

Interview with Dalia Fadila, Assistant to the president at Al Qasemi Academic College of Education - Arab Islamic College in Israel

Moslem women must shoulder the complete responsibility for advancing their status within their societies

Unfortunately, most programs for the study of Islam in Moslem academic institutions are guided by the dogmatic frames of thought that were relevant to past centuries. Unless academic institutions create approaches to Islamic and cultural thought that are relevant to the present era and that accept diversity and respect the rights of humans and women, the human resources of their larger societies will not develop.

Al Qasemi Academic College of Education offers not only a chance Islamic higher education in Israel, but has the ambition to help promoting liberal values in the Muslim societies everywhere in the world. Would you kindly describe what is that your college is doing in this direction?

The core work of Al Qasemi evolves around the creation and sustenance of the balance between two realms: the Islamic cultural heritage, on the one hand, and the universal values of human rights, on the other. The vision of Al Qasemi is that our students are proud Moslem Arabs and citizens of the 21st century, capable of bridging universal values with the values of their cultural heritage, agents of positive change in their home communities. In our vision, ethnic and religious communities, Moslem ones in particular, should aspire to become human societies of knowledge, active and equal partners in the culture of the world.

It is especially through our unique approach to Islamic Studies and teacher training programs that we try to achieve the vision above, on both the individual and collective levels. We certainly discovered that it is not enough to promote our vision and approaches to it amongst the members of our local community. A humane and critical approach to Islamic studies, one that respects cultural diversity and promotes the values of human rights and women empowerment and life long learning is vital to spread worldwide too, as it will minimize the tension between Islam and other cultures in the world. It is no secret that the image of Islam in past decades has been severely damaged; we see that it is our duty as an Islamic Academic college and one concerned with the development of human resources to spread a humane liberal as well critical approach to Islam in the world through the following:

- Participation in conferences around the world that deal with Islam and other cultures.
- Conducting our own international conferences around the perception of Islam as part of the multi-cultural context of the world. Three annual conferences that we have are: "The culture of Dialogue" conference, "Technology Bridging Cultures," and "Islam in the Context of the Multi-Cultural Society of the World."
- Offering a "Summer School in Islamic Culture" to students from the world.
- Offering intensive seminars to groups who are willing to study about Islam.
- Participating in delegations to the U.S.A and Europe lecturing about our unique approach to Islam.
- Initiating student and staff exchanges with universities and other institutions around the world, thus offering opportunities for our students\staff and foreign students\staff to learn about the self and the other.
- Participating in Fulbright Scholarship Programs that deal with inter-faith dialogue.

What are in your view some of the main problems in the academia and the public opinion debates of today's Muslim societies? I understand that they are as

diverse as they come, but I am asking about general trends and features?

The most significant debate, in my opinion, relevant to Moslem societies and academia evolves around the issue of developing human resources. Moslem societies, either in the Arab world or elsewhere, should create and formulate for themselves a collective vision that will take them ahead and accelerate the fulfillment of human potential and development of inner resources. Processes of developing human resources have four main cornerstones: human rights, empowering women, spreading knowledge, and freedom. For those to be achieved there is a need for true leadership, a leadership that is aware of the needs and characteristics of its community while committed to a creation of a human society of knowledge. A humane and communal leadership of this kind should lead structured processes that pave the way to the institutionalization of the four corner stones of human resource development.

The role of the academia in this long-term project is to stress the importance of the relevance of academic knowledge to life in the 21st century. Most critical is that programs for the study of Islam should stress the values of humane development and relevance to the challenging political, cultural, economic facets of individual and communal life in our era. Unfortunately, most programs for the study of Islam in Moslem academic institutions are guided by the dogmatic frames of thought that were relevant to past centuries. Unless academic institutions create approaches to Islamic and cultural thought that are relevant to the present era and that accept diversity and respect the rights of humans and women, the human resources of their larger societies will not develop. The debate in Moslem academia and societies, in short, should evolve, in my opinion, around the issue of qualifying individuals, who are humane, Moslems and expert professionals to act as agents of change for advancing their societies, while aspiring to be active partners in the world. These societies must allow structured processes of change and crisis management systems that are aimed at the achievement of the collective vision.

One of the most damaging elements to the image of Islam in the West seems to be the position of the woman in the society. As a successful professional woman what is your view on this issue?

First, I believe that Moslem women must shoulder the complete responsibility for advancing their status within their societies and representing a different, more humane image of Moslem women in the world. Most Moslem women have not been taking an active role in social change that includes or focuses on changing their own status. Moslem women must realize that once they take such responsibility and stop blaming the patriarchal norms of their societies and the politics of the Western world, they will contribute largely to advancing themselves and their societies.

The basic problem lies in the women's



Dalia Fadila has a Ph.D in Arab American literature and she is active in the field of women empowerment and cultural projects management.

definition of herself and role in society. Unless women start, first of all, defining themselves as equal human beings and equal cultural partners, they will not be able to represent themselves as thus. In the meanwhile most of the women in the Moslem world allow others to represent them and accept silently their inferior role in the social, political and familial hierarchies.

This is not to say that the issue of women advancement should be seen separated from the advancement of the whole society. On the contrary, the issue of women status in Moslem societies must be seen as a long term structured process that concerns all the society and integral part of its comprehensive processes of developing human resources.

Albanians belong to three different religions but there is a lot of inter-religious harmony among them. Considering the high degree of secularity among

Albanian Muslims would you think that an exchange program between your college and academic institutions in Albania would benefit your efforts?

Certainly! An exchange will be beneficial to both us and Albanian Moslems. These will be exposed to Al Qasemi's unique model where Islam and universal values can be bridged and balanced. An exchange program can help them acquire some of the tools for creating and managing that balance as community and individuals. Through such programs, we, in Al Qasemi, can also share with them our vision and models for cross-cultural dialogue as we see such models as vital for communal development and positive interaction amongst cultures locally and globally.

For us, such exchange poses an opportunity for voicing a moderate humane approach to Islam, an alternative to the image proposed by culturally problematic figures throughout the world.

You have been offering some great insight on the situation of the Israeli Arabs. In today's world cultural affiliations often trump political ones but the situation is even more concerning in conflicting areas. How do you think the prospect of peace in the region or the escalation of the conflict influences the identity crisis of the Israeli Arabs?

The identity of Arabs in Israel is found within several circles: The national cultural Arab identity; the Palestinian one; the religiously Islamic circle, and the Israeli one. Each circle is itself multi-faceted: the Arab community in Israel is formed of Moslems, Christians and Druz. The combination of the circles forms a multi-crisis identity, where one circle, sometimes, conflicts another. The question that is mostly raised for Arabs in Israel is how to construct a humane coherent identity when one's external and internal environments are defined, among other things, by their inner or interactive crisis?

The discourse and reality of conflict in the Middle East complicates the identity of Arabs

in Israel and places them in an in-between-world-situation. Yet although difficult as a place of self definition and development, the status of Arabs in Israel offers positive opportunities. Because of their unique place, Arabs in Israel can form a bridge between Israel and the Arab and Moslem worlds and be active partners in economic and cultural exchange projects. These exchanges will not only contribute to peace in the region but also to a higher quality of life.

What do you think is the right approach to restive minorities? Now that Kosova is the newest independent country in Europe, its strongest challenge is the integration of the Serbian minority. Obviously, it is not easy for a state to deal with a minority that does not accept its right to exist. What are some of the general guidelines that Kosova, Israel or any other country with similar problems should adopt to make their minorities feel at home?

Any country that is truly concerned with strengthening its inner immunity, should invest in minimizing gaps between its communities or between the minority and majority in it. Minimizing the gaps occurs through a just distribution of resources amongst communities, investment in education for the members of the minority and granting them equal opportunities for economic prosperity, an improved quality of life and higher education. When gaps are minimized through educational and economic empowerment, members of the minority will be more willing to be integrated within the larger society as they feel that they are treated with symmetry, respect to their difference and rights for a human life and future.

It is of course the main responsibility of the minority to be aware to its reality and advance its status, but the majority who has the political and economic resources must be aware that a healthier society depends on the extend to which gaps are minimized between its communities.

(Interviewed by Ruben Avxhiu)



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