

Bashy Quraishy: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – two sides of the same coin

2007-04-15 | **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, both professionally and as a private person. It surely made me a cosmopolitan person who looks at people as individuals and judges them through their actions and not who they are.

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 also saw Israel through some tainted glasses. In this fast age of instant communication, who have not heard untold stories of Arab-Israeli wars unresolved Palestinian issue, 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 take a side.

And this is what I did. I sided with those who were weak and occupied. Oppressor can not 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 Wailing Wall, Dome of Rock, Al-Aqsa, 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 treat me? How I would be searched at the customs? Would I be treated differently because of my Muslim origins?

Israel turned out to be an adventure without comparison. To see for myself, how Israelis and Arabs live and interact, I criss crossed 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 in length with some politicians, discussed touchy issues with many academics, locked horns with journalists, asked touchy questions to government officials, visited Kibbutz to see the alternative living styles, Israel was built on, centres for uncontrollable Falasha youth, integrated activity centres for all children, villages for handicap adults, hospital 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 can not claim to know a complex society like Israel in few visits, I did come across some amazing facts.

So is the diversity of views in Israel's Jewish population on every issue under the sun, that it is jokingly said that if there are two Israelis Jews discussing an issue, they will have three opinions. But when it comes to their own history, I was amazed to notice that from taxi driver to a professor, every one 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 school books knowledge. It was a genuine interest in their roots and background.

But what touched me most was the world of the NGOs who are truly the unsung heroes of the Israeli society. They are in the front line of building bridges among

Arabs - Muslim, Christian and Darude – and Jewish populations in Israel and the occupied territories. Contrary to what the outside media would have us believe that Israelis are en mass oppressors and Palestinians are totally oppressed, I saw numbers of projects which are the proof that there is great desire among people to live in peace with each other. There is a huge reservoir of good will on both sides and an 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; daily bad treatment at check points by young soldiers, continuous building of separation wall, lack of work and opportunities, ID checks in the cities and derogatory behaviour towards Arabs – Palestinians on one side and a deeply felt, experienced, and now engraved sense of insecurity and fear of survival on the Israeli Jewish side. Driving in the country gave me the understanding of how small and vulnerable the country 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 psychic and soul that it will take centuries to heal.

Jewish people are rightfully proud of belonging to an ancient land of their ancestors. This gives them identity and self esteem. And so do Palestinian. In the dispute between Israeli security and wellbeing and 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 who are progressive , flexible and willing to compromise, and explain to those - Israeli Jews and Muslims groups – who hate each other that their conflict is also having dire consequences in the world at large. Anti-semitism and Islamophobia among Europeans as well a s among conflicting parties is poisoning the 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 the question of biological or ethnic racism, to cultural and now more and more of a religious nature.

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 an 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 knew 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/ 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 Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Paris and Pascale Charhon from Brussels based Jewish Information Centre. Even if I have been closely involved in human rights and anti-discrimination work in Europe for the last 20 years, listening to their untiring efforts, I came to realise how little did I know, about the present European anti-Semitism – verbal and physical.

This awareness fired 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 where ever 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.

There I truly felt that everyone among Jewish and Muslim communities has 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.

Examining of self will make it easy to confront the societal prejudices, lay framework for social action and open the doors of respect. During that conference, I also visited a synagogue in suburban Paris, 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 hard to keep myself from emotional choking.

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

A Forum has been set up in Brussels. We have done mapping exercise in 6 European countries, including my own - Denmark, to identify personalities with Jewish and Muslim background who have been involved in building bridges and wish to go further than kissing on the cheeks, 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 a 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 of many forms.

It is also important to mention that this common cause will transform Europe in to 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 the society, one belongs to.

In the last 5 years, I have spoken at many conferences on the issue of co-operation 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 safety net.

Time has come for everyone in the Jewish and Muslim communities to reflect how they can remove mutual prejudices and misunderstandings. Muslim communities have to learn to organise, become professional in advocating their case and stop blaming the "Jews" for all their misfortunes. I am often amazed to hear from my fellow Muslims, many fantasiful stories of the power of Jews, how they rule USA, control banking system, own the international media or even how they 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 are effected.

Such stupid rumours in this modern time and age can only be eradicated if people learn about each other, by reading the common history, talking about their present conditions, exchanging school visits and even homes if possible.

I would appeal that Jewish communities all over the world take this issue seriously. A very well planed 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 inform about Israel but about the Jewish people, their history their plight, and their efforts to be united like every one else.

I would also suggest that we de-link Israel-Palestinian conflict from the general Jewish Muslim dialogue outside 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 Middle East. It happens not because these youth are Muslim or are inherently anti-Semitic but partly because they also face persistent discrimination, humiliation and marginalisation and partly what they see on TV channels or hear from Imams or friends.

According to a new report from 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 very deep angry impression in general European and American public. This has resulted in a very 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 get out of complaining habit, work hard to be part of the country they live in, contribute as good citizens and 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, traditions and have very little in common, except belief in one God, same Prophet and same Quran. From there on there are 72 different sects in Islam.

In European circles – among some Jews and Christians – I hear of the great Judo-Christian Civilisation, contra a militant Islam. This brings smile on my lips, because I have studied the 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 co-operate again. Not against anyone else but to help each other. Otherwise, history's verdict will be very harsh.

An encouraging example of such reasonable co-operation came to light during USA's midterm elections in Nov 2006. Keith Ellison, Democratic candidate for Congress from Minnesota contested the seat against the Jewish opponent who stood for the Republican Party. Not only many of Ellison's votes came from 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 scholar 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 a dialogue will lead to peace among religions. Peace among religions will lead to peace among nations. Is it not what we wish and desire?

Bashy Quraishy
Chief Editor – Media Watch - Copenhagen
President – **ENAR (European Network Against Racism)**
<http://www.enar-eu.org>

(This essay has been published on 13.April 2007, in Politiken, one of the largest and minority friendly newspaper in Denmark <http://politiken.dk>)

Please also see:

Growing Islamophobia
<http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=IV0703-3257>

April 14, 2007

About ten Year after,

I think that what I have forseen is happening.

They prepared a cold war against Islam, and now they are making it a real war.

I remember that the Vatican have spoken about that also and warned about a kind of building us.

It is really sad to see how some countries work things in the world, how they just build conflicts here and there, how evil they can be.

Please read what I have written ten years ago.

Help bring justice peace and TRUTH.

Abouna Labib Kobti

<http://www.al-bushra.org/stop.htm>

Jouney to Jerusalem 2007

United by Faith and culture, Children from Jordan, Israel and Palestine Share

Jerusalem for one day And together they prayed for peace.

<http://www.hcef.org/index.cfm/mod/news/ID/16/SubMod/NewsView/NewsID/1750.cfm>

JVP Conference

April 28-29, 2007

"Pursuing Justice in Israel/Palestine:

Changing Minds, Challenging US Policy"

http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/publish/article_781.shtml

