



PROJECT INTERCHANGE
International Seminars

Muslim Leaders from France

December 14-19, 2008



In the past two years, Project Interchange has accelerated its outreach to Muslim leaders around the world.

This seminar was designed to enhance understanding of Israel and extend relationships with leading French Muslims identified by AJC's Representative in Paris. Through these efforts, a diverse and high ranking group of French-Muslim leaders were invited to Israel and received by Israeli and Palestinian government elite, including Presidents Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas. Participants met with members of the Israeli Knesset and officials of the Palestinian Authority in Bethlehem. The group enjoyed a dinner hosted by the Ambassador from France to Israel, Jean-Michel Casa, at his residence; and a visit to *Haram Al Sharif*. The delegation also learned about projects aimed at encouraging cooperation between Arab and Jewish Israelis, such as the "Bridge over the Wadi" School in *Kfar Kara*; and about the state of interfaith and intergroup relations with Dr. Rabbi Dov Maimon. Briefings with Israeli political and civic leaders provided insights into contemporary Israeli society and politics. An understanding of Israel's security concerns emerged from tours of the security barrier in the North and review of regional strategic issues with IDF representatives and non-governmental experts.

Participants

Rachida Belliard

Development Director,
Pertinence Conseil & Formation

Malika Benlarbi

Deputy Prefect of Police, Paris

Boris Boillon

Diplomatic Advisor to the President on the
Maghreb, the Arab world & Israel

Jeannette Bougrab

Member, French Administrative Supreme Court

Hanifa Cherifi

General Inspector & Ombudsman
Ministry of Education

Mohamed Douhane

Commandant of Police, Paris

Mafjid El Jarroudi

President, French Young Entrepreneurs

Nacer Kettane

General Director and CEO of Beur Radio & TV

Dalila Kherchouche

Journalist, *Madame Figaro*

Fadila Mehal

Director of Culture
National Agency for Culture and Equal
Opportunity

Fadia Otte

President of Safe World Peace

Aziz Senni

Businessman and community leader

Francois-Aissa Touazi

Senior Advisor on Middle East Affairs, AXA
Corporation

Tayeb Touazi

Deputy Mayor of Dreux

Valerie Hoffenberg (Staff)

Director, AJC Office
Paris, France

Sebastien Kopelianskis (Staff)

Assistant Director, AJC Office, Paris

Participant Comments

Mohamed Douhane:

"This trip was illuminating...we now have to light the flame of brotherhood in our country and put the candle on the table of discord. I had never experienced a trip that has been as fulfilling as this one. I will never thank AJC enough for what I discovered."

Nacer Kettane:

"I could not pronounce the name of the country, I would only say the "Zionist Entity" and I did not believe Hamas was a terrorist organization. Now I fully understood that Israelis have a strong commitment for peace. I thought Israel was a bossy, self-confident and dominator (sic) country. I realized that the society is in fact diverse, almost fragile, and I therefore understood its need for security. It is probably the only country in the region where, in the same city, people can attend freely to a service either in a synagogue, a mosque or a church. It would not be the case in Jerusalem if it was still under Arab domination."

Dalila Kherchouche:

"Before the trip, I was pro-Palestinian. Now, I am both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel, because one cannot go without the other. I discovered a very open-minded society, and a will for peace."

Rachida Belliard:

"The trip made profound changes in my perception of the conflict."

Jeannette Bougrab:

"Visiting Israel enabled me to understand myself better. Going to Yad Vashem and debating with Rachel Korazim on the Impact of the Holocaust on Israeli Society were the most touching moments. I could relate to my own suffering and to the global issue of integration of minorities, including in France. I was also fascinated by the dynamism of Israeli civil society."

Madjid El Jarroudi:

"It was very stimulating, it had a thorough overview of the Israeli challenges. I am now convinced that most of the Israelis want peace and the idea of a viable Palestinian state is completely accepted."

Malika Benlarbi:

"Meeting President Peres was one of the most touching moments of my life. I was struck by his greatness, his humanity, and the emotion he shared with us."

Fadila Mehal:

"I understood the complexity of the regional stakes, and the role of the neighboring countries. I was very surprised by the openness of our discussions and how open-minded is the Israeli society, that speaks with no taboo."

Evidence of Impact

Following the Israeli incursion into Gaza, and during a reunion with the AJC's France Representative, alumni developed and then published a National Plea for understanding and tolerance which appeared in *Le Parisien* newspaper January 10th, 2009.

Furthermore, alumnus Nacer Kettane, founding president of the most popular TV station and Radio Channel in the Muslim community, had the idea, together with Bernard Abouaf, director of the #1 Jewish radio station, to organize a conference to enhance inter-religious dialogue and promote national coexistence. Both stations heavily advertised the conference, entitled "A Better Understanding for an Improved Coexistence" to help achieve this objective.

On February 5th 2009 many PI alumni from the French Muslim and other previous seminars participated in the Conference, which was held at the National Assembly and organized by the AJC Paris office. The Conference was a big success, as more than 300 people (40% Muslims, 40% Jews

& 20% Christians) attended the four round tables on intercultural dialogue, the values of the French Republic, the role of religion in the State and the question of identity.

Key participants included experts from different Institutions (National Education, Police, Social Centers), representing civil society, religious leaders and key politicians such as the Majority Leader, two Members of Government and a leader of the opposition.

Alumni Mohamed Douhane, Fadila Mehal, Fadia Otte, Naima M'Faddel, Hanifa Cherifi were asked to be speakers at the round tables. Their experience during the Project Interchange seminar was discussed, and they mentioned how enlightening the experience had been. Mr. Francois Touazi also provided a list of 150 very important and influential Muslim leaders whose attendance he recommended. Several media articles mentioned the conference, one of which is listed and translated into English below.

Israël rejette l'appel de l'ONU
ISRAËL a décidé hier soir d'ignorer un appel du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU à un cessez-le-feu immédiat. La décision a été prise par le cabinet de Sécurité israélien, qui compte 12 ministres, au cours d'une réunion présidée par Ehud Olmert. Le chef de l'ONU, Ban Ki-moon, s'est dit « déçu » et a appelé le Premier Ministre israélien.

Des musulmans français lancent un appel

ILS RETIENNENT de leur voyage au Proche-Orient, en septembre, une phrase que leur a glissée Mahmoud Abbas : « Dites aux Français qui s'identifient à la cause palestinienne que je n'accepterai jamais qu'un seul acte de violence contre les jeunes juifs soit perpétré au nom de notre cause. » Un mot du président de l'Autorité palestinienne qu'une dizaine de personnalités françaises musulmanes veulent relayer dans la société française. Médecin, directeur de radio, com-

mandant de police, sous-préfète, chef d'entreprises, écrivain, consultants, responsables d'association, etc. ; ce collectif composé de figures d'origine maghrébine signe, avec le soutien de l'association juive pro-israélienne American Jewish Committee, un manifeste pour refuser l'importation en France du conflit israélo-palestinien.

Un appel qui coïncide avec la manifestation qui aura lieu à Paris aujourd'hui, à 15 heures, place de la République, contre l'offensive de Tsahal à Gaza. « Nous affirmons notre attachement à la création d'un Etat palestinien économiquement viable, au côté de l'Etat d'Israël, dans la paix et la sécurité, écrivent les signataires. Nous refusons l'importation de la violence sur le territoire français, qui remettrait en cause le vivre ensemble auquel nous sommes tous attachés. »

Condamner l'antisémitisme
Un appel assorti d'une mise en garde contre tout « glissement communautaire ». « Le conflit à Gaza crée une situation de crispation communautaire en France, décrypte Aziz Senni, dirigeant d'entreprise auteur de « L'ascenseur social est en panne... J'ai pris l'escalier ». Il faut condamner les actes d'antisémitisme en France. » Ces Français ont rencontré aussi Shimon Peres, président d'Israël. Ils envisagent d'autres rencontres avec des personnalités juives de France et des déplacements dans les quartiers.

AZZEDDINE AHMED-CHAOUCH

LUNDI, DANS LE PARISIEN ECONOMIE
Une nouvelle vie après l'armée
UN SUPPLÉMENT GRATUIT **Le Parisien**

SAMEDI 10 JANVIER 2009

Translation:

French Muslims Issue an Appeal

They remember from their trip to the Middle East last September (sic), a phrase of Mahmoud Abbas: "Tell the French who identify with the Palestinian cause that I would never accept one single violent act against young Jews perpetrated in the name of our cause."

These are the sentiments, emphasized by the President of the Palestinian Authority that a dozen high level French Muslims want to share with French society. Doctor, radio news Presenter, Chief of police, Deputy Prefect of Paris, business manager, writer, consultant, Association Directors-- this is the nature of a group of important figures from northern African origin, who with the support of the American Jewish Committee, have spoken out against the importation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to France.

This appeal coincides with the demonstration taking place today in Paris at 3pm, at the Republic Square, against the IDF offensive in Gaza. "We ratify our commitment with the creation of an economically viable Palestinian state, living side by side with the State of Israel, in peace and security" say the signatories. "We refuse the import of violence to the French landscape, which undermines the cordiality in which we live together and to which we are all committed."

Condemn anti-Semitism

This appeal resulted from a general state of vigilance against all community friction. "The conflict in Gaza creates a state of social tension in France" describes Aziz Senni, business manager and author of "The Social Elevator is Broken, I took the Stairs. "We should condemn the anti-Semitic acts in France." While in Israel, these French leaders have also met with Shimon Peres, the President of the

State of Israel. They anticipate other exchanges with Jewish representatives in France and in local neighborhoods.