

# From Detroit To Sarajevo

Creating pathways to peace between Muslims and Jews.

**M**ore than 100 Muslims and Jews from 39 countries met in Sarajevo this summer to exchange ideas, discuss hot-button issues and unite for the sake of uniting. Many of these conference participants would not have met in their lifetime had it not been for the Muslim Jewish Conference (MJC), hosted this year in what Bosnia and Herzegovina call the European Jerusalem. I was one of the Jewish participants from the U.S.



Ariana Segal

I attended the conference as part of the American Jewish Committee's ACCESS delegation. This was my second international conference as part of ACCESS, my first being an all-women's delegation to the Women as Global Leaders Conference at the Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. I came with an academic background in Muslim and Jewish studies and in diplomacy.

During committee sessions at MJC, I was reminiscing about my experience in the Tectonic Leadership Conference (TL) where young professional and student Muslims, Christians and Jews, all from Metro Detroit, spent five days and nights together to create united groups from opposite sides of the conflict who become leaders fully committed to transforming it. Our discussions on identity, Zionism, the Holocaust and the plight of the Palestinians were similar to those at MJC.

I found that locally, perhaps, our most obvious obstacle to mutual understanding is our lack of engagement. For the most part, Muslims in Dearborn and Jews in some pockets of Metro Detroit do not share daily experiences. Even on college campuses, these two groups seem



Andrea Varad of NYC, Metro Detroiters Brenda Rosenberg and Ariana Segal, and Samia Bahsoun of New Jersey at the AJC Global Conference



Attendees of the Muslim Jewish Conference praying at Srebrenica

distant until clashing political demonstrations ensue.

At TL something as simple as my showing a Muslim that I could write his name in Arabic and Hebrew and share a love of theater was enough to begin a level of trust. From there we talked about hot-button issues pragmatically.

At MJC, when a Pakistani participant showed an Israeli the top of Page 3 of his passport: "This passport is valid for all countries of the world except Israel," I smiled, happy that in Sarajevo we were united despite the exclusion policy.

The mission of MJC is to deepen interest in and evoke curiosity for intercultural communication and interfaith issues, in particular Muslim-Jewish relations. The MJC seeks to expand its visibility and extend its vibrant network of dialogue and intercultural communication in order to move closer to its goal of becoming a global think tank for Muslim-Jewish interests.

This MJC statement provoked my curiosity. What are Muslim-Jewish interests exactly? I asked Ilja Sichrovsky of Vienna, Austria, the founder of MJC.

"Muslim-Jewish interests are something that we are strongly working on identifying throughout our conferences," she said. "The most obvious one today probably is the danger of losing our traditional rights to slaughtering kosher and halal meats, and to losing our rights to male circumcision in Europe, where a big debate is taking place on several of these issues. Also, jointly fighting Islamophobia and anti-Semitism is something we identified as crucial for both communities.

"This year in Sarajevo we specifically looked at conflict transformation, gender and religion, hate speech and its influence on public opinion, and education and the effects of historical narratives," she said. "All of those topics concern both the Muslim and Jewish communities. Finding answers to them together is what is fostering innovative networks of cooperation, going beyond borders and religion."

Some of our shared interests are, at core, religious

commonalities like dietary laws and dressing modestly.

As an American today, I never felt our religious rights were at stake, but a Somali-Muslim living in Germany expressed her frustration with German policy for public teachers. She chooses to cover her hair with a hijab, face fully visible, and yet, she is not allowed to teach in a public setting for lack of neutrality. The line where religion meets state values is blurry. Jews and Muslims can agree on that.

Can we also agree that for those living in the U.S., Europe or other pluralistic countries, for the sake of good neighbors, we ought to engage?

At MJC we learned of Jews that sheltered Muslims in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. We also traveled to a more solemn place, Srebrenica, the site of the July 1995 massacre where more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed under the nose of U.N. Peacekeeping. At this site, Muslims and Jews, united by the MJC, prayed for the victims. This powerful moment bonded two peoples.

Across the globe, policies and history may divide us. But let's think of the righteous Muslims that protected Jews during the Holocaust. Remember that at our most vulnerable times, we rely on others. Let us unite to protect one another.

And lastly, we can take a lesson from MJC: There are no simple or quick solutions for problems such as non-communication and miscommunication; therefore, the MJC is determined to consistently exchange knowledge and experiences, share information about each other and nurture truthful interest in one another. □

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If you're a young leader in the Metro Detroit area, interested in being part of Muslim-Jewish dialogue, contact Kari Alterman at Detroit@ajc.org.