

The Tolerance Conference

Testimonies from The Muslim Jewish Conference

Breaking interfaith patterns

April 2021



Connecting  Actions



European
Commission

A context that calls for more interfaith engagement

In 2016, there were approximately 1.08 million Jews¹ and approximately 25.8 million Muslims² living in Europe, and both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism have been on the rise. In just six months, Germany alone witnessed an attempted shooting of a Synagogue by a neo-Nazi gunman in Halle (October 2019), as well as the shooting of two Shisha bars in Hanau (February 2020). Similar anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attacks occur throughout Europe; a 2018 report from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that over 70 years after the Holocaust, “9 in 10 (89 %) respondents in the survey feel that antisemitism increased in their country in the five years before the survey; more than eight in 10 (85 %) consider it to be a serious problem.”³ The European Islamophobia Report of 2018⁴ also noted the widespread effects of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobic terrorism, particularly its insidious presence in extremist right-wing discourse. There is also noted animosity between Jews and Muslims living in and outside Europe, whether stemming from the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict or from difficult triangulation with largely Christian-secular EU nations whose memories of the Holocaust remain fresh.

This underlines the urgent need to address both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism as these prejudices proliferate, particularly considering the structural impediments to dialogue between the two groups, the contestations over what constitutes anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism, and the loss of Holocaust survivors to provide testimony for the upcoming generation. Confronting these intolerances furthermore demands an intersectional approach, one that also takes into account anti-Black racism, as well as misogyny and homophobia.

By understanding how Muslims and Jews can learn from and with one another, citizen-interfaith dialogue and cooperation effectively reduces bias and improves trust building, thereby creating the conditions for a more tolerant and less discriminatory society. By uniting Jews and Muslims to address together the discriminations each community faces, Muslim-Jewish dialogue builds broad, interconvictional coalitions to fight discrimination, promote remembrance, and empower Europe’s religious minorities.

Two partners in interfaith work

The Muslim Jewish Conference (MJC) is an Austria-based, grassroots dialogue and leadership initiative that focuses on building sustainable networks between Muslim and Jewish youth, students and professionals from around the world. Since its founding in 2010, the MJC has hosted a conference every year in European cities, Bringing together approximately 100

¹ [Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass. “Jewish communities in the European Union.” European Parliamentary Research Service \(January 2020\)](#)

² [“Europe’s Growing Muslim Population.” Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, 29 November 2017.](#)

³ [“Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism: Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU.” European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union \(2018\).](#)

⁴ [Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez \(eds.\), European Islamophobia Report 2018.” SETA: Brussels, 2019.](#)

participants each time for an immersive, six-day educational experience, serving as a first point of cooperation between “othered” communities. During the conference, they engage in meaningful dialogue on topics including: confronting stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice, the religion of “the other,” interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and genocide awareness. A major initiative during the week is “sharing the pain,” where we visit memorial sites of genocide having affected both communities. Visits to holy sites are also included in the program. Participants are invited to step beyond the boundaries of ignorance and stereotyping and to develop and implement projects focused on promoting interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue and combating racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, in particular anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism. This space also enables participants to co-produce grassroots projects, including programs focused on tolerance and education, interfaith or art, which create global and local impact. The MJC maintains a network of over 1,000 alumni across more than 50 countries who work in their own communities to promote the MJC’s vision and support alumni-led projects that amplify the message and ripple the effect of the Conference. Along with its partner organisations, the MJC provides a safe space for Muslims and Jews to learn about and celebrate one another’s cultures, to process and combat hate speech and other forms of intolerance, and to foster capacity-building in order to build a new global movement of young Muslim and Jewish leaders, activists and experts who are committed to mutual respect.

Connecting Actions (CA), originally incubated at the Muslim Jewish Conference in 2015, was initiated to convene and organise experts and initiatives committed to the field of intercommunal, interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In 2018, twelve European Civil Society Organisations were convened by Connecting Actions to launch the **European Institute for Dialogue**. This ambitious coalition gathers and supports local, national and European organisations fighting hate, ignorance, prejudice, racism and discrimination through constructive conversations and activities between members of various identity groups. Today, Connecting Actions and its partners continue to lead this effort to enhance the field of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation by bringing together its main stakeholders around common projects and professionalizing the field through ongoing training and evaluation.

The Muslim Jewish Conference and Connecting Actions contribute to the development and dissemination of best practices to combat multiple discriminations and to empower Jewish and Muslim communities. They also raise awareness about EU principles of equal rights, non-discrimination, and peaceful dialogue, as outlined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, across and beyond the EU Member States. Over the past 10 years, the MJC and Connecting Actions have built a global network of alumni and partner organisations that are part of a robust ecosystem of social change networks within the European Union. This network also serves to better understand the manifestations of anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism outside of the EU, and to build global interfaith coalitions.

Why engaging across faiths?

Interfaith dialogue is a growing field led by a constellation of Civil Society Organisations to promote healthy and constructive engagement among citizens of different faiths. It is not limited to theological discussions among religious authorities. At the citizen level, it is a way to address common issues, learn about oneself, the others and the World we live in. It is also a way to create or repair relationships that were either inexistent or broken. Conversations, which extend way beyond theological topics, cover all aspects of culture, society and politics from arts, cooking, history and remembrance, fighting racism, gender and religion, role of the media business, hate speech vs free speech, historical narratives and identity, among others.... They include a mix of (sometimes heated) conversations as well as icebreakers and games, skill building workshops, field trips and, last but not least, downtime and informal exchange. They also give the opportunity to reshape religious practice in a more inclusive manner. Religious prayers and celebrations (Shabbat, Jumaa) spontaneously take place to ensure everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Those conversations and interactions are structured in a way to help participants break down stereotypes and realise that people from the other faith are not all the same, countering the dominant narrative of insurmountable enmity towards a supposedly homogeneous community. By cultivating the image of a designated enemy, we remove our focus on improving our lives. By understanding that the other is not in fact an enemy, it is possible to look inward and reinforce our own identity. Interfaith encounters are not just meant to understand what is common between the different practices and scriptures of each religion. They are a way to clarify where differences exist and why they exist. The point of interfaith dialogue is not to agree on everything, even less forgo of what is constitutive of one's identity. The testimonies presented here prove it: Interfaith engagement doesn't weaken but reinforces one's own identity. One of the core issues in intercommunal tensions is that every side treats oneself and the other as if it was a monolith. The conflict imposes an apparent homogeneity that never exists. Even in the most unifying religions, diversity of interpretations, cultures and practices is the rule. In fact, interfaith dialogue is most effective when it is accompanied by *intrafaith* dialogue. This allows participants to remove the focus on the other and acknowledge issues that are internal to their respective communities. If internal issues are acknowledged, they can be addressed. If they are addressed, our collective identity is more authentic and therefore stronger.

The point of interfaith dialogue is not to ignore the power structures and imbalances that exist in society. Depending on where they are, Jews and Muslims can all be in a situation of numerical and political minority. They both know all too well that being in such a situation has implications on every aspect of life. Dialogue acknowledges systems of power and equips participants to address them. With the right preparation, structure and framework, Interfaith dialogue sets the right conditions for not only a deeper understanding but a sense of solidarity and a genuine willingness to collaborate for the betterment of everyone's life and society as a whole. This is especially the case for Muslim-Jewish dialogue. Muslim-Jewish Interfaith is so inspiring that even those not belonging to the Jewish or Muslim identities have felt inspired to join these spaces and

communities. This shows that Muslims and Jews can lead the way in shaping a more inclusive space.

The value of interfaith engagement is also about learning to engage constructively with the other, even and especially when we disagree with them. When trust is established, interfaith engagement also supports participants in devising and planning joint projects. In that sense, interfaith spaces do not just change the participants' attitudes and behaviours, they turn them into agents of change and "multipliers": participants, most often inspired by their own interfaith experience, continue their journey by meeting others in their respective communities to spread the learning that they went through. There are now countless examples of Jewish-Muslim social initiatives and businesses in an increasing number of countries. Many of those projects have been possible thanks to the deep connection that interfaith spaces enabled, including from the Muslim-Jewish conference. Today, the former participants of those programmes form a vast community of partners and friends, ready to support each other, protect each other and work together for a better world.

The testimonies

In April 2021, Connecting Actions and the Muslim Jewish Conference invited five Europeans, Jews and Muslims, to share their own stories of meeting with the Other. Those leaders, who all have had an interfaith experience through the Muslim Jewish Conference and Connecting Actions and who continue to lead the way in interfaith cooperation in Europe, have very different stories. They come from different countries (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy) and very different backgrounds. All of their stories illustrate the type of journey one can experience when going through such a deep interfaith engagement. They also reflect the diversity of what it means to be Muslim or Jewish in Europe today.

They show that, despite the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in fostering antagonism in the broader Muslim-Jewish relationship, the confrontation is not inevitable. That in the real world, Jews do not have to hate Muslims, Muslims do not have to hate Jews, Jews do not all agree with each other and Muslims do not all agree with each other. They also show that it is often a lifelong struggle for both Jews and Muslims to fully shape their identity and worldviews. Finally, they show that it is possible to see what is common in the Other, while acknowledging what remains different. Because identities are always evolutive, complex, subtle and multiple, the role of interfaith dialogue is to create a space where this complexity can unfold without being taken advantage of. More than just meeting with the other and breaking down the stereotypes Jews and Muslims may hold about each other, those encounters have allowed these persons to broaden their world views and develop a renewed sense of humanity and spirituality.

The stories those interfaith activists narrate are not miracle stories. They illustrate the long, difficult but transformative path of reaching out to the other while maintaining a sense of self-identity. What is common between those personal journeys is that, far from being a threat to one's own identity, interfaith exchange is in fact a powerful way to better define and strengthen this self-identity. They show that spaces like the Muslim Jewish Conference are the best thing that can happen to anyone feeling the slightest curiosity about the other, as they allow for deep learning and sustained change.

Listen to those five contributors sharing their very personal stories, explaining their specific relationships to Islam and Judaism, their original preconceptions about the other, the interfaith shifts they went through in their lives and their recommendations for the future of Jews and Muslims in Europe.

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Parin

My name is Parin, and I am 26 years old, living with my family in England. I was born in London and have lived in England all my life, although I now live in a small town in the north of England, called Blackburn. I am a British-Muslim, of Bangladeshi-descent, as both of my parents arrived from Bangladesh to settle in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s. I am a broadcast journalist and a content creator by trade, but occasionally, I dabble in different social-action projects. In the formative years of my career, I led various projects with an interfaith, youth, and community development focus. Before my career in journalism, I worked as a project leader for a community organisation, Interfaith Forum, that focused on strengthening the relationships of people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in my hometown, Blackburn with Darwen.

This small borough based in the county of Lancashire is known for its multi-ethnic diversity and was often cited for the religious and ethnic tensions between the majority secular, or Christian White community and the minority Muslim, South-Asian community that resides here. For example, back in 2007, the BBC programme *Panorama* released the first part of a two-part programme called ‘*White Fright: Divided Britain*’ highlighting the issue of segregation between the different ethnic communities in the town. This was later followed up after ten years with the second part of the programme, to address whether things changed after many efforts and investments were made in Blackburn with Darwen to strengthen social cohesion. Blackburn with Darwen is also currently one of the five cities/towns in the country to be part of a national government’s pilot projects scheme, Integrated Communities Strategy, which was introduced by ministers in March 2018. Therefore, living my teenage life in multicultural Blackburn, I was very conscious about religious and ethnic differences and personally, as I have never faced any direct issues for being Muslim or South Asian, it is something that I loved about living in Blackburn.

My faith inspires a lot of my life decisions, regular habits and even dictates a part of my daily routine.

I was born and raised into a Muslim family, although some of my family members are not so practising Muslims i.e., they don’t observe the five daily prayers that are required in the Islamic faith, but they may observe the fasting for Ramadan with the wider community. Whereas for me, I would consider myself a somewhat religious person, as Islam is a significant part of my life. My faith inspires a lot of my life decisions, regular habits and even dictates a part of my daily routine. For example, my five ritual prayers are a priority in my daily routine, and I usually plan my schedule around them regularly. I also try to refrain from consuming food and drinks that are not permitted by Islamic guidelines i.e., avoiding alcohol or pork meat. On some days my relationship with my faith is weaker than other days, especially when I become very distracted with work and a busy schedule. My relationship with my faith is also apparent because of my commitment to dressing ‘modestly’, as you would typically see Muslim women do, like wearing a headscarf. Although wearing a headscarf and being ‘visibly Muslim’ can be a struggle sometimes, especially in the secular world, as it is what distinguishes someone as a Muslim woman, and this can often make them vulnerable to marginalisation, unnecessary attention and negative reactions. However, after wearing my headscarf for almost ten years, I now embrace it as

part of my identity, as dressing modestly and wearing a headscarf reminds me of all the values that I hold so dearly. Being one of the few Muslims in my workplace and being the only one who 'looks visibly Muslim', my faith invites a lot of questions from my peers. I don't mind being asked questions by people and in fact, I appreciate questions and I like having the opportunity to satisfy people's curiosity. I completely understand that my commitment to my faith, in a country where my religion is a minority, may appear 'strange' or 'out of the ordinary' for some people - especially with the attention that Islam and other religions receive in the media and current affairs.

However, I haven't always been religious. Growing up I had a passive relationship with my faith, even though I had a religious upbringing and attended faith schools. My understanding of my faith was based on what my parents told me or what religious teachers taught me, and my faith wasn't important enough for me to challenge it at that time. Then around the age of sixteen, I started to become more sceptical, and intrigued at the same time, about my religion and that of others. Being constantly surrounded by the same ideas and a monolithic culture in school and my community, I was encouraged to get involved with projects outside my community. This ultimately led me to leave the all-girls Islamic college that I was attending at that time and transfer my education to a different college that was secular. The more I explored alternative ideas from school, the internet or mainstream media, the more curious I became. This was further challenged through my personal discovery and education of the Islamic faith and how certain teachings were slightly different to my parent's teachings, thus adding further confusion to my personal journey. Ultimately, this led me to put religion in the backbench of my life and not take it too seriously, besides getting involved with community events or passively participating in religious festivals. However, this didn't last too long, and in fact, it took an encounter with one Jewish girl for my relationship with religion to change all together – which I will come back to. Today, my faith is a source of inspiration for many things in my life, from dealing with relationships to handling finances and even maintaining proper hygiene. But it also restricts me in a certain aspect, from things which would probably be considered 'normal' otherwise - like dating outside of marriage, or accepting interests money from the bank and getting intoxicated etc. And this is why my faith is an important aspect of my life because it keeps me grounded, gives me a purpose for living and teaches me to contribute valuably to my wider community.

Throughout most of my high school education, I attended three different girls-only private schools for Islamic and secular education. All three of the schools were largely made up of Muslim girls from South-Asian households, with families of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian heritages, and one of the schools that I attended was a boarding school. This means I had less interaction with people outside of these demographics up until my later teenage years. Besides learning about different religions and interacting with local people from different backgrounds, I had little to zero contact with anybody from different faiths, especially with someone from a Jewish faith. All I knew about Jewish people was what I learnt

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in religious education classes in school and what people around me told me. And often, what I heard about the Jewish community were not always kind or respectful, an issue that was heavily fuelled by the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

I remember way too often there were many charitable or community events that had taken place to support Palestinian victims in the conflict and this inevitably created a conversation amongst the youth about the plights of the Palestine people and the Israeli people as the pitted enemy. Over time, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was a common topic at the dinner table in most Muslim households in my vicinity, even though it was an issue far from home and not connected with the South-Asian culture at all. However, it became a sensitive issue for Muslims because it was not a matter of a political conflict for British Muslims, but instead, it was a personal issue as the country, Palestine, was held in high regards by Muslim due to the religious connections it has with the Islamic faith. As a result, this created greater animosity towards Israelis and also Jewish people in general, and therefore, hearing derogatory comments about them were not challenged. Growing up I heard more negative stereotypes and witnessed hostility towards Jewish people amongst my peers, than any other faith groups that I was aware of.

This all changed when I decided to take that crucial step to transfer my second year of college, at around the age of seventeen, to another secular college based in my hometown. It was during my final year in college that I was asked to take part in an interfaith initiative set up by my college institution. I was informed that there was a group of multi-faith students arriving from Cape Town, South Africa to participate in a two-week interfaith exchange project and as I was previously a student from an Islamic school, they thought I would make a suitable candidate to represent the Muslim faith. The cohort that arrived from South Africa consisted of young people, who were around the same age as I, largely from the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and then other folk or no religions. It is during this encounter that I met with Jewish people for the very first time, and they were four people, Adam, Talia, Gabriella and their cohort leader, Marlene. I remember seeing them for the first time in the icebreaker mixer and how I was hesitant and nervous to approach them and talk to them, and I felt that I was not alone in this as it was also shared by my Muslim counterparts from the British cohort. Initially, I wasn't aware of who was Jewish or who was not, because the appearances of the Jewish ladies - Gabriella, Talia and Marlene - were not anything out of the ordinary, but I understood that Adam was Jewish because of the kippah that he wore on his head, a visible indicator of his Jewish faith. Eventually, as the evening dragged on, I got into a conversation at the beverages table with Adam, Gabriella and Tao, over a discussion about which biscuits were best to eat with a cup of tea (which are Digestive biscuits of course), and thereafter, the ice was broken and we enjoyed a lovely first introduction. Amongst the Muslims in the South African cohort were also young people from different ethnic backgrounds, such as, Egyptians, South Africans and Sudanese backgrounds, something that I had not come across before as I was more familiar with Muslims from South-Asian backgrounds, like myself. After my first day of this unique experience, I just knew that the next two weeks were going to be very interesting.

During the two weeks of the interfaith exchange, we spent time together taking part in various group activities and team exercises to bond together as a group. This was truly a

life-changing experience for me as the programme offered a wider perspective on the realities from different angles. The first part of the programme helped me to develop greater respect and flourish friendships with people who were entirely different to me. I found myself engaging with people beyond their outer appearance, their ethnic tags and their religious identity and connecting with them through deep interactions and common understandings. I remember thinking how the Jewish participants were not what I had expected at all, rather, they were friendly and kind, especially Talia who was a gentle person and oozed warmth, and Marlene, who was an elderly lady in her 60s with a passion for interfaith work, my expectations exceeded far from my preconceptions of Jewish people. Even more fascinating was my friendship with Gabriella, another Jewish participant, who explained to me that she was a secular Jew and taught me many things about the Jewish culture in South Africa.

It was my first time hearing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the 'other' perspective.

The latter part of the exchange programme was spent on a residential trip at a cabin site, this naturally led to more contact time and deeper conversations. Inevitably, the elephant in the room was addressed, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One evening, during free time, I found the majority of the participants were huddled around the Egyptian-South African participant, Khabir and Adam engrossed in a deep discussion while everyone else listened attentively. In this discussion, I observed a calm and healthy debate about the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. As an Egyptian and a neighbour to Palestine, Khabir felt very strongly that Israel's occupation of the land was unjust and unacceptable. I discovered that, although the Jewish participants lived in South Africa, they had strong connections with Israel and were supportive of their religious homeland. Adam offered the argument of the Jewish plight and the need for a homeland that left millions of Jews vulnerable following the Second World War. At one point he admitted sorrow for all of the victims in the conflict, including Palestinians and Israelis and expressed a point about the Two-States Solution, as an ideal win-win option for both parties. This astonished me as I realised that this was my first time hearing about the conflict from the 'other' perspective. The debate ended with an open understanding and a respectful handshake.

The interfaith exchange programme ended after two weeks in the UK, and the friendships continued. A year after their first visit, my college arranged for us to visit the South African group in Cape Town, to continue the second part of the programme. A notable moment during this part of the programme was when Gabriella and I stayed up through one night and engaged in a conversation. At one point she struck me with a key question that ultimately challenged my way of thinking. She asked me, 'How is Talia so convinced her faith is the right path, and you're also convinced your faith is the right path?' Talia was a very religious Jew, observant of her daily prayers and Shabbat, compared to Gabriella, who described herself as a secular Jew. This was a valid question and one that I found myself unable to answer at that time. I don't think I ever considered my religion as 'the right path' or one that claims the monopoly of the truth, but I know some religious people who do. She asked me many questions that challenged me and inspired me to search for answers. This moment stayed with me, even after I returned home, as I committed myself to learn and understand my religion to get some answers.

That summer, I was so immersed in learning about my religion that I became almost obsessed with it. It was like understanding Islam with a fresh pair of eyes and re-learning my religion.

Taking the initiative to discover my faith, rather than taking a passive approach as I did before was refreshing. My commitment took me as far as enrolling myself on a two-year course on Islamic Science. The course involved a thorough study of the Qur'an and the Prophetic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and the jurisprudence of Islamic laws. Following this experience, I felt reconnected with my faith and I felt it was thanks to Gabriella for instigating me with the initial discovery. This ultimately inspired me to encourage others to be open about interfaith exchanges, as I believe you can only learn more about yourself and stimulate personal growth when you engage in dialogue with people who think differently from you.

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And thus, began my interfaith journey. A year later, I went to university to study for a bachelor's degree in Religion, Culture and Society, with the hope of using my knowledge and experience to create more dialogue about multi-faith communities, urging other people to get involved in cohesion work and ultimately addressing issues related to religious intolerance and prejudice in the UK.

My first MJC experience was in December 2018 in France, when at the time I was working as a project leader for the Interfaith Forum. I initially applied for the conference from a Facebook ad and thought about how this would be beneficial for me as someone involved with interfaith work. My second MJC experience was in December 2019 in Austria. As we hardly had any Jewish people living in Blackburn and I had not met any more Jewish people since I had returned from the South Africa trip a couple of years prior, I was intrigued to get involved with MJC to understand Judaism and know more about Jewish people. Since conversations about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remained a sensitive topic in my community, I was hoping my participation at the MJC would provide me with a greater understanding to help address the ignorance and antisemitism that was prevalent in my own community.

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My whole MJC experience was essential in helping me consolidate that shift from ignorance to being informed. I met hundreds of people through MJC, they were Muslims, Jews and people from different religious beliefs, but it was my first opportunity to meet some Jews and Muslims who were living in Palestine and Israel. The MJC was a great opportunity to exchange ideas, strategies, and experiences and turn tensions into opportunities for peace and joint action. The fact that we spent time living together in one place offered the intimacy to observe how 'the other' worship and live, and also gave the chance to exchange honest conversations. I remember not knowing anybody from my first MJC experience, but some people already knew each other previously, possibly from previous MJC events. I was in

awe of watching Muslim and Jewish friends from different countries reunite and being so pleased to see each other again. I was in even more admiration to witness a couple, a Muslim woman with her Jewish partner, in their traditional head-coverings, her wearing a headscarf and him wearing a kippah, denoting their commitments to their respective faiths.

A notable memory from my first MJC trip was my friendship with a man called Yair. I remember how when we first introduced ourselves and I asked where he was from, he said 'Israel', and I responded saying 'Oh, so you're an *Israeli Jew* Jew from Israel?', and I immediately felt embarrassed of my ignorance and for my abruptness. However, Yair was very polite and laughed it off, as if he was not surprised by my outburst and just said, 'Yes, I'm a real Jew from *Israel*, Israel.' This later just became a joke between us, and I appreciate how comfortable I was in his presence. He also informed me how he was a former soldier in the Israel Defence Army (IDF), and this perked my interest even further. Yair was a friendly, family man with kind eyes, and I couldn't imagine attaching all the negative connotations and stories that I heard and read about the IDF, with this man. Throughout MJC, Yair and I had several conversations about our lives, about our religions, about our jobs and also about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I shared many of my personal frustrations regarding the conflict and he listened openly and respectfully, and I also offered the same. All in all, we are still great friends to this day, even though we share different beliefs and opinions.

What I took away from the experience was a greater appreciation for differences, honest friendships and a more open mindset. I know that I may not change my mind about how I feel about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, however, I have learnt to respect differences of opinions and learnt to distinguish that not all Jews are the same and not all Israelis are the same. Another thing I appreciated about the MJC was the safe space that was provided to allow open dialogues and exchange difficult questions, not only about 'the other' but also understanding my Muslim counterparts from different parts of the world. I thought I was less ignorant because of my previous interfaith experiences and also because of my educational background in (BA) Religion, Culture & Society. However, the whole experience was an eye-opener and taught me that people from different faiths and backgrounds are humans first. My interaction humanised people who were previously dehumanised by preconceived ideas. It also allowed me to exercise active listening, empathy and consider viewpoints that were different to my own. And finally, it helped me to appreciate and understand how we are more similar than dissimilar, and when we leave politics and religion out of the way, then we are just people and friends who like the same music, who enjoy great food, and who love to laugh and dance together. My involvement made me determined to share my experiences with my own peers when I returned home, with the hope of inspiring them to be more respectful towards other religious communities. It also made me confident to challenge friends and family who were antisemitic and who made ignorant passes about Jewish people.

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There's a common misconception in interfaith work that if you engage with people who hold different beliefs, then there's a risk that you could compromise your own faith or identity, and I think this couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, the deeper the engagement that I have had with 'the other' the further it has reinforced my identity as a Muslim. This is maybe because, through the interactions and dialogue, I have had the opportunity to explore my own religion in a greater deal and respect my religious values. Also, mixing with other religious people inspired me to share my faith with others, especially because in most interfaith events I have been one of the few Muslim women present wearing a head covering and therefore, this invites questions from other people who want to understand my commitment to my faith. Sharing my faith in this way strengthened my identity as a Muslim, as I was keen to dispel any preconceived ideas and stereotypes that people previously held about Muslims.

It is not fair to make assumptions and negative connotations about a religious group without ever knowing the members directly.

I would encourage young Muslims in Europe today to try and engage in dialogue with people from the 'other side' – whoever the 'other side' maybe for that person. Sometimes, we build a negative perception of a certain community based on ideas we pick up from friends and family, media and the internet. However, it is not fair to make assumptions and negative connotations about a religious group without ever knowing the members directly. We, as Muslims, are fully aware of what ignorance can do as many Muslims are vulnerable, and many have become victims, to the taunts of islamophobia. However, you must enter a cross-dialogue exchange with an honest heart, an open mind and with full integrity. So, if you're ever granted an opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue, then take it because you will learn a great deal about yourself, as well as about others. The driving

structures across Europe need to bring all of their tools to the table to address the social tensions and conflicts in key areas of Europe and provide instruments for social cohesion. More investments need to be in education, social action and cross-cultural dialogue. Such opportunities can allow more people, especially the youth, to make practical contributions and develop positive inter-communal relationships.



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Daniela

My name is Daniela. I am originally from Frankfurt, Germany and currently live in Berlin. I feel like I was born with an inherent interest in the wider world, its different cultures, nature and people and it's what I truly feel passionate about. During high school I left Germany for the U.S. to spend a year at a Jewish boarding school. After coming back and graduating high school, I "left" again briefly: I wanted to get to know Israel better, so I attended a two-month language course at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I continued to do my bachelor's degree in Governance and Public Policy at the University of Passau, Germany, including a semester abroad at the University of Warsaw. My mother is from Poland and I wanted to see how the young generation of Poland was like. I also wanted to explore the Jewish, (and ultimately my own) history of the place. After finishing my degree in the small University town of Passau, I wanted to try myself at conquering the diversity and buzz London had to offer. There, I did a M.Sc. in International Public Policy at University College London. My following destination was Brussels, where I started my professional life with a 5-month traineeship at the European Parliament. I stayed on to work at a liberal German political foundation whose main mission is policy analysis and political education. After three years in Brussels I left for Berlin to continue working at the foundation's head office, in the field of political communication, media policy, press- and media freedom – where I worked until recently.

Family history and being a minority have shaped and influenced my ties to Judaism significantly and early on.

One of the things I appreciate most in my life is a sense of community. A strong community is a safety net in an uncertain world, a place of belonging and a place from where one can start helping one another. In a world where communication is short lived, I value strong human connections. To me, these connections start with being present, listening and being attentive to the environment and its needs. I believe that these values encourage people to bring out the best in themselves. Values such as loyalty, kindness and a can-do attitude resonate strongly with me and are my guiding principles in life. For this reason I currently spend my free time volunteering as a treasurer/ member of the board of directors of the non-profit organization Hillel Deutschland, as well as helping out elderly people in the Jewish community of Berlin. I'm also part of the organizing team of this year's Muslim-Jewish Festival 2021 in Berlin. The Muslim-Jewish dialogue and building of alliances is very dear to my heart. My other hobbies include food (cooking/baking, eating and of course sharing food!), hosting friends, hiking, yoga and travelling.

Generally speaking, being Jewish feels to me like a hug from a warm cashmere sweater on a cold and wet autumn day. Of course it does not always feel like that (even the nicest sweater can be a burden in the summer heat). I live a secular life, my family even more so, but family history and being a minority have shaped and influenced my ties to Judaism significantly and early on. As a teenager I started to become active in my local Jewish youth group and I went regularly to Jewish summer/winter camps. These interactions and Jewish education have definitely strengthened my connection to Judaism. Growing up and over the years my interest in

getting to know Jews from different backgrounds has grown and so has my interest in what it means to be Jewish. Often I would ask myself “what do I have in common with some people that coincidentally happen to be Jewish as well?” I am yet to find a final answer to this. For now I can pinpoint a shared history, trauma and experiences as a common denominator, as well as community, belonging and a safe space. This of course does not always hold true (especially not with everyone). However these are some of my anchoring points of connection to Judaism.

Before I met with Muslims, to be honest, I did not feel anything in particular towards them. I had Muslim classmates at school whom I’d see every day and would occasionally engage with in my Ethics class (Muslim, Jewish and some non-religiously affiliated students were exempt from Christian religious studies) - but that was about it. Both my interaction, as well as my thinking about Muslims was very limited. I felt indifferent. In retrospect,

being indifferent towards another minority group that makes around 6 percent of the population in Germany, might not be particularly appropriate. But I think the lack of interaction and interest came from living separate and different lives, just being in parallel worlds. It was a black box that at first, maybe also because I was very young, did not feel like I needed or had the possibility to open. Growing up, I wasn’t told anything in particular about Muslims but being a teenager in a post-9/11 world did of course influence my view on them. Learning about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and threats of terror attacks made me anxious towards “the other”. I never felt any sense of hate or dislike. Early on I understood that there are so many different Muslims that surely not all of them were bad people. But it did definitely manifest a distant feeling and maybe a bit of fear towards them. In hindsight I realize that it was mostly fear from the unknown and the imagination that “they” probably all hate Jews.

Being a teenager in a post-9/11 world and learning about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and threats of terror attacks made me anxious towards “the other”.

The first time I actually engaged and really met Muslim people was during my master’s degree in London. I met some wonderful people and I started to become good friends with them. I was not only getting to know them as persons, but began to learn about their religion, customs and spiritual experiences of being a Muslim. It was fascinating. I encountered many differences of course, but actually I found out about so many similarities. I saw their strong bond towards their own heritage (just like mine, to my heritage) and many shared experiences of “being the other”. Both my friends and me understood what it was like to being the only student in class with different holidays for example, or the discomfort and hurt encountering racist or anti-Semitic comments among classmates. A particularly transformative moment was during Ramadan. My friends took me along to the University’s ‘Ramadan Tent’, where all students were invited for Iftar and I had the possibility to engage and learn about the holiday. I felt comfortable asking questions and getting to know religious practices. It was a welcoming experience. My previous imagination that I might be met with suspicion or simply will not be welcomed did not hold true. This moment sparked my interest to dive deeper.

Becoming close friends with Muslims during my master’s degree ignited my interest to further learn about Islam, to deepen the conversation and explore the relationship between Jews

Just being friends with Muslims did not automatically lead to the very core and “hard issues”. This was the main reason that drove me to apply for the MJC.

and Muslims. However, just being friends with Muslims did not automatically lead to the very core and “hard issues”. This was the main reason that drove me to apply for the MJC. I wanted to find a way to get to know Muslims and their viewpoints and to understand why prejudices between both groups exist. I had no idea what that could look like, but I felt that through a platform like the MJC, this could be my chance to get closer to it. And it really did. Learning from the other participants, both Muslims and Jews, was really eye-opening for me, as I got to see the world through their lenses. Having a platform for guided conversations was so helpful, because besides the many fun conversations we had, there were also the “uncomfortable” ones, also within our own religious group. I expected difference in views along political or religious lines, but was surprised to see the differences between diaspora and Israeli Jews, especially with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for example. It was helpful to create awareness towards issues that might be sensitive to others and to learn how to tackle these situations. There were a wide range of different opinions that were met with utter respect, acceptance and curiosity. It should be natural, but it was almost unbelievable to me that something like this was possible. The “AHA” effects were not tied to learning something about Islam, or “the mysterious other”. The experience of the conference as a whole was an important and humbling life lesson that helped me consolidate an openness to the world and people different from me. This experience was truly life changing.

I think one of the most remarkable experiences of the MJC was getting to know the life stories, contexts and circumstances of the other participants’ lives. It was truly inspiring. There were many “don’t judge a book by its cover”-lessons throughout the conference and a lot of stepping out of my own comfort zone. Learning for example from women wearing a hijab what it means to wear one, how navigating through this world looks like or how they view a ban of wearing the hijab, were “lessons” no book could have explained to me. The MJC taught me as well how important safe spaces are, especially for people from minority groups. I always felt heard and understood by the other participants and vice versa – it felt very comfortable, just like the cashmere sweater I described earlier. It demonstrated to me how important it is, despite the differences, to look for common ground in order to fight together against injustices and discrimination. I’ve also realized that this does not necessarily mean agreeing on everything. The conversations at the MJC were proof that disagreeing or having different viewpoints *can* be constructive and they *can* be met with respect. Most importantly: the MJC has given me lifelong friends all over the world, for which I will be forever thankful.

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Before I went to the MJC my Jewish identity as such was pretty strong. I think it’s because I felt comfortable in my own skin and towards my Judaism that I could get out of my

comfort zone to experience this conference the way I did. The experience at the MJC demonstrated to me how important it is that we need to be at peace with ourselves in order to make peace with other people, especially people different to ourselves. The deep engagement with the other participants has reinforced my belief in the power of listening, kindness and human connection. So one of the messages I'd have for young Jews is: Get active (also physically, but I mean politically and socially! ;-)) and be curious!

Be curious and get to know the issues of other minorities and their struggle, even if this means hard work to overcome fear, prejudice, differences and your own ego.

Anti-democratic forces, discrimination and violence towards minorities are on the rise in Europe. It's never been more pressing to be attentive to what is happening around us. We need to make our voices heard within society, because living in a democracy is not self-evident. This is also the reason why we need to build alliances. Be curious and get to know the issues of other minorities and their struggle, even if this means hard work to overcome fear, prejudice,

differences and your own ego. Listen and try to find common ground! I also think that the minority communities in Europe could definitely step up their efforts in building alliances. For this, more openness, tolerance and willingness to hear the other communities would help in bridging the differences. It would also be helpful to create platforms or opportunities to meet and get to know each other. I think one step into this direction are smaller scale initiatives, such as the Muslim-Jewish Festival in Berlin planned for November 2021, that are seeking to create common platforms of exchange.



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Nassr

“People are of two kinds, either your Brothers in faith or your equals in humanity.”

Imam Ali as.

I am a Religious counsellor, activist, Migration-Gender & Human rights independent consultant and FORB Trainer. Born and raised in Morocco in a traditionalist Sunni Muslim Arab-Amazigh family, I had the chance to grow in an intergenerational environment rich of strong cultural norms, conservative religious values and a vibrant intellectual atmosphere. I grew attending simultaneously the quranic school (Madrassa) and the private school for almost 4 years and that experience impacted permanently my unconscious self and my faith formation. My relationship to religion has undergone multiple steps, my spirituality has been snaking through diverse paths in a continuous reformation and I believe this is a lifetime mission as spiritual growth should expand beyond conventional labels and boxes. Religion challenged and still challenges my life philosophy, my everyday self-critical thoughts, my clothing, eating, celebrating, mourning, relationships' habits and attitudes. Faith still contributes to many of my ethical and aesthetical choices. It shaped and still shapes how I grow and how I love, how I practice and how I study theology and question it. At the same time, I give myself the right to deconstruct, to rethink, to reshape my faith expressions and values, to shake them and redesign the normativity and the boundaries, the core and the peripheral from within.

Religion challenged and still challenges my life philosophy, my everyday self-critical thoughts, my clothing, eating, celebrating, mourning, relationships' habits and attitudes.

My road to faith and my journey from inside is complex but here we go for a small overview. I was born Sunni Muslim as almost everyone around me. My early interests in politics made me attracted to “Social Salafism” where I found a sense of political activism and shared community's strength before losing excitement as I couldn't deal with much dogmatism at my early age, especially the fact that I didn't and couldn't live with so much authority, hierarchical rules. I found myself after a while out of religious practice and frustrated by religion in general. At that period, I had other giant existential question marks in terms of sexuality, God's existence, social norms, gender, religious freedom, cultural taboos and religious practices. All contradictory self debates and questionings, heavy and spinning mind-challenges. I am glad I made this journey safely! I then embraced later on a Moroccan Sufi order and it was a peaceful smooth introductory space to my future conversion to Shia spirituality.

My first exposure to identity self-debate started during this early childhood. I remember endless debates with my friends about the origins of Moroccans, the majority-minority discussions, Amazigh-Arab identities, French colonization, Amazigh resistance, pre-post Muslim presence in North Africa, Jewish roots of Morocco and the very dominant religious education that was challenging our young rebellious spirits. We grew up trying to locate ourselves in this complex history and to find our self-positionality. Moroccan society seems to be very

homogeneous or portrayed by the official narrative as so. However I was never comfortable nor with the “Plural society concept” nor with this “Standardized unified society-identity style”. And even if it’s not obvious for the outsider, there is much to say about how Moroccan society lacks religious diversity and effective pluralism. Furthermore, no one ever speaks about the institutional racism and the alarming absence of Amazigh history and language in the whole educational and political system. I still reminisce how we were categorizing, othering and acting upon our identity affiliations. I recall memories when “Us and Them” was the leading process of our school activities. Unconsciously, we as kids, acted upon the pent-up emotions of our society. Social and cultural labelling manifested through collective stories, playful teasing, jokes and weirdly via school curricula. The Amazigh/Arab or Black/White labels nurtured a sense of otherness and were always overshadowing the belief of uniformity of our moroccanness. In hindsight, I don’t think it is a traumatizing experience for me or my friends but that is how power dynamics play in different cultural, political, social and religious settings and one should be aware that the process can reach more critical stages of exclusion, discrimination and othering.

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Talks and stories of identity were always part of my upbringing. Being Amazigh meant that I belonged to the whole Amazigh history and geographic era. Being muslim meant that I belong to the worldwide muslim community. Being Moroccan, meant that I hold a polyculture made of pagan, Christian and Jewish cultures and faith traditions. Being Arab meant that I belong to the Arab nation in its complex expressions. And this last point shaped my opinion of the “new Jews”. The “old Jews” were the people I knew in Morocco, who were as Moroccan as me, they were friends and family and I have never actually questioned their moroccanness. They shared my space and shared their daily lives. Sometimes, I actually forgot they were jews. We shared religious celebrations, we ate the same food, we shared childhood memories and adulthood dreams. We had built our own togetherness, our own commonality, our own story and I didn’t need to look at them through my over-emotionalized opinion of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. My Jewish Moroccan friends weren’t politically involved in such topics and actually their moroccanness was much stronger than their identification with Israel or any other politicized Jewish dynamics. We essentially talked about Jerusalem and its holiness and their relatives who immigrated to the Holy Land.

My feeling was different towards Palestine. As Moroccan, Palestine holds or used to have a tremendous sanctity in my religious and political beliefs. We inherited Palestinian history as part of our Arab collective history and Muslim collective consciousness. We have been brought up keeping Palestine as part of our own identity to an extent of inseparability. Our transnational solidarity with Palestine is due to many historical, religious, spiritual, cultural factors. I will briefly mention 2 reasons. The first one is the sacredness of the region and Jerusalem which played and plays a vital role in our religious identity. The second point was pan arabism. It was or used to be a very important identity-influencer as its effects were quite complex on our upbringing. In spite of my very deep Amazigh sense of belonging, this panarab education was connecting us to a mythical identity and we couldn’t see the world through different prisms.

That is why Meeting the “new jews” in Europe was for me a challenge and it shook my very ontological beliefs. Indeed, in 2007 I decided to continue my master studies in France and joined different human rights and charity activities where I met the “new Jews”. Some with Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian origins, other real “white european Ashkenazi jews” and each encounter was a big event! I remember I was once invited to a Shabbat in the 19th district in Paris. When I came into my friends’ apartment, there were only three people as many other guests couldn’t make it. I was really confused. It was my first time celebrating Shabbat in Europe. Our host was a mixed Ashkenazi-Sephardic artist woman and the other guest, a Sephardic ex-soldier freshly arrived from Israel. Well, It was a weird setting. I was invited to participate in the Kiddush prayer and then to say an Islamic prayer afterwards. I was getting even more confused. Actually, I was in the middle of a complete transgressive inclusive Shabbat Kiddush around vegetarian food and grape juice. I am writing these words right now and can’t stop laughing. I remember we had very tense discussions afterwards about identity, religion, zionism, north african traditions, Paris, French people and food ethics etc. This Shabbat was the beginning of a long list of other syncretic Shabbats and encounters that broadened my views, shook some beliefs, empowered my perceptions, opened my eyes on my own relationship with my faith and its expressions. I was already engaged in a spiritual cycle and was questioning my Moroccan religious education and Sunni Islam in general.

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Being transgressive is my inner nature and I couldn’t avoid challenging myself on my binary analysis of the world. It can be so easy and comfortable to live with pre-established convictions, with ready-made assessments, nationality-based and ethnic-based beliefs. I believe everyone should break this ice of inherited “education-indoctrination” and should find a way to self-liberation from all these barriers and ceilings of binarism. We can’t see the wide universe with a binary bias. I thought at some point that I should try an interfaith meeting and I was wondering how an interfaith education can solve some of our daily faith-geopolitical related problems. Interreligious dialogue was for me a way to implement my evolving understanding of others and I reckon I was looking for a challenge. In France, interfaith dialogue isn’t really as developed as elsewhere in Europe or Africa or even the Middle East. But I was determined to give myself a try.

I was differently involved in many mainstream Christian-Muslim initiatives driven partly by my religious institution early 2011 but I will tell you a very interesting story. I never imagined feeling God’s light in minority groups’ circles or thinking about God’s mercy while listening to stories of marginality, exclusion, solidarity, love and social justice. I started interfaith meetings in the feminist-queer movements. It was the first ever proper interfaith setting and the first ever workshop on personal testimonies of queer people of faith and how marginality and denial of subjecthood in the religious communities played a central role in shaping a new religious identity of queer people. Interfaith solidarity between marginalized groups was truly an eye-opening and unique experience for me. Marginalization alienates subjecthood and self-agency, challenges faith,

questions belief in God but it allows people living in marginality to be empowered somehow. The level of spiritual connectedness of people experiencing discrimination, objectification, exclusion and denied recognition or equality, is much different and much more vibrant. It requires a lot of strength and self-confidence to face and/or deconstruct the normative societal injunctions on freedom and self-agency. I felt this power in migrant-feminist-queer-antiracist groups especially when their activism was inspired and led by faith-convictions. In these groups, people were sharing much more than political work, they were sharing an immense quest for social justice, taken from them by family, society, political power and religious institutions. They were navigating between essentialization and self-representation behind the lines of their respective holy scriptures. They decided in the name of God, not be alive only, but to Exist. I think that conviction is very legitimate. In these circles, I built my strongest friendships worldwide and I had very life-changing memories and I will cite here my very first experience of lifting and dressing the Torah at a synagogue in Argentina in an inclusive interfaith service with my very dear friend Franck. I felt honoured and really blessed by the love and kindness of the Rabbi. It was so spontaneous and pleasantly surprising for both of us leading these religious meetings with such a level of spiritual closeness.

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I have a different story with the Muslim-Jewish Conference. The starting point was a very official meeting in Paris with different activists and change makers, when I heard a guy vivaciously talking about the MJC. I was wondering if such “Thing” could ever exist! Well that guy became gradually a very dear brother, Rafael. He was the entrance card to my MJC journey which was and still is a sparkling bubble and a transformative tool of my mindset. My first MJC

I can still breathe the pain and the collective experience of our remembrance services at the genocide site of Srebrenica and the labour camp of Sachsenhausen.

was a radical interfaith conference and shook my very deep certainties and beliefs. Who could have imagined that I will be putting in order the setting of the shabbat-service? When my dear Alexander came in and asked if I could be part of the working team on religious services, I was first completely shocked and speechless. Then I realized he was truly asking me to brainstorm on how we could organize an inclusive Shabbat service. I felt honoured and also worried being put in the middle of all these Jews discussing their rules for prayers and food. It was one of the most heart and mind changing events in my MJC’s memories. The year after, I was part of the religious team with Alexander and I had officially the task to organize the religious services and activities during the conference. I still remember the discussions with Alexander on the most inclusive “multidenominational” format and type of the Siddur to be used. I

still hear our laughs while reminding ourselves that the conference religious dimension will rely on how a Shia muslim and an orthodox Jew would collaborate in complete loving brotherhood. I still reminisce about these long moments with Yunus, Basya, Amira, Alina, Alexander, Rachel, Meytal and Shayna trying to find the best way to make the prayer room inclusive with different

spaces so that every participant would feel comfortable praying, meditating and celebrating. Trying to find the Qibla and the Mizrach, trying to contact Kosher and Halal food providers while ensuring the conference venue kitchens and vegetarian food are all respecting religious requirements. I can still breathe the pain and the collective experience of our remembrance services at the genocide site of Srebrenica and the labour camp of Sachsenhausen.

At the MJC, we haven't invented interfaith but we have reshaped it, spiritualized it, made it more inclusive, more participatory and more heart-opening. Beyond monotonous official statements you can hear in a mainstream conference of world religious leaders, we actually succeeded in making interfaith transform ordinary people into powerful ambassadors. We even made the impossible talks on intrafaith dialogue more real, more reachable and thus unique. MJC allowed these precious encounters between diverse Muslim and Jewish sects. It was the first time for many to meet a Shia or an Ahmadi, a women rabbi or a Black Jewish, a queer Orthodox or a trans Muslim convert, a Palestinian Christian or an Israeli Arab peace activist. MJC allowed the meeting of art and faith and facilitated discussions on unimaginable topics in genuine ways. I would not exaggerate to say that MJC redesigned how interfaith work should look like and how it should be implemented. We have created the unity while respecting and cherishing our respective religious-philosophical-cultural traditions and life choices. We celebrate the uniqueness of each person and make our serious sensitive disagreements an experience of respect and love. We have designed a unique bubble where you don't have to hide behind labels and political views.

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At the MJC, even awkward discussions were metamorphosed into engaging and mature talks where we listened to each other, learned from each other, jumped out of our own truths and allowed room for empathy, and a degeopoliticised, desectarianised stance on struggles and identities. Obviously everyone has their own political views on the Israeli-Arab conflict and what is happening in that region. Everyone has views on regional powers like Iran, Arab states, Gulf countries or Lebanon. Everyone may hold different understandings on concepts such as citizenship, zionism, equality, colonization, oppression, self-defense, settlements, security, safety, terrorism, peace or apartheid. This mixture is so toxic that it should be unpacked in a complete demotionalized setting. In Europe we suffer a lot from this systematic connexion made with middle east politics as soon as we enter a Jewish-Muslim space. But at the MJC, we refuse to be the battlefield of any political or religious settling of scores. Many of the jewish participants support Palestinian rights, they are involved in human rights and peace building work on the grassroots level. No one can reduce jewish identity to Zionism and Israel's policies. On the other hand, no one can freeze the Palestinian identity into official political parties' definitions and actions. So we weren't able to write UN peace agreements, not even our countries' policies on this ongoing Middle Eastern pandora box but we were, against all odds, brave and dreamful enough to impact the hearts and minds of the 1000 members of our big MJC alumni family. I

think we can be proud of it. Now, the journey continues, with many tribulations and difficulties but with great hope and interconvictional will.

Interfaith solidarity, dialogue, coexistence, friendship, common work and common goals aren't marketing slogans or any strategy to trigger a process of religious identities' dilution.

I would like to be clear, interfaith solidarity, dialogue, coexistence, friendship, common work and common goals aren't marketing slogans or any strategy to trigger a process of religious identities' dilution or a false politeness to allies who are like-minded. Breaking down stereotypes is the first session we organize at MJC, imagine one second the amount of stereotypes we can have towards one another. As a Shia Muslim, you can imagine how much fun it can be to announce my identity to a participant who was looking forward to meet the perfect muslim! (laughs)... I can assure you that on the last day, we had a very emotional farewell! At MJC, we do cherish and value our very specific strong personal and/or religious identities. We do engage in very hard talks and disagreements. We acknowledge the need for respecting our alterities. We challenge each other on intellectual, theological and spiritual beliefs. Through

these interactions, I learn more about Jewish laws and spirituality while magnifying my connectedness to my complex Shia identity, my connexion to the holy scriptures and other sacred texts in the diversity of their enlightening theological, gnostic manifestations. My interfaith journey had given substance to my faith and conversion road to Shiism as I conversely tailored interfaith work and beliefs through my Shia heart, ethical compass and its hermeneutical loop. Interreligious work is empowering but it cannot avoid tackling discriminations, social injustices, xenophobia and hate speech at the societal or institutional level. Interfaith work should serve higher purposes and build a common ground towards addressing social justice beyond our identities' diverse affiliations. I personally think we should first be loyal to our humane values before any ideological affiliation.

On a European level, the rise of populist discourse, neonazi nationalism and xenophobia should bring discussions to this European level because we, Muslims and Jews, have to tackle the outspoken islamophobic, antisemitic and racist narratives and policies targeting our visibility, identity, coexistence and social cohesion. This is where we should invest and locate our efforts for a better inclusive society. In hindsight, as far as I am concerned, I think that Arab nationalism was and is still an illusional flag that serves only "Arab Unity Myth" which hinders a critical Middle Eastern identity and the organic consciousness' construction of our generation. I believe the ethnic, religious and cultural nationalisms that are enshrined into collective imaginary identities in the arab – Muslim or Jewish communities are dangerous and could lead to a polarization. Also, confining jewishness, Judaism, arabness, muslimness or Islam into a political geographical state project is a vicious circle that takes away the dream of peace and a transcendental cross-cultural-religious-ethnic Identity. I believe everyone should transcend their own mindset, there is much to learn outside of your own self's truths. I will quote Imam Ali - peace be upon him: *"Your remedy is within you, but you do not sense it. Your sickness is from you, but you do not perceive it. You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire Universe. You are indeed the Evident Book, by whose alphabet the Hidden becomes Manifest. Therefore, you have no need to look beyond*

yourself. What you seek is within you, if only you reflect. " I do believe in the power of engaging ourselves into meaningful, challenging, genuine and positive-driven attitudes. Let us surrender to the power of honest words, of self-discovery, of self-criticism, of empathy and love. We will then be able to change our views, our hard-line opinions, our inherited truths and find a balanced critical area where we can all meet and build imperfectly togetherness beyond our other affiliations.

In the name of the most merciful and loving, peace be upon prophet Muhammad and his immaculate family and upon you all, wonderers and future travellers of your own journey.



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Eliana

It is never easy to try and describe who you are...Humans are complex beings, but they are also a simple mix of identities. Yet, answering the question 'Who are you' is still one of the hardest tasks for me. I am Eliana, Italian, 28 years old, project manager. This is the very simple answer of course. I am also partially Israeli, I am Jewish, I am agnostic, I have a significant amount of Arab blood in my veins too; I am a left winger who loves the free market, I am a woman, and still very much a daughter. While I feel more Italian than anything else, I have been living abroad for over 10 years now, and all this time spent across different countries has heavily impacted the way I live my life, but also the way I feel. Not only am I an Italian who now loves Starbucks, I am also a person who finds it easier to write in English than in my native language, someone who often forgets it's Shabbat on Friday, but I also love to wear my grandma's Magen David across my neck. I lived in Israel, Palestine, France and now I have been enjoying the incredible city that London is for almost 4 years.

I have always had a very weird relation with Judaism, one of love and respect, but also of rejection and rebellion. I don't come from a religious background and I was not brought up in a practicing or traditional family. My parents are proud atheists, they believe in being open minded, in making their own traditions, in following only the rules that feel right to them. While their independent thinking has always been a reason of admiration for me, it also translated in a bit of solitude growing up. Italy is a heavily Catholic country and it's attached to its centennial traditions. Judaism stands on rituals, habits, routines. My family believed that you make your own rituals, you spend time together because you want to, not because it's that day in the calendar when you should see your relatives. My father's job has always been very demanding and forced him to travel a lot, often enough during the holidays. That meant that, while for people around me Christmas, Rosh HaShana etc were 'sacred days', times that must be spent at home together, in my own family we were hotel-hopping around European capitals.

My grandparents were proud Syrians, they spoke Arabic at home, they cooked kubbeh and malfouf, they listened to Fairouz and Umm Kulthum, but they also recited Kiddush and lit the Chanukiah.

The interesting side of this is that, while I definitely grew up with a lack of 'obvious' traditions, that does not mean that I did not feel Jewish when I was younger too. We did not keep kosher, we did not respect the rule of Shabbat, we did not make our leavened food disappear from the house during Passover. But we listened to Israeli news; we read Kafka, Salinger, Derrida; we watched Allen and Polanski. My grandparents were proud Syrians, they spoke Arabic at home, they cooked kubbeh and malfouf, they listened to Fairouz and Umm Kulthum, but they also recited Kiddush and lit the Chanukiah. All of this was Judaism for me. I felt deeply connected to what I considered a very important part of my identity, but in my own way, according to what I knew.

Moving to Israel at 18 to go to university changed my relationship with Judaism. I moved to a country where there was a very 'conservative' idea of what Judaism is and should look like, I confronted myself with a completely different way of approaching my culture, my religion, my identity. I started to feel like 'the wrong kind of Jew', and that made me more disconnected in a way. If my approach to Judaism was not the right one, then maybe I wasn't Jewish at all. 10 years after, thinking about the days when I felt that way makes me smile, because with aging you don't only get more wrinkles and worries, you also gain more awareness and self-confidence. But in my late teens I was not as sure of my values and feelings, and that made me doubt my connection to Judaism too.

My rocky relationship with Judaism was also linked to my political views. Yes, I am Jewish and Israeli. Politically left-lenient, I am extremely sort, I do not believe in connect to the need of dividing identity.... While we should all belong to one group, the for me is also the capacity of different, of compromising, of sharing, of disagreeing. political views are heavily a strong believer that the horrors our ancestors went behind wanting an equal, coexistence where differences negatively highlighted. realized that often enough my My dreams of healthy cooperation and solidarity between Jews and Arabs were seen as naivete, my total trust that dialogue and honesty can drive comprehension were brushed off, my doubts of the Zionistic values (or at least some of them) were judged as a betrayal to my own people. Questions started to fill my head...Can you be Jewish if you are not religious? Can you love your identity and also eat pork? Can you adore Israel and Jews, but also love Palestine, Islam, Arabic and multiculturalism? And, not to spoil what is about to come, but MJC was the answer to all of my doubts.

I am a strong believer that the history of our people and the horrors our ancestors went through, must be the engine behind wanting an equal, merit-based society, a world of coexistence where differences are celebrated rather than negatively highlighted.

though I have always been very against discriminations of any nationalism per se, I do not people based on their have the right to feel like we foundation of a healthy society living side by side with the discussing peacefully, of Moreover, my social and connected to my Judaism. I am history of our people and the through, must be the engine merit-based society, a world of are celebrated rather than However, during my BA, I peers did not share my values.

I recall days when I started to think that maybe there was no possible peace, that maybe we really are too different, that maybe we, as Jews, really get hate no matter what.

I never left Judaism, but I was not sure of what that meant to me. I also never really changed my political beliefs, but some events and maybe my surroundings had sometimes the power to make me doubt my commitment to cooperation and cohabitation, specifically with Muslims. If I close my eyes to the bitter memories of 2014, when because of the war in Israel I lost more than I wanted to admit, I also recall days when I started to think that maybe there was no possible peace, that maybe we really are too different, that maybe we, as Jews, really get hate no

matter what. There was not only the loss of people I loved, but also the mistrust from those who had known me for years, the rejection of my genuine pain for Israeli and Palestinians both, for Jews and Arabs. Some friends from Italy told me that, if I dared to feel any sorrow for Israel in that war, I was simply a bad human being. I felt no solidarity, no comprehension, no understanding that, who they saw as ruthless soldiers were my friends, my family, young men defending their own survival. I felt alone, judged and misunderstood. Usually, those emotions are the recipe for disaster and, in my own experience, 2014 was the first time in my life when I caressed the idea that I had been wrong in believing anything I had cherished until then.

Interestingly enough, that was also the year I was introduced to the Muslim Jewish Conference, and it felt just right to go and see for myself what it was all about. I still think it was perfect timing, because it helped me to remember what I stand for, what I stood for, but most importantly, why. I was never scared or really doubtful of Arabs and / or Muslims. I grew up hearing Arabic at home, my last name is very 'Arab', I used to call my grandmother 'teta', I have been drinking Sahlab all of my life. My father's first language is Arabic, I met Muslims from all over the Middle East since I was a child because of my parents' business, I traveled across Arab countries with my family, and I have always been eating baharat-seasoned food. However, while I had always been familiar with certain aspects of the Arab culture and of Islam, I still held my hidden prejudices. I was very weary of religious people, convinced that Islam did mean conservativisms somehow, which translated in only a partial understanding. To be clear, I always respected Muslims, I found their traditions and practices fascinating, I loved my dad's friend Gazi as an uncle. But deep down I thought that I was never going to meet one who I completely connected with, who would fully understand my 'progressive' mindset and my values, but also my political ideas. If we add the events of 2014, when a bloody war between Israel and Gaza clouded our existence, I also started to think that there was only gloom awaiting.

While I had always been familiar with certain aspects of the Arab culture and of Islam, I still held my hidden prejudices.

The Muslim Jewish Conference revealed to be one of the most incredible experiences I had in years, and not because I found myself to win most of my stereotypes, since I really did not have many, but because it allowed me to meet many like-minded people, who felt as confused as me, while being passionate the same way. I was surrounded by people from the most diverse backgrounds, who shared the same curiosity in getting to know each the real way, not just with superficial chit-chat. It was not just a group of young men and women who shared a religion or two, they were people who actually were open to disagree aloud. My first MJC can be thought about as a week of tasteful honesty, days when we spoke our mind even when what we had to say was not incredibly popular, hours dedicated to sharing our hopes and to creating something new. I met Muslims that were more secular than me (I did not think it was possible), I spent hours speaking to an Orthodox Rabbi on a personal level, after years of distance from a religious institution that I never felt like

I was surrounded by people from the most diverse backgrounds, who shared the same curiosity in getting to know each the real way, not just with superficial chit-chat.

‘mine’, and I did not feel judged, but rather respected. I opened up about the doubts and fears I had started to harbor and was not ashamed to admit my weaknesses (and anybody who knows me is aware that I hate to look vulnerable or unsure). I learned of people who had to run away from their country because of their belief in freedom, because they wanted to choose who to love and who to hate and, most importantly, because they wanted to decide which messages were theirs to share.

The conference made me also feel extremely lucky, of all the freedom I had always had, of the parents who brought me up as a free thinker, at least partially. I realized that I had taken for granted values such as freedom of speech, social liberty, but also that my beloved interest in getting to know others was not just my perk and skill, it was also a luxury. I truly believe that the stereotypes MJC helped me to win the most were those about myself. I had to confront the fact that I was not a better person than others because of my liberal views, I actually had the incredible chance in life of feeling free, of exploring my values, of going back and forth with my beliefs without any real consequence. It was groundbreaking, and incredibly humbling. However, the best part of the MJC, the life changing aspect, was the awareness that many more people out there felt like me, about their own religion and the one of the others, about their traditions and also about their limitations. The Muslim Jewish Conference became the community I wanted to find, even if I did not know. They were international and slightly lost people who wanted to share their talent and time to build bridges, to converse, to understand, to improve. We had different expertise, interests, financial possibilities and personalities, but we all deeply believed in the value of dialogue, of confrontation, of solidarity, and even today, with life getting busier and somehow more cynical, I never for a second lost the absolute trust in the wonderful people who were with me at the conference when I was just a participant, or of those who kept working on it the years after because, like me, they felt that leaving it behind was not an option.

One of my closest friends in life is a Tunisian girl I met at the conference. Her parents are extremely conservative and used to be very politically active. They probably never thought they would host an Israeli in their house, no matter what her political views are. I have been there for holiday three times already, my father calls them for Ramadan every year, and 5 years after the first time we met, I just spent one entire month in Turkey with her. This is the MJC magic.

Europe is built by us, those who make this continent. We are the ones who can work to make multicultural cooperation the most important of values.

I am now almost 30, I saw many more things in my life and met hundreds of people. Still, the MJC is the best project I have been a part of; it represents some of the best weeks of my life and it translates into some of the best people I know. If I think of the conference, the words that pop in my head are love, passion, struggle, faith, exhaustion and hard work: love for humans, no matter what; passion for social cohesion and support; struggle to convince the others; faith (in God, in the future and in life); exhaustion because some days it's not easy; and hard work because no matter what causes MJC stand for, they are always worth the fight. As Europeans we are very fortunate, because we can travel easily, we have the

opportunity to move around without much ado, and we are exposed to an enormous amount of news, sources, knowledge, opinions. We are allowed to be curious, we have the freedom to challenge what we hear, to change our mind, to explore. And I think this is the secret behind it all. I don't believe there is a way for Europe as an external entity to improve its intercommunal relations. I think Europe is built by us, those who make this continent. We are the ones who can work to make multicultural cooperation the most important of values. We should be curious, unafraid to explore, ready to get our hands dirty, willing to admit when we don't understand something, eager to learn more, respectful but also able to challenge what doesn't feel right.

As Jews, we should also be willing to put our own fears and complexes behind. We have a dismal history and sometimes a scary present, but remembering that there is another side to every story is the only real way to be ready to change things. Having a positive outlook to the improvements our community is benefitting from, while also being able to admit when we are wrong, is the foundation of a healthy society. We will never be really solid if we are not able to look holistically at who we are and what we stand for, even when it means going against our immediate interests. Society as I see it, does not survive on hedonism and individual gain, it thrives off compromise and solidarity. And while we are often the victims, I really don't think that it helps us to make pain and fear the base of who we are. This is what being Jewish is meant to be, and this is what I want to wish to every young Jew. May we all be brave, capable of admitting when the change needs to start from us, and ready to listen even when it burns. And, of course, may we all find our own MJC, wherever that might be.

Remembering that there is another side to every story is the only real way to be ready to change things.



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Dennis Sadiq

My Name is Dennis Sadiq. I am 30 years old, based in Berlin, Germany and work as a freelancer in non-formal education. I have a European name, an Arabic name and a Jewish surname. I was born in the GDR (East Germany), my parents were born and raised there. I have a White German background. Most members of my family fought on the wrong side during World War II. Through time, it became more and more important for me to recognize that part of my family's history and to be transparent about these facts, because many of my White German fellows are not willing to confront themselves with their own past. My step grandfather became an orphan in 1945. He was one of these orphan kids, playing in the ashes and ruins of post war Berlin. He was lucky though, because he was brought into an orphan house owned by a Jewish family around his neighbourhood after the Shoah. As many of these kids, he did not have any official papers or any relatives alive. Therefore the family who owned the orphan house named them after their own name. That is the short story of how this Jewish family name became part of my life.

“Dennis, you’re a big boy, you can do whatever you want but please avoid getting in touch with Jewish, Muslim, Black or Homosexual youngsters”.

It actually took me years of research because within my family this story is still untold. I grew up in a neo-Nazi family. My grandfather served in the Luftwaffe, while being a child; some of my relatives moved to Norway to be surrounded by the ‘Aryan race’. Every year on Christmas they used to visit the rest of the family in Germany and always brought me and my brother strange presents like the latest white power music record. Back in those days they tried to convert the young boy that I was into their ideology. When I was around 10, they would tell me things like “Dennis, you’re a big boy, you can do whatever you want but please avoid getting in touch with Jewish, Muslim, Black or Homosexual youngsters”. That was the “forbidden fruit” I was not allowed to taste. As a young kid, I did not think about questioning these kinds of values. I just accepted these ideas as righteous. So I started to look for friends who shared the same values at school.

Unfortunately far-right sentiments were rife in my school. Quickly, I got in contact with other right-wing influenced youngsters but at first they refused me to join their group because of my brown hair, my dark eyes and my tanned skin. They insulted me by telling me ‘You’re a f***ing Paki, you’re Arab, you will never be part of our group’. Paradoxically, the more they refused to include me, the more I felt motivated to join this gang. It was already post 9/11, and Islamophobia was on the rise in Europe. So I made the awful plan to become the most notorious guy in my school by attacking Black, homosexual or Muslim schoolmates, to raise the attention of these neo-Nazi gangs. The plan worked and when the gang heard about my actions, they invited me into the fold. Remembering these terrible times I am glad that no-one died from the violence that our group meted out – but there were some close calls. I have to admit back in the days I severely lacked self-confidence and being part of a gang was a way to ‘be strong’ and to have a clear enemy. In such a self-destructive environment, of course, the violence eventually took its toll. I

‘Our blood has the same colour, our tears are the same, why am I doing this?’

started to recall the guilt I felt late at night with a wince. When the person was on the ground bleeding, I may have thought it was a righteous action but deep in the night, I had an annoying voice in my head raising doubts – ‘our blood has the same colour, our tears are the same, why am I doing this?’

It took me some years to taste that “forbidden fruit”. But when I became older, I became friends with other Muslim youngsters in my neighbourhood. I realized that the path I took was wrong, and that the values that I fought for were never actually my own values. During the teenage years I started to question everything. As a result, I developed a deep hatred against these Nazi family members who influenced me as a child. I was thinking about how to provoke them most effectively. I came up with two solutions: converting to Islam or to Judaism. While researching both ideas I found out that converting to Judaism is a long process. As a Teenager who wants to build up his own revolution I took the much simpler version. So I converted to Islam and immediately researched and found almost everyone I attacked years before to ask for their forgiveness. It was not easy to track them but I am glad that I found these people and even became close friends with some of them.

The first conversations with them were the hardest ones though because I had no idea where to start. After a while I got used to it, but at first, while I felt regret, I could not envisage a way of apologizing without losing face or losing my identity. Instead I turned to heavy drinking and drugs. For the next five years, I continued the spiral of violence, alcohol and drugs and by the time I turned 16, I could not even envisage reaching my 17th birthday. I almost died. I knew I needed to change my life if I wanted to survive, so I decided to quit “Cold Turkey”. By that time, I had to switch schools

I preferred being a Muslim because Islam was giving me a strong frame with lots of rules

because of failing grades and found myself a minority, with most of the students being Muslim. That part of the story I already told. I preferred being a Muslim because Islam was giving me a strong frame with lots of rules – such as respecting people, completely renouncing to violence, drinking alcohol or using drugs. These kinds of values fitted perfectly with my current situation at that time. Quickly I found a student in my class who was religious to teach me everything I wanted to know and through his advice, I converted to Shia Islam. Being Shia was pretty cool because Shi’ism is really spiritual, it has a lot of religious practices one can do as a group. And like every convert, I didn’t start at 60% or 80% but at 150% and that quickly became a problem. I converted to Shia Islam in 2006, just before the Lebanon war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah and soon I became embroiled in its politics through the mosque I attended regularly back then. It had strong links to Hezbollah and they tried to convince me to go fight in the conflict zone. They tried to use my past against me, by telling me I could use drugs if I went for jihad and followed the example of the *Hashshashin* who allegedly used drugs while murdering people. The *Hashshashin* were the most ancient order of assassins in the world, rooted in a branch of the Ismaili sect of Shia Islam, that operated from the 11th to the 13th centuries.

I was devastated. I thought I had found new friends and I knew there was a high risk of going back to drugs so I decided to leave the community – but as I was already in very deep. As I had a lot of insider information, I started getting death threats. Therefore I decided to leave the country and went to Turkey for six months, telling my parents I was going on a holiday trip. In Turkey I

discovered Sunni Islam and began researching it. When I made it back to Germany, I wanted to find a community that focused on the “rational” rather than the “spiritual” and I fell into *Hizb ut-Tahreer*, an Islamist group that does not advocate for violence but wishes to establish an “Islamic” caliphate by convincing leaders of the Islamic world to do it. It is not a violent gang but I would still call it a gang because they have their own rules and they are very closed, you can’t just join by going up to them. Hizb ut- Tahrir fundamentally opposes the *Islamic State* (ISIS) but today I am sure that it can act as a gateway for youth to join more extreme violent groups. They push young people into the idea of a politically active Islam but a lot of young people get frustrated when they join as they see it as “just talk”. Denis Cuspert for example was one young man who I met while being with Hizb ut-Tahreer. Also known as Deso Dogg, the former rapper converted and we became close friends. However, Cuspert was one of the youth who got frustrated by the lack of action, joined Isis and became Germany’s most notorious jihadist. Cuspert became infamous as a “gangsta jihadi” and was killed in 2018 during clashes with anti-Isis forces. When these youth left Hizb ut-Tahreer to join Isis, they asked me to join them several times but I refused. There was no way I was going to move to a country I was not familiar with, using a language I did not speak, and hold an AK 47 in my hands – I had already experienced being a violent person back in the day as a right wing extremist, I didn’t want to do it again.

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By then I left Hizb ut-Tahreer and discovered a branch of Salafism which felt “much more active”. I joined them when I was 21 years old. Salafists, sometimes described as ultraconservatives, follow a branch of Islam that considers Muslims must follow not just the ‘spirit’ but the ‘letter’ of the law and live like the early, righteous generations of Muslims, known as Salaf. At this time of my life I threw myself fully into the Salafi community and established the ‘lies projekt’ which focused on street proselytising through small stands and handing out free Qurans. But the project quickly grew unmanageable and I abandoned it. Too many people joined and I could not control who was coming in... Then some of them tried to encourage youth to join Daesh and I realised I had to leave it. The project was later banned by the state.

By that point, I was experiencing an identity crisis and considered leaving Islam. For more than five years I had engaged with the religion and I had been told that I could be violent, that I could use drugs, that I could kill people – that was not my idea of what Islam should be! The main reason I didn’t leave Islam was an old friend called Yusuf Adla. Yusuf had come to Germany as a child, fleeing Aleppo, and founded “I-slam”, an empowerment project for Muslim youth using art, poetry and comedy. I have to admit that I pushed all my “normal” friends away when I became Salafi, full of righteous indignation about what was forbidden or *haram*. But Yusuf stayed in touch with me. When he saw me having an identity crisis, he told me, ‘I can see there’s a lot going in your mind and I don’t want to ask a lot of questions – but for me as a refugee, it was not easy to become German and writing things down was a kind of therapy’. This was when I discovered other types of Muslims, - people

This was when I discovered other types of Muslims - people who combat racism and help minority communities.

who are polite, who establish great organisations, who combat racism and help minority communities.

Another reason why I overcame my identity crisis was through the research on my Jewish family name. My surviving grandmother refused to talk about the surname because most part of our family, as I already mentioned, had never left the dark ideology of Nazi Germany. Instead I turned to library archives and governmental institutions and after months of research, I discovered a fragment of my family history. Realizing the historic nature of the actions of a Jewish family raising Nazi kids after the Shoah in Berlin, I came to the strong realization that I have a responsibility to accept this story and question my own identity. This Jewish family, carrying my surname, survived the Holocaust and decided to stay in Germany, instead of going to Israel. They took in hundreds of orphan kids and raised them, giving them their own family name. It is still unbelievable to me, how strong these people are! This family didn't consider these children as part of the offender nation but as victims. May our Lord grant them paradise!

So by the time, I became more and more interested in Jewish history and interfaith relations. In 2017 I was invited to join the Muslim Jewish Conference in Sarajevo. This journey had a huge impact on me. I would say it was definitely a turning point in my life. In one week I met over a hundred different Muslims and Jews from all over the world. It has brighten my view on what Judaism and Islam can be. I realized that every participant lived their own version of Judaism and Islam and that it was so beautiful. I learned so many key competences and so much information about Islam and Judaism like never before. It was the first time I saw Israelis and Palestinians sitting side by side cheering and laughing about the same silly jokes. I witnessed joint prayers at the memorial side of Srebrenica, which I never could even imagine before.

In 2017 I was invited to join the Muslim Jewish Conference in Sarajevo. This journey had a huge impact on me. It was definitely a turning point in my life.

And of course I met Maurice! Let me tell you this funny story: While having a quick view on the list of participants I found another person with my surname on the list! So I met Maurice in Sarajevo, my brother from another mother. Maurice is Jewish and was born in Jerusalem but his parents went to Berlin when he was a child. We are the same age so it might be the case that we played as kids at the same playground, because his parents went to the exact same area where I was raised! Maurice and I became close friends. Being part of the MJC delegation and being able to attend sessions led by the Israeli organisation "Combatants for Peace" or visiting the memorial site of Srebrenica was one of a kind moment that I will keep in mind for the rest of my life. The joint prayers, or the spontaneous dance and sing sessions in the streets at night where moments I can never forget. These tiny little situations can move mountains. The MJC created a unique space and brought people together from all over the world. The experiences we had may be, for most people in the world, a utopia but for MJC Alumnis it became part of the reality that will shape the future of humanity.

It has been 5 years since my first contribution on the Muslim Jewish Conference but I still feel a strong connection with the MJC Alumni's. For example Daniela and I became close friends after getting in touch at MJC 2017. Later she moved to Berlin and we organized several Shabbat or iFtar dinners together. Last year, I was honoured to celebrate Rosh haShanah at her family's house near Frankfurt. It was my first time spending a Jewish holiday with a Jewish family. I will never forget the

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kindness of this unique invitation. Every time when I went abroad during the last five years, I checked on my MJC alumni network for any possibility to catch up. Through this network I spent time and space with friends from all over the world in my hometown of Berlin or while travelling in Israel, France, Morocco or the US. In Morocco for example I lived for a couple of days in the cousin's house of a former MJC participant. This was the first time for me as a convert celebrating the Eid ul Adha, the most important holiday in Islam, together with a Muslim family. We slaughtered a sheep, cooked together and exchanged some gifts. It was a very beautiful experience. Or while visiting the US I was invited by a former MJC participant to perform as an artist in his storytelling salon at a synagogue in Brooklyn, New York. My mother was so proud when she got that picture from this performance.

Another interesting story is that while converting to Shia Islam, I took the name Sadiq as my "Muslim name". In 2018 I visited Israel and met a guy at a bar whose name was Tzadik. At this point I realised Sadiq / Tzadik is also a well known Hebrew name. So I chose a Hebrew name while joining an antisemitic Shia community! Sometimes I still laugh when thinking about this fact.

The MJC experience totally changed my life in a positive way. Today I am managing Germany's biggest Muslim youth organisation called JUMA. This year JUMA is organizing a Muslim Jewish Art Festival which will take place in Berlin in late 2021. This is the first Muslim-Jewish art festival celebrating 1700 years of Jewish life on German ground which is organized by a Muslim youth organization in Germany. Also we established at JUMA an educational program called "Interreligious Peers". Within the "Interreligious Peers" we are constantly working with young people from the Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Jewish Community. We have several Peer educator groups across the country (for example in Frankfurt am Main, Stuttgart, Leipzig or Berlin). Just last week we created a bunch of new digital methods to expand our online interfaith activities due the outbreak of COVID-19. After joining MJC in 2017 I also started interfaith as well as de-radicalisation work. I joined I-slam and I now work with ten different organisations as a facilitator, including the "Kreuzberg Initiative against Antisemitism", "Ufuq" – a de-radicalisation initiative, the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum. I also advise the "Violence Prevention Network" on the implementation of interventions and de-radicalisation methods. Sometimes, I go to schools and mosques to discuss islamophobia, antisemitism, racism and hate.

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In 2018 I visited prisons to talk to youngsters who have left Isis and are being de-radicalised. Back in the days I could have been one of these guys, no one came over to me so I try to be that person now. That is my solution. The German state arrests returning fighters and puts them through de-radicalisation programmes. I believe other European governments should also work closely with third-sector organisations and the Muslim community to deal with radicalised youth. Most of these youngsters come from unstable families. So a lot of young people look for a father figure and some find it in gang leaders, some find it in football and some find it in a strange guy with a long beard and an AK 47. My work sometimes also takes me to schools in areas that show strong support for the far-right. I remember visiting a village on the outskirts of Berlin where the pupils had been told a man with my name would hold a workshop on racism. When I entered the next day, they all stood up and performed the Nazi salute. I was shocked but I started a discussion around it – because if you tell someone they are racist, nothing comes out of that conversation. Therefore in my opinion communication skills and being able to pierce your own bubble to start an open dialogue with all kinds of people becomes a key skill in life.

My advice for the upcoming generations of young Jews and Muslims : be *a part*, not *apart*. Join broad international coalitions like the Muslim Jewish Conference or find national interfaith initiatives like Coexister, France or Dialog Perspektiven, Germany. Leaving the comfort zone and pushing yourself into a learning zone will have positive effects on you in so many ways. If you have the chance to meet people from different communities you will gain so many new perspectives which you can use to reflect at an individual or a collective level. Being part of these Initiatives totally changed my life. It was a long journey from where I started and where I stand right now and if I can walk this path so you will run through it, I am pretty sure ;) So many times I witnessed within my own community that we say in our dua: “O Allah take care of the ones who got forgotten. O Allah change the world into a better place for the human race, O Allah grant us paradise“. While whispering the words at night we sometimes forget that Allah said in Quran that he will not change the circumstances of a nation if they don't change themselves. Therefore I would like to encourage you to be the one making the first steps of this journey.

My advice for the upcoming generations of young Jews and Muslims : be *a part*, not *apart*.



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