

Violence rages in Gaza, but a meeting of Jewish and Muslim women has given me hope

Remona Aly, *The Guardian*, 1 November 2023



We met in a space within Westminster Abbey, and agreed that both religious communities must fight for safety and empathy

No matter how many times I rewrite these words, nothing feels right. There is pain, there is rage, there is grief. It feels impossible to do justice to the horror that is unfolding. My social media feeds groan with ghastly images and fraught, exasperated posting. And the bleak news from the Middle East has claimed a further

casualty: the already volatile state of relations between Muslim and Jewish communities in the UK and across the globe.

Each day brings more fury and tension. I fear the will to protect faith and community relations is eroding, which risks propelling higher an already sharp surge in antisemitism and Islamophobia. The rejection of this hard-fought equilibrium can leave a vacuum for extremists to clamber into, and for hate to breed. Rising tensions have been deadly. In the US, Wadea Al-Fayoume, a six-year-old Palestinian-American, was stabbed 26 times and killed by his own landlord, who shouted “you Muslims must die” during the attack. Over the weekend, a mob in Russia stormed Dagestan airport searching for Jewish passengers arriving from Israel. In London, antisemitic attacks went up by 1,350% and Islamophobic offences by 140% in the first half of October.

But with years of relationship-building in jeopardy, I am one of a group of women trying to salvage relations between the communities that we are part of. Last week, I was invited to a safe space: a private gathering co-hosted by a Jewish woman and a Muslim woman. We met in the precincts of Westminster Abbey in the fittingly named Jerusalem Chamber.

Like many there, I have been shaken by waves of hurt and helplessness; but also like many of the women I met, I have sought ways to resist fatalism. “It takes courage and vulnerability to come into a space like this,” said Julie Siddiqi, the Muslim co-organiser and a faith-relations consultant.

Julie, alongside Dr Lindsay Simmonds, a Jewish academic who researches women of faith and peacebuilding, felt the need to create a third space outside religious institutions and political organisations. These forums were avoided because they tend to raise more barriers to communication and lead to “more danger” according to Julie, particularly as many people fear that officially speaking out or showing sympathy for the other side will draw backlash from their own communities. The safe space created in the abbey was instead built on love and trust. “It’s during catastrophic times when relationships are tested,” said Lindsay, who has known Julie for more than a decade. “But it is precisely now we need to show friendship, solidarity and trust.”

Even from a place of profound pain, the women I met had the capacity to reach out and feel the hurt of others. The empathy I saw is a precondition of the kind of wise, pragmatic leadership we are all desperate for – yet women’s voices are woefully nearly always absent

from the decision-making. One participant, Elizabeth, a veteran peace activist and faith relations expert, tells me that between 1992 and 2019, women constituted only 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators and 6% of signatories in peace processes around the world. Despite this, Elizabeth sees the power women have as “agents for social change and conflict resolution the world over”.

There are multiple examples of women “coming from a place of genuine empathy and demonstrating authentic leadership,” she said. “Think of the Good Friday agreement, or Women Wage Peace, a grassroots initiative in Israel and Palestine comprising thousands of Palestinian and Israeli women, who even now continue to work for peace on the ground. In the UK, there is also Nisa-Nashim, a Muslim/Jewish women’s network, who have worked to build enduring friendships.”

But however collaborative and empathic the women I met are, this does not shield them from the criticism of some in their own communities. Ayesha*, a women’s and refugee rights activist, received threats when she condemned the 7 October Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians. One person told her: “You deserve to burn.”

Ayesha said these threats are based on a perception that sympathy for “the other side” is a betrayal, and they disregard the fact that she has campaigned for the freedom and rights of Palestinians for decades. But she pointed out that “so much gets lost in our binary narratives” and mentioned to me how a close Jewish friend told her she had asked her synagogue to pray for the people of Gaza and has called for a ceasefire. “Those who say interfaith relations are just a facade or a waste of time have never experienced it themselves,” said Ayesha. “The one message all our holy texts teach is ‘love thy neighbour’. If women were at the table, we wouldn’t be in the situation we are in now.”

Julie told me she broke down in tears when being interviewed on the radio as the host read out the stark death toll in Gaza and Israel. “I don’t know how anyone can’t be horrified by each and every civilian life that’s been violently taken,” she said. “Likewise, a Jewish friend was passionately imploring leaders in her community to voice compassion for the thousands killed in Gaza. Our grief shouldn’t be reserved for one or the other. When we share it, we move forward.”

Hope is hard to come by at the moment, but mine was gently lifted by the women I spoke to, wept with and prayed alongside. Coming away from the gathering, I dared to wish for things to get better, and found resolve in the ripples of goodwill that came from the female solidarity I experienced.

In this inflamed political climate, with violence tearing across the world, surely we must make all efforts to embody and fight for the opposite: safety and understanding. If we burn every bridge, the ugliness will never end; but if we build bridges in the hope of a better future, humanity might just stand a chance.

**Ayesha is not her real name*

Remona Aly is a journalist and broadcaster with a focus on faith and lifestyle