

# Diasporic Identities and EU Civil Society: Jews, Muslims and Israel

## EU Civil Society Responses to Jewish-Muslim Tensions

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Thank you first of all to JPR, to Tony and Lena, and to the CSEPS at Ben-Gurion University, for organizing this seminar, and especially for inviting me into a group where I seem to be one of the few people who is neither a Doctor nor a Professor. It is with this in mind, that I would like to emphasise that my presentation is based on observations from the ground, on CEJI's experiences in working in anti-discrimination education and policy.

When discussing Jewish-Muslim relations, one is sometimes tempted to remember Rudyard Kipling's famous quote from "The Ballad of East and West": "*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*".

By this, I mean that EU civil society responses to Jewish-Muslim tensions can sometimes be seen to divide into two groups: some initiatives assume that reconciliation is easy, that people are good at heart and are simply not aware of the real facts. If only they knew more, were better educated, they would understand things better and our problems would be solved.

Others, however, seem to claim that Muslims are bad, and that a rapprochement, especially with the Jewish community, is simply dangerous. This sentiment is possible among Jews only because they are, as Göran Rosenberg pointed out, seen as part of the established cultural community. As it was described to me last week: Some are inclined to appease, and others are inclined to be racist. Both these sentiments are prevalent, and very hard to combat. Allow me to illustrate these two sides with some examples:

The positive approach is best illustrated by the Mayor of Amsterdam, even though this is hardly civil society. Job Cohen, the Mayor, and yes, a Jew, though a thoroughly assimilated one, has gone to meet with even the most extremist imams in the city, claiming this may indeed show them that they are heard, and hoping this will help them to become more moderate. Similar examples can be found everywhere, including here in the UK, where the government is actively trying to give some extreme voices a say in matters of Muslim representation.

This model is also replicated in some Jewish and Muslim organisations and in some Jewish-Muslim dialogue initiatives:

The Belgian Collectif Dialogue et Partage (Collective Dialogue and Share), for example, was founded by Jewish activists who were unhappy with the way the media presents Jews, Muslims and the conflict in the Middle East. The organisation aims to get its voice heard in the media, and specifically looks to reach out to the Muslim community. In doing so, it built relations with the Muslim Executive of Belgium, the equivalent to the Consistoire. It was sorely disappointed when the Board of the Muslim Executive was accused of financially supporting a Muslim terrorist in a Belgian prison, and finally lost its partner entirely when the

Muslim Executive collapsed under a mix of fraud convictions and internal conflict between Moroccans and Turks.

Similarly, the Danish Ethnic Debate Forum, which is run by Bashy Quraishy, a fairly non-observant Muslim, recently published a document called “Jewish and Muslim Communities in Europe”, which glosses over the bad parts of life for Jews under Muslim rule, ignores antisemitism in the Muslim community, and makes the case for Jewish-Muslim co-operation as two oppressed minorities in a secular but Christian society.

So we see that some organisations are inclined to see things through rose-coloured glasses, and pretend all is well: everyone is good at heart, and if we instill that message into a sufficient number of people, we will overcome the obstacles that remain between communities and the hatred that exists in society.

This attitude makes it very hard at times to address substantial issues within the Muslim community: we see a lack of recognition in some quarters, Muslim, Jewish or otherwise, of antisemitism emanating from the Muslim community, or it is simplistically blamed on the fact that Muslims feel discriminated against, which, while a factor, is not the whole answer. Similarly, some are unwilling to discuss real issues of integration of Muslim communities into European societies, including educational attainment and employment.

Another obvious drawback of this attitude, which is related to this lack of willingness to engage in the tough topics, is of course the fact that you risk legitimizing some of the more extremist voices to sideline the most extremist ones. A failure to talk about real problems allows one to pretend all is well, to ignore the difficult opinions and ideologies of certain partners, as these are not the issues you are dealing with after all. Interestingly, it was exactly a Muslim thinktank here in the UK, the Quilliam Foundation, that recently noted this point and argued it can't be good for European Muslims if we empower extremists of any kind.

Looking at the negative approach, for want of a better term, is difficult in and of itself: as Tony Lerman said just now, we see that certain organisations, including I would argue the European Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee's Brussels-based Transatlantic Institute, are loath to reach out to the Muslim community and organisations, and essentially blackball them. They may do this because they are convinced that Muslim immigration is bad for Europe, or simply because they would rather see a Judeo-Christian society. Some of them say that while Islam in Europe is not a problem as such, we need to create a European Islam that would first of all recognize the importance of European values, making Muslims simply Europeans through and through, just with a different faith.

While, of course, most of these organisations would not explicitly admit that this is their attitude, we can see it reflected in their lack of coalition-building, and the lack of co-operation or even basic communication with Muslim organisations.

To mitigate this harsh accusation, I should add that it is not easy to find Muslim partners at the European level, and this is something we at CEJI have also had problems with: when founding what is now the European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation, we aimed to find a European Muslim organisation that would partner with us and co-ordinate the platform with us. Until today, we have not found an organisation at European level that is able to do so.

Overall, then, we see that we could be disheartened by a polarized world of Jewish Muslim relations. But there are numerous organisations that fall somewhere in the middle. These are, however, often small dialogue initiatives at the local level, but they do form a part of EU civil society. The local initiatives that succeed are often the simple meetings, the basic opportunities to learn about each other and build a relationship.

A number of these initiatives are included in the Mapping Reports CEJI created a year and a half ago. To give you an example: In Bristol, a Jewish Muslim radio station was created, called Radio Salaam Shalom. This has been a tool for empowerment for both communities, and it has brought together people from these communities in order to increase communication, which I guess is obvious for a radio station. It has dealt with some interesting topics, easier ones and more difficult ones, and allowed people to decrease some of the tensions by simply learning about each other and working together in a non-confrontational way. Other examples include the Jewish-Moroccan football games that have been organized in the western part of Amsterdam, and the recent founding of a Jewish-Moroccan museum in Brussels.

These initiatives, while not ignoring tough issues, choose first to build relationships. Only after a solid relationship has been set up are they then willing to tackle the difficult political exchanges.

Crucial to all this work is the building of good relationships and coalitions with other communities and minorities, and with other NGOs. Such co-operation with other communities is integral not only to engaging in effective solidarity, but also to confronting existing stereotypes and prejudices against Jews.

For this reason, among others, we decided to create our Jewish Muslim Co-operation project. It empowers local Jews and Muslims to create their own initiatives, to build relationships at the local level, by showing what is already happening in other places in Europe. Moreover, it allows those who are already active in dialogue and co-operation projects, to come together and exchange experiences in an international forum, thus strengthening the moderate bridge-builders. Lastly, the project, and specifically the creation of our Mapping Reports and the conference, is a way of showcasing these grassroots initiatives to the European institutions, and placing local issues on their radar screen. This is particularly important, we believe, as many of the projects that we know about are small and very local, making them basically invisible for policy makers and officials in Brussels, Strasbourg and Warsaw.

Another point that I would like to highlight, is the fact that we found that the vast, overwhelming majority of dialogue and co-operation initiatives is created by simple Jews and Muslims, rather than by rabbis and imams. This is an important point to keep in mind, as I believe that the current religious leadership is not at all where the innovation is taking place. Looking at organizations such as the Conference of European Rabbis, the Orthodox umbrella of rabbis in Europe, we see that dialogue consists mostly of photo-opportunities. The same can be said for the interreligious dialogue meetings of the European Commission and the Council of Europe: they invite the religious leaders of all sides, each presents for 2 minutes and then they have their picture taken with a beaming Barroso. It is, of course, much easier for a politician to invite those who look authentic, who have religious authority, and who claim to be representative. And indeed, the photo-ops with politicians do provide legitimacy for grassroots dialogue initiatives within the religious communities, which can be important.

Similarly, these meetings attest to the political will to empower dialogue. We can see further proof of this will in the fact that even as we speak, we are in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, while last year was the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All. Moreover, the European Commission, in its Education and Culture funding, has placed a clear emphasis on dialogue and co-operation projects. This has obviously empowered NGOs in the field to continue their activities.

So to summarise, we can say that EU civil society responses to Jewish Muslim tensions, can be grouped into three categories: those who believe all is well, those who believe all is not well, and those who think that there is much work left to do, but that we have to continue to empower new initiatives, and plod along to make things better. The local and grassroots projects are often overlooked and yet relatively more successful at creating long-term relationships and coalitions. Overall, I would say that the field is currently doing well, due to the support of the European institutions that currently exists, but there is plenty of work left.

So let us look forward for a moment; while at times it seems that as I said, “never the twain shall meet”, there are positive and proactive steps that are being taken by various actors in numerous organisations and communities as well as in political institutions. From these initiatives, I believe we can see that there is goodwill, even if that goodwill is not always widespread in the Jewish and Muslim communities on the continent.

Step by step, it will be possible to create a truly inclusive European society, a society in which all have equal opportunities to participate and succeed. And to tag on to the comments made earlier about a “European Obama”, let me give you an interesting example: Ahmed Aboutaleb, a Dutchman of Moroccan origin, was recently appointed mayor of Rotterdam, the Netherlands’ second largest city. Most of the emails I received about this from anti-racism organisations, stated that “Muslim Aboutaleb becomes mayor of Rotterdam”. While he is indeed a Muslim, his first name is Ahmed, as opposed to Muslim. What we at CEJI would like to see is not that Muslims and Jews and LGBT people are seen as such, and also as politicians, but simply evaluated in their task, whether they are effective or not. That, to us, would indeed indicate a colourblind situation where people truly have equal opportunities.

From CEJI’s perspective then, and as is clear from our activities throughout Europe and with international organisations, we believe it is crucial to capitalize on the positive energy where it exists, and to replicate good examples. We aim to contribute to a society that, when we hand it over to the next generation, will be better and more inclusive than the society we inherited from previous generations. This is perhaps well illustrated by another quote from Kipling, this time it is aptly taken from “The Rabbi's Song”:

*“Let nothing linger after--  
No whispering ghost remain,  
In wall, or beam, or rafter,  
Of any hate or pain:  
Cleanse and call home thy spirit,  
Deny her leave to cast,  
On aught thy heirs inherit,  
The shadow of her past.”*

Thank You.