

## **Jerusalem and the people of Abraham**

Drafted by Dr. Ifthikar Ahmed Khwaja and presented by Imam Umer Ahmed Ilyasi

Dignitaries, Participants, ladies and gentlemen

I offer you Islamic greetings of peace, Assalamalaikum

I, Imam Umer Ahmed Ilyasi bring from India the good wishes and blessings of half a million Imams of India who are the local religious and spiritual guides of 200 million Muslims of India. Indian Muslims of late have started taking interest in world issues. We come from a cosmopolitan environment and therefore are unique among the global Muslim community. Respect for unity in diversity, secular and democratic outlook, fundamental rights, civil liberties, freedom of expression and worship are the hallmarks of our grooming. My participation in this Conference is part of the exercise to bring Indian Religious Muslim leadership into the mainstream efforts of global civil society which is working for peace and amity among the community of nations. Dr. Khwaja Iftikhar Ahmed, Founder President, National Consultative Body of Indian Muslims and Inter Faith Harmony Foundation of India is representing the intellectual Muslim leadership in this conference.

The subject on which I have been asked to speak about is very sensitive. The religious sentiments of Jews, Christians and Muslims are very strong on the subject. Therefore before making my presentation I would like to put on record my opposition and rejection of extremism in all its forms and manifestations. I am a strong believer in rationality and moderation which I see as the only available way to move forward. Rigidity is a killer and rationality is saver. Let us work on the later.

Jerusalem as a city can be looked upon in many ways; Theological, Geographical, Territorial, Political, Social and Economic. These propositions can help us search Jerusalem in more conflicting terms than conciliatory. Fortunately that is not my objective at all. There is a human dimension of the city which takes us towards, peace, amity, conciliation and harmony. I would like to focus on that.

Human integration is the larger question we need to address today. How can the human mind, body, soul and spirit be transformed so that the followers of different political, economic, social and religious dispensations learn to live together, respect diversity, honour difference in opinion and develop tolerance to survive peacefully even in the most provocative and hostile conditions?

Extremism, fanaticism, obscurantism and terrorism are the biggest threats that we as one human family are facing on this planet. Global warming, scarcity of water and various other environmental disasters are indeed issues of common concern but until and unless we achieve human integration scope for the elimination of conflict and discord may not vanish.

Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism are the major world religions. Buddhism is concentrated most in China and South East Asia, Christianity though born in Middle East but followed more in the west and some parts of Asia, Hinduism is confined to India, Nepal, Mauritius and Fiji, Islam is followed mostly in Asia, Africa, South East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia but in America, Canada, Australia and Europe too it has substantial presence and Judaism is primarily confined to Israel and America but in small numbers Jews are living in most parts of the world.

All religions are Asia centric. Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Sikhism belong to Indian subcontinent whereas Judaism, Christianity and Islam have their origin in various parts of Middle East. Almost 60% of the world population follows these three religions. For all the three major religions and their followers Jerusalem is eternally important. It is a city that belongs to the Family of Abraham and the Family of Abraham consists of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Some cities in the world have their own significance for religious and spiritual reasons. For example cities like Mathura, Kashi, Ayodhya, Tirupati, Balaji, Gaya, Nalanda, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem have their significance for the followers of respective Faiths. These cities must not be made the bone of contention for conflict and discord between the followers of different Faiths. Rather they need to be turned into the training grounds of peace, tolerance, harmony and human integration!

Right now before me is the city of Jerusalem on which I want to talk and give my views. Before coming exactly to this issue first of all I would like to give my thanks to the Organizers for providing me such a unique opportunity. I am also grateful to Almighty Allah for blessing me with this opportunity.

When we look at the history of religion it is impossible to neglect Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the land of Bani Israel is the land of Prophets and therefore we call Jerusalem; The Holy City of Jerusalem. Judaism without Jerusalem, Christianity without Jerusalem and Islam without Jerusalem are impossible to conceive. All the three religions are so eternally tied with the City that separating any one of them from this City is like separating the body from soul and soul from the spirit. Theologically on Jerusalem all the three religions have their own beliefs and manifestations. However all of them are free to have them and have them dear to their heart as much as they wish to.

All the three religions owe their allegiance to Prophet Abraham and regard him as Father. Therefore Jews, Christians and Muslims belong to the same Family and tradition. Abraham and Jerusalem together must become a source of unity and integration for the members of the Family of Abraham rather than become a point of conflict, discord and hatred among them. Let us not forget that as far as Islam is concerned for us Moses and Jesus (Peace be upon both of them) are as dear to us as Mohammad. We are able to recognize Mohammad (S.A.W.) through the eyes and scriptures of Jews and Christians. Denying Moses or Jesus is denying Mohammad. A Muslim ceases to be a Muslim if he denies or disrespect any of the two.

The city of Jerusalem is holy in many respects for all of us. Let this commonality be a binding and uniting factor for all of us. Let us not fight on it. Let us stop playing politics on it and with it. Let us cease all hostilities relating to it. Let us recognize its common sanctity and maintain its holiness in entirety. Let us together work to build an atmosphere of mutual trust and make credibility the hallmark of it. Let us forget animosity of the past, build on present ground realities and secure hope with safety for one and all.

Peace within Family of Abraham is vital for peace in the world. The Arab-Israel conflict, creation of an independent Palestinian state, evacuation of all occupied territories to pre 1967 position, legitimate security guarantee to the State of Israel by the Muslim world in general and Arab world in particular, ceasing of hostilities by both sides, stopping of killings of innocent civilians and giving peace a chance are some of the steps required to be taken jointly by all the concerned parties. The recent ceasefire in Gaza with Egyptian mediation is a right step in the right direction. Both Israel and Hamas must exercise restraint and do not allow any hostilities from either side.

The peaceful resolution of dispute in the Middle East will have its bearing on the world peace. This is a very important region. It supplies energy and fuel to the whole world. Let us together take a pledge that enough is enough. No more bloodshed in the land of Holy Prophets. Let the religious leaders belonging to Judaism, Christianity and Islam from all over the world must assemble in the Holy city of Jerusalem, denounce terrorism and extremism together and give a call for peace to their respective followers. May the day come sooner than later when the followers of all the three Faiths find it easy to travel to the city of eternal peace Jerusalem without any hassles and problems? I conclude by praying to Allah that peace finally returns in and around Jerusalem. Amen

Before I take my position I would like to offer the services of All India Organization of Imams of Mosques in achieving the noble cause of peace. The two visits of Imams from India and their leadership to Israel bear testimony to the fact that we are serious about building a relationship of trust with our sisters and brothers in Jews and Christians. Imam Organization is doing its utmost to create conditions of peace in whole of the world particularly in Middle East. We propose to hold an international conference on the Relevance of Peace in Middle East for the world provided we have some active partners to share responsibilities.