

American Baptist leaders return from study tour in Middle East

by [Bob Allen](#)

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VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP) -- A delegation of 12 American Baptist leaders recently returned from a 13-day study tour in the Middle East.

Goals of the trip included helping American Baptists become more familiar with the life of the church in the Middle East, learning how Christians and Muslims in the Middle East are building bridges in the face of the rise of radical Islam and better understanding the forces at play that make the Holy Land a powder keg.

Roy Medley, general secretary of American Baptist Churches USA, described the Nov. 28-Dec. 13 trip as "an excellent learning experience."

Highlights of the trip included a day-long visit with Prince Ghazi, a member of the royal family of Jordan, at a recently opened center on the Jordan River marking the spot where Jesus is believed to have been baptized.

Medley delivered a major [address](#) Dec. 2 to a predominantly Sunni Muslim crowd about Baptists' role in defending religious liberty in the United States.

The tour began with intensive study at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut facilitated by author Colin Chapman, an expert on Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. Prior to making the trip the Americans [read](#) books including Chapman's *Cross and Crescent* and *Blood Brothers* by Elias Chador.

In addition to dialogue with Muslims, the group had opportunities to interact with Arab Christians in the Middle East. "It is clear that our Arab sisters and brothers need our continued prayers as they faithfully

strive to serve Christ under extreme and challenging conditions that tear apart their daily lives," the group stated in a [press release](#).

One message driven home more than once was that when derogatory or inflammatory statements are made about Islam in the West, the churches in the East suffer as radicals use those statements to inflame others.

Medley said delegates also came away keenly aware of negative effects of Christian Zionism -- a view that Israel has absolute right to the land because the Bible says so -- and the complexities of U.S. policies in the region.

In a [blog](#) written on the road Dec. 5, Medley said the path to peace and reconciliation in the Mideast is not an easy one.

"The attitudes towards Israel vary from 'we can never accept its existence' to 'we can live with Israel as a state if there is justice for the Palestinians,'" he wrote. "The appeal for justice for Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, demands our attention."

"Just as Christians do not accept uncritically every action of our government as in accord with our faith, nor can we accept every action of Israel as worthy of support," Medley said. "As U.S. Christians we are rightly challenged to develop a more balanced view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the justice issues present in those communities."

The group said it found a "genuine desire" among many Islamic leaders for improved relations between Muslims and Christians. Arab Baptist Theological Seminary received high marks for its efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation between the two faith communities.

While dialogue among religious leaders and scholars is important, participants agreed the real need is to get similar conversations going in villages and communities to bring people together locally to better understand one another and work together for the good of all.

"I came on the trip with an open mind, wanting to learn as much as I could," said participant June Peters, "but there is much more to learn and much more work to be done in this part of the world."