

## UPF-ILC conference on Syria: Communication Soft & Power Approaches to Peace

Cabot W. Peterson with David Fraser-Harris  
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Taj Hamad, center, with conference panelists

There are few stories or events happening in the world that has as much impact on our lives as that which is taking place in Syria today. The civil war that has been raging there since 2011, has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and appears to have no end in sight nor the chance of peace to ever prevail.

With this very clear knowledge and understanding, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) organized a conference sponsored by the International Leadership Conference (ILC) from December 17-19, 2016 in Larnaca, Cyprus under the title: Opening Lines of Communication and Soft Power Approaches to Peace.

The conference set clear-cut, defined goals in contrasting the reality of war with the demands of peace, making sure to keep the dialogue centered on finding paths of communication and away from stark, often contentious, political differences. As the organizers stated:



Heather Fraser-Harris, on left (standing), then Marilyn Angelucci, David Fraser-Harris and Dr. Habash.

“For people to live in peace different factions need to find the way to understand, accommodate and even respect each other. It is here that the search for a future for Syria has to begin. The conveners of this conference are hoping to establish an environment where agendas - political, religious or other - are set

aside while participants come to listen and communicate.”

Among the participants, representing a cross-section of countries from the Middle East and Europe, were members of delegations from both inside and outside Syria, including Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Germany, Austria, Cyprus, the United Kingdom, Belgium and France.

Also in attendance were three Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) graduates, Taj Hamad, David Fraser-Harris and Marilyn Angelucci.

All three have been involved in international activities for many years, seeking to promote peace, in the Middle-East but also in other parts of the world. They brought to the Cyprus conference the skills necessary to effectively build trust and engage in dialogue: communications skills, teamwork skills, skills in thinking critically, and skills in organization. Like other alumni they will say that UTS was a place to discover and hone those skills, in preparation for a life of service. The “real world” after UTS can be demanding, even unforgiving; these three, Taj, David and Marilyn continue to rise to the challenge and press forward as agents for peaceful change.

Umberto Angelucci, Marilyn’s husband, is the Regional President of UPF- Middle East, and helped organize and co-host the conference along with Dr. Mohammed Habash, founder of the Syrian Peace Initiative (SPI) and a former member of the Syrian parliament.



Dr. Habash launched SPI in the early months of the crisis in 2011 with the hope of going beyond political and religious differences to find what he dubbed, “a third way”.

“Five years of meetings between the opposition and the regime have brought no reconciliation, only mutual recriminations,” said Dr. Habash. “I believe that this can be considered the first time an international organization has brought together representatives of both the regime and the opposition. Please take this chance for the sake of our people who are being slain at this very moment. People will say that this is the first time we were able to make a bridge after all these years.”

Dr. Habash then announced that during the conference two invitations had been received to take this dialogue to Syria. Then he also came up with a surprise proposal and called out Heather Fraser-Harris, David’s daughter, from the translation booth (she is fluent in Arabic and English). He proposed that she lead a delegation of Syrian girls to visit Damascus and pave the way for future negotiations and a possible conference. As Heather spoke of her desire to return to the Damascus she loves, a conference made up almost entirely of men was moved to tears.

Evidence of an atmosphere of coming together in the spirit of peace were everywhere. One key element that made this conference rise above previous ones was the ready participation of both sides, and where real, respectful dialogue took place. Members who support President Assad were welcomed as well as those who oppose his regime.

A Syrian businessman living in Cyprus hosted the entire conference one evening at his restaurant in Nicosia for a wonderful Syrian dinner. Four years ago, when he opened the restaurant, he put a sign outside that said: “No one who supports the Syrian regime is allowed in.” This time, two participants from the government side joined the group for dinner.

The impact and influence of the conference can best be summed up in the words of Werner Fasslabend, Austria’s former minister of defense, when he stated at the conclusion of the conference’s final session:

“This was one of the most fruitful conferences I have attended in my lifetime.”