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Reflections

Traveler There is No Path, the Path is Made by Negotiating: The Story of the Abraham Path, a Decade and a Half of Negotiations, and Lessons Learned

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Introduction: The Idea

*Caminante, no hay camino
se hace camino al andar.*

Traveler there is no path
The path is made by walking.
Antonio Machado

The words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, above, aptly express the challenges involved in establishing the Abraham Path. Although the Path was made by walking, negotiation played a central role in dusting off the legendary footsteps of one of the best-known figures in human history. This is the story of these negotiations.

The idea of developing the Abraham Path began in 2003 with a dinner in the mountains of Colorado among negotiation professionals and friends who had just returned from a long trip to Syria and Gaza. The project was conceived with the purpose of building mutual understanding between people in the Western part of the world and those in the Middle East.¹ The gulf between these two worlds had been widening for years, with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq creating more disconnection and misunderstanding. The Path was an effort to bring people together across cultures and societies, a project that we, the authors, helped initiate and shepherd for many years. The initiative would seek to achieve this goal by providing an opportunity for people to travel to the region and walk an ancient path, staying with people in the region and engaging in bridge-building interactions. Through these interactions, people would get to know each other on a personal level, thereby breaking down stereotypes of the other. Those travelers would then go home, share their experiences, and begin to break down stereotypes more widely. The activities were quite simple and humble—walking, sharing stories, showing respect and learning from one another, and breaking bread together. What unfolded for the organizers, however, was nothing short of an epic adventure filled with seemingly endless twists and turns, and a vast array of negotiations.

As the initial organizers, we advanced the project through the Global Negotiation Initiative at the Harvard Negotiation Project and then through the Abraham Path Initiative (API), a nonprofit entity that we established in 2007 to do the work on the ground.² As we sought to implement the idea, we were confronted with a critical initial question: where, and how, to begin such an effort. Certainly, creating a long-distance walking/hiking route like the Appalachian Trail was not new. However, doing so through perhaps the most tumultuous and conflict-torn regions of the world posed all kinds of unique challenges and conundrums. There was no blueprint to follow

Why Abraham/Ibrahim?

Abraham/Ibrahim, the legendary ancestral figure of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is revered by hundreds of millions of people. His legendary journey from ancient Mesopotamia to Canaan, Egypt, and Arabia can be considered, in anthropological terms, a founding origin myth for the peoples of the Middle East and West. While there are dozens of different stories about him, one unifying theme is that he was known for his hospitality, his kindness, and his generosity toward strangers. Legend says he kept his tent open in all four directions to welcome people in need. His story and that of his family provided a symbolic anchor for the basic activities we hoped would help connect people: walking, stories, and hospitality. Because Abraham/Ibrahim is a deeply held emotional fulcrum for many in a deeply divided region, invoking his story can become charged with conflict as well as commonality.

for such a significant and innovative undertaking.³ Amidst all the unknowns, we suspected that negotiation, both formal and informal, would play a fundamental role in dusting off the mythological footprints of Abraham, as he was remembered in the region. Little did we know how much this would be true.

Several strategic questions needed answers before anything could happen on the ground: How could a vibrant cultural walking route be created? Who would accomplish this delicate work through dozens, if not hundreds, of villages, towns, and cities? And how could the Path be made sustainable over the long term? The answers gradually emerged through understanding the entire endeavor as a prolonged negotiation campaign, a concept created by our negotiation colleagues and future Path partners James Sebenius and David Lax. A negotiation campaign required that we and our future partners come to understand the vast and uncertain landscape in which we were negotiating, the multitude of parties involved, and the proper sequencing. It called on us to take an iterative approach to the entire prolonged negotiation process. As in many difficult negotiations, there was no guarantee of success; if anything, the odds of success were considered slim. Before examining the negotiation campaign itself, it is useful to discuss the barriers that we initially envisioned as we embarked on this highly uncertain endeavor.

Barriers to Success

As might be imagined, in a project such as this there were many barriers to overcome in order to fulfill the vision of a functioning Path that

benefited the local communities and built bridges between disparate worlds. We identified six primary obstacles early on. These are briefly discussed below and are revisited toward the end of the article.

The first barrier was negotiating to obtain the short- and longer-term resources needed to sustain the effort. This type of project would not be years in the making; it would require decades at least. From setting up an organization to securing the resources to engage local partners to mapping the trail itself, a long period of time was required.

A second barrier was the trepidation that many around the world felt toward the Middle East region. When we shared the project with others and told them where the Path was to traverse, we were often met with a range of expressions, from general skepticism and disbelief to downright fear. This fear was further enhanced by additional safety concerns related to walking.

A third barrier was trying to work in a region where many countries had strained relations with each other, or worse, considered others along the path as mortal enemies. Given the inherently regional nature of the undertaking, this negotiation challenge was pervasive and erupted on numerous occasions.

A fourth barrier, closely connected to the third, was the concern by many in the region that this was secretly a backdoor normalization project to get countries to work more closely with Israel. While this was never our intention—the nature of each relationship was left up to the countries to decide—perception is reality, particularly in a region where skepticism often pervades everyday life.

A fifth barrier was figuring out how exactly the Path would come to life. Given the lack of a road map for doing this, acknowledging that the Path would be owned by the local communities along the way and that our role would be catalytic and supportive, the obstacles were numerous and rooted in seemingly endless practicalities. For example, how would we find good partners on the ground? Where would travelers stay? How would international travelers show proper respect for the local culture without creating conflicts? And there were many more dimensions that required attention and only became clearer as the project evolved.

A sixth and final barrier was meeting the different underlying needs and interests of the entities involved in bringing the Path to life. We were part of the international group that started the API, and we had a set of goals and objectives within a certain framework. Governments and the Path's local partners shared some of those goals and objectives, but also had their own desires and preferred ways of framing the project. The ability to manage these tensions as well as

Figure One
Map of the Abraham Path [Colour figure can be viewed at
[wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)



the Path's varied purposes took considerable time, effort, and negotiation (Figure One).

Clearing the Way for the Path: A Negotiation Campaign

To understand the development of the Abraham Path from a negotiation point of view we will employ the concept of a negotiation campaign, which ultimately guided our efforts. A *negotiation campaign* is a series of multifaceted negotiations that lead to an ultimate agreement. Such an effort requires a carefully designed and structured approach that contributes to a grander end goal. This idea has six steps, which are discussed below: choose the right parties and group them into fronts, assess interdependencies between fronts, determine whether and when to combine fronts, sequence the campaign, determine how much information to share and when, and learn and adapt (Sebenius 2010; Lax and Sebenius 2012). The reader will note that these steps occurred at both the macro- and micro-levels. For

example, at the outset sequencing was a predominant concept for the overall project and later it was key for many individual or locally connected negotiations.

Lax and Sebenius emphasize that before embarking on a negotiation campaign, one must first understand the ultimate target agreement (UTA)—the campaign's end goal. For us, the UTA was the Path's development, implementation, and sustainability—in other words, the creation and maintenance of a decentralized Path that was “owned” by the people living along the route. We sought to create a route that—following the planting of the initial seeds—was self-sustaining through the guest–host relationship. Of course, the UTA was made up of many smaller deals and agreements that all came together to serve the larger goal.

Step 1. Choose the Right Parties and Group Them into Fronts

The first task in a negotiation campaign is to choose the right parties with which to begin the campaign, map out the other parties with which you will need to engage as the campaign evolves, and group the parties into fronts to manage them effectively. Later these fronts will come together, but initially it is helpful to separate them for clarity and direction. This first step was vital for us as we took a big-picture perspective on how to approach the Path's development and all the potential key players.

Front # 1: Negotiations to Gain International Credibility

We initially thought that gaining international support and working our way down to the local level would be the best overall approach for bringing the Path to life. As the idea was developed at Harvard University it already had critically important credibility. After some analysis, we began our prolonged series of negotiations by seeking partnerships with United Nations organizations, prominent funding agencies, and universities. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) became one of the first partners of the Path since our goals aligned with theirs. This arrangement was followed by partnerships with the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). High-profile international nongovernmental organizations, such as Engineers without Borders International, the World Heritage Alliance, and Outward Bound Peacebuilding, also joined the effort after seeing clear connections between their organizations' interests and the Path's goals.

In parallel to these partnerships, we initiated negotiations to secure funding from a diverse array of sources. These were particularly

important negotiations given that a project's funding sources often indicate to observers much about its' true intentions. Fortunately, early funding was secured from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund; the Council of 100 (connected to the World Economic Forum); Prince Al-Walid Bin Talal; and several individual supporters from many places, including Europe and South America. It was important to us that others view the project as a global effort, and the diversity of funding sources helped others to see it as such. We also thought that the global nature of the project was critical to our success given the controversial role of the United States in the Middle East region.⁴ Finally, as the project had its roots at Harvard, universities abroad and in the region were approached. These first included Leeds University in the UK and ESPM in Sao Paulo, Brazil; later we partnered with Sabanci University (Turkey), Bethlehem University (Palestine), Birzeit University (Palestine), and Ben Gurion University (Israel).

Front # 2: Negotiating with Governments Along the Path

Having built a credible network of global support, we shifted our attention to the next front—national governments of the countries that the Path would traverse. This was a difficult set of negotiations for many reasons, the most important being the tenuous relationship between some of these governments. After doing much research and some feasibility studies on the ground, we understood that formal written approval from a governmental ministry in each country was needed to codify their approval and make progress on other fronts. After some deliberation, we decided to focus our attention on the ministries of tourism, given these were the least politicized of all the entities within most governments. While this proved true, we still found that a project such as the Abraham Path was rarely viewed with a benign lens.

As we prepared for negotiations with the regional national governments, we considered what might draw these governments to the project. This led us to identify the governmental interests that the project could meet. Through this preparation, and numerous discussions with countless stakeholders, we found a common thread. All the governments wanted more tourists/travelers—particularly those interested in history, culture, and a connection to the region through their religious heritage. Of course, this last category synced clearly with Abraham/Ibrahim, one of the most meaningful figures for the region's inhabitants and viewed by the governments as a vital ancestral link. While this view is shared by people around the world, Middle Easterners also see Abraham/Ibrahim as a living figure, as shown by the many sites and locations named for him and the ways that he is deeply embedded in the cultures found along the route.⁵

As Abraham/Ibrahim is a central figure at the heart of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the evoking of his name aroused curiosity, interest, and a sense of honor. It also conjured suspicions, providing much material with which to work and early indications of the negotiation challenges ahead. One such negotiation with a Turkish government ministry exemplified this challenge. While Turkey had been dogmatically secular for many decades under the leadership of Kamal Atatürk and many subsequent prime ministers, during the regime of the current Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a movement was afoot to embrace the religiosity prevalent in the country's more rural areas. The Abraham Path seemed to fit in with the movement's vision of the future, especially in the remote Southeast region of Sanliurfa, which prides itself on its connection with the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim. As Weiss and Arzu Yilmaz, a Turkish colleague who worked on the development of the Path, met with representatives of the ministry, many questions were raised about the project's true intentions. After considerable positional back-and-forth over many cups of tea, the deputy minister disclosed an underlying interest in the quest for ways to honor Abraham/Ibrahim through tourism and other projects connected to his memory. He noted the importance of proceeding very slowly to lessen the broader public's concern about a major shift toward greater religiosity in the country. He explained that they were prepared to support the Path's development and the visitors it would bring because they liked the project's essence. However, were there one small misstep or any public backlash, their support would be pulled. Implementing the project in line with our discussions and framing it for the public according to the ministry's wishes proved to be critical in keeping their support.

Some governments were attracted to the project by its regional scope. Despite the challenges of forging governmental relationships in the region, some ministers and other officials were inspired by the idea of the Path and its potential to bring about greater connection with other countries. To these officials, the Path held out the promise of longer stays in their country and opportunities for cooperation with neighboring countries with which they had friendly relations. However, to other ministers, the prospect of greater cooperation with neighboring governments was a source of concern—a view that kept them at arm's length from the planning process for quite some time. When these ministers did decide to get involved, they did so slowly and cautiously.⁶ In the end, we and our partners secured letters from the region's tourism ministers giving their stamp of approval for the project.

Another key dimension to negotiations with the ministries was our desire for the project to occur primarily at the civil-society level. Put differently, we politely but firmly asked the governments to limit their

involvement and leave the work to the people on the ground, supported by the API. We believed that the fronts would come together on this point and that the more local the Path-building work, the less political it would be. We also thought that putting the Path into the hands of the locals at an early stage would benefit them economically and socially, allow them to own its development, and make them more inclined to nurture it over time—increasing the likelihood of success and mitigating residents' suspicions about the project. This was essential for the early adoption of the Path as well as its long-term sustainability. The request to limit governmental participation and allow work to occur at the civil-society level was honored to varying degrees, with most countries—particularly Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel—consenting. The only country that initially did not accede to our request was Syria, which required a different approach altogether given the country's very top-down and insular nature. Although a letter of approval arrived eventually, obtaining it required prolonged negotiation and some very creative thinking because we had to modify our initial proposal to meet Syria's underlying interests.⁷

Front # 3: Negotiations in Regions Within Countries

Having achieved a general level of success at the national level, we then moved to the regional-level front within countries to undertake early scouting and mapping work and build partnerships with governors, mayors, and local communities. The areas for mapping work were selected based on several factors—the connection to Abraham/Ibrahim, the beauty of the landscape, existing infrastructure (or the ease of developing it), and the perceived willingness of the local population to welcome guests. Many of these negotiations began with governors of provinces or administrative divisions or with mayors of both big and small cities along the path. Their general consent was usually forthcoming because they understood the potential economic benefits to their regions—many of which were quite poor and eager for the revenue. However, the governors and mayors also brought a healthy dose of skepticism to the table, and it was clear that we would have to “walk the talk” to retain their support.

One such negotiation involved Weiss and the mayor of Sanliurfa, Ahmet Fakibaba. At the time, few Westerners had worked or traveled in Sanliurfa—a city in Southeastern Turkey in a province by the same name—and traditionally there has been little tourism in the area except for pilgrims from the Arab world. Interestingly, the city is known for its connection to Abraham/Ibrahim as it is close to the ancient city of Harran, where he heard the call to “go forth.” Furthermore, according to one prominent Islamic narrative, Abraham/Ibrahim's birth cave is in the heart of Sanliurfa. The mayor, along with others, saw the potential for tourism in the area and believed that the Abraham Path could be an

important generator of such activity. Unfortunately, this excitement was tempered with suspicions about the project, and negotiations to obtain the mayor's support were circuitous, permeated by his constituents' many concerns. Adding to the challenges of the negotiation was the fact that Weiss had a stomach illness and fever during his session with the mayor.

As Weiss arrived for his meeting at a gray drab Soviet style-looking concrete building, he struggled to keep his focus. As he was led down a long dark hallway with his colleague Yilmaz, motion lights popped on and off to conserve energy. When the two arrived at the very large conference room, they found a massive table at which the mayor was seated. Chain smoking and wearing a dark suit, Fakibaba sat erect at one end of the table with his secretary seated by his side. As Weiss and Yilmaz greeted Fakibaba, the mayor asked if Weiss was OK because he did not look well. Weiss stated he was fine, and it was nothing a little tea could not fix. After a few cups of tea and struggling to breathe through the cigarette smoke, Weiss asked Fakibaba what it would take to gain his support and for them to work together to bring the Path to the region. Surprisingly and despite public perceptions to the contrary, Fakibaba was eager to get behind the Path. He said he had heard some concerns from his constituents, but they were nothing he had not heard before and these fears were not uncommon from people who lived in a smaller region with limited access to media beyond local sources. He said that he would manage the challenges and saw the Path's value for his community and pledged to do his part to help the project develop. Weiss and Yilmaz assured the mayor that they would make it as easy as possible for him and would do whatever they could to meet any concerns. They also explained that they would follow his lead and guidance on the best sequencing for implementation of the Path, which gave the mayor an added level of comfort around wading into the domestic concerns that were percolating. This cooperation and endorsement from a figure as important as the mayor were pivotal to easing fears and getting many local organizations, which had been sitting on the sidelines, to finally feel comfortable participating in the project. Weiss had learned from Yilmaz and many previous negotiations in the region that culturally, there were genuine yeses of support and other yeses that enabled people to save face. This, thankfully, was a genuine yes because it included clear follow-up steps and tangible offers of support. Many subsequent negotiations of this kind would occur over the years; others would prove much more difficult and perfunctory at best.

Front # 4: Hundreds of Negotiations at the Town and Village Levels

The local villages and communities that the Path would cross constituted the last front. Each local negotiation was unique and required much

exploration of underlying interests, an understanding of cultural world-views, preparation for potential pitfalls, and personal connections that were developed over time. The cultures of the towns and villages varied greatly. As we came to understand, the diversity within a country—and even within a country's regions—was as significant as the diversity between nations.

The Abraham Path field staff and local partners conducted many of the negotiations at the town and village level. These negotiations took on many forms—some were around issues that affected all the participating countries while others focused on more local concerns. One of the more interesting negotiations related to the idea of homestays. As we began to develop the Path, one of the first issues that arose was where travelers would stay along the route. There were hotels and pensions in cities and towns but in the more rural areas there was nothing of the sort. Through brainstorming sessions with local partners, the idea of homestays arose. Initially, partners articulated many reasons why this idea could not work but there were few other options and after negotiations, they agreed that travelers would stay in the homes of local residents. Travelers often have commented that homestays were one of the best parts of their Path experience, allowing them to get to know the people and their local cultures. Homestay development involved a lot of interesting and befuddling negotiations, one of which is discussed below.

The route of the Jordanian section of the Path wound through the northern regions of Ajloun and Orjan. Despite outside perceptions of Jordan, not many Westerners visited these places—there was little tourism outside of Amman, Petra, and the Dead Sea. As the field staff explored the area, they were initially met with much resistance and suspicion. After we secured a letter of approval from the minister of tourism, some residents were more open to the idea of the Path. However, others remained opposed to the project. In one case, the team encountered a woman named Um Ahmed, who was partially blind, very poor, and lived with her children in a village along the Path's planned route. An amazing cook, Um Ahmed was known for her delicious bread, which was made with native ingredients. As the staff explained to her that travelers would offer money for her food, she expressed appreciation for the opportunity. Notwithstanding Um Ahmed's receptivity to the project, some members of her village were extremely protective of her and very suspicious of our entreaties. Over time and through many productive interactions with travelers, the villagers realized that their concerns were unfounded and supported Um Ahmed's involvement. Some years later Um Ahmed told our staff, "In a world in which I am often invisible [due to being poor and partially blind], you have made me visible again. Thank you!"

Another local negotiation—in Palestine—highlighted a different approach to negotiating the Path's development. Raed Saadeh, Vice President of the Palestinian Hotel Association and CEO of the Jerusalem Hotel, described the elaborate process of establishing the Path in several 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....

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.... The planning group partners included...Bethlehem University, the Palestine Wildlife Society, the Siraj Center [a cultural tourism organization], and Rozana [a cultural heritage society]...we also formed a group that was tasked with implementing an identified project or task. The implementation group was a virtual structure that included people, locally based contractors, and organizations, as well as staff with proven records of performance. We worked to come up with a business model that gave continual incentives to stakeholders to support the Path; for example, we have 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.... 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. (Sebenius and Leary 2011)

In every country each group working on the Path took a unique negotiation approach that fit with its culture, dynamics, and circumstances. As the reader can grasp from the description above, the Palestinian approach focused on community development and

building an umbrella organization. In Syria, given the state's centralized nature, negotiations to develop the Path were directed by the Ministry of Tourism. Consequently, the Syrian part of the Path was a very different experience for travelers. Finally, in Turkey, some of the smaller villages in and around Sanliurfa and Harran required a wholly different negotiation approach. As this area was still run according to a feudal system, there were chieftains (in local parlance *aghbas*) with whom we had to meet and build relationships. When negotiating with the chieftains, the Path staff had little leverage other than the ability to help people economically and socially. Fortunately, this message resonated with them because the people's well-being was one of the chieftains' utmost concerns. Had we not understood the proper channels, sequencing, and customs in each area, these negotiations would have been doomed to fail. We gained such invaluable knowledge from the local communities—and the small committees that they formed. They were not only the language translators and negotiators but also the cultural translators. Moreover, the negotiations in Turkey transpired in the context of an honor culture. One misstep or offense could set the entire project back considerably.

As we began to establish the Turkish section of the Path, a challenge arose within the context of this honor culture, one that significantly impacted our negotiations. There were two areas near Sanliurfa and Harran—a Kurdish area and an Arab area. Historically there had been very little contact between the two and at times, their different backgrounds led to hostility between them. The local partners who worked to develop the Path, Omer and Alison Tanik, understood this problem very well, but also knew that it was critically important that travelers be able to walk from one area to the other. This required some very delicate negotiations. The Taniks explained the potential benefits to all involved and slowly broke down barriers between the two groups, dispelling taboos around interacting with the "other." They employed an incremental strategy, bringing participants together for tea to introduce the idea and then taking small steps forward. Several villages eventually agreed to be part of the project and linkages were made tentatively, then cultivated consistently. Subsequently, that part of the Path came to life with travelers walking a unique five-day segment.⁸

Step 2. Assess Interdependencies Between the Fronts

Once the Path began to take shape the initial analysis of the campaign was complete, and we undertook the next phase of negotiations: assessing interdependencies between the fronts. This was needed to further develop the Path—increasing its length and involving more people in

different capacities. As the reader may have noted, these interdependencies naturally came into view as the work progressed and moved closer to the ground.

At the beginning of the Path's development, model segments of approximately 100 kilometers were created in each country to demonstrate to the national and local communities how the Path would work and how it could support residents. These "proof of concept" segments, as we called them, were closely monitored by national and regional governmental figures, who—given that their reputations were on the line—paid close attention and acted as caretakers of the Path. This led to negotiations that often included members from various fronts to ensure they were aligned and that the API kept its promises during the project's implementation. Over time much more mapping and many more negotiations were needed to develop and sustain the Path by connecting all the segments. Especially, when governmental funding at the national level was involved, the interdependencies between the fronts came together in a meaningful manner. Negotiations rotated from securing funding at the national level to working at the regional level to determine how funds would be dispersed equally at the town and village level. At times some areas believed that favoritism affected these decisions, which made future negotiations much more challenging.

Step 3. Determine Whether and When to Combine Fronts

Another question that arose as the campaign unfolded was whether and when to combine fronts. We knew that as work on the ground continued the API's negotiations would become more complex and increasingly involve a combination of partners at the national, regional, and local levels (rather than separately, as before). The negotiations between the API and its local teams and partners were key in deciding whether and when to combine fronts. The difficulty was in determining how to manage the long continuing series of negotiations that were necessary to keep the Path developing and growing while managing the different needs of all the parties.

As the Path progressed on numerous levels the international API performed many tasks, including staffing, raising funds for the Path's continued development, promoting the Path to a global audience, and creating chapters of the Path around the world—notably in Brazil, the UK, France, Spain, and Germany.⁹ The chapters raised funds for and otherwise supported the Path's development and organized trips for people who wanted to travel it. The API shared responsibility with the local teams and partners for growing their segments, which entailed

creating homestays, involving more villages and towns, finding and training local guides, engaging with local tour operators, and seeking out new partners with whom to work on different facets of the Path's development. Negotiations were constant and plentiful and much of the time the international and local groups worked well together and toward common objectives. Other times there were problems based on differing interests. For instance, the international teams' primary interest was that of connecting people—bridging the divide between the West and places in the Middle East with unfolding conflicts and fostering greater understanding between peoples and cultures. The local teams and partners certainly were not opposed to these goals, but their primary focus and their motivation for participating in the project was to help local communities economically and socially. These different underlying interests and goals sometimes conflicted, creating a standstill in the Path's development and requiring creative thinking to move forward. Specifically, at times that resources were scarce as the Path evolved, conflicts sometimes arose regarding how best to allocate them. Should the resources go toward more marketing and promotion of the Path to get people on the ground walking and engaging with host communities as the international group wanted? Or should those funds be allocated toward more homestay development and English-language training for guides as the local teams desired?

Step 4. Sequence the Campaign

While it was essential at the outset to have some sense of sequencing in a negotiation campaign of this magnitude, it became particularly important over the long term as the Path continued to grow and to involve more actors. The initial sequence—beginning at the international level and moving on to the national, regional, and local levels—made a lot of sense and for a while proved to be correct. Over time, however, the sequencing of negotiations became less clear-cut, and while some steps went according to plan and some negotiations were predictable, there was also a reactive dynamic to negotiations as challenges arose.

Many of the predictable negotiations were structured around expanding the Path's reach. Negotiations occurred frequently as new villages were brought on board and dynamic issues arose. While many negotiations began with the question of which families to involve and in what capacity, corollary issues often required consideration, such as those related to selecting guides and facilitating homestays. Those negotiations followed a fixed process and there was little to do at the national level other than obtain initial approvals and keep

governmental officials informed of progress and opportunities for promotion.

But as the Path developed, sequencing often was ambiguous due to unforeseen issues and challenges on the ground. Consider the following situation. As part of the effort to launch the Path in Turkey in 2007, the API worked closely with the governor of Sanliurfa Province and the mayor of the city of Sanliurfa, as discussed above. The governor, the mayor, and a local committee of tourism professionals and representatives of nonprofit organizations held a tourism conference, inviting over 100 people from around the world to introduce the Path and build support for it internationally and locally. To give attendees the experience of walking along the Path, they were given the opportunity to participate in a 10-kilometer walk to historic Harran, where all the monotheistic faiths agree that Abraham/Ibrahim heard the call from God to go forth. The walk was to be covered in local, national, and global media outlets.

Approximately six weeks before the conference, Weiss received a call from his colleague, Yilmaz. She explained that the chief of the village in which the walk would begin wanted to welcome the guests properly by slaughtering goats for lunch and asked how many he should kill. Both Weiss and Yilmaz were taken aback—they certainly were not in the business of slaughtering goats—but agreed to think overnight about the chief's request and how to manage it creatively. That night Weiss recalled an offer from a local tour operator to provide lunches to travelers should ever they be needed. The next morning Yilmaz called the tour operator and confirmed that he was still happy to provide the meals. Yilmaz then called the chief, thanked him profusely for his generous offer, and explained that the meals were already in hand. The chief understood and said he would still like to make a small sacrifice of one goat in honor of all the guests. Begrudgingly Weiss and Yilmaz agreed, believing that one goat was better than many. This solution allowed the chief to save face while Weiss and Yilmaz achieved their humane lunch goals. While the negotiation sequenced smoothly once it began, this was an unpredictable scenario that could hardly have been anticipated.

Another example of an unanticipated negotiation occurred along the Path in Jordan. As the Path began to unfold, the mayor of the Ajloun region expressed interest in the project, seeing its potential to help his people. The API worked closely with the mayor, engaging him at every turn and negotiating several issues related to the many villages in the area, including how many families from each village would participate, how to manage the possibility of jealousy among participating and nonparticipating villagers and villages, and how to prepare families to host overseas

guests. Over the course of a year, the Jordanian section of the Path began to take shape, people were traveling, and local communities were benefiting. However, just as things were becoming more rooted on the ground, the ministry of tourism had a change of heart. Expressing concerns about the project (in part due to political pressure), the ministry told the API and local communities to cease all activity. Needing to determine the best approach to address this issue—including the proper sequencing—the team decided to meet with the mayor to obtain his advice and talk through the ministry's opposition from a negotiation perspective. After analyzing the situation together with the API team, the mayor decided that his BATNA was to forge ahead, explaining that the Path was doing a lot of good in the community and he did not want to shut it down because the ministry had a problem with it. The API staff and the mayor agreed that the mayor was the right messenger and that he would take the lead in negotiating with the ministry. He did so. The result? The ministry was surprised by the mayor's strong views and commitment to the project. It relented and the mayor and the local community carried the project forward. While this was not so much a negotiation in the traditional sense, what was important was the sequencing of engaging the mayor, followed by his BATNA analysis. The mayor came to understand that he had a good BATNA, and he sensed that the ministry would likely back away if he demonstrated his commitment to the project and emphasized the good that it was doing for the people of his region.

Step 5. Determine How Much Information to Share and When

The next step in the negotiation campaign is to think through how much information to share and when to do so. In many of the negotiations, particularly those that the API conducted with governments at all levels and with local partners, there was much conversation about what information to share, why to share it, and when to share it. We often had to remind ourselves of the nature of the project and to resist getting pulled into lose-lose political negotiations that were not the project's focus. Over the years, numerous parties tried to negotiate in a way that facilitated extracting information from us that they could use to undercut the project. We always had to tread carefully under these circumstances.

While there are many examples related to this step in the process, one key negotiation—which initially occurred between the API and its local teams and partners—exemplifies the issue of what to share, when to share it, and who should share it. As the API engaged with its local partners in Turkey, Jordan, and Palestine, the question of the role of women frequently arose. How, for example, would homestays be possible given some of the cultural norms around women? Some local

men said that women were not to be seen by outsiders—particularly other men. During a negotiation on this issue, the API team and the local Palestinian team brainstormed solutions to the problem. Many on the local team simply could not see a way forward and felt they could not push against long-held cultural norms. The API team knew it would be virtually impossible to have homestays without the deep involvement of women. During the negotiation the situation became tense, with the API hesitating to share its perspective out of concern they would offend their local partners and the local team holding steadfast to its views. Then, a young Palestinian woman on the team spoke up and addressed her colleagues. She explained that while cultural norms should be respected, the project held so much potential for the local communities that surely, they could find a creative solution. She also explained that it was important to push back against certain norms, including those that would prevent women from participating in the project. They all had seen the good the project was doing for the women and families involved. Ultimately, the teams agreed to move forward with the proper setup and training. All homestay hosts attended the trainings, which covered many facets of the project, including the recognition of women as a core part of the homestay experience. Agreements were also reached around how women would engage with visitors, particularly males (and how female travelers would engage with local men), and limitations were established on where guests could go around the home.

The postscript to this negotiation is that the most memorable part of travelers' experience on the Abraham Path is the homestays. Without this delicate negotiation and the proper and careful sharing of information, these homestays would likely never have come to pass. The lesson from this negotiation is to be respectful of cultural norms, but also to recognize that in negotiations, norms often are discussed in positional terms. If one can get down to the underlying interests, it is more possible to solve the issues creatively.

Step 6. Learn and Adapt

Given the complexity of the Abraham Path and of the negotiation campaign to help it develop and grow, this last step in the process was perhaps the most vital. The negotiation campaign for the Abraham Path differed from most other campaigns in that it involved a great number of parties and there was no clear beginning or end. Thus, it was challenging to apply the very concept of a negotiation campaign to the project. However, it was the best framework we had for organizing our efforts to create and maintain the Path.

After the first few years of working on the Path, learning and adapting became central to our approach, which we often referred to as our “iterative approach.” According to this approach, we entered each negotiation with a strategy and goal in mind but expected to learn from the interaction and adapt to the circumstances. As is generally true in all negotiations, we always worked with incomplete information, particularly in negotiations at the local level. We entered each negotiation slowly, gathering information as we went. Many of the incidents described earlier, from saving goats in Turkey to negotiating the role of women along the Path, transpired in this way. There were many trips to the balcony to ask ourselves what was really going on and to determine how to meet our objectives while keeping valuable partners on board.

Learning and adapting were also particularly important as we managed negotiations with our long-term partners. As we negotiated with them over time, we learned more about the complexities with which they dealt and how to meet our needs given their constraints. One example involved one of our tour operators, who—for political reasons—was under significant pressure from organizations that objected to the tour guide’s association with us. As we negotiated with the organizations, we sought to reconcile our goal of bringing travelers to the Path with their opposition to such travelers, which they said was due to their fear of reputational damage. We learned to look beyond their initial resistance and consider their underlying interests, which concerned the content of communications that were made on the tour. Once we realized this, we agreed to work jointly on communication efforts to ensure that everyone was comfortable with the tour operator’s presentation, thereby assuaging the organizations’ fears that the operator might say something that would result in problems and challenges for them.

Revisiting the Barriers—Some Campaign Snags and Unsuccessful Negotiations

Thus far we have focused on the successful negotiation campaign that led to the development of over 1,000 miles of Path, the formation of partnerships with hundreds of local communities, and the establishment of over 150 homestays. All were welcome signs of surprising progress. Of course, as with any negotiation campaign, there were also plenty of temporary setbacks and longer-term failures from which to learn. The failures are connected to the barriers discussed earlier and include negotiations on initial and sustained funding, political issues and normalization, local and logistical problems, and divisive issues related to the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim.

The Political Dimensions

Perhaps the biggest failure was managing the negotiation campaign's political dimensions. While there was initial success in this area, there was always a dark cloud hanging over the project and forces seeking to undermine it. A project that sought to include Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel; eventually Egypt and Iraq; and possibly Saudi Arabia was bound to run into political issues given the tenuous state of their relations. Initially, our negotiations with all the entities were clear and straightforward. We never asked any of the countries to work with each other—that was left entirely up to them to do ... or not do. The API only asked that each country work on their part of the Path. It was also not the API's job to delineate the Path's route—that was left to folklore, history, and geography. While this framing reflected the project's mission and vision, and our partners accepted it for many years, there were always problems arising from differences in how people perceived the project and manipulated information.

At times political groups used the project for their own purposes, casting doubt on its true intentions and playing on people's fears that there was more to the project than met the eye. During one such incident, in which a group vilified the API by claiming that its true intention was normalization of relations with Israel, we sought to engage the group and negotiate a way forward. Unfortunately, the group was not interested in negotiating a solution, instead seeking to use the project for its own political purposes, which were incompatible with a negotiated arrangement. This problem happened on numerous occasions and the API was never able to find a solution that worked for all involved over the short or long term. Eventually, those groups moved on to the next issue on their agendas, but the damage to the API was done—people who wanted to view the project as a normalization project had fodder to do so. In the long term, this resulted in a never-ending stream of suspicions about the project in the eyes of many skeptics.

Local Problems

On the local level, there were many rivalries within and between groups. At times, issues related to such rivalries came to the forefront, emerging in different ways. One type of rivalry arose in several villages in which some families were involved with the Path while others stayed away due to various concerns and rumors.¹⁰ As the Path evolved and travelers went to different villages, some people benefited while others did not. Working with our local teams and partners, we were usually able to find some creative solutions to this problem. For example, in some places, villagers shared the food remaining after travelers ate meals that were prepared for them. In other places, some of these rivalries could

not be overcome, causing some villages to decide not to participate in the project.

Another failure occurred early on in the Path's development. As part of the 2006 Harvard Study Tour, members of regional and local communities were invited to events at different places along the Path¹¹ so they could learn more about the project and determine if they would like to be involved as partners. Unfortunately, at the meeting in Sanliurfa the attendees' ethnic and religious mix created a very sensitive moment, causing significant worry among some parts of the local population as to the project's true intentions. After the study tour, Weiss asked Yilmaz what they should do to try to repair any damage that had been done. Yilmaz suggested that she, Weiss, and staff member Daniel Adamson go back to Sanliurfa, meet with a core group of people from the area—including the governor and mayor—and apologize for any perceived missteps and seek their counsel on how best to proceed. The three met and negotiated, the apology from Yilmaz and Weiss was accepted, and the three discussed a path forward that worked for all involved. However, relationship effects from this meeting lingered and were felt for a few years afterward. Eventually, through proper sequencing and bringing together people from different fronts, we proved ourselves by walking the talk and living up to our words.

The Figure of Abraham/Ibrahim

Last, and certainly not least, was the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim and all that he meant to those across the region. Of course, Abraham/Ibrahim is a revered figure, and over three billion people on the planet are connected to his legacy. He is indeed a unifying figure for many. He is also a figure steeped in controversy—one sometimes associated with ownership and the claiming of land and rights.¹² The negotiations in and around this issue were difficult and often unsuccessful. The views among travelers and supporters from outside the region were often positive and based on a connection to Abraham/Ibrahim through their own heritage. The views from inside the region were positive in a similar vein, but they were also negative due to the usage of Abraham/Ibrahim to support certain claims. We never succeeded in managing these different messages and framings—or “acoustic separation,” in the words of API board member James Sebenius (Sebenius and Hulse 2003).

Conclusion: Did the Path Reach its Ultimate Target Agreement?

In the end, can it be argued that the Path reached its Ultimate Target Agreement (UTA)? If so, how did it manage to get there? With over

1,000 miles of path mapped and waymarked and more to come (currently a path is being developed in Iraqi Kurdistan), more than 80,000 Path travelers estimated since 2008, over 150 established homestays in villages, and many millions of people exposed to the Path through the media in the region and around the world, it is fair to argue that the Path has made a great deal of progress toward its UTA, understanding that much more needs to be done. Key to this success was the strategy of learning from past negotiations and adapting to the new issues and challenges that presented themselves with each passing month. This was the only true way to approach the development of the path—through iteration.

As of this writing, the API has substantially reduced its close-in support of path-building work on the ground. The paths in Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt are run, as they should be, by local partners. It was always part of the strategy to pull back once the Path was established and local communities were shepherding it. These trails have gained in popularity thanks to a newfound tourism industry centered around walking and hiking as well as to a great deal of publicity related to the Path. While in the early years. International travelers predominated in using the Path, many local hiking groups later emerged and were very active along different parts of the Path prior to the Covid pandemic.

What were the keys to progress toward that UTA? They can be summed up by seeing the Path through the prism of a very long-term negotiation campaign. Within that campaign, two steps were particularly essential—first, carefully thinking about negotiation sequencing at the outset and revisiting it frequently as the Path developed, and second, taking an iterative approach that harnessed our learnings and forced us to constantly adapt to the situation that presented itself.

The overall concept of the negotiation campaign was critical in terms of analysis and execution. It conveyed to all those involved that this was a long-term endeavor that required a wide array of short-term negotiations as well as sustained negotiations over time. Negotiating our short-term needs while also building long-term relationships proved essential to moving the campaign forward. While negotiation is often cast in transactional terms, personal connections and relationships were central to the negotiations that enabled the Path's launch and sustained it over time. The process was highly time-consuming and required a lot of patience as we nurtured the Path's growth in a methodical—albeit often nonlinear—manner. Our initial connections were another factor that was essential to our success.

The sequencing of the Path's development and related negotiations also proved vital. Thinking about which individuals and organizations to meet with initially, why we should meet with them, and what impact those

meetings might have on the other fronts was at the heart of what we did. The early sequencing was very clear in our minds. The sequencing as the project continued was difficult and challenging given the unpredictable nature of many of the negotiations that arose. However, we always kept the concept in mind no matter how the negotiations manifested themselves.

Finally, the iterative learning approach was vital to the implementation of the Path. Michael Wheeler, a Harvard Business School Professor Emeritus, refers to the 80/20 rule. The rule states that a negotiator can prepare for about 80% of any negotiation while the other 20% is information that emerges during the process. Negotiators must adapt accordingly (Wheeler 2013). In all our Path negotiations, we found it critical to keep this approach in mind.

In the end, it is fair to say that the UTA has been partially achieved and there is much more to be accomplished. Fortunately, time always has been on the side of the API and its many partners. After all, what are a few more decades, or even centuries, in the context of a story that is already well over 4,000 years old?

Acknowledgment

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NOTES

1. Many people mistakenly see the Abraham Path as an effort at regional peace. That was never its aim or objective.
2. The Abraham Path was cultivated initially at the Global Negotiation Initiative (GNI) at the Harvard Negotiation Project. The GNI served as the Path's incubator for three years. As work began on the ground, we conferred with administrators at Harvard University, who agreed that the GNI would serve as the project's academic home, while a nonprofit entity, called the Abraham Path Initiative (API), would be created to engage in the work on the ground and develop partnerships with the local communities.
3. For more background on the Path's development, see the Harvard Business School cases on "Negotiating the Path of Abraham" (Sebenius and Leary 2011; Sebenius 2015). The Path organizers benefited from studying other routes, such as the Camino de Compostela de Santiago in Spain and the Appalachian Trail in the United States.
4. Much later, we set up an API European entity that was able to receive funds from European countries interested in supporting the Path.
5. API Fellows Daniel Maissan and Lisa Dupuy embarked on a journey in 2020 called "Finding Abraham/Ibrahim," during which they traveled the Path searching for people named Abraham/Ibrahim and told their stories. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6NMNZgzKuk>.
6. It was clear that a slow strategy based on dealing with easy issues first—often termed "gradualism"—was needed at this level. See Weiss (2003).

7. The Syrian case required us to make moves away from the table. We met with experts with connections and created a new deal design that better met the needs of both the Syrians and the API. See Lax and Sebenius (2006).

8. Sadly, after all the work that was done over a number of years, the Path in Turkey was put on hold because of its close proximity to the border with Syria, where a civil war began in 2011. It is hoped that this Path will reopen for travelers in the coming years.

9. The Brazilian chapter was unique and embodied the spirit of the Path in many ways. Once engaged, a core group of people, led by Alexandre Chade, took the baton and ran with it. For example, the chapter's primary annual event was a 10-kilometer run through the heart of Sao Paulo, a city of 18 million people. The event was held for many years, with upward of 10,000 runners annually. The run, called the Camino De Paz (Run for Peace), displayed images of places found along the Abraham Path. The work of the Brazilian chapter and others helped establish the Path as a global effort with broad support around the world.

10. Many places along the Path are very rural and have limited access to information. This was certainly the case in the early days of the Path, resulting in rumors about the Path that needed to be addressed carefully.

11. The Harvard Study Tour was our first full foray down the potential Path. Up to that point in the project's development, the idea that one could travel the route was met with much skepticism, given the tense relationships of the countries involved. In 2006, the study tour, organized by the Global Negotiation Initiative at the Harvard Negotiation Project, took 25 people from ten different countries down the Path in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. The purpose of the trip was to demonstrate the Path's feasibility and begin the search for local partners.

12. Ishmael (a prophet in Islam) and Isaac (a patriarch in Judaism) were both sons of Abraham/Ibrahim. Muslim and Jewish claims to the land of Palestine/Israel are supported by various interpretations of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the Quran, and Jewish and Muslim theology and history.

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Negotiating the Path of Abraham (B): Triumphs and Challenges

Critical moments and key decisions since December 2011¹

In November 2011, the staff of the Abraham Path Initiative (API) proposed three strategic objectives to the Board of Directors:

1. Build the Path: To establish consistently high-quality cultural and educational tourism opportunities with Abrahamic content along the already walkable sections of the Path, while opening new segments in Turkey, Jordan, Israel and Palestine.

2. Populate the Path: To recruit individuals of all kinds, and to motivate leaders across all sectors, to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, both on the Path and in their local communities. API would provide resources for community groups to organize Abrahamic walking and learning opportunities worldwide.

3. Transform the Path: To convene and nurture leaders and partners, helping them to design successful Abrahamic campaigns that would deliver concrete results in strategic locations along the Path.

These recommendations represented an ambitious agenda, which was short-circuited by a series of events that saw an organizational transition and a narrowed focus. At the November 2011 meeting, the Board and staff ultimately agreed to begin with just the first goal of building the Path through the process of mapping and developing maps, a guidebook, and a new website. This decision was taken due to significant internal changes at board and staff levels and against the backdrop of a region in turmoil after the start of the Arab Spring.

¹ Professor James K. Sebenius and Dr. Joshua Weiss (Harvard Negotiation Project and Abraham Path Initiative) prepared this case. We gratefully acknowledge valuable insights and suggestions of William Ury, Stefan Szepezi, David Landis, and Ivan Schooner. The case authors are board members of the Abraham Path Initiative. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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By the end of 2011 many changes had emerged on the organizational side of the Path. Executive Co-Chair Jerry White, announced after the board meeting that he would be stepping down and leaving to take a position with the US State Department. That had significant implications for API given that White had exhibited strong leadership ability and that much of the new fundraising success experienced in 2010 and 2011 was due to his contacts and connections.

With Mr. White's imminent departure, the board began to explore the options with regard to a successor and the process for finding a new Executive Director. At the same time, despite wide-ranging efforts to make the Path more of a reality on the ground, the board began to narrow the focus and shift the primary direction of the organization, at least for the near term. Put succinctly, while work on the physical Path would continue at some level, the emphasis shifted from making the Path real on the ground to making the Path a "meme" that would become real in people's minds. With this change, a clear division of labor was beginning to emerge – the partners on the ground² would continue to build the physical Path, while the international organization would put its emphasis and attention on building the Path in people's minds through the creation of a virtual guidebook. Ury crystallized the notion this way, "If there is a guidebook, then the Path exists in people's minds." The key questions then became: Who would take on the task of developing the guidebook and who would run the organization? And could, somehow, that person be one and the same?

Through his work on the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Mr. White had come to know Stefan Szepesi, a young European diplomat working at the Office of the Quartet.³ Szepesi, born in Naarden in the Netherlands, is an economist by training. He worked for the European Union on external relations with the Caribbean before moving to the Middle East. While Szepesi focused on economic issues, White was struck by his passion for walking in the West Bank. Szepesi had

² This refers to the API partners in the Middle East. These partners are generally NGOs with various levels of focus and expertise related to the Path. Some, for example, are tour operators, such as the Siraj Center in Bethlehem, Bedouin Experience in the Negev, and Experience Jordan. Others, such as the Rozana Association, the Al Ayoun society, and Sidreh are involved in rural development and empowerment.

³ The Middle East Quartet is comprised of the EU, US, UN and Russia. Quartet Representatives have included: Jim Wolfensohn (2005-6) and Tony Blair (2007-2015). The mandate of the Quartet is "to support the Palestinian people on economic development, rule of law and improved movement and access for goods and people, as they build the institutions and economy of a viable and peaceful state in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem."

<http://www.quartetrep.org/quartet/pages/6396/>

become so enthralled with his walks and hikes, after long days of diplomatic activity, that he authored a guidebook on the subject.⁴

With the board's consent, White and API Managing Director, Josh Weiss, approached Szepesi in early January 2012 about the API guidebook role and his desire to undertake the effort. Szepesi weighed the challenges involved and agreed to accept the guidebook assignment. However, before the ink could dry on that contract, another idea began to emerge between White, Weiss, and board chairman Ury. As far as these three could discern, Szepesi exhibited many of the leadership skills for which the API was searching. Perhaps, they thought, he would be a good fit for the Executive Director role as well. That sense, coupled with the fact that early search results were not yielding candidates with the skill set and experience that Szepesi possessed, led the three to make the offer to Szepesi after consulting with the board. After some back and forth, Szepesi agree to take on the larger role with Weiss remaining in the role of Managing Director.

2012: Change, focus, and building the organization for sustainability

As 2012 unfolded, the emphasis on the guidebook did indeed become the focus of the international effort. On the ground, the local partners continued to work on developing the Path through the southern portion of Palestine from Bethlehem to Hebron, in Turkey from Yuvacali to Gollie, Gobekletepe, and on to Kisas, and in Jordan from Ajloun down through the Jordan Valley to Pella. After getting up to speed in the first few months of 2012, Szepesi began to look at the organization's most pressing needs. Among other activities, he reached out to David Landis, creator of the Jesus Trail, which is a 65-kilometer hiking trail in the Galilee region of Israel that connects important sites from the life of Jesus as well as other historical and religious sites.⁵ With Landis, Szepesi began to discuss the practical challenges of actually building a trail in the region. By mid-year Szepesi concluded that a Regional Director, to be based in the Middle East, was necessary. This person would also work closely with him on the guidebook with an emphasis on detailed mapping and map development. Furthermore, he needed someone on the ground that could work closely with the local partners. Enter Landis, who was first brought on as a consultant in the middle of 2012 and formally assumed the role in January of 2013. Szepesi focused the guidebook efforts on an online version first, laying out the main elements of the work in collaboration with Landis: defining the exact route, scouting improvements, gathering logistical data for travelers, producing Geographic Information Systems GIS⁶ data sets for GPS navigation and map production,

⁴ That book has since been published under the title Walking Palestine: 25 Journeys in the West Bank, Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2012.

⁵ <http://jesustrail.com/about/what-is-the-jesus-trail-2>

⁶ GIS is a mapping technology that allows the user to create and interact with a variety of maps and data sources. GIS integrates databases with geo referenced spatial data (maps tied to specific known locations).

designing the first Abraham Path atlases of maps for Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, and procuring a designer for a new online portal for the Abraham Path.⁷

With fieldwork on the Path gathering pace, the organization itself required more attention as well. A critical decision point came in August 2012 when it became clear to Szepesi that the \$900,000 budget, approved at the November 2011 board meeting, was unrealistic since fundraising efforts would be inadequate. The shortfall was largely due to two factors. The first was an overall expectation, after a year and a half of renewed fundraising success, that efforts would continue on the upswing. The second factor, tied to the first, was that some major donors Jerry White had recruited wavered upon his leaving the organization.

The 2012 October Board meeting was difficult but ultimately served to reset the budget and endorse more limited progress in the field that year, with the board advocating a more conservative approach. In fact, income for that year would turn out to be \$260,000 lower than anticipated and there were four full-time employees, down from between six and eight in earlier years. Operational plans were radically scaled back to focus efforts and limited resources on producing the virtual guidebook, sharpening the mission, and find new resources for further trail development. The development of the guidebook and website was reaffirmed as the major external focus with a renewed emphasis on building a more stable organization (i.e. retention of employees, financial stability, etc.).

In November, Szepesi and Weiss made a contact that would prove pivotal. On a fundraising trip to Washington D.C., Szepesi contacted the World Bank. Although a long shot, Szepesi had an inkling that the Bank might be interested in funding the Path. After a productive first meeting and a follow-up visit with more senior Bank officials by Weiss in December, Bank personnel seemed to display a real interest in the Path and intimate that funding was not out of the question.

As 2012 came to a close with David Landis settling in as Regional Director, long-time Managing Director, Weiss, decided to leave the staff of the organization. The Board voted in early 2013 to ask Weiss to join the Board.

2013: A potential game changer on the horizon, reasons for optimism...and reasons for concern

The year 2013 came in with optimism, a clear focus, and a potential game-changing relationship with the World Bank. From an organizational and financial perspective,

⁷ Until this point some mapping had been done in different places but it was incomplete and internally inconsistent. While guides and others had taken many people on parts of the Path, the route had never been fully defined. The fieldwork done by Landis in 2012 was the first time the route of the Path became defined -- a vital stage necessary to making it real.

the API enjoyed a period of relative stability. With a reduced staff and a very focused mandate, the organization began working on the guidebook and putting in place personnel and retention policies to help build and grow the organization in a sustainable manner. The international team at the API now consisted of five people, two of whom were part-time. In addition, the organization slowed the flow of general operating resources to its partners on the ground and focused its resources on specific projects with concrete deliverables. For example, the international entity had been giving approximately 50% of its budget in 2011 to local partners, which was reduced considerably in 2012 to less than 10%.⁸

In March the Path received its first real boost of the year from a somewhat unlikely external source. The *Lonely Planet* guidebook series published a lengthy write up of the Path complete with 'how to' travel instructions. The authors at Lonely Planet did not stop there, declaring the Abraham Path "the pilgrimage of a lifetime."⁹ This was high praise and provided instant credibility from one of the world's most preeminent guidebooks.

On the heels of this achievement, at its April 2013 meeting, the Board approved a new communications framework. This included sharpened language on the mission statement, what the Path was exactly (and was not), what the organization would do, and how it would do it going forward. From April 2013, the mission and vision (the why), the mandate of the organization (the how) and its values, and the definition of the path (the what) were defined as follows:

⁸ The amount given to local partners did increase considerably in 2014 and 2015 with funding from the World Bank grant.

⁹ <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel-tips-and-articles/77684>

The Abraham Path and the Abraham Path Initiative

The Abraham Path is a long-distance walking trail across the Middle East. The path retraces the journey of Abraham, the legendary ancestor of over half of humanity, who is known for his hospitality and kindness toward strangers.

The Abraham Path Initiative (API) is an international organization cultivating the development of the path along with local and international partner organizations. The initiative is a non-profit, non-religious and non-political organization.

Mission and Vision

The mission of the Abraham Path Initiative is to support local partners in developing the Abraham Path as:

- a catalyst for socioeconomic development and sustainable tourism.
- a place of meeting and connection between people from the Middle East and people around the world.
- a creative space for stories that highlight the unique culture, heritage and hospitality of the region.

Why: The purpose of the Abraham Path is to inspire understanding, prosperity, and hope for humanity.

How: By inviting people to participate in a grand adventure: to walk together in the cradle of civilization, to meet people from very different cultures and traditions, to learn something new about ourselves, others, and the world, and to serve the larger community.

Our Values

- We value the human, cultural and natural beauty of the Middle East as a story largely untold and worth sharing.
- We value the humble act of walking from community to community, which inspires new encounters, new stories and new generosity by travelers and hosts.
- We value adventure, exploration and journeying into the unknown in the spirit of Abraham as a vehicle for personal reflection and growth.
- We value appreciation for the natural world, which inspires local and global communities to care for the environment for future generations.
- We value the power of stories, walking and hospitality, which can connect the Middle East and travelers from around the world to form transformational friendships.
- We value the path as a non-profit, non-religious and non-political project that affirms the human rights and dignity of all peoples.
- We value both the similarities and differences in the stories of Abraham as recounted by each faith and local lore, and recognize the various narratives in scriptural and non-scriptural traditions.
- We value the principle that the path is not used for exclusive assertions about Abraham, or to advance any political or territorial agenda.

What We Do

We support local partners in developing the Abraham Path, a long-distance walking trail across the Middle East by:

- Promoting walking/traveling the path through this website and referring travelers to our tour partners, and directly to local guides and host families directly
- Providing direct grants to local partner organizations who work on specific regional segments of the path
- Connecting local partners to third-party grants and funding opportunities
- Providing consultation regarding developing the route and hospitality services in local communities
- Providing technical assistance and training to local partners
- Creating practical hiker resources, such as maps, accommodation and transportation information
- Coordinating an international network of partners, and Friends Groups around the world to create a network of Abraham Path supporters

On the ground, the numbers of walkers rose sharply, in large part due to a weekly walk model that was started in 2012 and began to gain traction in 2013. The “weekly walk model” involved scheduled one-day hiking trips located along the Abraham Path in Jordan and Palestine, originating from Amman and Jerusalem. The concept helped familiarize the experience to a variety of walkers, and became especially popular with the expatriate communities living in these regional hubs.

The organization seemed to be on solid financial footing by Fall 2013 when the Board met at Harvard University. Financial resources were still modest but the list of prospective new funding sources was steadily growing. The board was also being expanded with new members who brought important areas of expertise, diverse backgrounds, and perspectives that had previously been lacking. The composition of the board was as follows:

- William Ury (USA) Chair, Author, walker and mediator. He is the founder of the Abraham Path Initiative and co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project
- Anisa Mehdi (USA) Co-Vice chair, Emmy Award-winning journalist specializing in religion and the arts
- Raed Saadeh (Palestine) Co-Vice chair, President of the Arab Hotel Association, owner and General Manager of the Jerusalem Hotel, Chairman of the Rozana Association and a co-founder of the Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil
- Lionel Savage (France), Senior Vice President and Portfolio Manager at the Capital Group in London
- Rick White (US), President and Chief Investment Officer of Minot Capital, LLC, a Boulder, Colorado-based investment firm providing global advisory services to institutional and family clients
- Louise Sibley (UK), Retired from a 30 year career in international business and industry, and now serves as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the River Thames Boat Project
- Veronica Martini (Argentina), Senior Executive Director for Global Initiatives, Columbia University
- Paul Gray (USA), Managing partner of Richard Gray Gallery, a leading international dealer in Modern and Post War American and European art
- Joshua Weiss (USA), President of Negotiation Works Inc. consulting company, co-founder of the Global Negotiation Initiative and Senior Fellow at the Harvard Negotiation Project, and creator and Director of the Master of Science Degree in Leadership and Negotiation at Bay Path University
- James Sebenius (USA), Gordon Donaldson Professorship of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, Director of the Harvard Negotiation Project and member of the Executive Committee of the Program on Negotiation.
- Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador), President of Ecuador from 1998 to 2000. Before becoming president, Jamil served as Mayor of Quito for six years.

The board was moving from a friends/founders board toward a more professional

body. Also of note, a three-year financial plan was put forth and approved by the end of the meeting. The table below shows the financial targets presented in the fall 2013 for 3-years.¹⁰

Table 1: 2014-2016 Work Plan Targets (all regions combined, cumulative except for)

Progress in numbers	2012	2013	2014	2015-2016
Walkers annually	958 ¹¹	N/A	1496	2339 ¹²
Website tour requests	0	10 (in 2 months)	150/year	500/year
Facebook Page Likes	1500	5000+	8000	15000
Total trail km	322	431km	775km	1760km
Longest connected trail km	182km	182km	395km	1228km
Border crossings ¹³ / countries	0/4	0 / 4	3/ 4	6 / 6
Regions (with trail) published in online guidebook ¹⁴	0	9 (7)	15	24
Guides certified in Wilderness First Aid	0	16	40	80
Local partners	5	9	12	15
API HR in Middle East (FTE)	1	1.2	4	7
Progress in milestones	2012	2013	2014	2015-2016
Abraham Path guidebook published ¹⁵				✓
First Abraham Path full through walk				✓
Budget US\$	2012	2013	2014	2015-2016
API budget	572K	446K	808K	1.1 MLN
API budget (excl. in-kind)	572K	362K	677K	1 MLN
Direct Grants provided to partners annually	0	11K	65K	100-200K

¹⁰ In 2014 the API redrafted the plan to be 2015-2017. That new plan contained higher numbers because ambition had risen and the team had already surpassed their initial financial targets.

¹¹ Compiling statistics on walkers and days walked remained a challenge though it has improved markedly for some regions (esp. Urfa, Harran, Nablus, Jericho, Bethlehem, Nablus). Current data includes tour groups and organized day walks; data does not include independent walkers. Note that “person days walked” is a better proxy for impact as it takes account of multi-day tours vis-à-vis one-day walks. Minimum data for 2012: Turkey 71; Jordan 150; Palestine 722; Israel 15.

¹² Growth scenario of 25% year-on-year.

¹³ Border crossings include both internationally recognized borders and crossings between Israel and the West Bank

¹⁴ Regions are defined on abrahampath.org. A region consists of 4-5 days of consecutive walking but there are exceptions in areas where the density of geographic, cultural or urban hubs (cities) is very high. Regions may vary in types of trails and path experiences to highlight their unique strengths and travel appeal niches.

¹⁵ As the project progresses, an assessment will be made for best marketable guidebook format, including integration of web, print and/or e-book versions that function well as the path grows. Additional financial and human resources would be required for this project, shaped specifically by the decided format and publication process.

Shortly after the board meeting, the API received the news that its persistent efforts had paid off with regard to the World Bank. The long shot had come to fruition and the Path was awarded a two-year grant of \$2.3 million for the development of the Path, in Palestine, through the Bank's State and Peacebuilding Trust Fund. According to Ali Abu Kmail, Senior Private Sector Development Specialist at the World Bank, the institution supported the grant for the following reasons:

1. Attractiveness of the project in terms of Inclusive Growth Strategies (Tourism in West Bank specifically supporting the growth of tourism throughout villages/communities);
2. Much of tourism to the region is religious tourism. While religious tourism is part of the Abraham Path, the project provides for a broader spectrum of tourism – including adventure, hiking, and cultural exchange;
3. The Abraham Path encourages and supports female and youth participation at all levels of project through homestays, guides, and travelers;
4. The Abraham Path creates a sustainable value chain that links NGO/civil sector with the private sector for the sake of integrating business and sustainability (with the tacit support of government officials); and
5. The Abraham Path is first project of its kind in region. The World Bank envisions gaining knowledge from the project in the form of action research that will collect data to quantify the Path's effect (whether social, economic, cultural, etc.) on local communities.

2014: A new reality, other pleasant surprises, morale, and resilience

As 2014 came into focus, the World Bank grant was helpful to the Path and the organization on many fronts. For the Path in Palestine, Bank funds supported four main areas: people (including a broad range of local partners); trail development (including new sections of the Path), marketing and private sector engagement, and action research. For API, the grant meant adding more staff to work specifically on grant project management and the four areas mentioned above.

This grant strongly boosted the morale of the entire organization. With this new, high profile support, API had changed from a small NGO to an organization recognized by a significant global institution. This development also energized donors and supporters of the Path.

The team worked hard during 2014 to set the small NGO up for such a large infusion of resources. From a staff perspective, the initial exuberance was slightly tempered due to the extensive grant administration required for procurement as well as finding completely legitimate means to support the Path's local partners.

The challenge of administering the World Bank grant would pale in comparison to what emerged next -- perhaps the biggest test the Path had ever faced. The threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS alternatively IS or ISIL) burst into global and regional consciousness in June 2014 with the fall of Mosul. Subsequent ISIS

incursions across the region from Iraq into Syria created a threat to many parts of the Path and rendered lengthy sections un-walkable. The path in Syria, which was “temporarily” discontinued in 2011 and never restarted due to the violent aftermath of the Arab Spring in that country, showed no hope of being revived any time soon. Furthermore, the fighting on the Syrian-Turkish border had a negative impact on the Path in Turkey.

ISIS incursions along the border with Syria and Turkey occurred at the same time that a tragic incident occurred in the village of Yuvacali, which had become the hub of the Path in Turkey. A dispute erupted related to the Turkish national elections. The two families that largely populated the village of Yuvacali were split between supporters of the Adalet Ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP), the ruling Turkish party, and the Kurdish parties. The dispute turned violent at the polling station when members of these two families, supporting opposing parties, turned up to the voting stations with weapons. The situation escalated quickly and a number of people were shot and killed, including relatives of people working on the Path. Following this incident, the families involved in the Path were evicted from their village and had to fan out across the southeast of Turkey to begin a new life away from the only homes they had ever known. This effectively halted the participation of Yuvacali in Path development and severely crippled the progress of the Path in Turkey. This tragic conflict and the continued instability due to ISIS, only 40km away, required that travel to be suspended along the Turkish part of the Path. During the summer of 2015, violent conflict between the ruling AKP leadership and Kurdish factions in Southeastern Turkey intensified, further limiting opportunities for API in the region.

In spring 2014 the Abraham Path received a high profile boost from *National Geographic Traveller UK*, which declared it to be the new #1 walking and hiking trail in the world. This energized the staff, board, its donors, and lent it greater global credibility. At the same time, while the organization was doing well on paper, the team was feeling great pressure from many sides. Recruitment of additional staff to take pressure off the team had been slow or unsuccessful, including a failed new hire as development director. The World Bank grant, with its exacting procurement regulations and other constraints, was weighing on the team heavily. From the middle of June, the Gaza-Israel war and the increasing dominance of ISIS in Iraq and Syria took heavy tolls.

The October 2014 Board meeting was more somber in comparison to 2013. The Board focused on the resilience of the Path and the organization with an emphasis on deepening the quality of the trail and guidebook, and investing in geographical regions (Jordan, Palestine, Israel and perhaps Egypt) and markets (local markets) where the growth of walkers and local partner engagement continued apace. The board was further expanded to include Ivan Schouker, bringing his extensive senior executive, corporate advisory experience, as well as his global network of contacts from his base in Switzerland. In addition, Mark Khano, Mona Abdeljaward and Aseel Zharan were all added as disparate and thoughtful voices from the Middle East

region. Mark Khano, who has an extensive background in tourism and travel, brings that perspective and a vast network to the board. Mona Abdeljawad is a civil society leader in Jordan and has been the part of many important initiatives at that level. Aseel Zahran, who worked for the API for a number of years, recently finished her Master's Degree from Notre Dame University. Finally, Cully Lundgren was hired as the new Development Director and given the task of continuing to develop the fundraising base. Before coming to the Abraham Path, Lundgren worked for Mercy Corps, an international relief and development organization, as Director of Development for seven years. Prior to that, Lundgren had been Director of Development with Covenant House, a nonprofit working with homeless and at-risk youth. Lundgren represented a timely hire given the fact that the staff proposed, and the board approved, a 3-year *1001 Miles of Connection* campaign to raise US\$7.5 million for the years 2015-2017.

2015: Sustainability in the face of regional upheaval, a new beginning in Europe, the first long distance walk, and an open air university

During 2015 the API has continued to stabilize as an organization. However, the aforementioned regional geopolitical issues will create problems for the long-term sustainability of the Path for the foreseeable future. More work has been completed on developing a comprehensive resilience strategy and a risk assessment, both of which have been implemented. Efforts towards resilience focused on shifting the primary target audience to local hikers and domestic tourists, mapping out as much trail as possible in areas that remained the most stable for the online guidebook, and investing in more “timeless” content on historical sites relating to the cultural memory of Abraham in places like Syria, where travel is no longer possible. API's 2015 risk assessment addressed issues around geopolitical instability, trail safety, violence, reputation, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) and associated risks, and human resources retention and succession.

A significant development in 2015 was the registration of a new European NGO with the goals of trying to raise more resources from European based foundations, Governments, and institutional entities such as the European Union. This new NGO also sought to induce more Europeans to travel the Path, and generate more media exposure in Europe for the Path. Furthermore, relations with partners on the ground have stabilized and Path development continues, with additional sections of the Path in Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and exploration into the Southern Sinai in Egypt. This work has brought the total amount of continuous trail from 431KM in 2011 to 2008km (approximately 1250 miles) today,. The continued development of the Path, with a steady flow of local walkers and other groups of more than 2500 annually, is a significant accomplishment against the backdrop of a very tumultuous region.

The first long distance circular thru-hike (i.e. hike along the entire Path that is in use) from Jerusalem through Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Israel and back to Jerusalem is being planned along the southern Abraham Path during Fall 2015. This

walk will be filmed for the creation of a feature length film or documentary as part of a new media campaign. This long distance walk will make the Path even more real in many people's minds and will highlight its potential as a platform for all kinds of activity.

Finally, a group of people involved in the Path, William Ury, Josh Weiss, Shay Rabinau, David Landis, and Jessica Menasce has begun to explore the Path as an open-air university. The concept, which is in its early stages, would focus on the educational potential of the Path. Activities that are currently being explored are: 1) significantly increasing the number of faculty and students who travel the Path as an experiential learning opportunity; 2) developing an online educational component to the Path where events would be held in the online sphere by various experts connected to the Path, and 3) creating partnerships with different universities around the world that would conduct research directly on or related to the Path.

As 2015 proceeds, the Path exhibits a paradoxical feature: from an organizational standpoint, the API has never been in better shape, both as a long-distance walking trail and as an organization. At the same time, the Middle East region is more challenging than ever as a venue for would-be Path developer and walkers with no end in sight to the myriad of conflicts that rage in the region.

Summary of Accomplishments and Lessons

A snapshot of the accomplishments of the Path from 2013 through 2015 would include:

	Current Total (2015)	2013 Projection
Total trail scouted and mapped	2008km (123 days)	1760km
Continuous Trail ¹⁶	1695km (105 days)	1228km
Walkers per year ¹⁷	2563 (2014), 1702 YTD	2339
Local Partners ¹⁸	10	15
API staff based in Middle East	9	7
API Budget	\$2 million	\$1 million
Direct grants to local partners	\$105,000	\$100-200,000

¹⁶ Continuous trail in Jordan, Palestine, Israel & Egypt (requires ferry between Aqaba and S. Sinai). Currently, no opportunities exist to increase this unless security improves.

¹⁷ Total walker volume from summer 2014 was due to local use increase loosely corresponding to a decrease in international use. Data is conservative and reliable to the extent of APIs capacity to measure it via partner tour operators and self-reporting groups/individuals. Data collection channels over-emphasize numbers from Palestine and Jordan.

¹⁸ Focus on quality over quantity, but greater diversification of local partners would increase overall stakeholder support and project reach across region.

Similarly, a set of possible lessons have been drawn by various staff and Board members from these four years of remarkable progress in difficult times. From a board and staff perspective, these tentative lessons may be characterized as follows:

1. Local use of the path is the bedrock of its sustainability in the near term and not the flow of international travellers, which will come and go in waves, and could decline for a good while depending on political conditions in the region. Local use has only been growing since the start of the weekly walks;
2. Local ownership and local partner investment in sections of the trail are the only pathways to sustainability. This could include the API being a global umbrella or an associated brand, but local brands (e.g., the Masar Ibrahim in Palestine, the Jordan Trail, etc.) being at the forefront in both local development and local branding. This is counterintuitive to many in the West, who would prefer to simplify and see one cross-regional brand emphasizing cross-border connections. The API (board and staff) has shown it understands these nuances and is leaning towards empowering the network of trail brands rather than an elegant, simple, top-down but arguably less desirable alternative.
3. The project's Achilles heel—Middle East regional turmoil—is also one of its greatest assets. A hopeful project based in the Middle East is an easy draw to the world's media. The API is able to tell a story about humanity that is relevant for the world at large, not just the Middle East. In other words, for a similar project in a less daunting region it would be much harder to create an attention-grabbing platform. The Path has only just begun to realize and make use of this potential asset.
4. The social impact of the Path (cohesion between local communities, quality of life, health, etc.) likely proves to far outweigh the direct economic benefits. Research for the World Bank suggests that this is the case, as does the team's experience on the ground with stakeholders. The impact of this is still preliminary, but it will be important to learn how investments in the Path can be geared towards enhancing social cohesion on a broader scale throughout the Middle East.

Key challenges going forward

Over its short lifetime since 2006, the Path has faced a number of challenges. Many were beyond the API's control: from wars to terrorism, to economic turmoil, and to the Arab Spring with its complex aftermath. Throughout, the project has forged ahead and exhibited a resilience not seen by many NGOs.¹⁹ Part of the reason for this resilience has been a persistent mantra evoked at the outset of the project by one of the early key people involved in the Path, Elias Amidon. As he advised the board and staff at the time, "When we come up against all of these problems and challenges we see them as boulders in the road. We can try to push through them or go over them. But we would be better if we were more like water, gently and slowly

¹⁹ The Path was featured in a book by Andrew Zolli called Resilience: Why things bounce back. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2013.

finding a way around them.”²⁰ With that mindset many further challenges confront the Path in late 2015:

Challenge #1: Creating a sustainable and resilient Path in the midst of a long-term period of chaos and change in the entire Middle East with a deep drop in tourism.

There is no greater issue confronting the Abraham Path than the one that is outside its control – namely the regional turmoil in the form of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the civil war in Syria and Iraq; and the precarious position of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan; the refugee crises; the rise of ISIS and other militia groups; the terrorist attacks in North Sinai, and, as a consequence of all this, the shifting regional fault lines that continue to affect the overall climate of the region. Even with that daunting list of geopolitical challenges it is worth keeping in mind that the Abraham Path project was not created in anticipation of a region that is about to flourish, but was conceived because the status of the Middle East and its relations with the rest of the world were and will likely continue to be in a dire position.

One of the many implications of such uncertainty is the impact on tourism²¹. While the Path has created a thoughtful plan for how to manage the situation²² there are many unforeseen dilemmas if the situation in the region from a security perspective does not improve. Local walks have proved to be the backbone of this approach, but can they last over the long term? Under what conditions would people start traveling to the region again in larger numbers? And how long can the local communities along the Path, who have been involved in and benefitted from the Path, stay engaged and supportive?

Challenge #2: The Name

To a number of API staff members and local partners, the terms “Abraham” and “Ibrahim” have strong connotations of Israel and land claims. Given the escalations of tensions and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the association of the Path and the names “Abraham” and “Ibrahim” are a deterrent to involvement and expansion. How should those considerations be managed?

Challenge #3: How to make the Path ‘real’ in people’s minds.

One of the biggest refrains heard about the Path is “that it is a wonderful concept, but can it actually become real?” Of course the Path is very real with 1250 contiguous miles mapped over 6,000 people having walked since 2008. The Path also has a remarkable media presence; stories have been written or aired on National Geographic, CNN, the BBC, Der Spiegel, Globo, and Fantastico, to name just a few outlets.

²⁰ Quote from board meeting in May 2005 in Boulder, CO.

²¹ See www2.unwto.org for data and statistics related to tourism in the Middle East. .

²² See the resilience plan that was eluded to earlier.

The challenge then is one of branding and making the Path come to life on the ground, but also in the consciousness of a much wider segment of the public at large. While the physical Path is clearly important as a platform for all types of interactions, the Path as a symbol is truly the heart of the endeavor. The Path is a symbol of human connection and common ancestry as well as courage in the face of daunting obstacles. .

So, with all the media attention and proof of concept, why is this not sticking in people's minds and having the maximum impact? What will enable the Path as a symbol for human connection and our common ancestry to come to the forefront? How can the Path be branded to embody its true essence? And if the API is able to brand the Path to its potential, how will this relate to the first challenge mentioned above?

Challenge #4: Can the organization find new funders and keep long-term supporters involved over time? And how will the Path ultimately sustain itself going forward?

The organization has done well when it comes to funding over the 11 years of its existence. There have been many valuable and committed individuals, foundations, and institutions that have provided multiple years of resources. With the recent addition of the World Bank monies, the organization and local partners not only received a sizable infusion of resources, but also the credibility that comes with such support. Furthermore, with the creation of a European entity, a relatively "new" source of funds may become available. However, there is also "donor fatigue" that takes hold in most long-term endeavors -- a problem the organization has experienced to some extent.

How can the organization continue to keep current donors on board given the circumstances in the region? How can the organization attract new donors that will help it with its sustainability challenge? And ultimately how can the Path reach a point of sustainability so the primary revenue comes down to traveler and host, with the need for outside funding from the organization further diminished?

Challenge # 5: What is next for the Path now that it has been initiated?

With the first long distance walk along the Path planned for the second half of 2015, as well as other innovative ideas, such as the open air university concept, there are many options for what the Path can be used for and become in the future. Will the Path be a platform for many varied activities? If so, what are the possibilities? Is it best seen as a walking and hiking route? Or could it gain the most traction as that open-air university? Ultimately, how can it become a powerful symbol for humanity that truly makes a difference to those who live along the route, the people who travel, and those that observe from afar?