

Jewish Muslim Co-operation: A reality on the ground

By Bashy Quraishy

The European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation was launched in November 2007 at the European Parliament – shortly preceding the European Year for Intercultural Dialogue.



The European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation brings together Jewish and Muslim NGOs and resourceful individuals.

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are tired of the “I am OK, who cares about the rest” mentality.

At the Parliament ceremony, some participants, however, openly expressed the view that such a platform should have been established long ago, considering the genuine need for Jews and Muslims to shed prejudices and create a climate of mutual trust, recognition and understanding.

Origin of the European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation

While there are many local dialogue initiatives throughout the European Union between Jews and Muslims, these generally remain grassroots projects with little visibility at the European level. There was a lack of sustainability, and there was no overview of the activities or exchange of good practices. In view of the anti-Semitism and Islamophobia present in Europe today, this situation required mending. The logical next step was for Muslims and Jews to join forces, for the good of their people and also to create harmony in society.

To make this process possible, CEJI – A Jewish Contribution

to an Inclusive Europe, brought together Jewish and Muslim NGOs and resourceful individuals. They met and discussed what the two communities needed and how they could support each other in fighting prejudices and replacing them with respect and acceptance. Since dialogue was considered crucial, one of the suggestions was to establish a European Jewish Muslim Dialogue Project.

It became clear that partners in this dialogue should come from the whole spectrum of European Jews and Muslims, the main requirement being that they be willing to collaborate. Since the intention was not to compare notes on theology, we had to start with a meeting of hearts to win over the minds.

To enable a fruitful dialogue and create a progressive interaction, two vital factors were looked at closely and agreed upon:

- ★ De-linking of the Middle East conflict from European issues of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; and
- ★ Practice of neutrality by intellectuals and academics

among Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe, when European societies discuss Islam, terrorism or Middle Eastern cultures and Israel

Setting up the European Platform

An initial steering group of Jewish and Muslim individuals with experience in inter-faith dialogue was started in 2005. To find out about developments in the field, we established local contacts. These used a network of activists on the ground to create Mapping Reports, which were completed in 2006 for five European countries¹.

It should be noted here even though some mapping exercises and surveys of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia had been carried out, for example by the EUMC (predecessor of FRA), there was essentially no information available on dialogue initiatives between the Muslim and Jewish communities. The Mapping Reports, while not exhaustive, were therefore an important first step towards discovering grassroots activism. We were pleasantly surprised to find that there are many positive activities. This demonstrated that many Jews and Muslims are eager to meet and discuss issues that concern them.

These examples of practice on the ground were published in the Mapping Reports to empower and encourage other people, and also to raise attention for them in the European institutions. These reports intend to be a source of inspiration for what is possible elsewhere, as they can pave the way to the creation of new projects, based on experiences by other activists.

In April 2007, the first-ever European-level Conference on Jewish Muslim Dialogue was held. 70 grassroots dialogue practitioners from the five countries participated, coming together in Brussels to network, exchange ideas and conduct dialogue. Good and bad experiences were shared so that existing work can inspire and motivate other initiatives and help to prevent that mistakes are being repeated.

Moreover, the conference was a chance to showcase grassroots initiatives to the European institutions – which is an especially relevant aspect in the run-up to the European Year 2008 on Intercultural Dialogue. Based on the European Commission's interest in the conference, and on the large attendance at the November launch of the European Platform, we think we have made a real step towards the goal of

raising awareness among European-level officials that local activities are key to dialogue.

Besides the political aims of the platform, we also struck a chord with the delegates, based on their own feedback, leading us to think that the conference should not be a one-off event. Thus, one of the outcomes of the conference was the creation of a Steering Group, which brings together people from all the countries involved, hoping to lead the way to further and deeper collaboration. We have already established partnerships with Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and we have identified partners in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Building and enlarging the platform is a slow but necessary process based on consensus. As the saying goes: Rome was not built in one day.



¹ Namely Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.



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CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe has so far hosted the secretariat of the platform.

From dialogue to co-operation

In the early days of the initiative, we talked about “dialogue”, whereas now we speak about “co-operation”. While dialogue is an important step, it is equally important to take the next step – moving from discussion to common action. Co-operation is about the creation of something new, something tangible. We want to work together in solidarity towards shared goals.

Since mutual support is necessary for true co-operation, we needed to move beyond dialogue and to work together towards a more inclusive Europe, facilitating understanding,

strengthening mutual respect and standing in unity in each other’s hours of need. This includes a common fight against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in society-at-large, but also confronting prejudices within our own communities.

To us, a peaceful and inclusive Europe is not a pipe dream. One has to travel only to such places as Cordoba, Spain, to see what a great Islamic civilisation achieved in Europe during its heyday. Common interests, mutual admiration and shared values helped Jews to integrate and contribute more effectively than was possible in pagan or Christian Europe at that time. In times of openness and enlightenment among Muslim regimes, Jews contributed in no small measure to the furtherance of culture. The areas of mutual enrichment included religious and secular sciences, including theology, philosophy, ethics, medicine, mathematics and also poetry. As translators of Arabic works into Hebrew, and through their border-crossing connections with Jews under Christian rule, Jews became some of the prime transmitters of Islamic knowledge to “the West”.

To continue such historic co-operation and to capitalise on the potential richness of today’s European diversity, we

founded the European Platform with the explicit aim of bringing people together, helping to fulfil a long-term vision of peace and mutual respect. The platform is open to any organisation that is involved in Jewish Muslim dialogue and co-operation initiatives.

Moreover, the Steering Group created a Declaration of Support for Jewish Muslim Co-operation², which all Europeans are invited to sign to declare their support for co-operation through the platform.

Rising to the challenge

Judging by history, co-operation between Jewish and Muslim communities is possible. Today, however, it is not only possible, it is acutely necessary. We have no doubt that a common destiny is powerful enough to shape the future course of the relationship between Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe.

Let us help each other to create an inclusive Europe, a Europe where we are not judged by colour, creed, culture or religion, but by what we contribute to society for the common good.

We know that there are groups and individuals among our communities who do not want to work together. They certainly

² Available at: <http://www.ceji.org/dialogue/declaration.php>

may have their own political, religious or cultural agenda, which prevents them from realising the need of the hour. But most of us want peace and co-operation and we base our work on this majority. Their positive energy is our driving force.

We are wholeheartedly convinced that successful partnerships, constructive actions and positive and equitable inter-cultural relations will lead to the

emergence of a new generation that will be more receptive to listening than to shouting. With our European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation being a reality, we hope to serve as a space for resolving differences and the sharing of innovative approaches to peace and understanding, locally and throughout the European Union.

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ish Muslim Co-operation, and Chair of the Advisory Council of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR). The European Platform for Jewish Muslim Cooperation is currently facilitated by CEJI and is guided by a joint Jewish Muslim Steering Group. CEJI is a Jewish anti-discrimination organisation active in 12 EU countries, for more information, see www.ceji.org.

Broadcasting Dialogue: Radio Salaam Shalom

Launched in February 2007, Bristol-based internet radio station Salaam Shalom was developed as a broadcast platform for discussion, debate and new ideas between local Jewish and Muslim communities.

A growing city with around 500,000 inhabitants, Bristol's diversity is reflected also in its Muslim population, which hails from all over the world. The Jewish community also has a wide spectrum, and includes liberal, orthodox and secular Jews, who all have their own institutions and affiliations.

Incorporating these multiple perspectives, Radio Salaam Shalom covers diverse subjects, including music documentaries and online discussions. Many of the presenters are Bristol-based, but they come from as far afield as Singapore, Israel and Iraq. The station reaches listeners in the USA, the Middle and Far East and Australia. Station Manager, Kyle Hannan said: "The commitment of our volunteers has been extraordinary and we are gaining the respect of both the Muslim and Jewish communities, with more volunteers joining us all the time."

Originally set up with help from the British government's Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund and the Community Development Foundation, it received additional funding from Bristol City Council's anti-islamophobia

PREVENT fund and the Clore Duffield Foundation. Today the project is fighting to secure its future through a fundraising campaign.

On the occasion of the station's first birthday, Peter Brill, Chair of Salaam Shalom said, "We're delighted with our first year of broadcasting but we also know that we have only scratched the surface in helping develop further understanding between Muslim and Jewish communities."



Radio Salaam Shalom has received significant media attention and was awarded Highly Commended status in the prestigious Clarion Awards for social responsibility in broadcasting. Representatives from the station formed part of the UK delegation to the European Conference on Jewish Muslim Dialogue.

Farooq Siddique, the station's Vice-Chair and Director of the Bristol Muslim Cultural Society, said, "Not only are we reaching the Jewish and Muslim communities, but people of other cultures and faiths are becoming involved with the station. In the current political and social climate developing understanding is more important than ever."

For more information on Radio Salaam Shalom, one of the media partners of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, see www.salaamshalom.org.uk.