



Intervention Delivered by Ruth Friedman, Education Programmes Manager at Side Event on *Challenging Intolerance against Muslims Through Education* October 3rd 2008

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CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe runs networks of anti-racism education and religious diversity training in eleven countries in Europe and facilitates the European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation.

Before I talk in detail about our work to challenge islamophobia I want first to address the issue of the ‘other’ that is prevalent in society today. This ‘other’ manifests itself in many forms, as Islamophobia of course but it also manifests as antisemitism, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, discrimination against all migrants and refugees, and indeed against women. These discriminations are all different faces of the same problem. We – and I mean ‘we’ as members of society – are apparently susceptible to discriminating against the ‘other’ whatever form he or she takes. This problem is not the problem of the Muslims, the Jews, the homosexuals or whatever ‘other’ is the topic of current concern - it is a problem of society at large and therefore the problem should be tackled by society at large. Hatred and intolerance are both reflections of society and therefore, as minority groups, we need to stand together in solidarity and support each other as we work with all of society in tackling this issue together.

One of the reasons we began focusing on religious diversity was as a result of the lack of solidarity shown at the United Nations Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001. We very much hope that the OSCE participating states, who are all also UN member states, will make good on the commitments they made in Durban as will be assessed in Geneva next April.

At CEJI we have been working on diversity education in its various forms since 1996 and all of our trainings follow the same pedagogical flow. We know from our experience in the field in 22 European countries that it is a process which is effective and we use this same process in our new anti-discrimination training module focusing on islamophobia.

Our trainings are highly interactive and participatory and build on a group process which demands safety for the participants from the outset. We invite participants to explore their own identity and to come to terms with their own place in society. Once we have a better understanding and awareness of ourselves, we are able to begin the process of exchange with others and to increase our awareness of them in an effort to learn about their perspective. Having developed understanding and empathy we are now in a much stronger position to confront issues, whether these issues relate to ourselves or to other groups that face discrimination. In doing so, we empower the participants during the course of this process. The final stage of the process focuses on social action, providing the opportunity to reflect on how to take the lessons learnt on this training home, to tackle issues participants face in their everyday lives, and to provide both feedback and support for initiatives to combat hatred and create a more inclusive society.



The training on islamophobia is a by-product of the more general training on Religious Diversity and Anti-Discrimination, You can learn more about this by viewing the rolling slide show in the hall. This training was launched in 2006 and has received a Gold Award from the European Commission in the field of Adult Education. We now have over 50 trainers who have rolled out this training in 16 European countries to date.

The Anti-Discrimination Training against Islamophobia itself is at an early stage and has been produced alongside a similar training against antisemitism.

We developed these two trainings side by side because we recognize that Jewish and Muslim traditions have much in common and share a strong religious and historical communal base. Both communities live in Europe, within a predominantly Christian society in which we all enjoy equal rights and citizen status. As such Judaism and Islam need not be on a 'collision course' and should be able to find a way to complement the cultural and spiritual thinking of European societies rather than confront each other under the shadow of the conflict in the Middle East.

We piloted both trainings together this May, working with a mixed group of Jews and Muslims, tackling these two issues side by side because we see them as two faces of the same coin . The group included a balance of Jews and Muslims, young and old, observant and non-religious and was delivered by a joint Jewish Muslim training team

One of the young, well-educated devout Muslim women, already involved in Jewish Muslim dialogue, shared an insight which I give as an example. For the first time she understood that the Jewish sense of 'chosen-ness' did not make Jews feel superior or better than other people but that it reflected a sense of a responsibility to God to carry out a particular role. As a practicing Muslim she could relate to that and could now feel empathy and affinity and relate it to her own feelings of being Muslim. This insight was also an eye opener the Jewish participants.

The results have been extremely positive and have helped to generate new projects bringing Jews and Muslims together on the ground.

We are planning to run the training again both for Jews and Muslims working together, and for wider audiences in 2009. We will also release a training manual to our trainers who will then present the training module in summer 2009.

Standing alongside the trainings on antisemitism and islamophobia is the European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation which CEJI initiated and now facilitates. This Platform brings together over 100 Jewish and Muslim grassroots practitioners already involved in dialogue and co-operation projects on the ground.

Now active in six European countries, we plan to expand the Platform to reach a further six countries over the next two years, with the eventual aim of reaching all European countries where Jewish and Muslim communities live side by side. We plan to achieve this first of all by researching existing dialogue and co-operation projects taking place at grassroots level. (This exercise, completed for the initial five countries of the Platform, highlighted some excellent work taking place on the ground and led to the First European Conference on Jewish Muslim Dialogue held in April 2007 and to the establishment of this Platform).



We also plan to launch an annual Award in the field of Jewish Muslim Co-operation, to highlight projects of particular note. The first year will focus on projects in the field of culture and the arts, as our research shows dialogue projects focus in this area. There will be a second conference and award ceremony scheduled to take place next summer.

One of the benefits of this Platform, as well as it being one of the mechanisms CEJI can use to disseminate trainings to challenge anti-semitism and islamophobia, is the opportunity it provides to highlight the excellent ground level work of forums such as this one, and to give inspiration to these projects elsewhere in Europe. The dialogue projects that exist today are often small projects that do not register on the radar screen of larger organisations like the OSCE, the Council of Europe or the EU. The Platform provides an opportunity to showcase these projects at a European level so that policy-makers in these international organisations find out about initiatives and can support them and help replicate them.

We are also committed to publicizing grass roots work in order to help empower the local people involved in them within their own communities. By reaching out to moderate people who are willing to work with other cultures we hope to empower them to communicate with, and indeed to challenge, the more radical elements in intra-community dialogue - work which is increasingly necessary within the faith communities.

Our experience in CEJI shows us that while islamophobia, xenophobia, Romaphobia, homophobia and indeed antisemitism are all different, they share the fact that they are based on fear of the unknown, the 'other', as I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. CEJI's work in education is geared to combating all forms of bias, hatred and intolerance. We hope that this side event, as well as the whole HDIM, will help the OSCE participating states commit to supporting diversity education, and that the family of NGOs working to combat hatred and discrimination will be empowered to work together for a society free of bigotry, a society that is more inclusive of all its people.

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