

Sixty imams and rabbis gather in Washington to trade ideas for advancing interfaith understanding

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [December 24, 2014](#) issue

Frustrated by high tensions between Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land, 60 imams and rabbis gathered in late November to hatch concrete plans to bridge the gulf between their communities.

Organizers hope that the 2014 Summit of Washington Area Imams and Rabbis will be the first of many such gatherings of Jewish and Muslim clergy in cities across the United States.

After prayers and a kosher-halal lunch at a Washington synagogue, the clergy resolved to limit feel-good talk and spent the afternoon trading ideas. Among them: joint projects to feed the homeless, basketball games between Muslim and Jewish teens, Judaism 101 courses for Muslims, and Islam 101 for Jews.

“Host a seder in a mosque and hold an iftar dinner at a synagogue,” suggested Rizwan Jaka, who chairs the board at the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in northern Virginia.

They threw out tough questions: “Do you invite people in your community who are particularly closed-minded to participate in interfaith dialogue?” asked Dan Spiro, cofounder of the Jewish-Islamic Dialogue Society.

And when Jews and Muslims meet, several imams and rabbis advised, they should not sidestep the focal point of their mutual pain: the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

“Discuss things from a spiritual narrative as opposed to a political narrative,” said Imam Sultan Abdullah of the New Africa Islamic Community Center in Washington.

Both rabbis and imams repeated that Jews and Muslims believe they are descended from the sons of Abraham—Jews from Isaac and Muslims from Ishmael. In practice, they noted, similarities between the faiths abound. Both face toward the Middle East at prayer, for example, and share similar dietary laws.

“In my view we are the closest two religions in the world,” said Gerry Serotta, executive director of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, who sees healing between Muslims and Jews as a blessing.

“There is something about a Jewish-Muslim rapprochement that is very important for the rest of the world,” Serotta said. “The perception is that Jews and Muslims are irreconcilable, and when people see that we’re not, it gives them hope.” —Religion News Service