



Religious Leaders' Summit for Peace in the Middle East: "Religion can no longer be an obstacle"

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ALICANTE – An interreligious meeting was held on November 14-16, 2016 in Spain, which brought together Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders. At the heart of the debate is the responsibility of religious leaders in the construction of peace in the Middle East. They reiterated their appeal against violence and incitement to hatred between religions.

"Relentlessly seek peace in the Holy Land": at a time of extreme religious and political tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim community leaders gathered in Spain for a three-day meeting, at the conclusion of which a joint denunciation against violence and incitement was issued.

The declaration was signed by Chief Rabbi David Lau and other senior Israeli rabbis for the Jewish side; from the Muslims by Sheikh Raed Badir, a leading Islamic Legal scholar and member of the Palestinian Council Ulama, and Sheikhs Hamad Abu Dabes and Imad Falouji, from Gaza and other dignitaries close to the Palestinian Authority or Hamas. Senior Christian dignitaries also participated actively in this meeting: the Melkite Archbishop George Bacouni, the Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem Munib Younan, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Timotheos Margaritis and Bishop William Shomali, the Patriarchal Vicar in Jerusalem and Palestine.

"Our two peoples are responsible for their common fate, that the three religions are responsible for creating peaceful existence, and that we, as religious leaders are responsible for promoting a life of mutual respect based upon justice and safety, in the spirit of the word of God as conveyed by His prophets" stated the final declaration, which "focused on the sanctity of life and a disavowal of violence in general, especially that conducted in the name of God." "The violence that is conducted, supposedly in the name of God, is a desecration of His name, a crime against those who are created in His image, and a debasement of faith. The proper means of solving conflict and disagreement is by negotiation and deliberation only."

The religious leaders also called for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "that recognizes the right of the two peoples to exist with dignity". At the end of the meeting, a standing committee was established to implement the declaration. The strictly political considerations were somewhat put in parentheses, observed Bishop Shomali, patriarchal vicar in Jerusalem and Palestine. "The atmosphere among the participants was fraternal and friendly, but I will not hide that I was expecting more from this meeting. Peace cannot be in the hands of politicians alone, and progress of the negotiations requires concrete action on the part of all. Words and meetings are no longer enough."

The Palestinian leaders present notably failed to point out to their Israeli counterparts, the difficulty or the ambiguity of this dialogue, while an Israeli bill intends to deprive Muslim muezzins of their loudspeakers for the call to prayer and worship in the mosque. Chief Rabbi David Lau hastened to call on Israeli officials to be cautious in taking measures regarding this law, which represents a serious hindrance to freedom of religion for Palestinian citizens living in Israel. At the same time in Israel, Jewish officials expressed their concern regarding the law that could later lead to the banning of the Shabbat sirens.

"Having been able to smoothly deal with the muezzin issue is a positive point," said Bishop Shomali, adding that "if these meetings do not advance the cause of peace in a tangible way, they nevertheless prevent a deterioration of the situation, and therefore have a positive influence on relations between the three communities. Religion can no longer be an obstacle to peace and reconciliation. That we have been able to sign a joint declaration is another step to a better awareness of our contradictions. "

The summit was organized by the Adam Center for Dialogue of Civilizations and the Mosaica Initiative under the auspices of the Spanish government.

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