



# Religious leaders denounce killing of innocent civilians

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At a special symposium which took place before a crowded audience at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on May 14, 2003, religious leaders denounced the killing of innocent civilians – in Israel as well as in the Palestinian Authority – as a desecration of the name of God. Rabbi Michael Melchior, M.K. on behalf of Labour/Meimad, Archbishop Aristarchos of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, and Sheik Talal Sidr of Hebron – who are all signatories to the Alexandria Declaration of religious leaders of the Holy Land of January 2002 – all spoke poignantly about the role of religions and religious leaders in advancing the cause of peace.

Dr. Johannes Gerster, representative to Israel of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Germany, welcomed the crowd of over 200 people and stressed the importance of the potential contribution of religious leaders dialoguing and working together for peace. And Dr. Ron Kronish, Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, added: 'Religion needs to be part of the solution, not part of the problem, in Israel and the Middle East.'

In a passionate yet reconciliatory speech, Sheik Sidr said in unequivocal language that 'the murder of innocent civilians is wrong – in Tel Aviv and in the West Bank.' He emphasized that even though he wants a Palestinian state, next door to the Israeli state, he is not 'greater than God' and therefore he does not decide who shall live and who shall die.

Rabbi Melchior, who has worked with Sheik Sidr very closely during the past two years in the planning and implementation of the Alexandria Declaration – a process which was initiated by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey and implemented on the ground by Canon Andrew White, special emissary of the Archbishop of Canterbury for Reconciliation in the Middle East (and other parts of the world) spoke about the special role religious leaders can play in peace-building in the Middle East. Even though the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a national conflict, not a religious conflict, religious leaders have a unique role and obligation to speak to the hearts and minds of the people in both societies. He emphasized the uniqueness of this gathering at the King David Hotel in the heart of Jerusalem, especially on a day with much tension in the air – with leaders of the Islamic Movement in Israel being arrested on suspicion of supporting terrorist groups and with a major terrorist incident in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, he applauded his partner in dialogue, Sheik Sidr, for having the courage to stand up and say loudly and clearly that the killing of a Jewish child or a Palestinian child is a 'hillul hashem,' a desecration of God's Name.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) will continue to sponsor public symposia this year on the theme of The Contribution of Religions to Peace-building in Israel and the Middle East.

Ron Kronish

Rabbi Ron Kronish is the Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. The ICCI is a member of the International Council of Christians and Jews and the Israel chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace