the same mistake that Iraqis made in trusting right wing forces in Washington. The United States is even less trusted in the region than local governments, and I can think of what would happen if there were proof of a different set of American intentions, intentions that were markedly different than occupation and destruction, which is all that Syrians see coming out of the Iraqi invasion, and what they hear from the refugees. I imagine what I would do with an investment of a few hundred million American dollars in the hands of a million and half Iraqi refugees in Syria, half a million Lebanese, not to mention millions of poor Syrian Sunnis who suffer from the isolation of the Syrian economy. I don't see an American war for hearts and minds. I see a lot of talk, not investment in the people of the Middle East.

One of the many tragic gaps in global political communications is between democrats in the Arab world and authentic democrats in the U.S. This leads to naïve biases of the Left in America that make them turn a blind eye to Arab democrats who are isolated, and, on the other hand, to a naïve thrust of Arab and Islamic democrats into the arms of American ultranationalists who ultimately do not care if destabilization leads to thousands of innocent Arab and Muslim deaths. The proof is everywhere in Iraq.



Iraq is the litmus test of what Neo-cons and American ultra-nationalists actually do when they get hold of an Arab country. They are a problematic group, particularly because, unlike classical realists like Kissinger, they miss every piece of empirical evidence that prevents folly in war and foreign affairs. If only true democrats in the U.S. and true democrats in the Arab world spoke and strategized together we might come up with nuanced and effective strategies for real change where the ends of democracy and the means to get there would be more in sync, more decent. This way the pressure on all parties, from the U.S. to Israel to the undemocratic regimes, would be more consistent and appealing to masses of people who are smart enough to smell authentic care if it really is present.

### **THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PEACE**

I have also become mystified increasingly about the absence of pressure globally for a Syrian/Israeli peace track. I have encountered in Syria much criticism of Israel that is common throughout the Arab world. At the same time, the discussion from politicians to universities takes it as a given that a peace deal with Israel would and should entail a complete normalization of relations with a mostly Jewish state, assuming a viable Palestinian state. Would a peace process between Israel and Syria that demilitarized all aspects of the relationship not make it far easier to come to a peace accord in Palestine, and with other neighbors? The end of the radical wing of Hamas? The end of a militarized highway from Iran to Hezbollah? Why is this moment not being seized?

The word in Syria is that Israel has no compelling need to negotiate and give back the Golan because the Syrian Army is practically non-existent. Is the implicit message then that Syria has to arm itself with the most advanced missiles from Iran, that it has to transfer nuclear technology from Iran in five years time in order to get to the bargaining table again about the Golan? This seems a self-defeating and short-sighted logic. It all sounds very pro-Israel but it is not. Israel and the Jewish people are in greater mortal threat than at any time in recent memory despite all the high-tech defense. More people hate Jews and Israel than at any time since World War II. So where has this course of action of unilateralism brought Israel in terms of safety? Winning over your enemies is just that, winning them over to cease being enemies, not killing a small number during every skirmish so that they can be replaced by a hundred more who are willing to die killing Israelis and Jews. From the point of view of winning over enemies history will demonstrate clearly that neoconservative ideology has successfully created more mortal enemies in a shorter time than any other Western political ideology. That is not to say that pacifism is the

recommendation here, but the use of force when necessary should always be coupled with an aggressive outreach to one's enemies.

What I have tried to pioneer with Hind Kabawat and other Syrian friends is a fourth way, neither that of the Neo-cons nor that of the Left, nor that of the realists. It is a way of embracing a civilization, looking for the best in it, and then exchanging ideas in a powerful way that naturally adds pressure for positive political and economic change. This approach of positive peacebuilding is what mainstream America needs to embrace the most. It is what the Europeans must more aggressively engage in with both the Arab states and Israel. This is the only path to an engaged future with the rest of the world that, as of now, fears America even more than they fear despotic regimes. The American people must wake up to the travesties that have been committed in their name and take greater control of foreign policy through engagement with their representatives. Their lives in this interconnected world depend upon it, and they must insist upon far greater investment by their government in the strategies of peace rather than war.

I have also heard on these trips to the Middle East, especially in Israel, that Syria's overtures and rhetoric on peace are never believed, that peace overtures are always proffered when Israeli politics cannot respond, or that peace whispers from Syria are always a bluff. Perhaps that is true, but then I say call the bluff and be vindicated. Offer the Golan for a full peace and let the pressure turn back to the Syrians. I say the same to the Syrians, if you are serious about peace do not just whisper it but offer it loudly, with Western press conferences elaborately arranged, and put the pressure back on the Israelis.

A peace process between Israel and Syria that addressed all aspects of war and proxy war in Lebanon would have a revolutionary impact on radicalization along the Northern Belt of the Middle East that is destabilizing Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and militarizing Shi'ism. Why would short-circuiting that virulent dynamic not be in the American and Israeli long-term interest? Reformist Syrians inside the government are tired of this trap of being hijacked always by pan-Arab and pan-Islamic radicalization when it ruins their chances for normalization and prosperity. They believe that in 2000 they had earnestly opened a small window between Syria and the world, even between Syria and Israel, with an intentionality to make overtures of peace. I myself was the recipient of several of those overtures. Now these reformers are losing the upper hand in moving the Syrian leadership toward reconciliation with the West, and they feel abandoned by the United States and Israel that could have responded positively to overtures of peace instead of hammering away at regime change. Between the regime change strategy and the lack of response to

their years of quiet overtures to Israel, they feel they have been hung out to dry. On the other hand, disastrous policies of Syria in the region have certainly made it hard for the world to encourage a peace process at the present time.

I surely know how dangerous the other side of politics is along the Northern Belt, including in Syria, and why outsiders react with great suspicion to the rhetoric of peace overtures. But I fail to understand why this radical trend cannot be fought through overtures from the West and from Israel that would strengthen the forces of moderation. All systems, except the most brutal dictatorships, like that of Saddam, have pushes and pulls of politics, a Left and a Right, and I have directly witnessed and participated in that push and pull in Syria. I do not understand why the most basic rules of diplomacy in terms of incentives is not being followed. I can only conclude that the lack of relationship between enemies, which I have observed endlessly on this trip and others, leads to a level of demonization which prevents any vision of an alternative relationship. This happens on all sides of the toxic American/Syrian/Israeli relationship. Finally, there is the fate of the Syrian people themselves and especially their courageous democrats. No overtures to Syria should imply an abandonment of the people of Syria or their democratic pioneers. On the contrary, what I am arguing for is an embrace of a Syrian peace track with Israel and the U.S. that has certain conditions, and the most important one should be the condition of the people of Syria. There is every reason to believe that an evolving freedom in Syria and Egypt and Jordan will not be destabilizing. The cardinal sin of the democratic push in Palestine and Lebanon is that it allowed for democratic participation by armed groups that were more powerful than anyone else. That is not democratization but hostile takeover. But this is not what would happen in Syria and Egypt. There it would resemble far more the push and pull of liberalization that we have seen in Turkey, Morocco, and Jordan. What a brilliant way to integrate Islamism into democratic evolution of the Middle East. I am convinced that there is a wing of Ba'thists who are ready for this careful, measured approach to economic and political liberalization. Where is America in encouraging this hope, this only hope, for the nonviolent evolution of Syrian culture? I know exactly all the reasons to be skeptical that this can occur, and I also know that countless wars are started because people in power do not give peaceful alternatives a chance.

I have also challenged the Syrians to speak directly to Israel about all their grievances, but I say the same to the Israelis. In many ways the relationship between Lebanon and Syria is much harder to disentangle because of vested interests and a Syrian sense of Syria and Lebanon being one. Not so with the Golan. In one fell swoop by giving back the Golan Israel could create a peace

treaty with Syria and Lebanon, undo the legitimacy of a militarized Hezbollah, and secure its entire Northern border with international recognition. Syria could recover for the first time in decades some of its pride over lost lands on all of its borders, and it could join the West, the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, and its Arab neighbors, in their proposal for a just solution for the Palestinians, including the many refugees inside Syria. If Syria authentically bought into the Arab League peace plan, embraced Mahmoud Abbas, we would be living in a very different military and political atmosphere. But this will require a modest amount of incentives from Washington that are not forthcoming. It does not need to translate into either exoneration of the murderers of Harriri nor the abandonment of Syrian reform. I am convinced from many interviews that there exists a modest set of incentives that can produce the desired change.

Syria needs to have an utterly new relationship with all of its neighbors rather than searching the Persian Gulf for a dubious alliance that in the end will only bring them sorrow. The people of Iran have much to offer the Syrians and the world, but the present government of Iran will prove to be a broken reed that will pierce their hand when they lean on it. It is a political alliance with too heavy a price in terms of the loss of the rest of the world. Rather Syria has the opportunity to re-define itself in terms of its neighbors, to open itself to new opportunities of wealth and commerce with neighboring states that will fundamentally improve the quality of life of both rich and poor in Syria. Syria is a goldmine for investment in human capital, in the arts, in tourism, and it is essential for Western forces to paint the positive picture of embrace rather than militaristic threats that have utterly discredited America in this part of the world.

I felt in Syria the overwhelming shadow of a million and a half poor Iraqi refugees who are the sole living symbol of America in Syria. People see these poor, homeless Sunnis and they see the raw face of American policy. How can we in America let that be the overriding symbol of our engagement with Syria? Make no mistake, the tragedy of those refugees has just as much to do with Arab states that also fueled the fires of extremism and sectarian violence in Iraq. But it is easy to see why from an Arab point of view the failure to secure the lives of millions of people in Iraq falls mostly on the shoulders of the most powerful nation on earth that claimed it had the capacity to liberate Iraq but has not done so. More on recommendations regarding this later.

## **ENCOUNTERS IN EDUCATION**

One of the highlights of the trip was a day spent with the administration, faculty and students of one of the new private universities in Syria. This one is

called the Arab European University, and it is headed up by Professor Abdul Ghani Bared who used to be the President of Damascus University. This was a fabulous experience, one of the most meaningful to me of all my work in Syria in the last three years. There was an exploration with the students and faculty on tough issues that divide the West and Syria. They peppered me with hard questions for an hour and a half. Then I met with the faculty and administration and I was deeply impressed with their interest in collaboration, multi-disciplinary studies, and most important their interest in my field of conflict analysis and resolution. I hope to see them again and collaborate with them in a variety of ways. As with all our other work, it depends on 'the situation', and the degree to which the bonds of friendship between civilizations will be stifled or allowed to flourish. I believe in a path of 'one step at a time'. They build positively on our courage to come to them, and then we build on their courage to reach out in turn and build a better future. I am convinced that we can build a wonderful relationship of mutual learning between all of our students in our respective institutions, and I do believe this could happen in other parts of Syria as well. The goal is to have thousands of people learning from each other across civilizations and academic disciplines.

I am still trying to understand why this meeting affected me so, which after all was not as public and high profile as the many 'ambassador dinners' or the lecture at the Assad library of the previous year. Perhaps it was the deep sincerity and wisdom that I sensed from Abdul Ghani, or perhaps it was the idealism and courage of his young faculty members. Maybe I just feel safe and hopeful inside institutions of higher learning that are geared to the future and so lacking in wealth and pretension.

What I know is that places of learning are reenactments of timeless dramas between students and teachers, engaged in the same kind of inquiry that has been going on since the dawn of mankind. In the barren plains and hills of Syria north of Damascus I seem to be much more conscious of this eternal drama than back home. Perhaps it is because I am only now coming into a full awareness of the timeless dramas of this region. For most of my life I simply landed in Israel as if I were landing on the moon. I felt the ancient connection to my people and my religion, but there is something that happens to the soul when you travel the neighboring countries in an intimate way. You begin to travel the paths of prophets and poets who passed between these peoples millennia ago. You come to terms with the ancient dramas and conflicts that have always unfolded here, the choices for life or for death that false and true prophets always presented to both royalty and simple people alike in all of the neighboring civilizations. You can see the layers of civilizations that have faced

these choices going back thirty thousand years in the Damascus Museum. The politics and the military situations of humanity here were always complex, but the choice between brutality and beneficence, the myths of war and the myths of harmony, courage and cowardice, life and death, were always stark and simple in a strange way.

In the shadow of ancient regional wisdom coming from prophets and wise men of old, you can always look among a faculty and find their descendants, you can always find a Socrates, ready to speak the truth despite the fact that he may have to drink a cup of poison someday. But as I bear witness to the living reality of Syrian Socrates, I cannot help but wish there were more teachers to speak the truth in the U.S. today, not in angry rhetoric that no one can hear, but just the dispassionate truth about fundamental rights and wrongs. It is a basic, eternal prophetic truth that even the greatest of history's civilizations have the power to gain a little more access to vital resources like oil, take a little revenge, and then lose their souls—all in the blink of an eye. But this is a difficult thing to say to any culture at any time of history, and it is no less difficult now in America, especially after the horror of 9/11 and the real threat of more.

## **DINNER DIPLOMACY**

As the week in Damascus continued, Hind Kabawat created, once again, an amazing dinner that brought together numerous ambassadors, writers, professors, and others, many friends. The dinner culture in Syria, when done by a skilled strategist, is a crucial way in which society is weaved together, and Hind has created a hopeful network of relations that, despite all the troubles, continues to offer leadership, good advice, and vision. I was very impressed this time with the brilliant Swiss ambassador Jacques Watteville, who has become a good friend, as well as the retiring Canadian Ambassador. Through the role model of these men I have come to see the enormous potential that ambassadors have to do good in the world even in the most difficult circumstances. They are constantly linking people, providing openings at various levels of culture, religion, economics, trying to devise new ways out of an impasse. I cannot imagine our work in Syria without their moral support. The American DCM who is also retiring to teach in San Diego, Steve Seche, has been nothing less than graceful and supportive in many ways. Diplomacy at its best is a central key to positive global change.

## **TRANSFORMATIONS: FOUR HOURS IN AN ALEPPO MOSQUE**

The most difficult but awe-inspiring part of this trip was what happened in Aleppo. The journey there where I was accompanied by the able and wonderful Nizar Mayoub, head of the Syrian Public Relations Association, took me through the hills, the countryside and a variety of terrains for almost four hours. Nizar explained everything to me and made me feel informed at every stage of my trip. I passed tens of thousands of newly planted trees that have been part of a national campaign to reforest Syria. Two million trees are being planted, and it gave me hope that even in this place which has been under such duress one can see the positive effects of an emerging global consensus on trying to improve the earth's absorption of carbon dioxide. I have since read that tree planting does not remove as much carbon dioxide as had been hoped, but I cannot see it as a bad thing that emerging global programs are creating cross-cultural cooperation on an unprecedented scale. So much more of this is essential in this region, and war continues to stand in the way of urgent human and earth needs.

We passed through Hama on the way there and back, and it felt very eerie. I wanted to see a memorial to the thousands who had died here because I have always felt that Hama is an open wound of this country that is allowed to fester by being buried in silence. As we arrived in Aleppo I realized that we were in a city of great culture going back thousands of years. This was one of the most important centers in the history of Arab culture, as well as Islamic and Jewish learning. Some of the very foundations of the Biblical texts were analyzed and gathered here millennia ago.

The Grand Mufti of Syria had been on a panel together with me the previous year, and we had exchanged warm greetings through third parties since then. Upon hearing about his courageous stands for tolerance and coexistence I had invited him to our Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University to receive an award. I did not have funds to truly offer him a respectable award, but I wanted to simply make the gesture. Due to complicated reasons that we will not elaborate on here Sheikh Hassoun could not come, and this made him deeply frustrated and even angry. He shares with us a passionate commitment to embrace of adversaries, to dialogue and demonstrations of respect, and he too saw the opportunity to come to Washington as a way to further dialogue and provide an alternative to conflict between America and Syria, as well as to present a different image of Syria to the world.

Sheikh Hassoun invited me to Aleppo on Friday, in a reprise of a previous invitation from a previous trip. I did not know for sure that I would be invited to the mosque but I knew that I wanted to honor him by traveling all the way to

see him. When we spoke for half an hour before the Friday prayers the sheer weight of his concerns and frustrations were apparent. I was not going to talk at all about the Washington visit, but he went on at some length about politics and religious leaders, how dangerous they can be to world peace. He was angry, and later in his sermon he was almost apocalyptic in his sense that extremists in politics and religion were destroying the world. And then at a single moment in his talk he began to weep. I came to attention at that moment, straightened my back, in order to bear witness to a Muslim leader as he wept over violence, extremism and war. I later would learn how many people in the audience were refugees from Iraq and how difficult this is for them and for the people of Syria. I sensed that day that he was quite agitated and nervous about the situation. There was clearly tension at work in the social and political situation that I was not privy to.

When we went to the mosque we first went into a beautiful private antechamber where about forty people were gathered. There were two seats in front at some distance from everyone else, everything set up very formally, and I realized I was supposed to sit next to the Mufti. This made me nervous as I have grown unused to formal religious situations where I am the center of attention. I used to do this all the time, but I have grown shy of religious ceremonial moments. I was not asked to speak at this point, for this was simply a more intimate session with the Mufti before the main service.

Then something happened. The Mufti introduced someone on my right. He was tall and young, maybe in his late twenties. He was dressed in white from head to toe with a traditional coat and cap. Others there wore turbans, those who were senior Sheikhs. The Mufti told me the story of this young man, and he said it in very few words. "He is Iraqi, he was in Abu Ghraib for eight months and then released without charge. His two brothers were also picked up and have never been heard from since. This young man also spent twenty-two days living in a coffin. The American soldiers would take him out at meal times and then shackle him back inside the coffin." I have to presume from what the Mufti said that the coffin was also his bathroom.

When I heard this my heart began to pound hard and I began to breathe heavily, my hands trembling; I felt the need to get up from my seat but I did not. No one knew how strongly I have reacted in my life to American torture and how much it has changed me. It had begun to change me at least two years before in 2003 when, on the way back from Jordan on a plane, I happen to meet a 'consultant' to the American military in Iraq who described to me in detail how he has 'taken care of trouble' both in South Africa and now in Iraq. He was South African. I think right around the time he proudly described cutting off the



thumbs of a recalcitrant worker in South Africa I got a good picture of this employee working on my tax dollars. So different than the wonderful people I encounter at the State Department or the United States Institute of Peace, or even at the intelligence agencies. But this is the complex reality of my country, indeed the complex reality of human sin when it is perpetrated by a culture.

The Mufti went on speaking about other things and I did not hear anything that he was saying. I was looking at the young man from Abu Ghraib, and he at me, and I could not take my eyes off of him. He had an intense and serious look on his face, and pain, and also a curious kind of shame, but I did not feel any hatred coming from him. He looked as if he was concentrating in a painful way on something, and he did not avert his eyes from me. I felt like his face was becoming seared into my memory. I have forgotten so many things and so many situations in my lifetime. But sometimes in life you feel you are living through a moment that is being burned into a new construct of your reality, and I felt the burning brand on my heart.

I could not sit anymore. I broke decorum and I got up in the middle of the Mufti speaking and I walked across the hall to the young man. The interpreter followed. The Mufti stopped speaking, and all eyes turned toward the side of the room. I spoke to the young man quietly and I told him how deeply sorry I was for what had happened to him, and I apologized in the name of the American people. Then I held his arm, and then I embraced him. I held back the tears. He stood there close to me with a look on his face of confusion as if he were searching hard for an answer, not angry but pained. I knew the question and I could not answer it. The question was as old as the Bible, 'Why me?'

I went back to my seat after a time and there was some commotion. I kept looking at the young 28 year old man. The Mufti was moved by what happened but in a strange way. It was as if he had expected this even though we never spoke. He looked as if he was sighing. Every time I did something that resonated exactly in his tradition in the last couple of encounters he seemed strangely resigned, sad, almost as if he could have predicted what I would do. It made him sad, I think, because he knew in his heart that this is the way it could be between our peoples if only he were allowed to teach this way to the world. But the world does not recognize repentance, apologies, the impulsive embrace of enemies who suffer. It does not recognize emulation of Abraham in the ways of respect for strangers, nor in Abraham's ways of compassion and generosity. Not the hard world of politics, nor the hard world of organized religions, as a matter of fact. Only the buried spiritual world of the heart, of rarified traditional memories, texts and stories, always overshadowed and censored when religious

ethnic groupings insist on being drenched in righteous anger. Emulating Abraham in the world of Abrahamic religions today is like holding your finger to a hole in a window with a flood on the other side.

I let the Syrians accompanying me know that I wanted the names and exact information about the missing brothers of the young man from Abu Ghraib in the hopes that perhaps this family could be reunited someday. And so I send out this information now in the hopes that someone reading this may give this to someone who might look into the case. The brothers' names are Hamed Abdul Hafez al-Kubaysi, born 1981, and Ayman Abdul Hafez al-Kubaysi, born 1983. They were taken on June 22, 2005 from the city of Basra, and went, as far as the family knows, to Buka prison. That is all I can do for them, and it is not enough.

This was not the end of the episode, however. The session ended and then the Mufti and everyone else promptly and quickly went into the mosque. Our group of outsiders were brought to the back of the mosque on the second floor. There were no less than three thousand Muslims on all the floors and flowing to the outside on that hot sunny day. The Mufti spoke at great length and very passionately. He wept at one point about the wars and the killing and the extremism. It was at a time when Shiite/Sunni killings were reaching unprecedented heights in Iraq. He spoke again and again about how Islam forbids the killing of civilians and the love that he has for Christians.

Then the Mufti announced that there was 'a man of religion' from America and invited me to come forward and say something as a guest, not as part of the service, which had already finished. Only later would he let it be known to a smaller gathering that I was a rabbi. He is a smart man when it comes to dealing with difficult emotions and enemy systems, and there is a reason why the people in that mosque are so fiercely devoted to him. I was escorted quickly through various doors outside and then inside, each time putting on my shoes and taking them off, having absolutely no skills at what is standard practice in maneuvering around a mosque. I was trembling badly in a way that I had not done since the Assad library talk. It was very difficult to stare at so many people who were not smiling. I would later learn how many of them were poor and refugees.

I went to join the Mufti down with the people, his senior sheikhs who seemed to be engaged in subtle forms of crowd control, and the young man from Abu Ghraib was there as well right near me. I elected to cite many of my religious traditions that paralleled the Mufti's lecture, but without citing them as Jewish sources. I cited Biblical teachings on love of neighbor, on the sin of hatred in

the heart, on avoiding doing to others what is hateful to you, quotes from Psalms that those who love life and want to be God fearing should keep their mouths from speaking against others, and that they should pursue peace. I spoke of true heroism being the changing of enemies into friends and how humbled I was to have the chance in my life to learn spiritual truths from such a heroic figure as their Mufti. I talked for just three or four minutes.

Then the Mufti told them what I had done with the young man from Abu Ghraib, and this created quite a stir. I believe he said, “He apologized, how can we not respond to this?” He also rebuked them and mentioned how rare it is that they apologize, meaning the Muslim world, when they do something wrong. Then some commotion occurred at the front. Some members were saying things to the Mufti, and I asked what was going on. They said that people were objecting to his bringing me here. They said, “He elected George Bush,” and, my voice trembling, I responded, “We did not elect torture.” Then the Mufti put me together with the young man and said to his followers, “Show the world what he have done here today,” and immediately ten or twenty people in the front rows took out their cell phones and began videotaping our group standing with the Mufti and the young man. They put me together with the young man, I believe. It is all a bit of blur now as I was in a daze by this time. As I was walking out through the crowd, which dispersed with amazing speed, a young man smiled at me broadly and meekly, held my hands, and gave me a very inexpensive set of Islamic prayer beads made of green plastic. I think it was one of the most valuable gifts I have ever received in my life.

We left the main hall and proceeded into another beautiful reception hall where about 50 people were gathered. Again, I sat in front with the Mufti. We were treated to a wonderful visit of a contingent of Ismaili Muslims from a village in Syria who were paying their respects to the Mufti. Such minority groups are deeply grateful to this Mufti because his tolerance for all sects keeps them safe from the extremists. In addition there was a remarkable lecture given by a three to five year old who came up to my knee—and I am short. He proceeded to hold forth for almost twenty minutes repeating the Mufti’s lecture, it seems word for word, complete with dramatic gestures, pauses, passion, sighs. I could not believe what I was seeing. The father was at the far end, and I noticed him wiping his eye a few times, and the blind teacher was there as well. I thought to myself about what a rich and ancient culture there is here, and how vital it will be to engage it with care and respect at every level. Never in my travels have I ever seen a child that young perform this way. Of course, he was a prodigy, but it was the investment of the Islamic culture in him that was astonishing. My hosts and I left the mosque, but not before the Mufti gave me a beautiful piece

of religious art and a Koran as a gift. I sensed strongly that he wanted more time together but it seemed not to be possible. The truth is that I also had to get back to Damascus before sunset. We went to get some humous, zatar, and pita in a restaurant next to the Citadel and then went home to Damascus.

The drive home was relatively straightforward except that we got lost in the side streets of Hama, which caused considerable nervousness. In the end we made it back to Damascus in time for nightfall so that I could observe my Sabbath.

## **THE MUFTI IN DAMASCUS AND THE SHADOW OF ASSAD**

Hind and I decided to invite the Mufti to her house in Damascus on Sunday. We would have a meal just with him, but including the Swiss and Moroccan ambassadors, of course. Nizar came as well as Lena, our wonderful friend and translator. What was astonishing was the shift in the Mufti's mood. Whereas just two days before he seemed agitated and upset, on Sunday he seemed quite elated. In the course of conversations it emerged that the Mufti had had a meeting with President Assad earlier in the day, together with the other Muslim leaders, I believe. He related to Assad what had happened at the mosque in Aleppo on Friday.

The Mufti said that Assad said to him that what happened at the mosque "was worth more to me than a hundred speeches by the American President." It is hard to know exactly what Assad meant. Was it because there was an apology from an American for what happened at Abu Ghraib? Was it the honor of Islam and Syria by an American, or the interfaith encounter itself? It certainly seems to have something to do with the deeds that we did in terms of apology and reconciliation. And why was it so meaningful to Assad or important to him or valuable politically? I put together these cryptic comments together with the change in the Mufti's mood, his very negative statements on Friday about religious leaders destroying the world, and the knowledge I gained about other appointed muftis in Syria who are hard line or even jihadist, and I concluded that the meeting on Sunday was a contest between competing directions of Islam in Syria. Considering the fact that Assad has made such strong overtures to Iran recently, including defense treaties, and Iran is repairing holy sites, in addition to great pressure from Wahabi funds that are radicalizing Syria, I realized just how under fire this Grand Mufti is. I also caught a glimpse of how Assad calculates which way the winds are blowing in Islam and what is acceptable to Islamists in Syria.

For just one day the Mufti shifted the balance a little. The Mufti was able to show to his followers, and therefore to Assad, that you can get further politically through honoring guests, receiving apologies and acknowledgements, even with the hated Americans. For just one weekend he was able to demonstrate to Assad that there are ways to deal with America that do not include religious brinksmanship or flirtations with religious radicalism that is virulently anti-American.

As I reflected on this chain of events I realized that this sacred encounter in Aleppo was a drop in the ocean of trouble we have today between civilizations and religions. But we are the ones responsible for this being but a drop and not a flood. Floods shift the course of rivers, but drops do not. There is a drought of diplomatic wisdom today, and there is no one to blame but ourselves because a different way is possible. We must choose to lead the way or be drowned in a sea of anger and miscommunication.

## **MEDIA ENCOUNTERS AND LESSONS**

The final public encounter of the trip was a press conference in which I fielded questions from Syrian TV, Iranian TV, Abu Dhabi TV, al-Jazeera, and a number of other Middle Eastern radio and newspaper outlets. Mostly this centered on secular political questions, such as the nuclear crisis. In addition to answering questions in as direct but diplomatic way as I could I just kept hammering away at the central message of our work, that people and their needs, their values and their cultures matter, and that they are the crucial missing link in helping to solve state conflicts. I kept bringing back the various political stalemates to the central importance of encounter between enemies at every level, and how only that meeting of peoples and civilizations has ever led in history to lasting peace.

The perennial sadness that I feel in Syria is that the Western press either does not care or is not permitted to be at these press conferences. It seems to be a bit of both. The Western press seems especially geared up for anything violent or extreme coming out of Syria, and do not seem to take cultural encounters as seriously. This is as true in the West as it is when the Western press finds itself in the Middle East, and this is a tragedy that guarantees the continuation of stereotypical images between enemy groups, East and West. For all of the deep flaws of Syrian society in terms of freedom, it is truly ironic that they give me so much play in the media, but I can guarantee you that a Muslim sheikh peacemaker who visited the United States from Syria would be laughed out of our media's offices.

I continue to be amazed at how un-free the global media really are. They seem to be servants of public rage, whatever public they serve. This is remarkably as true of democracies as it is of authoritarian regimes, and one has to wonder what the deep-rooted functionality is of media in today's human psychology. Are they there for information or provocation? Are they modern incarnates of the people in ancient armies who would go with the army and rile them up against their enemies right before battle? Are they latter day counterparts of those who put on the gladiator shows for the masses, so that the masses could witness and experience vicariously the horror of violence and war? Of course, I exaggerate, but it is remarkable to me how easy it is to get the media to cover anything violent or scandalous. We joked among us clerics at the World Economic Forum, with the world's media buzzing all about world leaders in the hallways, that the media would never come to our peace ceremony, but if during the peace ceremony I could orchestrate a fistfight between an Imam and a Rabbi they would come rushing in, and then we could get them to film the peace ceremony.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE WARRING PARTIES**

I want to conclude this report with some recommendations for several parties to the conflicts of the Middle East. Throughout my trips to this region, as I have tried to make suggestions on political steps forward, I have grown tired of how many times policy makers and diplomats on all sides have told me about what 'they know the other side will never do'. Here is my response to that argument. (I deliberately leave out Lebanon and Hezbollah here which must be treated separately. I also leave it out because Lebanon is the theater where other unresolved conflicts are being played out, and so I return to Syria, Israel and the United States):

Recommendations for all parties:

- Instead of always making assumptions about enemies and their insincerity there is great advantage to calling of bluffs. If there is an offer you have received and you think an enemy is insincere then test him by calling what you think is his bluff. If they fail the test you have been vindicated but if they prove to be sincere and they are serious about negotiations and compromises then your security situation can only improve. In either case you win because you have either proven yourself morally superior to your adversary whose insincerity is clear to the world, or you have honestly moved forward with an enemy in a way that will make your people safer.

- Shift toward more and more official diplomacy that is completely public. There is a lack of utility in the old way of whispering peace and waiting for replies. Polls and popular opinion more and more dominate our world, and sincere offers of peace are very popular with people the world over. This is not the same as being perceived as a capitulator or collaborator, and it is not about pacifism. It is about the very public offer of peaceful alternatives to your current stance. People the world over want to feel that they are with the side that is the most generous, the most civilized, the most vindicated by their own behavior. No public likes being shamed or maligned by the world. Take full advantage of getting global publics to see you as the most reasonable party to a conflict, and let that set in motion a positive set of reactions from your enemy. If your enemy fails to respond to the public offers then watch your enemy sink in a morass of global isolation.

#### Recommendations for the United States:

- Send back an Ambassador to Syria, and let that ambassador communicate fully the grievances of the United States with Syria, in addition to a modest set of incentives for positive changes. An ambassador is a crucial bellwether of what the problems are and what the possibilities are. I have been amazed and impressed with some of the ambassadors in Damascus who are every bit as aware of the problems there as the White House, but are also capable of constructive engagement that helps the people.
- Do not put out monies for reform movements that will signal the death of those reform movements as traitors to their countries. This is pointless. Rather secure funds for overtures from the American people to people who have suffered the ravages of the Iraq war, such as the one and half million Iraqi refugees in Syria, or the Lebanese refugees. Furthermore, there is no reason to not publicly engage projects that help the poor of Syria. If it is rejected then the U.S. looks better, so what is the downside? Surely it is easy to say, without admitting failure or defeat, that the planners of the Iraq war did not hope or intend to put a million and a half refugees inside Syria and have countless families plunged into poverty and statelessness. Offer them help, offer food, care, clothing, medicines and doctors, free communications with family back in Iraq, and perhaps safe passage arrangements for those who come from regions that have been stabilized—assuming there are any.
- The best way to help reformers in Syria is to positively engage the people of Syria with help and with the kind of listening skills that other

governments have demonstrated. Engage the Syrian government on the outstanding grievances in a way that offers concrete alternatives for the present Syrian regime. The calmer things are the more possible it will be that Assad might return to the Damascus Spring. The Damascus Spring, a largely internal Syrian process that was far from complete or perfect, is the only kind of change that will be both nonviolent and lasting. Regime change and opposition groups are part of a phenomena that should be internal to the evolution of Syrian culture. The moment it is aided by the U.S. in a belligerent, threatening or underhanded way it poisons the effort and makes every reformer into a traitor.

- The issue of American aid to reformers is complicated but even if this cannot be resolved make it very clear in public that positive incentives outlined here are conditional open the freedom of reformers in Syria.
- Let the legal proceedings of the Hariri investigation proceed and go where they will but without making it into a battering ram against Syria at every turn.
- Encourage as a part of the bargaining, more and more clear proof of Syrian disengagement from destructive forces in Lebanon, but do not use Lebanon as merely a weapon. There too focus on people and their needs, and you will become more enamored of the people of the region. Work with the Syrians on the delivery of unprecedented amount of aid to Lebanese citizens.
- Learn from the Swiss and the Canadians about how simply helping people with their needs is the flower of effective diplomacy. There is much to be done to create good will. This takes a much more artful coordination of aid and diplomacy wherein only the best experts in village-based aid guide policy makers on how to ease life as far as possible for the very poor of this region. I doubt that Syria will resist this, especially in coping with the desperate situation of the refugees from Iraq. But if they do then you can be free to make your offers very public and thus turn the onus away from you and onto them.
- Create an informal White List of uncorrupted Syrian businessmen who can begin to do business freely in the United States as a positive incentive to others of wealth to join this list and abandon corrupt monopolies in Syria. Many even in the regime may seize the opportunity, and if the regime blocks the effort then make this very open for the Syrian public to see and judge for themselves. Be generous with a civilization as a form of pressure, and thus put the onus on corruption as an old way that is no longer profitable.

For Israel:



- Respond to Syrian overtures even though they are in a weak position militarily. If you think it is a bluff, then call the bluff. Make the conditions of peace quite clear, in terms of the future of Hamas, Hezbollah, and normalization of relations.
- Make explicit your conditions for a future peace, make them public and be prepared to follow through.
- Offer concrete confidence building steps such as cultural and economic exchange, in addition to steps toward the Palestinian people, that will allow the Israeli population to get used to the possibility of a comprehensive peace process along more than one border.
- Allow for religious and cultural representatives to pioneer engagement with enemies as a first step in moving slowly toward a peace process.

For Syria:

- Re-embrace cultural openness to the world, come to international meetings like WEF, and let the world in. Even let your enemies in for conversations and debate.
- Make your diplomatic overtures to Israel and America, overt, highly public. Be willing to part company with rejectionist ideologies but only in return for the Golan. At the same time join the Arab League's secular peace proposal. It is the natural secular pragmatic construct of two states for two peoples, which is where Syria belongs as a champion of secular culture and religious pluralism.
- Invite yourself to Jerusalem, and openly invite cultural and political exchange as a means of more effectively getting what you want, as other neighboring states have done. But embarrass Israel and America into accepting your overtures by going public. Put the burden on them and watch your reputation improve on the world stage.
- Give your peaceful and tolerant representatives of religion the freedom to reach out to the rest of the world and to invite them in. Let this be an attractive bridge between the rest of the world and Syria.

## **REFLECTIONS ON LESSONS FROM DORA EUROPUS**

I want to end with why I dream often of Dora Europus. Dora Europus is a ruin of ancient town in Eastern Syria not far from the Iraqi border. It is an ancient town that flourished from the last centuries before the Common Era to a couple of centuries after the Common Era. When it was unearthed in the 1920's it was discovered that there was a synagogue that had been buried in dirt for almost two thousand years, with the result that all the paintings of the walls survived intact. This was unprecedented, for almost all other synagogues had never had

paintings as far as we know. But this region had a specialty in religious art that influenced all the religious sites. The Damascus Museum now houses the remnants of those synagogue walls. They are in a closed room behind dark curtains, and I stood before them for a very long time unable to move.

The most extraordinary thing about Dora Europus is that there were no less than sixteen different temples in the city. There were temples to three different versions of Zeus worship, to Artemis, and many other forms of worship, including a Christian church. But what astonished me the most was the layout of the city. It appears that the city was planned in such a way to have numerous religious forms of worship represented, all along a geometric pattern in the center of the city.

This city has captured my imagination in terms of the age-old question of religious pluralism, of majority and minority status, and the fonts of human wisdom and truth. I am devoutly monotheistic but I must say that monotheistic intolerance and self-righteousness makes me sick, especially in the last two decades of my life. That is why I like being a minority, and I like experiencing difference. It means that I always know a lot about others, more than they know about me, and that I can never be lulled into the self-delusions that majorities often fall into. The safety of the majority is always a false safety because it is unprepared for destruction that may be coming your way because you do not know strangers.

I think to myself how almost two thousand years ago in the Middle East someone knew how to design a city that was by definition culturally and spiritually pluralist, a place where strangers could almost assuredly find a form of worship right for them. Then I think of our contemporary world, and the world wrought by our civilizations, and I say that Iran cannot hold a candle to the Persia of Cyrus, and that the Abrahamic religions are having difficulty promoting the kind of tolerance that Greece promoted over two thousand years ago. Surely this must produce some humility from all of our religious and secular civilizations.

Wisdom comes from everywhere, and it is sometimes buried beneath layers of two thousand year-old dust, but it is no less real. That is why I keep coming back to this haunted place called the Middle East, why I respect it for what it has to teach me, even when it is mired in trouble.

## **ESSENTIAL TRUTHS**

Despite my admiration for Dora Europus, however, I suspect that its lessons of planned pluralism will not be sufficient to heal the wounds of this place right now, as good a vision as it may be. All I know is that I, a Jew the descendant of Lithuanian and Ukrainian Jews whose roots go back to the Middle East, and whose villages and roots were all destroyed in a couple of months in 1941 by fascists and Nazis, found myself standing one day in the Middle East. It was a day where I stood before three thousand conservative Islamic people in the conservative town of Aleppo, Syria, many of them refugees like my ancestors had always been. I stood before a young man in deep pain who had been tortured and who I suspect would not find common cause with me about setting up pluralist, secular civilizations in the Middle East as an answer to its problems. But it did not matter, because our hearts met.

It is a lesson of the best spiritual teachings of all the world's great religions, and also the greatest insights of Enlightenment thinkers from David Hume to Carol Gilligan, that nothing transforms our consciousness more than the meeting of hearts in a place of common feeling. When all is said and done, that is all we have done in Syria, and it will stand the test of time, no matter how much the irretrievable losses of war devastate our hearts.

The Sufis believe that war, violence and hatred are the illusion, and that when our hearts meet we are merely uncovering the true reality that we are all one. Geneticists scanning the globe of late discovering that we are all cousins seem to be trying to tell us the same thing. Perhaps we should listen.