

## Connected but Cautious: Religious Muslim and Jewish Women Promoting Interfaith Dialogue in Israel

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*The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is protracted and ongoing. In recent decades, there has been an increase in the number of initiatives in Israel and around the world that bring together religious Jews and Muslims for interfaith dialogue and to establish religious leadership that takes a role in finding a solution to the conflict. Muslim and Jewish women have various personal motivations when engaging in interfaith encounters: a desire to get to know the other; a desire to influence the religious discourse; as well as the political motivation to form a Muslim and Jewish religious coalition in the face of the secular Jewish stream in Israel. The encounters between the women identified a common denominator and an interpersonal experience that strengthened the women's religious identity. A major gap revealed was the difference in the level of formal religious education. Jewish women usually had formal religious education, but Muslim women did not, mainly due to political and historical conditions. The very participation of religious Muslim and Jewish women in interfaith dialogue in Israel makes a political and feminist statement simultaneously. The article is based on field research and in-depth interviews with Jewish and Muslim participants in interfaith dialogue.*

*Keywords: interreligious dialogue, interfaith dialogue, Muslim feminism, Jewish feminism, religious education, Israel, Palestine*

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is deep and complex and is often described as intractable.<sup>1</sup> To deal with its implications, dialogue groups between Jews and Arabs were established in Israel in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these initiatives, there have been dozens of Israeli associations that promote coexistence between Jews and Arabs based on a civil and human rights discourse. Some of them, such as the Abraham Fund and the Peres Center for Peace, also work to promote interfaith dialogue.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that there are no Arab or Muslim initiatives in Israel that promote interfaith dialogue. The trend has been for Muslim clerics to join and participate in existing Jewish initiatives.

Dialogue groups serve as a means of reducing prejudice and hostility between conflicting groups.<sup>4</sup> Their purpose is to provide the participants with a better understanding of the conflict and suggest means for dealing with it. This includes developing participants' awareness of the complexity of the conflict and their role within it, as well as investigating identity and its construction.<sup>5</sup> Dialogue groups constitute a microcosm of the overall system they represent, and

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<sup>1</sup> L. Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on field research and in-depth interviews with Jewish and Muslim participants in interfaith dialogue. This research was supported by a grant from the Truman Institute at Hebrew University (Jerusalem), for which the authors express their thanks.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Initiatives Home Page, <https://abrahaminitiatives.org.il/about>; Peres Center for Peace & Innovation Home Page, <https://peres-center.org>.

<sup>4</sup> D. Bar-Tal, "The elusive nature of peace education," in *Peace Education: The concept, principles, and practices around the world* ed. Gavriel Salomon and Baruch Nevo (London: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 27–36.

<sup>5</sup> S. Sagi, Sh. Steinberg, Sh., and M. Farhaldin, "Ha'ani ha'ishi ve'ha'ani hacolectivi bemifgah ben-kvutzati shel Yehudim ve'Aravim be'Yisrael" [The personal I and the collective I in Jewish-Arab intergroup meetings in Israel: A discussion of two different intervention strategies] in *Megamot* 31, no. 4 (2002): 534–56.

therefore tend to reconstruct the basic concerns, fears, collective memories, and aspirations of the participants through their group behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Other initiatives have been established by international organizations such as the large British organization, Search for Common Ground, founded in 1982.<sup>7</sup> It has thirty-one branches in conflict areas around the world, with one of its main branches located in Jerusalem. This branch organizes meetings among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious leaders in Israel.

In Israel, there are other local initiatives organized by Jewish clerics. One of the leading organizations in the Occupied Territories is the *Shorashim* (roots) organization from the Gush Etzion area. Within the organization, meetings are held between Jews and Arabs (separate groups for men and women) attempting to establish dialogue and acquaintance between the two peoples, in addition to reading and interpreting religious texts.<sup>8</sup>

The Mosaica organization, established in 1999, organizes meetings between Jewish and Muslim clerics and, among other issues, has dealt with the issue of education for interfaith tolerance.<sup>9</sup> Rabbis for Human Rights was founded in 1988 by a group of rabbis from the Reform and Conservative streams, led by the Reform Rabbi David Forman.<sup>10</sup> The Interfaith Encounter Association established an initiative that has worked to create interfaith dialogue between different religions, cultures, and backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> *Oz LaShalom-Netivot Shalom* is a merger of two religious left-wing movements that have been working together since the 1980s to establish peaceful relations between the two peoples.<sup>12</sup>

In recent decades, dozens of interfaith meetings have taken place to explore ways of promoting a tolerant religious discourse that advances peace between the two peoples. Meetings are attended by figures with significant religious social status and authority from both peoples. In recent years, dialogue meetings have taken place between religious Muslim and Jewish women. One of the projects in which Muslim and Jewish women and international activists participated was *Reborn*, led by two women, Esther Herzog and Ebtisam Mahamid, in 2001. Approximately 250 women from both religions participated in the project. One of its main goals was to empower women and build an environment for peace within a conflict-ridden environment.<sup>13</sup>

There are no statistics on the number of Muslim and Jewish women involved in interfaith dialogue in Israel. In our estimation, these are only dozens of activists, most of them religious Jews. However, they all have senior status and a broad societal influence. They are leaders and influencers in various social, religious, and political activities and in religious education.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert C. Kelman, "Negotiation as interactive problem solving," in *International Negotiation* 1, no. 1 (1996): 99–123.

<sup>7</sup> Search For Common Ground, What We Do, [www.sfcg.org/what-we-do](http://www.sfcg.org/what-we-do)

<sup>8</sup> E. Leshem, "In a settler's living room, a Palestinian reaches out," in *The Times of Israel* (27 December 2021). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ali-abu-awwad/>

<sup>9</sup> Mosaica Home Page, <https://mosaica.org.il> [Hebrew].

<sup>10</sup> Rabbis for Human Rights, Home Page, <https://www.rhr.org.il/about>

<sup>11</sup> Interfaith Encounter Association Home Page, <https://interfaither-encounter.org/eng>

<sup>12</sup> M. Shamarayhu, "'Oz LeShalom' neged 'Gush Emunim' [The battle in the National Religious Party: 'Oz LaShalom' against 'Gush Emunim']" in *Maariv*, 20 October 1974. <http://www.ozveshalom.org.il/>.

<sup>13</sup> A. Blanch, E. Herzog, and I. Mahameed, "Women Reborn: A case study of the intersection of women, religion and peace building in a Palestinian village in Israel," in *Women, Religion, and Peace: Illuminating the Unseen*, ed. S. Hayward and K. Marshall (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015).

Throughout the Middle East and in other regions of conflict, women, often religious and political activists, have participated in peace-building projects from a religious perspective. In Thailand, for example, reconciliation meetings between Muslim and Buddhist women were held.<sup>14</sup> In Indonesia, women were involved in trying to reconcile the regime with the rebels.<sup>15</sup> In Nigeria, interfaith encounters between Muslim and Christian women have taken place.

The Arab Spring of 2011 served as a catalyst for the growing involvement of Muslim activists in the public sphere and politics throughout the Middle East and in other Muslim states. One of the manifestations of this involvement was their participation in dialogue groups and their promotion of a discourse of peace between peoples or groups in conflict situations. Such interventions took place during this period in Israel between religious Muslim and Jewish women. They thus expanded the borders of the public sphere, which had previously been dominated by women with nationalist or secular perspectives. The participation of religious women marked an important step in the development of religious Jewish and Muslim activism in Israel.

This article examines the characteristics of the dialogue between Muslim and Jewish religious women who are citizens of the State of Israel. The research question posed were: What motivates women to participate in interfaith encounters? To what extent did these sessions help women promote a tolerant interreligious discourse? How did the participants perceive themselves and their religiosity and how did they perceive the other participants? What are the characteristics of the dialogue that occurred between these women and to what extent are they different from the religious dialogue that took place between men?

## **Research Corpus**

The study was conducted utilizing qualitative research methods. The fourteen Jewish and ten Palestinian Muslim interviewees, all citizens of the State of Israel, were selected at random and interviewed between 2018 and 2020. They resided in various cities and villages in the north and center of the country, such as: Fouradis, Kfar Qassem, Kfar Bara, Baqa al-Gharbiya, Acre, Jerusalem, Gush Etzion, and Petah Tikva. Most of the Jewish interviewees lived within the sovereign borders of Israel, except for three who lived in West Bank settlements.

The Muslim interviewees had general secular education, and all ten had a first, second or third academic degree from an Israeli university (Middle East studies, Law, Education and Teaching, Social Work, Science). Most had acquired religious education only informally, through independent study or through participation in Islamic Movement activities. Only two had a formal religious education (Sharia academic degree).

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<sup>14</sup> S. A. Kadayifci-Orellana, "Muslim Women's Peacebuilding Initiatives," in *Women, Religion, and Peace: Illuminating the Unseen*, ed. S. Hayward and K. Marshall (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> E. Anwar, "The Politics of Resistance: Muslim Women Negotiating Peace in Aceh, Indonesia," in *Women, Religion, and Peace: Illuminating the Unseen*, ed. S. Hayward and K. Marshall (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015).

All the Jewish interviewees had some formal religious education, nine out of fourteen in Jewish studies, and had completed a first, second, or third degree in fields such as Jewish thought, Talmudic studies, rabbinical studies, and other related fields. Some had been granted the status of *rabbanit*. Three had academic degrees (bachelors or masters) in secular subjects such as education or biology.

All the interviewees worked in various professions, mainly teaching, religious education, law, and business. The Jewish interviewees ranged in age from twenty to sixty-five; the Muslim interviewees from twenty-five to fifty. Their names are pseudonyms. In this article, we will present the opinions of some of the Jewish and Muslim research participants who reflect the opinions of the majority.

This article has four parts. The first part deals with religious feminism in Israel; the second and the third deal with motivation and dynamics between the participants in the meeting; the fourth deals with the issue of the religious education of the participants.

### **Feminism or Religious Activism in Israel**

A historical approach towards the development of Jewish and Muslim religious feminism in Israel reveals differences. Among Muslim activism in Israel, there are three central realms. First, the activities of women within the Islamic movement, served as an incubator for the establishment of Muslim female activism in Israel. Since the beginning of the 1980s, religious Muslim women in Israel have worked within the Islamic movement in the fields of *Daa'wah* (religious preaching) and in the promotion of community projects: donating to the needy, facilitating the movement's public support in local or Knesset elections, and more.<sup>16</sup> A second realm was their activity within a feminist organization called *Nisaa wa Afaq*, which defined itself as a feminist organization that promotes improving the status of women through a feminist reading of the *Quran*.<sup>17</sup>

The third realm includes the religious interpretation of independent academics and intellectuals who do not belong to a particular religious or feminist organization or movement.<sup>18</sup> Numerous secular Palestinian feminist scholars or activists are conducting research and engaging in activism towards a reinterpretation of the *Quran* and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. Due to this range of activities, it is difficult to claim that there is a central current of Islamic feminism in Israel. Worldwide, Islamic feminism has developed among scholars who have sought to combine feminist concepts with new religious interpretations of Islam that seek to promote and realize equality and justice between the two genders.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> S. Alinat-Abed, *Meha'atzamah lehanhagah: Nashim batnuah haIslamit be Yisrael (1980-2013) [From Empowerment to Leadership: Women in the Islamic Movement in Israel (1980-2013)]* (Ben-Gurion University in the Negev. Ph.D thesis. 2016).

<sup>17</sup> L. Kuzma, *Le'nochah beit din ha'shara'i: Tahalichei shinui be'ma'amadan shel nashim Muslimioth be'Yisrael U'be'mizrach ha'tichon [In the Presence of the Sharia Court: Processes of Change in the Status of Muslim Women in Israel and the Middle East]* (Tel-Aviv: Risling, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> M. Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Thought Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> A. Krami, "an-Nasawiya al-Eslamia: keraah nasawiya ga'dida im estratigia le'nil al-chakuk" [Feminist Islam: New Women's Islamic Movement or a Strategy for Obtaining Rights], in *Arab Feminism: A Critical Approach [an-nasawiyia al-Arabiya ro'iya nakdiya]*, ed. Rafif Tzidoy, et al. (Lebanon: The Derasat al-wehada al-Arabiya wa markiz albuhtuth, 2012).

The development of Jewish feminism in recent decades has contributed to the formation of this current in terms of leading figures, goals, and action methods. At the same time, Islamic feminism in Israel has not yet taken shape. In its place, the religious activism of Muslim women has strengthened.

Jewish religious feminists established various organizations and platforms to disseminate their ideas to religious women and to the public. Religious feminism in Israel began to sprout in the mid-1970s with the establishment of women's forums that read Torah, as well as the establishment of girls' religious schools. In the late 1990s, a feminist religious stream began to form, given voice in 1997 by the formation of the *Kolech* organization, founded by Hanah Kehat. The organization united dozens of groups and called for full equality, especially in areas of religion.<sup>20</sup> In 2012, the Facebook group *Religious Feminists with no Sense of Humor* was established. The group held numerous national conferences and served as a center for discussion and criticism

Over time, additional organizations arose, such as Women of the Wall, and following their efforts, other groups were formed. Their focus is Torah reading and study, prayer, representation in the religious public, legal rights, and more. Within religious feminism there are sub-currents within the major streams of Reform Judaism, Orthodox Judaism, and others. Religious feminism has, from its outset, encountered opposition from the religious establishment in Israel. However, over the years, as researcher Iris Elor has argued, "radicalism has become normal" and acts that were considered "extreme feminism" have become normative among elements of the National-Religious public.<sup>21</sup>

In response to the absence of women from the traditional canon, feminists began to fill this lacuna by creating *midrashim* (interpretations) that recount various biblical, Talmudic, and legendary stories from a female perspective.<sup>22</sup>

In interfaith dialogue groups, we found that the Jewish participants identified as religious feminists, who belonged to religious organizations and enjoyed a prestigious social status in their community. They hailed from the inner circles of religious Zionism and the ultra-Orthodox elite. They belonged to social groups that possess religious and political power and use their religious knowledge to wield power in their community. In contrast, some of the Muslim participants have a religious status of *da'eiyat* (preachers) in their communities. Most came from the central region, had a high socio-economic status in their community, and were associated with the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement.

### **Motivations for Participation in Interfaith Dialogue**

Participation in peace dialogue was for personal or political motivations. Personal motivations were varied and included: loss of a relative due to the conflict; the desire to be exposed to the

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<sup>20</sup> H. Kehat, *Feminism ve'yahadut: mehetnagshut le'hitchadshut* [Feminism and Judaism: From Clash to Renewal] (Tel-Aviv: The Ministry of Defense, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> T. Elor, *Be'Pesach ha'ba: nahsim ve'orianuth be'tzionuth ha'datit* [Next Passover: Women and Literacy in Religious Zionism] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> R. Irshai, "Theology and Halakhah in Jewish Feminisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

other sides and gain legitimacy in their eyes; the desire to meet new people in the opposing group; curiosity to acquire information and gain new experiences.

Participants wanted to learn more about the religious experience of the women on the other side. Some of the sessions included an analysis of religious texts, in which each participant presented her interpretation of the text, primarily as a woman and not necessarily as clergy or expert in the field. Any opinion, even if not based on religious proficiency, was accepted at the meeting.

Noga, from the *Shorashim* organization, arranged meetings in which texts from the Quran, Torah, and Jewish Sages literature were read. The sessions that Noga organized took place from 2018 to 2019 with Muslims from the Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron areas and Jewish women from Gush Etzion and Jerusalem. Noga said:

We were a group that read religious texts together, it was also a very powerful experience for the Jewish women to hear Serin, a relatively young girl who can read the Quran in melody, using the right intonation, and for us it was very, very impressive and exciting to hear it....Then we would analyze texts, the conversations were interesting, I think we also saw a lot of common issues in them, and also the difference between perceptions and cultures.<sup>23</sup>

Organizing the group involved technical difficulties such as coordinating meetings that would suit the lifestyles of both Jewish and Muslim women. According to Noga:

On both sides, there was a desire to continue meeting, particularly among the Palestinian women, I felt there was less the desire to learn and more the desire to get to know one another, to get to know life [of the other side], talk, even the little things. Where do you buy things? What do you buy? How do the children do in school? I really felt a very, very great desire to get to know—the simplest and most ordinary human interpersonal interaction, it was something very clear in these meetings.

Shuruq, 60, who organized and participated in meetings at an interfaith seminary at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 2016 and 2017, noted that these meetings were attended by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim men and women, where there was great interest in interpretation of texts. She stated: “We had to prepare for the meetings and delve into topics studied, such as charity and compassion, fasting, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, and other topics.”<sup>24</sup>

Shuruq (Muslim), who organized and participated in meetings together with Hila (Jewish), said: “The Muslim participants cut short the discussion on religious issues, because for them the issues were obvious, and they wanted to know more about the social life of the Jewish participants, they wanted to know details about the lives of Jewish women.”

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Noga. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabho, Jerusalem, May 1, 2020

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Shuruq. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, Kfar Qasem, June 30, 2021.

Each of the interviewees had a personal story that led her to take part in interfaith encounters. Tami, an Orthodox religious woman who very strict about *halakhah* (Jewish law), grew up in a religious home and defined herself as National-Religious. Her 16-year-old son was murdered in a terrorist attack in the Occupied Territories in 2014. As a result, her family received significant support from the religious and public. In 2014, she became acquainted with the *Shorashim* group, which operated in Gush Etzion to build bridges between Palestinians and Israelis.

In an interview with Tami, she did not explicitly refer to the connection between the murder of her son and her involvement in dialogue groups. However, she addressed the importance of instilling the values of mutual respect between the two groups and was critical of aspects of Jewish religious education. Among other things, she wanted to influence the perception of religion both in Jewish society and among the Muslim participants in the groups.

Salma, 38, an appellant lawyer, emphasized in an interview that human and interpersonal encounters were important to her. “When there is personal acquaintance, the fear and emotional barrier wanes, and then there is the possibility of expressing opinions without fear and without attempting to placate others.”<sup>25</sup>

Salma emphasized that the meetings aided the development of interpersonal relationships without affecting the narratives of the participants. She said: “It was love without concessions. On a personal level, we understand one another other, ready to talk about children and family, but on the political and religious levels there were no concessions ... and not at any cost.”

As an example, Salma mentioned the discussion surrounding prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque. The women claimed that members of both religions had the right to pray there, and there was agreement that they pray to the same God. However, when discussing the issue of sovereignty over the mosque, the Muslim participants opposed Israeli sovereignty, while the Jewish participants opposed Muslim sovereignty over the site. Another point of dispute was the location at which Jews could pray, whether it should be within the compound of the mosques (144 dunams) or below the mosques. According to Salma:

This sensitive discussion took place in private rooms, as both groups expressed concerns about expressing their views among members of their own community. Specifically, the Jewish participants who were exposed to the narrative of Muslim women found themselves identifying with that narrative but could not express this in front of their own community.

Tami took part in discussions regarding al-Aqsa Mosque. She stated:

Among the Jewish group there was, to a certain extent, a separation between religious and textual-halakhic discussions and political discussions, while among Muslim women there was no dividing line between the political and the personal...the line between religious and national was conducted without

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Salma. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, Baqa al-Gharbiah, December 05, 2019.

dividing lines, it's the same thing, so you start a textual discussion, and it quickly moves straight to the national realm.

I remember one meeting we tried to say, okay, so let's leave everything aside and try to talk only about my personal memories of the Temple Mount or what it is for me, so then we advanced a little bit more because at least we reached feelings of empathy for each other. On the personal level, there was a lot of affection, there was a lot of looking each other in the eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Tami's words illustrated the desire of the women in the group to hear the voice of the other women.

During discussions, there were participants who were criticized for voicing unwelcome claims vis-à-vis their own religious group. One of them was Shadiah, 42, a political activist who defined herself as a Muslim but not exceptionally devout. Shadiah participated in meetings with Muslim and Jewish women, in which she felt it was important to express her varied identities: "Arab-Palestinian, Muslim, feminist, and Israeli citizen." She stated: "My presence in the mixed group is not for show, but it was important for me to bring my voice, and the questions I want to raise for discussion." For Shadiah, it was important to talk about the occupation and not just about al-Aqsa Mosque. While the mosque is a religious symbol, she argued, "there is a need to talk about the Palestinian people's land." For Shadiah, it was very important to make challenging statements, not only for the Jewish group but also for the Muslim group. Shadiah claimed: "There are two voices within the Muslim group, an internal voice, that which is said within the group, and an external voice, that which is said to the Jewish group, and here lies the problem."<sup>27</sup> Shadiah's approach was not accepted by some of the Muslim members in the group, who sought to emphasize to the Jewish group the cohesive collective voice of the Muslim group.

As for political motivations, it was apparent that some of the Jewish participants had a desire to form an alliance with religious Muslims, as opposed to the Jewish secular sector. For some Muslim participants, political motivations were expressed through their desire to explain the perspective of the Muslim minority to the Jewish majority in Israel, exposing them to the Muslim way of life and the challenges of the reality of Muslim life in Israel. In general, the Muslim participants did not express any specific political aspirations or vision.

Muslim participants reported that they were impressed that the Jewish participants attributed importance to reaching an agreed-upon solution to the status of al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, even through interim agreements, such as determining visiting arrangements to the mosque. However, Muslim participants had no desire to discuss such issues and explained that they have no authority to decide on matters related to the mosque.

Sarah, a Jewish resident of Jerusalem and mother of three, emigrated with her family from Iran at the age of two, served in the army, and came from a religious, conservative home. She was 50 years old at the time of the interview. Her approach to religion had a political

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Tami. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Jerusalem, November 17, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Shadiah. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, Ber al-Sabea, April 12, 2020.



dimension, which impacted her dialogue with Muslim women. Sarah worked in political and religious settings, serving in the office of a religious minister, and ran an organization that initiated meetings between Muslim and Jewish educators and clerics. Sarah criticized the Israeli left-wing, accusing it of damaging the image of the right-wing in the eyes of the Arabs, and the possibility of reaching peace between the two peoples. She argued:

For seventy years, the left-wing cultivated expectations. A Palestinian state will be established here, or the State of Israel will transform to a state that is only democratic and will no longer be Jewish. But, that is not the case, the State of Israel is becoming more and more Jewish, society is becoming more Jewish. . . . The left-wing does not administer policy nor does it change its policy, the right-wing changes its policy, the right-wing has returned territories. . . . At least the right-wing produces a more credible discourse towards the Arabs in my eyes than the left-wing.”<sup>28</sup>

Sarah’s remarks indicated that she was interested in strengthening relations with religious Muslims, convincing them of the merits of the right-wing approach in Israel.

Maha, a 34-year-old Muslim social worker from the central region, claimed that the meetings contributed to breaking down prejudices among the two groups. She stated, “Despite the fact that we are the weak side and they the strong side...the dialogue has a long-term effect on a personal level...it is enough for me to change one person’s way of thinking, there are always circles of influence, even if they are limited circles, that can bring about change.”<sup>29</sup>

The two motivations, personal and political, of the Muslim and Jewish participants, facilitated the establishment of dialogue with the other side. The expectation of other participants to deal with prejudices, to change attitudes, to challenge the dominant discourse, was apparent. The Muslim participants were more inclined to discuss personal issues and did not feel comfortable presenting positions related to the holy sites. In contrast, Jewish participants were more inclined to discuss political and religious matters as separate issues and did not generally want to mix them.

The choice of what to focus on was not natural but resulted from political considerations. The Muslim participants were afraid to express positions that did not agree with the Palestinian-Muslim national and religious consensus and therefore did not want to discuss sensitive issues such as al-Aqsa Mosque. For them, this can damage the legitimacy of the dialogue.

At the same time, the Jewish participants wanted to bring more practical dimensions into the dialogue. They wanted agreement, in principle, around sensitive issues. These agreements were vital to them because they could derive maximum benefit from the dialogue.

This gap can be explained in the attitudes of the Jewish and Muslim participants as part of the dynamics of majority-minority relations in the dialogue group. The Muslim women, who are part of a Palestinian national minority group, wanted the Jewish women to know them and

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sarah. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Jerusalem, November 07, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Telephone interview with Maha. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, April 15, 2020.

their narrative. The Jewish participants, as part of a majority group, tended to bring political insights to the meetings, perhaps as part of an attempt to gain political power by strengthening the religious camp in Israel when religious elements from Arab society joined it.

### **Connection to Personal Experience, Difficulties in Interfaith Dialogue**

The Muslim and Jewish participants reported a similar type of powerful experience. The two groups related to their common experience as religious women leading a religious lifestyle in a country with a secular character. All participants expressed curiosity about the religious life of women on the other side: how a Muslim or Jewish religious woman conducts herself in the religious and secular spheres simultaneously. During the sessions, the participants pointed out that their inner personal strength helped them deal with their community's reactions regarding their participation in interfaith dialogue. All participants claimed that the opposition expressed by their community to their participation was limited and claimed that their families supported their participation. They said that the reservations expressed by members of their communities did not prevent them from continuing to attend the meetings.

As religious women, the issue of modest dress was central for them. The Muslim women interviewed for the study all wore *hijabs*, illustrating their observance to Muslim religious dress codes. Some wore dresses, others wore pants, depending upon their customs and taste in fashion. The Jewish participants, who defined themselves as religious feminists and some as devout Jews, dressed according to their religious affiliation—Orthodox, Reform, or Liberal. Some wore a head covering, religiously required of married women, others did not. Participants were curious about the issue of religious attire in domestic, public, and religious spheres.

Iris, from Petah Tikva, studied literature, Talmud, and Jewish philosophy at Bar-Ilan University, and defined herself as Liberal-Orthodox. She had participated in several interfaith dialogue. For her, the issue of religious dress-code was fascinating. She stated, “Suddenly, I noticed that I was looking at women with a *hijab*, and I said to myself, for a moment, maybe I know them. And, for example, conversations we had, the attitude to modesty was very funny...we would say ‘I am always the religious one with the sleeves.’ But relative to others, they pursued this issue, saying, ‘why do you have sleeves and your skirts are so short?’ In our circles, it is to the elbow and the knee...Or for Orthodox Jewish women who cover their head with a wig rather than a hat or a headscarf. Explaining to religious Muslim women why it is okay to wear something that looks like hair, because it is something different in Judaism, as the head covering is only for married women....It really created a connection, that we are all women and dealing with similar things.”<sup>30</sup>

Iris further pointed out religious women's difficulties with respect to “the security checks that humiliate religious women at the airport.” Iris recalled that on one of her trips to Ireland with a Muslim group, she encountered humiliation at the airport. She stated:

Then, I suddenly understood what a Muslim woman feels [at Ben Gurion Airport]. . . and it's also something I feel is my duty, as a religious Jewish woman, to give voice to and say I understand and identify with it, and we must talk about

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Iris. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Petah Tikva, May 28, 2019.

it, we must shout about it, even with the security issue, and I understand the needs of security. My brother was injured in a terrorist attack when a female suicide bomber exploded next to him, so it's not that women don't commit terrorist attacks, they do. Yet, still human, and religious feelings must be expressed through religious tolerance...and the *hijab*, one cannot hide anything in the *hijab*, it can't be this way, we must understand the heavy price of this humiliation, the heavy price of hatred, every effort should be made to avoid it, that a person is humiliated only because he is religious, only because he has a religious appearance. So, this is something that as a religious woman, I can understand more than any secular man, no matter how much he is in favor of peace.

Iris linked several important issues that shaped her Jewish religious identity with her relationship to Muslim women. The first was religious dress, a common denominator between religious Jewish and Muslim women. Both groups had an appreciation for modest religious dress and all participants accepted the religious dictates, even if there were differences among group members regarding the fulfillment of the dictates, both on individual and group levels. However, in principle, religious dress is an important symbol for the expression of religious identity. Iris, as a religious Jewish woman, experienced humiliation at the airport, as a result of which experience, she related to the humiliation experienced by religious Muslim women at Ben Gurion Airport.

At the same time, she identified with the state's security considerations. Iris saw no contradiction between being a Jewish citizen in an Israeli nation-state and her identification with Muslim women who belong to the minority group.

In addition, Iris criticized Israelis she defined as secular leftist for not having the capacity to understand the experience of religious women. She covertly conveyed the message that the Israeli religious right can understand religious Muslims to a greater extent than the Israeli left because of their shared religious experience. Iris thus gives voice to a central political justification for interfaith dialogue. This was repeated by other Jewish and Muslim religious women.

Fatinah, a Muslim lawyer from Kfar Qasem, participated in interfaith meetings in 2018 and 2019. She also referred to conversations with Jewish women regarding religious dress codes, stating:

We talked about the head covering and the differences between the two societies with respect to women's head coverings. The topic is a world unto itself to which I had not been exposed enough...We talked about the *Niqab* (face covering) and the connection between *Niqab* and terrorism.... I found out to what extent we really do not know the Jews, and had to face our negative prejudices about them, that they hate us and want to kill us. On the other hand, over time I began to understand that we share a common denominator with religious Jews more than with secular Jews. Suddenly, I began to internalize that the person who grants more respect to a religious Muslim woman is an ultra-Orthodox man. For me, the issue is not religious, but national. For the ultra-Orthodox, the connection is not

to the state. . . . They are not nationalist but are connected to human beings. Human life is more important than the sanctity of the land.<sup>31</sup>

Fatinah's remarks reinforced Iris's approach regarding the shared experience and close relations established between religious Muslims and Jews which, in the end, was perceived not just as a religious message, but as a political one. In other words, the participants came to appreciate the political potential of the interpersonal relations established.

Fatinah added another layer to the conversation about religious dress-codes— her prejudices that Muslims have about Judaism, and vice versa. One of the issues was the *Niqab*, which was associated with terrorism in the eyes of the Jewish participants. The Muslim women took care to explain to the Jewish participants that religious dress has no connection to terrorism. In parallel, the Jewish participants also presented their religious experience with respect to dress, which helped both groups challenge their own ignorance with respect to the other group.

The participants also addressed the difficulties that arose during the meetings, a central issue being the fear of speaking. Fatinah referred to the Muslim women's fear to "talk about politics", stating: "There was caution when reflecting upon emotions and thoughts, in addition to the fear of devoting oneself to the interfaith experience for fear of losing one's own identity." On one of the tours to her village, Fatinah took the group, Jews and Muslims, to a mosque where they heard the call to prayer "Allah Akbar." She claimed that the Jewish participants understood that this was not a call for murder - they had previously related the call to the experience of terrorist attacks on buses. Fatinah also told of her experience of visiting a synagogue for the first time in her life, in the Petah Tikvah area. She stated, "It was amazing. It was the first time I visited a synagogue and learned from close up about praying in it."

Fatinah's remarks expressed well-known concerns in dialogue groups: the need to create trust among group members. The fear of sharing and expressing is also apparent in non-religious dialogue groups that are based on national identity. Interestingly, Muslim participants tended to perceive their experience as having a "political" character, indicating that Muslim women perceived any contact with the Jews as political in nature. This highlighted the dilemma of whether to reveal the difficulties associated with participation and possible criticism they would incur for connecting with the Jewish groups. The "price" that might accompany their participation in such an initiative was clearly on their minds.

It is possible to understand the conduct of the Muslim participants against the background of the relations between Jews and Arabs in the country. The state shaped the attitude towards the Arabs from the days of the military government it imposed on them between 1948 and 1968. This has a long history. This policy has many consequences today, for example, the fear of Arab citizens to express a position that the state may not accept. As a result, there is fear of harm by security forces, or suspicion among Jewish citizens regarding Arab citizens and their treatment as "enemies" and "fifth columnists."

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Fatinah. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, Kufar Kasim, January 1, 2020.

Another example is the planned separation of the state between its Arab and Jewish citizens, separate neighborhoods, and separate education systems. All this and more creates prejudices among Jews and Arabs.

Yet another very prominent example related to the circumstances of the establishment of the state for the Arabs is catastrophe (*nakbah*) for the Palestinian people. At the same time, for the Jews, establishing a Jewish nation-state entailed fighting a war of independence. The history of conflict between the two people resonates in the background of the meetings. It dictates the conduct of both the Muslim and Jewish participants.

In meetings between the religious women, conflicts unique to bi-national Jewish and Arab groups, as well as groups that include both men and women, arose. Another difficulty expressed by participants was sensitivity to the other side. Hagit, 42, an ultra-Orthodox religious woman from the Jerusalem area, lived for a time in England and studied Talmud and English literature there. She defined herself as someone who is constantly studying Torah. Hagit participated in a variety of Jewish-Muslim dialogue initiatives comprised of religious women from around the country. She said: “I was careful ... I did not want to step on places that could be offensive to the other side.” Hagit stated:

When I speak about Jewish women, there were women who went through great personal trauma because of the political situation in the country. Women who lost family members or women who personally knew friends.... They had a hard time not because of the individual women sitting in the room, obviously they did nothing to them...but the very fact that there could be a friendly connection... there was someone there who felt that she was betraying the memory of the people who were killed during clashes, that was one of the difficulties that existed...we were always cautious in the group.<sup>32</sup>

Hagit spoke of two co-existing layers experienced by Jewish participants. The first layer was the personal, characterized by a curiosity to get to know the other side, including the trauma that may be associated with their personal background. The second involved the difficulty of separating individual Muslim participants from their national affiliation. The Jewish women did not always feel comfortable sharing this challenge in the mixed group for two reasons: a) they felt it could damage the fabric of the group; b) the feeling of “betraying the memory of the people who were murdered,” in other words, betraying their nationality.

The meetings were thus filled with internal conflicts, as both the Muslim and Jewish participants were very cautious about expressing their negative and sensitive experiences regarding the conflict. The caution was influenced by the degree of trust in the group, the agenda of the organizing bodies, the skills illustrated by the facilitators and other aspects related to encounters between different religious and national groups. Iris, a 37-year-old single woman born in Argentina, had a Reform Jewish education there and came to Israel at the age of twenty-two. She had participated in the *Shorashim* project, and noticed differences between men and women in their perception of the dialogue, stating:

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Hagit. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Jerusalem, January 1, 2020.

One of the things in which women are different from men is in their ability to see complexity. At *Shorashim*, the people who founded it are men, where they talk about things in common, they learn each other's story, they talk a lot about the narrative and understand the pain of the people, and that's it... You [women] need to see what is in common, the good people, the bad people, the occupation, the right of the Jews to a state, the right of the Palestinians to state of their own, you need to address the fact that this issue is complex in order to really engage in a process, and that, they do... I think it is easier for women to relate to these complexities and avoid trying to cut corners, to really get into things that are difficult, this is a difficult story and is also a difficult story to resolve.<sup>33</sup>

Maha, a social worker from the central region, attended meetings that also included Jewish and Muslim men. In some meetings both sexes were present, in others only women. Maha expressed criticism of the Palestinian men who participated, who, in her opinion, did not express trust in the women. She argued, "On the one hand, we are treated as leaders and expected to speak. On the other hand, they do not trust us. Each group, whether with men or women, has its own character, I don't feel the need to compare the discussions of the men versus those of the women. I also saw this in the Jewish group, as one of the Jewish leaders wanted to join our group because even among them, the women are not really trusted. I wondered if I should say what I really think or what the group expects me to say?"<sup>34</sup>

Maha's remarks expressed a common difficulty for the Jewish and Muslim participants, related to male-female relations. Both Muslim and Jewish women felt that "men do not trust us." There is a hierarchy between men and women in the religious world, one that is institutionalized and to a large extent socially accepted in both groups. The sessions reinforced women's critique of this hierarchy, rejecting its applicability to sessions characterized by a specific kind of discourse among religious men, and a different kind of discourse among religious women. Women like Maha therefore sought independent and separate dialogue encounters for women, in which they could express their thoughts and feelings.

In addition, the conflict between the personal and collective voice, as presented by Shadiah, meant that participants struggled within their own group to express their personal positions which did not always align with the collective voice dictated mainly by the men in the group. Another issue that arose during the meetings was the tension between the national conflict and the definition of identity. According to Maha: "In these meetings, my identity became sharper and clearer. I am Palestinian and Israeli at the same time without undermining it. Nobody can tell me that this is not true. This feeling intensified. It is difficult for Jews to accept me as a Palestinian. It is easy for them to accept me as a Muslim. For them, it does not make sense...they do not accept that there is occupation, they tell us 'We have returned to our country.'"

Maha's remarks indicated that at both the group and individual levels, it is easier to accept a religious identity than a national identity, because the national identity is imbued with the protracted conflict. Therefore, this distinction between national and religious identity

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Iris. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Jerusalem, November 13, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Maha. Conducted by Salwa Alinat, Kfar Qasem, April 15, 2020.

ultimately facilitates the perpetuation of dialogue from the perspective of the Jewish participants. In contrast, some Muslim participants, such as Maha, demand their Palestinian national identity, not just their religious identity, be recognized and legitimized by the Jewish participants.

Maha's statement raised the issue of the importance of her Israeli identity and its integration with her Palestinian identity and asked that this combination not be questioned. From her point of view, there is no contradiction between these two components of her identity. In contrast, the Jewish participants' perception of nationality is different, illustrated by Sarah's remarks: "I really love the idea of Jewish nationalism, it is not ordinary nationalism, it is not nationalism like any other nation, our nationality is actually a constitution, our Torah is a national constitution, it is actually a *mitzvah* (commandment) of how we should conduct ourselves as a society, an exemplary society, to establish here in Israel an exemplary society that will serve as an example to all of humanity, not just for us. It imposes very significant effort and responsibility, and we learn how to implement it."

Sarah's remarks indicate that religion imbues the Jewish women with a sense of mission, which may influence their motivation to participate in interfaith dialogue with Muslim women. Through this dialogue, they seek to realize a religious vision. Furthermore, they do not express doubts regarding their identity, as do some of the Muslim participants. In their approach, there is no distinction between religion and nationality in Judaism, nor did they seek recognition of this identity during conversations with the Muslim participants.

From the perspective of the Jewish participants, there were no interview statements that expressed conflicts between religion and nationality. However, there was criticism of Israeli society and its polarization, as well as the political leadership that they defined as "dishonest." Most of the criticism was directed at the Israeli left-wing. According to Sarah, "For seventy years, the left (also) created expectations in the heart of the Arabs that a Palestinian state will be established here or that the State of Israel will transform to a state that is only democratic and will no longer be Jewish, but that is not the case. Due to the understanding, interpretation, and expectations that results from it, the conflict is intensified."

Sharon talked about the unseen dynamics taking place among Jewish participants who, afraid to express their views to a mixed group or to Jewish men, choose not to reveal their political attitudes to the community. She referred to one session that took place abroad; a mixed session (men and women, Jewish and Muslim) in which the Jewish participants heard about a terrorist attack in the territories. Some of them then had a conversation about this in the bathroom.

Sharon stated, "We went to the bathroom, cried a little bit, and it was interesting...and I remember a Jewish woman who said, 'The attack was in the territories. I want to tell you something and it's awful, I felt better when I realized that the person killed was a settler'. A Jew said that. We as women, each one of us could express things that are a bit problematic, and I'm not sure if we would say these things out loud if we were also with men, I'm not sure, so there was something, solidarity, we could talk about, it was very difficult, but also other things that come up in situations like this."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Sharon. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, October 1, 2018.

For Sharon, the dialogue among the Jewish participants was an emotion-laden discourse. They did not judge one another and received support and acceptance of their feelings. They did not feel safe sharing their feelings with men or women from the other group.

In conclusion, the dynamics between the Muslim and Jewish participants in the meetings were not uniform. Discussions in various groups centered on religious issues. In groups with exclusively female participants, the women felt more comfortable asking questions, presenting positions, expressing their personal voice, and speaking about their personal experiences. Religious dress was a central issue during these meetings and created a commonality among the women. At the same time, both Muslim and Jewish groups faced conflicts and difficulties, including fear, mistrust, sensitivity, and caution, for fear of “blowing up” the encounters. Some of the Muslim and Jewish women, who participated in mixed meetings, criticized male political and religious leadership and the hierarchical relationship between religious men and women, which was illustrated in men’s lack of trust of women.

Meetings between the religious participants, Muslim and Jewish, revealed mechanisms of “identity politics” among them. Sometimes it was easier for them to connect to their personal and individual identity; sometimes, they connected more to their collective identity so that they were part of a nation or religion. Sometimes, it was clear to them that their gender identity as women superseded any other identity. Identity politics allowed them to move from one identity to another flexibly, sometimes accompanied by contradictions and conflicts between “I” and “the other” or “the collective.” This politics is dynamic and essential in dialogue meetings between different groups and is a benefit.

The gaps in religious education between the Jewish and Muslim participants were apparent to them and will be presented in the following section as a central issue characterizing the relations among participants.

### **Education, Dialogue, and Religious Feminism**

The interfaith meetings invited the participants to present religious knowledge, illustrate their skills in analyzing religious texts, and discuss their personal experiences as religious women. At times, there was a request to discuss issues of religious sensitivity, such as their attitudes towards the Al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount from a religious perspective.

Sessions that required religious knowledge revealed gaps in religious education between Muslim and Jewish participants. While the Jewish interviewees demonstrated knowledge in their fields, the Muslim interviewees based their knowledge on personal experiences as Muslim women and from general knowledge gained from independent study or through informal education. The Muslim interviewees explicitly discussed the perceived gaps in formal religious education and its implications for the encounters. Some of the Jewish participants served in formal religious roles, such as *rabbanit*, *halakhic* (Jewish law) counselor or educator at a religious college (ten out of fourteen interviewees); conversely, none of the Muslim interviewees served in formal religious positions. Three out of eleven Muslim interviewees worked in their communities in the role of *da`eyiat* (religious preacher), two of them under the auspices of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, while one operated in East Jerusalem by virtue of being the wife of a well-known religious sage who was among the observers in the sessions.



Salma (see above) was a Muslim participant who explicitly noted the gaps in religious education between the Muslim women and men who also attended the meetings, as well as the gaps in education between the Muslim and Jewish participants. She participated in meetings organized by the organization Search for Common Ground between 2018 and 2020. She stated, “During the sessions we were divided into separate groups of women and men and there were some mixed sessions. In these meetings, I learned that Muslim men have greater religious knowledge than Muslim women. Men can explain the religion and understand the subtleties compared to most Muslim women, who have superficial knowledge of religion. So, we asked for more knowledge, and as part of the project, we learned much more from external lecturers about topics we did not know before. The men who attended the meetings were leading clerics or activists from the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement or *imams* in mosques.... When meeting with the Jewish women, the gaps were even more pronounced. All the Jewish women in my group had academic degrees in religious fields such as rabbinic training. They had education and knowledge and had professional religious training. In our group, I was surprised by the proficiency they had in the details of religious fields. All of us in the group felt it.”

The educational-religious gap was clear also to Sharon. She expressed criticism of Muslim women with no religious education who came to meetings, stating: “Several times, the women I met on the other side were not religious, or they presented themselves as religious, but, in fact, they were not interested in talking about religion. First, men have official roles. If a man attends a meeting as a Sheikh, then he has a role. He knows he speaks from this place, from religion. However, women probably find it harder to get to a point where they can speak from a place of religion and speak from a place of their education in religion. Both in Islam and in Judaism, religious education is very important, you’ve either studied your religion or you haven’t. It’s not enough just to say, ‘I am religious in my heart’, it is not enough, one has to study it, one has to spend years learning it, it is no simple issue.”

Sharon’s remarks, like those of other Jewish participants, indicated gaps in the level of religious education between Muslim and Jewish participants. Her criticism had two dimensions: First, she was critical of Muslim women who did not make the effort to acquire a religious education, which for her affected the level of dialogue. Second, she expressed criticism of religious Muslim men who led the interfaith discourse and represented the Muslim group. She viewed this as Muslim men taking control of the discussion, while the women did not feel comfortable speaking on behalf of their religion.

A possible explanation for the gaps in formal religious education lies in the fact that for Muslims in Israel, there is no public religious education system, as there is for religious Jews. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article. During the meetings, the Jewish women became aware of the implications of the inequality between Jewish and Muslim religious education systems, specifically regarding the opportunities available to women. Some voiced the demand to correct this situation.

Hagar, a married, religious woman of 50 from Jerusalem, is a graduate of the Jewish religious education system in the United States. Hagar’s demand that Muslim women, should, as Jewish women do, acquire formal religious knowledge, illustrated her feminist approach. She said: “Women want to be *rabbanit* and they understand that power is granted to people who hold

this knowledge. In the entire religious world, not just the Jew, there is a lot of power in a religious leader who comprehends the Quran or the Bible or the New Testament.... Higher education has suddenly opened its doors to women.... They want equality in education and equality in salary and equality in society.”

According to Hagar, to build an egalitarian society: “One should talk to men, leaders and rabbis from a female perspective, and also teach texts that a woman has never learned and taught...and to add their voice [to the discourse]—that of women.”<sup>36</sup> Hagar’s approach relates to the claims of Jewish and Muslim religious feminists in Israel and around the world who seek gender equality and justice within a religious context. She argues that equal access to religious texts and knowledge will enable religious women to express interpretations that advance their social status.

In summary, religious education helped women in both groups improve their status within their community. However, there were gaps between the two groups in access to formal religious education due to political and historical conditions based on unequal relations between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. Religious education is an important tool in the hands of religious activists or feminists; as such, the demand among Muslim women to take part in interfaith meetings for the purpose of formal religious training is rising.

For Jewish religious feminists, religious education is essential not only for the acquisition of knowledge, but also to enable women to acquire religious and social status through which they can bring about changes in the interpretation of religious texts and customs. Based on the materials collected in this study, it is difficult to determine the inherent potential in interfaith dialogue for the promotion of religious feminism in Israel. However, such interfaith encounters make a feminist statement and not just a religious one.

## Summary

The history of the protracted conflict between Jews and Palestinians over the Holy Land does not appear close to resolution. Israel had tensions on several levels: between Jews and Arabs, between religious and secular, and tensions on sectarian and cultural groups. Some journalists and politicians in Israel presented religion as a factor fueling the national conflict.

In the research literature, there is an approach according to which holy places such as Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount are national and religious symbols used by conflict groups to strengthen their political and social status among their supporters.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Hagar. Conducted by Laila Abed Rabbo, Jerusalem, January 17, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> N. LUZ, *Al-Haram Al-Sharif in the Arab-Palestinian Public Discourse in Israel: Identity, collective memory, and social construction* (Jerusalem: Floersheimer Institute for Policy Study [Hebrew], 2004); Y. Reiter and D. Dimant, *Islam, Jews and the Temple Mount: The Rock of Our/Their Existence* (Routledge, 2020); M. Muharib, “Siasat Israeil tijah al-Aqsa” [Israel’s policy towards al-Aqsa Mosque] *Siasat Arabiah* 19 (2016), <https://siyasatarabiya.dohainstitute.org>; Sh. Abu Shamalih, “[Addawr ashaàbi fi adifaà a`n al-masjid al-Aqsa, aribat namudajan]. *Majalat dirasat bait al-maqis* [The popular role in defending al-Aqsa Mosque, Ribat as a model]” in *Majalat dirasat bait al-maqis* 21, No. 2 (2021); 253–268.

In recent decades, we have witnessed the entry of new actors into the political and social arena of Israeli society. Both the Jewish and the Arab-Palestinian public has undergone a process of becoming more religious.

In this study, participants challenged the conventional belief that views religion as a force that fuels the conflict between the two peoples. The Jewish and Muslim interviewees emphasized that there is no contradiction between their identity as religious women and their desire for peace between the two peoples. They emphasized that their sense of religious duty motivated them to participate in interfaith encounters with women who could be considered an enemy.

The interviewees emphasized the morality of each religion, while stressing their role as religious women in educating the younger generation, according to the religious values of tolerance and mutual respect. Each of the women interviewed had a personal story, sometimes a story characterized by loss or fear. Despite this, they attended meetings to heal their personal pain and to heal the pain of the collective. Their very participation in interfaith encounters characterized them as significant social and religious actors who can influence the other side, while at the same time demanding legitimacy of their religious identity within the Israeli sphere.

In the interfaith sessions, the participants attempted to acquire a “friend” in place of an “enemy.” They emphasized the common denominator between the two religions by reading religious texts common to Jews and Muslims and sharing personal experiences and the meaning of being religious in the Israeli social sphere. The meetings created interest and identification following exposure to the lifestyle of the other side, including issues such as clothing, dilemmas in raising children, relationships with spouses, and more. This exposure strengthened the interpersonal ties between the participants and contributed to the continuity of the meetings, despite the existence of political and other tensions in the external environment.

However, there were also conflicts and differences between the participants. These conflicts existed on several levels. Within the context of gender, the women reported that the men in their group did not sufficiently trust them. At the individual level, some of the participants felt that their specific group wanted to censor them. They felt a tension between their own personal voice and the collective voice that they were expected to voice when in contact with the other.

Additional differences between the two religious groups included the fact that the Jewish participants desired more emphasis on religious experiences during the meetings, while the Muslim participants sought greater emphasis on their political experiences. Gaps in the levels of education were evident. The Jewish women generally had obtained a higher level of formal religious education than the Muslim women, whose religious knowledge was generally not obtained through formal education but through independent study or through informal religious groups. This difference was based on political reasons and the structure of the education system in Israel.

Participants in interfaith meetings were unable to reach compromises or solutions regarding arrangements for the holy places, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but acknowledged religious dialogue had the power to affect relations between the two peoples.

We can identify several characteristics of interfaith dialogue between religious women in Israel. Firstly, this study illustrates that holding such a dialogue in areas of protracted national-religious conflict is indeed possible. In addition, this kind of dialogue is primarily based on religious values and the common religious denominator among the participants, which attests to the legitimacy of religious dictates, and is not viewed as obstructing peacemaking between peoples. Although there are different religious approaches and different lifestyles in Judaism and Islam, the common denominator of religion provides a foundation for creating a respectful discussion.

Second, we can conclude that religious women play an important role in promoting interfaith encounters due to the belief that it can lead to a better future for the younger generation. The religious participants saw themselves as mothers and educators of the younger generation and chose to participate in the interfaith meetings due to this sense of commitment.

Their participation in interfaith dialogue can be viewed as a kind of religious activism that simultaneously makes feminist and political statements. The feminist statement was reflected by their desire to acquire religious education and thus a higher status in their community, while the political statement was reflected by their acknowledgement that religion could not be separated from politics in Israel. These two issues are interrelated and inseparable.

The study showed that the direct contact between the participants resulted in changes in their thinking about the other party. According to their testimonies, they manage to change prejudices and get to know the lifestyle of the other side in depth. The connection with the personal and religious experience was an empowering experience for the participants.

In our view, this contact experience made the participants perceive that they have a more central role in resolving the conflict between the two nations—part of the education of the younger generation, thus also responsible for the country's future.

In Israel, the prevailing attitude is that the source of the conflict between the state and the Arabs is related to nationalism. It is about Zionist nationalism versus Palestinian nationalism competing to establish a national home in Israel. In this context, religious people on both sides have a role in creating a denominator for dialogue that goes beyond a conflict over land or religious symbols.



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