

A book that is a credit to the Albanian people

By Stephen Sylejman Schwartz
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The Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP), an international network of moderate Muslim intellectuals, journalists, *ulema*, and Sufi *shaykhs*, is gratified to endorse the publication of my friend and colleague Vehbi Bajrami's book on his journey to Israel in 2008, and to support its widespread distribution and discussion. Vehbi, by openly travelling to the Jewish state as the leading Albanian-American journalist, author, publisher, and managing editor of the New York newspaper *Illyria*, showed great courage. While the majority of Albanians are Muslims, they, like most adherents of Islam around the world, know little that is simple, direct, and candid about the realities of life in Israel.

In composing his narrative, Vehbi has spared nothing of what he saw. He has expressed admiration for many aspects of Israeli life but has also asked hard questions, mainly concerned with recognition of the Kosova Republic by Israel. While encouraging him in its publication, we at CIP comprehend that such a book will be very controversial among many Muslims, but we have welcomed it as a contribution to a debate that must take place. The time is long overdue for Muslims, regardless of their views on the topic, to speak with a new honesty about the 62-year confrontation between Israel, on one side, and its Arab and other Muslim enemies, now led by Iran, on the opposite side. We congratulate Vehbi for breaking the silence on this topic, an action that embodies the role, principles, and goals of CIP, although Vehbi is not a member of our organization.

I join Vehbi in thanking the Amer-

ican Jewish Committee and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations for making it possible that groups of moderate American Muslims may tour Israel. I note that two more of my close friends and colleagues, the President of CIP, Kemal Silay, and a CIP Director and leader of the American Shia Muslim community, Nawab Mousvi Agha, were included in the same visit, as Vehbi points out.

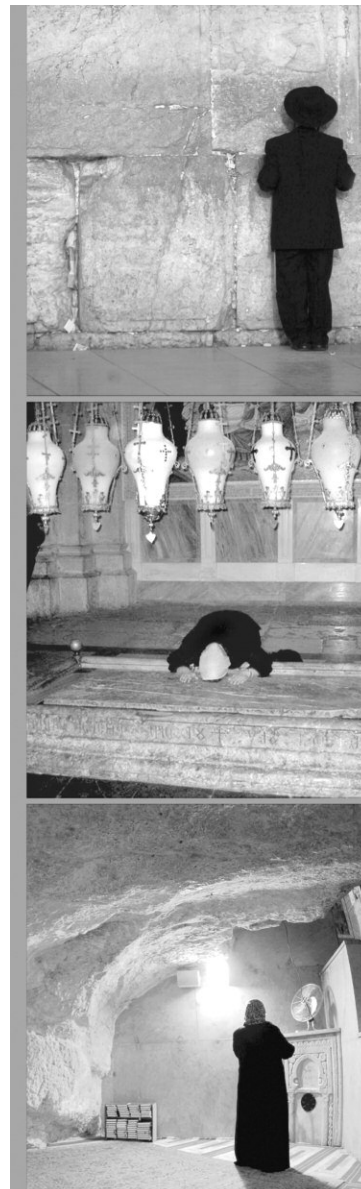
Vehbi writes with justifiable pride of the rescue by Albanians, both Muslim and Christian, of Jews on their territory during World War II. Alone among the countries occupied by the Nazis, Albania refused to hand over a single Jew to the criminals who planned and carried out the Holocaust, and was the only Axis-occupied state to count more Jews on its soil at the end of the war than at the beginning. Vehbi's comments on the salvation of Jews by Albanians speak not only to Albanian honor but also provide a powerful repudiation of those who deny the genocide of European Jewry, especially among Muslims, and who are exemplified by the Iranian dictator Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. American Jewish leaders, in many cases acting out of simple conscience and memory of their own people's suffering under fascism, rather than detailed knowledge of Albanian-Jewish relations, similarly defended the Albanians of Kosova from an attempted genocide during the 1998-99 NATO intervention against Serbia. Without the evil of Hitler in the Holocaust, Serbia would never have believed it enjoyed impunity in its attacks on Bosnian Muslims as well as against Albanians, who, to repeat, include both Muslims and Christians. The road to Auschwitz, which should have been closed forever, led to Srebrenica and Korenica. A Balkan Muslim foolish

enough to deny the Holocaust of the Jews has committed moral suicide, supporting the hand holding the knife that cut so many throats in ex-Yugoslavia.

Vehbi has disclosed many aspects of Israeli life that are unknown to the Muslim world. To cite one very significant example, he describes the Islamic Shari'a courts supported by the Jewish state as a legal right of Muslim Arabs.

I am further gratified that Vehbi so thoroughly observed the saintly life and work of another friend and colleague, the late Sufi *shaykh*, *rahmetli* Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari, who lived in East Jerusalem and was a descendant of Imam Bukhari, the great compiler of *hadith* or oral commentaries by the Prophet Muhammad *sallallahualejhisalaam*. *Shaykh* Bukhari, whose ancestors came to Jerusalem centuries ago, was the leader of the Uzbek Muslim community in the city. But we were shocked and outraged that this honorable man of peace suffered physical aggression and the usurpation of his Sufi center by Wahhabi fundamentalists. In this regard, *Shaykh* Bukhari in East Jerusalem stood on the same front line against Wahhabi aggression that we see in Tetova, in Western Macedonia, where the Harabati Bektashi Sufi shrine is under the same kind of attack. Wahhabis in East Jerusalem and Tetova both exploit local ethnic conflicts – Arabs vs. Jews, Slavs vs. Albanians – to advance their evil agenda for subversion of pluralistic, traditional, and spiritual Islam.

A similar fundamentalist spirit of intolerance among Muslims led to the attempt, recorded by Vehbi, to exclude him and the rest of his group from a visit to the *Haram-i-Sharif*, precincts of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque, by "guards" who challenged the visitors' Islam. But the values



Vehbi Bajrami

My Visit to the Holy Land

Center for Islamic Pluralism

Cover of the book *My Visit to the Holy Land*, by Vehbi Bajrami, the publisher of *Illyria*.

of traditional Islam prevailed in that situation and Vehbi and his companions enjoyed their visit to the Islamic holy sites of Al-Quds, as well as to the Western Wall where Jews gather to pray. Vehbi notes that the reconstruction of the Wall and the provision of a prayer space adjoining it were ordered as a service to the Jews of Jerusalem, and to Jewish pilgrims, by the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman Kanuni, and completed by the Albanian-born architect Mimar Sinan, perhaps the greatest of all Islamic builders.

Vehbi serves the truth in a dramatic and extremely significant way when he describes the tunnel constructed under the *Haram-i-Sharif*, which has been the subject of many accusations against Jews and Israel by Arab radicals. The latter claim that the tunnel is intended to undermine and destroy the Islamic monuments in the *Haram*, but Vehbi provides personal evidence of the non-destructive goals and methods employed in completing the tunnel. CIP has long pointed out the hypocrisy present when Wahhabi extremists, who have destroyed much of the Islamic heritage of Mecca and Medina, including the house where the Prophet Muhammad lived (impelled by the irrational belief that preservation of historic mosques and similar structures is a form of idol worship), emit continuous and dishonest rhetoric accusing the Israelis of such vandalism. Vehbi Bajrami now stands as a witness to the falsity of this lie.

I am further gratified that Vehbi met with and recounts his discussions with the Israeli Arab journalist Khaled Abu Toameh, a newsgathering colleague with a similar attitude of fearlessly accurate reporting. Abu Toameh began as a media advocate for the

Palestinian Liberation Organization and now contributes to *The Jerusalem Post*. Abu Toameh's truth-telling about the corruption of the Palestinian leadership under Yasser Arafat is heroic. Vehbi visited the Al-Qasemi Academy, an Islamic institution at Baqa al-Gharbiyya on Israeli territory, animated by the Sufi spirit and unique in its record as an exemplar of Muslim education in Israel.

Finally, Vehbi reminds us of the horror of the Kosova war, and specifically of the massacre of Albanian Catholics at Korenica, near Gjakova, ten years ago. Here a circle is closed; CIP has supported both the Al-Qasemi Academy and the primary school at Guska, near Korenica, where Catholic and Muslim children – most of whose parents were brutally murdered – study together.

Vehbi Bajrami has seen many things that needed to be seen, and in this book has written many things that needed to be expressed. His work is a credit to the Albanian people.

Washington, December 2010

[Stephen Sylejman Schwartz is the author of *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony*, published in English in 2008, and in Albanian in 2009, as *Islami Tjetër: Sufizmi dhe rrëfimi për respektin*. He has published many other books, including three more in Albanian. The Center for Islamic Pluralism is accessible at www.islamicpluralism.org.]

NOTE: You can call *Illyria*, at 212-868-2224 or e-mail at info@illyriapress.com to order a copy of the book for a total of \$30 (price includes shipping and handling).



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