



The Practice and Promise of Inter-faith Dialogue and Peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Concretizing the Positive Role of Religion in Settling the Long-standing Dispute

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not, essentially, a religious conflict. However, religious traditions are invoked to justify nationalistic claims and frame grievances. Religious tradition with its symbols and loyalties is fundamental to the identities of both Arabs and Jews, even for those who do not define themselves as traditional or observant: most Jews and Muslims (and Christians as well) consider the land they claim as being “holy.”¹ Although invoking God’s name to justify harm to others perverts everything sacred, religious fundamentalists in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have too often made matters worse and fueled violence between the two peoples. Many political analysts and theorists on conflict resolution therefore conclude that religion is a negative factor for conflict resolution and thus favor keeping religious aspects and community leaders out of any peace-making process. But for Israel and Palestine, as elsewhere, this doctrinaire stance risks forfeiting the positive contribution of religious peacemakers: while the “most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion,”² religion, by contrast, can become a powerful force for managing crises as well as promoting peace and reconciliation.

The Role of Religion for Peace and Conflict – Some Conceptual Remarks

In his seminal book of 2000, R. Scott Appleby aptly summarized this finding as the ‘ambivalence of the sacred’: although it might be concluded that life in general is ambivalent, the secular no less than the religious, the variance in religious actors’ behavior is indeed striking.³ Yet the question remains how to explain

this ambivalence. Daniel Philpott analyzes the political ambivalence of religions by referring to two variables: first, the political theology of a religious group, that is, its ideas about legitimate political authority, ranging from a political system dominated by religion to a complete separation of the respective spheres; and second, the actual state of institutional differentiation between state and religion in a given case. A religion with an integrationist theology has a strong impetus to take over the state and suppress other religious minorities. By contrast, one with a political theology that prefers differentiation embraces religious freedom and a pluralist society. Depending on the state’s policy towards religion, these political theologies may be met with sympathy, suspicion or outright repression – a mixture which has potential for violence.⁴

The political theologies Philpott describes – integrationist or differentiated – resonate well with a typology of different kinds of individual believers proposed by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a veteran scholar in the field of inter-religious dialogue. He identifies two ideal types: religio-centric believers deny that other religions constitute “the truth” for their believers; instead, they believe they hold an absolute truth that leaves no room for different religious practices. Such a belief might easily translate into an integrationist political theology. A religiorelativist believer, on the other hand, “is firm in his/her belief that other religions have the right to exist and be practiced, even if such norms and beliefs are contradictory to one’s own set of religious beliefs.”⁵ Such a pluralist and tolerant stance is much more prone to support a differentiation of religion and state, thereby negating mutual interference with each other’s domains and providing religious freedom

Abstract

This POLICY BRIEF approaches inter-religious dialogue, education, and action from two different perspectives: the conceptual/theoretical and the practical views. The first one concludes that one should not expect too little of religious peacebuilding, because religious institutions and leaders have enormous resources at their disposal for supporting peace. The second one holds that one should not expect too much: religion cannot be the main solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when it is not the core problem. In order to achieve a comprehensive peace which takes into account the religious and spiritual dimensions, believers on all sides need to become active on at least three levels: during official negotiations, at the international/regional level by religious authorities, and, finally, at the grassroots level. The latter is of special relevance since the challenge of transforming people’s hearts and minds after generations of conflict requires a serious and systematic set of educational programs for future generations about the existential need to learn to live together. In this context, the activities of the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel and of Al Wasatia, Moderate Islamic Movement in Palestine, are presented as two encouraging examples – without losing sight of the numerous other ongoing inter-faith initiatives in the Holy Land.■

This POLICY BRIEF is based on the discussions of the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA workshop held in Frankfurt from November 9-11, 2013, with participants from Israel, Iran, Germany, Palestine, United Kingdom, United States, and Yemen. The conference was generously supported by the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN).

for every religious adherent regardless of the respective tradition.⁶

Mohammed Abu-Nimer's categorization seems to suggest two possible ways of transforming religious actors into forces for peace. First, the obvious goal would be to turn religiocentrists into religiorelativists, thereby creating a culture of understanding and cooperative coexistence in a given society. But this objective, however desirable it may seem, is extremely difficult to achieve. Such a change in people's identities and normative outlooks, which are deeply embedded in collective culture and memory, is not impossible, but will certainly take generations to evolve. Therefore, the second way of addressing the problem of how to employ religion in a positive way is to mobilize those who are already religiorelativists. In order to build a strong and sustainable peace, much more is needed than changing one's own belief system. Peacebuilding as a concept has its origin in the so-called 'Agenda for Peace' by then-UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992. At the time, this report understood peacebuilding as part of a chronological sequence of actions: preventive diplomacy seeks to avoid violent conflict in the first place; once a conflict has occurred, peacemaking and peacekeeping are the appropriate measures to be taken; and peacebuilding, in this chronological sequence, is the long-term effort to avoid a fallback into violence, create and sustain peaceful ways of conflict resolution and political interaction, and lay the foundation for sustainable peace and socio-economic development of a given society.

Today, most authors understand peacebuilding as a broad and far-reaching concept which cannot easily be slotted into a specific step in the process. It encompasses a wide range of measures and activities, which are geared towards preventing violence in the long term and building sustainable peace. Therefore, peacebuilding entails more technical issues such as disarmament of militarized groups, rebuilding of transportation infrastructure, or capacity-building assistance for political and civil society institutions. But it also incorporates the dimension of transforming relationships in a conflict-ridden society by building bridges between ethnic or religious communities, healing trauma, engaging in transitional justice, and strengthening human rights and civil society.⁷ Given the importance of civil society in this broad conceptualization of peacebuilding, there are ample opportunities for religiorelativists to actively engage in building peace in its various facets. Yet with regard to such activism, two cautionary remarks seem appropriate which are presented in the following.

Don't Expect Too Little of Religious Peacebuilding

Religious leaders are in a unique position to foster nonviolent conflict through the building of constructive, collaborative relationships within and across ethnic and religious groups. Due to their social location and cultural power, religious leaders are potentially critical players in any effort to build sustainable peace. The communities they oversee are repositories of local knowledge, custodians of culture, and sites of moral, psychological, and spiritual formation. Often, religious communities maintain essential educational and welfare institutions and are therefore deeply anchored in society.⁸ Thus, religious leaders enjoy high degrees of trust in the population, sometimes even beyond their own religious community; they have authority to interpret their respective religious traditions and suggest ways of action; and they are uniquely positioned to mobilize adherents for a common cause.

Religious institutions and leaders have enormous resources at their disposal for supporting peace. On the other hand, if religious leaders miss the opportunity to engage in a peace process, or if they are deliberately excluded by the political elite, there is a strong danger that many citizens at the grassroots level are likely to be left uninvolved, without a sense of belonging, responsibility, and ownership – with negative repercussions for a comprehensive and sustainable peace. We have witnessed this kind of alienation in the Oslo Peace Process in the 1990s: Neither Muslim nor Jewish religious communities were involved in any way in the negotiation and implementation of the agreements, resulting in deep resentment being harbored against the peace process on both sides.

Don't Expect Too Much of Religious Peacebuilding

Religious peacebuilding is a necessary condition in conflicts where the parties are mostly defined by religious identity markers. But this condition is far from sufficient. Regional and civil wars today are mostly not about religious issues at their root, but about power and socio-economic issues. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about issues such as land, borders, water, settlements, Jerusalem, and refugees. Some of these issues have a genuine religious dimension, such as Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif; and most of these issues can probably be additionally framed in religious terms – but they are all complex matters that involve various dimensions outside the scope of religion. Thus, religious peacebuilders might be able to

contribute to conflict resolution and comprehensive peacebuilding, yet as religion is not the core problem, it cannot be the main solution.

Even if we accept this limited goal, religious activists who engage in peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine will have a tough nut to crack. On the one hand, there is the task of initiating a transformation of their own respective religious communities. As stated before, turning into religiorelativism is enormously difficult in the Israeli-Palestinian setting due to the protracted nature of the conflict and the deeply entrenched exclusive identities of the opposing groups, especially the rejectionists on both sides, which include both religious as well as nationalist groups.⁹ On the other hand, mobilizing religiorelativists into action for peacebuilding, is an equally demanding task, but it has begun to be tackled. While there are relatively few religious activists in the Israeli-Palestinian context who seek to bridge national and religious divides, work actively for peace, human rights, and the transformation of relationships, more of them have been surfacing in recent years. While some of the inter-faith groups remain within the 'harmony model' by restricting themselves to exploring and learning about the other's theology and rituals, others touch upon the core issues of the conflict in serious, substantive, and sensitive ways.¹⁰

How Religiorelativists Can Promote Peace: Official Negotiations and Inter-religious Dialogue

For any peace plan to gain support from those who oppose any compromise, the agreement needs to explicitly include a religious dimension. Decades of conflict have resulted in deep wounds that require spiritual, not simply political, remedies. These wounds have been outlined by Yehezkel Landau as including "the displacement and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 and of Jews from Arab countries afterward; a series of Arab-Israeli wars spanning half a century; a prolonged, harsh, and humiliating occupation of Palestinian territory since 1967; continuing violence against civilians; reluctance on both sides to accept the other nation as a legitimate sovereign neighbor; and mutual dehumanization exacerbated by fear, anger, and grief."¹¹

In order to achieve a comprehensive peace which takes into account the religious and spiritual dimensions, we suggest that religiorelativist believers on all sides of the conflict need to become active on at least three levels: during official negotiations between Israelis and



Palestinians; on the international/regional level by religious authorities; and, finally, for activities carried out by religious organizations on the grassroots/community level.

Official Negotiations

Some people feel the official negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians need to include credible religious authorities to lend them legitimacy, especially on religiously sensitive issues. The future of Jerusalem, access to holy sites in Israel and Palestine, and the status of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif among others require attention by religious leaders on all sides. But less obvious issues, such as the elements of national identity and purpose, also touch on questions of meaning and value. Religious authorities should help in reaching agreement on these points of contention because peace-making that prescribes only political, military, and economic arrangements may lack long-term effectiveness, as Landau says, “restricting the role of religion to synagogues, churches, and mosques forfeits the opportunity to inject a necessary spiritual dimension into the process of reconciling Israelis and Palestinians.”¹²

Others, however, dissent from this point of view, since they think that many of the traditional religious leaders in the region are too conservative and closely tied to the political establishments. Rather than including religious leaders in political negotiations, those actors would serve the cause of peace more by tackling key issues of religious and national identity with regard to the deep meaning and core values that they believe in, thereby preparing their people to actually live in peace with their former enemies. Religious authorities should therefore leave ‘peacemaking’ to the politicians and diplomats; they should engage in religious and inter-religious ‘peacebuilding’ efforts, which will involve them in spiritual processes of reconciliation.

The International/Regional Level and Religious Authorities

In addition, active inter-religious education, dialogue, and action, which adopt a pluralist, peace-promoting stance, need to be fostered between religious leaders and their followers, including youth, young adults, educators, community activists, and academics. In January 2002, more than a dozen senior Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders met for a three-day summit in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria. Sheikh Mohammed Said Tantawi, the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar and one of the world’s most senior Muslims, hosted the talks, while



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George Carey, then-Archbishop of Canterbury, chaired the meeting. It was a historic occasion; never before had such distinguished religious authorities from the region, representing all three Abrahamic traditions, met. The gathering resulted in the signing of an unprecedented joint declaration, known as the ‘First Declaration of Alexandria of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land’, containing a condemnation of violence as well as a commitment to work together for a just and lasting peace by using their religious and moral authority (see Box No. 1).

While the Alexandria Declaration gained support from Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, no cease-fire could be achieved (with or without religious support) to end the Second Intifada, and instead the cycle of violence worsened in the spring of 2002. While the long-term impact of the inter-faith summit in Alexandria remains to be seen, the practical work is being carried out by the ‘Permanent Committee for the Implementation of the Alexandria Declaration’, which was established by the signatories and

Box No. 1: First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land

"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 to life and dignity.

According to our faith traditions, killing innocents 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 the 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 the 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 parties 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 from 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.*
- 7. 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."*

other spiritual leaders and has since met regularly in Jerusalem as one of the few visible networks that span the religious and political divide between Palestinian and Israeli leadership.

Concretizing the Role of Religion and the Benefits of Inter-faith Dialogue and Peacebuilding: The Grassroots/Community Level

The educational challenge of transforming people's hearts and minds, after generations of conflict, requires grassroots efforts across the board, in many locales and among people of all ages. The activities of the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel (ICCI) and of Al Wasatia, Moderate Islamic Movement in Palestine, can be seen as two encouraging examples without losing sight of the numerous ongoing initiatives in the Holy Land.

The Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel

The ICCI's mission is to harness the teachings and values of the three monotheistic religions as sources of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence for their leaders and followers, based on the understanding that religion should not be part of the problem, but rather can be part

of the solution. The work focuses primarily on religious leaders, youth, young adults and educators, who can all serve as catalysts to spread the message and the method of peaceful co-existence to their communities.

Founded in January 1991, ICCI is now Israel's best-known and most respected inter-religious organization. As an umbrella organization, it comprises more than 60 Christian, Palestinian/Muslim, and Jewish institutions, including Jewish-Arab coexistence organizations, museums, universities, and other inter-religious organizations. ICCI's programs are based on core values that reflect profound humanitarian principles:

- *Moving from dialogue to action:* the programs combine facilitated dialogue, study, and action projects which demonstrate to the wider community the tangible benefits to be gained from working together towards common goals.
- *Addressing the conflict:* all programs promote relationship building, including frank and open exchanges of perspectives on subjects related to local and regional conflict.
- *Focus on communities rather than individuals:* participants are carefully recruited based on their potential to have an impact on their respective religious communities.
- *Long-term programs and relationships:* all major programs are long-term so as to encourage the building of lasting relationships.
- *Religion as part of the solution:* by utilizing inter-religious textual study as an educational tool, ICCI promotes religion as a means of bringing people closer together.

Envisaging real change coming from grassroots faith communities, ICCI encourages personal transformation and empowerment of a growing cadre of influential Christian, Jewish, and Muslim local religious and cultural leaders. This is combined with the long-term goal of making non-violence and mutual cooperation among local Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities a model for society as a whole, resulting in a transformation of the public discourse, which will empower peacebuilders in the region to effect lasting change. That is, ICCI starts with empowering and mobilizing religiorelativists, but also aims at transforming the religiocentrist worldview in the long run.

In its activities, ICCI concentrates on programs for religious leaders as well as for youth and young adults, usually conducted bilingually in Hebrew and Arabic. With regard to the first, the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel brings together mainstream grassroots religious



leaders from Arab (Muslim and Christian) and Jewish communities within Israel to meet one another, develop personal relationships, and engage in inter-religious dialogue based on the sharing of personal stories, sacred texts, and views on core issues of the conflict. Together these leaders develop action projects, which mobilize their communities to serve as positive forces for social change. The most prominent current example of such activities is the 'Galilee Religious Leaders' Forum', a group of grassroots religious leaders from all over Galilee comprised of some 30 rabbis, imams, priests, and Druze religious leaders. It was first convened in 2008, and the group's meetings have since taken place two or three times a year, involving both the study of each other's religious traditions and discussions of contemporary concern, and nowadays also offering educational outreach in Jewish and Arab high schools in the Galilee. 'Kodesh – Religious Voices for Peace' (Hebrew for 'holy' – Kolot Dati'm L'Shalom) is a new group of Jewish and Muslim participants who began to meet in the first half of 2013 and has again had more meetings in 2014. The group is comprised of 30 people (15 Jews and 15 Muslims) consisting of religious leaders, community leaders, academics, educators, and journalists, who all have much potential to impact their communities and Israeli society as a whole.

ICCI offers various programs especially designed for teenagers and young adults. For Jewish and Palestinian youth and young adults in Jerusalem, throughout Israel and throughout the West Bank, who have had at least one meaningful dialogue experience and are interested in moving from dialogue to action, ICCI provides a framework for meaningful follow-up experiences with its Face to Face/Faith to Faith' alumni network. Established in 2011, the program combines group-building activities with joint planning of action projects of mutual concern to Jews and Palestinians aimed at mitigating misunderstanding and hatred as well as improving the current sociopolitical situation. ICCI's network of young adult alumni now numbers around 250 Israelis and Palestinians who have graduated from ICCI youth programs and have demonstrated commitment to understanding each other, understanding themselves, and working hard to bring peace to their communities.

In addition to these activities, ICCI also offers programs for visiting groups interested in a serious and systematically balanced educational experience in Israel, ranging from site visits and panel discussions or lectures to two-week intensive seminars. In addition, special study

tours have been designed on topics such as 'The Varieties of Islam in Israel, the Varieties of Christianity in Israel', 'Arab-Jewish Coexistence in Israel', or 'Jerusalem as a City of Two Peoples and Three Religions'. All these activities are complemented by public education for the wider community via seminars, courses, special lectures, and symposia. Recently, the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel has also taken a leadership role in combating hate crimes via the new 'Tag Meir' coalition. ICCI joined a coalition of more than 40 different organizations for a series of events aimed at communicating a clear message of tolerance and coexistence, which opposed 'Tag Mechir' ('price-tag') terrorism. These events took place at various locations around the country in which 'price-tag' incidents of violence occurred. They typically involved the lighting of a 'coexistence torch' with various speakers addressing issues of religious and cultural (in)tolerance as well as testifying about the phenomenon in the Committee on Education in the Israeli Parliament and organizing large demonstrations, such as the one across from the residence of the Prime Minister on May 11, 2014.

Al Wasatia, Moderate Islamic Movement in Palestine

Another encouraging example on the grassroots/community level is Al Wasatia, the Moderate Islamic Movement in Palestine. While it is true that moderation is not normally thought of as a revolutionary concept, when viewed within the context of the stubbornly intractable conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, it is precisely that. It is not the militant, extremist voices on either side that are revolutionary. Their refusal to seek a middle way and their self-serving campaigns to demonize each other only lead to more conflict, instead of change. It is those who call for moderation and understanding as the basis for a fairly negotiated two-state solution who are the true revolutionaries. A deep chasm of misunderstanding, distrust, hatred, and enmity separates Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Holy Land. The question is whether we should stand by and watch that chasm widen and widen or work to bridge it. If Muslims are taught that Christians and Jews are the enemies of Islam, and Christians and Jews are taught that Islam is a false religion, all bridge building will be futile. As political and religious radicalism in Palestinian and Israeli societies continue to rise, the question remains how to avoid the outbreak of violence in the near future.

Drawing on the growing community of Palestinians who call for moderation, Al Wasatia was founded in January 2007 with the objective

»» The educational challenge of transforming people's hearts and minds, after generations of conflict, requires grassroots efforts across the board, in many locales and among people of all ages.«

Box No. 2: The Role of Diasporas – Partners or Spoilers on the Way to Peace?

Diasporas play an important role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The term 'diaspora' refers to a people with a common origin, who reside outside their real or imagined place of origin – their homeland. Independent of their actual citizenship, members of a diaspora identify themselves or are identified by others as members of the homeland's national, ethnic, and/or religious community and uphold (or are alleged to uphold) emotional, material, and/or political ties with both the homeland and other communities of the same origin in different host states (i.e. the states of current residence). Until the 1990s, diaspora communities were generally considered problematic 'long-distance nationalists', sending 'home' money, weapons, and even personnel to support national struggles for independence.¹ However, such communities also draw attention to human rights violations, lobby governments and international organizations to support the peace process or even conduct reconciliation projects themselves – on the ground or with their 'enemy's' diaspora in the country of residence. In other words, diasporas are not either partners or spoilers on the way to peace – they are both; diasporas are by no means homogenous groups.

In the wake of the Oslo Accords, the rift between supporters and opponents of the peace process could be observed not only in Israel/Palestine, but also in the Palestinian and Jewish communities in the United States. Ever since, diaspora organizations have increasingly engaged in related activities as pronounced 'hawks' or 'doves'. Two causal mechanisms contributed to that process: first, diasporas adapt to the political environment of their host country. Second, diaspora organizations compete with one another for resources, public and political resonance, and for representation of 'the community'. Not least, new Arab and Jewish American organizations have been founded in recent years which are proactively working to achieve a two-state solution: in 2008, J Street was launched to provide a counter-voice from inside the American Jewish community to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Already in 2003, the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) was formed in order to advance the foundation of an independent Palestinian state living peacefully side-by-side with Israel. For that purpose, it also explicitly accepted the current parameters of American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East: the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel. ATFP endorses Israel's right to exist in words and deeds – representatives of the organization even accepted the invitation of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., for the celebration of Israel's independence day.

But diaspora organizations are under pressure from their intra-community peers. All Arab and Jewish American organizations, including religious ones, are private groups and do not receive any direct financial support from the state. They compete with one another for voluntary contributions from the respective communities and rival for time and attention of decision-makers and the American public at large. Consequently, diaspora organizations often try to portray their positions on the Middle East as the 'true voice' of the community at large. J Street, for example, claimed to represent the previously marginalized segment of American Jews who supported Israel but also believed that public criticism of the Israeli government was necessary and legitimate whenever Israeli actions were counter-productive for the two-state solution. The traditional American Jewish organizations rejected exactly that latter view, and they treated the newcomer with disdain and resentment. Intra-community competition encourages diaspora organizations to stress their differences rather than their commonalities. The best way to peace in the Middle East is thus not only contested among and within the parties on the ground, but also within their diasporas.

- I. Benedict Anderson (1992) 'The New World Disorder', *New Left Review*, 193 (May/June): 3-13.
- II. Hazel Smith and Paul Stares, Paul (eds) (2007) *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers?*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

of advocating moderation as the only effective path towards a negotiated peace with Israel that would help to bring peaceful solutions to the acute religious, economic, social, and political crises plaguing Palestinian society. Al Wasatia's declared goals are:

- Bringing a deeper and more rational understanding of Islam to Muslims as well as to non-Muslims by deconstructing religious mythologies and Quranic distortions and

misinterpretations and promoting knowledge of the religion of others;

- seeking answers for the deep political, social, and economic crises plaguing the Palestinian society;
- striving and working towards ending the Israeli military occupation through negotiations and peaceful means and establishing an independent, tolerant, democratic, secular, non-militarized Palestinian state that fosters economic prosperity and social justice, and would adopt liberal values of equity, tolerance, pluralism, freedom of expression, rule of law, and respect for civil and human rights;
- spreading and promoting Islamic tolerant concepts, values and principles within the Palestinian community;
- encouraging the practice of moderation among Palestinians in order to mitigate religious radicalism and reduce political extremism, and thereby bring a message of peace, coexistence, tolerance, and reconciliation to the Palestinian community through vocal civil leaders; and
- teaching creative and critical thinking as well as open-mindedness in order to empower the next generation of leadership in Palestinian society.

The movement's name derives from the term 'wasatan' which appears in a verse in Al Baqarah Surah in the Quran. The Arabic word wasatia means 'center' and 'middle'. In the Holy Quran it means "justice, moderation, balance and temperance". The word wasat appears in verse 143 of the second chapter, which is 286 verses long, so it appears exactly in the middle. The verse says: "And we have created you a middle ground (moderate) nation" or "a centrist ummah [community]".¹³ The passage demonstrates that the need to be moderate and temperate is a central message within Islam, indicating the need for justice, balance, moderation, middle ground, centrism, and temperance. In studying other faiths, particularly Judaism and Christianity, it becomes clear that they, too, uphold the same values as Islam, thus offering fertile ground for inter-faith understanding and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, Al Wasatia may be seen as a prime example of the religious mindset Abu-Nimer has called 'religiorelativism'.

But it is not merely moderation as a religious principle that should replace the radicalizing rhetoric of militant extremists. Moderation is at its core a deeply human principle, a willingness to see those on the other side of the conflict not as 'the enemies' but as fellow human beings, shaped by different histories but all looking towards the day when they can live in peace



and security. Al Wasatia rejects the view that extremism is the best way or the most authentic Islamic way, quoting Prophet Mohammed as saying, “the best way to run affairs is through moderation.” Wasatia is a movement that advocates achieving peace and prosperity through the promotion of a culture of moderation that would lead to walking away from the current climate of religious and political extremism that is escalating fear and violence.¹⁴ Al Wasatia claims the centrist position – that balance between passion and hate, between amity and enmity, and between deep despair and false hope, which would lead the Middle East out of its chronic conflict and despair. Part of the religious animosity problem is related to ignorance – of one’s own religion and that of the ‘other’. So far, religion has played a major role in stirring conflict, and it is time for religion to become a catalyst in resolving it. Many Muslims do not know very much about Judaism or Christianity, and what many of them know about Islam is distorted. Interfaith dialogue helps to dispel stereotypical images, myths, and misperceptions. In any conflict, religious peace is a prerequisite for sustainable political peace.

In this context, the main activities of Al Wasatia focus on delivering seminars, lectures, and training workshops to advance the dissemination of justice, balance, voluntarism, and religious moderation as core values in Palestinian society. The workshops aim to deepen knowledge of the key factors and principles that have created the context for religious pluralism. Seminars and inter-faith dialogue aim to expand the understanding of different religious traditions in Palestine and foster appreciation of the strengths and complexities of a religiously pluralist society. The movement’s publications identify and provide the principles, values and practices of inter-faith dialogue and are distributed free of charge to the public. To further disseminate its message, Al Wasatia uses the press and social media, presentations to high school students and especially designed workshops, lectures, television interviews, and study tours – Al Wasatia was the first to organize a tour of the Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz for Palestinian students from March 25-30, 2014.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the past, a tradition of stressing the liabilities and problems that accompany deep and fervent beliefs developed: “Sharing at the deep level of religious conviction can generate resistance and defensiveness. Interreligious conversations can provoke intolerance of the religious narratives of others.”¹⁵ Especially in the Middle East, inter-faith work for peace “causes all of us

– Jews, Christians, and Muslims – to confront some of our deepest fears and most persistent prejudices about one another”¹⁶ in addition to running the risk of “inflaming stereotypes and prejudices against one’s own group.”¹⁷ Indeed, when dialogue is conducted poorly and unprofessionally, this can still happen.

But our POLICY BRIEF has adopted a more positive point of view on the ambivalent role of religion in conflict. We have approached inter-religious dialogue, education, and action from two basically different perspectives: the conceptual/theoretical and the practical one. We have demonstrated that inter-religious dialogue can be of great value in ameliorating conflict and advancing reconciliation, even when religion is not the central cause of conflict. When dialogue is organized across religious boundaries, it enables people of faith to live out what most faith traditions consider a sacred duty to be peace-builders: “Inter-faith dialogue carries with it the benefits of secular dialogue but also the potential for deeper and more meaningful engagement because of the possibility for spiritual encounter. This in turn may enhance the participants’ commitment to peace work and social change.”¹⁸

Endnotes

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Religion: A Blessing or a Curse? – An Obsolete Juxtaposition

To successfully limit liabilities and expand opportunities, activities in the top echelons of religious leadership (like the Alexandria process in the Middle East) have to be complemented by inter-religious councils consisting of representatives from faith communities and, most importantly, by inter-religious dialogue and peacebuilding at the community level on a day-to-day basis. The latter is most promising if such interaction goes beyond just dialogue and entails joint projects such as educational study tours, courses on double narratives, or volunteering in Jewish and Palestinian hospitals.

This 'other peace process',¹⁹ – the educational, religious, and spiritual one – needs to supplement the political peace process. There is desperate need of a massive religious, spiritual, educational, and psychological campaign to change the hearts and minds of people on both sides, a serious and systematic set of programs which will educate coming generations about the existential need to learn to live together. This transformation of religiocentric believers into religiorelativists, presented at the beginning of this issue as the second way, will not be quick, nor will it be easy. But it will soon become the new

educational imperative of the new era. We will have no choice but to bring people together in large numbers to engage in inter-faith dialogue, education, and action in order to learn to live in peace. The focus of such activities should be on:

- rabbis, imams, priests, and ministers as well as grass-roots community leaders;
- teachers, educators, school principals, assistant principals, curriculum writers, youth movement leaders, and informal educators in a wide variety of settings, such as community centers, camps, and seminar centers; and
- women from all parts of Palestinian and Jewish societies – professionals as well as laypersons, educators and activists, housewives and mothers, and community leaders.

This people-to-people peace process via inter-religious dialogue and educational activities in Israel and Palestine may be needed for a long time to come. Religious leaders and their followers from abroad – Jewish, Muslim, and Christian – will be called upon to help. It is time not to understate the possibilities of peace, but to invest in peacebuilding programs in Israel and Palestine, across borders, for the sake of the Holy Land. ■

About the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST (APOME)

The Orchestra is the follow-up project of the "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East". The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 100 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the prospective Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010. For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF's Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

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The views presented by the authors do not necessarily represent those of the project coordinator, editors, sponsors, or PRIF.
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Layout: Anke Maria Meyer

The Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East wishes to thank its generous sponsors, the Foreign Ministry of Norway, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau.

