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**Title: Dr. Bahā' Bakrī Reviews the ZIVIC Peacemaking Paper**

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Dr. Bahā' Bakrī, president of Sinai University, has been a friend of Arab West Report for some time, commenting earlier on the Abu Fana report following the efforts of Cornelis Hulsman to encourage peace, understanding, and attention to root issues in the case of the Bedouin attack on the Christian monastery. Dr. Bakrī's review of this paper encouraged in many ways a strong feature of the current ZIVIC Peacemaking project, namely, the involvement of the NGO community in preventing the escalation of conflict and the restoration of social peace. We have asked Dr. Bakrī to provide a review of this paper as well, which he gladly agreed to do, first in a brief phone interview and then in an extended discussion.

On the phone Dr. Bakrī focused his remarks on the interreligious component of the paper, namely, the tension which exists between Muslims and Christians and the occasional violence which breaks out between them. In noticing the religious climate in Egypt, he found the situation even more appalling in Iraq, and described the entire region as growing in tension between the two religious groups. He urged that the paper not restrict itself to the situation in Egypt, but analyze why such tension appears to be a growing trend. On the one hand, religion itself is becoming more fundamentalist throughout the world, creating a superficial understanding and losing its spiritual vitality. On the other hand, fundamentalist religion is also highly materialistic, meshing with the dominant philosophy of Western nations, and increasing in the Arab world. He stated in particular that United States and European policy is anti-Islamic, stemming from this materialistic world order which opposes the religious spirit. This produces a

backlash in the Middle East, and Christians, seen sometimes as allies of the West, bear the brunt of Islamic reaction.

Dr. Bakrī wished also that more attention be paid to the historical cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Since the revolutionary days when Copts joined with Muslims to oppose British colonialism the two communities have been integrated. What has happened to disturb these good relations? Dr. Bakrī believed the culprit to be government manipulation of the religious communities in the previous decades, in an effort to either co-opt or decrease their power. Muslims were played off against Christians and vice versa, all in an effort for the state to strengthen its authority. In the center of these manipulations were the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist movements, which Dr. Bakrī rejects completely as faithful interpretations of Islam. The results of these government policies still reverberate today in having produced a society divided by religious lines. This, he believes, is contrary to the message of all religion.

Upon Dr. Bakrī's return from international travel we had opportunity to sit together to discuss the paper. Conversation began again with international issues, but I asked him to direct his thoughts to the local situation. Knowing of his involvement in a local conflict in the city of ʿArīsh, capital of the North Sinai governorate, near Gaza along the coastal road into Israel, I asked him how he solves conflict there.

Dr. Bakrī began by explaining the situation. There are four main groups involved in conflict, in addition to the government. The native “ʿArishis” are the original inhabitants of the land and have lived in general peace with the Bedouins—about forty local families whose larger tribal territory stretches unofficially through southern Israel and into Jordan. The second group are labeled

Egyptians, and are originally from the Nile Valley or Delta region, but have relocated to the area in search of land and opportunity. In addition to these there are Palestinians, but they are mostly represented through intermarriage. The main groups compete with each other for nominal leadership of the area, concerned mostly over the issue of 'dignity'. The government is also involved, seeking to stamp its authority on the region as is fitting a modern state, only it lacks the strength to do so in the face of tribal opposition.

Though the land of ʿArīsh is valuable, capable of supporting agriculture and fishing, the main business of the inhabitants is trade. The conflict, then, is not primarily over limited resources but honor, making this a moral issue. I was eager to hear Dr. Bakrī's solution; how can a moral solution be extended to the tribal sentiment of ʿArīsh?

His proposal was novel, though not an infusion of morality as I was expecting. Dr. Bakrī criticized the government for simply trying to assert its power rather than to develop the region. He called for a free investment zone in ʿArīsh, which would create job opportunities for up to three million people. He calculated that it costs in Cairo 200,000 LE investment to create one job; in ʿArīsh the threshold drops to 80,000 LE. In all of Sinai there are no more than 200,000 people altogether, for a density of 0.17 per km<sup>2</sup>. In the Nile region this proportion skyrockets to 2,200 people per km<sup>2</sup>. Developing the region is good policy not only for ʿArīsh, but also for all of Egypt.

I protested somewhat, for while I saw the overall benefit I did not see how this solved the problems of the groups of ʿArīsh. Such development would require the power of the state, yet he described this as one of the main problems. Furthermore, an infiltration of three million people will do nothing to solve the

'dignity' of the tribes; if anything it will only further degrade it as they become marginalized.

Dr. Bakrī stated this was exactly the solution. The problems of °Arīsh are nearly intractable; the best solution is to drown out these backwards and reactionary feuds through planned population increase corresponding to economic development. Not only will a better economy stabilize the original though now negligible families, but if they continue in their 16<sup>th</sup> Century lifestyle it will be of much less importance to the governance of the region as a whole. He then told of a local anecdote to illustrate both the problems of moral solutions and his attempts at modeling moral behavior.

One day following class at the university a scuffle broke out between an "Arishi" and an Egyptian. Local police became involved, separated the two, and tried to implement a moral solution. They had each student apologize to the other, hug, and express forgiveness. Though this ended the immediate incident it of course had no bearing on the internal state of the two students. Later that day the Egyptian found some of his friends and went back to the "Arishi" and made more trouble, which was then broken up by police. The next day the "Arishi" had taken more of his relatives, this time with weapons, and in attacking the Egyptian cut him on the face. After this conflagration was pacified Dr. Bakrī called a student meeting.

He assembled the entire student body of 1,000 and addressed them, stating that they were living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but that their parents were still living in the 16<sup>th</sup>. This was not a criticism, he asserted, just a stating of the facts. You as students must love and respect your parents, but you must also confess your differences, and not let yourself become a copy of them. Through being honest about your situation you can both honor your elders and help them to enter the

modern world. One student speaking sincerely accepted the message but illustrated the stranglehold of his value system when he asked how to do this. "Shall I hit my father?" he inquired. Dr. Bakrī insisted this could only take place through respectful dialogue.

Yet Dr. Bakrī himself was tested the following day when he convened a meeting between the fathers of the student body. To the general assembly he spoke, asking them what they desired for their children. Do you wish for him to be an engineer, or simply to perpetuate your old system? Response was mixed, but decidedly hostile in the third meeting with the fathers of the main culprits during the altercation, with regional politicians represented among them. As they discussed the issue they proposed the solution that the father of the Egyptian who was cut with the knife should go to the "Arishi" tribal head, kiss his hand, and apologize. They emphasized that among them the Egyptians should be treated as guests, but that these boys were not behaving respectfully among their hosts. Dr. Bakrī confessed he felt like throwing his shoes across the room. The Egyptian families, originally from the Nile Valley, have been living in ʿArīsh since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, yet the discourse is not of citizenship, but of hospitality. The tribal code emphasizes that the Egyptian, though ostensibly receiving the most harm from the situation, is ultimately guilty for not honoring his protectors. Oddly enough, the solution stood, and though the Egyptian father went to apologize, the "Arishi" refused even to receive him.

Dr. Bakrī then turned to administrative matters. He took the four parties most guilty in the altercation and expelled them from the university for one year, with associate parties receiving a three week suspension. Applying the punishment as a lesson for the student body, in equality for all guilty participants, and in love toward the perpetrators, he was hoping to elicit from them a statement of apology. As time went by and he realized there was no redemption in his

punishment, he revoked his decision and allowed the resumption of their attendance with the penalty being failure in the one class in which began the troubles in the first place. Though one of the four, an Egyptian, came back to university to accept his punishment and restore his place, the three others continued to stay away. Dr. Bakrī is considering now a new track, writing an official letter which will ban the students permanently from any university in Egypt. This is a severe threat, but he is fearful it also will have no impact on the students or their families, who are supporting them, if not driving them, in their stance.

Here the moral approach was witnessed, but witnessed to be failing. I did not yet wish to give up, though, asking how in the case of these recalcitrant students and families could a message of reconciliation be preached. The broad solution will eliminate the problem over time, but the particular issues themselves remain unaddressed. In short, there is no reconciliation.

Dr. Bakrī spoke that it was not fitting for him to go to these “Arishis” and convince them of the need for reconciliation and moral adjustment. He is the president of a university and represents not only himself but his post. Furthermore, it does no good to go to a person unconvinced of the need to reconcile. It is only when he senses this himself that he will come and receive wisdom. Dr. Bakrī’s heart was open, but change must initiate first in the perpetrator, or else the advocate wastes his time. If there is anyone at all who can go to convince of the need to reconcile, it is only one of his own group, an “Arishi” like himself. Perhaps then he can accept this word.

There is wisdom in this testimony, but I was not yet satisfied. Who can affect the heart of an “Arishi”, and how can this be done? Dr. Bakrī answered negatively, criticizing the mosque and church preachers who hold their listeners in the 16<sup>th</sup>

Century, focusing on the smallest part of religion, the things we must do in our relationship with God. These, like forms of prayer and foods to eat or not eat represent only 4% of Islam. 12% is composed of proscriptions of moral behavior, what to do or not do. The rest is instilling a vision about man and God and implications of interaction with his responsibilities, his relationships with others, with science, with his environment, with his world.

Fine, but how is this conveyed? In particular, how is it conveyed to an "Arishi"? Or in our project, to the inhabitants of Upper Egypt who maintain a culture so alien from our own? Making it practical I asked him what he does. Your conduct with your students is exemplary, but outside of this, where you are not bound by your post, what are you doing to speak to the heart of Egyptian society?

Dr. Bakrī told me of his involvement with students who are not within his sphere of responsibility. He meets with them, encourages them, and looks to inspire them to be leaders. At the same time he confesses that today's youth, even in Cairo, have little moral consciousness, so his efforts are directed to instill this within them. Tracking with me, however, he spoke of how it was necessary to achieve a raising of moral consciousness throughout Egypt, but this was beyond him, and us, and required another means.

Dr. Bakrī is limited by his responsibilities, and he feared for us that we would be limited by our nationalities. Going to the people is difficult, and the government fears this for it can build a grassroots civil revolution. Instead, the message of moral consciousness, as he would put it, and social reconciliation, in our parlance, must be carried by NGOs. These are the people already involved in the local area, in touch with individual people, working within a common culture. If these can be marshaled for reconciliation in an area our mutual goals might see actualization. He encouraged us to continue down the path we have

chosen in working with NGOs. He believed the first step we had taken in assembling an NGO workshop, in which he participated, was positive.

Yet he had two words for us, and then later one hard but vital question. First, he emphasized the difference between Western and Islamic approaches to reconciliation. In Western culture, he explained, if we have words between each other, and then these words lead to bad action and broken relationship, it is at this stage that Western reconciliation gets involved. Effort is expended to bring the parties back together, point to mistakes, admit faults, offer forgiveness, and then reconcile the relationship. This is good, he said, and our project attempts it. The problem is that even if the problem is resolved, and the relationship is restored, it is liable to fall apart again, even assuming the reconciliation was not superficial to begin with.

The Islamic concept, however, goes deeper. In the *Qur'ān* it states that God is pleased with "those who control their wrath and are forgiving toward mankind" [3:134 taken from *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān*, by M.M. Pickthall, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/003.htm>]. Western reconciliation techniques are applied after problems occur; our project is lacking inasmuch as it neglects this spiritual aspect of the work. The goal is not to achieve repair of relationships after conflict, but to give the individuals amidst conflict the ability to control their inner selves, so as to be able to forgive internally those who oppose them. As Jesus stated, he quoted, it is necessary to turn the other cheek. If this reality is lived among some, all tension and conflict will wither away.

In similar fashion he highlighted the second criticism. The subtitle of our report is: Pre- and Post-Conflict in the Egyptian Setting. Dr. Bakrī stated that with a focus on pre- and post- we miss the most important aspect – conflict transformation. This is the focus on his efforts in *ʿArīsh*; the conflict as it is will not be solved, but as

the local situation is developed the conflict will decrease in importance and eventually wither away.

I protested some, not wanting to strive in self-justification but eager for him to understand us correctly. Our project aims not for the solving of conflict but for the restoration of relationships. The problem in these conflict areas is that each group is pursuing its own interest neglecting that they are one community with success built upon all. This is not about negotiation of interests, though it is an aspect, it is about a change in orientation, a change in heart towards the other. It is not about simple acceptance, it is about embrace. Our message will embody neither his Islamic terminology nor a Biblical Christian one, though each may be spoken to particular adherents. Whatever his justified critique of Western conflict resolution, however, our project looks to go beyond it.

Furthermore, though neither the above nor the following received ample space in the report, our project does call for the transformation of conflict. Social reconciliation and mutual embrace are fine ideas to which conversion is possible. The process is much easier, however, if it also serves the diverse interests of a community. Our project recognizes that institution of a project to integrate the community will go a long way to alleviating social tensions of any nature.

Nevertheless, Dr. Bakrī still had one more critique. My appeal had established the sincerity of our goals, but also reminded him of a previous joint venture between our organization and his. Last year we hosted the Imam and the Pastor, a Nigerian duo one of which was a militia member purposed to kill Muslims, and the other an imam who actively prayed for the cursing of his enemies. In time, both repented, the militia member became a pastor, and now they travel together throughout Nigeria to put an end to the ongoing circles of violence. It is an inspiring program, and we hope to invite them back next year

to lead training in establishing an early warning system similar to Nigeria to identify signs that might point toward the escalation of tension into violent attack.

In light of new outbreaks of mass killings in Nigeria, however, Dr. Bakrī mentioned that they had failed. By no means is he critical of their efforts, but he sees in our project a potential for the same errors. Egypt has 220 cities, 4,600 villages, 18,000 *ʿizbas* [literally farms], and 240,000 *kafrs* [Editor: the last two are the smallest Egyptian administrative districts]. A village size is between 1,000 and 25,000 people; an *ʿizba* between 200 and 1,000. A *kafr*, however, is no more than a few families to a 100 or so people. Let us imagine that our project is wildly successful, establishing reconciliation in all six locations we have established in our proposed budget for 2010. Compared to the thousands and thousands of Egyptian communities, however, our great expenditure of effort is only a drop in the bucket. Our project will do little to change the overall trend of Egyptian and, recalling our earlier phone conversation, international religious relations.

Some projects focus on macro issues, such as government and international relations. Others focus on micro issues, such as community development and localized training. Our project, he criticized, has a focus on the middle, yet this is the place of least influence. Governments can change policy, and grassroots reform can change behavior; what broader good will come from the restoration of peaceful relations in six isolated *ʿizbas*? He mentioned Cornelis Hulsman's extraordinary and positive involvement in Abu Fana. Yet he posed the question: What good did it do?

The words struck close to home, engendering the protest that both micro and macro are good and necessary, but who else is going to the middle? Are these communities not valuable for their own sake? As time was elapsing and his

perspective is worthy I did not want to argue further but asked instead: All organizations have limited resources, where are ours best invested?

Dr. Bakrī returned to the idea of NGOs, but broadened it in light of another focus of our project: Media. Through media you can influence a whole society; it is right that you are working here. Yet through NGOs you can influence local individuals—not directly, but through the NGO personnel you infuse with your vision. In the electronic age it will be easier and easier to establish networks with NGOs throughout Egypt. By having primary focus on building their capacity for community development and organization we can reduce tensions throughout Egypt. By having secondary focus on media we can help arrest the negative trends which ferment these tensions. Our project does well in containing these aspects; Dr. Bakrī fears that not only will our desire to involve ourselves in local tensions backfire due to our status as foreigners, it is also a non-judicious investment of time and resources.

With his final evaluation and advice I thanked Dr. Bakrī and expressed appreciation for his time and consideration of us. I also asked, to whatever degree is appropriate, if I might travel with him one day to ʿArīsh to see more closely the conflict which exists and the atmosphere which sustains it. Our center has learned much about Egypt in the years we have been working, but I am still lacking in my experience, and every new opportunity to study further is beneficial. He expressed openness to the idea. In closing, our project will review the comments of Dr. Bakrī with a sense of gravity; as we have learned from experience, we do well to consider deeply the insight he has to offer.