

UPF Europe and Middle East Experts Assess Role of Faith in Shaping Middle East Peace

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UPF-EUME – UPF-Europe and Middle East (EUME), together with the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), convened an international webinar on September 3, 2026, titled “Peace in the Middle East: The Contribution of Religions.” The speakers addressed the urgent necessity of track-two diplomacy and religious peacebuilding in light of ongoing regional conflicts. Recognizing that formal political mechanisms often fail to address deep-seated human and social wounds, four distinguished religious leaders and scholars gathered to evaluate how faith traditions can cultivate moral responsibility, prevent dehumanization, foster forgiveness, and establish solid foundations for sustainable peace.



Mr. Jacques Marion, president of UPF-EUME, serving as moderator, opened the webinar by addressing the severe human cost of the ongoing Middle East conflicts. He invited the panelists to explore how religions and faith leaders can provide unique moral guidance, foster trust, enable forgiveness, and drive tangible progress toward regional reconciliation.

Dr. Androniki Barla, an Orthodox theologian and canon lawyer in Austria, asserted that religion must shape human conscience before politics dictates decisions. She warned that faith must not legitimize fear, violence and sacred political agendas; rather it must resist the psychological dehumanization of

adversaries and affirm universal human dignity. Crucially, communities must stop using historical trauma as permanent moral exemption; while suffering explains actions, it never justifies atrocities.

Peace, she said, demands genuine justice without revenge, combined with moral consistency – a single standard that condemns civilian killings, terrorism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and racism regardless of perpetrator or victim. She asked that religious figures guard language against incitement; foster human encounters across divides; and display the moral courage to challenge their own constituencies, proving that memory need not turn into hatred nor security require another's insecurity.



Dr. Mohammad Habash is chairman of the Human Fraternity Center and associate professor at Abu Dhabi University in the United Arab Emirates. He reported on an August 18 conference he helped organize in Damascus on “Civil Peace and National Fraternity.” It was sponsored by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, and attended by 150 Syrian leaders, including representatives from ministries and 20 members of the Syrian People’s Assembly.



Dr. Habash highlighted religion's dual potential to incite conflict or build peace, emphasizing that sacred texts across traditions contain multiple interpretations. Reflecting on Syria’s tragic conflict – which claimed over 600,000 lives and displaced millions under authoritarian rule – he noted that while fighters ended the revolution, establishing a stable state requires a profound shift from hatred to reconciliation. Through the Human Fraternity Center’s peace initiative in Damascus, religious leaders from all eighteen Syrian

denominations gathered to champion mercy and forgiveness. He introduced the "Stand of Reality" initiative featuring three levels: the Stand of Dignity for uninvolved citizens, the Stand of Apology for non-violent supporters of the previous regime, and the Stand of Recognition for wrongdoers seeking legal grace. Grounded in Islamic principles and prophetic precedent, Dr. Habash stressed that while legal justice belongs to courts, religious leaders bear the vital duty of preaching forgiveness and hope.

Dr. Afsar Rathor, vice president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations and a former United Nations diplomat, drew on his 30 years of UN peacekeeping experience in conflict zones including Bosnia, Rwanda, Angola and Mozambique. While religion cannot replace formal diplomacy, international law, or state negotiations, he said, it offers essential moral authority, grassroots networks, and societal trust. Faith leaders must humanize adversaries, counter religious manipulation, act as trusted bridge-builders, and foster reconciliation. Citing interfaith contributions in Angola and recent diplomatic facilitation in Islamabad, Dr. Rathor urged concrete interfaith action. Practical joint initiatives – such as combined community visits, youth anti-hate programs, and permanent regional early-warning networks – can prepare the ground for lasting peace, demonstrating that while politics negotiates treaties, only people make peace sustainable.

Father Joseph Saghbini, archimandrite of the Greek Melkite Catholic Church in Lebanon, emphasized the grave responsibility of religious leaders whose words carry power to move people toward either war or peace. In the Middle East, where faith is deeply woven into identity and politics, leaders must oppose

political manipulation and selective scripture readings that fuel nationalism and hatred.

Calling leaders to be "artisans of peace," he advocated for purifying curricula, establishing permanent interreligious councils, protecting human rights, and engaging youth before stereotypes harden. Living in multi-confessional South Lebanon, he attested to daily Christian-Muslim coexistence. Faith, he said, must promote tolerance, forgiveness and humanitarian solidarity, changing minds and hearts to transform communities and states. Peace becomes possible when justice supersedes humiliation, forgiveness proves stronger than vengeance, and religious leaders cultivate conscience rather than fear.



During the Q&A moderated by Mr. Marion, panelists explored practical mechanisms for interreligious peacebuilding. Dr. Barla highlighted track-two diplomacy's role in enforcing a single moral standard through careful language and self-criticism. Dr. Habash addressed the tension between justice and forgiveness, arguing that while victims retain rights to legal redress, religious leaders must promote reconciliation to break cycles of revenge. Dr. Rathor illustrated how grassroots interfaith councils successfully mitigated conflict in Liberia and Rwanda, advocating for tailored regional mechanisms across the Middle East. Father Saghbini detailed Lebanon's existing interreligious structures and daily Christian-Muslim collaboration, emphasizing "living together" over mere coexistence.

In final reflections, speakers urged establishing permanent local interfaith peace councils, separating faith from political exploitation, supporting grassroots peace initiatives, and supporting a two-state solution guaranteeing dignity, freedom and human rights for both Israelis and Palestinians.

In his closing remarks, **Mr. David Fraser Harris**, secretary general of UPF Middle East and North Africa, thanked the panelists and praised their concrete vision as embodiments of UPF’s founding principles. Reflecting on UPF founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s legacy – including his 1990 Cairo address and proposals for an interreligious council at the United Nations – he emphasized that global peace depends on harmonizing political statesmanship with religious wisdom. Reframing the theme as "the contribution of Middle East religions to world peace," he cited historical milestones like the Amman Message, A Common Word, World Interfaith Harmony Week, and the Human Fraternity Document, affirming that light and hope endure amidst regional suffering.

Click [here](#) for a recording of the webinar.