

Peace Meeting 'The Middle East' in WFWP Birmingham, UK

Patricia Earle
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The devastating crisis in the Middle East, the subject of our most recent Women's Peace Meeting, brought an incredible response from women of all faiths and cultures. With speakers from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, the UK, and a lady who had recently returned from Jordan having visited a refugee camp there, the evening attracted our largest gathering to date. Over 140 women came together, bringing their heart of compassion, concern and generosity. Our house gradually filled to capacity, to the point where we ran out of chairs and several women had to sit on the floor to squeeze in.

We ranged from doctors, Ph D's, Christian ministers and NGO representatives to several ladies who have just acquired citizenship in recent years, having arrived in Birmingham as refugees and asylum seekers. Thirty women were attending the Peace Meeting for the first time, and we had roughly 40 nationalities represented.

Our very special guest was the Pakistani mother of two boys who were attending the school in Peshawar, attacked with such brutal force by the Taliban in December 2014. One of her sons was killed, and the other flown to Birmingham for special surgery at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

After brief introductions, our first speaker was Dr Shetha Al-Dargazelli. Having taught for 20 years at Baghdad University, she completed an MA in Religious Studies at Birmingham University and is now resident in the UK. Referring humorously to the Sunni and Shia sects within Islam, she described herself as a 'Su-Shi' Muslim! Growing up in Iraq in former times, she explained how people co-existed peacefully, side-by-side. Having a deep appreciation for those of other faiths, she looked out across the room as she spoke, and described it as a 'blessed place' filled with 'so many beautiful faces'. She spoke of the situation in the Middle East as a war, but rejected the idea that it was simply caused by religion. "There are many factors involved, and one of the main ones is 'business'. Also, scientists played a huge role in the development of all these weapons, but no-one blames scientists. Religion tends to be blamed, but politicians are another major reason, using the fear factor to convince people of the need to go to war."

Hanna a Mandaean, a follower of John the Baptist, from Iraq, then spoke movingly about women's rights. "There are no women's rights in the Middle East. For women and children, it is so difficult. Around Iraqi cities some women are forced into prostitution... they have no money to live, no life." She reminded everyone of the Iran - Iraq war which, beginning in 1982, lasted 8 years and cost more than a million lives, so many of them young lives. "There was no winner of that war, except America, Russia, and those countries who sold weapons and could experiment with their new weapons, as Dr Shetha has said". She described the suffering of people under Saddam Hussein in Iraq, as a result of the conflict in Syria, and now with the advent of IS, or Daesh, who receive much funding and support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, believing that they will go to heaven for killing non-Muslims. Hanna said that where she grew up in Iraq, Christians, Mandeans and Muslims, both Shia and Sunni, would live side by side and not question each others' religions. Since coming to the UK, she found people asking her what religion she was. She would reply that she goes to church, and to the mosque, and celebrates Eid and Christmas and

other holy days and celebrations! "I don't understand what's going on today, why people discriminate among each other and exploit our differences. Maybe it's a 'game' for them."



Hansa, who has also lived in the UK for many years, had just returned from visiting a refugee camp in Jordan. She described the political and economic situation in Jordan, a relatively small, but stable, country with no oil, and the various waves of refugees who had fled there, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians and now people fleeing for their lives from the brutal oppression of IS. She spoke of two camps which had arisen in Jordan near its border, one hastily constructed for around 85,000 people and another more purpose built for 100,000 people, all with United Nations and international aid. Other refugee families have been accommodated by church communities in Jordan, and she visited one where 30 families were being cared for by 2 Catholic fathers. Most people are simply grateful to be alive, but when the opportunity comes along for some to move on they will seize the chance, sometimes helped out by relatives in other countries.

Our next speaker was Aema, speaking on behalf of Salina who had recently come from Pakistan to Birmingham with her son, for surgery on his badly damaged left arm. She described how Salina's husband had received a phone call, from a cousin in Dubai on December 16th, asking if everything was alright at their son's school. Her husband soon realised that something was terribly wrong, going outside and seeing people running everywhere. His younger son telephoned him from hospital where he was receiving treatment for the wounds to his arm. He did not know what had happened to his older brother. "Imagine the horror of the father running and searching among the bodies of dead children, trying to find his older son" Aema said. She continued "One thing I am proud of about Pakistan is its resilience in the face of so much violence. The school re-opened just a month or so after the massacre, in total defiance of the violence of the Taliban". [See Associated Press article at the end of this report.]

Lorna Archer, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, then spoke about her efforts to support Palestinian people in Gaza. Seven years ago, she helped to found the Worcester Palestine Friendship Association (WPFA), establishing a twinning link with the people of Khanyounis in Gaza, developing friendships using e-mail, Facebook, etc, and organising many meetings to highlight the plight of people's suffering there. Since 2010, several Palestinians and Israelis have been invited to speak at WPFA meetings, and farmers, women and young people from the West Bank have stayed with Lorna and her family in Worcester.

In a brief talk, Dr Susan Noori shared her experience of attending the Commission on the Status of Women meetings (CSW) in March at the United Nations. Every year, government representatives from around the world, as well as hundreds of NGO's, attend the meetings to discuss many issues and challenges facing women today. This includes inequality in all its aspects, violence against women, and access to resources, health and education. This year was especially important as it marked the 20th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, when a global agenda for gender equality was set. This year's CSW59 agenda set out to review governmental achievements during the past 20 years in equality, development and peace-building.

In line with our evening's theme, Susan mentioned a couple of examples of activities and NGO support in the Middle East, such as a project for widows and orphaned children in Iraq, supporting them both financially and through skills development workshops. The latter empowers them to be able to work and provide for themselves in the longer term. Susan felt that empowering women is crucial for the peace-

building and conflict resolution process, and equally important is the role of men in supporting women in the fight against violence and inequality.

Mahmooda Qureshi, Vice President of the Birmingham branch of the Islamic Society of Britain, and a coordinator of Islamic Awareness week, spoke about her work and some of the difficulties faced by Muslims like herself here in the UK, given the current climate generated by events taking place in the Middle East.

Finally, Marjorie Saunders, a long-time Jewish supporter of the Women's Peace Meeting and its associated activities in Birmingham, spoke movingly of the suffering of people on all sides, and her and her daughter's efforts, through a connection to a school in Ramallah, to bring a small but significant contribution to the process of peace, healing and reconciliation. Marjorie has always been prepared to take risks for peace and, even in this meeting, many Muslim women were deeply touched by her example.

In fact, Marjorie passed away just a few days after this meeting, and we will always remember her heart for peace and her wonderful humanity. Ironically, just two days later, a Muslim lady who had been at the meeting called asking me for Marjorie's telephone number, wanting to meet and chat further with her, but I had to inform her that Marjorie had sadly passed away. The memory of her will linger long with us all.

We invited comments from the floor, after our main speakers and, while this was going on, we passed a donations box around to collect money for a WFWP project in Jordan which is supporting women and children who are living there as refugee families. Altogether, we collected just over £400 which is a wonderful offering, coming from all our collective faith and cultural backgrounds.

As always, we concluded with some beautiful musical offerings from Julia McHugh, Swapna, Raginder, Swaran and Inge, followed by a candle-lit prayer and time of meditation. With the meeting formally over, we then enjoyed refreshments, an abundance of chatting and networking, making new friends and acquaintances, and continuing the discussion with one another.

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Monday January 12th 2015. (Associated Press)

Pakistani children returned to the school where, just one month earlier, Taliban gunmen killed 150 of their classmates and teachers, wearing their green school blazers, Superman lunchboxes and hands clutched tightly to their parents - a symbol of perseverance despite the horrors they had endured.

For many, attending school on Monday morning was an act of defiance and proof that they would not be cowed in the face of Taliban threats to attack again.

Andleeb Aftab, a teacher at the Army Public School, lost her 10th grade son, Huzafa, in the attack. She arrived Monday wearing a black dress and black head scarf and walked briskly toward the school, where she had last seen her son alive.

“I have come here because the other kids are also my kids,” she said. “I will complete the dreams of my son, the dreams I had about my son, by teaching other students. I have chosen to get back to school instead of sitting at home and keep mourning.”