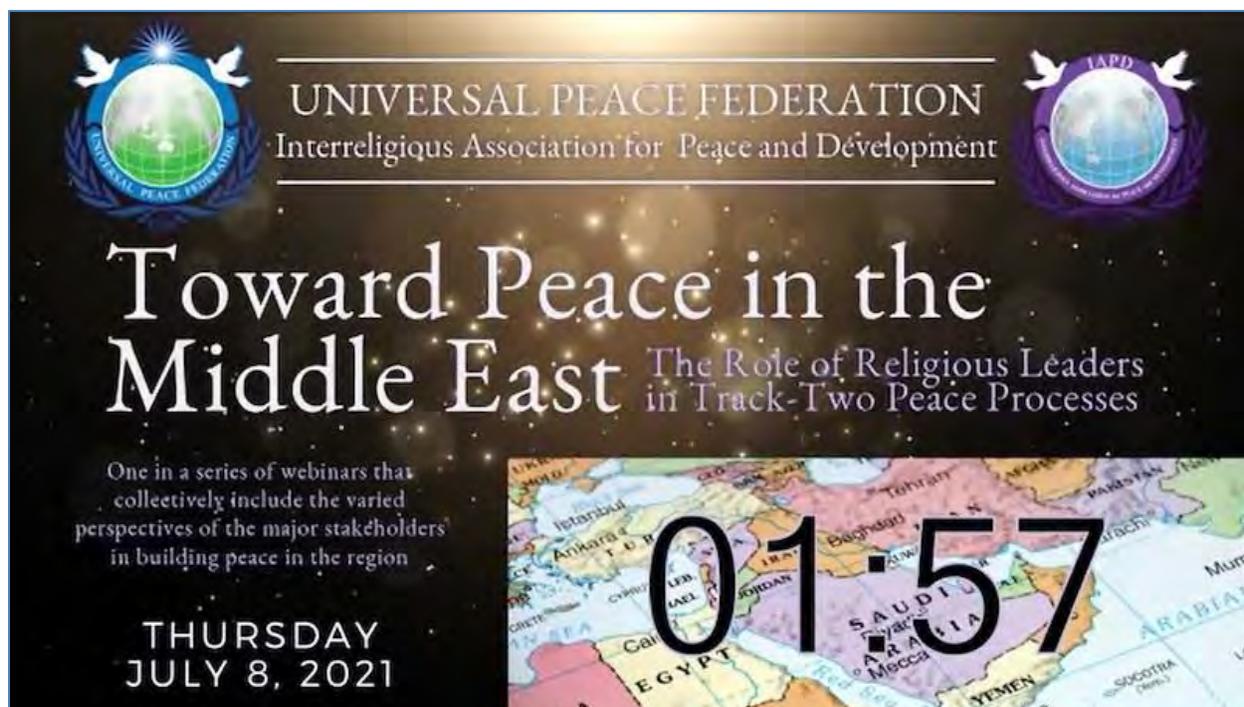


UPF Europe and the Middle East: Faith Leaders Urged to Light Path to Peace

Jacques Marion
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Europe and the Middle East -- The impact of the Abraham Accords was the focus of a webinar titled "Toward Peace in the Middle East: The Role of Religious Leaders in Track Two Peace Processes."

The online conference, held on July 8, 2021, was organized jointly by the Europe-Middle East and North American branches of UPF and its Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD). A total of 150 participants watched the event.



The webinar was the fourth in a series in which different UPF associations invited leaders in various fields to discuss the impact of the 2020 Abraham Accords. The first three webinars, held in January, February, and April of 2021, heard the views of political and academic leaders from the Middle East and other parts of the world. For the latest webinar, UPF turned to its IAPD network of faith leaders.

The longing for interfaith unity was expressed in one panelist's reply to the question "What message do you think Abraham would have sent to this webinar?"

His answer: "Please don't forget that you are -- all of you -- my beloved children. ... So you have to act as brothers and sisters."

The principal speakers were:

Dr. Mohammad Habash, Abu Dhabi University, United Arab Emirates;

Very Rev. Anders Gadegaard, dean of Copenhagen Cathedral, Denmark;
Professor Hanoah Ben Pazi, Bar Ilan University, Israel;
Imam Muhammad Elahi, House of Wisdom, United States
Sheikh Mohamed Elmuntasir M. Mustafa, secretary general of Sufis and Scholars in Sudan.

Marilyn Angelucci, the co-chair of UPF in the Middle East, was the moderator.



Archbishop George A. Stallings Jr., the chair of IAPD for North America, gave the opening remarks. He began with the greeting "Peace, *shalom, salam alaykum*" -- referring to the words spoken on interfaith pilgrimages to the Middle East that were organized by UPF's Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) starting in 2003.

Archbishop Stallings said that religious leaders are acutely aware that all conflict originates from our very distance from God. Therefore, they feel called to be a bridge between God and humankind, bringing solutions to conflicts that are very different from the solutions offered by political leadership.

The soft-power approach means bringing the best of faith, hope and love to influence those with political, military and economic power. So "our daily prayer," Archbishop Stallings said, is to recover that original oneness willed by the Creator as we work for a peace in the Middle East that will expand to peace across the globe.

For **Dr. Mohammad Habash**, cooperation between the children of Abraham has been a major focus for decades. "Unfortunately, there has been one century of conflict between Muslims and Jews," he said. Referring to the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, Dr. Habash spoke of the tragic ends met by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Saluting the courage of those pioneers for peace, he said: "Now it is our responsibility. Usually religious leaders should be the ones calling for peace, even when political leaders are caught up in conflict." Sadly, he said, too many religious leaders have incited conflict, a position that has nothing to do with Abraham.

Now is the time to correct such mistakes, he said, reminding the audience of times of harmonious relations between Muslims and Jews, for example in Spain's Andalusia. This is what we want to see today, he said.

As religious leaders, we should not ignore the plight of hundreds of thousands, Dr. Habash said. We should call for justice, human rights and harmony, support efforts for peace, and oppose any call for violence or war. Just as the Quran calls Muslims to have good relations with the "People of the Book," we have to walk together, he said.

"I am talking to you from Abu Dhabi. Just two kilometers from here is the Abrahamic Family House, which will include all the family of Abraham. Thirty years ago in New York, I heard [UPF founder] Father Moon speak of this vision of harmony between the children of Abraham. Now I see it with my eyes here in the UAE."

The **Very Reverend Anders Gadegaard** said, "This is one of the most burning issues of the world: Peace in the Middle East concerns all of us" -- however far from the region we may live. Peace in this

Sheikh Mohamed Elmuntasir M. Mustafa said that leaders in any religion have an important platform: simply put, the ability to influence their own community. Beyond that, they have a huge audience -- they can send their message through churches, mosques, social media, newspapers, conferences, etc. With a shared goal of peace, religious leaders must promote tolerance, love and stability. The sheikh spoke of the importance of religious diplomacy, which can enable religious leaders to have a positive effect on society.

The sheikh contrasted two schools of thought in Islam and their potential to influence society toward or away from peace. Sufism, a form of mysticism, focuses on the purification of the spirit, he said. Sufi scholars have a great influence in their communities, especially in the Middle East. Since mysticism typically accepts the other as human, they are well equipped to deal with diversity.



At the other end of the spectrum, the sheikh said, is "the industry of extremism and terrorism." Pointing to one particular school of thought, he gave a specific example of a terrorist act publicized on social media alongside a text from that school.

At the government level he sees two types of problems: Some governments sponsor institutions that promote such extremist schools of thought; while others prove incapable of properly managing diversity, due to either ministerial inexperience or lack of legislation.



We need to train religious leaders in religious diplomacy, the sheikh said. We should find out who is sponsoring the schools of thought that support extremist views. And we should support Sufi institutions and their work to promote peace in their countries; leaders there are willing and able to have a peaceful influence.

David Fraser Harris, the secretary general for UPF in the Middle East, moderated the question-and-answer session.

When asked if the faith and courage of Anwar Sadat could be considered a good example for peace in the region, Dr. Habash stated that for peace in the region an important step was made last year -- a likely reference to the Abraham Accords. Sadat and Rabin were not accepted by their societies, he said, but now is a different time. Our responsibility is to walk together, to find a way to support peace, to speak carefully and frankly about injustice, and to advise political leaders to end all violence.



Asked to give an example of a moving experience of the three faiths coming together, Rev. Gadegaard recalled what happened following the horrific killing of a Jewish warden outside the main synagogue in Copenhagen. For a mourning and remembrance ceremony, Christians, Muslims and Jews walked through the city hand in hand. The rabbi, the bishop and the imams spoke with one voice. All Denmark watched it on TV. "That was actually what created a much-improved atmosphere for Jews, Muslims and Christians ... because such an incident created trust among us."

UPF International President **Dr. Michael Jenkins** offered closing remarks, thanking each of the speakers: "We are very confident that when leaders of your stature and spiritual foundation come together, we can open the door for understanding."

He recalled his many visits to Jerusalem with interfaith delegations. "Everywhere we went as religious leaders, we were welcomed." He said that each of the Abrahamic faiths calls on its followers to share what they have in common. "We certainly did this today," Dr. Jenkins said.

"We will achieve peace if the religious leaders continue to light the path," he said.

