

## Report – November 2007

November saw the remarkable gathering of the leadership of the newly formed Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land in Washington D.C. from November 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>, hosted by Ambassador (former congressman) Tony Hall and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick at the initiative of Congressman Frank Wolf and in coordination with the US State Department. The Council is made up of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel; the PA Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Shaaria Courts; and the Christian Ordinaries of the Holy Land ( the Patriarchs and Bishops.)

The Jewish delegation consisted of the two Chief Rabbis of Israel Shlomo Amar and Yonah Metzger, the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Shear Yashuv Cohen, the Director General of the Chief Rabbinate, Oded Wiener and myself. The Muslim Sheikhs included the PA Minister and Deputy Minister of Religious affairs, the President of the PA's Supreme Shaaria Court of Appeals and the former Mufti of the PA Security Forces. The Christian delegation was made up of the Greek and Latin (Catholic) Patriarchs and the Anglican and Lutheran Bishops.

The program was prepared by Cardinal McCarrick, Ambassador Hall together with Professor Marshal Breger of CUA and consisted of meetings with groups of members of Congress, the Senate, the State Department, as well as meetings with US religious leaders. Originally the program included a second meeting with Secretary Rice (the first having taken place last month in Jerusalem) and Karen Hughes was meant to have been the main governmental host. In the end, the latter announced her retirement shortly beforehand and sent a nice letter to all the members of the Council apologizing for her absence and emphasizing her belief in the importance of the Council and bringing its work to the attention of the US administration and legislature. As a result of preparations for Annapolis, Secretary Rice made an additional unscheduled trip to the Middle East at the time she had originally planned to meet with the Council in DC.

However the meetings at the Capitol and with Members of Congress and Senators from across the US political spectrum were excellent, as were the meetings at the State Department (presided over by Ambassador Welch.)

At the concluding Press conference, a joint declaration concerning the Council, its purposes and aspirations was released and I was asked to speak on behalf of the Jewish delegation – the other spokespersons being Latin Patriarch Sabbah and the Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs Salah Zoheika.

In the rather limited US and international press coverage the Council was widely acknowledged as "historic".

Among the Council's declared purposes is a review of educational materials in schools and recommendations; and the establishment of a monitoring office to identify, respond to and counteract defamation or misrepresentation of any

one of the religions or their adherents. These goals will not be easy to achieve under the present political climate and working towards these targets will require substantial effort.