

Interfaith Muslim/Jewish
Seminar: How can we
foster a grass-root
cooperation between
Muslim and Jewish youth
in the EU

“Together for Sweden”
Marrakech, Morocco
2012:

A cooperation with
European Union
Jewish Students

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Synopsis

“Together for Sweden” participated in a five day interfaith seminar organized by the “European Union Jewish Students” during the 30th of October-04th of November in Marrakech, Morocco. The purpose of the seminar was to connect Muslim and Jewish interfaith activists, establish a sustainable network of Muslim and Jewish youth, exchange methodologies by which interfaith work may be conducted, and inform each other about ongoing projects and campaigns. The five days consisted of interactive workshops, facilitated discussions, and social activities all aimed at creating a safe space for interfaith activism to take place. The European Union of Jewish Students selected Morocco as the location for the seminar due to its long standing history of multi-religious coexistence between the Abrahamic faiths.

Participants

Participating in the interfaith seminar was a group of 15 Muslim and Jewish youth and four leaders. The Jewish and Muslim youth ranged between ages 17-38 and represented a diverse cultural selection. Among the participants were French, Swiss, Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, Italian, British, and Canadian Jews- while the Muslim participants were predominantly Moroccan. During an evening workshop, it was established that within the group of 15 participants there were a total of 32 languages being actively spoken- considering that most of the participants were at least bilingual. Most of the participants were attracted and interested in the seminar due to a curiosity about “the other” but also due to an interest in discovering personal ancestry in the North African region¹. For the Muslim participants it was interesting to see and to learn about the differences between Ashkenazi Jews (European Jews) and Sephardic Jews (North African/Middle Eastern Jews) who most of the time view the Jewish nation as a culturally homogenous group. Similarly, it was equally as enlightening for the Jewish participants to come across the cultural differences between the present Muslim participants and diverse ways of interpreting Islamic doctrine. In total there were 19 participants, six of those participants were Muslim and the remaining 13 were of Jewish background. Nine of the participants were female and ten were male.

Place

During the five days of the seminar, the European Union of Jewish Students had booked an entire Moroccan Riad² to host all the participants. The manner by which the Riad was built lent a feeling of proximity and intimacy between the participants. The rooms were either directly above or across from each other which simplified gathering and feeling close to one another. The feeling of intimacy was furthered by the sharing of all three meals together as a homogenous

¹ Many of the Jewish participants that came from either France or Belgium had either a parent or grand-parents that were either Algerian or Moroccan. Those with North African heritage took the seminar as an opportunity to research their own family history.

² A Moroccan Riad is a traditional Moroccan house, that consists of no more than three floors (plus a roof-top) and is built by mud/clay in order to keep the inside of the home temperate during all seasons. Riads are famous for their rooftops and inner courtyards.

group. Breakfast was consistently held in the same hall as well as lunch and dinner. Having the group (including the seminar leaders) staying in one place and consistently gathering for all meals (also in the same place) created a feeling of group cohesion and consistency. This proved quite helpful in the process of creating a “safe space”.

Methodology

The methods by which the interfaith activities were conducted were diverse; they were a mix of exercises that targeted cultural, religious, and social understandings. Provided below are three examples of the methods that were used to promote understanding between the two religious groups:

- 1. Cultural Understanding:** The participants were admonished by the seminar leaders prior to arrival to bring or share a song, artifact, or dance that symbolized their culture. The participants were then asked to share their culture for ten minutes.
- 2. Religious Understanding:** Some of the participants were asked beforehand to deliver lectures on specific topics pertaining to sensitive issues within their faith. For example, “Together for Sweden” had the opportunity to deliver a lecture on “Why is interfaith work relevant and necessary in modern society?”, through this lecture, light was shed upon how interfaith work was conducted in a Swedish context, how religion is and should increasingly become part of a solution for society’s problems, and how we can highlight the positive role that religion plays in the personal lives of people. Another interesting lecture was delivered by one of the Jewish participants on the following topic, “Jewish Law of Divorce: The Role of the Woman” this generated an interesting discussion on the role of women in each respective faith and highlighted the similarities that women shared in the Jewish and Muslim traditions.
- 3. Social Understanding:** One of the Muslim participants gave a lecture titled, “Why do Muslims get offended over the Muhammad Cartoons?”-this generated a lively discussion among the group that touched upon important values such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and the influence of religion on social conduct- when does it go right and when does it go wrong?

The positive element of all the workshops/icebreakers that were held at the seminar was that they were all held and conducted by the youth themselves. The leaders had done an excellent job at carving a significant portion of the seminar and putting it under the responsibility of the youth. Doing this gave an important sense of acknowledgement and helped the youth feel involved and interactive.

Planning and Field Trips

Reading this report would suggest that the group remained inside the Riad most of the time which would be incorrect. The leaders had also planned outings to religious historical sites in order to shed light on important historical factors that have significantly shaped the development of each

religion in Morocco. For example, the participants had the opportunity to visit the old Jewish Ghetto in old town Marrakech. Currently, the inhabitants of what used to be the Jewish Ghetto are mostly Muslims with a minority of Moroccan Jews. However, before the establishment of the state of Israel there were an approximate of 200, 000 Jews living in the city of Marrakech. During our visit to the Ghetto we also had the chance to visit the Old Sephardic Synagogue of Marrakech. As the group visited synagogue after synagogue the Muslims in the group began to wonder, “When will we visit the Mosque?”- This was the first imbalance of the seminar.

It was evident that the leaders of the seminar lacked the necessary connections with the Muslim community in Morocco in order to balance the seminar experience with the Muslim counterpart. Most of the outdoor activities were centered on Jewish history, Jewish culture, and the Jewish faith. It was highly educational, interesting, and informative but it was unfortunate that the Jewish participants could not have a similar experience with the Muslim faith. To be fair, however, in the city of Marrakech non-Muslims are forbidden from entering the Mosque due to old post-colonial political reasons. This said, it should have been the responsibility of the leaders to have a “plan B” if the group was unable to attend Friday prayers (luckily we managed to solve the problem).

Another issue that could be found in the planning was the actual level of presence of the seminar leaders during the workshops. It is integral that the leaders of seminars are to be present at each workshop and lecture. Not only does their absence send the wrong signal to the participants but it also decreases the legitimacy of a seminar. For example, during the “Muhammad Cartoon” lecture-due to passionate emotions-the discussion almost veered off track several times. At such a moment it would have been vital for the leader to intervene and resume decorum in order to respect the “safe space” that everyone has been working hard to establish. Furthermore, it is one thing to plan a seminar and another to plan and attend it. When the leaders of a seminar do not attend their own seminar, they deprive themselves from seeing what they could do better next time, which methods were a success, and which methods should not be used again.

Conclusion: What did we learn? and what can we do?

The idea that occupied my mind the most during the seminar was the complete lack of dialogue between Muslim and Jewish youth in Sweden. Observing the positive bonds that were being forged between the participants in Morocco made me realize the dire need of it in Stockholm. What would a Muslim/Jewish cooperation within a Swedish context look like? What would happen if we demonstrated to our Swedish youth the connection, the friendship, and the curiosity that exists between Jews and Muslims of Europe? Furthermore, what repeatedly astounds me is how simple tools of communication can help us approach highly complex matters! And that the creation of a “safe space” increases our individual willingness to learn about “the other”. I began to entertain the idea of hosting a similar Muslim/Jewish interfaith seminar but rather than doing it somewhere in the Middle East, it would perhaps be of greater relevance to host it in Sweden.

When I thought of what I would like to incorporate into an interfaith seminar from what I had experienced in Morocco, I thought of the following things:

- choosing one place where all participants (including the leaders) can stay. I learned that a shared space brings about a safe space.

- trusting the youth with holding their own lectures/presentations, this offers them an opportunity to learn more about themselves, their faith, their traditions simultaneously as they share it with the rest of the group. This does not merely offer them an opportunity to interact with each other but to also feel included in the interfaith process.

- It would be vital for me, when planning an interfaith seminar, that the historical/religious field trips maintain a sense of “equality” or “reciprocity”. For example, it would be wise for “Together for Sweden” to include Jews and Muslims in the planning of an interfaith seminar, should the project choose to do so. That way, participants will feel that leaders of the seminars went through the effort of contacting the different faith congregations in order to make the experience mutually educational. In order for an interfaith seminar to be successful, even the planning has to be conducted interfaithfully!

- I learned that while the Middle East offers the history of the Abrahamic family, perhaps, we in Europe could offer the future. While the Middle East is rife with religious/cultural conflict that sometimes might echo in European terrain, Europe also encapsulates an opportunity of fostering peaceful dialogue. Sweden for example has a proud history of aiding the Jews post and prior to the Holocaust and not to mention a fascinating history in terms of Muslim immigration. How could history and Swedish context offer its own twist as to how these two communities interact? How similar is Scandinavian Jewish diaspora to Muslim history of immigration? What do these two communities have to teach each other?

“Together for Sweden” has a unique platform in Swedish society and due to its prime focus on youth, has the opportunity to generate dialogue processes where none have been started before. This is highly positive. For example, Muslims might not feel “safe” attending an interfaith gathering that they know was organized by the Stockholm Jewish Congregation and vice versa...but having a religious project that is religiously neutral³ organize an interfaith event might facilitate the gathering from two “opposing” groups. This is something that will not garner “TFS” publicity and favor in Sweden alone but eventually within the EU as well.

The five days spent in Marrakech confirmed to me that there is yet much left for us in “TFS” to learn but that we have also come much further than we would like to think.

³ By religiously neutral I mean that the project does not prefer one religion over the other.