

IARF member group: **Interfaith Encounter Association**

Project Manager: Dr. Yehuda Stolov

Total Project Budget: \$10,000 (\$5,000 from IARF)

Project Location: Israel and West Bank, between Jerusalem and Hebron

Project Start/End Dates: March-December 2011

Accounts of some encounters

16 March 2011

This encounter, like previous ones, was held in the home of Sheikh Abu Khader Jabari in Hebron. In this encounter the group was joined by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the Chief Rabbi of Efrat; and Rabbi Yeshaiahu Hollander, of the "Sanhedrin". On the other hand, we were disappointed to learn that the other sheikhs canceled their participation this time, due to pressures of the Palestinian Authority. But this did not damage the encounter, which took place in an excellent atmosphere with many agreements between the participants – both on the macro processes that are needed and on the next steps of our group.



Sheikh Jabari mentioned that Islam accepts all prophets and accords special respect towards People of the Book (i.e. Jews and Christians). Moreover: even if an idol worshiper asks for help – a Muslim has to help him.

Rabbi Riskin responded that "with us it is exactly the same". This is manifested in the reconciliation of Isaac and Ishmael prior to the burial of Abraham. Also: the prophet Micah says that in the Temple there should

be a place for every one to pray in the name of his God. The important thing is that everyone will work for peace but politics damages and the challenge is how to meet without the interference of politics.

Itsik mentioned that the Sheikh declared publicly his full acceptance of the Jews and did not take his words back even when under pressure. This leads to mutual understanding and reciprocity, and to the unique situation in which Hebron, with all its extremist image, is the only place that does not have any "price tag" activities. Our joint challenge is to build together good neighbors relations.



Rabbi Dreifus said that he supports every word that was said before. Every human has to be treated as human, without the differences in religion causing separation.

He stressed that the very special thing that happens in this room is a microcosm that exemplifies what can happen in the whole of society. He also agreed that the good things that need to happen will not be promoted by the politicians – but by the people, as we see now happening across the Middle East. It is our task to awaken a new spirit, which is now

sought by most people, of respect and love between people.

Rabbi Riskin said that he is sure that God does not like it when we are in conflict with each other. The barriers between us are a result of fear, which comes from people not knowing each other. He then turned to proposing a practical vision for the group, a vision that was enthusiastically accepted by all. We have to meet regularly – every month to six weeks and then publicize them in our communities, since he believes that if we connect, brother to brother, it will also influence the politicians and lead to the removal of fear and barriers. He suggested that our next encounter will focus on what the Torah and the Quran say about us being brothers.

6 July 2011

For the first time an encounter was planned to be hosted by several of the Rabbis of the group – in the city of Efrat. This required a lot of courage from the three Sheikhs who were planning to join, due to the active anti-settlements campaign of the Palestinian Authority. It also required special arrangements with the security leadership of Efrat to ensure the smooth entrance of the Palestinian Sheikhs into the city. The theme that was planned was: "the agenda of the religious leader".

After many hours of work and preparations, by many people, all was set and prepared but two hours before the encounter it was realized that unfortunately the encounter will need to be postponed. For four days the leading Sheikh of the group was busy handling a serious conflict that arose between some people of Hebron and a nearby town. It started with a dispute over a horse-race, which caused several injuries and a damage of hundreds of thousands of Dinnars and was threatening to deteriorate into blood feud. With the Sheikh's skills and authority as "the Sheikh of Sheikhs" he was able to secure a Sulha between the parties but the intensive effort resulted in his becoming sick and unable to lead the other Sheikhs to the encounter.

We planned to reschedule the encounter to September, after the month of Ramadan.

2 August 2011: Ramadan visit I

The month of Ramadan brought the opportunity for visits of the Rabbis to the Sheikhs in honor of their celebration of the Ramadan. Due to conflicting schedules and the will of many to participate, we organized several such visits.

The first visit took place already in the second day of Ramadan, with the visit of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat, together with Dr. Yehuda Stolov, which took place at the home of Sheikh Abu-Khader Ja'abari. All were having a very warm conversation around coffee and tea, dates and nuts. The Sheikh apologized in person for the need to postpone the July encounter and explained in detail the complicated and impressive process that led to the Sulha. Then all were talking about the need to live together and the religious imperative to do so. It was suggested that the September encounter will deal with this issue from the two religious perspectives.

At 10:30pm we all farewelled with warmth and hugs, wishing Ramadan Kareem to the Muslims and that we will soon meet again to all of us.

(Ramadan visit II was planned for 14 August but needed to be cancelled at the last minute due to the busy schedule of Sheikh Ja'abari).

23 August 2011: Recruiting Pastor John Hagee



At the initiative of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a meeting was set between Sheikh Abu-Khader Ja'abari and Pastor John Hagee (Founder of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio and of Christian United for Israel). The three were joined by Dr. Yehuda Stolov, Dr. Ashraf Ja'abari, Noam Arnon (Spokesman of the Hebron Jewish Settlers) and a few guests.

For Pastor Hagee this was his first engagement with Muslims and the

conversation went extremely well. Sheikh Ja'abari shared a lot of his experiences and thoughts and Pastor Hagee listened and asked questions. Both of them and Rabbi Riskin shared their commitment to peace.

As a result of this encounter and the conversation, Pastor Hagee committed to donating a well-equipped clinic for the Palestinian citizens of Hebron.

12 September 2011: Encounter with Yoshinobu Miyake-sensei



For this day the plan was to hold an encounter about coexistence in the two religions. It was planned to be the first encounter to be held in the Jewish town of Efrat, with the attached historical significance of holding an encounter in a settlement. However, five days before the encounter, a warrant was issued by the Palestinian Authority for the arrest of Sheikh Ja'abari for questioning.

The Sheikh refused to obey and three days later, only two days before our planned encounter, a proclamation of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades threatened to use weapons against him if he does not take back his public statements for peaceful coexistence with Israel and all Israelis. In the next day the Sheikh moved to a safe place and it was clear he will not be able to perform the visit to Efrat. It was also clear that if he does not come – none of the other Sheikhs, who follow him, will come. As it was already too late to move the encounter to the new location, we held the encounter with Yoshinobu Miyake-sensei separately and worked to schedule another time for the joint encounter

- Part I: Visiting Sheikh Ja'abari

Yoshinobu-sensei and Yehuda drove together to the place of the Sheikh. We found him with a bit less energy than usual but with full commitment to continue the way he leads, saying: unlike them I am not concerned predominantly with myself but with the people – and this is the best way for the people. Yoshinobu-sensei shared his commitment to religious freedom and minority rights and that the best way to achieve them is through building direct relations through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Sheikh Ja'abari his commitment to developing good relations with Israelis and leveraging them, and other initiatives, for the development in the Palestinian society. He strongly criticized the idea of compromise, saying that religiously it is not allowed to give up any piece of the land. However, Islam does not require that this will lead to fighting. On the contrary: he accepts the given reality and works within it to improve the lives of his people and in this reality this definitely works best in cooperation with Jews.



- Part II: Meeting with three of the Rabbis

Yoshinobu-sensei and Yehuda then drove to Efrat, to the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat. In the encounter participated also Rabbi Yair Dreifus, Head of the Siach Yeshiva and Rabbi Elhanan Nir, a teacher in that Yeshiva. Rabbi Oded Nizani was unfortunately unable to join so also two new Rabbis that he was planned to bring with him also did not join.

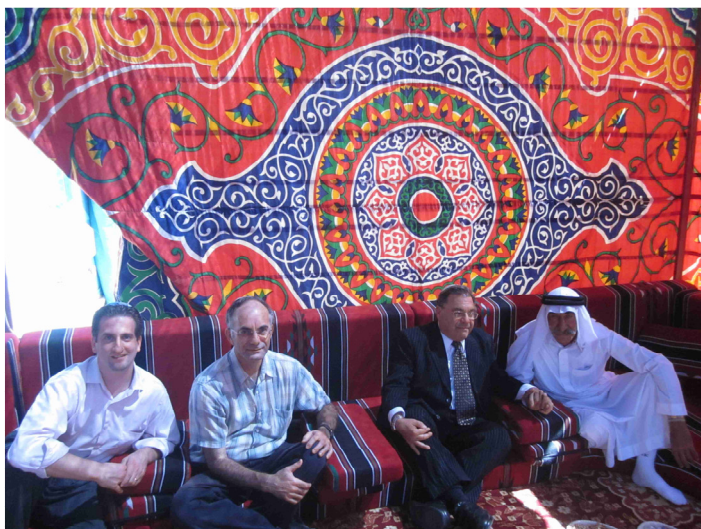
The four clergy men had fascinating conversation about faiths of Shinto and Judaism, going very deeply into the theological concepts, moral imperatives and reference to other faiths. We finally came to the interim conclusion that the Shinto faith is very similar to Hassidic Judaism but with a big difference in referring to other faiths: while Judaism rejects faiths that believe otherwise, Shintoism is fully tolerant towards heretic beliefs.

- Part III: Visiting Siach Yeshiva

Rabbi Dreifus and Rabbi Nir invited us to visit the Yeshiva. We entered the Yeshiva's library where

the Rabbis explained the role of a yeshiva in general, as a place for passing on the oral tradition of the Torah from generation to generation, and the uniqueness of the Siach Yeshiva, which tries to be attentive to both sides of the modern tension between tradition and life, and act as an example for other Yeshivot.

Very quickly the conversation went to extremely interesting comparisons of inter-generational relations and expectations in both societies. We concluded with a visit to the main study hall of the Yeshiva.



20 September 2011

Following the new situation, and the inability of Sheikh Ja'abari to join the encounter last week, the Rabbis decided to go and visit him in his tent, where he was better protected from the threats. For many of the Rabbis it was too challenging to physically join again in this busy time of year in the Yeshiva world.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi David Neckrutman joined Yehuda Stolov and together they traveled to the Sheikh's tent, south of Hebron. They were very warmly welcome by Sheikh Jabari and Dr. Ashraf Jabari and had a very friendly and caring conversation. Naturally the conversation focused less on religious exchange and more on the Sheikh's reality and slide also to political conversations.

The positions the Sheikh offered were very unusual as he declared that a Palestinian State will be a disaster for the Palestinian people, who will be much better off under Israeli control, since the Palestinian Authority represents only some 5% of the people and is being imposed on them.

He also stated that according to Islam it is totally unacceptable to give up even a very small part of the land so any compromise is against Islam. At the same time – this does not mean war as it is perfectly fine to accept the reality and reach practical arrangements with Israel, keeping the hope for Messianic times for control over the whole land.



When Rabbi Riskin asked him what he thinks the Government of Israel should do he responded: offer all Palestinians the status of East Jerusalem – namely permanent residency without full citizenship, which will dramatically improve the lives of Palestinians without threatening the Jewish nature of Israel. He also said that Israel has to treat the Palestinians with full dignity and refrain from helping impose on them the PA. We fare welled with warm wishes for the good health

and success of the Sheikh and with hopes to meet again soon.

(28 November 2011: Another encounter cancelled in the last minute

The plan was to hold an encounter about the role of religious leaders in their communities. Again it was planned to be the first encounter to be held in the Jewish town of Efrat, with the attached historical significance of holding an encounter in a settlement. However, this time again, one day before the encounter, a threat was made by the Palestinian Authority circles on the life of Sheikh Ja'abari due to statements he made in closed conversations but were published the day before. The Sheikh moved again to a safer place and could not perform the visit to Efrat. It was also clear that if he does not come – none of the other Sheikhs, who follow him, will come.)

23 January 2012: Next encounter planned