

Jewish-Muslim dialogue gets a boost in Kazakhstan

By Herb Keinon

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan -- The scene at the Presidential Palace in Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan, has a decidedly other-century feel to it.

Some 30 rabbis in black suits and hats file past delicate vases, china and ornamental swords that bring to mind the Great Silk Road and Kublai Khan.

The rabbis walk into a large, well-lit conference room, ornamented by simple geometrical designs, and wait for the entrance of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Nazarbayev enters. After a few words of greeting by the president, and by billionaire Jewish businessman Alexander Mashkevich -- who is considered close to the president -- the head of the Conference of European Rabbis, Aba Dunner, recites a prayer: "Blessed art thou, God, King of the Universe, who gave of his honor to flesh and blood." The words are translated into Russian, and Nazarbayev nods. Everything is going according to script.

And the script for the October meeting seems simple, as tried and true as the Jews sojourn in the diaspora. The Jews are profuse in thanking Nazarbayev for allowing their co-religionists to live in peace and security within his domain, and they shower him with praise -- almost to the point of fawning -- for allowing freedom of religion in his land. They also ask for his help for Jews in distress in nearby Iran.

The president, referred to in the World Almanac as "authoritarian," warmly receives this group of rabbis, as he has other rabbis and Jewish and Israeli leaders over the last decade. The reason, say some of the officials whom he has met, is the belief that the Jews are his ticket onto the world stage.

And behind it all stands Mashkevich, one of the new oligarchs who, since the fall of the Soviet Union, has amassed a king's fortune and adopted as his cause the small Jewish community in the country.

Mashkevich's supporters -- and there are many in the former capital Almaty who praise the mining magnate to the sky -- say he is motivated by true altruism, a genuine desire to bring about a flourishing of Jewish life in Kazakhstan.

His detractors, of whom there are also more than a few, say "giving Nazarbayev the Jews" helps him gain valuable concessions from the president, and that taking on this cause is good for both his business and his image.

Mashkevich is involved in a fierce rivalry with Israeli business tycoon Lev Leviev over who will emerge as the leading representative of the Jews of the former Soviet Union. The competition has led to the creation of two Jewish congresses, as well as two rabbinical conferences.

All of which makes what happened on one warm October afternoon in the blue-domed presidential palace in Astana a fascinating interplay of varied interests.

"The whole thing is like a play," says one of the participants in the meeting with the president. "We think Nazarbayev is more than he is, and he thinks we are bigger than we are." And everyone plays their roles perfectly.

The rabbis -- part of a new organization called the Conference of Euro-Asian Rabbis -- flew 90 minutes to Astana from Almaty on a plane chartered by Mashkevich. Among the group were the chief rabbis of the Ukraine, Poland and Georgia, and rabbis from Switzerland, Moscow, the Philippines, Australia and elsewhere.

Mashkevich brought this group of rabbis -- which includes Haifa's Chief Rabbi She'ar-Yashuv Cohen -- to Kazakhstan for two days to formally set up this new rabbinical conference and begin a dialogue with Islamic leaders.

The idea behind the dialogue, Mashkevich explains to the rabbis at the conference's opening breakfast held in the three-story synagogue-mikvah-educational complex he built in Almaty, is to show that despite the conflict in Israel, "there is no conflict between Islam and Judaism."

And there are few places where such a dialogue has a better chance of success than in Kazakhstan, a country with a predominantly Muslim population (60 percent of its 14 million inhabitants), but which is by far and away secular.

One can spend days in Almaty, where the smog is so bad that a snow-capped mountain which looks within arm's grasp in the morning disappears behind thick air by noon, and not hear a single mosque call one worshiper to prayer.

The city has very little outward Muslim influence. Rather, with a wide central boulevard, statues, run-down huts, and humidity, it looks and feels like a cross between the former Soviet Union, Johannesburg and the American South.

Indeed, according to diplomatic officials, there are only 24 mosques in all of Kazakhstan. During 70 years of communism, the Soviets succeeded not only in putting out the flame of Judaism but in dousing Islam's fire as well, at least in Kazakhstan.

And Nazarbayev is vigilant in trying to keep a religious Islamic element -- be it from Iran or from the Persian Gulf -- out of his country.

To get a feel of just how non-radical the brand of official Islam is in Kazakhstan, one need only listen to the words of Mimbayev Morat-Kagi, the rector of the Islamic University in Kazakhstan.

"There are many things that unite us," Morat-Kagi says to the rabbis, at an opulent kosher dinner on the final day of the two-day conference. "The idea of a day of reckoning, of the eternal nature of the soul, that everyone has to give an accounting to God.

"No one has the right to take the life of others," he says. "We all must preserve the other's life. Every Muslim is obligated to abide by the Ten Commandments; nothing about that has changed," Morat-Kagi says in Russian, which is then translated into Hebrew.

"Anyone who deals with terror has no connection with religion. Anyone involved with terrorism has no connection with Islam."

The words, obviously, are warmly received by the rabbis. At a meeting with Morat-Kagi and four other Islamic leaders in the Friendship Hall in Almaty the previous day, they were disappointed that they did not hear an unequivocal call against suicide bombers. Now they hear it, loud and clear.

As one participant quips, "Too bad he's only a rector in Kazakhstan, not the mufti in Jerusalem."

The rector's words were pleasing to the ear. But the question must be asked: So what? What is the significance of these words coming from an Islamic cleric in a secular Muslim country thousands of miles from Israel, from Hamas, Fatah and Islamic Jihad?

Shmuel Meirum, director of the Eurasia department in Israel's Foreign Ministry, admits the importance of a conference such as this should not be overblown. Yet, he says, it is a positive step. One baby-sized, positive step on a giant's long journey.

"It can't hurt," he says.

Dunner raises the idea of Nazarbayev serving as facilitator of a global Islamic-Jewish conference.

"On behalf of the newly formed body, we thank you for your patronage of the worldwide Jewish-Islamic dialogue," Dunner says to the president. "It needs a presence of your stature to get other Muslims to think in the same way.

"The only way forward is through dialogue. We would like to see Kazakhstan become the center of Muslim Jewish dialogue."

Nazarbayev graciously accepts.

"Kazakhstan is willing to be the bridge between Jewish and Islamic countries," he says

Indeed, a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations is slated for February in Kazakhstan with the leaders of some of the Muslim countries in central Asia.