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Sufi sheikh who preached nonviolence laid to rest

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Bukhari was a proponent of interfaith unity.

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In a small and ancient family plot attached to his ancestral home in Jerusalem's Old City, regional Sufi leader Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari was laid to rest on Tuesday at age 61, after a long struggle with heart disease. He was head of the mystical Naqshabandi Holy Land Sufi Order.

A longtime proponent of nonviolence and interfaith unity, Bukhari found his inspiration in Islamic law and tradition, as well as in the writings of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela.

"The stronger one is the one who can absorb the violence and anger from the other and change it to love and understanding. It is not easy; it is a lot of work. But this is the real jihad," he once told the Globaloneness Project in an interview.

His teachings and practices put him in danger and under great stress that over the years harmed his health, said Sheikh Ghassan Manasra of Nazareth, whose father heads the regional Holy Land Qadari Sufi Order.

“Sheikh Bukhari influenced lots of people, worked hard to bridge the religions and cultures; and his teaching is keeping part of the youth on the right path. We worked together for many years and succeeded many times and failed many times and decided to stay on the [path] of God to bring peace, tolerance, harmony and moderation,” he said.

“But on both sides, Jewish and Muslim, there are moderates but also extreme people, and our work was very dangerous, with a lot of pressure and stress until now, and I think this explains, in part, his heart problems.”

Dozens of family members and close friends, including Jews, Christians and Muslims, and the Uzbek ambassador to Israel, prayed together at the funeral on Tuesday, as Bukhari, in a white shroud, was lowered into the same grave as his grandfather, great-grandfather and the line of family sheikhs dating to the 17th century.

Numerous rabbis, Muslim and Druse sheikhs, Christian clerics and friends of all faiths from around the country are expected to pay respects at the mourning tents, which will receive visitors for three days.

Sheikh Bukhari, who also headed the Holy Land Uzbek community, was a direct descendent of the Sunni scholar Imam Muhammad Ismail al-Bukhari of Bukhara, the ninth-century author of the Hadith al-Bukhari, a collected oral tradition that contains guidance about Islamic tradition and religious law and practice.

The Bukhari family migrated from Bukhara to Jerusalem in 1616 and built their home on the Via Dolorosa in the Old City, where they have lived and taught until now.

The family home also serves as a library of ancient, hand-written Islamic manuscripts and as the Uzbek cultural center for the estimated 3,000-4,000 Palestinians of Uzbek heritage in east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

Bukhari’s family played a role in the political history of Jerusalem during the Ottoman era, when they were charged with overseeing the Islamic holy places in the Holy Land, including in Lebanon.

In the late 1990s, Sheikh Bukhari was invited by UNESCO to an interreligious conference in Uzbekistan, where he got to know Eliyahu McLean, an Orthodox Jew living in Jerusalem, who had studied Islam. Bukhari and McLean became friends and decided during their trip to launch “Jerusalem Peacemakers,” a non-profit partnership of interfaith religious leaders and grassroots activists, from Muslim, Druse, Christian and Jewish communities.

Bukhari later also got involved in the Interfaith Coordinating Council in Israel, the Interfaith Encounter Association, and the Sulha Peace Project, and in 2007 launched the “Jerusalem Hug”

every June 21, where Israelis, Palestinians and foreigners of all faiths form a human chain of prayer around the Old City.

He also traveled extensively in Europe, to give a Muslim face to a message of unity and tolerance and to show the deep friendship possible between Muslims and Jews.

During Operation Cast Lead, Bukhari initiated a delegation of Arab youth and religious leaders to show solidarity with the students and teachers in Sderot and to share the pain of his own family's experience in Gaza.

“He was really special,” Rabbi Tzion Cohen, a native of Sderot who is chief rabbi of the Shaar Hanegev region, said of their meeting.

“Despite his own great pain for his family, and despite the fact that some of the group got heated up during the discussion, he and his wife remained gentle and patient and so very kind. I was truly impressed by their pleasantness.”

Between interfaith activities and teaching Sufi tradition, he raised money from the European community to teach job skills to disadvantaged Palestinian teenagers and women. As word of his ideas and activities spread, he was asked by the Jerusalem Municipality to serve as the Islamic representative at City Hall events during the past few years.

Sheikh Bukhari is survived by a wife and six children, whose families are scattered across Jerusalem, Gaza and the US.