Hassen Chalghoumi

Leadership Talk by the Imam of the municipal Drancy mosque Seine-Saint-Denis

I want to start my deliberation by emphasizing that there are four aspects to the question of Islamic antisemitism in particular and all forms of antisemitism in general. These four aspects mark four areas on which we should focus and for which we can develop solutions to combat antisemitism successfully. The first area is religious discourse, the second education, the third the internet and social networks, and the fourth politics and civil society.

Religious Discourse

When it comes to religious discourse, unfortunately, we are in a sad state of affairs in Europe: Instead of spiritual religion, a political religion exists. It is this political religion that has come to the fore, rather than a religion concerned with the relationship between individuals and their Creator. Today, Islam is dominated by the so-called Muslim Brotherhood, also referred to as the Ikhwan.¹ This movement has been gaining ground enormously in France, wherever it is present.² Its influence can be seen when at the end of their sermon, Imams raise their hand in prayer against the Jews and the Christians, saying “God,

¹ Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest political Islamist group in the Arab world. Establishing a universal Islamic system of belief and rule based on a wide-range reform of existing political systems in the Arab world is the main focus of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the last ninety years, the movement has spread throughout multiple countries of the Arab world, most notably through Syria and Jordan, and has influenced other Islamist groups such as the Hamas. While the Brotherhood itself claims to be a peaceful, democratic organization, Western countries look at it as a radical Islamist organization. Especially after the events following the Arab Spring in Egypt 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood is largely considered a terrorist organization. For an overview about and evaluation of the Muslim Brotherhood cf. C. Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

² Cf. F. Khosrokhavar, “The Muslim Brotherhood in France,” in *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Middle East in Focus*, ed. B. Rubin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 137–47; Y. Visser, “Analysis: How the Muslim Brotherhood is taking over France,” *Arutz Sheva*, February 1, 2018, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/241461>.

please, deal with the Jews and Christians.” The destructive influence of the Muslim Brotherhood presents us with an enormous task. Until we as European Muslims have distanced ourselves from this and any other form of political Islam, until we have taken the necessary steps within the Muslim community to eradicate and fight political Islam, and to fight the movement which feeds this discourse, there can be no solution to the problem of Islamic antisemitism in Europe. The Muslim movements we have in France and in Europe illustrate my point. The UOIF (*Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* [Union of Islamic Organisations in France]), the CCIF (*Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France* [Collective against Islamophobia in France]), the AMIF (*Association Musulmane pour l'Islam de France* [Muslim Association for Islam in France]) etc.—none of these movements seek spirituality. Unfortunately, they stir up conflict; they incite hatred. When you hear an imam, a sheikh or a lecturer say that Jews are the brothers of pigs and apes, you can imagine the influence that will have on his audience and in particular the children among his audience.³

Next to political Islam, another problem are the antisemitic elements included in the Quran, Hadith, and Sira. Otherwise, we would never have seen, for instance, the collusion between the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammed Amin Al-Husseini and Hitler. I think that there are some passages in the Quran which are harsh. These days, in Paris neighbourhoods such as Barbès, which is predominantly Muslim, you can find groups of people coming together to burn Israeli flags, bash into Jewish shops and throw stones not only onto Jewish or Israeli targets but also onto members of riot police trying to stop them.⁴ There are some verses in the Quran that are very harsh. It is high time for Islamic scholars, be they from Al-Azhar or from another school, to engage in a real reading of the Quran. Such an interpretation of the true sense of the Quran will counteract the negative influence of these harsh passages. To illustrate my point: Some texts say that the Jews have been cursed by God, for they have killed the Prophet. If you teach this to a child, you will pay the price someday. What children should be taught from the Quran should be guided by its true sense and by nothing else. I think this is an important task to be fulfilled within Islam, by Muslims them-

3 For a discussion of the widespread discourse of depicting Jews as “the descendants of apes and pigs” in the Arab and Islamic worlds and its foundations, cf. A. Dankowitz, “Based on Koranic Verses, Interpretations, and Traditions, Muslim Clerics State: The Jews Are the Descendants of Apes, Pigs, And Other Animals,” *Memri, Special Reports* 11, October 31, 2002, <https://www.memri.org/reports/based-koranic-verses-interpretations-and-traditions-muslim-clerics-state-jews-are>.

4 Cf. G. Jikeli, *European Muslim Antisemitism: Why Young Urban Males Say They Don't Like Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 60, 83, 93.

selves, in order to promote a reading and explanation of the texts which is based on the historical context, to avoid interpretations which have terrible consequences. This is very important: if we do not fulfil this task, we as Muslims will pay the price because the harsher passages of the Quran feed the hatred of political Islam.

An answer to these problems would be to create a French Islam, or a European Islam, which so far does not exist. Two initiatives illustrate the approach such a French or European Islam should have to its Christian and Jewish brother religions. The first initiative I would like to mention is that we have founded the *Conférence des imams de France* [*Conference of French Imams*] which includes eighty imams. In 2012, there were hundred imams of the *Conférence des imams de France* assembled before the Shoah Memorial. Some twenty of us went to Israel, to Yad Vashem, to Ramallah, to the Wailing Wall, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and so forth.⁵ It was a powerful moment. As part of our initiative, we met with president Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. In Israel, we met with president Peres, may his soul rest in peace. And you know, at that moment, there in Israel, we thought, “This is it; this is peace.” We were a group of twenty imams, together with members of the Jewish community and members of the Palestinian community. But when we returned to France, there were demonstrations against us at the airport, against the traitors who had sold out. We asked some questions in response; we said, “where are the Palestinians? Are they in France or in Ramallah?” This is an effort that will have to go on for a long time.

The *Conférence des imams de France* has also introduced the “Time of Abraham,” which we celebrate every year during Ramadan. Every year, there’s a fast-breaking event, called Iftar, at which Jews, Christians, and Muslims eat together. We are continuing to develop this initiative.

Education

This brings me to questions of education. Education is key in the Muslim fight against Islamic antisemitism. The example of Abdelkader Merah illustrates why. He gave evidence in the case of his brother Mohammed Merah, the killer of Toulouse. In his testimony, Abdelkader Merah said that their mother had

⁵ Cf. C. Lussato, “Des imams en route vers Jérusalem: ‘Notre mission c’est la paix’,” *L’Obs*, November 11, 2012, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20121111.OBS8932/des-imams-en-route-vers-jerusalem-notre-mission-c-est-la-paix.html>; E. Miller, “‘Imam of the Jews’ Pays Historic Visit to Yad Vashem,” *The Times of Israel*, June 4, 2012, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/imam-of-the-jews-pays-historic-visit-to-yad-vashem/>.

raised her children to hate Jews, from their earliest years.⁶ A poor child pays the price of such an education in hatred. If you tell your children that Jews and Christians won't go to heaven, that is a serious problem. If you tell your children that a billion people (the Muslims) are going to heaven, but the other six billion are going to rot in hell, then that is a serious problem. It is a problem of education in the family and at school.

By contrast, the *Conférence des imams de France* is engaging in active education about terrorism and its implication for young Muslims. An organized visit to the Shoah Memorial and Drancy was organized for a group of young people from Molenbeek, the neighbourhood of the murderers of November the 13th, the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks at the Bataclan Theatre in Paris. Following this initiative, these young people started to see things differently. They listened to the testimony of one of the survivors. And at that tangible moment, the importance of education was demonstrated. The fruits of such an education can protect across generations.⁷

Social Media and Internet

This brings me to my third point, social media and the internet. Unfortunately, Mr. Google holds more power than Imam Chalghoumi. It is a sorry picture: 2,600 francophone Islamist websites; 43,000 tweets per day. That's a huge number. There is a massive amount of antisemitic propaganda out there. Recently, videos of killings in Syria were posted online. Also recently, a video was posted showing a person dressed like an Israeli massacring Palestinians. This propaganda is appealing to young people across the social networks.

Beside the social networks, there's Al Jazeera, the well-known TV network. It is a powerful network of hate which is present in many homes. This has a huge impact, because Al Jazeera spreads hatred, and there is culpability in that. In the Middle East, Christians are being massacred; Yezidis are being massacred. And the network bosses are responsible.

The hate incited by the social media, Islamist webpages, and Al Jazeera incites new hatred on a daily basis. Take my own Facebook page as an example,

⁶ Cf. A. Breeden, "Brother of 2012 Toulouse Killer Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison," *The New York Times*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/world/europe/brother-toulouse-attack.html>.

⁷ Cf. Line Press, "Attentats. Hassen Chalghoumi et jeunes de Molenbeek en hommage," filmed February 18, 2017, Paris, video, 51:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbQFavcTBFs>.

Imam Hassen Chalghoumi.⁸ You will find thousands of antisemitic comments, “Chalghoumi is a Zionist,” “Dog of the Jews,” etc. You will see how much hate there is.

Politics and Civil Society

In closing, I would like to come to my fourth area, politics and civil society. I think that the political class shares responsibility for the growing antisemitism, too. There are, unfortunately, some political parties in France that try to capitalise on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are some political parties which for electoral reasons as well as out of pure and simple clientelism chase the Muslim vote. Instead of having such opportunistic politicians—be they from the right or left—we need politicians who have a vision: a vision to unite the faithful, to unite all citizens. The desire to support the Palestinians and the Israelis means to strive for peace, not for its opposite. I think that when these extreme left-wing parties or communist parties exploit the poverty of Muslim people, the poverty of certain neighbourhoods, for their own political purposes, we pay a very high price for it and we can reckon with very, very serious consequences. In my opinion, there is a culpability here.

It is important for us as civil society, to be involved. The reason why is demonstrated by the following allegory: There are two groups of people in a boat, those down below and those on top. Those below would like to get some water, but they don’t want to bother those above. So they start making a hole in the boat’s hull. If you let them do that, then everyone is going to drown. If you stop them, everyone will be saved. I think that unless civil society as a whole—the various associations, the citizens, the writers—react, then unfortunately in the face of all this hatred and the rise of Islamism and the extreme right, Europe is at risk of enormous damage, similar to what happened in the last century.

What Can Be Done?

In light of these four points, I would like to conclude my remarks with some reflections on what can be done to fight Islamic antisemitism beyond the ideas I

⁸ Cf. “Imam Hassen Chalghoumi,” Facebook, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Imam-Hassen-Chalghoumi-441382799350121/>.

have already mentioned. I basically recommend a dual approach. On the one hand, there needs to be enforcement: It is very important that the current government and President Macron are discussing Islam, but I also think that people expect President Macron and Europe to stand firm on political Islam, really firm. It is time to move beyond discussion alone. Seventeen people were killed between the crimes committed by Merah and those of the Kouachi brothers⁹ and Mehdi Nemmouche¹⁰ and others. There has to be proper punishment for such crimes and any others. On the other hand, and at the same time, we also need to develop spiritual Islam, an Islam that helps us to live together. There's a need to make sufficient funds available for this because, you know, sometimes we at the *Conférence des imams de France* struggle on our own. We try to make progress, but it's not easy. I think if President Macron's government is not successful in this regard, there will be an enormous risk.

At the end of my contribution, I would like to emphasize that the future of the French Jews is in France, that the future of the French Muslims is in France, that my future is in France, and that the future of the Europeans is in Europe. If there are problems, we cannot just throw in the towel and leave. That's not a solution. The solution is to resist, in spite of the threats, in spite of the problems, but at the same time, we need everyone to be involved. If the Jews leave, then, to my mind, everyone will leave. Why do you think I pay tribute to you? Who founded LICRA (*Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme* [*International League against Racism and Antisemitism*]) or SOS Racisme? Wasn't it the leading lights of the Jewish community, because of what they had to endure, the Shoah? And this is what the Muslim community does not understand. If the Jews leave, the next victim is going to be the Muslim community itself; and it will pay a very high price. But unfortunately, the scourge of Islamism prevents this message from being heard.

⁹ Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, French citizens of Algerian origin, are responsible for the 2015 attack against the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. For an overview of the attack cf. N. P. Petrikowski, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., "Charlie Hebdo shooting," (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019), accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Charlie-Hebdo-shooting>.

¹⁰ Mehdi Nemmouche is a French-born jihadist of Algerian origin who, after spending a year in Syria fighting for the IS, was responsible for the shooting at the Brussels Jewish Museum of Belgium in May 2014 where he killed four people. Cf. e.g. A. Penketh, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooting: Suspect with Islamist Links Arrested," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/01/suspect-arrest-brussels-jewish-museum-shooting>.

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