

**פרויקט לחקר דת תרבות ושלו**  
פקולטה למדעי החברה

***Project for the Study of Religion Culture and Peace***  
*Faculty of Social Sciences*

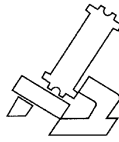
**Evaluation Assessment**

**Impact of Activities of Interfaith Encounter Association 2014**

This report will offer an assessment of the impact of Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) activities in 2013-2014. The assessment will be presented against the background of evaluations prepared in 2009 and 2012, which will offer a larger context to appreciate current trends in the activities of IEA. In all cases assessments are based on reporting of representative samples of dialogue activities, from a qualitative perspective. For our assessment of 2014 activities our evaluation is augmented by important quantitative questionnaire based data, which will be presented in a separate report.

1.) Main conclusions of research assessment in 2009: This assessment offered evaluations based on the dynamics observed in three representative Israeli-Palestinian/Jewish-Arab dialogue groups along with in depth interviews of participants in these activities. As noted consistently IEA has set before itself two main goals: The fostering of dialogue based on common conversations on religious/spiritual themes between Israelis and Palestinians as a means of promoting conditions to advance efforts at building reconciliation and peace; and the constructive strengthening of the religious/cultural identities of the participants while promoting openness to understanding the "other". The main focus of dialogue activities in line with the Association's modus operanti is to promote relationship building through discussion on commonalities and differences in the religious culture of Judaism and Islam, on topics such as the main elements of religious belief and practice (i.e. in prayer, dietary laws, mourning) and other elements such as similarity in religious narrative found in the Hebrew Bible and Koran and discussion of the characteristics of common religious personalities such as Abraham, Joseph and Moses. These conversations have served to alter and improve mutual perceptions and humanize "the other".

Other important conclusions stressed by the participants and observed was the existence and importance of on-going personal ties, developed often by interaction in the dialogue groups and later continued informally. This process of relationship building strengthened improved perception and at various points in the process of dialogue even enabled moving examples of relationship transformation and forgiveness to take place. Participants also noted the satisfaction they experienced in presenting aspects of their own religion to others which served to strengthen their own identities while promoting positive rapport with "others." A common theme found among many of the participants concerned the motivation for being involved in dialogue. Many cited a pre-existing disposition of openness to other religions along with a basic curiosity. Many cited the essentially positive reaction of family members and friends to their participation in the activities of the IEA, they noted in that in a few cases they were able to bring a few relatives or friends into the circle, and this represented a slow but discernible ripple effect.



**פרויקט לחקר דת תרבות ושלו**  
פקולטה למדעי החברה

***Project for the Study of Religion Culture and Peace***  
*Faculty of Social Sciences*

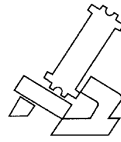
2.) Main conclusions of research assessment in 2012: The assessment was also based on an in-depth analysis of processes and dynamics observed in several representative dialogue groups. Conclusions reflected strong similarities to those observed in 2009 and recorded above. Additional themes related to the need for "institutional" and/or "social environmental" support for the activities to succeed and the need to support IEA in its constant efforts to expand the circle of participants beyond the existing core of dedicated participants. At times as well in the dialogue encounters the need for greater understanding of cultural differences particularly in respective communication styles of the participants was evident. Also noted was the importance of maintaining dialogue contact even on the part of those participants with a "positive predisposition" as positive perceptions can soon be negatively affected by prevailing social trends unless continuously reinforced.

**3.) Research Assessment of Activities in 2014.**

Five interfaith encounter groups were visited from the period of early June 2014 until mid-July 2014. This period encompassed the tense period including the abduction and subsequent murder of three Israeli teenagers, the "revenge" murder of an Arab youngster, and the beginning of recent hostilities between Hamas in Gaza and Israel. This prevented the possibility of additional visits. The assessment is based on anecdotal observation and quantitative empirical data.

The first group was extremely interesting in that it involved religious Palestinian participants from the area of Nablus and religious Israeli Yeshiva students, mostly from settlements in the same area. This group was a cohesive group even though the participants had met only a number of times in the past and this was evident from the degree of positive relationships (and likely perceptions). The topic of discussion, again based on a respectful exploring of commonalities and differences in the respective religions, focused on the religious legal structure of the courts of Sharia (in the Palestinian areas) and the Rabbinic courts in Israel (based on Halacha). The subject of the "Sulcha" was also addressed as a means of conflict resolution in Arab society. The meeting took place just outside the entrance to Jerusalem in the area of an abandoned Arab village, a spring and scenic area, with the ambience contributing to the positive atmosphere evident in the group.

The second group, involved Palestinian participants from the Palestinian Arab village of Yata near Hebron and Israeli Jewish participants both religious and secular. The Palestinian participants were highly traditional. The group had been meeting for a significant amount of time prior to this specific encounter which took place in a café in downtown Jerusalem. As the Palestinians came in very traditional garb the mixed group attracted the attention of the Jewish café management and clientele however once the nature of the group was explained the group was received warmly. Again strong personal relationships were evident. The discussion focused on similar practices in Judaism and Islam, including the circumcision rite, which in Judaism represents the covenant between



**פרויקט לחקר דת תרבות ושלוש**  
פקולטה למדעי החברה

***Project for the Study of Religion Culture and Peace***  
*Faculty of Social Sciences*

man and G-d, and in Islam is a rite of "purification" and without which no Muslim man is permitted to marry. The characteristics of both the Jewish and Muslim calendars were also discussed.

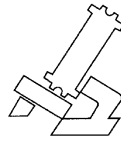
The third group assessed had a particular academic ambience in that it involved both B.A, and more advanced Hebrew University students from both communities and took place at a Café on the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It also involved representatives from the three religions (Christianity as well as Islam and Judaism) and women participants from the Arab side. This group had met many times before. Discussion focused on practices connected to Ramadan with emphasis on regulations concerning the fast. The discussion evolved towards practices related to fasts in Judaism as well. Again the ambience and interactions between the participants were highly positive and the process in which participants experienced a sense of pride in their own religious heritage in the course of discussion with the "other" was noted.

The fourth group took place at a hotel just outside the Damascus gate of the Old City of Jerusalem. It was a group of young Palestians from Hebron and young Jews from Jerusalem. The group had met many times before and this fact was evident in the pleasant and friendly atmosphere of the encounter. The discussion was about Astrology and whether it is allowed or forbidden to try and predict the future. It was followed by coffee and cake.

The fifth group also met at the Hebrew University and involved Israeli Jews, and both Muslim and Christian Palestinians mostly from Bethlehem, meeting for their second time. The main portion of the meeting was devoted to a tour of the Hebrew University botanical gardens with flora from all parts of Israel. The group then visited the campus Synagogue and new Mosque on the campus. The tour of the parallel places of worship also helped contribute to a strengthened sense of identity on the part of the students while opening participants to the "other." The group which was highly cohesive then concluded with light refreshments at the Beit Maiesrdorf café in which participants discussed the holiness and holy places of Jerusalem from the perspective of the three religions. The meeting which took place in the early phase of the hostilities between Israel and Gaza was briefly interrupted by a missile alert due to a missile attack in the area of Jerusalem. The ambience was not disturbed however by this event and the strong relationships and positive atmosphere of this rich meeting were maintained.

A sixth group was planned to be researched. It is a group of young people from the village of Yata and Yeshiva students from the Otniel Yeshiva, a group that meets for more than a year. However, due the closure on all Hebron area as a result of the abduction of the three Israeli teens, the participants from Yata were unable to arrive.

The seventh group that was planned to be researched is the group of young people from Jericho and Yeshiva students from Maaleh Adumim Yeshiva. This group also meets more



**פרויקט לחקר דת תרבות ושלוש**  
פקולטה למדעי החברה

***Project for the Study of Religion Culture and Peace***  
*Faculty of Social Sciences*

than a year. It had a relatively long break and was planned to resume its activity in June. However, as the Jewish coordinator was recruited for reserve service in the Israeli army, the group could not meet.

Participants pledged to see each other at a IEA large event, in which participants from many groups came together for a joint breaking of the Muslim fast of Ramadan and the Jewish fast of the 17<sup>th</sup> Day of Tammuz. Several dozens of people took part in this event. While eating and chatting together, many expressed the significance of this event, especially when the fighting in Gaza was going on, and carrying the message of the continuation of the work to build brotherhood, peace and reconciliation, as the only way to prevent future fighting. After the meal the group gathered together and held a conversation in which everyone shared their experience of the fast, which varied between those totally immersed in the hardship of fasting, those who were able to reflect, those who fasted without noticing and those who did not fast at all.

**4.) Overall Conclusions:** Based on the preceding evaluation and analysis a number of conclusions become relatively clear concerning the impact and conditions for the inter-religious dialogue to succeed in promoting love and forgiveness. First of all, it was evident that the inter-religious encounter made participants more open to the "religious other" while often making the particular identity of the participants stronger and more positive. The identification of commonalities in religious practices in the various religion, and discussion of them was a critical factor for success. However equal in importance to the formal encounters were the informal ties which developed between the participants and made many other processes such as relationship transformation possible. Many, but not all, of the participants had a generally positive predisposition for participation in such activities, often generated by early family influences and a general curiosity, however meetings strengthened these tendencies.

While the number of participants in the very promising activities of the IEA is still relatively small, there is some discernible trend (which needs to be strengthened) of expanding the circle of participants and creating a larger ripple effect, particularly as each participant often affects the perceptions of others in their social and family circles.

Prepared and Submitted by:

Dr. Ben Mollov, Faculty Graduate Program in Conflict Resolution, Bar-Ilan University

Gili Rozen, Advocate and Graduate Program in Conflict Management, Bar-Ilan University

(25/8/14)