



# Cross-Border Celebrations



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I n a world often afflicted by a sense of exclusivism between religions, Palestine knows many instances of Muslim-Christian mutual openness and conviviality surrounding religious celebrations.

Jamila, a Muslim woman from Beit Sahour, cherishes special memories about Christmastime in her predominantly Christian town:

“As a six-year-old child, I lived near Shepherds Field in Beit Sahour. I used to meet with my Christian and Muslim friends to pray and sing Christmas hymns before the Christmas midnight mass. We used to carry oil lamps and walk barefooted at night, heading towards Manger Square to commemorate the shepherds who were guided by the star to the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. I also remember how during the Christmas feast our Christian neighbors used to come knocking at the door to offer us Christmas gifts and sweets. From our side, we as Muslims used to give them little gifts and sweets during Islamic feasts, such as *katayef* at the breaking of the fast in Ramadan (*katayef* is a sort of sweet dumpling filled with cream or nuts, and commonly eaten during Ramadan nights).”

In cities such as Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, where Christian communities live side by side with the Muslim majority, one can still find many traces of border-crossing traditions. In the interreligious school project “Diversity and Citizenship: Christian-Muslim Living Together,” students in the Bethlehem and Ramallah regions explore and collect stories of joint Muslim-Christian popular practices, such as Muslims inviting Christians for a Ramadan evening meal, sharing in the coloring of Easter eggs, or decorating a Christmas tree. Many of the stories are not only about popular practices, which, though still surviving, have been somewhat in decline over the last decades, but also about the great power of human gesture – a power traditionally held in high esteem in the Palestinian-Arab culture of hospitality and neighborliness.



A Christmas procession in Beit Sahour. Photo courtesy of the Arab Educational Institute, Bethlehem.

Examples abound. Surprisingly, Christians may help to reinforce the customs of Ramadan. On the streets of Ramallah and Nablus, it happens that Palestinian Christian youth distribute water and dates just before the evening breaking of the fast during Ramadan. A student writes about her village and notes that when an imam became ill, the priest tolled the church bells to announce the end of the fast! Similarly, a Christian man is said to once have taken over the role of *mousharater*, the person who wakes up the Muslim believers to take an early breakfast before the fasting starts.

The long tradition of interreligious living together in Palestine has come under pressure at times – not in the least because of the Israeli occupation that may pit Muslims and Christians against each other, for instance at checkpoints or because of religion-based allocation of travel permits. In general in the Palestinian context, solidarity between the religions often has a political dimension. For instance, a local imam once welcomed Christians to pray at the mosque because their church was damaged during a raid by occupation forces.

The personal human stories of neighborliness, lovingly written down by the students, shine most brightly. Sometimes they are told of parents and grandparents, but several students experienced such priceless moments themselves.

Palestine takes pride in its tradition of “Muslim-Christian living together,” which reveals itself in mutual openness and conviviality during Muslim and Christian religious celebrations.

A story of neighborhood is told by Lama, a Muslim student:

“The doorbell rang. Muriel, my Christian friend, and her mom were there. She came to wake us up for the *suhur* [Ramadan early-morning breakfast]. Muriel explained her coming early, ‘I did not hear your voice and was afraid you would not wake up for the *suhur* as this would keep you, my dear Lama, hungry throughout the school day.’ Then my father invited my friend to share the *suhur* with us: ‘Please help yourself and share our customs in the same way as Lama shares and participates in your Christian feasts.’ Muriel came with her parents to the evening *iftar* [breaking the fast] meal and gave me a gift as she entered the house. Then we began to eat. We broke the fast with dates and carob juice, then we all ate. It was a wonderful evening filled with joy. For the moment we could forget about the occupation.”

Sometimes it requires creativity and determination to cross religious borders. One story is about a Muslim girl who desperately wanted to take part in the wedding of her best friend, a Christian.

"My girlfriend and I have known one another since preschool. Providence brought us together, and our friendship continued after graduation. She was the ambitious and successful Christian youth and I was the creative and anxious Muslim girl. We did not feel any difference or sensitivity about religious topics. We were two Palestinian girls living in the same town sharing the same concerns and the same goals. Years passed, and the day of my girlfriend's wedding ceremony approached. We asked the church parish priest, "Can a Muslim girl be a witness for a Christian bride?" The answer was, "No, this is religion, and we can't change God's rules." Later there was a wonderful solution, however. The priest agreed to have me as a second witness in the church as that did not require the signing of any document. My girlfriend entered the church and all welcomed her. The moment I entered behind her, carrying the wreath, the attendees stood up and welcomed me wholeheartedly. My happiness was so great!"

Palestinian schools strive to revive the tradition of interreligious living together. It has often been said that an open celebration of feasts enhances the atmosphere at schools, and many private and government schools with Muslim and Christian student populations presently organize joint Muslim and Christian celebrations. After studying the concept of generosity in a joint interreligious lesson, one school connected an educational campaign for needy students with the celebration of Muslim and Christian feasts. At another school, Muslim and Christian students initiated a Lenten cooking school day after the fasting period. One Christian government school teacher relates: "During the Muslim *Isra* and *Miraj* feasts [marking the night that God took Mohammad on his journey to heaven], sweets were distributed to all students and I, as the only Christian teacher, felt at ease and touched by such student initiatives."

The project "Citizenship and Diversity: Muslim-Christian Living Together," a collaboration between the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem and the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), encourages Palestinian students, 14 to 17 years old, at 30 private and government schools in the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas to learn about "citizenship" and respect for "diversity" through the example of "Muslim-Christian living together" in Palestine. The project aims to prevent Muslim-Christian relations from being hijacked by fear, prejudice, and exclusivism. Christian and Muslim students receive joint religious education lessons in school. The project further organizes journeys to Muslim and Christian holy sites, joint Muslim-Christian celebrations, and an essay competition for stories that are written or collected by students.

The shared celebrations at school give Muslim and Christian students an opportunity to learn about each other's customs and to respect and appreciate them. Typically, the celebrations create a sense of pride and dignity among students and teachers, as well as a deeper feeling of shared Palestinian identity.

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