

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Descriptive title of the case:

The Holy Land conflict peace approaches were lacking an interreligious dialogue between “ordinary” citizens.

Location (including brief description):

The Holy Land and the Middle East in general.

Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

Since 2001.

Different actors (religious, interreligious, political, etc.) involved (including their main characteristics and the reasons for the involvement of the mediating actors):

Actors directly involved:

- Mainly, the Jewish and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian people in Holy Land and, more in general, from all over the Middle East.

Mediating actors:

The Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA: www.interfaith-encounter.org), which seeks to promote peace in the Middle East through interreligious dialogue and a joint study of the different cultures and religions. Through the IEA, the Abrahamic (Jewish, Muslim and Christian) believers and communities become mediating actors of the conflict.

The interreligious dialogue started in Israel at the end of the 1950's thanks to a small group of visionaries (and, among them, the Jewish philosopher, theologian and writer Martin Buber). However, despite years of efforts and activities, at the end of the century just a minority of people were aware of the fact that faith and religious commitment without dialogue between people is a menace to social cohesion. Clearly, there was still a need to spread this message and dialogue proposal to many more people. This is what motivated a group of veteran dialogue activists to create the IEA, which today is recognised by UNESCO and the United Nations for its contribution to the culture of peace.

The IEA understands dialogue through these missions and principles:

- Providing spaces where people can be fully who they are and preserve their own faith without a blending of all traditions into one undifferentiated group.
- An equal representation of all faiths in the Association.
- The equality of the genders in the decision making processes.
- Outreach to individuals from all faiths, age groups, walks of life and levels of society; also to individuals across the religious-secular divide and political spectrums.
- Continual research of new participants on the local and regional levels.
- Continual research, also, of new forms of dialogue an interaction between people.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

Jerusalem seems to be at the heart of the century long conflict in the Holy Land. As this conflict has affected the whole of the Middle East –and at times much of the whole world- it seems that everyone is trying to solve the problem. Still, after so many attempts and initiatives and peace-plans, it does not appear as if the conflict is coming to an end. The answers to the question "Why is that so?" are probably as many as the number of peace initiatives and plans.

The IEA realised that the conflict in the Holy Land is a neighbours', or even a family quarrel. In this kind of dispute the most important elements are the relationships. Until the relationships are healed these issues can not be settled. The real challenges we face are psychological, not mathematical. In any political arrangement the communities will continue to live together and they have to learn to do it peacefully. Only such peaceful relations will assure the long term nature of the arrangement. This understanding leads naturally to the second understanding, which claims that building peace is not mainly a leadership action and that "ordinary" citizens have both the ability and the responsibility to contribute to the process. A building of peace will be like a building composed of the bricks laid by all the people.

The next understanding is that these bricks are made of human interactions that are both positive and deep. When people of difference communities cease to ignore each other and engage in real, deep and positive interaction, they are surprised to discover how close they are to each other, how quickly they can remove their prejudices and fears and how fast they can replace them with understanding, trust and even friendship. The conflict is much less deep than the common belief and it is easily overcome when using the right approach.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

- Organising interreligious dialogues between Jewish, Muslim and Christian "ordinary" believers where they learn to respect each other and this way pacify the context where they live.
- Focusing these dialogues on the study and deepening of the different cultures and religions of the participants.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out and of the case itself:

At the practical level the IEA works in four geographical contexts:

(1) **Among the citizens of Israel** the IEA works to create and sustain local on-going groups that meet monthly for sessions of interfaith encounters and to build inter-communal relations of respect and friendship. Until now, 37 such groups have been created which are seen both as examples for the larger communities that such relations are possible and as growing islands that will finally include and transform the whole of the larger communities.

These fragments are taken from a story of an encounter of IEA's first Israeli-Palestinian group, of young adults from Jerusalem and Hebron, and illustrate how the work is being done: "On January 17th [2008] the members of the group met for joint study and focused on the biblical figures of Miriam and Jesus (...) For the Muslims it was a real discovery to learn that Jesus is not perceived positively at all in the Jewish tradition. We tried to summarise the approaches of the three religions of Jesus: at both ends stand Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand – Christianity sees Jesus as the son of God, and on the other hand Judaism, at least Talmudic Judaism, sees him as an inciter and instigator with Maimonides having a more moderate approach (...) Between Christianity and Judaism stands Islam that negates the idea that Jesus is the son of God, with the Koran explicitly saying that God did not produce, but on the other hand holds Jesus as a positive figure and a full prophet (...) We wish ourselves that we will be privileged in reaching the point where the only debates between Jews and Arabs will be theological and commentators' arguments like we have in our group and not the conflicts we see among us today."

(2) **In the Israeli-Palestinian context** the IEA works in cooperation with 8 Palestinian organisations, from across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and are holding regular weekend retreats of interfaith encounters; until now the IEA has prepared more than 20 of these meetings and also manages two on-going encounter groups.

(3) **In the larger context of the Middle East**, the IEA works with additional organisations from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey; mainly in the format of joint annual conferences.

(4) More recently, the IEA is developing **a fourth geographical context, this one global**: one of caring people from all around the world, people who will support the work morally and financially and at the same time will actively engage in parallel interfaith encounters in their own country. One example of this work is the Euro-Mediterranean Abrahamic Forum (<http://www.euromedalex.org/fields/religion-spirituality/projects/euro-mediterranean-abrahamic-forum>), coordinated by the IEA with the support of the Anna Lindh Foundation, and which has already organised two conferences: the first one in Amman, Jordan, in April 2010, and the second one in Lublin, Poland, in May 2011.

Mediator resources mobilised (human, spiritual, community, etc. resources belonging to the involved actors or resources of the mediating actors):

More than anything else, the conviction that, instead of causing the problem, the religion can be and has to be a source to resolve conflicts in the area and elsewhere. According to Yehuda Stolov, executive director of the IEA, “the right approach to the conflict has to include religion as its central power, and for two reasons. Religion is a mighty power and if we do not intentionally use it for peace it may be used against peace. Indeed many religions allow wars under certain circumstances, but the basic teaching of all religions is love, peace and compassion towards the other, any other – so the use of its power for peace is more natural than otherwise. Religion, at least in the Holy Land, is also at the heart of existence and identity, even for non-religious people. Therefore, encountering each other through the perspective of their religion takes the encounter to the existential level that provides the depth it needs in order to be effective. The many common good shared by the Abrahamic faiths obviously contribute to the needed positive nature of the encounter, but perhaps most importantly, it is the fact that within the safety of interfaith encounters we are able to openly discuss the differences between the religions and while doing so we meet each other in our wholeness, in a most real and deep encounter, without needing to conceal parts of our identity for superficial equality. In this way we are training ourselves to accept and respect the other in his or her otherness and to be able to be friends with people we disagree with. In this way we work towards achieving the ultimate level of peace.”

Expenses related to the mediation intervention (working hours of the mediators, materials needed...):

The IEA engages thousands of people, from a wide variety of religious, political, social and other aspects, in hundreds of programmes, slowly growing to become a large social movement for change, a movement that will manifest the power of religion for positive change and the inspiration of Jerusalem as the City of Peace as its Hebrew name indicates.