

The Alliance of Rabbis in Islamic States: A Summit for Jewish Communities Old and New

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Rabbi Mendy Chitrik is the founder and chairman of the Alliance of Rabbis in Islamic States and serves as the Ashkenazi Rabbi to the Turkish Jewish community.

Reflecting on the first summit of Rabbis in Islamic states, the benefits and necessities of cross-communal collaboration are clear.

Ninety-five percent of global Jewry lives in just nine countries, which is less than ten percent of the world's nations. And yet, there are active Jewish communities in most of the remaining 186 countries, including more than one hundred thousand Jews living in Muslim-majority countries.

Providing communal and religious leadership, rabbis have played a role in Islamic countries for centuries. Precisely due to their apolitical status, history has recorded numerous instances of kings and ministers seeking their counsel to help mitigate delicate issues of international significance.

As today's communal rabbis, we see ourselves as continuing in this noble tradition of rabbis as peacemakers. Dedicated rabbis make enormous personal sacrifices to serve their congregations. Often, rabbis do much more than enable community members to sustain their faith and connectivity. Rabbis are uniquely positioned to interface with host governments at the highest levels to nurture a hospitable environment in which Jewish life can flourish and thousands of Jews can visit in a welcoming, safe environment. In so doing, local rabbis also have a unique role to play in fostering peace and universal brotherhood. As the Talmud teaches [in *Berachot* 64a]: "*Rabbis bring greater peace in the world.*"

While the integration of Jewish life across the Muslim world has not always been without challenges, Jews have, and continue to form, an integral part of the Islamic world. In fact, many people are surprised to learn that not only are there Jews in most Islamic states, but a number host quite active Jewish community. For instance, one of the largest Jewish communities is the *Ashkenazi* community of Azerbaijan. Headed up by Chief Rabbi Segal, the community is comprised of Jews who moved to the region during Russian rule, adding to the indigenous Mountain Jew community of Azerbaijan which has been living in the region for 2000 years.

Moreover, these communities have a notable range of diversity—from Jews in Muslim countries who are the remnants of communities with centuries or even millennia-old roots—such are the communities of Iran, Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia, to the post-communist Muslim countries of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and others, which still

boast the largest Jewish communities in the Muslim world. Other communities, such as those of Abu Dhabi and Dubai of the United Arab Emirates, are in the process of expanding in the wake of the signing of the Abraham Accords. Meanwhile, some Jews find themselves in more remote locations for a variety of personal or professional reasons.

In order to support these diverse communities, the Alliance of Rabbis in Islamic States (**ARIS** (<https://rabbisalliance.org/>)) was founded in 2019 to connect and develop the activities of *Sephardi rabbis*, whose communities members' ancestors lived in North Africa, the Middle East, and Spain; *Ashkenazi rabbis* representing those whose ancestors lived in Central and Eastern Europe; Chabad rabbis, who are members of a movement working to support and foster Jewish religious life globally; and communal rabbis serving Jewish communities in countries that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

At present, the network comprises of rabbis in countries such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, UAE, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria, as well as rabbis serving in communities of other Muslim majority regions, such as North Cyprus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan. Like myself, our network comprises of full-time residents in the countries we serve. We support local Jewish life and visitors in all their Jewish needs while also leading initiatives to combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. As a united voice, we provide a powerful model for mutual respect and the quest for interfaith deference by encouraging dialogue, religious tolerance, and practice. From Nigeria to Turkey, Rabbis across the ARIS network engage in efforts to strengthen ties with Muslim faith leaders, whilst actively arranging welfare initiatives for the most-needy general population during Ramadan and other Muslim festive periods.

As a rabbi of Turkey's Ashkenazi community and elected chairman of ARIS, I was proud to recently host the First ARIS Summit, held in Istanbul under the auspices of Hahambashi the Chief Rabbi Haleva of Turkey. The summit provided a unique opportunity for rabbis to connect and to learn from each other's experiences—while helping to “normalize” Jewish life in the Muslim world. It was also the first time in history that certain senior rabbinic positions in the region interacted; the ARIS Summit marked the inaugural meeting of the Chief Rabbi Gerami of Iran, Chief Rabbi Cohen of Kazakhstan, and Rabbi Meirov of the ‘Mountain-Jews’ community of Baku.

It was an opportunity for the rabbis present to be inspired from the experience of Rabbi Hattab of Tunisia, to receive a signed copy of Egyptian Rabbi Avraham Dayan's book about the last rabbis of Egypt, and to learn from Rabbi Rabin—the Head Rabbi of Bucharian Jews of Uzbekistan—who addressed matters of Jewish law pertaining to Jewish identity in cases of marriage and divorce.

Rabbis also learnt from Chief Rabbi Lazar of Russia—a guest of honor at the summit, Chief Rabbi Reichman of Kyrgyz Republic, and Rabbi Saidian of Isfahan. And, showcasing the centuries-old spiritual connection with Turkey, participants prayed at the Etz Ahayim synagogue in Ortakoy with local Rabbis Haleva, Peres, Alauf, Sevi, and Gerson.

The culmination of this historic gathering was an invitation to an audience with Turkish President Erdogan at the Presidential Palace in Ankara—during which the President reiterated that Anti-Semitism, as is Islamophobia, a crime against humanity and contrary to Turkish law. The warm reception, the Kosher food that was served, and the evening Jewish prayers in the palace all provided a powerful statement: that Jews and Jewish practices are welcomed, and simply a part of the social fabric of the Muslim world.

As we reflect on this inaugural historic summit, and embark on planning the second, the benefits of intercommunal collaboration have become even clearer, whether it be in the field of youth education, the sharing of best practices between rabbis, or the formation of projects for the preservation of Jewish heritage sites. ARIS rabbis anticipate a growth in many of the existing communities as well as the emergence of new Jewish communities in various Muslim-majority countries as Jews seek countries that safeguard religious practice and evolving economic factors

lead to further travel and migration. Externally, this creates an opportunity to enhance interfaith dialogue and collaboration—with strategic benefits to the local Jewish and Muslim communities, to Israel, global Jewry, and humanity. In turn, this will require rethinking on how many perceive the Jewish world, allocation of financial resources and the recruitment of additional rabbinic talent. ❖

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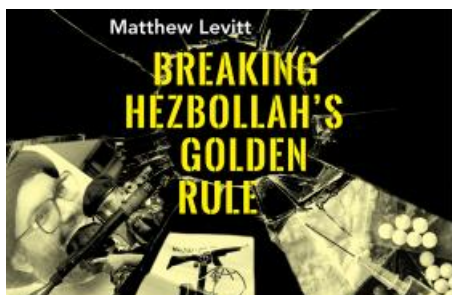
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