

ANTOINE NASRI MESSARRA
Professeur
56 rue Abd el-Wahab el-Inglizi-Sodeco
Rés. Messarra
B.P. 16-5738
Achrafieh
BEYROUTH – LIBAN 1100 - 2070
Tel & Fax: (..961-1) 325 450
(..961-1) 219 613/4
E-mail : antoine@messarra.com
http : //antoine.messarra.com
http : //www.lfpcp.org
http : //monitoringdemocracy.com
M124/05c ang

“The Arab Islamic-Christian Dialogue Team”
Visit of Five American Cities

A Different Kind of Diplomacy For Communication Between People*
Defending Jerusalem and Protecting the Arab Coexistence Structure
A Dialogue Map of Constructive Partnership

Antoine Messarra

Communication between people namely through civil associations is a diplomacy of a different kind, one to which the Arab regimes did not give any importance; quite the contrary, it has been considered as a threat, or confined to specific fields. The only exception may be the Institute of the Arab world in Paris that endeavors to make the Arab culture known. There are often complaints among Arabs about the ‘biased politics of the U.S.’ in favor of Israel, the American ‘interfering in’ Lebanese affairs, ‘the exporting of democracy’, and the prejudiced ideas that Americans have about Islam and Arabs in general. Yet, the Arab regimes do not in the least try to rectify these ideas by activating communication between Arab civil associations and those in the U.S. The E.U. has set up programs under the watchword ‘Europe for the People’. The Arab regimes, on the other hand – at the exception of Lebanon that has escaped the contagious disease of Arabic prisons – persecute civil associations on the pretext that they are financed ‘from abroad’, from an international civil society that trespasses its powers.

In fact Arab policies that are limited on the levels of culture, diplomacy, and globalization mix up between the American administration and some states that may exert pressure upon the latter in favor of some common causes.

* This is an analytical summary that does not necessarily express the opinions of all the team members; the latter split into two groups then reunited at the end of the tour in Washington. The text includes the tour in Charlotte – North Carolina, NYC, and Washington (15-30/4/2005). The team members who visited Charlotte – North Carolina and NYC are: Samir Murqus, Nadia Mahmud Mustapha, and Antoine Messarra. The team members who visited LA and Chicago are: Muhammad Sammak, Abbas Halabi and Riyad Jarjur. Kamil Menassa later joined the two groups in Washington.

“The Arab Islamic-Christian Dialogue Team” official visit of five American states on April 15-30, 2005 – LA, North Carolina, NYC, Chicago, and Washington – upon an invitation from the Church World Service Middle-East Forum can be considered as an attempt to maintain communication between people. These visits ensue the world forum held by the Arab team in London in the end of 2003 about Islamic-Christian relations, between the East and the West after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the war on Iraq.

The visit of the Arab delegation aimed at introducing Muslims and Christians from the Middle-East to communities and churches in the U.S. It also aimed at presenting positive cooperation patterns between Christians and Muslims, fighting preconceived ideas and raising awareness among Christians in the U.S. The team split up into groups: the first visited LA and Chicago; the second visited North Carolina and NYC; then both groups met in Washington for three days. Such visits help reestablish the cultural facts and realities on both sides – since the latter are often distorted by the media. These visits also help activists who try to defend just and rightful Arab causes.

I have already experienced the effectiveness of communication between people as diplomatic action of a different kind, one which is perhaps more deep-rooted than any other. This was when I was a student in third year at law school and at the Sociology Department of the Saint Joseph University and the World Literature Institute in Beirut affiliated to the University of Lyon in France. I was chosen among twenty Arab students in 1962 to visit four US states – NYC, North Carolina, Chicago, and Washington – within the Program ‘Getting To Know the U.S.’¹, which was launched by President John Kennedy and run by the American Friends of the Middle East. I had then been introduced to the founding values of the American popular heritage as well as to ways that develop communication outside the regular frames of rigid diplomacy – this is because the area of the U.S makes Americans interested in internal affairs only without being open enough to world affairs or to world culture or history whereas the American Administration’s role is that of a world superpower, perhaps exclusively after the collapse of the USSR.

1

Charlotte: The Minority Card Leads to Conflicts and Failure

1. At a lunch in the hall of the Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte – North Carolina – presentation focused on the Lebanese lab, which is at the heart of three crucial issues nowadays: the efficacy of consensual-based systems, fields of dialogue between religions, and the place of small states in the world system. This is what led Pope John Paul II to hold the Synod for Lebanon in 1995 and say: “Lebanon is not merely a country; it is a mission”. Wars in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 were partly civil and partly multinational and ‘for others’ as Ghassan Tuani put it in his writings though he was often misunderstood. Real examples were set forth about communication and how sectarian division failed in Lebanon. Today, the media are showing via satellite, pictures of thousands of Lebanese of all ages and all parties, side by side, in the Martyrs’ Square, around the tomb of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri who was assassinated, Christians and Muslims united in prayer. It was also brought out that religion is exploited for political purposes at an international level after the 9/11 terrorist attacks; it is now clear that democracy is the fundamental basis

¹ Antoine Messarra, *Témoignage d’Amérique* (Testimonies From America) *Action-Proche-Orient*, Beirut, Jan.-May, 1962: *L’Universitaire*, Jan.1962; and *Trirème*, Jan. 1963.

of world peace in a time when nuclear power can easily be acquired, a time when conflicts are run by groups that go beyond nations and are not submitted to a legitimacy that may check them and hold them accountable for their acts.

Papers showed that the minority card is ineffective for the following three main reasons:

- *Religion has nothing to do with area*: constitutional Arab heritage has never linked religious identity with a specific area, contrary to the Israeli pattern that has appropriated a geographic area for a religious identity. Both the Arab region and Israel itself suffer from this shift that contradicts historical heritage and still disrupts Arab relations.

- *Lebanization considered positively*: Lebanon suffered throughout fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990, from barricades and check points but it proved that it was impossible to divide its regions on a sectarian basis; Lebanisation has now acquired a more positive sense, so much that it means unity through pluralism.

- *Oppressed minorities and majorities*: it has often been made clear that wherever a religious minority has no rights, then the ruling majority itself has no freedom of expression and cannot participate freely in political matters. The meeting clearly underlined the fact that the society that has a problem with its minority has many others with the majority.

The meeting helped to make participants aware of the common responsibility regarding the defense of Jerusalem, as a symbolic setting that unites the three Abrahamic religions not as an area of violence and domination in the name of God who is used in Zionist ideology for land exploitation.

Particular importance was given to the contribution of religions as concerns world peace through the defense of the oppressed. Religious bodies ought to take clear and outspoken stands as concerns human Rights and the acknowledgement that these rights are universal for at least three reasons: the fact that all human nature is the same, that all basic human values are the same, and that all humans live on the same planet. Education in terms of human Rights or culture in terms of human Rights has to respect specificities. Principles ought to become more firmly rooted and conveyed properly taking into account traditions, mentalities, experiences, needs and priorities. However, one needs to avoid generalization when talking about religious violence or in the name of religion since atheist movements in the world such as the fascist or Nazi movements or Soviet communism were lethal to man who did not have any limits.

In the U.S, the role of religious bodies is – among other things – to call for justice in international relations, bridge the gap between the North and the South, implement international resolutions as concerns the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian cause, and preserve the symbolic role of Jerusalem that unites all three Abrahamic religions.² It was emphasized during the debates that both Christian and Muslim religious bodies in the Arab world ought to take clear and outspoken, perhaps even bold stands as concerns injustices to the people of the region and flagrant violations of religions and human Rights in general, since each one is responsible of the image he conveys. In case Arab religious bodies fail to take such a stand in conformity with the real image of Islam, then we will see more preconceived ideas about political Islam and more people the likes of Bin Laden.

² About religion and politics in the US: Tarik Mitri, *Mādīna ‘ala jabal? ‘an al-dīn wa-l-siyāsa fī america* (City on a Mountain? About Religion and Politics in the US), Introduction by Ghassan Tuani, Beirut, Dar an-Nahar, 2005

2. What are the questions that forty students in international relations, religious sciences and political sciences asked when they met with the members of the Arab team in Queens University of Charlotte, upon an invitation from religious sciences teacher Diane Mowrey? One of the team members said to the students: you are asked to be more aware of what is happening in the world today since you are American citizens and you have an international role; therefore your duties are three: spread justice and peace, support your government in this sense, and sometimes rectify some political deviations should communication with the society be lacking.

Particular importance was given to minorities in the Middle-East that is a part of issues related to citizenship, which was called by one of the participants 'the third road'. The need is therefore for a global approach to democracy as concerns equality, political participation, and the acknowledgement of civic, political and cultural rights.

3. Churches and religious institutions in the U.S. are very much alive and serve as gathering places, provide services and consultation, contrary to some cities in Canada and Switzerland, and contrary to the preconceived ideas of a consumer-based society.

Three hundred members of the Providence Baptist Church gathered for a dinner followed by a round table debate run by Pastor David Jordan with three of the team members. Instead of simply giving a paper, participants were allowed to ask as many questions as they needed about their fears and their conceptions of the Arab region. Some of these questions were: how do you manage as Christians and Muslims and as citizens in Egypt? What authority do Muslim religious dignitaries have? Does the concept of Jihad contribute to violence in Islam? Do you consider that Lebanon is today on the right peace track?

Answers were based on real examples, from the Ottoman and Islamic heritage of more than four centuries, examples of how to run religious, community, and cultural diversity, as published in many writings even in English and should be referred to.³ This constitutional heritage gives many societies normative patterns that are applicable today as long as they are developed and up-dated. Some of the team members placed the concept of jihad and the authority of religious dignitaries in a larger context, i.e. how religion is exploited in politics that leads to violence-generating conflicts.

4. In an interview with a network of radios in North Carolina, dialogue mainly focused on the American media since positive changes have been noted in the past years as concerns the human side of prolonged conflicts in the Middle-East. This helps humanize diplomacy and general politics in the Arab region, which is the most wronged in international relations since the creation of Israel in 1948. In terms of real examples, that of Lebanon was given with more than one million people from different regions, ages, and affiliations gathering for the sake of the country's unity, freedom and independence, and to preserve the role of Lebanon, a pioneer in the Arab world in terms of democracy, coexistence and communal living. Also mentioned were the common prayers at the tomb of the great martyr, former Premier, Rafiq Hariri and his companions who died on February 14, 2005, and the common call of

³ . Benjamin Braud and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society*, Holmes and Meier Publishers, New York – London, 2 vol., 1982.

the representatives of all communities on April 13, 2005, to commemorate April 13, 1975, the start of the Lebanese war.

2

New York City

The new Enemy: Political Islam or Autocratic Regimes?

5. In a small encounter with the Ikhwan Muslimins at the Mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood run by Imam Talib, you pray fervently with around fifty believers as you move away from the hustle of the city. You see African Muslims who were born in the U.S. and who read the Koran with an American accent, and you hear a different sermon than some of those given in the Arab world. When you speak to them, you find they are true Americans, yet special in the same time. You may even consider they have not quite integrated the 'melting pot'.

6. The Metro Baptist Church held a meeting with David Waugh and Lucinda Mosher from the Enabling Inter-Religious Understanding center, Pastor Shanta Premawardhana, Secretary general of relations between religions, a human Rights activist. It was noted that violence between religions ought not to be taken lightly for the problem is often political and not religious. A socio-academic and reasonable approach to violence focuses on general socio-cultural aspects, whereas violence is often generated by politicians who mobilize followers in the name of religion to give political action a holy, non-negotiable aura.

Through which pattern do conflicts erupt? There are often, hidden somewhere, burning matters that engender conflict, and there is also someone with a match, but who? Practical research in conflict creation and conflict creators is what gives cultural immunity and the ability for the civil resistance to oppose violence, which tries to find justification in religion.

Who is the enemy today after the collapse of the USSR and world communism? In fact, there are two enemies: first *tensions in the world* namely in the Middle-East, and the lack of justice in the enforcement of international resolutions for global and fair peace; and second, *autocratic regimes* that engender poverty, oppression, direct terrorism or by proxy in other countries.

Americans ask you about democracy in the Arab region and ways to democratize Arab regimes. This is the basic issue. Violence is generated by autocratic regimes that threaten people with prisons and that submit to foreign orders spreading oppression and violence by proxy. These regimes try people for security matters, and rule by terror, thus they may form a nuclear threat to the world in case the international balance of power disrupts in their favor. The major change in world politics since the 9/11 terrorist attacks has been to consider democracy as the cornerstone of world peace; wars between countries were replaced by internecine and proxy wars.

The worst preconceived pattern is a Christian and Islamic mental programming to solve matters that are not religious but are rather related to political hegemony, financial and moral terrorism, and the creation of sectarian divisions in order to preserve a given political class. The Lebanese may have discovered since February 14, 2005 the ways that were used to give any issue a sectarian aspect in order to maintain hegemony over them; they awoke in a civil resistance and united after the dramatic event of February 14, 2005. One of the techniques that were used to maintain divisions was to have Christian political leaders call for independence and

territorial integrity. But if an Islamic leader were to do so, he was pressured to remain quiet in order to give the impression that there were internal divisions and waste time to establish a reconciliation that did not even need to take place were it not for pressure, which sometimes became assassination threats and actual killing.

7. After a moving visit to the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in NYC, a meeting was held in the New York Interfaith Services (NYDIS) with its executive director, Peter Gudaitis, David Weaver, director of the Mission Relationships and Witness Program in the Church World Service, David Wildman, executive director of the Human Rights and Racial Justice organization, and Ali M. Gheith, from the Population Based Resilience, Office of Mental and Health Disaster. The participants discussed two problems of inter-religious relations: first, the differences and similarities related to culture and creed, as well as traditions and mental patterns related to both; and second, the larger political aspect as religious differences are exploited and used for political purposes. This second issue requires a more pragmatic approach since it involves playing with people's feelings and beliefs by political experts that know how to generate conflict. The latter are possible when political exploitation comes in line. The Lebanese case and in former Yugoslavia prove how differences can be given a sectarian aspect in order to create schisms. This is why general religious or general cultural dialogue is not enough; civil resistance must be fostered to counter such practices.

When one of the participants brought up the issue of one official American institution publishing documents that condemn the lack of religious freedom in the Arab region, and the reactions stirred by these documents, the answer was that the American Administration is submitted to pressure from lobbies in the U.S. asking for distinct religious rights, so is the case in European countries. Religious reciprocity in Europe, the U.S. and the Arab states would help balance in conformity with the human Rights international charters. One of the participants who runs a Hindu-Islamic association stressed common interest matters: all children go to school together, use the bus and share the same quality of public life. A documentary that has not been made public yet was broadcast at the meeting showing a refugee family whose father is persecuted and imprisoned, then the family is deported from the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. After the collapse of the USSR, the *other*, from a different area and religion, has become the greater *enemy* that ought to be persecuted to fill a basic political need for an enemy.

One question was raised: who is the enemy of the U.S. today? Both European and American diplomacies who used to back up totalitarian regimes that would comply with their orders, consider after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that totalitarian regimes are the worst enemy of world peace. In fact these regimes are potential terrorist creators in other fragile states; they also resort to non-traditional means in international relations such as hostage taking, storing nuclear and biological weapons, financing and arming terrorist organizations.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the meeting is that a survey should be made of typical and practical experiences as concerns relations between religion in order to set paragons and empower the people, increase their immunity and resistance. If one walks around Martyrs' Square in Beirut after February 14, 2005 and in Lebanese villages and towns, one finds real communication examples more than in any analysis of so-called civilization clashes. These examples provide a ground for comparative, practical and useful studies on a comparative level.

The Lebanese case provides, during the war years since 1975, and after, positive patterns as to the building of solidarity, resistance and communication relations to fight off attempts to create and maintain fictive sectarian divisions. Several times was the experience of the Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace and the Foundation program “Civil Peace Monitor and Memory” mentioned since it is based on more than one hundred indicators to study the evolution or regression or stagnation of constant civil peace. The Monitor publishes a monthly report, which is a sort of fore-warning to prevent the consequences of politically used religious differences.⁴ These indicators hold dialogue components and are ground for useful programs that group all religions and communities.

8. A meeting was held in the Salam Arabic Lutheran Church presided by Pastor Khader N. el-Yateem with fifty members of the Church and the Arab colony in Brooklyn. The most striking is that some Arab immigrants to the U.S. for more than one generation, have carried on with them a discourse, an ideology, and preconceived ideas that existed in the Arab world at the time they left their native country and their memories stopped at that time. You try to talk to them with a renewed discourse born from changes that have occurred. However, you are faced with criticism and refusal. You wonder: what is the role of Arab colonies outside their native country? Is it to reproduce what already exists on the local Arab scene, or is it to act as useful mediators between the countries where they now live and their native country for the sake of both in order to establish real communication between people? This requires a creative mental combination of the native identity and the one that has been acquired, which allows a multicultural citizenship. The Arab immigrants are not asked to necessarily criticize the American Administration in all cases, or to call for a cessation of ‘foreign interference’ or to underline that ‘democracy cannot be exported’, etc. These immigrants had better rectify the common process since they are in the ideal spot to do so. Pastor Khader N. el-Yateem tries very hard to build a useful relation between immigrants in the US and their native country.

When speaking about Lebanon, some may use preconceived and predetermined words. So you endeavor to make clear the difference between what is ‘foreign’ coming from a state and what is ‘international’ coming from an international organization in which Lebanon and other Arab states are members. You need to make it clear that what is generally called ‘foreign’ includes elements such as military intervention, cultural exchange, complementary commercial relations, and communication for common interests.

You then wonder, in order to be able to see things more clearly, whether the Americans have a wrong image of Arabs and Islam or whether one needs to acknowledge that Arab regimes are themselves a source that conveys negative values. You also wonder when faced with various discourses whether the U.S and the Arabs can have one common language to build cultural basis and common interests. This common language first requires – as the E.U. tries to do in its Arab and Mediterranean policy – to start off from two principles:

1. *The 9/11 shock*: Arabs need to acknowledge the extent of the disaster caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and its psychological effects on Americans, and

⁴ Antoine Messarra (dir.), *Civil Peace Monitor and Memory in Lebanon*, (in Arabic, with summaries in English and Fench), Beirut, Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace, in cooperation with the Aya Napa Conference Center - Cyprus and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Librairie Orientale, 2004, 656 p.

their attempt to establish security as the nuclear threat looms ahead and terrorist groups wage war against whoever they deem it necessary.

2. *Basic universal rule of law*: Arabs need to acknowledge that there is a basic rule of law as concerns the democratic process. You often get the impression that to convey Lebanese and Arab diplomatic and political issues to the Americans you need to know more about psychology than about politics and international relations. Americans – even the most learned – are, in fact, easily traumatized and develop feelings of hatred towards what disrupts their material and mental ease. Arabs set off from accumulated predetermined ideologies to sort out matters in a way that prevents them from thinking rationally, practically and calmly.

Why do Arabs – be they individuals, groups, or states – try to enlarge the circle of their enemies whereas they mostly need to gather more support for their rightful causes? If ever you try to say something positive about American diplomatic affairs after the 9/11 attacks, you will certainly be accused of trying to justify in absolute terms a conspiracy against the Arab nation!

The E.U and the Arabs have made great strides to come to a common language in Euro- Mediterranean dialogue and partnership. The Arab-American dialogue is still unstable and contradictory, despite common interests, and despite strong individual and group relations. It is necessary to realize that preconceived ideas are not rectified through words only, but with real testimonies, examples and facts. Constant and absolute criticism, permanent denunciation of the conspiratorial ‘alliance’ between Israel and the U.S., of a ‘hegemony’ over the region, and denunciation of an ‘exported’ democracy, etc. are all quite useless. In fact these denunciations only help Israel that is wittier than Arab ideologists and is more pragmatic in trying to find common interests. Arab discourse about terrorism seems to disregard the threats that terrorism represents for all humanity as non-traditional wars develop, and does not seem to understand the extent of the shock caused by the 9/11 attacks. Instead of criticizing the American administration’s ‘exploitation’ of this disaster, Arabs ought to exploit this human tragedy to exert more pressure for peace in the region and true world security – instead of again drawing a distinction between so-called ‘resistance’ and terrorism in an attempt to escape defining terrorism. Why repeat a discourse about the reality of Islam and tolerance whereas everyone knows that the problem lies originally not in Islam but in Arab autocratic regimes and a certain unbalance in international relations.

You wonder: what the efficient short- and long-term language between the U.S. and Arabs as concerns their common interests? In fact, this language should include two elements:

- *Middle-Eastern peace*: there should be fair and global peace in the region without further delay in order to eradicate one source of violence, especially that the issue has now become ripe after half a century of fighting and conflict; Jerusalem ought to become the place where all Abrahamic religions gather,

- *World peace and the democratic process*: support should be given to the democratic process in the region and include three elements: democracy mechanisms, its contents, and its consolidation. Content and consolidation are a pure personal product, but minimal democratic standards in power change, periodic elections, and conformity with basic human Rights, etc. are universal and include Arab countries.

Minimal standards are inexistent in Arab regimes and conformity with these standards needs support – which is different than interference – if the regimes are autocratic and produce a culture of submission and brainwash people into yielding to

force. When speaking about the basis of democracy and its minimal standards, you may confront a strong reaction as though you were trying to justify the occupation of Iraq! When speaking about terrorism in the world system changes, you would encounter another strong reaction as though you did not know the difference between resistance and terrorism. One cannot help noticing that the Arab mind has somewhat become narrow since it has only known a dictatorial discourse. Ideology-based regimes have made the Arab mind lose some of its common sense, so much that it tries to deny the extent of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

9. The team took part in two celebrations in the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Marble Collegiate Church. One of these celebrations was followed by a meeting with a group of young people who asked questions about the status of women in Islam, about the Arab civilization ‘that has lost today its splendor’, and about the Lebanese experience in terms of democratic management of plurality. It was underlined that barricades and demarcation lines in the war years in Lebanon failed to divide the Lebanese. This experience acquires particular meaning at a comparative level after the collapse of the USSR, the dismantling of former Yugoslavia, and the spread of fanaticisms in the world as a very result of globalization that fosters individual and group identities and the need for solidarity.⁵ The natural and historical evolution of the Arab civilization has been checked by three factors:

- *The creation of Israel* in 1948, which spread a state of injustice in the Arab world.

- *The spread of autocratic regimes* that often exploit the regional situation in order to impose their hegemony on their people, and use the support of superpowers until the major political changes after the 9/11 attacks.

- *The lack of an Arab educational revolution* after the period known as the liberation and independence period in order to build an independence culture.

Dr. Nadia Mahmud Mustapha (Egypt), one of the team members, summed up some of the conceptions of the young people, of researchers and of activists in the following trilogy: Islam and jihad, Islam and women, Islam and terrorism! This trilogy should make Arabs aware that others should not be accused of being ignorant or ill intentioned or of creating conceptions. Arabs should find rational and convincing internal solutions and find ways to come out of this preconceived trilogy.

10. In the Interchurch Center in NYC a meeting was held, presided by John Hiemstra and Mia Adjali from Global Concerns-Women’s Division. Particular importance was given to the solidarity that the Lebanese showed after thirty years of suffering in what resembles the Prague ‘spring’ and Solidarnosk in Poland. The Lebanese know very well, be it physically or mentally, what terrorism is since they have experienced it every day of the war and after it, and they know about resistance that does not grow in a culture of submission, terror, and subordination. Examples of active communication were given, which were more expressive than entire volumes about tolerance as an ideology. The most striking example was that of a soldier,

⁵ Antoine Messarra, *al-Nathariyya al-‘ama fi-l nizâm al-dustûrî al lubnânî* (The General Theory in the Lebanese Constitutional System: Comparative research in consensual system, Beirut, Librairie Orientale, 2005, 464 p.

Khalid Kahul who defended Christian fellow soldiers in the army as they were stopped by an armed checkpoint in 1975 in order to abduct them.⁶

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from this meeting was the need to adopt a renewed pattern in the study of relations between religions through typical and real patterns to increase people's empowerment, and through issues that are raised in specific ways (secularism, sectarianism, religion and state, etc.) in order to spot injustices and remedy to them. This is how we can fight off prejudices, and initiate an effective and serious dialogue about real issues that are often a source of injustices for individuals and groups. When someone asked: why do the American official bodies care so much about religious freedoms in particular? The answer was that religious freedoms are, both from a historical and secular point of view, the mother of all freedoms and human Rights in general.

11. At a meeting with thirty researchers and activists in the Center for Christian Studies-Presbyterian Church, presided by Oscar Mc Cloud and James L. Cairns from the World Religions Congress for Peace, it was said that Arabs expect a lot from the U.S as a superpower who has a historical heritage as concerns freedoms. This is why they may be extremely critical. Debates also brought up the image the media convey of the Middle-East as they truly show human sufferance and the way people live, not just the speeches of politicians and diplomatic positions. Particular importance was given to relations between religions from the starting point of citizenship and the very behavior of Jesus Christ who taught and worked as a full-time citizen. One of the she-team members said: Americans wonder: why do they hate us? And we ask the question: what is happening to us and to our country? It was also said that art and literature may bring people together thus positively influencing diplomatic processes. One of the team members asked: does anyone know *The Prophet* by Jibran, the Lebanese author who immigrated to the U.S and who speaks of a universal spiritual heritage? It was also said that the centers of research about the Arab world and the Middle-East in the U.S. are pioneers, but are too academic without aiming to spread the result of their research among social forces.

12. At a meeting with professors and students from the Auburn Theological Seminary, debate was focused on the constitutional problems that may arise in the management of religious and confessional pluralism since religious dialogue does not concern religious and philosophical matters alone; it requires a frame related to the defense of freedoms and rights. One of the professors was asked about the issues of theocracy and democracy. Another was asked about the ability to combine Islamic Shari'ah and democracy. One of the participants answered that this combination was possible if one considered the following Koranic verse globally not on the basis of ideology: there is no coercion in religion. In this respect, each individual should be given the right to believe or not, or to believe in his own way, upon the condition that he does not disrupt the general order. The latter is not that of the prevailing religion, but the system that respects basic human Rights and is based on the rule of law – which emanates from the Chamber of deputies through fair and honest elections – and is protected by a free judiciary.

⁶ Tony Atallah, 'Soldier Khalid Kahul Fights Abduction Upon Identity (8/12/1975)', in the book: Antoine Messarra (dir.), *citizen for Tomorrow: Human Rights and Freedoms* (in Arabic), Beirut, Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace in cooperation with the National Endowment for Democracy, Librairie Orientale, three vols., 1995-1998, vol.2, pp. 263-282.

It was said at the debate that citizenship is not unilateral, and is sometimes quite diverse; citizenship requires a common and neutral public space; citizenship should include secularism. These may not be the perfect solutions but they are a second possible solution. One of the participants talked about ‘bridge builders’.

At a meeting with the Christian-Muslim Taskforce – Episcopal Diocese of New York St. John the Divine Cathedral House, debate focused on dialogue between religions, its content, and civic education for the sake of peace, as well as programs that foster cooperation for the common interest. The Lebanese case was brought up so was the work of the Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace that fought along with other associations ‘Lebanization’ in its negative meaning – i.e. divisions and permanent conflict. Lebanon later acquired a more positive meaning – i.e. the ability to unite through diversity, despite barricades and demarcation lines. Other countries such as former USSR and former Yugoslavia have not succeeded in this positive Lebanonization process.

One of the main hurdles to mutual understanding is that Arab people use the terms and words of their political regimes, terms that sound more like arbitrary slogans. International relations require flexibility and openness. Even when we criticize these slogans and terms, we help to spread them and we consider them as a reference for debate. As to those Americans who criticize their government’s foreign policy, they often lack a global vision of the challenges of world peace, and they do not realize that their prosperity is linked with an American foreign policy based on expansion or exchange.

3

Washington: Quasi-complete Absence of Arabs and A Live Lebanese Presence

14. At a meeting with the Muslim Public Affairs Council directed by Salam al-Marayati and Ahmad Younis, the Council officials set forth clear, direct and outspoken positions without prevarications related to the *Fiqh*, contrary to what you may hear in other meetings with Muslims in the Arab countries or elsewhere. We have already noticed some ambiguity in a religious way of thinking based on a distinction between the cases where Muslims are a majority and cases where they are a minority – a distinction that cannot be accepted since it hides a certain hegemony in the absence of the minimal law standards and human Rights if there is just one citizen, or more, from a different religion who is not given his full rights as a citizen.

The Council officials say: ‘We are part of the American melting-pot. We work for the future of Islam in the U.S. without being financially dependent on any Arab party. We are not secluded from the American society but we are rather committed to the setting and to the time we are living in.’ You realize they mean to recognize the existence of a neutral and common public space where each individual has the right to believe in his own way. One of the team members set forth the following issue: ‘Some stands and behaviors outside the U.S. blur your image and the way your fellow citizens deal with you. Cooperation bridges ought to be built by Islamic and religious organizations in the U.S. and Arab countries.’

Some team members stressed the need for organizations who try to promote a real and contemporary Islam to show this image of Islam through the media. When the American report about religious persecution in the Middle-East and some other Arab countries was mentioned, some brought up the issue of the pressure exerted by

religious bodies in the U.S. and in Europe for religious and cultural rights, which are inexistent in Arab countries. Should there not be some mutual pressure in order to set up a reciprocity system just like relations related to taxes and consulates, which may lead Arab countries to admit the minimal standards in terms of human Rights and religious freedoms?

15. In Georgetown University, the Catholic University of the Society of Jesus, created back in 1789, the team members met with Professors John Borelli, Ahmad Dallal, Yvonne Haddad, Paul L. Heck, Iman Yahya Hendi, John Voll and members of research teams. Talks focused on the need to defend Jerusalem as a symbol that gathers religions and holds a common spiritual heritage in order to reach a fair and global peace in the region after half a century of suffering. There is also a need to rectify mutual Arab and American prejudices, protect the identity of coexistence in the Arab social fabric, develop fields of partnership, enlarge research fields in terms of relations between religions, etc.

Issues related to relations between religions have three dimensions:

- A *religious* and cultural dimension with what it comprises as theological, doctrinal, educational, and mental issues.

- A *constitutional* and *legal* dimension in the American administration as concerns religious and communitarian diversity.

- A *political* dimension, i.e. when religious differences are given a sectarian aspect to serve political competition and mobilization. In the world, you find experts, schools and specialists in conflict maneuvers and mobilization through the exploitation of religious and tribal differences. Peace building requires the development of a culture of immunity and resistance against the exploitation of religion in political competition.

One Muslim team member asked the following question: ‘What is the place of the Christian Arabs in your vision of the future? The decrease in the number of Christians in the region changes the identity of the latter.’ Another question was asked about the reasons why the American administration has given so much importance to Christian-Islamic relations after the 9/11 attacks. One Muslim team member underlined the danger in having Christian universities and religious bodies address Muslim Arabs without addressing directly Christian bodies as an efficient element that has to be empowered – which is what Pope John Paul II did especially when he organized the synod for Lebanon in 1995, and announced the Apostolic Exhortation on October 5, 1997, in order to activate the role of Lebanese Christians nationally and in favor of all the society. Some

American participants complained about certain Islamic organizations in the U.S. who ‘proselytize’ instead of working for solidarity and cooperation. One the participants spoke about the misinterpretation of the situation in the Arab region, since some Americans compare Christian and Muslim Arabs with – relations that used to exist between – white and black Americans, whereas the situation is completely different. It was suggested that there should be partnership relations; also, both sides should try to produce cultural and educational material in terms of religious culture and good practices.

16. At a meeting in the office of the Chairman of the Committee on International Relations – US House of Representatives, Henry Hyde and some of his assistants, namely Lara Alameh, Professional Staff Member, talks focused on the

symbolic value of Jerusalem, the case of Lebanon that fought against barricades and demarcation lines, and the importance of internal solidarity to reach independence and overcome the hurdles, which people may face as they try to reestablish the rule of law – after years of occupation, repression, and rule of secret services – and to organize free and fair elections in due time.

You realize as you hear people talk, that Arabs have no impact contrary to an active and efficient Lebanese presence. You also realize that Arabs disregard the rules of the balance of powers in politics. Someone said: ‘Some congressmen read and know what is happening, but other congressmen are in another world. Those congressmen who know and want to defend the Arab cause cannot do so without support from political forces. You get from politics what you place in it, and often Arabs do not place anything whereas they are quite demanding!’ Examples were given of investors, who in some countries support an electoral campaign whereas Arabs – even inside the U.S. – ‘have not created active groups that have a strategic methodology to create a policy.’

The reason for all this is obviously dictatorial regimes that spread slogans about resistance, endurance, nationalism, Arabism, and ‘foreign intervention’; these regimes tame people in order to ensure their own survival not the people’s.

4

Recapitulation and Deductions: Absence of Any Arab Action, American Readiness to Understand, And a Positive Attitude of Churches

The results of this official visit stem, for some team members, from the conviction that communication between people is the key to understanding, democracy, and world peace, as well to the key to good governance. This visit also stems from the conviction that after the 9/11 attacks, autocratic regimes that lack this communication are a threat to their people first and to world peace as well.

What we learned from our encounters with American religious, academic, and social bodies is that dialogue has given way to some changes as concerns preconceived ideas and prejudices, which often lead to a vicious circle and which researchers and activists are trying to change. If someone asks you about Islam related to violence and tolerance, and you answer him with Koranic verses then you are using texts as a reference to change his perceptions, whereas the question was probably asked because the person saw or was told about some practices where Muslims use violence and use a reference that they call Islamic. In such case, the one who asks the question and the one who answers debate in a field where preconceived ideas are the frame, the concept, and the tools. It is important to find another field of debate, get the one with questions in it – i.e. with other more objective, more deductive concepts. We often contribute – though we mean well – to the spread of prejudices and preconceived ideas since we use common concepts, which are used by everyone else.

Is the primary source of violence in the Arab world – resistance for the sake of liberation, and self-determination being a different matter – religion or rather autocratic regimes that have used prisons as a threat to impose themselves and have used God to trade him with their concepts? World liberation experience showed that the liberation of the people from autocratic regimes helped liberate them from power in the name of religion.

After the cold war and the collapse of the USSR, who is the enemy today? Politics includes three dialectical pairs: public and private, governance and obedience, the friend and the foe. Every policy needs a friend and a foe. It is easy, on a popular level, to be led by the 9/11 attacks towards animosity against ‘Arabs’ and ‘Islam’. One American channel broadcast, on April 22, 2005, a film showing Arabs and Muslims preparing for a terrorist attack! What is the use of saying that Islam is victimized by the world? This actually helps the Zionist process in Israel, which says it is impossible to live with Islam in the region whereas the Arab region is a pioneer and has managed, pragmatically and rationally, for centuries, religious and communitarian pluralism. Jews have not suffered from racial discrimination in the Arab region; most of those who left the region have done so because of political strife.

You may feel at a loss when you hear conflicting and opposite views whereas you know there are fields of useful communication, which are not used by the people for the sake of peace. You also realize that this communication needs a peaceful revolution in the Arab region in terms of education in the twenty-first century. You also realize that relations between religions face awkward comparisons in the American mentality as they compare the former relation between whites and blacks with the existence of a Christian majority and an Islamic minority – as well as other minorities – in the American society.

The visit shows that there are four tendencies to be avoided:

- *Discourse that does not have any patterns*: you clearly sense through all of the meetings that the effect of the Arab discourse about the essence of religion is limited. It lacks real and positive patterns, which may set a paragon. If you quote verses from the Koran or the Bible, people will say: ‘This is what the texts say!’ and this does not change their behaviors or their positions that are related to what they see and experience.

- *Talk about relations between religions*: this title brings up preconceived ideas in the American mind that the Middle-East issue, as the Zionist ideology tries to spread, is basically religious – thus denying the political aspect that concerns occupation, liberation and self-determination.

- *The defensive position as a reaction*: when trying to answer some points, you tend to take a defensive position – namely as concerns tolerance in Islam, the status of women in Islam, Arab democratic evolution, etc. – instead of suggesting a new vision that does not perpetuate the ones already existing on the political scene.

- *The global, ideology-based position*: when discussing matters related to the *fiqh*, debate often degenerates and positions become conflicting – secularism, sectarianism, religion and the state, etc. This is often to evade finding a solution to down-to-earth problems. A reasonable, realistic and deductive discourse ought to be based on real examples, cases and facts to defend justice or fight off tyranny.

Practical orientations can be summed up in three sub-titles for the work of the Christian-Muslim Arab dialogue team:

1. *Democracy and peace*: to have peace in the Middle-East and fight off terrorism in the world, there should be justice in international relations namely as concerns the Middle-East conflict, which has gone on for over fifty years. One of the sine-qua-non prerequisites of world peace is common action to establish minimal democratic standards and human Rights.

2. *Muslims and Christians together to defend Jerusalem*: the future of Jerusalem is crucial for the three Abrahamic religions not as a geographic area but as

the symbol of spiritual unity based on mutual respect and tolerance, and creative communication that reflects a long tradition in managing religious and communitarian diversity in the Middle-East.

3. *Religious contribution in building justice and peace*: religious institutions and believers are asked to be more committed in terms of world justice and peace as there are more threats of non-traditional wars, as the gap between the North and the South is widening, and as there are more and more political experts in the exploitation of religion in political competition to create conflicts. This requires cooperation to build a culture of civil resistance, in order to rectify several concepts related to equality, justice and brotherhood. Arab immigrants in the US have a considerable role to take on as fully-fledged citizens, who participate in the country's public life – and do not confine themselves to old memories or simply criticize instead of being committed – trying to bring in some change and have an influence in this sense.

Arab ruling systems are mostly incapable of managing an efficient diplomacy in favor of their people and their countries. When a country resorts to dynamic diplomacy, such as is the case of Lebanon, namely through former Lebanese delegate to the UN, Ghassan Tuani and after this period, accusations are made up whereas those who make up these accusations are worried about the survival of their regimes not the interest of their people.

As a result of being accustomed – or perhaps even brainwashed into – a frame of submission or nationalism, intellectuals, academics, and field activists take on the official political discourse in international relations – i.e. they denounce 'foreign' intervention, 'democracy exportation', and they establish a distinction between 'resistance' and 'terrorism' – as though these regimes actually defend people's interests and resist against foreign hegemony. Is it not possible, and more useful, to take on a more pragmatic discourse that would help communication between people and serve people's interest on the long-term rather than perpetuate the rulers' prerogatives? These rulers use submission if it prolongs their regime, and they turn their coat if necessary as was the case after the 9/11 attacks since their position was jeopardized in a changing world. Are we finally going to react as free men, to use the words of Ghassan Tuani in the editorial of *an-Nahar* after the February 14, 2005 terrorist assassination of Rafiq Hariri, his companions, and MP Basil Flayhan, and the attempt to kill MP Marwan Hamade before that?

When will Arab academics, intellectuals, and media workers realize that by using the official discourse of the ruling regime they help perpetuate these regimes, giving them some sort of legality? Will the Americans who criticize their administration's policy in general and dream of the past American isolationism realize that their well-being is related to some expansion or even in worst cases to a new colonialism and hegemony? Henceforth, how can we build a pragmatic, realistic, and efficient discourse that would serve the people, and help establish democratic principles – no matter where these may originate from, the US, Africa, or the confines of China?

At a last assessment meeting, the team members agreed that the visit 'broke the ice'. We can deduce from it 'a map of issues', and the need to renew the Arab discourse that hinders communication and is burdened by accumulated ideologies making it impossible to 'give a good image of something bad'. It was repeatedly said: 'Arabs do not move'. A question was raised as to Islamic bodies in the US: who actually does something positive?

One team member made the following summary: absence of any Arab action or reaction in the US, open-mindedness of Americans, and positive perception by American churches of the Arab reality. Thus both sides ought to ensure follow-up, after the return of each team member to his country. It was also underlined that some positions in the US are dangerous namely the distinction between the status of Muslims as a minority or a majority, without any consideration to any rule of law as concerns equality.

An efficient discourse that would help convey the Arab message has to focus on five elements:

- *Autocratic regimes*: admitting clearly and honestly those Arab autocratic regimes are the worst threat to Arabs and to world peace. These regimes violate the rules of good governance as well as the basic rules of human Rights; thus, they develop what has now been known as ‘Saddamization’ (from Saddam Husayn) after more than two generations of despotism, and rule of secret services that have spread to every thread of the social fabric.

- *Arab religious fanaticism*: it is a sub-problem derived from autocratic regimes; as the people become liberated, so will religious thought. The fact that these regimes use religion as a source of legitimacy generates violence.

- *Minimal democratic rules*: they are universal; democracy has minimal standards that ought to become deep-rooted and pressure should be exerted in this sense – no matter where the pressure may come from, Africa or the confines of China.

- *Self-criticism*: the Arab theory of a conspiracy against them, throwing the blame on others – or ‘on the Italians’ as the Lebanese saying goes – actually goes against them based on the theory that ‘prophecies prove to be correct’, i.e. if you predict something bad to others, it will happen to you.

- *Positive discourse*: American mentalities tend towards a positive discourse. Therefore, criticism, complaints, and nagging, do not work on the American brain. Arabs ought to say what they want and act without simply complaining or giving speeches to the crowds.

The outcome of the Arab team visit can be summed up in the words of a young she- participant in the beginning of a meeting in the Presbyterian Church: ‘I know very little about the Arab region.’ And then at the end, she said: ‘I now feel deeply concerned’. One of the team members then said: “There is a third stage, which is commitment in favor of peace and justice in application of what Laure Moghaisel said: ‘More painful than the harm of evildoers is the silence of those who mean good’.”⁷

⁷ Laure Moghaisel in the book: *Nisâ’ fi imra’a: Syrat Laure Moghaisel* (Womenkind in One Woman: The Life of Laure Moghaisel, Beirut, Dar an-Nahar, 2002.

The visits to Charlotte-North Carolina, NYC, and Washington, April 18-30, 2005 included:

1. David Jordan
Providence Baptist Church
4921 Randolph Road Charlotte NC 28211-4000
(704) 366-2784
2. David Weaver
Alma Mathews House
73 West 11th St. New York City
(212) 691-5931
3. Rev. Dr. Calvin D. Butts
Abyssinian Baptist Church
132 Odell Clark PL. 138th St. NYC 10030
212/ 862-7474

4. Marble Collegiate Church
1 West 29th Street / NYC 10001 / 212/686-2770
5. Mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood
130 West 113th Street / St. Nicholas Avenue
New York, NY 10026 / (212) 662-4100
6. John Hiemstra
Interchurch Center
NY Pastors Luncheon – TIC Lounge
475 Riverside Drive / NYC 10115 / 212/870-1022
7. Auburn Theological Seminary
3041 Broadway
NYC 10027 – 212/662-4315
8. Peter Gudaitis
New York Disaster Interfaith Services
212/669-6100
9. David Waugh
Metro Baptist Church
410 West 40th Street / NYC 10018 / 212/594-4464
10. Khader El-Yateem
Salam Arabic Lutheran Church
345 Ovington Ave. / Brooklyn, NY 11209 / 718/748-4024
11. Khader El-Yateem

Sunday Evening Dinner – Host

12. Oscar McCloud
5th Avenue Presbyterian Church
Center for Christian Studies / James Cairns
7 West 55th Street / NYC 10019 / 212/247-0490
13. Prof. Linda Mosher, chair
Christian-Muslim Task Force
Episcopal diocese of New York
St. John the Divine / Cathedral House
Informal Evening of Discussion
212/663-5158

14. The Muslim Public Affairs Council
Washington
15. Baptist Church
16. Georgetown University
17. Lara Alameh
Professional Staff Member
U. S. House of Representatives
Committee on International Relations
Chairman Henry J. Hyde
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Phone: (202) 225-8097
Fax: (202) 226-9967
lara.alameh@mail.house.gov