

Despite reservations, Muslim call for dialogue wins Jewish support

By Ben Harris

Jewish Telegraphic Agency

NEW YORK — A landmark statement by leading Muslim intellectuals calling for Jewish-Muslim dialogue has won broad support from Jewish leaders, even as some elements were deemed problematic.

The statement, released in February, is titled "A Call to Peace, Dialogue and Understanding Between Muslims and Jews." Scholars at the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations at the University of Cambridge in England facilitated the letter.

Unlike earlier efforts at dialogue, which often sought to discourage discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the statement openly acknowledges the conflict's centrality to Jewish-Muslim tensions.

The letter, addressed to "rabbinic leaders and the wider Jewish communities of the world," calls for a solution that provides "mutual respect, prosperity, and security" to both sides, while providing for Palestinian self-determination.

"Most Muslims would hope that the sufferings Jews have experienced over many centuries would make them more sensitive to the sufferings of others, especially the Palestinian people," said the letter, whose full text is available on the center's Web site.

No signatories were included with the letter, but according to news reports, they include leading Muslim figures from around the world. Among them reportedly are the grand mufti of Bosnia; Sheik Suhaib Hasan, one of Britain's top Islamic scholars; and Sari Nusseibeh, the president of Al Quds University in Jerusalem.

Most Jewish leaders welcomed the statement as a promising sign of enhanced dialogue between Muslims and Jews. An adviser to British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called it an "enlightened document," according to the *London Jewish Chronicle*.

Leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements in the United States also welcomed the letter, notably its call for a "peaceful resolution" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, the representative body of world Jewry for interfaith dialogue, issued its own letter in response, echoing the call to dialogue.

"We cannot afford to spurn the hand of Muslim moderation," said Rabbi David Rosen, the committee chair. "The Jewish people have a critical, existential interest in advancing Jewish-Muslim dialogue."

Though Rosen acknowledged that parts of the letter were "not entirely satisfactory," in particular its failure to acknowledge Arab responsibility for the conflict, he nevertheless believes it would be harmful to Jewish interests not to respond positively.

Also of concern was one of the reported signatories, Tariq Ramadan, a controversial Swiss scholar who was denied a visa by the U.S. government to teach at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Recently, Ramadan called for a boycott of the Turin International Book Fair because organizers decided to focus on Is-

Austin Islamic, Jewish communities come together for dialogue

By Tonya Cone

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Temple Beth Shalom and the North Austin Muslim Community Center collaborated to offer a series of five Islamic-Jewish dialogues in February, March and April. Each session addressed a topic or set of topics, including the basic tenets, rituals, lifestyles and life cycles of the two religions.

Rabbi Alan Freedman and Imam Mohamed-Umer Esmail gave individual presentations, answered questions from audience members and, in the course of answering questions, dialogued with each other.

"It gives the people who are attending, members of the Jewish and Muslim communities, an opportunity for encounters and relationships between members on a very personal basis," Freedman said.

Esmail explained that the goal of the program is to create better understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and Jews.

Recalling a quote from Congregation Beth Israel's Rabbi Steven Folberg at Austin Area Interreligious Ministries' Thanksgiving event last year, Esmail said, "We can have our differences in religion, politics, color, culture, personality or whatever it may be, but it should never lead to resentment. It should lead to creating respect and better understanding of one another."

Three of the sessions in the series were held at the Dell Jewish Community Campus and the other two at the North Austin Muslim Community Center, with 50 to 60 people attending each discussion so far.

The session that covered ritual and worship was held at the North Austin Muslim Community Center, which Freedman said gave those in attendance the privilege of witnessing evening prayers.

"We're trying to create opportunity for both communities to reach better understand of each of our respective religions," he said. "It is not a forum for political debate. It's all about our religious perspectives."

The program aims to clear up misconceptions about the tenets of both religions and what they teach about tolerance. "This is something the imam has been terrific in explaining,"

raeli writers in honor of the Jewish state's 60th anniversary.

Ramadan "has a history of troubling statements, and indeed he has said some troubling things about me personally," said Daniel Pipes, the director of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum. "I think this is someone on the other side of the war on terror and should not be allowed to participate in mainstream life, as his exclusion from the United States has in part done."

The controversy over Ramadan underscores the difficulty Jewish leaders have encountered in their efforts to foster dialogue with the Muslim community, especially the challenge of identifying so-called Muslim moderates to serve as interlocutors.

Two years ago, an interfaith meeting hosted by Rabbi Marc Schneier of New York was nearly derailed when Imam Omar Abu-Namous, the head of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, unleashed a barrage of criticism of Israel, calling for a binational state of Arabs and Jews to

replace Israel and denying the historical record of Arab belligerence against the Jewish state.

Undeterred, Schneier and Abu Namous tried again, organizing a second meeting where they agreed to take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict off the table. The same rule applied to a November summit meeting of rabbis and imams, also organized by Schneier, the president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.

"There are some very significant Islamic leaders that have signed on to this and have expressed their heartfelt desire to engage in dialogue with the Jewish community," Schneier said of last week's statement. "It's a very, very exciting opportunity."

Schneier acknowledged that Ramadan's participation had given him "pause."

The letter describes tensions between Muslims and Jews as more a function of ignorance and misunderstanding than any innate animus between the two communities. Several Koranic verses are cited to demonstrate Islam's respectful attitude



Imam Mohamed-Umer Esmail (left) and Rabbi Alan Freedman are taking part in a series of Islamic-Jewish dialogues. Earlier this year, they also engaged in an inter-religious discussion after the screening of 'Arranged' at the Austin Jewish Film Festival.

Freedman said. "There's religion and there's culture. Cultural differences play into how one presents religion. From his perspective and that of his community, anti-Semitism is unacceptable. You can read any religious document and find bad things said about those outside that religion."

Religion can be viewed as a source of peace or controversy, Freedman said, but in Austin the community sees it as the former.

There is also a social aspect to the Islamic-Jewish Dialogue events. Food and time to mingle are provided.

"Those conversations are very cordial," Freedman said. "We usually wind up with a lot of exchanges of smiles, senses of familiarity."

As minority groups, Muslims and Jews in Texas face similar issues, such as making sure their religions are respected in schools, Freedman said, and from a Middle Eastern standpoint, the two religions also have some culinary traditions in common.

Esmail said he was surprised to learn of some other similarities between Islam and Judaism, like traditional separate seating for men and women.

Informal time to talk one-on-one gives those who attend the sessions a chance to attain an individual perspective from one another and to ask people questions they might not feel comfortable asking in a group setting.

"The thing I continually find interesting is how many similarities there are between Judaism and Islam," Freedman said. "I am confident this will be the basis for ongoing dialogue and a deepening relationship between our communities. The imam is a remarkable person. One of joys of this has been to come to know him better."

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toward Jews, and several theological affinities between Judaism and Islam are noted.

"There was a need to provide a very clear statement by the Muslims to the Jews on the various matters addressed in the letter and to create an awareness in Muslims that they can have, and continue to have, a positive stance and inclusivistic approach to its relations with Jews," said Sheik Michael Mumisa, a lecturer at the Centre for Muslim-Jewish Relations.

Still, the statement drew criticism, and not only for Ramadan's role.

Writing recently in the *London Jewish Chronicle*, Mehri Niknam, an Iranian-born Jew and executive director of the British-based Joseph Interfaith Foundation, called the letter "naive and condescending," and questioned its scholarly credentials.

"To assume that the problems of Muslim-Jewish relations worldwide can be resolved simply because we all worship a Unity, give charity and eat kosher and halal food," Niknam wrote, "is intellectually offensive equally to both sides."