

A B R A H A M P A T H I N I T I A T I V E
SPONSORED BY THE GLOBAL NEGOTIATION PROJECT
AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Referans 11.11.2006

The Abraham Path Initiative Hopes to Reunite Civilizations

Following in the footsteps of Abraham, the Path begins in Harran and passes through Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine. The objective of the Abraham Path Initiative, one of the biggest faith tourism projects in the world, is to build a sense of unity between different cultures and religions around the world. Work on the Path will begin in 2007.

Santiago is a small town in Spain, smaller than Urfa, but there are direct flights to Santiago from the United States and from other parts of world. At least 200,000 people a year travel from to Santiago in order to walk a holy path called Camino de Compostela. This holy place is one of the important faith tourism centers in the world. Now a similar project is planned for Urfa.

The Abraham Path will start in Harran, where many believe Abraham was born, and will pass through Syria, Jordon and Israel. It will finish at Hebron/Al Khalil where Abraham was buried. Construction on the path, the biggest faith tourism project in the world, will start in 2007. It is thought that 3 billion people – the descendents of Abraham – will be interested in this path with many wanting to walk it.

The Abraham Path Initiative, which is sponsored by the Harvard University Global Negotiation Project, has two primary objectives. The first is to promote cohesion between communities, and the second is ecological sustainability. People who walk the Path's 1,100 Km will also help support the local communities economically and

help to protect those communities' cultural heritage.

We met with the director of the Abraham Path Initiative in Urfa. William Ury, the director of the Harvard University Global Negotiation Project, answered our questions just before the Abraham Path Initiative's initial meeting in Harran. Deputy Prime Minister Abdüllatif Sener also met with Ury. Sener was in Urfa to participate in the meeting of Businessmen Living in Europe.

From religious war to tolerance

Sener, like us, heard about the Initiative for first time in Urfa. The aim of Initiative is to inspire a path to unify communities around the world.

“Our starting point is something that already exists in your society,” Ury said. “Your poet Sinasi says, ‘If you want to know somebody well, you should travel with him or her.’ Nowadays the main reason for conflict in the world is this: people don't know each other very well.”

For this reason Ury said that the directors of the initiative came to Urfa to start the Path. Ury added that the Initiative is an answer to his colleague Samuel Huntington's thesis. “Different religions and different cultures will maintain the unity between communities. Religious wars will be ended by religious tolerance. We are trying to implement our thesis by following the 4,000-year-old footsteps of Abraham,” Ury said.

Walk from Harran to Hebron/Al Khalil

From Harran, the path will continue through Aleppo, Damascus, Amman, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem, finishing at Hebron/ Al Khalil. In addition to promoting unity, the Abraham Path Initiative aims to help local people earn money through religious tourism. Ury said that the Initiative is also an ecologically sustainable project.

Ury emphasized that the initiative doesn't have any political objective. He pointed to the support from leaders of different religions and cultures as evidence of the Abraham Path Initiative's non-partisan, non-political and anti-propaganda orientation. The leaders involved with the project include the Dalai Lama, Jimmy Carter and other political and religious leaders from different parts of the world. The Initiative is currently seeking the support of religious leaders from the countries along the path. So far, the reaction from Turkey has been positive.

Besides the Harvard University Global Negotiation Project, the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation and associations from Brazil, Italy, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and the United States have helped fund the Abraham Path Initiative.

For the last three years, the preparation period, the Initiative has been operating on an annual budget of \$300,000. The preparation stage has included building a network to communicate both within and outside the Middle East. The members of the Initiative are also planning the route and mapping it, as well as trying to find accommodations for travelers.

Ury said the initiative is still looking to partner with other organizations. He declared 2007 as the date of the official start of the Path.

Ury came together with the official and religious leaders of Urfa, the Mufti of Urfa, Hıdır Bayrak; Armenian Patriarch II, Mesrob Mutafyan; Syriac Community Leader, Yusuf Sag; and several leaders of NGOs participated in the meeting. Sener was there as well. Ury said that Sener was interested in the Initiative and reacted positively. Ury added that he planned to meet again with Sener in the following days to talk about the details.

3 billion potential tourists

Ury, who has already begun work on the Path in Harran, pointed out that Turkey has a special role in this Initiative. Ury thinks that because Turkey is a secular country, it has a more tolerant culture. It may be an example to other countries in the Middle East, which have stricter and less compromising attitudes. In other words, the Abraham Path Initiative in Turkey is seen as not only a starting point, but also a foundation for promoting tolerance between different cultures and religions.

We asked Ury how many tourists might eventually walk on the Abraham Path.

“A similar project to the Abraham Path is the Camino de Compostela,” he answered. In the 1970's there were only 50 visitors to the Camino. But now it draws over 200,000 per year. The Abraham Path is projected to be bigger than that because billions of people worship Abraham. Ury thinks many of the 3 billion descendents of Abraham may walk on the Abraham Path someday and he hopes that this project will inspire widespread interest.

An Important Bridge

Mufti of Urfa, Hıdır Bayrak, thinks that the Project has potential for building bridges between conflicting cultures. After the Abraham Path meeting Bayrak said: “I believe that the Abraham Path Initiative will contribute friendship, peace and tolerance. It is not only a faith project. The Abraham Path Initiative may give rise to an important economic income for Turkey and for the other countries involved in the project. The Abraham Path Initiative may play an important role for the development of this region.”

Bayrak pointed out that if we could restore the 350 sites of cultural heritage in Turkey, it would contribute to significant tourist income for local people.

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