



Negotiating the Path of Abraham

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Negotiating the Path of Abraham¹

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Abstract

In the face of daunting barriers, the Abraham Path Initiative envisions uncovering and revitalizing a route of cultural tourism that follows the path of Abraham and his family some 4000 years ago across the Middle East. It begins in the ancient ruins of Harran, in modern-day Turkey, where Abraham first heard the call to "go forth." It passes through some of the world's most revered cultural, historical, and holy sites, ending in the city of Hebron/Al-Khalil at the tomb of Abraham. With Abraham as a venerated patriarchal figure for Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—monotheistic religions whose adherents have so often clashed--the potential unifying power of this conception has attracted a remarkable range of supporters from around the world. From a notion crystallized at Harvard in 2004, this idea has been carefully negotiated into a concrete reality with supporting country organizations in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Palestine², and Israel. If completed, it would eventually extend to encompass Abraham's travels to and from Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. With the endorsement of the U.N.'s Alliance of Civilizations, over three hundred kilometers of the Path have now been opened to a fast-growing number of travelers ranging from student study groups to Syrian President al-Assad walking a stretch of the path with former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. As it takes fuller shape, the Path variously serves as a catalyst for sustainable tourism and economic development, a platform for the energy and idealism of young people, a beacon for pilgrims and peace-builders, as well as a focus for seemingly endless media inquiries from reporters, documentary film-makers, and writers keen on telling its story to audiences worldwide. This paper provides background on the Path in terms of strategic negotiation, social entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, and economic development.

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¹ Copyright ©2009 by James K. Sebenius, who can be contacted at jsebenius@hbs.edu. This working paper was conceptualized, structured, and refined to its current form under the supervision of Professor James K. Sebenius drawing primarily on extensive interviews, research, and excellent successive drafts by Kimberlyn Leary, with substantial and invaluable help from Joshua Weiss, useful contributions from William Ury and Daniel Adamson, as well as generous cooperation of Emran Akhtar, Elias Amidon, Ravia Amidon, Essrea Cherin, Barbara Fields, Martha Gilliland, Susan Collin Marks, Tyler Norris, Stephanie Saldana, and Arzu Yilmaz. Sebenius is a board and executive committee member of the Abraham Path Initiative. However, the contents of this paper are entirely based on the judgment of Sebenius in his personal capacity. This paper is neither an official document of nor is it endorsed by the Abraham Path Initiative.

² Following the usage of the in-country team, this paper will use the name "Palestine" throughout for what is variously called the "Palestinian Territories," the "West Bank and Gaza," the "Occupied Territories," etc.

From an intriguing notion crystallized at Harvard in 2004, William Ury and his colleagues have negotiated this idea into a concrete reality involving varying levels of support and/or active country organizations in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Palestine³, and Israel. If completed, it would eventually extend to encompass Abraham's travels to and from Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. With the endorsement of the U.N.'s Alliance of Civilizations, over three hundred kilometers of the Path have now been opened to a growing number of travelers ranging from student study groups to Syrian President al-Assad walking a stretch of the path with former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. With an annual budget that exceeded a million dollars in 2008 prior to the economic downturn, its major financial contributors hail from diverse faiths and 18 nations. As it takes fuller shape, the Path variously serves as a catalyst for sustainable tourism and economic development, a platform for the energy and idealism of young people, a beacon for pilgrims and peacebuilders, as well as a focus for seemingly endless media inquiries from reporters, producers, documentary film-makers, and writers keen on telling its story to audiences worldwide.

In late August 2009, Executive Committee Board members of the Abraham Path Initiative ("API") gathered for a Boulder, Colorado retreat. In the shadow of its rugged peaks, this group pondered the most important issues facing their improbable quest to uncover the footsteps of Abraham. They grappled with urgent questions of fundraising in a time of severe economic stress, the appointment of a new Executive Director, whether the organization's headquarters should move from Boulder to a Middle Eastern location, and the like. Near the sixth anniversary of the first glimmerings of the Path in Ury's imagination, they also felt it would be useful to refocus on the vision, founding, and evolution of their entity. What had been their key choices so far? Were they right? Looking forward, which were the most critical strategic questions? What choices should be reaffirmed? Altered? (Section 5 sketches some of these questions.)

A scant few weeks later in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an informal group of academics from fields as disparate as negotiation, social enterprise, archaeology, law, psychology, and economics gathered for different but complementary purposes. Intrigued by various aspects of this inchoate initiative, they sought to identify and frame some of the most interesting research questions raised by the Abraham Path as well as opportunities faculty and student involvement. Participants were variously interested in the Path's implications for a range of topics, including, but hardly limited to:

- The characteristics and prospects of very long-term, decentralized negotiation strategies across borders and cultures, and in the face of an array of barriers,
- The anthropological role of Abraham in the "cultural memory" of those in the region,
- Inter-religious activities and dialog processes contributing to conflict resolution and peacemaking,
- Social enterprise and entrepreneurship,

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- Sustainable tourism and economic development,
- The archaeological record and quest for exploration and preservation along the Path, and
- Most broadly, of what class(es) of phenomena is the Abraham Path a member? What interesting generalizations might be sought? And how?

Hosted by the Harvard Negotiation Project, the conference was organized to brainstorm and sharpen key questions in these and other areas. Participants hoped to learn of other's interests and to explore opportunities for the seemingly insatiable appetite for involvement of faculty, students, and others in Path-related activities. As background and to inform these and other discussions, this paper offers raw material for analysis in the form of an interview-based description of the Path from multiple perspectives. The sections that follow explore several topics:

1. The Inspiration: Stories of Abraham (pp. 3-5)
2. Origins And Early Stages Of The Abraham Path Initiative (pp. 5-10)
3. Overcoming Barriers and the Path's Current Status (pp. 10-18)
4. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Different Countries: Turkey (pp.19-23), Syria (pp. 23-25), Jordan (pp. 25-27), Palestine (pp. 27-29), and Israel (pp. 29-30)
5. Some Strategic Themes and Questions (pp. 30-32)

Three supplementary sections flesh out the core narrative by 1) describing the API Board, staff, and major donors (Exhibit 1, pp. 33-35); 2) discussing some of the organizational challenges faced by the API and its responses to them (Exhibit 2, pp. 35-37); and 3) including a document from the API appealing for financial support as a "social venture opportunity" (Exhibit 3, pp. 37-39).

1. The Inspiration: Stories of Abraham

The name Abraham translates variously to "father of many nations" or "high father." Although there is no definitive historical or archaeological evidence that Abraham actually lived, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish traditions all recognize the story of Abraham and claim it as a canonical text. Abraham's story is also a part of numerous folktales, village traditions and local mythology. The Path links the places where Abraham is remembered to have passed and thus is based, as Ury puts it, "on anthropological reality" or "cultural memory." Even the casual visitor following the route of Abraham's legendary pilgrimage, will find a disproportionate number of men and boys named "Ibrahim" and "Abraham" in his honor. Hospitality to the stranger is often prefaced by the expression, "in the name of Father Abraham/Ibrahim." The story of Abraham is, in anthropological terms, one of the world's most widely shared origin stories, shared by over half of humanity. Many versions of the story exist, the most widely recognized of which are in the Book of Genesis/Bereshit and in the Koran.



The Abraham Path

— Route of 2006 Harvard Study Tour and 2008 Kellogg Fellows Tour
 - - - Abraham's Possible Routes

In the (Jewish) Torah/(Christian) Old Testament, for example, the story of Abraham begins in the city of Ur--the ruins of which are located in contemporary Iraq--where he was known as “Abram.” In these texts, God calls upon Abram to leave his father’s house and go to a place “which I will show you” (or, in an alternative translation, “where I will show you yourself.”).

Although already an old man, Abram gathered his household together, demonstrating his trust in God by embarking upon an exploration into the unknown. In doing so, Abram became, in the biblical record, the first pilgrim. Abram and his family decamped first to Harran before moving further to the land of Canaan. As a shepherd, Abram would have traveled with livestock along the Path, probably following water sources. To escape famine, he moved again to Egypt, Be’er-Sheva and then to the area of Hebron where he is believed to have died.

In Hebron, Abram received a second and more definitive call from God. This time God directed him to found a nation, recognizing only a single deity. Abram entered into a covenant with God who promised Abram and his wife, Saraii, innumerable progeny. As Saraii, Abram’s wife, had not been able to bear him children, she persuaded Abram to impregnate her servant, Hagar, whose children Saraii would then regard as her own. Ishmael was born of Hagar and assumed to be the fulfillment of God’s promise.

When Ishmael was born, Abram and all the males of his household marked their devotion to God, by undergoing circumcision. As a further symbol of his pledge, God changed Abram and Saraii’s names to Abraham and Sarah. Later, visiting strangers to

Abraham's encampment – revealed to be angels of the Lord – renewed God's promise to provide Abraham with a son born of Sarah. Thus, when Abraham was a hundred years old, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, in what was the second fulfillment of God's promise. Sarah, however, became jealous of Hagar, fearing Ishmael's competing claim to Abraham. She persuaded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael into exile. In a final test of Abraham's faith, God called Abraham to a fearsome task – this time to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice on Mount Moriah, only to stay his hand at the last moment, and then replenish anew his promise to Abraham's descendants.

Islam's story of Ibrahim differs from the Jewish and Christian version in several important respects although the narratives of Ibrahim's travels are roughly commensurate with those ascribed to Abraham. Muslims venerate Ibrahim as one of the four most important prophets – indeed, with the exception of Moses, no prophet is more referenced in the Koran. In the Koran, Ibrahim honors Allah with his devotion. In one particularly important story, also told in the Jewish tradition, Abraham is thrown into a fire by King Nimrod for challenging the King's belief in idols, only to be rescued by an angel sent by God. God does not stop there, but also turns the fire into water and the logs of the fire into fish. This ancient story is geographically depicted in the central park in the city of Urfa, in present-day southeastern Turkey. In the park there are two pillars that sit atop the hill overlooking the city. These two pillars are said to be the place where Abraham was catapulted by Nimrod toward the fire below. In addition to Abraham's birth cave that lies in the park itself, two long reflecting pools, teeming with sacred carp, complete the heroic story.

The Koran does not specify which son Allah asked Ibrahim to sacrifice. Some Muslim scholars have determined that Ibrahim put his knife to Ishmael's neck. As such, the Koran celebrates Ibrahim as the first man to submit, joyfully, to the will of God.

Thus, Jews and Christians trace their ancestry to Abraham through Isaac, while Muslims lay claim to Ibrahim through Ishmael. The story of God's test of Abraham/Ibrahim's faith bears testament to this division. Importantly, the story of Abraham/Ibrahim also embodies a vision of transcendence. The Biblical text, for example, suggests that Isaac and Ishmael enjoyed a rapprochement, coming together when Abraham died to mourn at his grave.

For Ury, their father's legacy lies in this account of reconciliation. Ury was moved by this ancient story and, with his colleagues, decided to experiment with its potential for healing. The Abraham Path Initiative was founded in the belief that the activity of walking side-by-side could create opportunities for collaboration and communication that had eluded other efforts in the Middle East. Ury believed that the symbolic act of walking in Abraham's footsteps could be a step towards a reunion of the often-warring members of the patriarch's modern, three-branched family. While so many issues bitterly divided the region, the path of Abraham held the promise of physically representing common, even sacred, ground.

2. Origins and Early Stages of the Abraham Path Initiative

One summer evening in August 2003, a group of old friends gathered for an informal dinner in Boulder, Colorado to discuss the Middle East. All the dinner guests were engaged in professional work promoting peace and intercultural understanding. Elias Amidon and his wife Rabia Roberts had just returned from the Middle East, where they had been organizing interfaith pilgrimages. William Ury, co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project and co-author of the best selling negotiation handbook, *Getting to Yes* was also at the dinner. At the time, he had been working as a third party in a bitter dispute between President Hugo Chavez and his political opponents in Venezuela that threatened to turn into civil war, as well as an advisor to a peace process in Indonesia aimed at ending a 26-year-old civil war that had killed over 10,000 people.

The dinner guests were alarmed by political developments in the Middle East. In March 2003, the United States had invaded Iraq and violence had escalated in the region. Reflecting on unresolved conflicts and escalating tensions between the West and the Muslim world, the friends met to consider what they might do as concerned citizens with professional expertise working in conflicts at the people-to-people level.

Some twenty-five years before, Ury's negotiation career had started in the Middle East. In the late seventies, while Ury was a graduate student at Harvard studying anthropology, he had worked with Roger Fisher to formulate negotiation process advice used by the American mediators in the 1978 Camp David peace process. Ury later spent several months in the region interviewing Palestinians and Israelis. He used these stories to contribute to a guide for negotiators to the intricate issue of Jerusalem, laying out the interests and options of the various stakeholders, and their competing claims to the city.

With Roger Fisher as the senior figure and his contemporary, Bruce Patton, Ury helped to found the Harvard Negotiation Project, later to become a core element of the Program on Negotiation, a Harvard-based, interuniversity consortium. Soon after, Ury's professional work turned from the Middle East and towards reducing nuclear tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a consultant to the White House Crisis Management Center, he played a role in persuading the two rivals to dramatically upgrade the "hotline" – an old Teletype machine – with nuclear risk reduction centers in Washington and Moscow focused on averting accidental nuclear escalation. During the middle years of his career, Ury continued to follow from afar the ongoing strife in the Middle East, while writing further bestselling books such as *Getting Past No* and the *Power of a Positive No*, on negotiation-related topics. Like others working in the region, Ury believed that a different future for the Middle East was a precondition to a sustainable world. Along with colleagues, Ury had been exploring the role of the "Third Side"⁴ in places like Aceh, Indonesia, and Venezuela as a means of mobilizing communities within and surrounding conflict regions to transform deadly conflict into constructive conflict and collaboration in which many different constituencies have a voice in their future.

For Ury, the prospect for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East seemed to founder on the basic issue of identity. As a social anthropologist, he had long been interested

⁴ The Third Side, as Ury defined it, was a form of conflict transformation directed at empowering communities to appreciate that they have a say in the violence within their borders, and voice with which to combat it.

in the issue of identity and the importance of symbols. Behind the conflict over land and power was a struggle over what Ury called “story.” Muslims, Jews, and Christians each held distinct and conflicting stories about the land and the history that defined their identities. At the center of each of these accounts was the common experience of exclusion, trauma, and the desire of a people not to be further humiliated. From a conflict resolution viewpoint, these stories highlighted the interests out of which perceptions and positions had calcified. Ury thought that if identity stories underlay suffering, perhaps a story that engaged identity in a concrete and practical fashion might over time be powerful enough to create a new opening for reconciliation.

During the evening over dinner with his Boulder friends, Ury observed that the current war was being staged in the ancient land of Mesopotamia, where Abraham, the common forefather of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, heeded a call from God to go forth and found a new nation. Ury asked: Why not try to inspire the re-creation of the route that would retrace the journey of Abraham? What if a permanent pilgrimage route could be revived based on a commonality of cultures, rather than the conflict among them?

Conceivably, Ury speculated, the Abraham Path could become part of the emerging sector of responsible tourism, which creates collaboration that gives back to local communities and benefits the local population from the business generated by tourists. The Path could also draw from the wider tradition of meditative excursions like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, a collection of medieval pilgrimage routes across Europe, beginning for many at St. Jean Pied de Port in France and culminating in the city of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Indeed, concerted regional and European efforts to revive the Camino in recent years, especially in Spain, had been accompanied by a dramatic increase in pilgrims and other travelers with correspondingly positive economic impacts along its route. In recent years, tens of thousands of people have annually walked, biked, or otherwise traveled up to 800km on this pilgrimage.

Perhaps the nascent Abraham Path might find inspiration as well in the vision of Benton MacKaye who in 1921 conceived what is now known as Appalachian Trail. Only fully realized a half-century later, generations of its backers negotiated innumerable challenges and setbacks to piece its various sections together on a permanent basis by 1971. The Appalachian Trail now spans some 3500km from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine (and continues into Canada as the International Appalachian Trail). Some thirty clubs and multiple partnerships have been forged to maintain the trail for the stream of hikers that annually make some or all of the trek.

Very long-term negotiations had also been required to advance the vision of the European Union. From the post-World War II conception of Jean Monnet, union had fitfully proceeded from the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom, the Common Market, and so toward monetary and, increasingly, effective political union. Was the formation of the E.U.—involving decades of public and private negotiations, energized by a vision of unity—an instructive, if grandiose, analogy for the Path?

In short, could the concept of the Abraham Path, if articulated persuasively, prove compelling enough as a “focal idea,” perhaps like the modern revitalization of the medieval El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the creation of the Appalachian Trail, or the formation of the European Union? Could the idea of uncovering the steps of Abraham and his family millennia ago serve to animate and organize the countless efforts and decades of negotiations that would be necessary to overcome the barriers to its realization?

After the Boulder dinner and increasingly inspired by the potential of the concept, Ury asked Elias Amidon and Rabia Roberts to raise the idea of the Abraham Path with their Syrian and Jordanian friends and colleagues during their next trip to the region. Ury also emailed Susan Collin Marks, Executive Vice President of Search for Common Ground, an expert in conflict management in South Africa and a long-time friend, asking what she thought of the idea. He also pitched the Abraham Path to his long-time colleague Joshua Weiss, who holds a Ph.D. in conflict studies from George Mason University. Both were affiliated with the Program on Negotiation, an inter-university consortium of Harvard University, Tufts University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Simmons College School of Management.

Weiss remembers when Ury first mentioned the Abraham Path to him as they walked through the Rocky Mountains during one of Weiss’s tri-annual visits to Boulder where Ury lives. Weiss recalled: “The initial thing I remember is that I saw it as a huge endeavor and challenge but one that was worth taking on for the potential impact. I also recall thinking that while most efforts in the Middle East skirt the notion of religion, this was attempting to go to the heart of the matter and embrace it in a unique, affirming, manner. We would later learn how difficult and powerful that was.”

Amidon soon emailed from Syria, saying that the concept of a journey in the footsteps of Abraham had captured their imagination. A prominent sheik, he reported, called it, “the idea of the century.” Ury spoke with Jewish and Christian religious leaders who also encouraged him to take the idea forward. As Ury and his colleagues held consultative meetings with civil society representatives, religious leaders, and at universities, in the United States and abroad, Joshua Weiss recalls that their intention was to listen to the response the project received as a kind of litmus test for moving forward. Along with enthusiastic reactions, Ury understood the skepticism they often encountered: “I had a similar reaction at first. And I thought, this is fine for other people to do, but it’s not my line of work. As I reflected on the potential of the idea and started to get bits of resonant feedback from others, the idea grew on me. It made me think maybe there is something here. The question for me, still, was discerning whether this was mine to do – or not. That wasn’t easy. What did this have to do with negotiation? I soon came to appreciate that it had everything to do with it.”

Ury and his colleagues came to see in Abraham/Ibrahim’s story a kind of “source code” that was uniquely sensitive to the hopes and dreads of those living in the region. Ury believes that the twin wounds at the heart of conflict in the Middle East are exclusion and scarcity: “Ishmael feels excluded. Hagar feels excluded. Sarah felt excluded. Isaac probably felt excluded. It’s the story of the human family. The Palestinians feel excluded. The

Israelis feel excluded. Muslims feel excluded, Christians feel excluded, and Jews feel excluded.” Ury recognized that the innovation he wanted to sponsor was to redefine the strife among nations as one of a family conflict. The Abraham Path, Ury thought, could be seen as an attempt to put a physical frame around the conflict. Within this frame, the story of Abraham could serve as a kind of antidote, redefining the parties as kin, and function as a symbol of respect and hospitality stretching across boundaries and borders, focusing on common interests, and giving value to the other. If realized, the Path could literally be common ground in the region, a vessel for hope, a vehicle for mutual encounter, and an engine of economic development at the village level.

“I’ve always admired Gandhi,” Ury says with the smile that some consider to be his trademark. “[Gandhi] was a master of strategic symbolic action. What would Gandhi do in this situation? So many of the negotiations in this region founder on the whole issue of identity. The Abraham Path allowed us a way to take identity into account at the heart of what we were doing.” For Ury, walking the path of Abraham makes the traveler a part of the story in the Middle East: “People learn through the stories that move them, so if one could re-enter an old story, and re-tell it in a way that is relevant for today and tomorrow, it might be possible to begin heal the old wounds.”

Drawing on his negotiation background, Ury saw the conflict in the Middle East as very much stuck in a zero-sum trap. “If one side gives the other land, it would have less land. What is needed are ‘game-changers,’ and the Abraham Path might over time become just that.” For the Path has the potential to add positive-sum elements to the mix. “If I give you respect, I don’t have less respect. In fact, you’re more likely to give me respect,” as Ury puts it. And if cultural tourism along the Abraham Path succeeds in one country, it is likely to increase the number of tourists in the other countries as well.

The Abraham Path Initiative itself began to take shape in 2004 as Ury, with a cooperative of scholars, religious leaders and negotiation specialists, began to study the possibility of the Path and how it might come into being. Harvard University provided key institutional support. The Global Negotiation Project at the Program for Negotiation at Harvard Law School served as the Abraham Path’s organizational home for the study process in the early years. The Global Negotiation Project provided early funding along with a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which had previously supported Ury’s work, and with time, office space, and materials from the Program on Negotiation.

For some time, Ury and Weiss had studied various uses of the “Third Side” through the Global Negotiation Project. The Third Side, as they defined it, was a form of conflict transformation directed at empowering communities to appreciate that they have a say in the violence within their borders, and voice with which to combat it. Ury and Weiss began, at first, to conceptualize the Abraham Path as a type of Third Side activity. Weiss described the Abraham Path as a “non-political tool to get countries and people working together. It’s the interaction of many sectors of society that can help to build relationships and break down stereotypes.” Ury saw Abraham as the symbolic “Third Side” of the conflict in the Middle East, the reminder of a larger whole. Ury also viewed the Abraham Path as a cultural

memory project and as such, it made sense that it should come out of a university, a place of ideas.

In 2004, the API commissioned a study at Harvard to look at the feasibility of such a project and to examine the concept of Abraham as a potential unifying figure. It was undertaken by two Harvard Divinity School students, Rachel Milner and Stephanie Saldana; the latter would become the first in-country coordinator in Palestine. The two students produced a 60-page report on many potential aspects of the project, including scriptural references, places of crossover between the text, and the possibility of Abraham becoming a rallying figure. In addition, Joshua Weiss and Kimberlyn Leary, a PON-linked faculty member at Harvard Medical School, organized a small group of students interested in Third Side Initiatives, including the Abraham Path Initiative. The papers that focused on the API analyzed the possible role of water and the role of women along the path while another group assessed the role of mystics. The students' work culminated in a small conference and a monograph on research on the Third Side. Enthusiasm for the concept slowly grew a wider circle of involved people.

Of course, skeptics and geopolitical barriers loomed large. Susan Collin Marks thought the project had genuine resonance and spoke to the longing to find a way through the conflict among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Yet after consultations with a number of people in the region where she had spent years on various initiatives, she reported considerable doubt to Ury: "I was working in the West Bank and Gaza with both Israelis and Palestinians. Their concern at a minimum was how this could be doable when one could not even cross many borders in the area."

Ury admits that working in the Middle East carried the attraction of "by reputation, the deepest, darkest conflict" and offers the chances "to dive into the sea of intractability and perceived impossibility to see what just might be possible." Ury was not unmindful of the concerns expressed by Marks and others, but for him, this only underscored the need for an out-of-the box project. Perhaps only an unexpected, paradoxical intervention – gathering people to take a walk – could gain traction in the Middle East, which had grown weary of the multitude of peace projects brought from the outside. But Ury had come to believe in the gifts the Middle East has to give to the world – for example, in the face of all these challenges people there maintain an unyielding commitment to hospitality, a sacred obligation to the stranger, a tradition that is associated with Abraham. "The Path could become a way for people from around the world to come pay their respects and express their gratitude to the villagers living in the Middle East who have maintained over the centuries the heritage of Abraham of treating the stranger as sacred guest, an inspiration that the world very much needs today."

3. Overcoming Barriers on the Way to the API's Current Status.

Early on, Ury and his colleagues crystallized three barriers to the Path's development beyond the evident challenge of building an effective organization and raising substantial resources. As Ury put it, "the first was a *knowledge* barrier to help individuals and communities see how they could use Abraham's story to advance transformative change."

This was an especially critical question for strife-torn communities that were wary of new international interventions, after so many others had failed. The story of Abraham as a unifying figure himself had already been incorporated into a number of dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, particular in inter-faith contexts.

But even if the Abraham Path were appropriately framed and accepted as a viable means to enhanced collaboration, there was no consensus that pilgrimages of this sort could be feasible in the region. The second barrier lay in establishing the *credibility* of the Path's vision, specifically the belief that pilgrims could safely undertake Abraham's journey and that such journeys could spark real economic development. Abraham's ancient trek crosses the sovereign soil of at least six, possibly as many as ten, nation-states, some of which do not formally recognize one another. Checkpoints, travel restrictions, and the threat of terrorism further impede movement. Local communities, national governments, as well as international visitors need to see the Path's vision as credible, not merely appealing.

To its proponents, the Abraham Path rests on the assumption that effective kinship in the Middle East requires a context of what Ury calls "enoughness" and prosperity: "until economic development expands the pie, it will be difficult to divide up the pie in equitable ways." Ury believes that shared prosperity requires those in the region have access to an inclusive umbrella identity. He believes that tourism could be the cornerstone of this inclusive identity. Former API Executive Director Tyler Norris notes, that in the Middle East, "safety is judged by my village. You hand off the traveler to the next person's village, and that's how the traveler moves through. We have a stake in each other's well being, because if my hand-off doesn't go well, neither does yours." Establishing the credibility of these beliefs, however, among key players was a challenge.

The third barrier was the lack of *trust* in the motives that animated the Path. Conspiracy theories tend to run rampant in this part of the world. The most innocent of initiatives can easily be made into a scrim onto which stakeholders can project their own fears and dark imaginings. With the United States at war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, work projects with any kind of American brand in particular were likely to be suspect.

Ury and his colleagues decided that for the Abraham Path to emerge, they needed to demonstrate that these barriers could be addressed and even overcome. Given the widespread skepticism about the feasibility and safety of crossing borders, Ury and several colleagues who had continued to travel to the region, determined that the time was ripe to take along a group to show the Path could indeed be traveled. In November 2006, a group of 25 people from ten different countries undertook a two-week bus journey, traveling from Urfa in Turkey – where many believe Abraham to have been born – and Harran – where he is believed to have heard the call to go forth – to Aleppo, Damascus, Amman, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and finally to Hebron/Al-Khalil, where Abraham is believed to be buried. The purpose of the trip was to introduce the idea of the Path and explore possible interest in it. In four countries along the way, Ury and his colleagues convened broad consultative meetings with government leaders, religious figures and local officials simply to present the concept and to listen and learn from those who were already living on Abraham's ancient path.

From this set of experiences, the API grew, with a vision of a prosperous and peaceful Middle East, connected through the hospitality and respect widely associated with Abraham. The API is a non-political, non-sectarian organization open to and honoring all cultures and faiths. Its mission is not mainly seen as creating a new path, but rather helping people to rediscover an ancient path. “We are simply dusting off the footsteps,” Ury likes to say. “Keep in mind,” Weiss emphasizes, that “the *Abraham Path* itself is distinct from the *Abraham Path Initiative*.”

The API is headquartered in Boulder, Colorado (where Ury lives), with academic activities centered at Harvard, and with several regional, in-country organizations responsible for ground operations. It has established international support teams, in-country organizations, and community-based planning processes in a collective effort to build awareness of the Path, to facilitate demonstration projects illustrating the potential of the Path to contribute to economic development, and to carry out the diplomacy necessary to ensure the opening, development, official support, and long-term sustainability of the Path. Since its formal inception in 2007 as a non-profit NGO, the API has grown and now has offices in Ankara, Amsterdam, Beirut, Bethlehem, Boulder, Cambridge, Jerusalem, Oxford, Paris, Sanliurfa, and San Paolo.

[See Exhibit 1 for a description of API’s Board, staff, field teams by country, and major financial donors. For those with a special interest in some key challenges and dynamics of building and growing the API as an organization, Exhibit 2 offers a more detailed account of its development over time.]

Its partners include, among others, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the Harvard Negotiation Project, Engineers without Borders International, the World Heritage Alliance, Outward Bound International, the United Nations World Tourism Organization, and Bethlehem University, Sabanci University, and Ben Gurion University. Key Middle East leaders as well as Nobel laureates have endorsed the API while donors to the organization have come from eighteen nations. Senior API staff have calculated that over a hundred million people worldwide had been exposed to the Abraham Path through various positive media events, including international media stories, television programs, and the web.

Weiss believes that the Abraham Path Initiative’s affiliation and academic partnership with Harvard’s Program on Negotiation played a critical role in its early growth and credibility, particularly in the Middle East. Norris describes Harvard University as providing the “good housekeeping seal of approval” for the project, especially in this notoriously suspicious region. Without it, he believes that Abraham Path might have engendered even more distrust: “As one of the oldest major academic institutions in the world, with perhaps the greatest brand, it buys credibility in a no man’s land. It creates operating room and time so that we can be known and help build an accurate portrayal of what we are trying to do.”

By the spring of 2009, five major travelable segments of the Path had opened, totaling 310 kilometers. The API has sponsored study tours and walks, for example, between the ancient Turkish city of Harran and Sanliurfa (40 km). Travelers may also walk

along a route called the Syrian Cultural Walking Trail from Deir Mar Musa to Damascus (80 km), and between the Jordanian municipalities of al-Ayoun to Ajloun (30 km). An additional section of the trail has been mapped to Mount Nebo but is not yet available to walkers. A section of the Path has been opened in Palestine from Nablus to Jericho and on to Betin (biblical Bethel) (70 km). Several successful youth exchanges in Jordan and Palestine have been held. Finally, in addition to shorter stretches, there is also a segment (60 km) from Be'er-Sheva to the city of Arad in the Negev desert in Israel.

So far, over a dozen subsequent tours and walks along parts of the Path have taken place by groups from the Kellogg Fellows to local university students to international student exchanges. In 2008, approximately 250 people walked the Path. In the first half of 2009, some 650 persons have walked on routes that the Abraham Path has either opened or has played a role. The long-term goal is that a 5000km Path will be travelable in all the places where Abraham is believed to have journeyed, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

From the start, API staff members have been careful to cultivate the understanding that the Path was already in existence, as it has been for thousands of years. Consequently, the work of the Abraham Path Initiative lay in working with its partners to ready the ancient Path for travelers. Opening segments of the Path involves a process of community organizing, village by village, engaging local leaders, tourism officials, and governments in the idea of the Path, to determine if the Path is right for their community. “We had to relinquish any sense of control or ownership from the beginning,” says Ury, “Our goal is capturing the human imagination with the possibility for mutual respect.”

For example, Raed Saadeh, Vice-President and former President of the Palestinian Hotel Association, CEO of the Jerusalem Hotel, and API board member, described the fairly elaborate process of rooting the path in a number of Palestinian villages. “First, the Palestinian team needed to identify key stakeholders such as the village council or the leadership of the municipality, women’s groups (who might offer hospitality services and handicrafts), and local small businesses such as restaurants and guesthouses that would serve Path walkers. In a low-key manner, we introduced and explained the concept of the Abraham Path to these groups and helped them see its potential advantages for them. We thought of ourselves as forming an umbrella entity with these stakeholders on behalf of the Path through their village. We also identified other influential people in the village or municipality such as elders in important village families or clans. It was vital to ensure their familiarity with our plans and to address their concerns as we went along. On an ongoing basis, we zig-zagged in conversations between these key people and the other stakeholders, a process that inevitably takes time.”

Saadeh continued, “To coordinate efforts and identify projects to enhance the path (e.g., mapping, rest areas, trail clearing and marking), we relied on a planning group, whose membership had many members in common as we worked in different villages; planning group partners included, for example, Bethlehem University, the Palestine Wildlife Society, the Siraj Center (a cultural tourism organization), and Rozana (a cultural heritage society). To ensure real results from the planning group process, we also formed an implementation

group asked to implement an identified project or task. The implementation team is a virtual structure that includes people, locally based contractors and organizations, as well as staff with proven records of performance. We've worked to come up with a business model that gives continual incentives to stakeholders to support the path; for example, we've tried to define appropriate fee splits (for guided walks on Path segments) among the guide, hotels, and other stakeholders. Thus far, the Palestinian team has carried out this kind of process in several villages or municipalities such as Awarta and Douma. It takes a long time, with many difficulties along the way, but these villages now feel that they 'own' their piece of the Path and have a real stake in its overall success.”

[Note: the Path's negotiation and development to date in the various countries of the region is detailed in Section 4 of this paper. There is no better way to really “get” the reality, opportunities, and challenges associated with the Path's development than to carefully peruse these remarkably different accounts of actions by API staff in each of Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel.]

At the heart of the Abraham Path is the experience of walking, just as Abraham and his family did. The Path is being mapped so that those who wished to travel by motor coach, car, camel, donkey, or bicycle may do so as well. Small teams of local surveyors have used Global Information Systems (GIS) – accessed by Global Positioning Systems (GPS) -- to locate old trails and dust them off. Beginning in 2008, Google Earth software has made it possible for virtual travelers to do an initial “flyover” of key sites along the Abraham Path (<http://www.abrahampath.org/virtual.php>), making a cyber version of the Path accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Plans were in the works to geotag significant Abrahamic sites along the virtual Path, for interested parties to research and describe, constituting a sort of virtual guidebook that could grow over time as different people contributed to the lore.

As host committees and organizations have emerged in different cities and countries in the Middle East, so too have groups of “friends of the Abraham Path” in different cities and countries around the world. Perhaps the most important of these chapters is the one that formed in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in the middle of 2006.⁵ The Brazilian friends of the Path, organized with an office and staff, have sponsored Brazilian scholars and youth to travel the Path. In July 2009, they organized a 6K race through the city center of Sao Paulo as a “virtual” Abraham Path, in which more than 2000 runners participated with major streets and tunnels blocked off, the Mayor (of Lebanese descent) and other dignitaries walking past a series of API billboards (with pictures of Urfa, Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Hebron/Al-Khalil) along the route, the presidents and staff of the Hospital Sirio-Libanés and Hospital Albert Einstein walking together, live helicopter and media coverage, etc. Brazilian chapter members have built important diplomatic connections, offered critical financial support, and garnered significant media to bring attention to the Path. Notably, together with the United Nations endorsements, the close involvement of the Brazilians has helped to shift perceptions of the Initiative from an American-supported effort to a global one. This global

⁵ More recently, a chapter has just been initiated in England. There are early conversations about chapters forming in the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany.

vantage point was one the Initiative organizers had always felt strongly about and desired to cultivate given the nature and scope of the task.

Another kind of Brazilian contribution offers more granular insight into how the groundwork for potential future expansion of the Path is being laid. In a May 28, 2009 email to Board members, William Ury described some useful steps by Salim Schahin, a Brazilian Board member, on a recent trip to the region:

Friends,

We had some good news today from our friend and board member Salim Schahin! As you may know, he has recently been elected President of the Brazil-Arab Chamber of Commerce and has, in this role, proved an extraordinary ambassador for Abraham's Path. A few highlights from his recent trip to the Middle East:

- Salim met with the Chief of Protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Saudi Arabia, who was very positive about the idea of Abraham's Path -- one good step towards winning the blessing of the King. He mentioned that there is an ancient trail in Saudi Arabia that goes up to Syria, something worth investigating.*
- He also met with Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the Arab League, who some time ago, thanks to Salim, gave us a letter expressing a positive attitude towards Abraham's Path. Mr. Moussa continued to express positive sentiments, while remaining concerned about the political situation, particularly the settlements in Palestine.*
- Salim also met with the Syrian Minister for Expatriate Affairs and gave him materials about Abraham's Path. The Minister suggested he meet with Mr. Kuzbari, our friend in Vienna, who is a good friend of the Minister.*
- In Cairo, Salim also talked about the Path with the Egyptian Ministers of Commerce and Petroleum, who are interested in promoting tourism.*
- Finally, Salim got a call from his friend, the Jordanian ambassador to Brazil, remembering that Salim had given some materials about Abraham's Path to King Abdullah on his visit some months ago to Brazil. The Ambassador said that King Abdullah has given his blessing to Abraham's Path, and that the King would like to meet with Salim. This is promising news indeed!*

So deep gratitude to our friend Salim!

William

In a number of U.S. communities as well, including Cincinnati, Austin, Dallas, and Santa Barbara, groups of Abraham Path supporters have emerged and organized “Abraham

walks,” often traveling by foot together from a local church to a mosque and to a synagogue. These walks not only build awareness of the Abraham Path, but enable people to participate who would not otherwise have the opportunity to travel to the Middle East. In this sense, the API staff sometimes see their creation as “omni-local.” In these communities, Path events have served, for example, to build bridges and break down walls of misunderstanding and misperception between different faith communities.

As a social enterprise venture, the Abraham Path Initiative aims to enable a sustainable business platform for tourism and economic development. Tyler Norris notes that when the Path is fully developed, the presence of travelers will create demand for products and services. This demand will stimulate local entrepreneurship, generate income and create jobs in villages along the Path that host travelers. As this cultural tourism grows, it will create incentives to restore and preserve historical sites and encourage environmental stewardship. When it is fully operational, API staff believes that it will become an educational and recreational resource for the local community as well as for visitors. Thus, the Abraham Path may be described as many things at once. In appealing to potential financial supporters, a December 2008 document, articulately detailed the many facets of investing in the API as a “social venture opportunity.” [*See Exhibit 3, where the contents of this document are reproduced.*]

In a very real way, the Path does not exist “out there.” It is constituted by the act of walking along routes with deep cultural and historical meaning and through the collaborations relating to hospitality that are made possible. This distinction is a crucial one to Ury and his colleagues. For even though the physical trails lie within the sovereign territory of many nations, the Path itself cannot truly be “owned” by any government, constituency, and certainly, not by the API itself. The Path’s real stakeholders, in Ury’s view, are the villagers through which the Path goes as well as those who journey on it.

Experiences of the Path. API staff and those who have walked segments of the path often describe singular experiences. Visitors on the Path are able to engage with local traditions – food, music, and handicrafts – and experience the hospitality for which the Middle East is legendary. By virtue of allowing time and a venue for these exchanges, “the Path offers the opportunity for little successes, and breakthrough moments,” says Essrea Cherin, API’s board coordinator, who spent four years on a pilgrimage around the world herself before joining the API (starting in Los Angeles and ending in Hiroshima). Tyler Norris, a senior advisor to the Abraham Path Initiative, is a partisan of walking trails: “We do encourage going by foot, if possible, because it slows people down, so that they can experience the people and the landscape and the culture.” Ury himself has always been drawn to walking, which he sees as inherently collaborative: “There’s something about having a conversation side-by-side, actually physically moving in a common direction.”

Essrea Cherin notes that the Abraham Path invokes the ritual of host and guest. By definition, these engagements require collaboration: “Too many times we sit down and say ‘We need to collaborate.’ The Abraham Path offers the opportunity for people to collaborate and that makes it different.” In creating the conditions for what Ury terms, “transformative hospitality,” travelers on the Path can change the way they experience the Middle East.

Senior Adviser Tyler Norris calls the Abraham Path a “citizen exchange movement,” with an expectation of transformative hospitality extending beyond co-existence: “It hinges on an opportunity for a world in which people of all faiths and walks of life can live in harmony, with a just and equitable peace.”

For those living in the Middle East, the experience may be of a different type. Stephanie Saldana is an American scholar who served as a researcher in the Path’s earliest incubation stage at Harvard, who later spent a year on a Fulbright fellowship in Syria, became the coordinator for the Path in Palestine, and now serves as a senior adviser in Palestine. Saldana is particularly attuned to the importance of building credibility. She notes that in Palestine, for example, the Path already belongs to the community and is a way of telling their story: “Abraham is familiar. They are reclaiming the story of Abraham that has been taken away by the conflict. The Path is a way of showing the world, and themselves, that Abraham was a Bedouin who wandered as their ancestors wandered. For the Palestinian, walking the Path, in a situation where there are checkpoints everywhere, the Path is a symbol of freedom.”

Saldana also notes that for those not living in the Middle East: “The Path is the chance to discover your own calling when you move outside of your comfort zone as a traveler, and put yourself at the mercy of others in this land of hospitality. It is a way of becoming vulnerable and somehow being born a new. In the Bible, Abraham receives a new name and that’s a way of losing yourself to begin as a new person with greater understanding.” In this way, Tyler Norris underscores that the Abraham Path is an opportunity to create a more accurate story about the Middle East in a post 9/11 world where “fear and concern push away the other and render music and culture into symbols of the enemy rather than emblems of a rich civilization.”

Some challenges. As the Abraham Path Initiative evolved, it has retained its distributed, organizational structure. This meant that its activities are spread among Boulder, Colorado, Cambridge, and the cities in which in-country coordinators were operating. Among the dilemmas the organization faced was one of leadership. Should the leadership of the Abraham Path Initiative be concentrated in Boulder with its founder, in Cambridge, the site of early, critical institutional support, or in the field, with the men and women working on the ground to help communities to realize the potential of Abrahamic hospitality? If the in-country operations were to be autonomous, to what extent did values and policies need to be aligned and coordinated? Or should a shift occur toward the region?

Ury believes that it is critical that the Abraham Path be configured as a series of local projects, arising out of a community’s intrinsic interests, rather than be imposed in any way. He was prepared for the fact that the Abraham Path Initiative’s idea of what a Path might look like or how it might work would be superseded by the local community’s direction or inspiration. Ury knew this very likely would mean that the Abraham Path in a given country might not – at least, for some time – be viewed as linked with the Abraham Path elsewhere, because of political tensions. The policy against “normalization” in several Arab countries, for example, made it highly unlikely that Abraham Path activity in Arab countries would easily intersect with initiatives in Israel. It was not critical to Ury and his colleagues if the

walking routes were even called “the Abraham Path” or went by some other name so long as they could establish the architecture that could inspire communities and enable transformative hospitality. This proved to be very important in Syria, for example, where the Abraham Path Initiative was engaged in supporting the opening of the “Syrian Cultural Walking Trail.” In Palestine, as well, the turn to local wisdom about hospitality and ancient traveling routes proved to be more auspicious to mapping the path than some of the professional expertise the Abraham Path Initiative had at its disposal.

Staff and friends of the Abraham Path Initiative have reflected about the proper balance between US based operations and in-country partners. Elias Amidon, for example, appreciates that the Abraham Path Initiative is keen to shed the sense that an American consortium holds the concept. He is concerned that the organization will cede too quickly to countries that are reluctant to link their routes to the larger Abraham project. But he is also sensitive to the ambiguity that exists with respect to the Path: “To whom does the Abraham Path belong? Does it belong to the ancients? Or is it Bill’s project? Does it belong to the Board, to the staff or to the people in the region? But what if the people in the region barely know about it? Does it belong to the people who will walk or to their children, and future generations?”

Tyler Norris also expressed some discomfort with the idea that in-country operations could become wholly independent of the international NGO. He supports Ury’s notion of shared leadership, but believes that it would be beneficial if key values of local partners were aligned with those of the international organization, if local groups wish to be affiliated with the Abraham Path Initiative. Norris, for example, speaks of a system that allowed some guides to become “preferred providers” or “licensees” of the Abraham Path Initiative, enabling some quality control. Weiss make something of the same argument, suggesting that the leaders of small group tours and the early travelers see themselves as “ambassadors” whose conduct is crucial to the development of both the Abraham Path and the Abraham Path Initiative.

Another challenge: the Abraham Path Initiative has been approached by over 20 documentary film producers with a film now being planned to begin in the coming year. Clearly, the idea has moved from an appealing concept to a reality on the ground. For example, the positive media the Abraham Path Initiative has garnered means that Ury and his colleagues must decide how much of their attention to devote to building further international publicity and how much of their focus should remain on in-country development of the Path. At a moment in the organization’s history where the Abraham Path Initiative has gained attention and mobilized for future growth, changed economic circumstances mean that it is must contend with how to mobilize this capacity in the context of having fewer resources and uncertain prospects regarding fundraising.

Despite a four-fold increase of travelers on the Path, the global recession has had a significant impact on the organization. Weiss reports that the organization is now understaffed and has had to reduce its budget by almost one-half. The engagement of the staff, however, means that in-country teams have stepped forward and are redoubling local efforts to secure funds. If in-country donors provide increasing support to the Abraham Path

Initiative, they may well expect an additional share in the direction and decision-making of the international organization. Weiss believes that the next few years will be crucial for the Abraham Path: “The irony is that just as the Path is ready to take off and do so much more, we have to contend with having less. That said, we are making tremendous progress step by step and that is really the key to the sustainability of the Path over the long term.”

4. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Different Countries

Imagine for the moment the task of actually negotiating a segment of the Path in one of its potential host countries. What would it take to move from vague concept to physical and social reality in that country? Sustained success would require twin feats: earning on-the-ground village commitment as well as official government approval, generally from the tourism ministry. How should these twin processes be undertaken and related to one another?

At a regional level, should negotiations be opened in many countries simultaneously, or with the choice, in which country would be most promising for initial focus? Once there, who should be consulted, on what basis, seeking what specific commitments, over what time period? What moves should be made to prepare the ground and deal with inevitable challenges or setbacks?

To be a bit more specific, what would be the elements of the best approach in a country like Syria, ruled autocratically and with suspicious security forces monitoring Syrians and, especially, outsiders with possibly sinister intentions (like opening up a path that might be walked by Zionists or that could lead to a surreptitious link to Israel)? If Syria became an official supporter, would that specially help negotiations in other Arab countries of the Path? By contrast, at official and unofficial levels, the Israelis initially seemed to be keen on quickly developing the Path in Israel and had deeply knowledgeable experts committed to the concept, especially Avner Goren, one of the countries’ most experienced archaeologists. Should the emphasis, then, be on harvesting the “low-hanging Israeli fruit?” Would that choice make it harder or easier to proceed with other countries? How about Turkey? Jordan? Palestine?

Such questions had engaged the board and staff as they began to take action in the region. And, of course, there were longer-run issues. Geopolitics had dictated at least quasi-autonomous in-country entities, at least for the present. However, should these in-country organizations be structured to enable a more or less regional, integrated whole? In reading the following sections detailing with the very different country-by-country processes, keep in mind the potential relationships among the individual country efforts to realizing the overall conception.

a. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Turkey. The first section of the Abraham Path to be officially launched was in Turkey. Turkey is a secular democratic republic located in the southwestern corner of Europe. It was established after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I. Its culture and traditions are a unique blend of East and West, with the Bosphorus Strait demarcating its European and Asian parts. Turkey has

become increasingly aligned with the West, although it retains close cultural, political, and economic ties with the East. Turkey itself is in an internal struggle for its identity -- between the secular governing principles Kemal Ataturk, the father of the nation, espoused, and a more religious Muslim populace that is challenging the nature of the republic. This secular/religious issue is at the heart of many issues in present day Turkish society and would play an important role in the introduction of the Abraham Path to the country.

In December 2004, Bruce Allyn (Ury's old Harvard colleague from their earlier joint work in the Soviet Union), Emran Akhtar (a friend of Ury's from Pakistan), and William Ury made an early visit to Urfa and Harran to consult and explore the possibility of reviving the ancient route of Abraham. (Allyn and Ury continued across the border into Syria where together with Elias Amidon, they explored the possibility with Syrian experts from across the civil society spectrum.)

How to frame their intentions posed a challenge. Of course, much of the original impetus for the Abraham Path Initiative had emerged from the concerned parties desire to foster a just peace during a time of war and heightened international conflict. Since many in the Middle East were wary of new social interventions, would tourism and economic development offer a better point of entry and better suit the needs of those in the region? These questions came to life for Ury and his colleagues as they moved forward.

During this December 2004 trip, Ury and his friends decided to organize a small meeting of interested parties in Urfa and Harran in the fall of 2005 in order to initiate the process of reviving the ancient route. In addition to discussing the practical matters of organization, the friends of the Path planned to take a symbolic short walk from the ancient arch in Harran, from which Abraham is believed to have set forth on his journey. Out of respect to the Islamic tradition, Emran Akhtar proposed that this initiating meeting and ceremony take place at the time of Quranic Night of Power, one of the most auspicious moments in the Islamic calendar. Akhtar hoped the event would set the right tone for the re-awakening of this ancient path.

The meeting was held in Urfa and Harran in October 2005 and involved about fifteen to twenty people from Turkey, Syria, the United States, and Brazil. While the meeting was very productive and the walk and prayer were deeply moving, one small incident that took place underscored the sensitivities. After one dinner hosted in a local person's home in the small village, some members of the group began an invocation of gratitude and honor to Ibrahim in Arabic. The owner of the home, who happened to be the mayor of Harran's brother, grew alarmed because he did not understand the ritual and was afraid he might be held responsible for the strange behavior of foreigners. Arzu Yilmaz, a Turkish Ph.D. candidate at Ankara University from Ankara who first met Ury through her university mentor during one of his first visits to Turkey provided crucial reassurance to the mayor's brother by explaining the intention behind the event. It was an indication that smoothing the path to mutual understanding, not only between different cultures, but between city and country, might take some work.

In November 2006, Ury returned with the first study tour consisting a delegation of some 25 people from 10 different countries, to retrace the footsteps of Abraham from Urfa and Harran to Hebron, from Abraham's remembered birth cave to his death cave, from 'womb to tomb' as Ury put it. In nearby Urfa, Ury and his colleagues met with the Mayor of Harran and learned that a torrential flood had just occurred, leaving several hundred people without drinking water and significantly affecting his community. When the traveling group asked if and how they could help, the Mayor indicated that drinking water would be most welcome. Ury decided on the spot to help, using private funds to purchase a truckload of bottled water: "how could we not, being there as we were at that moment. There was no quid pro quo expected or anything like that. It just seemed like the right thing to do since the very place we had come to honor was in dire need at that moment." Because of flooding in the region, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey came to Urfa to view the damage. Upon learning about the consultations and Harvard's involvement, he came to the meeting and endorsed it with a quote that opened the door to further conversation ("We're interested to learn more.").

At the study tour meeting in Urfa, further issues – one in particular -- emerged that would cause the project significant challenges. In preparation for the meeting, some of the Initiative's early partners in Istanbul, via Amidon's previous relationships, suggested that the Armenian Patriarch, a Turkish citizen resident in Istanbul who enjoyed good relations with the Turkish state, should be invited. After all, the Abraham Path was about inclusion and healing of old wounds. Unfortunately, the presence of the Patriarch in Sanliurfa caused some significant concern among many citizens as to the true nature and intention of the project. Relations between Turks and Armenians in Sanliurfa were still sensitive and not nearly as well-developed and positive as those in Istanbul. Rumors abounded: was the secret purpose of the API here to work on Turkish-Armenian relations? The study tour left an uneasy city with many unanswered questions and significant concerns.

The in-country coordinator for Turkey, Arzu Yilmaz, commented how occasions like these became important learning moments for Abraham Path Initiative. She noted, for example, that in Istanbul the Armenian Patriarch's presence might have been more readily accepted, but not in smaller more traditional communities where there had once been a significant Armenian community (and where she felt that the presence of Armenian clergy on the street might be seen as a signal Armenians intend to pursue reparations). "One of the challenges is to realize the boundaries are not just between countries, between the West and the Middle East, but within countries, often along the lines of modernization."

Yilmaz helped the API staff to appreciate that in the Middle East when a project is described as "international," it is often understood to mean it is American: "You are undertaking an American project in the Middle East while the United States is at war with Iraq." She also said, "it might have been normal for the Abraham Path to get in touch with religious groups, but Turkey is a secular country, and when anyone gets in touch with a religious group, it can be viewed as a provocation, and the government may get angry."

Weiss candidly acknowledged the complexities of the Patriarch's visit. It was the host committee of Turkish colleagues that had suggested inviting the Armenian cleric, but

they were from Istanbul...not from Sanliurfa. As had become evident, those two Turkish places had very different worldviews. API staff simply had not realized just how sensitive the situation still was in the southeastern part of the country. Weiss commented: "The early implementation phase was not done nearly as well as it could have been. In the end, this was our responsibility and we made it very challenging for locals to support the project in that phase." Although the Abraham Path had created a host committee in Turkey prior to the Sanliurfa event, there was no one from Sanliurfa itself on the committee. Despite these missteps, the Initiative continued to make progress in Turkey. This experience speaks the staying power of the project: "We've endured some challenging blows due to our mistakes and yet the project is still standing."

Later, Ury, Weiss, and Yilmaz realized they needed to engage the community in Sanliurfa quickly. Yilmaz suggested she go and met with the mayor and governor. She did and carried the message back to the Abraham Path that if they wanted their project to work, they would have to do a better job of listening to the local leaders. Weiss described the Initiative's collective response as: "OK we understand, tell us what we need to do. The Mayor and Governor explained the importance of tourism to the area and suggested that framing in these terms be used going forward because the people in Sanliurfa would understand it. Emphasize that the tourist angle and show it to be true, they explained, and you will gain the people's trust and confidence."

In May of 2007, Weiss, Yilmaz, and Daniel Adamson, Director of Path Development, went to Sanliurfa for a key meeting with representatives of the Governor, Mayor, and civil society representatives. At that meeting the three expressed regret for the way things had transpired and that they were really here to listen to them and to have them take the lead with the Initiative supporting them. Yilmaz explained that this was a key moment for the project in Sanliurfa but certainly not the end of the concerns.

In November 2007, the Abraham Path sponsored a tourism conference and trek in Sanliurfa and Harran, Turkey. Weiss attributes the success of this event to Yilmaz's efforts on behalf of the Path:

"A lot of the credit for that goes to Arzu. She gained their trust and she's a city girl, you know, a Kurd again in a realm where there's tenuous relationships. She was magical in terms of getting the trust of the governor and the vice governor. Things had been fluid. One minute they were right behind us and the next minute, they couldn't support us. In 2007 in November, we had 170 people come to the tourism conference. 100 people did the trek. We'd also planned a concert but we cancelled because a few days before, some Turkish soldiers were killed and the local hosts thought that it would not be a time to celebrate and so we did not that out of respect. Part of the purpose was to try to change the image of the project there. We got tremendous publicity. The Ministry of Tourism paid for eight international journalists to come. There were seven national stories written, 25 local stories, TV spots, and thanks to our Brazilian colleagues we had a Brazilian TV company called Globo come and air a 4 minute segment on Fantastico (the equivalent of 60 Minutes in the

United States) on Christmas Eve in Brazil which was watched by close to 40 million people. And so we got a tremendous amount of publicity. I was surprised that we succeeded at reformulating the project. We had made so many mistakes.”

In digesting this set of experiences, API staff were learning how to work effectively with their partners across the political and religious spectrums. Ury believes that the paramount issue is one of trust. The Abraham Path, he notes, as been labeled by some as an American conspiracy, a British conspiracy, a Kurdish conspiracy, an Armenian conspiracy, and even a Puritan conspiracy after a local journalist in Sanliurfa discovered that the Puritans had founded Harvard University.

Prior to the Sanliurfa tourism conference, the Abraham Path Initiative had been the subject of threats from a small group of locals who opposed the initiative. Part of this opposition was due to the geopolitical situation at the time, which saw the United States and Turkey at odds over the handling of the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq. Furthermore, the US House of Representatives had just passed a non-binding resolution stating they believed that the situation in the early twentieth century between the Armenians and Turks should indeed be labeled a genocide. Anti-American sentiment simmered among some in the local population. Threatening emails were sent to members of the Abraham Path Initiative staff. In the face of continuing conflict about the Initiative presence in the area, Weiss conferred with Ury about how they should proceed. Ury asked for Weiss’s opinion. Weiss reported that Yilmaz told him that the governor and mayor had acknowledged that there were threats but promised to do their best to provide security. Weiss recalled telling him: “We have to trust our partners. We’ve sought partnerships, saying we would take the lead from them.” And Bill said, “fair enough.” Weiss continues, “So we went and while there were some small protests, everything went off without a hitch despite there being some tension in the air. It was good lesson that you have to put your money where you put your mouth.”

To illustrate: On the first night in Sanliurfa, the in-country staff became worried when an unknown young man showed up at Ury’s hotel, asking for his whereabouts. Amazingly, the hotel front desk clerk gave the man Ury’s hotel room number. As a precaution, the staff changed Ury’s room in the hotel. Later that night Ury returned to his room to discover a mysterious unmarked cardboard box in his room -- only to find out that the box contained a gift from the Governor of Sanliurfa.

b. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Syria. Framing the objective of Abraham Path also proved critical in Syria, an Arab country that attained independence, via French mandate in 1946. Since independence, several attempts had been made to overthrow the government, resulting in a state that has been controlled by Emergency Law since 1962. The country’s current president is Bashar al-Assad who succeeded his father in 2000. Syria’s population is ninety percent Arab, mainly Sunni Muslim, although the military is under the control al-Assad’s minority Alawite sect.

As in Turkey, as the Abraham Path Initiative was developing its vision and establishing networks on the ground, it expected that one of its first natural constituencies

would be faith communities. This focus, again, was largely due to Elias Amidon's connections as a Sufi Pir who had led pilgrimages to Syria for many years. During a visit to Syria in 2004, Amidon had expected that religious groups would welcome the Abraham Path Initiative, which they initially did. As the idea of Abraham's Path seemed to be gaining more traction, however, unexpected problems arose. Amidon explained: "The dominance of religion in the region has created a turf battle. Any engagement inevitably provokes questions and illuminates social hierarchies. Who's dominant? Who is recognized? Who is in charge? We found a project like ours was a wonderful juicy bone. Everyone wanted a bit and was upset if the other got it." In Syria, for example, early conversations about the Abraham Path became unwittingly entangled in a pre-existing feud between two rival Imams who also happened to be brothers. Amidon remembered: "At first we thought we could make nice and say to everybody "we can belong to all of you." However, the Imams were allied with rival factions within the Syrian parliament, which proceeded to take sides. Amidon acknowledged that the Abraham Path Initiative's effort at a balanced approach reflected a Western, American bias that didn't take into account the prevailing culture.

Daniel Adamson was a hiking guide working for a private company in England when he met Elias Amidon at the Deir Mar Musa monastery in the desert some 50KM from Damascus. Adamson, who done considerable work in the region, had developed a deep affection for Syria. Amidon invited him to become part of the project and Adamson was charged with exploring the possibility of opening the Path in Syria. Working out of a hotel in Damascus, Adamson adopted what he believed would be a "low key approach" to capacity-building, engaging in informal conversation with a range of local influentials about what would be required on the ground to build support for the Abraham Path.

Adamson's low key and seemingly innocent, exploratory conversations with Syrian colleagues nonetheless attracted the attention of the Syrian authorities, who expressed concern about his efforts and intentions. Suspicion was such that in 2005, Adamson arrived in Damascus and was denied re-entry into the country. He received clearance to re-enter Syria in November 2006 to participate in the Abraham Initiative's first study tour and by 2008 was given visas once again.⁶ He believes that this is an indication of very conscious API efforts at trust building and an outcome of the affirmative diplomacy that has transpired since those early incidents.

In Syria, the Abraham Path Initiative has ended up with a model that reflects the realities of the political milieu. As in other partner countries, the Abraham Path initiative functions as a catalyst and convener, raising money and bringing in staff at the invitation of local hosts to open path segments in each country, and arrange for positive media when travelers begin to walk. The goal of the organization is enable Path development in countries in the region and then allow country partners to shape the Path to suit local needs. In Syria, it has taken time for these efforts to bear fruit.

⁶ Diplomatic efforts by the Brazilians were significantly helpful in altering the perceptions of the project in Syria and with the Arab League.

Weiss notes that after Adamson's experience in Syria, it became apparent to a number of people in the Abraham Path Initiative that, without President Assad's approval, the project would languish. How might this approval be gained?

For much of 2007, Weiss acknowledges that "we were stuck" until David Lesch, an American scholar of Syrian politics, on the faculty of Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, interceded on their behalf. Lesch's involvement came by an unlikely series of events. One day in Jerusalem Weiss was talking with then-Palestinian Coordinator Stephanie Saldana who suggested that Weiss acquire a copy of Lesch's book *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria*. Lesch's book was one of few Western-authored books about Assad available in Damascus, which Weiss realized meant that it had received President Assad's approval. Weiss read the book with interest and for clues on how to break the logjam.

After finishing the book Weiss decided to call Lesch, explain the initiative, and ask for his help. Weiss sensed that Lesch saw the value of the project. After a few calls, Weiss asked the scholar if he would be willing to discuss the Abraham Path during his next meeting with the Syrian president. Lesch agreed. In May 2007, Lesch spoke with President Assad again and mentioned the project to him. Assad liked the idea and recalled previous internal conversations about enhancing tourism in Syria and the possibility of creating a Syrian Cultural Walking Trail. In November 2007, during another meeting between Lesch and the president, Assad indicated that he would welcome advice from the Abraham Path Initiative about how to create such a walking trail. Assad tasked the Ministry of Tourism to work with the Abraham Path Initiative. In December of 2008, President Assad and former US President Jimmy Carter unofficially inaugurated the Syrian Cultural Walking Trail by walking a short segment together. At this point, the Syrian government has indicated their intention for the trail to remain a stand-alone project.

The Abraham Path nonetheless considers the opening of a Syrian route an important development. Weiss notes: "[we knew that the Syrian trail] wasn't designed to connect with anything anywhere else. At some point, maybe, it will connect to the Abraham Path, but that isn't ours to say." "We will have done our job, says Tyler Norris, "when we are out of a job. I hope one day my daughter can say, 'I'm going to Syria' and there's a Lonely Planet guide to the Abraham Path, and she can make her own trip."

William Ury views gaining credibility as one of the most significant challenges in development work of this kind. Reflecting on the Turkish and Syrian experiences, he indicated that

"We've been told that we were being too ambitious, that the project is not safe, and that we would never be accepted by the governments in the region. 'Are you crazy? You're going to get tourists to come to a war zone? Even if it is a good idea, it's not doable. But we arranged a study tour [in November 2006] showing it was possible because after all we did it. We have now have letters of support from almost every government in the region. We have validation from the United Nations [Alliance of Civilization]. It's still such a

small innocent project, in its infancy, but it's taken seriously enough now that it has even been the subject of a cabinet meeting in Syria where the Syrians discussed what their position should be on the Abraham Path.”

But trusting local partners and gaining credibility has also meant reconfiguring relationship with other partners. Although not an interfaith initiative per se, the Abraham Path began with the intention of engaging faith communities as part of their approach. After sponsoring programs in Turkey and Syria, it became clear that the Abraham Path could gain far greater traction by focusing its efforts on cross-cultural exchange, tourism, and economic development – the aspects of the project the people in the region desired. Weiss believes that governments in the region are eager for tourism. The Abraham Path's potential to deliver travelers to their countries is a major factor behind their support for the initiative.

c. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Jordan. Jordan, an Arab country in southwest Asia, shares its borders with Syria (to the north), with Iraq (to the northwest), Palestine and Israel (to the west) and with Saudi Arabia (to the east and south). It is ruled by a constitutional monarchy with a representative government. The Hashemite royal family traces its ancestry to the family of the Prophet. The current, King Abdullah II, is Western-educated. Since assuming the throne in 1999 after the death of his father, he has consistently steered his country to closer relations with the West, despite pressure from within the country by proponents of Arab nationalism.

In addition to his work in Syria, Daniel Adamson had been charged with developing the Abraham Path in Jordan. Adamson went to Jordan after Syria because the organizers felt Path development should pose the fewest challenges in the current climate. The thought was that Adamson and his colleague, Mahmoud Twassi, could begin the painstaking mapping process on the ground. The two had considerable success doing this. After a year or so of working on the path they had conducted a landscape survey on 120 KM and detailed mapping on 30 KM. This early work in Jordan did indeed seem promising to all involved.

Adamson and his colleagues were also working in Jordan to build partnerships at the local level and with institutions in Jordan, universities and government departments. In 2008, the Abraham Path was able to sponsor a study tour with students from Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom with students from Jordan's University of Yarmouk. The Abraham Path brought the students to the northern highlands where they stayed two weeks in a local village hosted by local people. The visit culminated with a festival celebrating the landscape and cultural heritage of Jordan. The festival generated a considerable amount of positive media, including a front-page story in the *Jordan Times*.

This youth exchange demonstrated a kind of tourism in which the local people, rather than being service providers, assumed the role of hosts and guides – showing the students the landscape, welcoming them into their homes, teaching them about the traditions and stories of the area. Designed and led by the local friends of the Abraham Path in the host villages, this exchange demonstrated potential economic benefits of tourism, introduced the new concept of cultural tourism based on community interaction and rural life, and contributed towards building support for the project at local level. For the students who joined the

exchange, it was an experience of walking together, sharing, and learning about another culture which, Adamson observed, had a profound and positive impact on their understanding of the world and their future lives. The event also helped to establish the importance of youth exchanges and volunteer service projects to the opening of the Abraham Path

The festival at the end of this exchange also attracted unwanted controversy in the form of protests by the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups who thought that the Abraham Path might be a political or religious project connected in some way with Israel. (These groups also pointedly challenged the Path in political forums.) This was an obstacle which caused real concern to the organizers of the festival, but local governmental authorities supported the event and made sure that it passed off without any disturbance.

The real challenge raised by this incident is the fact that support for the Abraham Path – at every level, from the governmental to the local – is vulnerable to rumor and misunderstanding, and can be threatened by ill-informed, vocal, influential opposition to the project. In such a highly sensitive area of the world, the conditions create a background of fear and insecurity that make trust-building central to the success of the project. API staff and friends have had to strive hard to counteract these suspicions at local level but, despite these challenges, believe that they have established broad and enthusiastic support among key community leaders, local officials, and families in the area. Interestingly, some members of the Muslim Brotherhood changed their negative perceptions after they visited the villages, spoke with residents, and heard their positive views about the Path.

Follow-up assessment of students from Leeds and Yarmouk Universities participating in the student exchange activities rated their engagement extremely favorably. Student comments included: “I’ve become more confident. In the past, I wouldn’t talk with anyone who I thought was even a little different from me. Now I talk to all kinds of different people;” “The experience made me a global citizen – it makes you feel the Otherness that we have in us.”

To date the path in Jordan has yet to overcome all of these political challenges at national level, and is still lacking a clear governmental endorsement of the project. At local level, however, the path seems to be flourishing in the local communities.⁷ In the first part of 2009, some 600 people have walked the path in Jordan with 20 local families registered as host (for home stays and meals) and earning income.

d. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Palestine. “Palestine” is the name known since the time of Rome to land that sits between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. In contemporary usage, the “Palestinian Territories” refer to two discontinuous regions, the West Bank and Gaza Strip that have been ruled by the Palestinian Authority since the Oslo Accords of 2003 and by the Hamas or the Islamic Resistance Movement, since their surprise victory in 2006 elections. The West Bank and Gaza Strip are home to some four million

⁷ To counteract negative impressions fostered by potential enemies of the Path, different actors have interceded on the Initiative’s behalf to varying degrees of success including the Brazilians and members of the other Abraham Path country teams.

people, many of whom consider themselves to have been displaced with the creation of Israel.

In this context, gaining trust has been at the forefront of opening the Abraham Path in Palestine. Although those working on Abraham Path Initiatives in the region must always choose how to sequence their activities due to the sensitivities of other countries pertaining to, for example, the role of Israel, these concerns are especially paramount in Palestine. Stephanie Saldana, now a Senior Advisor in Palestine, described the difficult choices she faced, when she was in-country coordinator, in trying to mobilize Path development in a way that is true to the work at hand:

“There were issues when we had the first study tour [in 2006]. There was a meeting in Bethlehem, with interfaith groups and very political leaders who were members of Hamas and Fatah. It was very difficult, very tense, and I was very confused... I didn't think there was anyone in the room could help us to build a path. I thought there was disconnect from the real nuts and bolts of doing the job. So I decided to scrap everyone who was in the room and start from scratch. Since I didn't know anything about building a path of any kind, I went out and looked for people who did. We put together a group of partners involved with wildlife, tourism and cultural history. At the end of seven or eight months, we had the Palestinian team.”

Saldana believed that the project's success depended on cultivating the leadership of Palestinian partners. Rather than have the outsider or foreigner (in this case, Saldana herself) function as director, she considered herself only the project's coordinator, obliging all decisions would need to be made by the Palestinians themselves. This required the partners to grapple with the tensions existing among them. Saldana described:

“For example, partners told me that people don't want to share work because they are very territorial, because they are worried about their own area of expertise will be taken away. There were also tensions about including partners from different areas because the different clans from different villages wanted to have control and were reluctant to give up control to people from other cities. There were also political tensions with Fatah who wanted to include the ministry of tourism and those who didn't want to work with the ministry of tourism. The political context became manifest in the day-to-day workings of the team. The team became a microcosm of the conflict itself.”

Saldana noted that her husband, Frederic Masson, now the in-country coordinator for Palestine, is especially gifted at working with Palestinian colleagues:

“He gives all the partners the feeling of really being recognized. Unconsciously, outsiders tend to favor the partners who most resemble us, the ones who speak English very well, who can write good English reports, who work at English-speaking universities. In community outreach, the people who are likely to be effective will be the exact opposites, the people who

don't speak English very well, who seem normal, pedestrian because that will be very easily received and respected and understood by the local population. He had a real gift for finding local people and going to them constantly with decisions to make sure they fit in the culture.”

Saldana believes that Masson's flexibility is due to the fact that he was *not* trained as an academic and so is less risk averse. Because he sees failing as inevitable part of learning, he is willing to take risks others shun. As an example, Saldana remembered that when mapping the Path in Palestine, she gravitated to experts who advised that the route go through cities, rather than directly from the north to the south along Abraham's original trajectory, because the mapping process it would be too difficult. Masson reached out to his Palestinian colleagues, sought their counsel and followed their advice. Led by his Palestinian colleagues, he went to the villages, met with the important people there and then asked, “How do we get to the next village?” The result is a 50-kilometer path offering access to communities along the way. (Their village-level approach was described in more detail above.)

Susan Collin Marks sees this same ingenuity and creative facility distributed throughout the Abraham Path. She observes that those associated with the Path on the ground are extremely sensitive. Joshua Weiss thinks that time and readiness play a crucial role in this project and that is for the teams in each place to decide the point at which a particular action is warranted. In other words, the situation has to ripen naturally. For that to happen, those on the ground, not outsiders, need to decide that they are ready. Weiss believes that before people whose identities have been challenged may be brought together, it is necessary for them to shore up their own identities so that they are strong enough to face the other, rather than retreat to default settings based on history and stereotype. The Abraham Path in-country teams are willing to underwrite the time necessary for this to happen and to let a natural approach, devoid of pressure, emerge in a functional manner.

In Palestine, Stephanie Saldana has wrestled with such challenges. She has recognized that the leadership challenge for her lay in acknowledging hard truths that sometimes seemed at odds with the original conception of the Path:

“There was a very early moment when well-intentioned friends of the Path Initiative came to Israel, and they were meeting with Israelis, and they told me -- ‘Oh, you should meet this woman. She's very interesting. She's worked with Palestinians in the past and she could help the project progress.’ I basically had to say, ‘I have friends who are Israeli in my private life, but that has nothing to do with the Abraham Path. I will not bring Israelis into the discussion of the Abraham Path. If the Palestinians ever want to meet with Israelis, than they can bring that up themselves and I'm happy to coordinate that, but I will not have a situation in which we have Israelis waiting on the wayside in case the Palestinians are ready.’ I thought there was a tension in which Palestinians were being made to feel that they were working on a tourism project but the international organization was still keeping the feeling that they were working on a peace initiative. And I had to draw a line very

clearly which is that there will not be a double standard. We're working on tourism initiative, and if the Palestinians should ever want to develop this into a peace initiative, then I'm happy to help them with that."

Tourism in Palestine is beginning to gather greater momentum after a downturn during the 2007 war between Israel and Hezbollah. In July 2008, Palestine hosted the first international youth walk in the newly opened 50km section of the Path through the heart of the West Bank. Masson and his colleagues have forged relationships with key influential partners, including those from the Ministry of Tourism. The Palestinian team has sponsored local walks for people of all ages and had over 100 people on the path in the first half of 2009.

e. Negotiating and Developing the Path in Israel. With a number of sites related to Abraham, including the well in Be'er Sheva, the ancient area known as Garar, and the area around Dan, Israel has much to honor when it comes to Abraham, the person known as the father of the Jewish people. This, coupled with the prominent and central story of Abraham in the Torah as well as other local traditions in Israel, including the Bedouin--who also hold the tradition that Abraham is their forefather--makes the path a potentially powerful concept in this country.

With unofficial support from the Ministry of Tourism, the Municipality in Be'er Sheva, and Ben Gurion University, the path in Israel is slowly coming to life. And like the other places, the path in Israel has seen its share of challenges. The primary issue confronting the Path comes from the geopolitical context: how quickly and prominently can the Path in Israel develop while also keeping all the other countries on board, given the broader atmosphere of distrust and strained relationships.

The Israeli Path's slower pace of development is also partly due to a lack of resources, actions on the part of the Director and his team, and disputes over how best to root the project in a manner that reflects and honors the diverse nature of the communities in Israel--Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bedouins, and Arabs--in their relationship to Abraham/Ibrahim.

Early on in the project, during the study tour, the Initiative received the advice from a former diplomat to begin work away from the Green Line. The strategic thinking behind this approach was to build something tangible and concrete that the Initiative could have as proof of concept before moving to the more sensitive areas of the region. So, logically, the Initiative began in the Negev due to the importance of Abraham in Be'er Sheva --where he is believed to have settled and dug a well--and its proximity to Hebron where he was laid to rest.

In early 2007, the Initiative engaged renowned Israeli archeologist and guide Avner Goren to lead the effort. Goren was made famous by his work with Bruce Feiler in the PBS special "Walking the Bible," which was based on Feiler's bestselling book of the same name, and for which he also heavily depended on Goren's encyclopedic knowledge in Israel and

throughout the region. Goren's resonance with the project and his understanding of the strategy being used has been invaluable to the overall success of the project.

Since that time, Goren and a colleague have delineated a 60 km trail from Be'er Sheva to the city of Arad. The path winds through the city of Be'er Sheva, passes the famous archeological site of Tel Sheva and Bedouin and Falahin (Arab farmers) villages. The first full Israeli walk is planned for the fall of 2009.

5. Some Strategic Themes and Questions

As members of the Executive Committee of the API Board approached their August meeting, they began to think seriously about some strategic themes and questions, including:

- *The evolution of the enterprise over time?* With the Abraham Path Initiative (API) serving as the *means* to enable the realization of the Abraham Path (AP) itself, at least two broad shifts were contemplated: 1) a shift of the center of gravity and emphasis from the API in North America to AP-linked activities in the Middle East, and 2) a possible shift—over time—from largely autonomous in-country organizations developing “their” Paths to a somewhat more regionally integrated entity. Were these the right shifts, and, if so, how best could they be managed?
- *The right organization and governance?* There are at least three emerging organizational entities: the international “center,” the in-country operational entities, and the supporting organizations in countries like Brazil and the UK (“Friends of the Abraham Path”). What should be the right structure and governance among these entities? With an eye toward its likely evolution, should the API be thought of as the headquarters with country branches? As a holding company with national subsidiaries? As a franchisor whose franchisees have more or less autonomy? As a loosely coupled collection of strategic partner entities in North America and the Middle East? In the right organizational structure, what functions are best centralized? Devolved? Where should decision rights for various classes of choices best be lodged?
- *Parallel v. sequential emphasis?* With a sharp retrenchment in funding and varying progress in different countries, were the organization's resources spread too thinly over too many in-country organizations? While the long-term goal of a comprehensive Path throughout the region was unshakeable, should scarce resources be more focused on one country such as Palestine, Jordan, or Syria? Were actual results on the ground—a successful “demonstration” project—the most potent “selling” tool for to get the rest of the Path up and running?
- *Scope and nature of API actions to create the AP?* So far, the Initiative has mainly acted to enable the creation of the Path in countries of the region, but has not sought to become, for example, a tour owner/operator. Are there clear lines between activities the API will itself undertake and those it will leave to others, but perhaps catalyze? Where and on what terms should it partner with other entities?

- “Open source” v. hierarchy to create the AP? With sharply limited resources when measured against the challenge of creating the Path, how could the Initiative stimulate and channel the keen interest of the many people in and out of the region who may wish to contribute to the Path’s development in different ways (e.g., from cash contribution, to working physically on a segment, to researching a site)? How could eager volunteers contribute without over-burdening the already stretched international and in-country staffs? To what extent should an “open source” model—like Wikipedia, Burning Man, or software projects such as Mozilla (Firefox)—be pursued in which a center heavily stimulates and coordinate efforts of others?
- *The Path as platform?* As now contemplated, the Path itself is intended to enable travel and economic development. Is it best designed for these kinds of specific purposes or more as a *platform* for as-yet-unrealized activities by groups not yet envisioned? If so, how?
- *Funding?* So far, the API has relied heavily on large donors, with some smaller donors and online initiatives. It is currently focused on gaining foundation support. Is this the right financial model, especially given the sharp economic downturn? Should the API depend more on revenues from walkers, licensing fees, royalties from potential strategic partners, or something else? How can potential funds from governments and multilateral institutions be tapped, especially for supporting cultural tourism and economic development?
- “Air” v. “ground” activities? More than twenty proposals for documentaries have been received by the API. The keen appetite of reporters, producers, documentary film-makers, and writers to produce programs on the Initiative and the Path could lead to a potentially disconnect: major media coverage that stimulates worldwide demand to walk the Path, while in-country organizations struggle to make the fledgling Path an on-the-ground reality. How can this tension best be managed?
- *Risk management?* What are the biggest risks to the successful development of the AP and how can they best be managed? A terrorist incident? Damaging rumors about the nature or “secret” purposes of the enterprise? Persistent efforts to frame the enterprise in terms that have not resonated with, or have even offended, the interests of local sponsors and supporters (e.g., peace, interfaith dialog) versus the framing that has mainly attracted local support (e.g., economic development, tourism, youth)? Insensitive actions by travelers (e.g., efforts to convert others)? Having the name (“Abraham Path”) or other intellectual property hijacked or stolen for purposes inconsistent with the vision?
- *The Name?* Should the enterprise continue to be known as “The Abraham Path Initiative” and the route as “The Abraham Path?” Is “the” a bit exclusionary? Should it be more possessive, like “Abraham’s Path?” Inclusive of Sarah and Hagar? Ought the “Initiative” suggest more of a network, like “Friends of Abraham’s Path—Brazil” or “Friends of Abraham’s Path—International”? Or something else?

As Executive Committee members pondered these and other strategic questions, Harvard Conference participants would soon try to frame the most interesting topics

for research as well as opportunities for faculty and student involvement afforded by the uncovering and revitalization of the Path.

Exhibit 1: API's Board, Staff, In-Country Teams, and Major Donors

Board of Directors

- **William L. Ury**, Chair and Co-Founder, Co-Founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project, USA
- **Susan Collin Marks**, Vice Chair, Senior Vice President, Search for Common Ground, South Africa
- Elias Amidon, Pir of the Sufi Way International, USA
- **Paul Gray**, Co-Director, Richard Gray Gallery, USA
- Lord Leslie Griffiths, Baron Griffiths of Burry Port, United Kingdom
- René Guitton, Editor, Author, and Publisher, France
- Amir Mahallati, Former UN Ambassador, Harvard Fellow, Iran
- Jamil Mahuad, Fellow Harvard Negotiation Project and Harvard Kennedy School
- **Raed Saadeh**, Vice-President and former President of the Palestinian Hotel Association and CEO of Jerusalem Hotel, Palestine
- Salim Schahin, Owner, Grupo Schahin and President Arab Chamber of Commerce, Brazil
- **James K. Sebenius**, Professor at Harvard Business School, Director Harvard Negotiation Project, USA
- Deena Shakir, Harvard University valedictorian 2008, Georgetown Graduate student, Iraq/USA

Note: **bold type** denotes member of the Executive Committee

Management Team:

Managing Director/Acting Executive Director – Joshua Weiss
Director of Communications – Daniel Adamson
Director of Strategic Development and Planning – Branwen Cale

International Teams

Senior Advisor – Tyler Norris
Grant Writer – Cate Malek
Communications Consultant – Anisa Mehdi
Administrative Assistant – Anisa Black Mallon
Board Development & Executive Administrator to William Ury – Essrea Cherin
Organizational Consultant – KJ McCorry
AP Brazil – Martha Leonardis and Fernando Latorre
AP United Kingdom – Dr. Max Farar

ABRAHAM PATH - FIELD TEAMS

Turkey

- Country Manager – Ms. Arzu Yilmaz

- Local Distinguished Representative– Dr. Mehmet Oymak
- Local Coordinator – Lami Huyurli

Syria (Friends of the Syrian Cultural Walking Trail)

- Senior Advisor – Dr. David Lesch
- Consultant – Osama Al Nouri
- SCWT Project Executive: His Excellency Dr. Saadalla Agha Al Kalaa, Syrian Minister of Tourism
- SCWT Project “Focal Point” Mr. Bassam Barsik, Ministry of Tourism

Jordan

- Country Director – Ramez Habash
- National Field Coordinator – Mahmoud Al Twaissi
- Women’s Outreach Coordinator – Suhair Ismail
- Distinguished Advisor: Senator Akel Biltaji

Palestine

- International Field Coordinator – Frederic Masson
- Local Field Coordinator – Hijazi Eid
- Distinguished Advisor: Raed Saadeh
- Women’s Outreach Coordinator: Areej Jafari

Israel

- National Director – Avner Goren
- Local Coordinator – Rami Haruvi
- Distinguished Advisor: Ambassador Avi Shoket

Egypt

- Consultant – Heba Aziz

Saudi Arabia

- Consultant - Anisa Mehdi

Lebanon (Lebanon Mountain Trail)

- Liaison: Karim El-Jisr, Ecodit Liban

Major Financial Donors:

Financial contributions at many levels have come from over donors in 18 countries; major contributors who have given in excess of \$50,000 include:

- Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation (Saudi Arabia)
- The Feffer Family (Brazil)
- German Development Fund (“DED”, Germany)
- The Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard University (US)

- Mr. David Rockefeller (US)
- The Rockefeller Brothers Fund (US)
- Mr. Salim Schahin (Brazil)
- Alan B. Slifka Foundation (US)
- The Sir Halley Stewart Trust (UK)
- William and Lizanne Ury (US)
- Mr. John Whitehead (US)

In kind contributions have come from the public, private and not for profit sectors in each nation of the path.

Exhibit 2: Key Aspects of API's Organizational Evolution

Early on, the Abraham Path Initiative also partnered with the Association of Global New Thought, an organization devoted to spiritually minded activism. Barbara Fields, the Executive Director of that organization was a member of the early study group. Other members included Elias Amidon and Rabia Roberts, Bruce Allyn (Ury's old Harvard colleague from work in the Soviet Union), Emran Akhtar (a friend of Ury's from Pakistan), Jim Kenney who ran an interfaith network in Chicago, Brother Wayne Teasdale, a long-time practitioner of interfaith dialogue from De Paul University, and researchers based at Harvard.

At the start, the Abraham Path Initiative functioned as a grass-root entity, operating more-or-less by consensus. William Ury's leadership, however, is mentioned frequently as a key factor in the ethic of responsiveness that is described as being "baked into" the organization. Ury's colleagues universally acknowledge the important role he has in holding the vision for the organization and in mobilizing the talents of others. Arzu Yilmaz, in-country coordinator for Turkey, notes that Ury's capacity for deep listening is at the heart of his ability to be effective. Elias Amidon notes that Ury's talent includes acknowledging everyone who is at the table, and ensuring that they are indeed heard.

Ury is deeply intuitive and improvisational in his approach to his work. He is willing to change in mind. With that flexibility, course corrections are frequent. Colleagues have sometimes had the experiences of implementing one of Ury's ideas only to have to backtrack, when they realize he had only been musing or brainstorming and hadn't really settled on a particular trajectory. In general, there is little criticism of Ury. People know what he does for the project and they consider him to be an extraordinary figure. His optimism is infectious. Colleagues describe their connection to him as coming from the heart.

Like all organizations scaling up, the Abraham Path Initiative had its share of growing pains. One very challenging factor was the virtual working structure of the project – with people spread literally around the globe. As a result, it was not uncommon for staff members to exchange upwards of 60 emails a day partly because the desire to retain a model of decision-making by consensus required everyone to be kept in the loop. Staff struggled to accommodate to growth but also recognized this problem came with the nature and scope of what they were doing. As Weiss explained:

“Doing this work is messy. These kinds of projects are messy. People struggle with that. They would like it to be more orderly. But we often have to be reactive because the circumstances around us are changing constantly and we have little control over a lot of it. It’s messy on the inside because it is messy on the outside. We’re constantly trying to bring a bit more order to the chaos we are managing. But the messiness mirrors what we are doing.”

Ury’s Executive Administrator, Essrea Cherin values Ury’s patience and the way in which he “keeps the doors of the tent open,” allowing people whose talent can’t be utilized by the organization to realize this themselves, and “fall away naturally.” Other of Ury’s colleagues, no less appreciative of his special talent with people, note that this same tendency complicates organizational efficiency: “Sometimes we have just needed to let people go. Sometimes Bill is being magnanimous and courteous and he leaves the door open. But when Bill Ury says, ‘in the future, there will be another role for you,’ people think there’s a real opportunity, when there is really not.” Over time this has improved and people who have moved away still see themselves as friends of the Path.

In June of 2006, the Abraham Path Initiative was ready to make changes to its organizational structure. Martha Gilliland was brought into the organization to do fund-raising. Weiss and Gilliland were to share the role of managing the organization so that Ury’s time could be available for strategic direction. Gilliland had been a university president and was well versed in development and comfortable with fundraising. Both Weiss and Ury hoped that Gilliland might be able to manage fundraising independently. Gilliland, for her part, tried to educate the Abraham Path Initiative about how fund-raising typically works, including how indispensable Ury would be to the process and the long-time frame required to cultivate high wealth individuals as donors. She admired her new colleagues although was surprised that the organizational infrastructure was not yet in place to pursue a capital drive of any real magnitude. Ury’s colleagues were aware that fund raising of this type held little personal appeal for Ury, although he recognized its importance. It was Gilliland who first approached Ury with the recommendation that the Abraham Path hire a single Executive Director. To ensure that the organization understood her motives, Gilliland told Ury she would not accept the position of Executive Director herself.

During the summer of 2006, as the organization prepared to grow, Weiss initiated the steps for the Abraham Path Initiative to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. Securing the tax exemptions that come with nonprofit status would be a crucial component for fund-raising. Part of the logic for seeking this status was to protect the relationship with Harvard so that the activities not traditionally associated with a university could be separated out and handled by the NGO. That left the Global Negotiation Project to focus on more academically appropriate work related to the Initiative such as student exchanges, research, and conferences. In July 2007, the Abraham Path Initiative became a 501c3 entity in Massachusetts and organized as an international non-governmental organization whose purpose is to support the development of the Abraham Path. This shift in the organization’s status was an important turning point. Although it remained affiliated with Harvard’s Program on Negotiation, the Abraham Path Initiative would now develop its own footprint. In the span of two years, the Abraham Path Initiative had grown in size and scope, from a

budget \$400,000 to approximately one million dollars. Much of the early fund-raising had been done by Ury and came from different sources including individuals and some foundations that had already been familiar with Ury's work. The Abraham Path Initiative now had developed small offices in Turkey, Palestine, Jordan and Israel and hired in-country coordinators who were in dialogue with officials and local partners about opening up path segments in these countries.

In May 2007, Tyler Norris was appointed to be the organization's new Executive Director. He brought with him an extensive resume in social entrepreneurship and building organizations, and a portfolio of considerable international experience, including helping to initiate a national park system in Tajikistan. Ury agreed to become the Chairman of a four person Board.

During the first months of Norris' tenure, he traveled extensively to the Middle East and succeeded in building bridges between field operations and the international organization. Some in the Abraham Path Initiative admired Norris for his strong start. Others were concerned about the pace of growth, expressing reservations about the organization's capacity to meet the promises Norris was making. Norris and Ury continued to work out the boundaries of their professional roles, with Ury exploring what kind of presence he wished to have as the Board's chairman.

The Abraham Path Initiative looked to be at the start of a significant growth trajectory when the global economic downturn upset plans. The organization now faced acute financial challenges and was forced to reconfigure itself in light of the changed funding environment. Weiss reports that the Abraham Path Initiative's operating budget contracted by nearly \$400,000. In December of 2008, by mutual agreement, Norris transitioned to the voluntary role of Senior Advisor.

Exhibit 3: Social Venture Opportunity Appeal

December 5, 2008

Challenge & Opportunity — Establishing Worldwide Understanding & Trust

Humanity faces no greater challenge than the widening divide between the West and the Muslim world. Fear, mistrust and violence continue to limit opportunities for shared understanding, respect and prosperity. The solution to deep mistrust of the "other," based on lack of knowledge and a common experience, is direct human connection.

From global leaders to local townsfolk there is a worldwide call to heal division, promote understanding and create new opportunities for working together. With the election of a new President in the United States, Americans have demonstrated their desire to change the way the U.S. relates to the rest of the world. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has launched an inspiring interfaith initiative through the United Nations, which he hopes will contribute to healing divisions and promoting stability. These movements are restoring connection and renewing conversation, but there is still much work to be done to turn these opportunities into real progress.

The Abraham Path Initiative stands uniquely positioned to address this global challenge in a positive, uniting and compelling way. The Abraham Path changes the conditions of the zero-sum game that has been played out through generations of humiliation, where one party's gain is perceived as the other's loss, and their loss as the other's gain. By leveraging positive assets already present globally and in the Middle East, the Abraham Path is a symbolic game-changing project that offers a new framework for building trust and prosperity between

peoples.

Vision — A Connected Humanity & Peaceful, Prosperous Middle East

The Abraham Path Initiative envisions an integrated, thriving, prosperous and peaceful Middle East, where tourism is the driving engine for human connection, inspiring and sustaining widespread mutual respect and understanding. The Abraham Path Initiative imagines a world connected through the values of Abraham, where people walk side by side and step by step toward a shared future, experiencing together justice, faith, respect, friendship, and hospitality.

Abraham's journey into the unknown and his encounters with others inspired a lasting tradition of sacred hospitality in the Middle East which continues to this day. Abraham's journey reveals the essence of human connection and reminds us that we are all one human family.

Mission & Method — Opening the Abraham Path

The mission of the Abraham Path Initiative is to connect humanity by opening a cultural route of tourism across 10 countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and, for Muslims, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

The Abraham Path leverages three existing assets that are unique to the region, which connect the human family through **a common story—Abraham, a common meeting place – the Path, and a common experience – walking side by side.** Its great power lies in making intangible connections tangible. These assets are:

1. *Common Story:* The **Abraham Path reawakens Abraham's inspirational journey throughout the world,**

inspiring both new and existing travelers to re-trace Abraham's footsteps – crossing borders, making friends, and discovering the shared values of justice, faith, respect, friendship and hospitality.

2. *Common Meeting Place:* The **Abraham Path is an outstanding cultural itinerary that connects some of the most revered world heritage sites and ancient holy places, and will join over 5,000 kilometers of**

scenic walking trails through the heart of the Middle East. Beautiful rural landscapes and villages inspire

tourists to “get off the bus” and directly meet the people of the region in an experience of hospitality and friendship. With 38 million tourists already coming to the region each year, the initiative is well positioned to channel

this existing interest towards a more connected cultural experience.

3. *Common Experience:* The **Abraham Path utilizes the region's surge in tourism to facilitate the travel of**

people along the path. Tourism growth rates in the Middle East are currently the highest in the world, averag-

ing 7 percent a year, with Jordan and Syria growing at 15 percent. In 2006 the UNWTO reported the Middle

East tourism industry brought in \$148 billion dollars to the region.

Obstacles & Strategic Actions — Recognize, Demonstrate & Engage

The Abraham Path Initiative overcomes three obstacles to its creation. First, many people *don't know* the Abraham Path exists. Second, many people *don't believe* the Abraham Path is possible or that it is safe. Third, some people *don't trust* the opportunity due to the ongoing cycles of fear and suspicion. The Abraham Path employs three corresponding strategic actions that overcome these obstacles and leverage the existing positive assets. These actions establish the powerful *story, place* and *experience* of the Abraham Path across the world.

- **Recognize and promote global awareness of the Abraham Path and activate worldwide support through launch events,** captured by the global media in film, print, television and web-based technology.

- **Demonstrate the efficacy and powerful potential of the Abraham Path as a worldwide**

destination and regional platform for economic and social development. The initiative will open pilot segments, hold high profile walks and events, collaborate with NGOs to run community-based projects and youth entrepreneurial programs, and partner with tour agencies, tour operators, and universities to facilitate the flow of travelers down the path.

- **Engage in diplomacy and facilitate partnerships**, through international support teams, national partner-ships, and community-based planning processes, which ensure the long-term sustainability and ownership of the path.

Benefits — Sustainable Economic & Social Development

The people living along the path not only have the opportunity to share their culture and traditions with visitors, but they receive direct economic benefit. Naima, a partner in the Palestinian village of Kufer Malek, runs an informal co-op in her community that produces beautiful traditional crafts. But with no access to a market, she is unable to sell any of her work, which lay accumulating dust in a garage. The Abraham Path brings tourists directly to her village, giving her a chance to make a living off of her art.

For visitors, the opportunity to experience the unique hospitality of the Middle Eastern people can be a transforming experience. Kathy Hearn, a recent traveler on the Abraham Path in Syria writes, “I experienced how important it is for Americans to travel – particularly to the Middle East. The impressions that our media give us about this region are one-sided and incomplete. They never capture the hospitality and generosity that characterize the huge majority of people here.” The Abraham Path benefits organizations as well as individuals. Tour operators partner with the initiative because they receive an attractive product that increases their customer base. The path also leverages the work of other social service and development NGOs. The Abraham Path enables them to serve communities in a more effective way, ensuring the long-term sustainability of their work.

Results & Successes — 100 Million People Reached & 3 Segments Opened

The Abraham Path Initiative has made rapid, concrete progress over the past two years. The initiative has received key endorsements from leaders both in the Middle East and the international community, including various Ministries of Tourism and Culture, the United Nations and Nobel Peace Prize winners. In the last 12 months, the initiative has opened three pilot segments totaling 200 kilometers, launched highly successful international youth exchanges in Jordan and Palestine, and hosted an international tourism conference in Turkey. Positive media attention to the path has been remarkable, reaching more than 100 million people in 20 countries around the globe.

Organization & Partners — World Class Institutions

The Abraham Path Initiative was founded at Harvard University by Dr. William Ury who is one of the world’s leading experts in conflict resolution. API’s partners include the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Harvard Negotiation Project, Engineers Without Borders International, World Heritage Alliance, Outward Bound International, Kellogg Fellows Leadership Alliance, Bethlehem University, and Sabanci University, among many others throughout the Middle East. The Abraham Path Initiative engages with national Ministries of Tourism, Culture and Foreign Affairs in all the countries the path travels through.

Impact — Sustaining Peace, Prosperity & Justice

The Abraham Path’s ability to connect humanity on a global scale is incomparable. The Abraham Path will activate a global population that is both connected through and transformed by the Abrahamic values and principles of justice, faith, respect, friendship and hospitality. As a tangible connector of the human family, the Abraham Path will be a place of shared futures and a worldwide symbol for a more just, prosperous and peaceful world. As millions of travelers visit the Abraham Path physically and virtually, connections will be made, friendships formed, antiquities preserved and businesses created.

