

Addressing Interreligious Tensions: Holy Sites in the Holy Land Conference report - 18.11.2015



Summary

Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) Jerusalem office held a day-long conference at the Konrad Adenauer Conference Centre in Jerusalem on November 18th 2015, entitled *Addressing Interreligious Tensions: Holy Sites in the Holy Land*. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel partnered with us on the conference, providing funding together with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. The conference offered translation in Hebrew, Arabic and English.

The conference took place within the framework of a pilot we are implementing in the Holy Land to gauge the practical effectiveness of a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. The Universal Code endeavors to safeguard holy places and promote interreligious reconciliation worldwide by demonstrating that dialogue between relevant religious and governmental bodies leading to common action is a significant tool for building relationships and reducing tensions around holy places.

The recent eruption in violence, specifically relating to heightened interreligious tensions around Jerusalem's shared holy sites, cast a timely backdrop to the conference discussions. Approximately 100 people attended including religious leaders from the Abrahamic faiths, diplomats, academics, representatives from Israeli authorities and members of the press. Reflecting on the current escalation, the conference discussed the power dynamics of religious majority-minority relations in the Holy Land as well as the possibility of finding common ground between religious and civic values regarding sacred places.

The third and final session placed a spotlight on Mt. Zion, just outside Jerusalem's Old City's walls, which is where we are focusing our activities to address interreligious tensions. A survey of its dynamic and checkered history and a photographic depiction of its current situation provided the background for speakers to address concerns and ways of educating towards greater respect for religious attachments to holy sites and their protection.

Time was left for questions at the end of sessions resulting in lively discussion. Feedback received after the conference was overwhelmingly positive with people commenting on it being a significant learning experience as well as interesting and of practical consequence. Newspaper articles were published in English, Hebrew and Arabic. See in English: [Can Religious Leaders Contribute to Middle East Peace?](#)

Agenda Report

Welcoming Panel



Sharon Rosen

Anna Jandrey, Deputy Director of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel, spoke of the significance of holy sites to the faithful and the interreligious tensions that often revolve around them. She reinforced the importance of conferences like these that bring together religious leaders in dialogue.



Anna Jandrey



H.E. Jon Hanssen-Bauer

H.E. Jon Hanssen-Bauer, Norwegian Ambassador to Israel, sent a clear message about Norwegian commitment to reconciliation in the Holy Land and to engaging religious leaders in that process. In particular he emphasized Norway's support for the Universal Code and its commitment to helping pass a UN resolution in its spirit.

Rev. Kyoichi Sugino, Deputy Secretary General of Religions for Peace, praised the interreligious work taking place in the Holy Land, which excels because of people's deep sense of history, commitment to peaceful coexistence and practical wisdom to find appropriate solutions. He brought concrete examples of interreligious efforts to protect holy sites in other parts of the world that have been inspired by the Universal Code and its implementation in the Holy Land.



Rev. Kyoichi Sugino

Session One: Living in a Multi-Religious society - Religious Majority-Minority Relations in the Holy Land



From left to right: Rabbi Menachem, Sheikh Assi, Rabba Elad Appelbaum, Father Neuhaus

Rabba Tamar Elad Appelbaum, Rabba of Zion at the Masorti community congregation Jerusalem, opened the discussion by stressing the sanctity of human life.

Father David Neuhaus, Patriarchal vicar at the Latin Patriarchate Jerusalem and vicar of Hebrew-speaking and migrant communities, emphasized the place of Israeli Christians as an integral, equal and contributing part of Israeli society. It is therefore essential not to think of religions other than Judaism as ‘minorities’ which sets them apart from the whole.

Rabbi David Menachem, Rasso neighborhood community rabbi and a poet and musician in the spirit and tradition of Iraqi Jews, is well known for systematically speaking out with a clear voice against religiously motivated hate and violence. He called on religious leaders to step out of their study halls into the streets and to be in touch with people face to face.

Sheikh Samir Assi, Imam at Al-Jazaar Mosque in Acre, spoke passionately about Jewish, Christian and Muslim interreligious coexistence in Acre, expressing the hope that this could be a model for Jerusalem as well. He called on religious leaders not to be led by popular sentiment, but rather to bravely lead their communities towards reconciliation, while stressing that the present political standstill is fuelling religious tensions.

Session Two: Finding Common Ground between Religious and Civic values: Holy Sites



Oded Wiener (left) and Prof. Aviad Hacoheh (right)

Oded Wiener, former Director-General of the Chief Rabbinate and the Holy Sites Authority and now Senior Advisor for Interfaith Relations at the Chief Rabbinate and the Peres Center, navigated the discussion between experts with a clear message about the need to find a shared model for resolving disputes related to sacred places.

Ofer Zalberg, Senior Analyst at the Middle East and North Africa Program of the International Crisis Group, pointed to the erosion of the status-quo on the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Compound by the State of Israel and referred to his recent ICC reports on the topic which outlined some possible models for administrating Jerusalem's holy sites in order to reduce conflict.



Ofer Zalberg (left) and Nadav Shragai (right)

Nadav Shragai, senior research fellow at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, highlighted the role of Palestinian Muslims in eroding the status-quo on the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Compound, and focused on the discrimination of Jews at the holy site. He concluded that there is an urgent need to enforce law and order there.



Salwa Alenalt

Salwa Alenalt, Advisor at the Open University and PhD candidate in the Middle East Department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, presented her research on the activities of the Murabitat, the female group at al-Aqsa Mosque supported by the Northern Islamic Movement which has recently been banned in Israel. She provided insights into the Islamic concept of *ribat*, which refers to pious behavior and the call to Muslims to protect Islamic holy sites.

Prof. Aviad Hacoen, Professor of Hebrew Law at Sha'arei Mishpat Law School and Academic College, pointed out the tension between Jewish law and the law of the State of Israel regarding holy places, with specific reference to the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Compound. He explained the complex distinction between the right of Jews to visit the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Compound and the actual realization of this right.

Session Three: Challenges and Opportunities - Mt. Zion

Eran Tzidkiyahu, Project manager of "Window on Mount Zion" at Search for Common Ground, presented SFCG's unique case study on Mount Zion and expressed the hope that our activities could be a model for other shared sacred places in conflict.



Eran Tzidkiyahu

Yisca Harani, independent scholar and history of Christianity expert, described the long and complex history of Mt. Zion and the attachments of different faiths to the Mount.



Yisca Harani

She was followed by **Ami Metav**, from the Unit for Development and Entrepreneurship of East Jerusalem, who analyzed the geopolitics of Mt. Zion and, using maps and photographs, commented on current affairs. He concluded by stressing the touristic potential of the Mount as a leverage to finding common ground between conflicting parties.



Ami Metav

Father Dr. Nikodemus C. Schnabel, spokesperson for the Dormition Abbey, shared a passionate account of the Benedictine community's situation on Mount Zion, specifically focusing on hostility towards Christian clergy when they wear their religious garments. He emphasized the Benedictine Community's peaceful intentions towards their neighbours as demonstrated by their hospitality to Jewish and other visitors.



Father Dr. Nikodemus C. Schnabel



Eli Dan

Eli Dan, Deputy CEO of the Diaspora Yeshiva on Mount Zion, shared the Yeshiva's vision with a focus on the challenges and opportunities resulting from its interreligious and multi-cultural setting. He unequivocally denounced Jewish violence against people of other faiths and appealed for the right of everyone to have access to their shared holy sites.

Johnny Kassabri, Chief Inspector and Liaison Officer for Christian Communities & Affairs at the David Police Sub-District Jerusalem, outlined the police's policy and actions on Mt. Zion in view of the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. Based on police data, he demonstrated how violence has been reduced as a result of the new permanent police presence on the Mount and highlighted the police's sensitivity to the location and its commitment to keeping the peace. He thanked SFCG and the Jerusalem Intercultural Center for their efforts in reducing tensions.



Johnny Kassabri



Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir

Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir, Director of the Jerusalem Intercultural Center (JICC) located on Mt Zion, focused on the complexity of life there and outlined the *Window on Mt. Zion* project, a cooperation between the JICC and SFCG that aims to reduce interreligious tensions. Activities include bringing together volunteers to monitor life on the Mount, holding tenant meetings and facilitating trainings for police on sensitivities regarding shared sacred places.