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The Crisis in Interfaith Relations in the Middle East

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The interfaith peace movement in the Middle East has foundered recently, a casualty of major geo-political events, among them the war in Iraq, the increase in hostility between Iran and the West, the [Israel-Hezbollah](#) war, and the failure of efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, fallout continues from the Danish cartoon controversy and the remarks of Pope Benedict XVI in 2006. These and related factors have contributed to undermine interfaith efforts and limit opportunities for meaningful dialogue and common action.

Yet, as four experts in the field recently made clear, there is still reason for hope. Interfaith dialogue can be, according to Dr. Marc Gopin, director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University, either a useless "cover for the status quo" or a "transformative means for catalyzing relationships" for the benefit of society. The Institute's [David Smock](#), associate vice president of the [Religion and Peacemaking](#) program, insisted that there continue to be "courageous members and leaders of all these religious communities who reach out across the lines of religious division." It is within this dialectic of sober realism and hope that the four experts reflected on the future of interfaith dialogue in the Middle East at a [recent USIP-sponsored meeting](#). The other speakers were [Rend al-Rahim Francke](#), a USIP senior fellow and founder and executive director of the Iraq Foundation; Samuel Rizk, a doctoral candidate at George Mason University, who was executive director of the Beirut-based Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue; and Mohammed Abu Nimer, a professor at American University and director of the Peace Building and Development Institute, and also the founder and president of the Salaam Institute.

This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Paul Wee](#), program officer in the Institute's Religion and Peacemaking program, as a summary of the views of the participants. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq

Rend al-Rahim Francke discussed the current rift between Sunni and Shi'a communities in Iraq. The rift, she said, is not based on theological or doctrinal differences, but on issues of political and economic power. The original split, in the seventh century, occurred because of a disagreement about the succession to the Prophet Mohammed. Because they viewed Ali as the rightful successor to the Prophet, the "Shi'a of Ali" ("partisans of Ali") became a minority in the Muslim world. They do, however, maintain a majority in Bahrain, Iraq and Iran, the latter due to the forced conversion of the shah to shi'ism in the early 16th

century.

Throughout the Middle East, the Sunnis have had the upper hand politically while the Shi'a have been politically dispossessed. Some Sunni groups (e.g. the extreme Wahabis) even question the legitimacy of Shi'a doctrine as genuinely Muslim. In Iraq today one might say that we are witnessing the outpouring of centuries of Shia grievance against the Sunni.

The sectarian divide deepened under Saddam Hussein, who continually warned the Sunni community about the dangers of Shi'a ambitions. A fear of the Shi'a was deliberately fostered by Saddam's regime. Following the war of 1991, the Shi'a were targeted for political, and even physical elimination. The alleged slogan of Hussein Kamil, Saddam's son-in-law and director of the Military Industrialization Commission, was "No Shi'a after today." The assassination of Muqtada Sadr's father and brothers deepened the Shi'a sense of persecution. Furthermore, in the 1990s the Baathist regime embarked on what it called "the campaign of faith," that strengthened religious identification at the expense of national cohesion.

In the period leading up to the war in 2003, a political contract was struck between Shi'a groups and Kurds and "ratified" by the United States. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) saw Iraq in simplistic terms, divided among Sunni, Shia and Kurds. This view became self-fulfilling, entrenching the divisions. Beginning with the CPA-installed governing council in 2003, Iraq's political structure has been designed along sectarian lines. Political identity now coincides with sectarian identity.

After the 2003 war, Iraq experienced a 180-degree turnaround. The Sunnis, who controlled the Iraqi state since its inception in 1921, lost their dominance; the Shi'a, the underdog in the Muslim world for centuries, became the new rulers.

The Sunnis condemned the war, thereby placing themselves in opposition to the new order. The insurgency that began in the summer of 2003 capitalized on the fears and the suspicions of the Sunnis. Most Sunnis did not belong to the insurgency, but equally they did not all condemn the insurgency. For many it was their insurance policy against the new order. For their part the Shi'a suspected most Sunnis of being Ba'thists. The de-Ba'thification law and the purges of state institutions further alienated the Sunnis. While Sunnis stayed out of the political process, the Shi'a took over the politics of Iraq.

Further alienating the Sunnis was the flawed constitutional process. The parliament that drafted the constitution was seen as legitimate in the eyes of Shi'a and Kurds, but illegitimate in the view of Sunnis. The constitution formally guarantees equal treatment under the law. In practice, the system is based on sectarian distinctions because the political model is based on sectarian ethnicity. The country's institutions, the army and the judicial system, need to reflect the equality that is provided for in the constitution. Additionally, a dialogue between Sunnis and Shi'a is long overdue. It is the only way to work through mutual fear and distrust.

Christians in Egypt and Lebanon

Samuel Rizk focused on the status of Christians in the Middle East. He noted that Christians are found throughout the Arab world, and occupy very different positions socially, demographically, economically, religiously, culturally, and politically. For example, Christians in Lebanon comprise over one-third of the country's four million population and hold a relatively significant share of the political and social capital; Christians in Egypt comprise about ten percent of the country's 75 million population and have a relatively meager share of the political and social capital. Christians in Palestine comprise about three percent or less in the West Bank and Gaza and have some voice in Palestinian political and cultural affairs; they represent about two percent of the population of Israel and have little or no voice in politics. In Iraq, they represent less than one million of the 30 million population and have little political significance, if any; the same can be said about Christians in Syria. In Jordan they represent about three percent of the five million population and enjoy a relatively significant profile in politics, economics, culture and society.

Following significant advances in interfaith dialogues during the 1990s, Christians and Muslims active in interfaith dialogue in the Middle East now believe that this once-hopeful trend has suffered some serious setbacks. The Christian community, which was engaged in intensive conversations and a range of cooperative activities with leaders of other faith groups, now find themselves struggling simply to affirm their presence and ensure their survival.

Interfaith dialogue has faced setbacks over the past five years primarily because several events in the public sphere have tended to erode the dialogues and their effectiveness. While these events have influenced the state of dialogue throughout the Middle East, Rizk focused on Egypt and Lebanon.

1. In a game of high stakes political poker between the government of Egypt and the still banned Muslim Brotherhood, the Coptic Orthodox Church and community has lost precious ground. In spite of its support to the candidacy of the current president during his 2005 election campaign, the Coptic community gained little in return during the subsequent parliamentary election. Further, it found itself having to deal with the slogan heard in the 1970s and 80s, "Islam is the solution." The resulting gains for the Muslim Brotherhood—in parliament and political life in general—have made Coptic Christians uneasy. Election tension between the government and the Brotherhood has spilled over into violence against Christians and Churches during Ramadan in November 2005 and on Palm Sunday 2006.
2. The Ministry of Religious Endowments in Egypt, a public institution supported by Christian and Muslim taxpayers, published a book authored by an Islamic scholar that included polemics, inciting and legitimizing attacks against Christians. In the face of protests, the book was withdrawn, but the harm had been done.
3. International incidents such as the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed and Pope Benedict's speech created tensions that could have and should have been avoided. Lebanon is one place where the cartoon incident played out into violent clashes that left private buildings and churches torched.
4. In Iraq, Christians have, for the most part, abandoned the country with no possibility of return in sight. The crushing animosity between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq leaves little opportunity for maintaining a Christian community. Furthermore, these tensions have effectively spilled over into the entire region and their consequences can be seen, for example, in Lebanon.

These and other factors have contributed to a diminishing of the popularity and effectiveness of interfaith dialogues. In the face of immense challenges, however, Christian communities continue to maintain a commitment to expressing their faith through involvement in civil society generally (through development, social services, and human rights) and through involvement in interfaith dialogue in particular. That Christian communities remain socially engaged can be attributed to the following reasons:

1. The first is the Christian faith itself and its mission to evangelize and to engage with people of different faiths and belief systems. From the earliest days of Christianity, followers of Christ were engaged in proclaiming the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, and later, they expanded their mission to numerous parts of the world.
2. A second reason is a civic duty and responsibility toward the community along the lines of Jesus' admonition in the Gospel of Matthew (22: 21) to "render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This conviction, for the most part, places Christians, irrespective of demographics, firmly at the heart of the communities in which they live.
3. One last reason could certainly be politics, and here, mainly, the politics of survival as a minority. This is especially critical for Christians in the Middle East. Engaging with Muslim counterparts and keeping open the channels of communication with official Islamic institutions is a politically expedient strategy for Christians living in a minority situation.

Whatever the reason, Rizk said, Christians believe that their faith entails some kind of social engagement with the "other," with the "neighbor," with "the lesser of the brothers," and this engagement is just as

strong where Christians are a minority as it is where Christians are a majority.

In the face of this precarious mix of religion and ideology, dialogue advocates have worked hard to re-establish the interfaith discourse on the foundation of shared values, traditions, and cultures. In what has been called "the dialogue of life," Christians have joined with Muslims in a search for common ground based on a commitment to human rights, democratization, justice, and equal citizenship.

Rizk concluded by asking this question: Although the dialogue of life has focused on common values and cooperative action, it has tended to avoid discussion of the basic elements of religion and theology. Has the time come for interfaith dialogue to address not only the commonalities but also the theological differences, in the hope that the dialogue of life will be further strengthened?

Jews and Muslims in Syria

Marc Gopin noted that because religious identity is invariably entangled in the complex dynamics of culture, politics and ethnicity, it is difficult to deal with interfaith dialogue as a purely religious phenomenon. Some religious groups, furthermore, simply reflect—or are perceived to reflect—the ideology of a particular state. American military and economic involvement in the Middle East, for example, is perceived by some to be a Christian intrusion into the heart of the Muslim world. Threats by the Iranian president against Israel are seen as part of a Muslim war against Jews.

Within the ambiguous mix of ethnic, religious, and political identity—made more complex by the blurred lines between reality and perception—it is the task of interfaith dialogue to draw distinctions and clarify language. In order to avoid the type of misunderstanding that leads to hostility and conflict, interfaith dialogue is called to separate genuinely religious and theological issues from other factors.

Seasoned diplomats often miss these distinctions, as the present Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq illustrates. A genuine interfaith dialogue would be helpful here. The major disagreements in this "sectarian" war in Iraq have little to do with the essence of religion or with theology. At the same time, interfaith dialogue might help to identify the common historical and religious traditions that might be useful in bringing the parties together. It can also lead to cooperation in addressing critical issues of politics and economy.

A genuine interfaith dialogue can produce results that are surprising in their ability to transform a situation of hostility and conflict into one of understanding and peace. Among other things such a dialogue can:

- Provide a forum for addressing common concerns;
- Forge alliances for meeting humanitarian needs;
- Allow understanding to grow and stereotypes to be shattered;
- Create a climate for the development of personal relationships of trust.

Sometimes, seemingly small and insignificant events can bring hope to situations characterized by suspicion and hostility. Gopin provided a personal example based on a visit he made to Syria in the spring of 2006.

I have always been welcomed and honored in Syria, but as tensions increased and there was talk of "regime change," coming from the West, the atmosphere in Damascus became cooler. In the midst of growing tensions internationally, however, an incident occurred that gave me cause for hope.

I was invited to attend Friday prayers in one of the largest mosques of Syria in Aleppo, by the Grand Mufti of Syria, who is also a friend. Before the prayers the Mufti surprised me by introducing, in front of a hundred worshippers, a young man who had been a prisoner in Abu

Ghraib. The Mufti told me that the man had been tortured and confined to a coffin for twenty-one days. On hearing this, I reflected and then stood up in the middle of the proceedings, walked over to the young man and offered him an apology in the name of the American people.

This moment seemed to change everything. What had happened was told to a larger gathering of 3,000 that day in the same mosque, the Mufti presented the man and myself to the worshippers as evidence of what true reconciliation is, and the news of this event, as I later learned, reached the office of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. The Grand Mufti, whom I met in Damascus the next Sunday, quoted the Syrian president as saying, "What you did in the mosque means more to me than a thousand statements from the American president."

This was one small incident that was instrumental in providing public support for a less confrontational and more honest stance between the United States and Syria. So many more are necessary in order to shift relationships and negotiations in a more peaceful direction.

Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Jordan: An Overview

Mohammed Abu Nimer observed that there is definitely a crisis in interfaith dialogue in the Middle East today. Wherever one looks—Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and the ongoing war between Israel and Palestine—this is evident. As to whether these conflicts themselves are motivated by politics or religion, the answer is simply that both play a role. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, religious factors have played a considerable part in defining national identity and shaping political vision.

Those who are committed to constructive diplomacy are well advised to take the religious factor seriously. The Oslo process, like Camp David before it, tended to neglect the religious dimension of the conflict. These agreements forgot the fact that the "Holy Land conflict" is also been shaped by "holy people."

A recent period of research into the role of interfaith dialogue in Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan has made it clear that interfaith dialogue, in spite of the failure of political leaders to negotiate lasting agreements, has led to increased respect for the other, forged alliances for social justice, and provided valuable resources in education for peace. Nevertheless, the situation of these interfaith dialogue organizations is mixed. Essentially, three models of interfaith dialogue are prevalent in these five countries:

1. The Harmony Model. This model seeks to create a measure of harmony through the sharing of cultural events, rituals, and prayers. Within this model there is no attempt to address either theological or political differences. On the contrary, it seeks to avoid controversy by avoiding the issues that divide. The goal is rather to create a measure of harmony by avoiding the issues of substance.
2. The 'Dialogue for Life' Model. This model seeks to find common cause through work together on projects that matter to people, such as micro credit, agricultural projects, or other socio-economic initiatives carried out by Muslims and Christians in Egypt. It also includes training in problem-solving and communication skills. There is little discussion of religious issues or political taboos.
3. The Liberation Model. This model is not afraid to address issues of faith and theology, but is especially well-known for its pro-active approach to the causes of injustice in the political and economic life of the community. Groups such as Rabbis for Human Rights (e.g. harvesting olives with Palestinians), the Sabeel Conference (e.g. arranging meetings in support of Israelis and Palestinians who work for justice and against the occupation), and the Conference for Non-Violent Resistance in Bethlehem in December 2005 (e.g. protesting Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands), are noteworthy.

Genuine and effective interfaith dialogue rests on mutual acceptance of the other. It seeks not to convert,

but to understand and appreciate members of other faith communities. Its goal is to create sustainable conditions for mutual acceptance and co-existence.

There are some basic functions and benefits for the interfaith dialogue initiatives in all of the five countries. In general, all of these models contribute to a re-humanizing of the other. Interfaith dialogue can begin with "harmonizing events" but eventually participants will demand that it move forward to a more meaningful agenda.

Also, interfaith dialogue can result in agreements and statements (e.g., the Alexandria Declaration) made by religious leaders. Those can also serve to create a climate and a mechanism for collegial cooperation between diverse faith communities and send a symbolic message to the political elites to negotiate.

Interfaith dialogue in the Middle East is an emerging field of practice. It needs a great deal of support and courage. Nevertheless, to develop into a potentially influential force in local and regional politics, the organizers need to take certain steps, such as designing and implementing interfaith dialogue within a strategic framework; launching initiatives characterized by both vision and long-term sustainability; linking the interfaith agenda to the concrete realities of the local communities; and fortifying the dialogue process against threats from external political events. Interfaith dialogue can have a profound influence on peace in the Middle East. However, "faith alone is not enough."

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