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[Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – Two Sides of the Same Coin](#)

A time for reflection among Jewish and Muslim Communities in Europe

Travelling is often the best way to personal enlightenment or, if one is unfortunate, it can also result in confirming one's own long held prejudices. I have had the blessing to visit many countries for professional and personal reasons. It has certainly made me a cosmopolitan person who looks at people as individuals and judges them based on their actions rather than their race.

But up until recently, there was one country, which I badly wanted to visit but my ignorance and fear came in the way. Israel is that land in question.

Like so many other persons in the world, especially among the Muslim communities and western leftwing circles, I saw Israel through tainted glasses. In this fast age of instant communication, who has not heard untold stories of Arab-Israeli wars, the unresolved Palestinian issue, the first and second Intifadas, human rights abuses in the occupied territories and the famous Wall of separation. Looking at the newspapers' coverage, live TV reports and radio messages, no one could remain emotionally untouched or not take a side. And this is what I did. I sided with those who were weak and occupied. The oppressor cannot have my sympathy, was my excuse.

And then, there came three separate invitations in a short span of time. I was invited to come to Israel to take part in an NGO seminar on inter-culturalism, to be part of a European delegation to study Israel's integration policies and finally to speak at an International Inter-faith Conference in Haifa on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue in Europe. I was excited. I was finally going to Israel, to the ancient holy land, full of history, to the land of Israelites, of crusades, of Jerusalem, of Masada, of the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock, Al-Aqsa Mosque and the places of Jesus' birth and crucifixion.

But I was also scared. My Danish passport tells about my relation to Pakistan and my name is very Arabic. How would the immigration agents treat me? How I would be searched at customs? Would I be treated differently because of my Muslim origin?

Israel turned out to be an adventure without comparison. To see for myself, how Israelis and Arabs live and interact, I crisscrossed the land from the Sea of Galilee in the North to Be'er Sheva in the South. I also visited Ramala. I saw many of the famous and ordinary historical places; talked at length with some politicians; discussed touchy issues with many academics; locked horns with journalists; posed controversial questions to government officials; visited a Kibbutz to see the alternative living style that Israel was built on, saw centres for uncontrollable Falasha youth, integrated activity centres for all children, villages for handicap adults, hospitals where Jew and Muslims lay side by side; and even had the possibility to exchange ideas with Israel's former Minister for immigration. Although, one cannot claim to know a complex society like Israel in a few visits, I did come across some amazing facts.

So diverse are the views of Israel's Jewish population on every issue under the sun, that it is jokingly said that if there are two Jewish people discussing an issue, they will have three opinions. But when it comes to their own history, I was amazed to notice that from a taxi driver to a professor, everyone knew where a particular village has its Hebrew name from, which tribe of Israel lived where, who built a particular site and what the Jewish people went

through in their wanderings. It was not a school book's knowledge. It was a genuine interest in their roots and background.

But what touched me the most was the world of NGOs who are truly the unsung heroes of Israeli society. They are in the front line of building bridges between Arabs - Muslim, Christian and Druze – and Jewish populations in Israel and the occupied territories. Contrary to what the outside media would have us believe, that Israelis are en masse oppressors and Palestinians are totally oppressed, I saw numbers of projects which testify to the great desire of people to live peacefully with one other. On both sides, there is a huge reservoir of good and awareness that they have no choice but to co-exist.

By saying so, I am not closing my eyes to the harsh conditions many Palestinians are living under. No doubt that there are differences of perception: for Palestinians, a daily mistreatment at check points by young soldiers, continuous building of the separation wall, lack of work and opportunities, ID checks in the cities and derogatory behaviour towards Arabs; and for Israelis, a deeply felt, experienced, and now engraved sense of insecurity and fear for survival. Driving through the country gave me the understanding of how small and vulnerable it really is. Add to that the constant fear of suicide bombings, rocket attacks and being surrounded by uncompromising adversaries. On top of all this, the collective memory of expulsions, pogroms, historical anti-Semitism and worst of all, the Holocaust, has left such a deep scar on the Jewish psyche and soul that it will take centuries to heal.

Jewish people are rightfully proud of belonging to the ancient land of their ancestors. This gives them identity and self esteem. And so do Palestinians. In the dispute between the Israeli security and wellbeing and the Palestinian desire to have a homeland, both groups have fixed positions. To narrow down the differences and achieve a durable peace, we in Europe should support those forces that are progressive, flexible and willing to compromise, and explain to those Israeli Jewish and Muslim groups who hate each other that their conflict is having dire consequences for the world at large. Anti-semitism and Islamophobia among Europeans as well as among conflicting parties are poisoning their relationship and any chance of mutual living.

Over the years, most people among the Jewish and Muslim communities have become specifically worried about the increasing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in many European societies. In the last 15 years or so, the whole public and official debate in Europe has shifted from being one based on biological and ethnic racism, to one on cultural difference, and now to one on religion.

Since Jewish and Muslim communities are two major victims of this hate manifestation, they have a common cause to join forces. I know this is untraditional logic, but in the struggle for a discrimination-free society, we do have a common destiny.

It has always been my personal understanding and conviction that without a concrete co-operation with Jewish communities in Europe, Muslims groups will have difficulty in tackling Islamophobia. Both Jewish and Muslim people have to grasp the fact that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are two sides of the same coin. As a media person, I know that we needed to study, analyse and eradicate these two sicknesses at the same time and with the help of each other.

But since this noble thought required gigantic efforts on the part of both religious and secular forces among Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe, an opening was needed. And luckily, it came at the right moment in 2001.

Soon after my election as president of ENAR, I met two very dedicated, antiracist personalities involved in the struggle against anti-Semitism in Europe: Shimon Samuel from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Paris and Pascale Charhon from the Brussels-based Jewish Information Centre. Even though I have been closely involved in human rights and anti-discrimination work in Europe for the last 20 years, while listening to their untiring efforts, I came to realise how little I knew about the present state of European anti-Semitism – verbal and physical.

This awareness enflamed my determination that a large network like ours should not only proactively work to correct the situation but also voice our strong opposition to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia whenever and wherever it raises its ugly head. The most memorable moment came when I was asked by Shimon to speak at a UNESCO International Conference, "Educating for tolerance - The case of resurgent anti-Semitism" in 2003 in Paris, in front of hundreds of delegates from all over the globe.

In Israel, I truly felt that everyone in Jewish and Muslim communities had a personal responsibility to help to build a foundation of trust for the other. Dealing with one's own prejudices will give a clearer sense of identity and cultural awareness.

Examination of the self will make it easier to confront societal prejudices, lay the framework for social action and open the doors of respect. During that conference, I also visited a synagogue in a Parisian suburb which was victim to repeated anti-Semitic assaults. This proved once again the importance of our common mission. While speaking from the synagogue podium, I felt among brothers and sisters. My eyes were full of tears and I had to struggle to keep myself from emotionally choking.

My dream of Jewish-Muslim Dialogue is progressing slowly yet very smoothly. Then again, in the end, only small steps can help to reach this goal.

A Forum has been set up in Brussels. We have done mapping exercises in 6 European countries, including my own of Denmark, to identify leaders with Jewish and Muslim backgrounds who have been involved in building bridges and wish to go further than kissing on the cheek once a year.

In April 2007, we are going to hold a conference with a clear agenda, aim and framework. We believe that both communities must dispel prejudices and suspicions against each other and recognise common values and interests. European history is living proof of what Jewish and Muslim co-operation achieved and contributed to the development of Europe, from being a medieval backward area to a centre of civilised learning.

It is also important to mention that this common cause will transform Europe into a true multi-faith continent, where an individual's loyalty would not be measured by colour, creed, culture or religion, but by the contribution that a person would make to the well-being of society.

Over the last 5 years, I have spoken at many conferences on the issue of cooperation and now I know that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia can be dealt with and this common struggle can give our two communities some form of a safety net.

The time has come for everyone in the Jewish and Muslim communities to reflect on how they can remove mutual prejudices and misunderstandings. Muslim communities have to learn to organize, become professional in advocating their cause and stop blaming "the Jews" for all their misfortune. I am often amazed to hear from my fellow Muslims about many fantastic stories of the power of Jews and how they rule the USA, control banking systems, own the international media or even want to destroy the Muslim world. Such propaganda not only poisons the thinking of ill-informed masses but also educated classes in many Muslim countries.

Such stupid rumours in this modern time and age can be eradicated only if people learn about each other, by reading their common history, talking about their present conditions and participating in school and even home exchanges.

I would argue that Jewish communities all over the world must take this issue seriously. A very well planned PR campaign directed towards the whole of the Muslim world – and not only towards Arab countries - is needed. This campaign should not be used to discuss only Israel but the Jewish people, their history, their plight, and their efforts to unite like all other groups.

I would also suggest that we deracinate the Israel-Palestinian conflict from the general Jewish-Muslim dialogue outside of the Middle East. It is important to start where there is a

common interest and slowly move towards difficult issues. I am convinced that attacks on Jewish people and properties in Europe are often carried out by youth who react emotionally every time hostilities flare up in the Middle East. It happens not because these youth are Muslim or are inherently anti-Semitic, but partly because they face persistent discrimination, humiliation and marginalisation and listen to the TV, the Imams and their friends.

According to a new report from the World Jewish Congress, the recent war between Israel and Hizbollah has not only radicalised a section of Muslim youth in the West but has also left a deep, angry impression in general among the European and American public. This has resulted in a worrying increase in anti-Semitism in the West. In such conditions, European NGOs can be helpful too. It is in our interest to create harmony. Jewish communities in Europe can help their Muslim co-citizens to stop complaining and to start working, to be part of the country they live in, to contribute as good citizens and to show the most beautiful examples of their faith. After all, both are people of the book and belong to the children of Abraham.

Here I would also request my Jewish cousins to stop being rude and insensitive towards Muslims. Muslims are very diverse and Arabs do not represent Islam. They are only 20% of the 1.5 billion Muslims who live in 60 different countries, speak different languages, have different cultures and traditions and have very little in common, except belief in one God, the same Prophet and the same Qu'ran. From there on, there are 72 different sects in Islam.

In European circles – among some Jews and Christians – I hear of the great Judeo-Christian Civilisation against a militant Islam. This brings a smile to my face because I have studied European history. If history has to be believed, then Jews and Muslims are the two communities who did live and work together for centuries, especially under the Muslim rulers. Circumstances demand that they must cooperate again, not against anyone else, but to help each other. Otherwise, history's verdict will be very harsh.

An encouraging example of such reasonable cooperation came to light during the USA's midterm elections in November 2006. Keith Ellison, a Democratic candidate for Congress from Minnesota, contested the seat of a Jewish opponent who stood for the Republican Party. Not only did many of Ellison's votes come from the Jewish community, but a Jewish newspaper also supported him publicly. Keith Ellison is an Afro-American Muslim.

On a recent visit to Pakistan, Karen Armstrong, one of the most eminent British scholars and author of many critically acclaimed books on Islam and Judaism said: **"There is much in common between different faiths, especially Abrahamic religions. We should pay greater heed to that."**

We can only say Amen to that because dialogue will lead to peace among religions. Peace among religions will lead to peace among nations. Is it not what we wish and desire?

This essay has been published in the following publications:

- http://www.worldfutures.info/portal/analysis/anti-semitism_and_islamophobia_two_sides_of_the_same_coin_3.html
- <http://www.ceji.org/press/2007-04-16%20-%20AV%20Maroc.pdf>
- 15 April 2007: UN Observer - Bashy Quraishy: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – two sides of the same coin <http://www.ceji.org/press/2007-04-15%20-%20UN%20Observer.pdf>
- 13 April 2007: Politiken - Bashy Quraishy: Efter en rejse i Israel - Jøder og muslimer må forstå, at antisemitisme og islamofobi er to sider af samme sag (Danish)
- <http://www.ceji.org/press/2007-04-13%20-%20Politiken.pdf>