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INTRODUCTION

Potentials and Challenges in Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, attention to, and interest in, interfaith dialogue (sometimes also called “dialogue of civilizations”) has grown. The discourse on the international political level emphasizes dualities: “us” versus “them” and “Christianity” versus “Islam.” Organizing and sponsoring interfaith dialogue activities, meetings, and conferences has become more common in the United States and around the world.

The increase in interfaith dialogue is a hopeful indicator—it holds the potential to change lives, radically alter perspectives, and build channels of communication between distrustful and fearful people. Dialogue is not a replacement for the work of diplomacy or structural peacebuilding projects, but it can provide a powerful aid and basis for such work.

Like other applications of peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue and interreligious peace assume that violence and conflicts emerge and persist partly (some argue mostly) due to ignorance and a lack of constructive interaction with the “other.” Thus, understanding the religion or faith of the other is a core strategy and motivation for initiating many interfaith activities. Knowing the other and getting to understand him or her has become a necessity in this age of diversity and transnational, global interactions.

A growing awareness of the role of religion in peacemaking and peacebuilding has encouraged interfaith dialogue (IFD), particularly since 2001, and intentional dialogues have taken place around the world, including in the Middle East. This book endeavors to shed light on IFD by closely examining the work of many individual actors and organizations in a strategic and diverse region: the Middle East.

Contrary to the stereotype that the Middle East has always experienced unremitting religious fighting and war, for many centuries, religious actors have worked for peace and reconciliation in various parts of the region. Despite wars and ethnic tensions, peaceful interfaith interaction has always been a part of the social and cultural fabric of the different religious groups coexisting there. In the Arab cultural discourse of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine,

and other societies, stories are shared about cooperation among Christians, Muslims, and Jews throughout various periods of history.

This research recognizes such narratives and acknowledges the history of interfaith relations in the region. Regrettably, these stories and illustrations of interfaith peace work have been marginalized and often neglected, especially recently. Instead, religious and sectarian differences have been highlighted and often utilized to divide communities.

This study intends to investigate specific IFD efforts in five selected societies in the region. As the first study of its kind, it actively examines the nature of the conditions and challenges facing IFD participants in these contexts. Most of the previous research that has been done in this field has either focused on one society or on one religious group. We attempt to draw a clearer picture of the types, nature, and conditions of IFD activities in five religiously heterogeneous societies: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. Even though all these cases demonstrate realities of religious diversity, they differ in terms of their ethnic and sectarian divisions, their level of violence and conflict, and the degree of openness or space for interfaith peace work that each political regime or society provides. We do not intend this book to be used as a primary historical resource for the reader interested in the political history or interfaith relations in any of the countries included in this study. While we do attempt to present a condensed historical context for the IFD activities in each case study, we acknowledge that we are only painting a broad overview of the conflict in each setting. Our intention is to refocus the discourse on the role of interfaith dialogue in each of these societies.

In our efforts to compare IFD in these five settings, we composed a standard list of questions to guide the local researchers in each community. The local researchers were asked to provide a brief introduction about the interviewees and their organization, an exploration of the assumptions and theories that guided IFD work (models), identification of the processes and issues of interfaith interaction, examples and criteria of IFD, challenges and obstacles IFD faced, and needs or recommendations to improve the interfaith field in the specific community.

Many challenges emerged in the process of data collection, and even designating and selecting the local researchers proved more difficult than we had anticipated. The tension and the actual eruption of the war in Iraq constituted a major obstacle for the field research in all five societies. The field researchers encountered a disappointing stream of rejections from potential interviewees. For the first few months of the research, until June 2003, it was extremely difficult to conduct any interviews, and the main response from interfaith organizers was “this is not a good time to discuss interfaith relations and peace.” Such responses illustrate the crucial impact that political events and contextual factors often have on the ability of the interfaith actors to operate or even freely and comfortably express their views on issues of religion and peace. In the volatile political reality of these five societies on the eve of the

Iraq war, interfaith actors and their communities shared the uncertainty and insecurity evoked by the possible consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In the Palestinian context, the continuation of the Palestinian Intifada and the Israeli military activities throughout the Occupied Territories added to the difficulties and challenges of scheduling interviews and even attending certain meetings in areas such as Nablus and Gaza. In addition, many political changes took place during the field research, including the continuing siege of Arafat's compound, the assassination of several prominent Palestinian leaders from Hamas and other factions, the death of Arafat, the election of the new Palestinian government and Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, and the victory of Hamas in Palestinian elections. Such factors often were cited by the Palestinian interviewees, who would ask, "Can religious peacebuilding really help under these circumstances?"

In the context of Egypt and Jordan, local researchers reported with extreme caution that the discussion of interfaith relations might be perceived as a threat to national security. In some cases, special framing of the questions and the subject of interfaith relations had to be worked out before any interviewee would agree to meet with the researchers. In Egypt, the security forces constantly monitor such research and interfaith interactions between Copts and Muslims due to the sensitivity of the subject and its implications for Egypt's national security and foreign relations.

It is essential to remind the reader that this is not a comprehensive or exhaustive study of all the interfaith activities or intrafaith organizations in these communities, but rather a snapshot of the kinds of activities prominently occurring in each context. In each country, we tried to reach out to most of the active individual actors and organizations in the area of IFD. However, due to the small number of actors involved in IFD in each country, we relied on the snowball methodology to compile a list of interviewees. In other words, we identified a few well-known actors in each community; then, based on their recommendations, we identified additional potential interviewees. On average, we have managed to formally and informally interview at least twenty-five (in the case of Israel and Palestine, the number of formal interviewees exceeded forty-five) interfaith peace actors in each of these communities. The interviewees in each community are diverse, and each has at least five years of experience in this area.

Data from all the interviews were transcribed and translated from Arabic, French, or Hebrew into English. Data from each case were classified and analyzed according to general themes that had emerged from the literature review and had been identified by the authors as key concepts for all the cases. A content analysis of the data was completed according to themes, general patterns, and responses in each category, as opposed to individual words, sentences, or paragraphs. Despite the agreement of most interviewees to publish their opinion and their consent to record their statements, in reporting the findings, the authors attempted to preserve some degree of anonymity for most interviewees

due to the sensitivity of the subject and political context. Thus, names of most interviewees were omitted from the text; however, the identities of some public figures and organizers are disclosed.

Chapter 2 comprises our literature review of existing research in interfaith dialogue and reviews some basic concepts and approaches in IFD that we see as central. The chapter aims to present the major approaches in interfaith dialogue as captured by various scholars and practitioners. In chapter 3, we begin the detailed description and analysis of each of the IFD cases, beginning with the conflicted area of Israel-Palestine. This chapter examines the interfaith field from the perspective of at least forty-five individuals who were interviewed by various local researchers as well as by one of the authors, Mohammed Abu-Nimer. In the fourth chapter, the work of the various Lebanese interfaith organizations is critically presented and examined based on informal structured interviews by Amal Khoury, who conducted all the interviews for this chapter. The fifth chapter focuses on interfaith activities in Egypt, based on interviews completed by Mohammed Mossad and his research assistant from Cairo University. The description of the interfaith organizations and the synthesis of the chapters were completed by Emily Welty, who conducted the research on the secondary archival sources on interfaith in Egypt. Our last case, in chapter 6, on IFD in Jordan, is based on interviews completed by a Jordanian journalist, Rana Husseini, who also provided some of the archival data on the subject.

The seventh chapter is our attempt to examine the five cases comparatively and present some of the shared lessons and general trends that emerged from this study. This final chapter is a comparative analysis of the common patterns and unique developments that characterize each set of interfaith peacebuilding activities in the different countries or societies. The last chapter presents a process model for IFD based on the intercultural sensitivity model used by Milton Bennet and Mitch Hammer. Our aim is to share the model as a potential guide for interfaith professionals who seek to design a more systematic approach to interfaith peacebuilding.

The final offering of the book is a selected list of resources describing the various interfaith organizations and initiatives operating in these five societies. Obviously this list is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates the scope of activities occurring in each region and it certainly includes many of the major actors in this emerging field.

Our hope is that this study contributes significantly to the emerging field of research around interfaith dialogue as a resource for peacemaking. We believe that those involved professionally in the field of dialogue will benefit from a focused look at interfaith dialogue in the Middle Eastern context, and that academics will use this as a resource to supplement their understanding of the many ways in which religion plays a role in civil society and peacebuilding in the region. As interest in dialogue grows, we hope that this book will be a step toward furthering the field of interreligious understanding.