

Religion and Politics in Alexandria

Feb 1, 2002



Brief Analysis

On January 20-21, an interfaith summit of Muslim, Christian, and Israeli Jewish leaders convened in Alexandria, Egypt, after several years of effort and planning. The meeting did not draw much attention in the Egyptian or Palestinian media -- only in the Israeli media -- but it deserves attention, if not for the religious dimension, then at least for the political.

The Interfaith Summit

About twenty religious scholars from the highest religious establishments of Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) met under the presidency of Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey. Egyptians in attendance included the head of Egypt's al-Azhar, Dr. Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi. Israeli representatives included Chief Sephardi Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, Deputy Foreign Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior, Rabbi Menachem Fruman of the Tekoa settlement in the West Bank (who had tried to create contacts between Jewish religious figures and Hamas leaders for many years), and Rabbi David Rosen (until recently the head of the Jerusalem office of the Anti-Defamation League). Palestinians included Chief Justice of the Palestinian Shari'ah courts Sheikh Taysir al-Tamimi, Mufti of Bethlehem Sheikh Tawil, PA minister of state Talal al-Sidr, and Mufti of the Palestinian police forces Sheikh Abd al-Salam Abu Shkheidem. Other leaders included Latin Patriarch Michel Sabah, Melkite Archbishop Butrous Mu`allem, Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem Riah Abu `Asal, and representatives of the Armenian and Greek Orthodox Patriarchs.

Efforts to arrange such a meeting were ongoing for several years, involving, among others, senior Christian figures in Europe. In December 1997, Israeli Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Meir Lau met Tantawi in Cairo, which led to severe criticism of Tantawi in Egypt. Nevertheless, Tantawi corresponded with Chief Israeli Sephardi Rabbi Bakshi-Doron. It seems that two factors were behind the timing of the meeting last week: the personal effort dedicated to the task by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the slight change in Egyptian policy toward Israel and the PA since the September 11 attacks on the United States and the capture of the arms ship *Karine-A* by Israel one day before it would have entered the Suez Canal. The meeting should therefore be studied not only for its politico-religious dimension, but also for what it says about Egyptian-Israeli relations.

According to the London-based Arab press, there were many conflicts during the discussions (e.g., on the future of Jerusalem). Yet, the participants managed to issue a seven-point common statement titled "The first Alexandria statement of the religious leaderships in the Holy Land." The statement called upon the Israeli and Palestinian sides to shun violence and live together as neighbors who respect each other's religious and historical rights -- with protection of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish sanctities and freedom of worship. Perhaps the most important element in the declaration was the statement that "all the monotheistic faiths prohibit the killing of innocents and regard it a crime, and all faiths and believing people should condemn violence."

President Hosni Mubarak officially received the participants on January 22 at the presidential palace in Cairo, in the presence of the Egyptian foreign minister Ahmad Maher. According to the Egyptian MENA news agency, President Mubarak emphasized that the religious leaders should have a say in bringing peace and tolerance to prevail in the

region. Despite the high-level attention by Mubarak, the meeting in Alexandria did not make much noise in the Arab world.

On the other hand, the meeting did not draw many attacks. Even bitter rivals of the Egyptian Islamic establishment under Sheikh Tantawi -- such as the Egyptian Dr. Yousef al-Qardawi, who lives in Qatar -- refrained from open attacks, probably in an attempt to diminish the effects of the meeting. To be sure, Palestinian Hamas -- in a long article on its official website by "Quds Press," a Hamas news agency in Damascus and London -- claimed that hidden British motives were behind the meeting, "in order to improve the image of the United Kingdom and the West following the war against terrorism led by the United States, described by Muslim activists as a Crusader attack." Egyptian Sheikh Yahya Isma`il, the former general secretary of the Front of the al-Azhar Scholars who was recently fired, described it as "humiliating concessions for the Jews." He added that even the Jewish rabbis were "war criminals and occupiers and there is no room for any dialogue with them, since they occupy a land that does not belong to them." Isma`il also attempted to connect the meeting to the American and British attempts to intervene in the teaching techniques of Islamic education in Egypt, another controversial issue lately.

Foreign Affairs and Religion

Within the last month, there has been a slight change in the Egyptian position toward Israel, Yasir Arafat, the Palestinians, and the global war against terrorism. The turning point seems to have been the capture of Karine-A on January 3, and the American support for Israel's move to marginalize Arafat. The Egyptian silence during the past month toward Israeli actions against the PA (including Cairo's relatively restrained reaction to the Israeli siege of Arafat in Ramallah) places the Alexandria religious conference -- with its large Israeli delegation -- in a very political light.

The Alexandria meeting was more significant for Egyptian-Israeli relations than for religious tolerance in the region. As one Israeli journalist wrote after the conference, real religious understanding would require something on the scale of a meeting between Sheikh Yassin of Hamas and Rabbi Dov Lior of Kiryat Arba, one of the leading extremist rabbis among the Israeli settlers in the West Bank.

Last but not least, the meeting showed much about Sheikh Tantawi. Well before the September 11 attacks -- in fact, since his appointment to his senior position as Sheikh al-Azhar in 1997 -- he succeeded in gradually returning al-Azhar to the leading role in orthodox and moderate Islam, despite all the criticism from popular radical Islamic scholars in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. Al-Azhar has done this with much support from the Egyptian regime, but with substantial personal courage as well.

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