

'Interfaith' Under Occupation is Normalization, Not Solidarity

 ampalestine.org/blog/%E2%80%98interfaith%E2%80%99-under-occupation-normalization-not-solidarity

Published earlier on www.hatembazian.com

Recently a firestorm has taken the US based Palestine solidarity movement because of the Shalom Hartman Institute's Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), as a second group of young American Muslim participants finished a two week fully sponsored visit to participate in an 'interfaith' program. The controversy is connected to Palestinian's civil society call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions that is directed at Israel and the participant's decision to join the fully funded program in complete disregard to Palestinians plea for global solidarity on its basis.

Indeed, by accepting a sponsored trip from Hartman, a well-established Zionist outfit in Israel involved in military educational officer training projects and government contracts to specifically counter the BDS movement, the participants crossed the global picket line and violated Palestine's civil society call for solidarity. The BDS movement is a Palestine's civil society non-violent grassroots initiative and a detailed call for specific steps and actions in solidarity with Palestinians living under Occupation. The BDS movement is founded upon an ethical and voluntary participation in an effort to effectuate a change in global political, economic and diplomatic support extended to Israel. Palestinian civil society seeks local and global solidarity that is reflected in words and deeds.

Based on Hartman's own website the description for MLI's goal, "is to enable emerging religious and intellectual leaders—including university chaplains, journalists, academics, and cultural figures—to understand the meaning of Israel in Judaism and in contemporary Jewish life." Hartman's MLI program involves bringing a group of young American Muslim leaders to participate in a fully paid and guided trip in Occupied Palestine for a purported 'interfaith-based' curriculum and engagement.

The controversy has many layers to it including Hartman's funding from Russell Berrie Foundation and Koret Foundation, a source of support for many Islamophobic organizations in the U.S. as well as the institute's direct links to the Israeli military and officer training programs.

Hartman's aims for the participants "to experience how Jews understand Judaism, Israel, and themselves," and more critically "helping emerging North American Muslim leaders to develop a deeper understanding of Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel." Hartman's MLI desired outcome being "to change attitudes in the North American Muslim community and in Muslim-Jewish discourse in communities and on campuses across North America."

Hartman's MLI project needs to be understood within the broader Israeli strategy to improve their globally damaged image after the wholesale slaughter of civilians in Gaza, counter the success of BDS on college campuses and prevent it from taking hold further in the US. Indeed, Hartman's MLI project aims at shaping emergent American Muslim leadership perspective on Israel and Zionism while peeling away layers of support to the Palestinian cause within the confines of American-Muslim communities.

Fatwa Does Not Sanction Hartman's MLI Program!

One important argument used by some participants in this program or defending the initiative revolves around the presence of a fatwa (a single juristic opinion) permitting visitation of Palestine and by extension, according to some participants, would lend support to such fully funded program with Shalom Hartman.

Before examining and responding to the cited Fatwa and in terms of established normative Islamic legal opinions, Muslim scholars are in agreement on the desirability of travelling to Jerusalem for performing legal acts of worship there: like prayers, supplication, remembrance of God, recitation of the Qur'an and staying in Al-Aqsa mosque for a

fixed period of time for the purpose of worship. However, this normative practice is supposed to be undertaken while the city is free and not under occupation.

A recent fatwa has been issued in a conference titled, "Road to Jerusalem" held in Amman under the auspices of the Jordanian government that explicitly called on Muslims to visit Jerusalem to support the Palestinian economy and society living under occupation. The conference was organized and hosted by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, the King's cousin and adviser on Jerusalem affairs with the main agenda focused on issuing this fatwa to permit visiting Jerusalem and Palestine as a follow-up or in conjunction with performing Hajj.

It is important to situate the conference and the broader Jordanian efforts post the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty in the area of normalization and constructing an Arab bridge for Israel into the Arab and Muslim worlds. This bridge was far stronger than the one constructed through the Camp David Agreement with Egypt and was given a major push by the introduction of the Palestinian Authority and the signing of the already failed Oslo Agreement. For anyone observing the Palestinian struggle these are not new revelations rather are part and parcel of understanding this role played by various Arab and Muslim actors in the region and the facilitation provided to Israel in the region. For more details on the subject read my earlier article in Turkey Agenda.

The conference fatwa needs to be located within the broader regional strategy and normalizing Israel's role in the newly formed alliances post Iraq invasion and events of the Arab Spring. Even before the fatwa was articulated, a number of prominent Muslim scholars took the unprecedented step of visiting Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa under Jordanian and PA facilitation with total coordination and pre-approval of the Israeli authorities. Number of articles were written in response to Egypt's Mufti visit to Al-Aqsa and some put the context of the debate, incorrectly if I may say, into the on-going conflict with the Brotherhood Movement. Indeed, having translated and documented every fatwa issued in relations to Palestine I can say for certain that the body of Fatwas from Al-Azhar and the office of the Egyptian Mufti on the issue of visits goes back 50 years and not a function of recent events or response to the Brotherhood Movement.

As the recent Fatwa, a number of questions arise as to the nature of the Fatwa, the rationale behind it, the scope, and expressed limitations? The fatwa's intent, as described by the conference, is to permit Muslims visits in order to help in "defending Islamic and Christian holy sites" and to stand up against "Israeli violations in Jerusalem." In the context of the conference, the rationale for the Fatwa was to help support and defend Palestinians under Occupation by allowing Muslims to visit, interact and spend their money in Palestinian owned business and establishments, in essence to help them stay steadfast in resisting the constant ethnic cleansing.

The scope of the Fatwa focused on permitting organized visits by individuals and groups with the ability to spend time in Jerusalem and other areas in Palestine. What is of relevance and significance as far as the MLI initiative is concerned is the expressed limitations included in the Fatwa itself, which barred participation in any event or program directed at normalization. Reading and considering the Fatwa in question I have to conclude that the explicit prohibitions would certainly include the Shalom Hartman MLI program

The text expressed in categorical terms that visitors must avoid "normalizing with the occupation" as well as stick to "buying, selling, traveling and [accepting] hospitality only with Palestinians."

Certainly, this fatwa is the first of its kind and it did depart from existing body of Islamic juristic opinions on Occupied Palestine extending from the initial opinions during the Crusades all the way up to the current Zionist occupation period. Even this carefully crafted conference with handpicked scholars could not overcome the body of legal opinions restricting extending any type of support to the Occupying power by engaging in normalization efforts. One can point to the contradictions in the limits imposed considering Jordan, Egypt, and Gulf States have open relations with Israel itself; however Islamic legal determination should not be confused or contingent upon actions or opinions of any single or combinations of Arab or Muslim nation states.

While some will raise the obvious arguments that such legal opinions are difficult to govern under contemporary

circumstances and the heavy participation of nation-state actors who are facilitating political and economic normalization. Another argument is located in the notion that as American Muslims we are not party or included in these perspectives because we live outside Muslim majority countries and have 'our' own jurisprudence and should not be confined by what is developed outside. These are legitimate and rich arguments and I would not purport to dismiss them altogether but MLI participants introduced the Fatwa from the Muslim world to support their actions while at the same time excluding the sections in the same opinion that runs contrary to their stated action and decision to participate in the funded program.

Some participants in the MLI program have cited the Fatwa as a rationale for participation in the program. However, and setting aside debates about how the Fatwa was arrived at in the first place and if the Fatwa is accepted as granting the permission to visit then the expressed limitations would preclude and make the MLI Israeli paid-for and hosted visits a prohibited matter.

Indeed, no scholar, past or present, including those who permitted visiting Palestine and Jerusalem in the cited Fatwa has accepted an opinion or action that a person visits the occupied area while funded by the occupying power. The body of legal opinions on this prohibition is unified and comprehensive without opposition. Certainly, Hartman's MLI project is an interfaith initiative in name only and in reality is a political program instrumentalizing religion in support of Zionism, settler colonialism and Apartheid.

The BDS movement does call for people to visit and come to Palestine in solidarity with the Palestinians. Come to Palestine and be a witness to the injustices taking place. Visit Palestine, stay, spend time and money with the Palestinians as an individual or group act of resistance and support for the oppressed people as many have been doing and will do in the future. The issue is not a matter of visiting Palestine but undertaking a visit sponsored and funded by the occupying power: This is an unethical and immoral political act that is hurtful to the Palestinians in Palestine and in the diaspora!

If Shalom Hartman Institute and Israel's leadership want to have an interfaith dialogue then let them allow all the Palestinians' Muslims and Christians expelled in 1948 and 1967 back for an open-ended dialogue on the meaning of thou shall not steal someone else's property!

Palestine: Toward a social justice based interfaith horizon

<http://www.hatembazian.com/content/palestine-toward-a-social-justice-ba...>

On April 16, 1963, Reverend Martin Luther King affirmed in a letter from Birmingham Jail in a prophetic voice "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." The letter was a call to action directed at clergy who, at the time, had yet to join the civil rights movement effort and opted to express public opposition to MLK's campaign in Alabama.

MLK's letter is an instructive for work related to Palestine. Beyond specifics, it challenges the clergy who remain silent in the face of oppression while are mighty critical of those acting to bring about an end to segregation and structural racism in America. Furthermore, by responding with the letter MLK managed to move the debate on civil rights from the confines of private and closed doors conversations among the powerful into the a national discussion framed by a moral and ethical voice.

MLK's public letter is instructive and no less timely. At present, a national interfaith dialogue campaign is underway focusing on American Muslims and attempting to manufacture silence in the face of continuous and massive Israeli crimes and oppression. The dialogue strategy is not new and dates back to the immediate aftermath of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the massacres at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Facing increasing negative public opinion in the US and Europe, Israel developed a plan to reverse the damage done which included the introduction of dialogue strategies focusing on Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims.

Indeed, what we had then and now is an effort to 'rehab' both Israel's image and standing in America with a strategy,

once again, directed at mobilizing interfaith dialogue partners, public officials and university leaders and hosting closed or small meetings for this purpose. Religious leaders from across the spectrum, Muslim regional Shura Councils, local groups and university chaplains are all being invited to private coffee and tea gatherings featuring Israeli consulate staff and employees so as to get the “facts” about the Gaza slaughter. The gatherings are an opportunity to “dialogue” and listen to Israel’s perspective on the issue and to explain how it is anti-Semitic to single out the ‘Jewish State’ for criticism while all kinds of atrocities are taking place in the region.

For sure, the local JCRC, ADL, AJC and other credentialed Israel defenders, right or wrong, will handle the invites, background screening of participants and the follow-up strategy since the campaign is intended to blame the Palestinians and rescue Israel’s shattered image. Thus, it is a pure public relations campaign pushed through the national, regional and university interfaith dialogue infrastructure, which essentially utilizes the moral voice of religious figures and institutions to defend Israeli crimes that were committed against Palestinians and, more importantly, to engender silence in the face of the Occupation and continued settlement building.

This amounts to a strategy of ‘faith-washing’ Israeli crimes, apartheid and occupation. Furthermore, Zionist Jewish partners in this type of interfaith dialogue are essentially collapsing Jewishness into a single site of engagement, Israel, something that is both problematic and incorrect historically and epistemologically.

The organizations involved are welcome to defend Israel as they see fit, but this is not an interfaith dialogue or engagement; rather it is mobilizing institutions for the support of a nation-state that is currently occupying another people and constantly unleashing unrestrained violence against them while stealing land at every turn to build settlements. The Zionist organizations participating never miss an opportunity to support social justice rather than fundraising to build settlements and defend settlers as well as supporting Israel’s violence and war unleashed on Lebanon and Palestine while having the chutzpah to speak from an interfaith based platform. When the next gala for the friends of the IDF please make sure to invite interfaith partners so God could be included in the next lobby effort!

Call it whatever you like but interfaith dialogue and understanding it is not. The religious leadership in America are invited to such gatherings in order to shore-up support for Israel’s settler colonial project at a time when Palestine’s train of global political consciousness had already left the station.

Furthermore, the tea and coffee gatherings and closed door meetings are not sufficient to wash away the blood stains covered streets, homes, schools, hospitals, soccer balls, toys, buses and ambulances in Gaza. The current pro-Israel organizations are all in denial and refuse to accept the basic fact that the Zionist project has failed and no amount of firepower, murdered Palestinians, regional and international support will alter this basic conclusion.

I do not envy the task confronting pro-Israel Jewish organizations and groups in the US and Europe that have collectively opted to hitch their moral and ethical wagons to a settler colonial nationalist (ultra-nationalist is more like it today) project that is set in a historically and continuously inhabited land by the indigenous Palestinians. The interfaith dialogue is intended to bring Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists into an alignment with the pro-Israel settler colonial moral and ethical wagons at a time were a global consensus has formed rejecting this type structure.

The invites are coming from organizations and groups that are deaf and mute to the Apartheid Walls of oppression and dispossession constructed by Israel since inception. Furthermore, the interfaith meetings with tea and coffee are symbolic and representative of a particular form of dialogue that is centered on power and the perception of access to the powerful; rather than an inclusive, social justice based engagement.

Where are all the Muslim interfaith dialogues and clergy mobilizations for Michael Brown, Oscar Grant and countless African Americans and Latinos who are included as numbers but erased from our collective consciousness? What coffee and tea invites do we choose to accept and which ones end up in the recycling bin? Are we dialoging about Palestine, oppression at home and abroad or more accurately negotiating a place on America’s power dining table

despite constantly being on the menu!

What I call for and am ready to work on is a social justice, transnational, and inclusive interfaith agenda that is rooted in transformative and restorative human horizons. Interfaith dialogue focusing on theology, prayers and understanding is important, but is empty and innocuous if it does not confront local and global injustices as well as being critical of our own individual and collective roles in it. I am for theology and prayers that liberate and heal the wounds of occupation, dispossession and racism; rather than a dialogue strategy rooted in rescuing the powerful and dispensing with the meek of the earth.

An interfaith social justice agenda that supports no more war, values every human life equally and epistemologically and structurally commits to ending racism in all its forms including in Palestine. We are all diminished when we envision our exclusive religious group as powerful when its members are traversing the land on top of a tank, airplane or celebrating bombings from hilltops. When we focus on worldly power and seek the company of the powerful then religion and religious leaders are partaking in the advancement of a unique and destructive form of idolatry: worshiping the material worldly power, not God.

All human life is sacred; black, brown, yellow, red, white and all the in-between shades of radiant colorful beauty that reflects God's creative power and spirit resting in all people. We require an interfaith engagement that mobilizes equally whenever a human life is taken and makes sure that justice, accountability and mercy are at the forefront of religious leadership response.

While each religion constructs an exclusive group; nevertheless an open and inclusive interfaith social justice agenda is needed that makes it possible for developing global views of the problem and challenges confronting humanity while continuing to work with others at the local and national levels.

By insisting that Israel be the sole site for Jewish interfaith engagement and constantly mobilizing efforts to defend its policies, we are risking reducing the totality of Judaism into a defense of a modern nation-state that is committing humanly made crimes against the Palestinians. The invites for tea and coffee are not an interfaith dialogue revolving around the role of religion in the world; rather it is an effort to mount a defense of a nation-state in the middle of a most brutal occupation and settlement build-up, Apartheid policies and total siege.

A further outcome is the isolation of authentic social justice based interfaith coalitions that are present across the US that has Christian, Jewish and Muslims groups working collectively to highlight Palestinian plight as well as mobilize on the domestic front. For those involved in this effort it is an insult to imply that Jews, Christian and Muslims are not working together or communicating because they have not come to accept invites to defend Israel by organizations that mobilize to protect Israel and Israel alone and treat interfaith dialogue as part of the Hasbara network and AIPAC public relations strategy.

Similarly the invites for university chaplains and faculty members to closed door meetings are in essence attempts at mobilizing academic institutions as a backdoor strategy to counter the emerging student consciousness focusing on Israeli occupation and Apartheid. Almost every university president in the US with a cast from his/her administrative staff has partaken of a fully paid trip to Israel (JCRC, ADL, AJC, ZOA, and Shalom Hartman Institute provide funding) to cement their commitment to view the world through the lens of Zionism and begin to see their campus as a front line for countering/limiting/frustrating criticism directed at the 'Jewish State'.

The university has an important role to play, but at present it is in the business of defending Israel's occupation and helping it craft its image. Indeed, university presidents and administration protect Israel by limiting free speech and inquiry, prosecuting students and faculty who speak out for Palestinians, coordinate public relations efforts with Israeli consulates across the country, fire faculty members or refuse to grant tenure or renew contracts, and go the extra mile to develop joint programs with Israeli universities and institutions without asking any critical questions about Palestinian academic access or the role of these institutions in racism, Apartheid, occupation and injustice.

University religious councils, chaplains and grants directed at supporting this part of the university take on the responsibility of constructing an empty public relations based dialogue between Palestinian, Arab and Muslim students and faculty on the one hand, and Zionist students and faculty complete with a sprinkling of administrative cheerleading squads ready to offer rewards for participation. Just like the US State Department incentivize Palestinian engagement in an open-ended 'peace process', the university leadership and administration follows suit and acts as the unofficial sponsor of the campus 'peace process' that protects Israel and Zionism at the expense of students, faculty and community. In this context, just like Palestinians are cast in a negative light at the national level and in policy formation, the university treats and frames them in the same identical manner, but uses more sophisticated academic jargon in the name of 'civility'.

The absurdity takes on completely different heights when the university becomes more embedded in Israel's public relations efforts by supporting and encouraging participation in visits to Israel under flimsy academic pretexts. These are designed jointly with Zionist outfits committed to countering the increasing support for Palestinian lead BDS movements on college campuses and for the most part intended to create spokespeople of outside the Zionist Jewish community to defend and narrate Israel's story. The visits and sponsored tours are akin to a 'Disneyland tour' of Israel intended to impress upon the participants the uniqueness of this modern state that 'made the desert bloom' but is threatened by the unwelcoming and 'terrorist' Palestinians, the Arab and Muslim 'hordes' at the gates of civilization.

The game on campus is structured to mirror the national political picture and upward mobility involves silence on the issue or making sure that you speak in favor of Israel otherwise the doors of opportunity; promotion and support of research initiatives are put out to pasture. One can see and understand that the university is part of reproducing the system in the macro and micro, thus the challenge is both local and national in the US with the university being at the intersection of knowledge production and power. I use the term embedded intellectuals, which references the role played by the university in reproducing the system since funding and resources coming to academia have been intertwined with power for most of the 20th century if not earlier and the bulk of university budgets are increasingly imprinted with military and corporate industrial complex footprints.

Just as critical is that fact that the interfaith dialogue in America is shaped by Zionist-Christian ecumenical understandings that emerged after WWII and central to it is a defense of Israel as the only refuge for Jews in the post Holocaust period and silence or accepting crimes committed against the Palestinians is posited as a worthy price for this lofty project. In this sense, Western Christianity viewed this ecumenical arrangement and support for Israel as a form of atonement for the genocide committed against 6 million Jews due to their silence, and some would maintain Christian complicity, in the Holocaust. Thus, Muslims who enter into the previously constructed dialogue space without knowing the existing historical framing are subject to all its constraints and epistemic boundaries.

The organizations sending the tea and coffee invites are all living in a state of denial and continue to operate from a public relations and crisis management approach from the Israeli and AIPAC manual. Indeed, the Zionist groups in America are in denial about the occupation (calling it disputed territories), settlement (neighborhoods), torture (moderate physical pressure), war crimes (Palestinians use of human shields), forced expulsion (left on their own) and Apartheid Wall (security fence).

The invites are to explain the moral and ethical nature of Israel's military. The effort once again intended to invite another group of religious leaders to visit the country so as to understand the security threats and fears faced by Israelis daily. I am sure the amount of cement used by Palestinians will be explained and criticized, the threats of 'Islamic terrorism' will be expounded upon and links between Hamas, Iran, Hizballah and ISIS will occupy the better part of these meetings while assuring the Muslims attending that they are the 'good' Muslims who understand the crisis of the radicals in the Muslim world. The interfaith dialogue becomes an Islamophobic festival with Israel's worldview defining who is a 'good' or 'bad' Muslim while discussion of the events in Gaza becomes secondary since the focus is Israel's security and interest, not the occupied or under siege Palestinians.

Israel has committed itself to settler colonialism, segregationist apartheid, racist and increasingly ultra-nationalist xenophobic trajectory; thus no closed doors, organic tea and latte filled rooms, breaking bread while observing halal or Kosher guidelines in an interfaith setting will challenge or reverse it. The moral voice for religion is realized when speaking truth to power. MLK challenged America's religious leadership to break their silence over structural racism and the time is now for clergies of all backgrounds to break away from 'faith-washing' Israeli crimes and speak with a prophetic voice calling for an immediate end to Occupation, siege, settlement activities, Apartheid policies and racism. We need a prophetic voice that seeks to usher-in a call for a social justice based interfaith action that demands and supports in words and deeds freedom, liberty and dignity at home and for Palestinians abroad for they are indivisible.