‘The importance of interfaith cooperation for the protection of Jerusalem’s holy sites’

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(2012)

Found in:

Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine, Chapter 11

Edited by Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter and Leonard Hammer

New York: Routledge

(2012)
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In February 2007 tensions over renovations of an unsafe bridge at the Mughrabi Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem exploded. Muslim demonstrators, reacting to perceived Jewish desires to take over the Temple Mount/Haram compound and encouraged by Muslim religious leaders, rushed to defend their holy sites which they believed were under attack. The violence, which left several people injured, subsided a week later following a decision by the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish mayor of Jerusalem, Uri Lupoliansky, to postpone further work on the bridge pending reexamination of the plans and amidst heavy criticism by some Israelis for "kowtowing" to Muslim extremism. The issue has still not been resolved at the time of this writing and the tender box is waiting to explode again at the next spark. The bridge is in a state of collapse, cannot be used by visitors and pilgrims to the area, and reconstruction, at some point for the sake of safety if no other, will need to continue.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommended to its Director-General in March 2007, that Israel be asked to stop excavations immediately, engage in a consultation process with all parties and continue the process under supervision of a team of international experts. This decision was later taken up by UNESCO's Executive Board of Directors, who emphasized in their statement the great universal value of Jerusalem for all three major religions.

Two professional meetings took place in Jerusalem on 13 January and 24 February 2008 between Israeli and Jordanian (including waqf) experts, in order to discuss the proposed design for the Mughrabi ascent. The World Heritage Center requested that international advisory bodies examine proposals presented by experts on either side. At that time, a Jerusalem panel approved an alternate plan to build a bridge around Mughrabi gate.

An Executive Board decision on 16 May 2008 cited recommendations from experts as well as previous UNESCO decisions and affirmed "that the principle aim of the final design of the Mughrabi ascent should maintain the authenticity and integrity of the site."

At a meeting on 18 August, 2008, a statement noted that the professional meetings "were conducted in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding and showed the importance of technical dialogue between experts to address complex issues that require consultation and consensus of different stakeholders. At this session, UNESCO's Executive Board requested that the World Heritage Centre continue monitoring at least every three months until a meeting in 2009 in order "to verify Israeli authorities continue to cooperate with all concerned parties on the issue, in particular with Jordanian and waqf experts" to "organize a technical follow-up meeting at the site with all concerned parties for additional exchanges of information to enable all necessary inputs to be considered."
On 20 October 2008, the organization reported that the Jerusalem District Planning and Construction Commission had decided on a planning scheme for the Mughrabi ascent, despite several objections lobbied at public hearings a few months prior. In a follow-up meeting on 3 May 2010, UNESCO noted that “circumstances” had impeded Jordanian experts from conducting an assessment of their own – as concerned parties – at the site. The organization thus “reiterate[d] its concern” that the authenticity and integrity of the site be reflected in any alternative plans for the Mughrabi ascent. UNESCO further emphasized its support for the organization of a meeting of concerned parties to evaluate all alternative building plans before their final approval.

This incident highlights the enormous sensitivity of its components – Jerusalem, holy sites, and the role of religious and political leadership in the region – as well as their power to promote peace or the reverse. This chapter will examine these aspects in relation to one another while reflecting on the following questions; what role can interfaith cooperation amongst religious leaders of the Holy Land play in assuaging the growing volatility of religious passions around Jerusalem’s holy sites? Given the political context and backdrop of conflict, can leaders of different faiths in the region together promote an environment of mutual respect and dignity for religious adherents that helps safeguard holy sites?

These questions assume ab initio that interfaith cooperation in the Middle East is possible. And indeed, if the author had been asked before the turn of the millennium, this chapter might have offered a different response. Interreligious relations in Israel prior to this had primarily taken place between Christians and Jews, according to Rabbi Ron Kronish, head of the Interreligious Coordinating Council, in Israel. A Jewish–Christian–Muslim dialogue held in 1996 was the first of its kind in Israel and, rather than involving any substantive discussions, was styled as a series of “learning sessions” on common values. The World Council of Churches, which in 2001 launched a ‘Decade Against Violence’ appeared to focus on the importance of dialogue regarding concrete political issues such as occupation, when it released a statement that “people of different nations, cultures and backgrounds should engage in “creative dialogue” to seek nonviolent solutions to problems,” a comment that supported interfaith dialogue, if not necessarily interfaith intervention. A statement, for example, made on 14 September 2001, by the WCC’s Executive Committee reaffirms the Organization’s policies for the “pursuit of a just peace in the Middle East, and for the status of Jerusalem, and its commitment to active dialogue among Christians, Muslims and Jews” demonstrates encouragement for dialogue but does not actually consolidate principles. Likewise, centers such as the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Study have for a long time encouraged networking between leaders and adherents of various faiths.

However, it was not until January 2002 that such cooperation took on a more diplomatic/political orientation, when prominent religious leaders from the Holy Land formally convened together for the very first time in Alexandria, Egypt, and a new era of interfaith activity was born in the region with the signing of the Alexandria Declaration.

Given the significance of the Alexandria process, this chapter will employ a case study methodology with regard to that process in an attempt to examine the role of moderate voices (emanating from religious institutional authorities) can play in halting the growing de-legitimization of the other’s religious identity. It assumes that religion, potentially, has the capacity to be a potent force in overcoming barriers and divisions both within and between faiths and that it can be utilized as a powerful tool for building mutual trust.
A further assumption is that a peace-promoting and collaborative relationship amongst religious leaders of different faiths can and does influence adherents to follow in their footsteps. Moreover this positive effect is multiplied when leadership relationships manage to break down the human psychological process of “othering,” that is segregating and excluding, while simultaneously modeling, through mutual respect, the sustaining of individual identity.23

It should perhaps also be noted that general theories of conflict resolution tend to give religion a wide berth. Very often they conclude that “religion, having so often inspired, legitimated and exacerbated deadly conflicts, cannot be expected to contribute to their peaceful transformation.”24 In his seminal book on the subject, R. Scott Appleby rejects this view, pointing to the groundswell of “religious peace-building” in various communities, a view which has been reinforced of late by other scholars writing on religion and conflict resolution.25

This chapter will analyze the role of religious leadership in promoting peace, while acknowledging the injurious role it can play in exacerbating conflict. According to Jonathan Fox, there is a general understanding “that all religions have within them both violent and peaceful tendencies.”26 Using Nikki Keddie’s definition of peaceful tendencies within religion as “quietist” ones, he notes that “long established religions have ideologies and doctrines that are so diverse and complex that justification for both quietism and violence can be found within their traditions.” Fox posits, and attempts to answer the question, “what is it that causes the adherents of religion to use their doctrine to support violent or quietist activities?” by examining environmental and structural theories, case studies, lists of propositions about the relationships between religion and conflict and even the qualities of the religions themselves.27

Perhaps the real problem is the search for a general theory of religion that can answer the tremendous variety of ways religion and conflict intersect. In most situations where contradictions abound – generally the case when human beings are involved – an either/or approach does not reflect reality. Religion can both be part of the problem and part of the solution. However by encouraging the latter, the former may be minimized.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem, a city sacred to three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is also a city divided by its faiths. Muslims, Christians and Jews rarely enter each other’s neighborhoods, let alone each other’s homes, and know very little about each other’s religion. Not only do they rarely meet socially, there is no compulsory school curriculum offering courses to acquaint pupils with the basic tenets and practices of other religions.28 Jerusalem’s inhabitants, for the most part, are ignorant of the significance of the holy places in each other’s faith and do not visit them, either out of choice or because their religion precludes them from doing so.29 Recent years have seen a correlating rise (whether related to this ignorance is unclear) in the denial of acknowledgement of the religious attachments of faiths to their holy sites by adherents of other religions.30

It is no wonder that the names of the Old City’s quarters are so distinctly and definitively divided in religious terms. The Muslim, Jewish, Armenian and Christian Quarters together span approximately one square kilometer but are clearly delineated according to the religious persuasions of their inhabitants. Rather than embodying mutual religious respect and understanding, this distinct religious divide reflects inter-religious separation, ignorance and often fear. This has global implications for the millions of people throughout the world who look to Jerusalem for spiritual uplift.
Jerusalmites, of course, do not live in a vacuum and the Arab–Israeli conflict has taken its toll. What was once a basically amicable arrangement, under Ottoman rule, of separate Muslim and Jewish development for socio-cultural and religious reasons, deteriorated under the British Mandate as animosity grew. War in 1948 resulted in the division of the city into Eastern and Western Jerusalem, the former in the hands of Jordan, the latter becoming the capital of the fledgling State of Israel.\textsuperscript{31}

It is important to note that the Arab–Israeli conflict is first and foremost a territorial one and the present situation between Israelis and Palestinians reflects two nations fighting for the same piece of real estate, an area smaller than the American state of New Jersey. When the secular leaders, Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser and Israel’s David Ben Gurion, went to war they were not motivated by religious sentiment. They were fighting for their nation’s right to sovereignty on physical territory.

However religion is inextricably bound up with the identities of the peoples involved in the territorial struggle, as was palpably felt by the euphoria of Israelis upon capturing East Jerusalem and unifying the city in 1967 after the Six Day War. An iconic image of the period has come to symbolize and epitomize the fusion of nationalism and religion – that of the Israeli soldier, rifle on shoulder, praying and crying with joy as he stands against the Western Wall, Judaism’s holiest site, whose accessibility for Jews had been forbidden since 1948. Religious Zionists call the creation of the Israeli state, “the first flowering of our redemption.”\textsuperscript{32} For them, the potential arrival of the Messiah is being hastened by events such as these in Jewish history.

Jerusalem remains a, if not the, focal point of extreme contention in the Middle East conflict, and it is becoming accepted wisdom that a solution to its final status cannot be left until “later” as was agreed upon in the failed Oslo Accords.\textsuperscript{33} In the meanwhile attitudes relating to holy sites are hardening. Not only do extremists on all sides deny the attachment of other religions to their holy places, but ordinary citizens are frightened that their own holy places are being delegitimized and are open to physical attack. There is an enormous need to diffuse this fear and anger which is ready to explode at any time.

**Jerusalem’s holy sites**

In his study on sacred space and the problem of indivisibility, Ron Hassner defines sacred places as those that are “set apart, centers for a religious community and axes linking heaven and earth.” The parameters of centrality and exclusivity define a two-dimensional continuum that assesses how likely it is for the sacred site to be the focus of conflict – “the more central the site in the spiritual landscape of the community and the more restricted [are] access to and behaviour within the space, the more likely it is that challenges to the sacred site will lead to conflict.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus, “the integrity, boundaries and nonfungibility of sacred places create conditions for indivisible conflict.”\textsuperscript{35} This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced when the same holy site is highly sacred to more than one religion.

The most obvious problem in relation to finding a solution around the issue of sacred places in Jerusalem is that the holiest place for Jews, the Western Wall, believed to be the outer wall of the ancient Temple that according to Jewish belief was built on the Temple Mount, is on the exact same site as Al-Haram Al-Sharif where the revered and holy Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock Mosques are situated. Disputes involving religious ideals and indivisible boundaries normally provide no room for compromise. Forced arrangements of shared control over sacred places might repress the conflict but they are extremely volatile and are often short-lived. Hassner offers examples from the Holy Land itself to
demonstrate the fragility of forced solutions by political actors – that of the volatile arrangement at the Tomb of the Patriarchs (Cave of Machpela) in Hebron and the continued in-fighting over authority and responsibility for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City of Jerusalem by different Christian denominations. Moreover any change in the Status Quo becomes an opportunity for the religious parties to renew their violence, as depicted in the Mughrabi Gate incident that opened this chapter.

Religious identity

Mohammed Abu Nimr, Director of the Peacebuilding and Development Institute, has pointed out that "religious identity is one of the most powerful sources in shaping attitudes and actions in a conflict zone." The Middle East provides a prime example of how a conflict, first and foremost over land, has fed into people’s primal fears of loss of identity, dignity and security – fears which can be both allayed and stoked by religious identification. Little wonder that the land which the three Abrahamic faiths call holy has become the container for such a seemingly intractable conflict. People are often prepared to risk their own lives, and forfeit others, in the name of religion and, when they sense that this profound aspect of their identity is being threatened, they tend to withdraw and become more insular while at the same time portraying the perceived enemy in two-dimensional terms. They are also inclined to a growing self-righteousness which enables justification of their struggle, encourages delegitimization, or at the very least diminishment, of the other’s position and leads to a growing demonization of the enemy. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Arab–Israeli conflict, where all the players feel their identities are under threat, religion plays such a central role in both reflecting and reinforcing these characteristics – so much so that it is often seen as the main motivator for, and source of, the conflict.

Thus religion can, and often does, exacerbate mutual alienation which compounds the conflict. Too often this results in religion becoming synonymous, in many people’s minds, with violence, suffering and extremism and loses its power to be a force for peace, justice and reconciliation. The Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular, holds religious significance for millions of religious adherents of the Abrahamic faiths around the world. Yet there has been little attempt to harness the positive values of these religions, and their influential leaders, so that they can be part of the solution to the conflict rather than simply part of the problem. To the contrary: the religious dimension is all but ignored. Various reasons have been postulated for this disregard, from religious prejudice, as a result of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy; what Edward Luttwak calls “secular reductionism,” the fear, subconscious or overt, that state power does not really have the tools to deal with intractable religious forces and thus one is better off ignoring or repressing them.

Rabbi David Rosen recalls a meeting he attended in Cairo with President Hosni Mubarak in 1997 when the Oslo peace process was still advancing, although at a painfully slow pace. During the meeting it was suggested that the president could play an important role in bringing religious leaders together for the sake of peace. His immediate response was, “religious leaders; you should keep far away from them! That is a very dangerous idea!” Although al-Qaeda’s September 11 2001 terrorist attack on the United States knocked the policy of ignoring the religious dimension on its head, little has in fact been done since to include religious voices in the Middle East peace process. President Mubarak’s uncompromising attitude towards religious leaders did temporarily change in the shadow of the September 11 attack, as will be noted further on, but practically, little has happened to ameliorate this neglect.
Yet more and more scholars are noting that “a new form of conflict transformation—religious peace building—is taking shape on the ground, in and across local communities plagued by violence.”41 Thomas Farr, for example, decries policy that relies on an assumption of increasing secularization in the modern age, noting that in fact the opposite is occurring and that “polls from across the globe show a growth in religious affiliation and in the desire for religious leaders to be more involved in politics.”42 In response, he suggests that US policymakers must find ways to work with religious scholars in states such as Iran, where religion is a driving factor behind Iran’s regional behavior. Such an approach was, in fact, implicitly espoused by Douglas Johnston in 1994 in his study on the contribution of religious and spiritual leaders on peacemaking, when he noted that there was an “observable expansion” in the role of religious leaders “in the conduct of various forms of mediation and conflict resolution.”43 One such example is the Community of St. Egidio (CSE), a Rome-based Catholic organization, which led efforts to work with local bishops to put an end to Mozambique’s civil war in the late 1980s.44

Conflict resolution is defined as a “political process through which the parties in conflict eliminate the perceived incompatibility between their goals and interests and establish a new situation of perceived compatibility.”45 This form of resolution, normally carried out by “track one” diplomacy may be effective, however deep the divide, if the conflict is one based on material issues for example, land and/or other assets. But when the conflict includes major issues of identity and “has been fueled by feelings of injustice and victimization” it “demands more than a formal accommodation and needs forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation.”46

Yehudith Auerbach investigated the potential contribution of religion in terminating conflicts through the examination of forgiveness as a religious concept common to various faiths, both in terms of its benefits and its limits. She also notes the difference between conflict resolution and reconciliation. Reconciliation, she suggests, is a much broader concept involving psychological, social, emotional and even spiritual processes that allow for the transformation of trauma-induced pain and sense of victimhood into an openness to attempt a peaceful future with “the enemy.” Such a role can be played by “track two” religious efforts attempting to reach reconciliation by examining shared beliefs that “can serve as a spiritual bridge” over the divide.47 It is, she believes, the process by which religious efforts are most likely to bear fruit.48

“Religionizing” of the conflict

The need to make religious leaders’ voices part of the solution in the Middle East conflict has become even more acute in recent years in light of the “religionizing” process taking place in relation to the conflict. Not by chance was Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount the lightening rod for the Intifada which broke out in September 2000 and became popularly known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The name became a constant reminder to the world of how religion can both symbolize and uphold the Palestinians’ ongoing struggle against Israel. The choice of the then Likud leader Ariel Sharon (a secular man) to “prove” Israel’s authority by his visit to this most sensitive of holy sites became the spark or—depending on one’s perspective—the pretext for the Intifada, thereby reflecting the explosive danger of fusing religion, politics and territory.49

Indeed, throughout the Muslim world, there is an increasingly held perception that Muslim holy sites are under threat in the Holy Land and in jeopardy from Israeli and Jewish malevolent intent. The mosques on Al-Haram Al-Sharif are considered in particular
danger from extremist Jewish elements visioning a third Jewish Temple on the site. At the same time, Jews, both in Israel and throughout the world, sense that their historic and religious attachment to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount is overwhelmingly denied and belittled in the Muslim world. This dangerous phenomenon of delegitimizing the other's religious identity and attachments will make any possible peace solution all the more difficult to reach and implement in the future. It is imperative that it is halted and reversed by moderate and influential voices emanating from the institutional and spiritual authorities of the Abrahamic religions in the region.

Hassan offers the role of the Saudi ulama in suspending the prohibition on the use of force in the incident of the 1979 hostage crisis in the Grand Mosque in Mecca as an example of how religious actors are uniquely capable of introducing some flexibility into the rules governing sacred space under constrained conditions. He warns that we ignore the power of these actors at our peril.

The disregard for religion's role in any potential solution has, in fact, only exacerbated the problem as religion is so inextricably bound up with the political life of the inhabitants and their core identities. It is interesting to note that, at the Camp David talks in 2000, when President Clinton suggested a vertical division of the site on Al-Haram Al-Sharif/ Temple Mount, giving the section of the Holy of Holies to the Jews and the level of the upper floor to the Muslims, Palestinian Authority President, Yasser Arafat's response was to deny the existence of a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem claiming that it had been situated in Nablus (Shechem). Moreover he emphasized that the whole issue of holy sites was a wider Islamic issue and not simply a Palestinian one. This may be taken to illustrate that any possibility of negotiations concerning a future regime in Jerusalem must take into account the regional religious authorities as well as the local political leaders.

The victory of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006 demonstrates the broad and sweeping role of religion in Palestinian political life even if one of the main perceived reasons for its success was the pervasive corruption of the opposing Fatah movement. The widely displayed photograph of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, together with Hamas leaders Ismail Haniya and Khaled Mashal, swathed in traditional white cloth while on a hajj in Mecca – there for the signing of the ill-fated Mecca agreement on Palestinian national unity in February 2007 – bears testimony to the significance of this religious role. In this instance, religious formalism attempted to play a part in unifying the camps within Palestine that were on the verge of civil war.

**Religion as part of the solution**

Religion can act as a powerful force in reducing barriers within and between faiths. The Abrahamic religious traditions present in the region emphasize the One Source of all life and the common bond between humanity. Islam, Judaism and Christianity unanimously proclaim the sanctity of human life and the inalienability of human dignity. But all too often fear, insecurity and recurring trauma triumph over the universal values of commonality and mutual dignity leading to demonization of the other and to conflict. Unquestionably, the conflict touches deep-seated needs for recognition and acknowledgement that feeds on past traumas and fears, not only of the inhabitants of the region, but also of adherents to the three faiths worldwide.

The Jewish experience of thousands of years of religious persecution and anti-Semitism, dimming in, but not concluding with, the Holocaust has created traumas within the Jewish psyche which may be indelible.
The Palestinian people are also traumatized by Al Nakba, the catastrophe they suffered during the 1948 war, which resulted in Israeli independence and Palestinian dispersion, the continuing plight of millions of refugees in soul-destroying camps, the brutal consequences of ongoing occupation and the lack of any political resolution for their fight for national independence.

So how does one provide hope to people who have suffered so much; to guide them towards a path that follows "the way of pleasantness for all its paths are peace." On a very practical and essential level there is a need for a political solution. Anything else, without a political path to peace, is at best damage control. But at the same time the total breakdown of the Oslo Accords by the beginning of 2000 reflected a process which had not engaged and transformed the attitudes of both peoples towards the enemy other. The essential need for recognition and dignity on both sides was not met and thus there was no basis for building trust. The power of religious leaders to use texts that incite people to violence is clearly evident. Would religious leaders have an influence on their adherents if they emphasized the universal and common values of reconciliation and peace (found in most faith-based texts) and sincerely followed them? Timing is crucial but in the right setting, they could provide the psycho-spiritual glue that differentiates between hope and despair and which results in the building of mutual trust.

Such intervention and guidance by religious leaders can manifest itself in two ways. Several personal religious efforts have taken place in an unofficial capacity by unitary individual clerics. One such exemplary case is Menachem Froman, rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, who has been involved in interfaith dialogue for many years. This dialogue has included meetings with Hamas leaders — such as Sheikh Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas spokesman in Gaza, and Sheikh Jamil Hamami, founder of Hamas in the West Bank — since 1990 and, prior to that, with Palestinian sheikhs via Egyptian, Palestinian and Israeli-Arab intermediaries. Several months after the Second Intifada broke out, Froman spoke separately with then-PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and with Israeli leaders to receive approval for the creation of a joint council of Jewish and Muslim clerics to work for peace; shortly thereafter, he established the council in collaboration with Sheikh Talal Sider.

In late 2007, he began working with Hebron-area journalist Khaled Amaryeh who is close to Hamas. In February 2008 the two publicized a draft proposal for a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas whose implementation included the cessation of hostilities towards Gaza, the imposition of a widespread halt to rocket fire and the release of abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The document was submitted to the Israel cabinet and to the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip.

Shortly afterward, in February 2009, Froman wrote an opinion editorial expressing his views on the potential to make peace with Hamas by using rabbis as the mediating tool. He opined that "to successfully negotiate with Hamas, one needs to understand how the religious organization thinks [...] and] those who understand that best are religious Jews."

Similarly, Eliyahu McLean, an active member of the Peacemaker Community, hosted several interfaith peace gatherings, particularly in 2004 and 2005, that provided a platform for individuals of different faiths to experience "people to people" meetings. In 2004, McLean was among the founders of the Jerusalem Peacemakers, associated with the international Peacemakers' network. In this capacity, the Jerusalem Peacemakers' community continues what McLean started as an individual peacemaker. One of his colleagues, the late Abdullah Aziz Bukhari, a Sheikh of the Sufi tradition and head of the Uzbeke community in Jerusalem, had participated in a variety of interfaith meetings in recent years to help promote understanding between Muslims and Jews in Israel.
A more institutionalized approach to interfaith interactions is evident at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Although technically a place of Jewish learning, the Hartman Institute, founded and led by Rabbi David Hartman, describes itself as a “pluralistic research and leadership institute.” In terms of interfaith dialogue, the institute has hosted, for the past two decades, a theological conference that brings together theologians of all three Abrahamic faiths. However, its approach is rather unique in that it focuses on “intra-faith” dialogues within each religion rather than dialogues between the faiths.

In addition, however, there is the formal institutional religious authority in the region: that of the appointed official religious leaders of each state or entity. In this capacity, and in contrast to the above informal cooperative efforts, institutionalized religion can play both a positive and undermining role in peace efforts.

As institutional leaders are subject to, and often appointed by, the respective Israeli and Arab political authorities, their positions are clerical rather than prophetic in nature and are almost inherently tied to a particular national policy. Thus, in many cases, political stagnation and religious negativity reinforce each other. However when there is a political desire to resolve conflict, the link between state authority and institutional religious leadership can actually compound the promotion of reconciliation, while working together to diffuse the violence.

The Alexandria Declaration

A serious attempt to make this happen took place in Alexandria, Egypt, in January 2002, as the Al-Aqsa Intifada was building up to new crescendos of violence with hundreds of people being killed on both sides. The Alexandria Declaration was the culmination of a process reached at the first ever official meeting of leaders of the Abrahamic faiths of the Holy Land. It was convened by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, and hosted by Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed El Tantawi, the head of Islam’s foremost seat of learning, Al-Azhar. The meeting ended with a joint declaration, decrying violence and with a commitment to work for peace in the region.

While both the religious leaders and their political leaderships supported the declaration in principle, the timing of the declaration, in the middle of the extremely violent second Intifada, was such that widespread appeal among both Israeli and Palestinian populations was limited.

During a solidarity visit to the beleaguered inhabitants of the Holy Land in 2001, Dr Carey answered the suggestion he had received from (now President of Israel) Shimon Peres to actively use his position to promote religious reconciliation in the region. As in the political arena, it was clear that an outside party was needed to mediate between the peoples in conflict. The position of the Anglican Church worldwide and the moral authority reflected in the figurehead of the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, were significant factors in encouraging religious leaders to participate. But just as important was the heartwarming personality of the Archbishop himself whose open sincerity enabled the first bricks to be laid towards building bridges of trust.

Just as the need for an outside third party to mediate the relationships became clear, it seemed crucial to find a significant Arab Muslim host to provide authority and status to the talks. Moreover the bitter antagonism between Israelis and Palestinians would not allow for a joint meeting of religious leaders to take place locally. A venue needed to be found that was near enough to conveniently gather the leaders of the three faiths from the Holy Land but far enough away not to be directly affected by the violence. An additional and
significant factor was the lack of authority that the voice of the Palestinian religious leadership commanded in the Islamic world. It was therefore imperative to find a Muslim leader, or institution of standing, that could provide both support and a safety net for the Palestinian Muslims. Providentially, the Anglican Church’s institutional relationship with Al-Azhar, the fountainhead of Islamic learning in the Muslim world at large, encouraged the Grand Imam, Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed El Tantawi of Al-Azhar, to prevail upon to answer affirmatively the request of his Anglican colleague, and he agreed to host the meeting of religious leaders in Alexandria, Egypt. This relationship in itself testifies to the power of interfaith cooperation to serve the wider good when the need arises.

Palestinian Muslim leaders who participated in the meeting included Sheikh Talal El Sidr, a prominent religious leader from Hebron and a man of uncompromising sincerity, uprightness and charisma. He was a co-founder and member of the Hamas movement but left it in the realization that its beliefs were incompatible with his desire to promote peace in the region through religious reconciliation. At the time of the Alexandria Declaration Sheikh Talal El Sidr was a minister of state in the Palestinian Authority and therefore represented both a religious and a political voice. Tragically this influential and popular religious leader succumbed to a massive stroke at the age of 52, fell into a coma and died a year later in February 2007.

Other prominent Palestinian religious leaders attending were Sheikh Taisir el Tamimi, Chief Justice of the Palestinian Shari’a courts, Sheikh Abdusalem Abu Shkedem, Mufti of the Palestinian Armed Forces and Sheikh Taweel, Mufti of Bethlehem. Sheikh Ikrem Sabri, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, although officially invited, was noticeably absent, but taking into account his vehemently anti-Israel views as well as his denial of Jewish religious attachment to the Temple Mount, this was hardly surprising. Feisal Husseini, the Palestinian Authority minister for Jerusalem affairs, until his death in 2001, was instrumental in recruiting the Muslim contingent to this summit, as were members of PASSIA—the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.

The Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, a religious leader with a strong interest in the pursuit of peace with Muslims, was encouraged to participate in the Alexandria meeting by Rabbi Michael Melchior who was at that time deputy foreign minister of Israel by virtue of his position as head of the Meimad faction within the Labour Party which was in coalition with Ariel Sharon’s government. Rabbi Melchior, like Sheikh Talal El Sidr, attended the meeting, both as a representative of the Israeli government responsible for the interreligious relations of the state, and as a religious leader. As the overriding purpose of the meeting was to give voice to a call for peace from leaders that would ripple down and hopefully influence religious followers, it was important that representative religious leaders also be present.

In addition, the Jewish delegation included Rabbi David Brodman, Chief Rabbi of Savyon, and Rabbi Yitzchak Rabbag, Chief Rabbi of Maalot Daphna. Rabbi Menachem Froman, paradoxically both a founder of Gush Emunim, the settler movement, the rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Tekoa and a veteran peace activist, was also a signatory to the Alexandria Declaration, as was Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, by virtue of his longstanding work in the field of interfaith relations both in the Middle East and internationally.

Christian leaders representing the primary Christian denominations in the Holy Land also participated in this historic gathering. The Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah was present as well as Archbishop Aristarchos, Secretary General of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, representing the Greek Orthodox Patriarch; Archbishop Boutros
Mualem, the Melkite Archbishop; Archbishop Chinchinian, representative of the Armenian Patriarch; and the Rt. Rev. Riah Abu El-Assal, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. In other words, representatives of the primary religious groups in the region were present.

Mention must be made of Canon Andrew White, who at the time was Director of the International Centre for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral and Archbishop Carey's right hand man and emissary for the interreligious initiative. Despite suffering from a debilitating illness, he indefatigably travelled back and forth between England and the Middle East and among the participants of the meeting in order to create as smooth a passage as possible for the summit itself. Also involved in the organization and providing funding for the summit was the World Conference on Religion for Peace (WCRP), represented at the summit by its Secretary General, Dr. William Vendley and the Church of Norway, represented by Canon Trond Bakkevig. In fact the Church of Norway was responsible - pursuant to the request of Rabbi Michael Melchior - for funding the travel of participants from Israel to the Alexandria Summit. Bakkevig had been involved in interfaith activities in the region since 1996 and many of the Christian and Jewish parties involved in the summit were drawn from networks he had established in this field.

In an atmosphere of mutual violence and recrimination such as defined the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2001, it is unlikely that the religious leaders would have had the desire nor the ability to reach a joint declaration without the encouragement and support of the political echelons. So what actually created the change of heart amongst the political leaders? The impact of the 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States triggered a reversal in policy. In a seeming desire to distance themselves from such infamy, Muslim political leaders suddenly demonstrated an interest in being seen on the side of constructive conflict resolution and being identified with the moderate, non-violent voice of religion.

President Mubarak not only permitted the Alexandria meeting to be hosted in Egypt but he invited the religious leaders to meet with him personally in Cairo at the summit's end. Both Prime Minister Sharon, who also wished to be seen as supporting peace, and Chairman Arafat positively encouraged the initiative. The final wording of the text was agreed upon in Alexandria itself after repeated last minute telephone calls by the Israeli and Palestinian sides, working on the text separately, with their respective political leaderships.

The aims of the gathering, according to the document sent to the Sheikh Tantawi in November 2001, were three:

- to enable a committment of religious and political will to the peace process;
- to establish mechanisms which sustain continued dialogue; and
- to gain the support of the religious leaders to seek a just settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Both in comparison to what came before and what has followed, there was no attempt to differentiate between the religious and the political, and this indeed is reflected in the wording of the declaration itself, entitled: "The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land." The text is introduced "in the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate" and is a fusion of religious language and a call to political action.

This can be most acutely observed in the fourth clause of the seven-point statement which calls for a "religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed from all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell" and Tenet" recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations." The religious leaders saw themselves as
representing not only their religions but their countries and as such called on their political leaders to stop fighting and pursue the path of peace. In truth, it was Chairman Arafat’s insistence on including references to the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, in last minute telephone conversations while the declaration wording was being finalized, that influenced the outcome. But, as mentioned previously, if the political echelons had not been fully engaged it is unlikely that a declaration would have transpired in the first place.

The text condemns the violent abuse of religion, the killing of innocents in the name of God and all actions that are oppressive and destructive of human life and dignity. It calls forth a vision of neighbourliness where peoples “respect the integrity of each other’s historical and religious inheritance.” It recognizes the sanctity of the holy places and freedom of worship for all. It speaks out against incitement and demonization and calls for educating future generations to respect one another. It also announces the establishment of a permanent joint committee to advance and sustain the process initiated by the signing of the declaration and significantly to “engage with our respective political leadership accordingly.”

The declaration’s first point begins with a clear and uncompromising statement: “The Holy Land is holy to all three of our faiths.” From this is deduced the need to preserve the sanctity and integrity of the holy places and to ensure freedom of religious worship for all. For indeed this is what all religious adherents want to hear – an acknowledgement and recognition that demonstrates that their faith is viewed with honour and respect and which leads to behaviour enabling people to practise their faith freely. Such a message, if sincerely voiced and acted upon, could make enormous inroads into building bridges of trust between peoples on all sides who feel so unrecognized and threatened.

In light of the ongoing violence of the Intifada, this was a document of historic significance and the first of its kind. The participants felt in many ways they were living history. Despite some turbulent moments, including initial difficulties in obtaining departure permits from the Israeli security services for some of the Palestinian leaders to leave Ben Gurion Airport, all invitees finally passed through passport control and a festive atmosphere prevailed. With British Ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles smoothing the way in the departure lounge, the journey to Alexandria began in a specially chartered private plane for all the participants, arranged by the Israeli government, but funded by the Norwegian government, for the occasion. It continued with transportation by a rapidly driven horn-blowing bus escorted by police to the exquisite El Salamick Palace Hotel, which had been requisitioned for the occasion because of its secure location within large grounds, and reached its climax with the signing of the declaration. The meeting was a testimony to how the hearts of people in conflict can be opened when they collaborate together for an ideal that encompasses the highest aspirations as well as the basic needs of all parties. This is not to say that there were no difficult moments during the course of the meeting. Indeed there was some serious brinkmanship by several of the religious leaders that threatened the final signing of the document. Nevertheless, as a participant at the meeting, I felt I had touched the edge of peace.

The euphoria, however, waned rapidly. The lofty – and perhaps in retrospect unrealistic – expectations of some were dashed at the press conference following the summit. Sheikh Tantawi did not remain to speak to the press in Alexandria and to sustain his mantle of authority. While not accompanied by an overt statement of antagonism or lack of support, this early departure sent a perceived message to journalists and other observers
that the document was of reduced importance. In addition one of the prominent Muslim
religious leaders, Sheikh Taisir El Tamimi, when asked if he condemned all suicide
bombings, took pains to explain how the concept of “self-defence” was a justifiable enough
factor for not issuing a blanket condemnation, with similar statements articulated by other
Muslim religious leaders. Taking into account the death and destruction taking place in
the region at the very time of the Alexandria meeting, it was difficult not to feel great
disappointment at these reservations.

Apparently, the prophetic role that the religious leaders had carved out for themselves in
the rarefied atmosphere of a magnificent palace in Alexandria could not be sustained on
their return to the harsh realities of their peoples.

The declaration, its integrity thus compromised and treated by the media with some
scepticism, did not result in any diminution of violence. It is nevertheless an important tes-
timony to what is possible. Rabbi Melchior has pointed out three unprecedented positive
aspects to the summit: that it happened at all at such a time of conflict; that it was the only
document signed by both Palestinians and Israelis during a more than four-year period;
and that it was the first time Muslim religious leaders were prepared to go public with such
an interfaith initiative. These all paved the way for a number of important developments
which will be referred to shortly.

Lessons learned from the Alexandria Summit

The Alexandria Summit revealed some very specific lessons for those seeking to use religion
to mitigate Middle Eastern conflicts. First, its feasibility was dependent on the help of an
outside third party, the Archbishop of Canterbury and his team, who worked intensively to
build bridges of trust through his authority and sensitivity. Second, a prominent external
Muslim presence, the Sheikh Al-Azhar, was needed to provide a wider Muslim imprimatur
and a canopy of peace under which the Palestinian Muslims could feel comfortable. Third,
it was essential that the wider political echelons involved demonstrated a willingness to
engage in, and provide continued backing for, the process. Finally, the main players needed
to be supported and sustained with empathy and firmness when they succumbed to the
human condition by faltering in the face of a harsh reality. Thus, one must be sensitive to
the role that personality clashes, both inter- and intra-cultural play in obscuring the “higher
vision” and the need for third parties to continually assist players to reach beyond inter-
personal conflict for the sake of peace.

Further developments

Aside from its symbolic significance, the Alexandria summit has spawned several interfaith
initiatives which are highly unlikely to have taken place without its precedent. These
include both formal continuations of the initiative and general successors to the spirit of the
declaration.

At the summit itself, a Permanent Committee for the Implementation of the Alexandria
Declaration (PCIAD) was established by the signatories. In a clear effort to capitalize on the
“spirit of Alexandria,” the PCIAD met in Jerusalem a month after the Alexandria Summit,
and called for “a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed on all sides and
for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting
of the restrictions and a return to negotiations. The committee has since met in Rome,
Egypt and London. Canon White, Rabbi Melchior and Rabbi Froman were invited by
Sheikh Tamimi to facilitate a meeting of twenty-five Palestinian Islamic religious leaders in Cairo on 12 January 2004. The consultation included Sheikh Tantawi and reaffirmed the importance of the Alexandria process. 88 On the other hand, there were also several meetings, already in 2002, that were canceled or at which statements were not issued because there was no successful agreement.

While no new declarations have been made, according to the United States Institute of Peace, "both PCIAD as a whole, as well as small sub-groups from the Permanent Committee, have been actively involved in efforts to de-escalate violence on the political, religious, and community levels" since 2002. Such efforts range from attempts to defuse crises such as that at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or the siege of Arafat's compound in Ramallah and continued efforts to engage religious figures thought to be inciting violence. 89

Certainly, the fact of Alexandria made possible later similar interfaith gatherings, such as the World Conference of Imams and Rabbis for Peace in Brussels in 2005 and in Seville in 2006, which met "under the patronage of the Kings of Morocco, Belgium and Spain." 90 The most recent meeting of this group took place in Paris in December, 2008, at which time the imams and rabbis publicized calls to end hostilities. Specifically, they agreed unanimously to condemn all forms of violence and terrorism perpetrated in the name of religion. They also reiterated their determination to be active custodians of the Sacredness of Peace. 91 The summit can also be seen to have enhanced interfaith youth initiatives.

Another non-official effort, self-confessedly in the "spirit" of Alexandria and the wide range of interreligious advocacy, was organized by Rabbi Michael Melchior. 92 In 2004 Rabbi Melchior cofounded with Professor Elie Wiesel the Mosaica Center—a non-profit organization committed to reconciliation and interfaith dialogue. The Mosaica Center states as its goal the translation of the principles of the Alexandria Declaration "into concrete actions that would impact upon the lives of Jews, Muslims and Christians in the region." 93 To this end Mosaica has partnered with Canon White’s Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FFRME) as well as the Adam Center for Dialogue Between Civilizations. The latter, headed by Sheikh Abdullah Nimir Darwish and located in Kfar Kassam, "serves as the arm of the Mosaica Center in the Muslim world." 94 In one such effort, Mosaica and the Adam Center partnered with the Clinton Global Initiative to sponsor an inter-religious cooperation and dialogue event in Jerusalem in 2006. 95

Since Alexandria, the focus has been on creating concrete institutions that extend Alexandria principles "on the ground." Thus, the 2002 PCIAD meeting in London set up a ten-point agenda that emphasized the importance of engaging more religious leadership and of creating a feeling of more local ownership of the process. 96

While external political actors may have desired more sweeping joint statements with the imprimitur of religion, Canon Trond Bakkevig has pointed out that making such declarations has been "almost impossible" given the representative nature of the religious participants and their loyalties to their respective communities. On the other hand, he maintains that broad rhetoric is now a secondary issue compared to the importance of achieving concrete facts "on the ground." In this capacity, he notes the role of interfaith efforts—in particular the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land—to tackle such tasks with a joint approach. 98 This Council is one of two recent interfaith initiatives specifically linked to the importance of interfaith cooperation in relation to Jerusalem's holy sites that will be discussed forthwith.
Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land

As previously mentioned, the permanent joint committee that was to implement the recommendations of the Alexandria Declaration was set up as per the document’s final clause. While the committee did meet to reaffirm the existing Alexandria principles, its abilities to achieve anything beyond this were restricted by the political impasse with its unending violence, threat to security and corresponding repression of the Palestinian people. With the dying embers of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2005, attempts were renewed but with some clear differences to the original concept as laid out in the Alexandria Declaration.

A decision was made to create a committee that would comprise institutions rather than individuals in order to sustain continuity and a sense of representation. Notably, the creation of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land was initiated by Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders. Following an impasse of several years, these individuals were experiencing growing disillusionment with the roles of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Canon Andrew White in the process. They were eager to take over the process themselves and make it local. Many of them had been participants in the Alexandria Summit. Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, who had participated in the signing of the Alexandria Declaration, had been present ad personam and his retirement resulted in a need to build connections anew with the present incumbents of the Chief Rabbinate’s leadership.

Chief Rabbi Bakshi Doron’s participation was superseded by the Chief Rabbinate as an institution, represented not only by the Chief Rabbis but by various other clerics and the director general of the Rabbinate. The personal participation of the present Chief Rabbis is significant for the following reason: Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Shlomo Amar, is closely linked, and beholden to, the most powerful Sephardi rabbi in Israel within the Ultra-Orthodox world, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who is also the spiritual leader of the Shas political party. Likewise, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger, is beholden to the most powerful leader of Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodoxy, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, who is the spiritual leader of the Degel Hatorah political party. Consequently the Chief Rabbis’ involvement in the promotion of peaceful initiatives has broad ramifications in as much as they both represent a state religious institution and because their activities can be perceived as having received the blessing of these two powerful religious leaders – and indirectly, of their political parties as well.

Other institutions include the Shari’a courts of Palestine, the Palestinian Ministry of Waqf and the primary Churches (Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Armenian) in the region. In addition to the emphasis on institutions rather than individuals, a further difference was the desire by the local bodies for more ownership of the process and local control over decision-making and activities. There was, however, recognition that a neutral third party (called conveners or facilitators) was still necessary for mediation and coordination purposes. Physical restrictions on the passage of both Israelis and Palestinians into each other’s territories precluded them from meeting unless outside of the region. The convenorship of the new committee was taken over by Canon Trond Bakkevig of the Norwegian Church, with financial support from the Norwegian Government. As previously mentioned, Canon Bakkevig had been involved in interfaith relations in the Middle East for more than a decade, was present at the Alexandria Declaration and was well acquainted with the key players. His understated and quietly active approach to mediation as well as his more subdued personality, as compared with that of Canon Andrew White’s, raised the comfort level and the local leaders’ sense of ownership of the process. Notably then, the committee began
to be perceived by its participants as a local activity rather than one imposed from outside the region.

The committee — or Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land as it was so named — has a threefold purpose. First it is to maintain open lines of communication between religious leadership; second, it is to make a public stand against any defamation, disrespect or attack on any of the three faith communities; and third, it is to support appropriate political initiatives for the resolution of the conflict and the promotion of peace. Its members — high-ranking Israeli and Palestinian clerics from all three Abrahamic faiths — issued a six-point communiqué calling for various steps to promote these principles, such as the creation of a “hot line” to address issues of access to holy sites and their protection, mechanisms for monitoring negative religious stereotypes in the media and the launching of a joint educational campaign. Indeed, its ultimate goal is to provide a regimen for interfaith cooperation in the Holy Land.

Such lofty goals seem a little “pie in the sky” when one considers the situation on the ground. A glance back to the opening scenario of this article, the conflict over Mughrabi Gate, reveals the necessity for such goals as well as the tremendous difficulty in reaching them under the present circumstances with its concomitant and continual setbacks to the building of mutual trust. The Chief Rabbinate did indeed contact the head of the Sha’aria Courts of Palestine, Sheikh Tamimi, to see what could be done to calm the waters over Mughrabi Gate. But the Sheikh, his own access denied to Jerusalem’s Muslim holy sites, chose instead to voice even greater protest against the Israeli authorities. For every stumbling step forward, there is all too often a slide back, as can be seen from its first days.

Already in August 2005, the Council agreed upon a protocol, including rules for its structural organization and membership (for the full text, see Appendix II). But it took more than two years of discreet meetings, sometimes punctuated by protests and absences by individual members as the result of violent incidents in the region, before the Council finally moved from its “in formation” stage to a public one in 2007. Moreover, while the Council’s official status has technically been accepted by both sides, its de facto operation has been limited by issues related to permits for members of the Palestinian Authority to enter Israel. Most notably, Sheikh Tamimi had been denied entry permits repeatedly, which has affected the work of the Council severely. According to Canon Trond Bakkevig, this “has made meetings and work much more unpredictable [and] has also cast a shadow on the willingness of the Israeli side to give priority to this kind of work […] even though you have very clear support from the Chief Rabbinate.”

Despite a war in Lebanon and continued hostilities, Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders of the main religious institutions of the Holy Land met regularly in the Talitha Kumi Lutheran School in Beit Jala, outside Jerusalem and accessible from both Israel and the West Bank, and the relationships amongst the key players began to reflect a growing trust. This was given an added boost when they agreed to discuss inter-religious issues with others outside their intimate group. On 21 August, 2007 the Council met with the President of the Council of Europe, René van der Linden. This was followed shortly thereafter by a meeting with the Middle East envoy and former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on 6 September of the same year, and then by a consultation with former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, on 15 October. Participants spoke of a cementing of trust during a visit by the Council leaders to Washington, DC on 7 November 2007 at the invitation of a group of American Abrahamic religious leaders, including Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Ambassador Tony Hall and Professor Marshall Breger, and which also included a visit to the US State
Department. This visit culminated in the Council’s first official joint document. Notably, it was decided during the 5 November 2007 meeting to label the document a communiqué rather than a public statement “in keeping with the fact that the views of the Council are still evolving.”106 Included within this document, inter alia, is the following declaration concerning holy places:

Our respective Holy Places have become a major element in our conflict. We lament that this is the case, as our respective attachments to our holy places should not be a cause of bloodshed, let alone be sites of violence or other expressions of hatred. Holy places must remain dedicated to prayer and worship only, places where believers have free access and put themselves in the presence of the Creator. Holy places are there for believers to draw inspiration to strengthen their acceptance and love of Almighty and all His creatures, from all religions and all nationalities.

Accordingly each religious community should treat the Holy Sites of the other faiths in a manner that respects their integrity and independence and avoids any act of desecration, aggression or harm.107

Further meetings with public figures continued in 2008 with the Jerusalem visit of US Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi on 19 May, followed on 27 May by meetings with former Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio, in his incumbent position as President of the Alliance of Civilizations, and with the then Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, Tzivi Livni.

Generally these meetings with senior political figures reflected the Council’s greater confidence in appearing in the public sphere and a burgeoning interest and openness amongst senior political leaders to discuss regional issues with representatives of the senior religious institutions.

In September 2008 the Council established a secretariat in Jerusalem comprising a Palestinian, Fadi Rabieh, and an Israeli, Keren Hendin, both holding post-graduate degrees in conflict resolution and administrative skills. This secretariat, which reflected the physical manifestation of local ownership by the Council members, has been involved in formalizing and structuring its work both locally and internationally, expanding its network and supporting efforts to make it more visible, for example, the creation of its own web site.108

Despite the communiqué, and a number of later joint practical efforts relating to specific tasks such as the management of holy sites or educational texts, the Council has encountered severe functional obstacles in recent years. Joint meetings have been cancelled several times, forcing Canon Trond Bakkevig to serve as a go-between and meet with each side individually. As stated, these cancellations are occasionally logistical (due to the lack of entry permits), but they have also been political, particularly during bilateral disputes. Canon Bakkevig recalls, for example, the impossibility of convening joint council meetings — and certainly issuing any sort of joint statement — during Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009, given the tensions between the sides. These tensions came to a head during an interfaith convention at Notre Dame Pontifical Institute in Jerusalem in honor of Pope Benedict XVI. During this interfaith event Sheikh Tayseer Tamimi grabbed the microphone and gave a ten minute tirade against Israel, alleging that the latter was carrying out war crimes.109 In response, the director general of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, Oded Wiener, said that Jewish members would no longer take part in a long-standing, three-way interfaith dialogue “as long as Tamimi is part of the Palestinian delegation.”110
It should be noted that Sheikh Tamimi's statement violates the Council's pledge of conduct which was signed by all Council members in January of 2007.\textsuperscript{111} In this pledge members had committed to making statements that "emphasize the value of [the group's] collective effort and the fact that [the members] are working to improve the atmosphere of dialogue" while avoiding "any public statement that could endanger [the group members'] ability to work together." The pledge's wording recognizes that altercations may take place between representatives of the two sides, but has members commit to "discuss the details of those matters upon which [they] most deeply disagree in [...] private meetings and not in public."\textsuperscript{112}

The repercussions of Sheikh Tamimi's latest inflammatory statements highlight an important manifestation of the Council's fragility and consequent reliance on a facilitator. Despite Israeli refusal to meet with Tamimi, participants have no jurisdiction to ask that Tamimi (or any other Palestinian representative, for that matter) be replaced, violations to the pledge of conduct notwithstanding. This state of affairs creates an impasse in which the only recourse for one side in dealing with a perceived undesirable element on the other side is the utilization of Canon Bakkevig as a mediator. Such incidents thus underscore the necessity of a third party who can serve as a bridge of communication between two otherwise uncooperative parties. Notably, Bakkevig released a personal statement in early January 2009, expressing his concern at the violence in Gaza and southern Israel. He noted that

while [the Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders] at this point in time, have not come out with a joint statement; I can say, without reservations, that they are all deeply concerned about the immense loss of human lives, especially of all the innocent and non-combatant victims before and during this war.\textsuperscript{113}

Such a statement, when juxtaposed with the lack of willingness to cooperate, is of limited utility but seems better than nothing.

Clearly, in light of the harsh reality, the lessons of the Alexandria Declaration, as outlined above, remain pertinent, that is, third party support is essential as a moderating component and political conflict will adversely affect attempts at interreligious collaboration.

One of the Council's recent activities has been the endorsement of a US State Department-funded project, initiated by Professor Bruce Wexler of Yale University, for an extensive one year research into Israeli and Palestinian school textbooks. According to an official summary of the project distributed by the Council on 22 July 2009:

The Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land is sponsoring a study of the "Portrayal of the Other" in Palestinian and Israeli school books. Books from grades 1 to 12 will be analyzed by two independent research teams. One team is a United States team that does computerized analyses of texts. The other team is a joint Palestinian-Israeli team that will employ Palestinian and Israeli research assistants fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew to analyze the texts. A Scientific Advisory Panel consisting of European, American, Palestinian and Israeli experts in school book analysis, history and education will oversee all aspects of the work. One hundred books from each community will be analyzed.

The Project was launched on 5 August 2009 at a conference hosted by the Council at the American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem, with 32 participants including religious leaders, senior diplomats, the Palestinian deputy Education Minister, researchers, educationalists and other academics.
As a participant at this conference, I was impressed by the cooperative atmosphere, the deep commitment, expertise and enthusiasm of those partaking in the research and the joint leadership of the senior religious figures. The latter were actively involved in ensuring a professional and common ground approach to the research for the sake of the next generation in the Holy Land.

In a similar vein, the Council is investing in media monitoring efforts as per the objectives of the 2007 Washington communiqué. Specifically, the Council is trying “to follow comments in the media from and about religious leaders, and [finding] ways for dealing with those that are derogative of others.” Such efforts should hopefully facilitate the identification of derogatory statements of any religion in the press and, hopefully, aid the process of issuing joint condemnatory statements by the Council.

Further, in response to a spate of violent events in Jerusalem in late 2009, the Council released a brief statement affirming the need for respect for holy sites in the Holy Land. And in October 2010 it issued another short statement condemning the attacks on mosques in Beit Fajar, near Hebron, presumably by militant settlers. Other statements on a variety of subjects have followed.

The Holy Sites Initiative (HSI)

The waning months of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2005 resulted in a plethora of new initiatives promoting peacemaking in the region. One such project, the Holy Sites Initiative (HSI), was conceived and developed out of the Jerusalem office of the international conflict transformation organization, Search for Common Ground (SFCG). As senior advisor to the initiative and now co-director of the Jerusalem office, I have intimate knowledge of both its advances and setbacks.

HSI was set up in order to facilitate an attempt to find common ground amongst key Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders in the region regarding the holy sites in Jerusalem. The specific goal of the project was to engage regional religious and political leaders in a process to develop new and creative paths, via the interreligious track, in order to test the waters for peaceful cooperation, and to diminish tension. Its basic objective was to unite the voices of regional religious leaders in a public declaration that formally acknowledges and respects the attachments of each of the Abrahamic faiths to their holy sites and to set up a mechanism – an interreligious standing committee – to prevent future conflagrations around such sensitive issues. Although focusing on Jerusalem, which is at the heart of the issue relating to sacred places, it was envisaged that such an initiative would facilitate the widening of inter-religious cooperation to other holy sites in the Holy Land. In its broadest terms, HSI is actually about pursuing peace, about acknowledging and respecting those of other faiths and offering non-violent alternatives to conflict.

Drawing on lessons from the Alexandria Declaration, which indicated the essential need for wider Muslim support for the Palestinian Muslim leadership in any peacemaking activity, Search for Common Ground decided it would attempt to engage the major Muslim players in the region that have a direct link to Jerusalem’s holy sites, in addition to the Muslim Palestinian, the Jewish Israeli and the Christian leaders of the Holy Land. These include the following Arab countries:

Egypt, whose leadership is widely recognized in the Arab world, where Al-Azhar, the pre-eminent institute of Islamic religious learning, is located.
Jordan, whose special historical role with respect to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem is acknowledged in the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. Morocco, whose King, His Majesty Mohammad VI, chairs the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Saudi Arabia, widely recognized as guardian of Islam and its holy places and whose King HRH Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz al-Saud sponsored the Arab Peace Initiative that was adopted by the Arab League at the Beirut Arab Summit in 2002.

Search for Common Ground, also recognized the essential third-party role it could play as a non-partisan, non-profit, non-denominational and internationally experienced organization in the field of conflict transformation; facilitating, helping to build trust and perhaps, above all, listening to the needs and interests of the parties while relaying them to the other party. Funding for the initiative was received from various governmental sources, including the Dutch, Spanish, Danish and Norwegian Ministries as well as the Clinton Global Initiative. To this end, SFCG’s Jerusalem office made contact with political and religious leaders of the Arab countries cited above, as well as Israeli and Palestinian political and religious leaders, in an attempt to engage them in the initiative.

Access to senior political figures was facilitated by Ambassador Robert Pelletreau, a former US Assistant Secretary of State for Political Affairs, who was the initial convener of the initiative and at the time co-director of the SFCG Jerusalem office. When Ambassador Pelletreau returned to the US, the convener ship was handed over to Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, one of America’s foremost diplomats. The connections and networks of these two men provided direct access to kings, prime ministers and other leading political leaders of major regional Arab countries and Israel, while my own interfaith network, largely drawn from my husband David Rosen’s interfaith activities and reputation, enabled interaction with leading religious leaders.

General agreement about the potential importance of such a declaration on Jerusalem’s holy sites exceeded all expectations. While all Arab interlocutors, whether political or religious, were adamant that progress was only possible if the Palestinians themselves would choose to participate in the process, there was clearly an interest in exploring the religious track as a possible path for testing waters and for promoting the positive voice of religion. This was particularly the case in that regional contact and cooperation in the political domain seemed highly unlikely in the near future.

The response to the initiative from the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, was “this is exactly what we need.” He immediately appointed Sheikh Tamimi to represent him in discussions. Encouraged by this reaction, a draft declaration on Holy Sites was prepared and passed amongst an initial core group of religious leaders for their feedback, and tentative dates were set for the summit and declaration signing.

However, in the Middle East things often do not go according to plan and this was no exception. The Israeli disengagement from Gaza, followed by a new Israeli Prime Minister in the wake of Ariel Sharon’s illness, the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections and the war between Israel and Hizbollah in the summer of 2006, with their accompanying uncertainties, violence and fears, succeeded in delaying the HSL.

Yet by the autumn of 2006, a window of opportunity had opened yet again as fear of an even greater conflagration in the region led to a search for ways to create a more fertile atmosphere for dialogue. SFCG’s personnel revived its process and methodology of painstakingly building relationships with regional religious and political leaders and facilitating
mutual trust-building amongst the religious leaders themselves. This process was greatly enhanced by the development of a close relationship with the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land whose secretariat now rents office space on SFCG’s Jerusalem premises. Although the Council comprises only Palestinian and Israeli religious leaders, it has provided an important base for testing the inter-religious waters in general and HSI’s Draft Declaration on Holy Sites in particular. The latter was accepted in principle as an appropriate document after minor amendments. The one-page Draft Declaration begins thus:

We, religious leaders from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East and beyond, have come together in mutual respect to declare our commitment to seek peace and pursue it, in accordance with the call of our respective faith traditions, and to prevent religion from being used as a source of conflict. We express our fervent desire to see peace prevail in the Holy Land and particularly in the city of Jerusalem, to which our respective Traditions are bound, each in its own unique way.

Jerusalem is a city of special significance for each of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions, containing within it holy sites of sacred religious attachment, dedicated to prayer and worship. Their inspiration is meant to draw adherents ever closer to acceptance and love of the One Creator and to all creatures on earth, regardless of religion or nationality.122

The draft thus premises a clear declaration of mutual respect amongst the Abrahamic religions and an acknowledgment that their respective faiths are peace-loving rather than conflict-fomenting. From this general principle, it focuses on the Holy Land and then on Jerusalem and its holy sites that are deeply sacred to the adherent of the three faiths. Despite the diversity of sacred places, the message is one of unity with an acknowledgment that the higher purpose of holy places is to draw all followers, regardless of religion, to a greater sense of union with the one God and to all peoples in the world.

The Draft Declaration continues with specific clauses relating to the preservation of religious sites as historical legacies that provide a religious and cultural heritage, the education of present and future generations to care and respect for them and provisions for freedom of religious workshop and access.

The Council also agreed to act as the core group of the standing committee that would fulfill the terms of the HSI declaration, thus providing a concrete infrastructure for steps to be taken following the signing of the declaration.

Mutual respect and trust building on a regional level were principally developed through a process of shuttle diplomacy, holding private meetings in the respective countries of the political and religious leaders as well as personal meetings with significant leaders at neutral venues such as conferences in a third country. Despite various ups and downs, including the opposition of one or two significant leaders, the initiative, by the middle of 2008, was poised to fulfill its mandate with a planned, highly publicized declaration signing summit in the presence of world religious leaders, some of whom had already been approached and voiced enthusiasm for participating in the event. The purpose was to focus the eyes of the world on positive efforts by Arab and Israeli religious figures to be part of the solution rather than part of the conflict. Hopefully this would have provided an alternative image of religious reconciliation to the prism of religious extremism and violence through which the world views the Middle East.
The problem, though, was finding a suitable venue for the summit. The ideal place would have been Jerusalem but with the present state of the Arab–Israeli conflict, it was clear that such an idea was highly premature. So efforts were made to hold it in an Arab country and discreet contacts were made at the highest level. Although first reactions were positive, time passed without a definitive invitation proffered to host the event. Further discreet probing resulted in a message that the timing was not quite ripe for a declaration on Jerusalem’s holy sites, given the lack of progress towards peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

In the meanwhile, the Gaza incursion by Israel against Hamas took place at the close of 2008, thereby nullifying the possibility of holding the summit in the near future. President Abbas called for a freeze on all cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian organizations which was still officially in effect as of 2010.

However, an interesting turn of events may in fact have salvaged the essence of the Holy Sites Initiative. In the summer of 2008, I was invited to present the process of the Holy Sites Initiative to a conference in Trondheim, Norway, at the request of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and One World in Dialogue, a Trondheim interfaith organization. The purpose of the conference was to explore the possibilities of developing a code on holy sites. In attendance were Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious, political and civil society leaders from Europe and the Middle East. The meeting was moderated by Canon Trond Bakkevig and present were several Christian, Jewish and Muslim representatives of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land. By the end of that meeting, a Statement of Intention was promulgated which stated:

We have agreed that there is a need to continue our discussions in order to clarify the common values we share with regard to Holy Sites. We hope to develop this into a jointly shared Code of Holy Sites which reflect common values of:

- shared respect for the sacred,
- mutual acknowledgment and respect for each other’s Holy Sites, and
- respect for individuals and communities who manifest their faith at these Holy Sites.

A small working committee of five people, including myself, plus representatives of the two hosting Norwegian organizations, was set up to develop a draft code, and in July 2009 it was presented in Trondheim to an expanded group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders from Europe and the Middle East. By the end of the Trondheim meeting, again moderated by Trond Bakkevig, a Code of Holy Sites was duly adopted by the plenary. It is a detailed code including a preamble, provisions and an implementation and monitoring mechanism.

The intention is to present this code to other religious leaders of the Abrahamic faiths for their support, discuss amendments that other faiths around the world may wish to incorporate in order for it to become a universal code on Holy Sites and then have it adopted as a convention by a world body.

The benefit of developing a code that does not specifically focus on Jerusalem’s holy sites, but does include Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious leaders from the Middle East in its development and adoption, is clear. Pressure is taken off regional political leaders to agree to a publicized declaration on Jerusalem’s controversial and sacred places. Yet at the same time, a document is created whose content, if adopted internationally, may have a
profound effect on future political and religious actions relating to holy sites in the region. Time will tell whether it will truly make a difference.

Conclusion

Religion is not the primary source of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict but, as one of the basic elements of ethnic identity among the peoples in the region; it is a key to its solution and we ignore it at our peril. Because political and religious power are so inextricably linked in the region, interfaith leadership initiatives are much more likely to succeed if encouraged as track two processes by the political echelons and assisted by third parties, both international and Arab. In that respect, the lessons of Alexandria are clear. What is perhaps less clear is the likelihood of politicians reaching a lasting resolution on Jerusalem and the holy sites without religious leaders on board and seriously engaged in the process. The yet-to-be-resolved Mughrabi Gate episode is a timely reminder that religion can be exploited as a tool by extremists to fan conflict, or it can provide the psycho-spiritual glue necessary to encourage adherents towards mutual respect and support for positive political processes. Therein lies the challenge for all those who “seek the peace of Jerusalem.”

Appendix 1: Alexandria Declaration (full text)

In the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, we, who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right of life and dignity. According to our faith traditions, killing the innocent in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religion in the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil which must be opposed by all people of good faith. We seek to live together as neighbours respecting the integrity of each other’s historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other.

1. The Holy Land is holy to all three of our faiths. Therefore, followers of the divine religions must respect its sanctity, and bloodshed must not be allowed to pollute it. The sanctity and integrity of the holy places must be preserved, and freedom of religious worship must be ensured for all.

2. Palestinians and Israelis must respect the divinely ordained purposes of the Creator by whose grace they live in the same land that is called holy.

3. We call on the political leaders of both peoples to work for a just, secure and durable solution in the spirit of the words of the Almighty and the Prophets.

4. As a first step now, we call for a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed on all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations.

5. We seek to help create an atmosphere where present and future generations will co-exist with mutual respect and trust in the other. We call on all to refrain from incitement and demonization, and to educate our future generations accordingly.

6. As religious leaders, we pledge ourselves to continue a joint quest for a just peace that leads to reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, for the common good of all our peoples.
We announce the establishment of a permanent joint committee to carry out the recommendations of this declaration, and to engage with our respective political leadership accordingly.

Delegates:

- His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey
- His Eminence Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Cairo, Egypt
- Sephardi Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron
- Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior
- Rabbi of Tekoa, Rabbi Menachem Froman
- International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee, Rabbi David Rosen
- Rabbi of Savyon, Rabbi David Brodman
- Rabbi of Maalot Dafna, Rabbi Yitzak Raibag
- Chief Justice of Shari'a Courts, Sheikh Taisir Tamimi
- Minister of State for the PA, Sheikh Tal El Sider
- Mufti of the Armed Forces, Sheikh Abdelsalam Abu Shkhaidem
- Mufti of Bethlehem, Sheikh Mohammed Taweel
- Representative of the Greek Patriarch, Archbishop Aristichos
- Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah
- Melkite Archbishop, Archbishop Boutrous Mu'alem
- Representative of the Armenian Patriarch, Archbishop Chinchinian


In the Name of God, who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, have proposed to form the Inter-religious Council of the Official Institutions of Religious Leaders of the Holy Land. The Council is formed by The Supreme Judge of Shari'a Courts in Palestine Department, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and The Heads of the Local Churches in the Holy Land.

The purpose of the Council:

1 To maintain a permanent relationship and open channels of communication between religious leaders in the Holy Land in order for them to reflect together as believers, on main issues of conflict between our peoples.
2 To sustain close working relationship with the political leadership of the Government of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority, especially on issues related to the role of religion and religious communities.
3 To engage with our respective communities in the Holy Land in order to promote peace and justice. The Council seeks to foster, on grassroots and national levels, an environment of mutual acceptance and respect.
4 To engage with religious leaders internationally and particularly in the Middle East, in pursuit of a durable and just peace in the Holy Land.
The organization of the Council:

1. The Council consists of at least five members from each of the three religions, appointed by the bodies which together form this body. The Council will meet twice a year or when needed.

2. The Council will elect an Executive Committee of six persons, two from each religious community. The Executive Committee will meet every second month.

3. The position as Moderator of Council will be rotated among the representatives of the three religions. A Moderator is elected for one year at a time.

4. The Council may establish working groups which deal with specific issues.

5. The Council will have a permanent secretariat located in a denominationally neutral place.

6. Decisions will be made by consensus.

Appendix III: Holy Sites Declaration, Second Draft

In the name of the One Creator and Guide of the Universe, the All Merciful and Most Compassionate. We, religious leaders from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East and beyond, have come together in mutual respect to declare our commitment to seek peace and pursue it, in accordance with the call of our respective faith traditions, and to prevent religion from being used as a source of conflict. We express our fervent desire to see peace prevail in the Holy Land and particularly in the city of Jerusalem, to which our respective Traditions are bound, each in its own unique way.

Jerusalem is a city of special significance for each of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions, containing within it holy sites of sacred religious attachment, dedicated to prayer and worship. Their inspiration is meant to draw adherents ever closer to acceptance and love of the One Creator and to all creatures on earth, regardless of religion or nationality. Accordingly we proclaim that:

- Holy Sites in the Holy Land are the historical legacy bequeathed by previous generations, demanding a responsibility to preserve them as a religious and cultural heritage for future generations.

- The special character and integrity of the Holy Sites must be preserved for their respective traditions as well as protected against all violence and desecration. It is the responsibility of religious leaders to adjure and educate their followers not to harm or cause affront to the sensitivities of other Faith communities, especially regarding their respective Holy Sites.

- Freedom of religious worship is an inalienable right for all Faith communities. Therefore access for adherents to their Holy Sites must be ensured. Relevant religious and political authorities have the responsibility to guarantee this.

- In order to preserve the peace of Jerusalem, to prevent conflagrations and to protect the Holy Sites, the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land will serve as a framework for communication, coordination and collaboration among the religious leaders in cooperation with the relevant authorities.

May the All Merciful and Creator of the Universe grant that this solemn Declaration may inspire the hearts and minds of all the Faithful and lead us to peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.
Appendix IV: CRIHL Statement in response to mosque vandalizing in Beit Fajar, Jerusalem, 4 October 2010

The Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL) representing the highest official religious authorities, expresses its grave concern regarding reports of vandalism of a mosque and burning of the holy Koran today in Beit Fajar, north of the city of Hebron.

The CRIHL strongly condemns these and similar acts of vandalism and arson which have taken place in the past year and calls upon people from all faiths – Christians, Jews and Muslims – Palestinians and Israelis – to refrain from any assault on places of religious significance and not to resort to extremism and the exploitation of religion for a political and territorial gain.

The Council calls upon all who live in the land which is holy to the three faiths, to extend their hands in peace and to respect the religious dignity and holiness of the Holy Sites for any of the three religions, avoiding any acts of desecration or aggression against them.

Appendix V

Recent statements made by the CRIHL, available online at http://www.crihl.org/, concern the following issues:


Notes

1. The author acknowledges the superb assistance of Noa Levanon who contributed to the research and writing of this chapter.
9. The relevant clauses 9 and 5 of executive decision 179 refer to General Conference decision (No. 33) from October 2005, which “appealed to all parties concerned […] to refrain from anything that may jeopardize the character of the Old City of Jerusalem.” Available online at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001504/150407e.pdf (accessed 27 June 2009).

Executive meeting 180.

Available online at: http://domino.un.org/unispal.net/59c118f065e4465b852572a500625fca/18952fb82e0d6e6852574e6b0073d6b00fOpenDocument (accessed 7 May 2009).

Available online at: http://domino.un.org/unispal.net/59c118f065e4465b852572a500625fca/18952fb82e0d6e6852574e6b0073d6b00fOpenDocument (accessed 19 November 2009).

A document in this vein containing 14 objections – from a 20 May 2008 public hearing – had been forwarded to the World Heritage Centre on 31 August 2008, after the commission decided to approve a building scheme to a series of stipulations. Available online at: http://domino.un.org/unispal.net/7f5643a78fc7a719852560f60005987ad/1908daa97c600a48852574e b00776cf20OpenDocument (accessed 11 August 2009).

The executive committee noted that as of 31 August 2008, one of the objectors had requested and been granted permission, to appeal to the National Council for Planning and Construction that the appeal was not envisaged in the months following the decision. The Israeli authorities indicated that in the meantime, and pending the recommendations of the WHO and its advisory boards, no further works were being carried out on the site. Available online at: http://domino.un.org/unispal.net/8f5643a78fc7a719852560f60005987ad/1908daa97c600a48852574e b00776cf20OpenDocument (accessed 15 August 2009).

Available online at: http://domino.un.org/unispal.net/7a9798a9bfb229138525617b0066d8d7/ db96b155d80f6a4585257721005fd26b?OpenDocument (accessed 30 June 2009).


Available online at: http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/34pre.html (accessed 14 July 2009). This contrasts, for example, with a more proactive approach to conflict resolution like the WCC’s anti-violence agenda in other locations. The WCC convened an interreligious roundtable meeting with the religious communities of the FYR of Macedonia, which was convened on 13 June 2001, in cooperation with the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the assistance of the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (MCIC). Available online at: http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/13pre.html (accessed 21 October 2008).

Available online at: http://www.Tantur.org/about/history (accessed 3 October 2009).


22 Jonathan Fox notes that while the case study approach has a major advantage in that it allows one to delve into the details and nuances of a specific case while taking into account transcendental and unquantifiable factors, its big disadvantage is that conclusions are not “generalizable” in relation to other situations, although they can be helpful in theory building. J. Fox, “Towards a dynamic theory of ethno-religious conflict,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 1999, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 431–63, p. 442. Thus, the case study presented here aims to provide light on the role of religious leaders in the Middle East but its conclusions only pertain to this part of the world. They might however provide pointers towards a more general theory in the future.


25 Ibid., p. 8.

26 Fox, *supra* n. 22, p. 433.

27 Ibid.

28 This is according to the formal curriculum of the Israeli Ministry of Education, although electives are sometimes taught according to the predilections of individual teachers. Muslim schools in the West Bank and Gaza follow the curriculum of the Palestinian Authority based on the old Jordanian system.

29 The Chief Rabbis of Israel Yonah Metzger and Shlomo Amar, and a number of significant rabbinical figures associated with the national religious world, issued a halakhic (Jewish law) ruling, reiterating a prohibition against Jews entering any part of the Temple Mount “in our times.” A similar ruling was issued several months after the Six Day War in 1967. Reported in *Haaretz*, 18 January 2005.
30 The previous Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, who was replaced in 2006, was notorious for his denial of Jewish attachment to its Holy Sites, thus he said that “No stone of the Al-Buraq Wall has any relation to Judaism. The Jews began praying at this wall only in the nineteenth century, when they began to develop (national) aspirations.” Kid Al-Arab, 18 August 2000. The activities of the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement for the establishment of a Jewish Temple on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque relay a message of Jewish denial of Muslim holy sites.


32 The prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel is proclaimed in synagogues around the world every Sabbath during the morning service. It begins thus: “Our Father in heaven, Protector and Redeemer of Israel, bless the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption. Shield her beneath the wings of Your kindness, and spread over her Your canopy of peace[1].”

33 The Oslo Accords, officially known as the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, were agreed upon by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace Conference on 13 September 1993. In Article 5: Transitional Period and Permanent Status Negotiations, it was agreed that negotiations covering permanent status issues such as Jerusalem, refugees and settlements amongst others would “commence as soon as possible, but not later than the beginning of the third year of the interim period.” Available online at: Israeli government documents www.4mimed.com/Israel/Documents/Oslo.html (accessed 4 October 2009).


36 Ibid., pp. 24–5.


40 Learnt through personal conversation with Rabbi David Rosen.

41 Appleby, supra n. 24, at p. 7.


43 Johnston and Sampson, supra n. 39, quoted on pp. 3–4.

44 Ibid., p. 328.


46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.


49 Hassner, supra n. 34, p. 32.


51 Arafat repeatedly stated that he represents all Muslims, reminding President Clinton that he serves as the permanent deputy chairman of the “Islamic Conference” organization. Al’Ayyam, 10 August 2000.


54 Proverbs 3: 17.


64 Ibid.


67 Much of the following information on the Alexandria process and Declaration is derived from personal observations as an active participant at the Alexandria meeting and through close connection and contact with many of the individuals involved, particularly my husband, Rabbi David Rosen, who was one of the signatories.

68 A relationship between the two institutions was built following three reciprocal visits by Dr George Carey and Sheikh Tantawi in the 1990s, beginning with the former’s visit to Egypt in 1995. See “Anglican Communion and Al-Azhar Al-Sharif Agree to Dialogue,” Worldwide Faith News, 2 February 2002. Available online at: http://www.wfn.org/2002/02/msg00025.html (accessed 15 June 2009).


70 Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, has been the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo since 1996. Prior to that, he served as Grand Mufti of Egypt from 1986 to 1996. He is considered by many as “the voice of Sunni Muslim moderation.” Available online at: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/763/profile.htm (accessed 3 September 2009).


74 Andrew White’s work in the Middle East began in Israel as he trained for ordination in Jerusalem. After returning to London to begin his curacy, he became chairman of the young leadership section of the International Council of Christians and Jews. Available online at: http://www.frme.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=37 (accessed 2 July 2009). He began working towards interfaith reconciliation in Iraq as early as 1998, following his first visit to the country. He was involved in negotiations surrounding the siege on the

75 The conference, founded in 1970, presents itself as “the largest international coalition of representatives from the world’s great religions dedicated to promoting peace.” Its mission is to create interfaith or intra-faith coalitions to address pressing issues in the world today. Available online at: http://www.wcrp.org/about/index (accessed 18 August 2009).

76 Interview by Noa Lebanon with Canon Trond Bakkevig, 14 May 2009, Jerusalem.


78 The Mitchell Report was the report of a fact-finding committee chaired by US politician George Mitchell and convened at Sharm el-Sheikh in early 2001 and published in May of that year. The report elucidated steps that the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority should take in order to promote three primary committee recommendations – ending the violence, rebuilding confidence and resuming negotiations. More detailed recommendations included the reaffirmation of existing agreements, the discouragement of incitement, the cessation of settlement expansion, the lifting of closures and restrictions in Palestinian territories, the halt to Palestinian militant activity, particularly from populated areas, cooperation between security agencies and potential cooperation in the preservation of regional holy sites, and endorsement of Palestinian and Israeli NGOs. Available online at: http://www.ipcrid.org/files/data/mitchell.html (accessed 20 October 2009), http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2001/2001/4/Report+of+the+Sharm+el-Sheikh+Fact-Finding+Committee.htm (accessed 20 October 2009).

79 The Tenet plan was an Israeli–Palestinian Ceasfire and Security Plan proposed by CIA Director George Tenet on 13 June 2001. It called on Israel and the PA to resume security cooperation immediately, adhere to existing ceasefire agreements including the cessation of Israeli attacks on PA facilities in the West Bank and Gaza and an end to ‘proactive’ security measures on one hand and the apprehension and incarceration of terrorists by the PA on the other. The plan also called for a joint security committee for the sides to share information and a commitment from both sides to prevent individuals from carrying out violent action in their respective territories. Through the committee, a retrenchment of Israeli forces and timeline for lifting closures was to be consolidated. Available online at: http://www.usip.org/library/pa/israel_palestinians/adddoc/tenet_plan.html; http://www.nad-plo.org/inser.php?view=nego_peace_73 (accessed 17 August 2009).

80 It is important to recall, in reference to wording, that there was only one version of the final Alexandria Declaration and it was written in English. In other words, much of the discourse was about the use of particular English words in a way that would accurately evoke the objectives and motivations of both sides.

81 Sheikh Taisir El-Tamimi at Cairo Airport, 22 January 2002.

82 For example, Sheik of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, condemned civilian casualties and even issued a fatwa to this effect, saying that the targeting of civilians was contrary to Islamic law. However, this fatwa did not constitute a condemnation of suicide bombings in general, a distinction clarified by the cleric’s later statements. For example, in 2001, he noted that suicide operations are self-defense and a kind of martyrdom, as long as the intention behind them is to kill the enemy’s soldiers, and not women or children.

83 Notably, Tantawi’s fatwa against Israeli civilians was condemned by other Islamic scholars, for example, Sheikh Youssef El-Qaradawi. Available online at: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/564/c5.htm (accessed 7 April 2009).


85 Mitchell refers to an April 2001 list of recommendations for conducting peace talks, and Tenet refers to a June 2001 list of security measures each side must take to halt violence so that talks can proceed.

Towards these ends we are actively working to:

1. Establish "hot line" procedures of rapid communication among ourselves in order to address and advise government officials regarding issues of protection of and access to Holy Sites before such issues become cause for conflict.
2. Establish mechanisms to monitor media for derogatory representations of any religion, and issue statements in response to such representations.
3. Together reflect on the future of Jerusalem, support the designation of the Old City of Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site, work to secure open access to the Old City for all communities, and seek a common vision for this city which all of us regard as holy.
4. Promote education for mutual respect and acceptance in schools and in the media. We will sponsor a conference for Israeli and Palestinian educators, academics and Ministers of Education on "The Role of Religion in Educating for Peace: Principles and Practices."
5. Demonstrate through our relations that differences can and should be addressed through dialogue rather than through violence, and strive to bring this message to our respective communities and political leaders that they may embrace this approach accordingly.

6. Provide ongoing consultation to our government leaders, and through the example of our work together remind them that the interests of one community can only be served by also respecting and valuing the humanity and interests of all other communities.


103 This was reported to me by members of the Council who agreed upon them during regular meetings in 2006.

104 The Council was constituted in 2005, with the agreement of the sides to a Council Protocol. Before that, the same group of people was simply called the Continuation Committee. Although the Council did not have any kind of constitutional meeting, they nonetheless had joint meetings outside of Israel, such as in Kyoto in 2006, prior to a more visible visit to Washington, DC in November 2007. Interview of Canon Trond Bakkevig by Noa Levanon, 26 April 2010, via telephone.

105 Interview of Canon Trond Bakkevig by Noa Levanon, 14 May 2009, Jerusalem.


109 The tirade was similar to Tamimi’s anti-Israeli verbal attack in March 2000 during Pope John Paul’s visit to the region. Available online at: http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1242029499952&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull (accessed 20 October 2009).


112 The pledge is available online at: http://www.crihl.org/content/crihl-pledge (accessed 20 October 2009).


114 “Religious Dialogue and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East.” Speech by Canon Bakkevig, supra, n. 111.


116 See Appendix IV.

117 See Appendix V for a list of recent statements.

118 Search for Common Ground, founded in 1982, is a non-profit organization whose mission is “to transform the way the world deals with conflict: away from adversarial approaches, toward cooperative solutions.” Operatively, the organization is involved in the mediation and facilitation of diplomatic and conflict resolution efforts. For more information, see www.sfsg.org.


120 The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), founded in 1970, is the second largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations. With a membership of 57 states, the OIC calls itself “the collective voice of the Muslim world” and states as its goal “to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and

121 President Mahmoud Abbas’ response to the then convener of the Holy Sites Initiative, Ambassador (ret.) Robert Pelletreau at a meeting in Ramallah, 4 April 2005.

122 Full text in Appendix III.

123 The text of the Code on Holy Sites can be seen on the website of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights. Available online at: http://www.oslocenter.no/images/stories/code_on_holy_sites_09_final.pdf (accessed 20 October 2009). It is worth noting that a similarly constructed "legal code" is being prepared under the aegis of the Knights of Malta.

124 Psalm 122.