

Muslim, Jewish Religious Leaders Denounce Violence, Promote Peace in Unprecedented Israeli-Palestinian Meeting

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Israeli President Rivlin hosts Washington Institute initiative that brings Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim religious leaders together for the first time.

In the first event of its kind, top Palestinian Muslim and Israeli Jewish religious leaders – including the top religious affairs advisor to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israel's Sephardi Chief Rabbi and leaders of a prominent West Bank yeshiva -- met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin to promote peace and affirm their opposition to all forms of religiously inspired violence.

Participants in the initiative issued this statement at the meeting:

"God created life and commanded life. Therefore, we denounce the killing of innocents or any kind of aggression against the other. We believe the deliberate killing of or attempt to kill innocents is terrorism, whether it is committed by Muslims, Jews or others. In this spirit, we encourage all our people to work for a just peace, mutual respect for human life and for the status quo on the holy sites, and the eradication of religious hatred."

Key figures at this unprecedented meeting included Israel's Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef as well as Palestinian President Abbas' Islamic Affairs Advisor Sheikh Mahmoud Habbash, the Supreme Sharia Court Judge.

"The meeting today is important and significant - perhaps the most important meeting that could be held during these days," said Israeli President Rivlin. "We all know that the tensions between Jews and Muslims are difficult, and specifically for that reason, we insist on meeting together here today. We must not allow this land to once again witness a sacrifice of blood senselessly spilled."

The summit was the result of a year-long Washington Institute initiative led by two of its scholars – Ziegler Distinguished Fellow David Makovsky and Kaufman Fellow David Pollock – who devoted dozens of hours in private talks to bring this group together.

"Having Jewish and Muslim leaders from Israel and the Palestinian Authority join together at the home of the president of Israel sends a powerful message of peace at a critical and sensitive moment," said Makovsky and Pollock. "Over the last year we have seen a rise in tensions between Israelis and Palestinians that has led to grave consequences. Since much of the violence of the last year has been religiously motivated, we believed it was vital for religious leaders to speak out. One should never assume one meeting alone can be transformative, but it could provide an important foundation to build upon."

With the help of the Center for Middle East Development at UCLA, in early 2016 the Institute brought together Sheikh Habbash, the Palestinian Authority's former religious affairs minister, and Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, head of

Yeshivat Har Etzion in the West Bank region of Gush Etzion, to discuss the role of religious leaders in conflict mitigation. In subsequent rounds of talks, each side brought three additional religious leaders. Participants began to understand each other's perspective on the conflict, how each views its own religious narrative, and the importance of religious leaders speaking out against religiously inspired violence and promoting tolerance and peace.

The Institute plans to continue this high-level dialogue to find additional practical steps to reduce religious tension.

"We hope that this initiative will create an ongoing mechanism for Israeli and Palestinian clerical leadership to communicate with each other and to work in concert to reduce tensions," said Institute Executive Director Robert Satloff. "In some small way, this initiative underscores the powerful idea that religion can serve as a basis for coexistence, not just an excuse for conflict."

Participants included:

- Rabbi Shlomo Brin, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion for first-year students
- Sheikh Mahmoud Habbash, Supreme Sharia Court Judge and Religious and Islamic Affairs Advisor to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas
- Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Gush Etzion
- Rabbi Daniel Tropper, founder and president emeritus of the Gesher organization
- Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel



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