

## **SYRIAZA: Tales from a Syrian Journey into Night: Personal stories, political truths**

*Syriaza* is a Syrian-to-Syrian storytelling, archiving, and dissemination project for peacebuilding, created by Ara Pacis Initiative and led by Syrian poets, defenders of human dignity and human rights, community leaders, and citizen journalists.

*Syriaza* is ...

- a collection of testimonials and narratives from all sides of the Syrian conflict, intended to support healing, preserve memory, document history, inform judicial processes, and promote peace.
- a body of stories which, through radio, social media, and satellite television transmission, community-based dissemination and artistic production, will challenge the fear and manipulation of religion and history, build bridges and human connection, and reverberate Syrian voices of suffering, courage, transformation, and hope beyond the realm of private confession and into broader spheres of public communication around the world.
- a collaborative, choral effort to retrieve trampled dignity and build on common humanity, in a quest for inter-communal peace and the moral reconstruction of the country.

### **Phase One: Capacity Building (completed)**

From the 18th of July to the 4th of August, 2015, with funds from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an intergenerational, interethnic, and interreligious group of 30 Syrians convened in Viterbo, Italy, for phase one of the *Syriaza* project: capacity building.

Capacity Building sessions focused on the following key areas:

1. Team building, trust building, and overcoming divisions
2. Psychic and emotional first aid, for victims and witnesses of extreme violence
3. Collection of healing testimonies for human rights advocacy, through the “Dignity Healing Testimony” approach\*
4. “Espere” (hope) methodology for forgiveness and reconciliation
5. Dignity leadership development
6. The power of personal stories, for community-building and community selfdetermination
7. Story collection: methods for writing, audio-recording, and visually representing true and fictionalized narratives and poems that reframe suffering in the direction of trauma recovery and peace building

(\* The “Dignity Healing Testimony” approach allows survivors of torture and other forms of violence to share their full life stories, not just their experiences of trauma, through a compassionate process that facilitates personal healing, the restoration of dignity, and the documentation of human rights violations.)

A group of international experts shared their experience and methodologies:

1. Dr. Donna Hicks, Political Psychologist, Associate at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, founder of the Dignity Model, founding member and Vice President of the Ara Pacis Initiative
2. Leymah Gbowee, Liberian peace advocate and Nobel Peace Laureate, 2011, President of the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, founding member of the Ara Pacis Initiative
3. Dr. Elizabeth Lira, Professor of Psychology and Ethics, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, member of the Latin American Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights and the National Commission on Political Prisoners and Torture, Santiago, Chile, Member of the Ara Pacis Council
4. Justice Silvana Arbia, former Chief of Prosecutions at the International Tribunal for Rwanda and former Registrar at the International Criminal Court
5. Maria Nicoletta Gaida, initiator of the Dignity Healing Testimony Model, president of the Ara Pacis Initiative
6. Leonel Narvaez, founder of the Schools for Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Colombia and recipient of the UNESCO peace education prize, founding member and Board Member of the Ara Pacis Initiative
7. Amy Hill, founder and director of the Silence Speaks storytelling and participatory media program and recipient of the 2014 U.S. "Art and Healing Award"

The two-week capacity building program also featured hearings with the human rights commissions of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Italian Senate, as well as a private meeting with the Hon. Laura Boldrini, President of the Italian Parliament.

A special visual arts and musical event was dedicated to Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit missionary kidnapped and disappeared in Syria almost four years ago.

### Results of the First Phase

**Training of activists:** at the end of the two week program, participants had experienced and learned basic elements of how to overcome divisions; transform rage, hatred, humiliation, and pain; work as a team; protect themselves from vicarious trauma; and collect, document, edit, produce, and disseminate stories for healing, juridical, advocacy, trust building, and peace building purposes. They learned to narrate stories in a constructive way so as to reverberate the voice of peaceful civil society abroad and sow seeds of hope and humanity inside the country and across the sub region, in the interest of reconciliation and peace. **Trainees are ready to put into practice the acquired skills and, with the assistance of mentors, begin to:**

- Initiate neighbourhood-based trainings on forgiveness and reconciliation, using the 10 module ESPERE methodology which helps participants transform their hatred and resentment and promote concrete actions that lead to forgiveness and reconciliation;
- Conduct "Dignity Healing Testimony" interviews documenting oral history, human rights violations and other impacts of conflict while fostering healing and a sense of justice;
- Meet with each interviewee to share and process with them their interview recording or transcript, for healing and advocacy purposes;
- Prepare the interview recordings/transcripts for archival purposes and for use by human rights defenders/lawyers, etc., by creating a shorter, 2-3 page summary of each interview; and

- Develop and carry out local plans for story- and arts-based community building activities, with a focus on processes for reconciliation and peace building.

**Parliamentary hearings:** The impact of the stories recounted by Syriaza participants to the Human Rights Committees of the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies, as well as in the course of a private meeting with the Hon. Laura Boldrini, President of the Italian Parliament, was such that it convinced the Hon. Boldrini to write letters of support for Syriaza to the Italian Foreign Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, and to the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini. President Boldrini also shared her impressions with minority Congress leader, Nancy Pelosi during her visit to the Italian Parliament accompanied by a congressional delegation. Ms. Pelosi asked to receive the English versions of the testimonies.

**Harvard University:** Donna Hicks, Syriaza faculty member, presented the project in the framework of a conference jointly organized at Harvard University by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, generating great interest in the innovative and interdisciplinary approach adopted by Syriaza in sharing stories of hope inside and outside Syria.

**Radio Rozana:** The project gained the interest of Syrian satellite radio, Radio Rozana, which agreed to host a weekly Syriaza corner, reverberating the peaceful voices of Syrians from different backgrounds.

**Open Democracy 50.50,** a site which publishes critical perspectives on social justice, gender and pluralism, read in 164 countries by 451,000 people, an editorial partner to the Nobel Women's Initiative, asked to publish Syriaza stories and poems.

**Abwab,** a newspaper published in Germany, by Syrian refugees for Syrian refugees, stems from the Syriaza experience.

**A Festival of Conscience,** produced by Theater Three Collaborative and Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City, has asked for Syriaza stories to be read by actors in the course of the June 2016 edition of the Festival, dedicated to the issue of refugees.