

What a Palestinian can Learn from Morocco

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Through her internship in Morocco the writer has been inspired to think differently about interfaith relationships. This article presents this experience and highlights the lack of global perspectives of those living in the midst of a conflict. .

PULL QUOTE:

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From the first day I landed in Morocco for my internship, I have learned more than I expected from Moroccan society and the Moroccan people, primarily regarding the coexistence between the Muslim and the Jewish communities. In this experience, especially in Marrakech, I have been able to contrast the Moroccan experience with my own in Jerusalem.

As a Muslim Palestinian woman from Jerusalem, I am used to daily interaction with the Jewish Community whether in school, work or business, and I understand well how both communities feel about the other in our country. Emotions on both sides are very intense, and deeply connected to politics, which ruin the social, economic and religious realities for everyone living in the city. Jewish and Palestinian kids are educated on different historical narratives and learn from their societies to react to the other community mostly with hate and fear. As the other side is so demonized and clearly seen as the enemy, violence and destruction are legitimized as an action to defend your people. Although there are still people who believe in peace and coexistence, it is very hard to act according to these ideals when confronting the political situation, which seems to get worse every day as both sides continue to disrespect to each other.

I have discovered that Jewish-Muslim relations are not the same in Morocco. In the High Atlas Foundation, the local NGO in which I interned throughout my studies at Glocal, I encountered different moments that showed how beautiful it can be to forget the religion of those around you and just to see them as humans. I was also inspired by the CEO of the foundation, Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir, a Jew who moved to Morocco twenty years ago, especially in his work with human development projects, which target Moroccan communities across the country, focusing on those who live in rural areas,.

One of the Foundation's projects is planting trees for carbon dioxide sequestering. Thus, I was offered a trip to one of the sites planted earlier in the year in order to visit the site. When I arrived, I noticed that the site happened to be a Jewish cemetery, located in Akrich, 25 kilometers from Marrakech. Immediately, I felt a range of emotions visiting the cemetery. Firstly, it felt familiar, coming across Hebrew, a language I speak from home. Secondly, I was really happy to see a Muslim man taking care of a Jewish cemetery and knowing its history perfectly, while remembering that in other places, particularly in Palestine/Israel, religious sanctuaries are generally looked after exclusively by members of the same faith. I was also struck by the fact that the Jewish community donated this cemetery, among other cemeteries, for the benefit of local Moroccan farmers to use the land for growing trees, such as

pomegranate, figs and olives, which are symbolic for both Muslim and Jewish religions. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn that the Akrich cemetery contains a seven-hundred-year-old shrine of Rabbi Raphael Hacoen, venerated as a miracle worker in ancient Moroccan tradition, and is visited by both Muslims and Jews, who celebrate together at this place.

After the visit, I compared our reality in Palestine and the one in Morocco. The difference was significant as while in Morocco both faiths are collaborating for preserving the cemeteries, in our country both Israelis and Palestinians invest in destroying each other's history, by harming historical monuments and religious places and by disrupting religious holiday celebrations.

Furthermore, specifically, in Palestine/Israel, religious cemeteries are not treated with the same respect as in Morocco. For example, the Muslim burial ground, Ma'man Allah (Mammilla) in Jerusalem, which is believed to be the oldest Muslim burial site in the city, dating back to the 7th century, has been under threat of destruction from the Israeli government for decades. Although it is believed that the companions of Prophet Muhammad were buried there, as well as soldiers and officials from the Saladin conquest or leading nobles from the Husseini and Dajani families, Israeli officials converted the cemetery into a public park, named the "Independence Park", after 1948, marking Israel's victory in the war. In this process, the graveyard was disturbed, including the disrespectful actions of opening graves or moving remains of bodies.

Furthermore in 1970, a school was built in a section of the cemetery, and in 1986, UNESCO dropped investigations after Israel promised that "no project exists for the deconsecration of the site," and that "its tombs are to be safeguarded". However, in 2008, Jerusalem families, together with the Northern Islamic Movement, failed to persuade the Supreme Court to stop the construction of the "Museum of Tolerance", which is expected to open in 2017 on the same land.

In a journalistic investigation by *Haaretz*, workers on the site revealed that in preparation for the construction in 2011, excavated skulls and bones were stuffed into cardboard boxes. Moreover, over the years, the cemetery was disrupted for luxury developments such as hotels, restaurants, museums, shops and other Israeli building projects that can now be seen clearly at the site. It is clear by Gideon Suleimani, an Israeli archaeologist who worked on the Museum of Tolerance excavations, that "The policy is to dismantle what is left of Islamic heritage in Jerusalem piece by piece, to clear the area and make it Jewish."

This is not the only example. In August 2015, the Bab Al-Rahmeh cemetery, dating back to the 8th century, and located outside Jerusalem's old city walls close to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, was fenced by the Israeli authority. Although it is still used by Muslims, they fear it will be confiscated in the near future. This feeling contributes to the general fear of Palestinians that their history and religious sites are threatened by the Israeli government, which does not honor them.

I question why this cemetery was chosen for the park. Was it impossible to establish the park or the museum in a location other than the cemetery, where Muslim soldiers and heroes were buried? It makes me sad to see that Palestine/Israel, which is considered to be the sacred place of the three major world religions, lacks the mutual respect that can be seen in Morocco. Instead, the Palestinians and Israelis let politics and conflict regarding land disputes be mixed

with religion, while destroying other aspects of life or opportunities for interfaith partnerships. Instead of raising the next generation on hate and fear, I only wish that the model I have seen through my internship in Morocco can be replicated in Palestine/Israel, in peace and with greater respect.