

Jews and Muslims join together to defend religious minorities

by [Jessica Mendoza](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) When Sheryl Olitzky first broached the subject of a Jewish-Muslim women's group, Atiya Aftab didn't buy it.

"Why is someone calling me because I'm Muslim?" Aftab recalled thinking. "This is creepy."

But as Olitzky made her case over lattes at a Starbucks in suburban New Jersey, Aftab found herself drawn in.

"This is a woman extending her hand to me, saying, 'I want to get to know you, I want to be your protector, I want to have your back because I know what you're going through, because of what the Jewish community has been through,'" said Aftab, a professor at Rutgers's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. "That was so compelling."

After that meeting in 2010, the two women launched the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, a casual gathering of Muslim and Jewish women talking about faith and family, sharing their experiences as religious minorities in America. Today, the group has chapters in more than 50 cities.

"There's more of a sense of urgency," Aftab said. "We've heard from people all over the country, even all over the world, saying, 'I need to reach out and do something constructive rather than be affected by this fear in a negative way.'"

The success of groups such as the Sisterhood point to a growing—and perhaps unprecedented—desire among American Muslims and Jews to work toward a common goal, some say.

"More people have become aware of their common faiths given the rise of toxic anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic hate," said Haroon Moghul, senior fellow and director of development at the Center for Global Policy, a New York think tank. "There's been a definite change—and for the better."

Recently business, political, and religious leaders from both communities for the first time formed a joint advisory council that seeks to give Muslim and Jewish Americans a national voice.

Jewish-Muslim relations are “the single thorniest interfaith issue of our time,” Moghul said. “If we can find a way to talk and to understand and respect each other even as we disagree, then we are establishing a model.”

Amid a post-election spike in anti-Islamic sentiment, local Jewish groups have stepped up their support for Muslims in their own communities.

When mosques in Rhode Island, Ohio, Michigan, Georgia, Colorado, and California received copies of a threatening letter in November calling Muslims “a vile and filthy people” and saying that president-elect Donald Trump is “going to do to you Muslims what Hitler did to the jews [*sic*],” Jewish groups were among the first to reach out, said Ojaala Ahmad, communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Los Angeles.

One Jewish group out of New Haven, Connecticut, started an online campaign to raise funds for a Muslim nonprofit, urging fellow Jews to “hold ourselves accountable for the intersectional oppressions Muslim people are facing, and honor and join the movements Muslim Americans are building to combat white supremacy and advocate for their rights.”

In Los Angeles, another Jewish-Muslim partnership formed after a meeting at a community center. Michelle Missaghieh, a rabbi, and Aziza Hasan, a mediator with years of experience in coalition building, started organizing local meetings for women to study the Qur’an and Torah. The program became a key part of NewGround, an organization that fosters interfaith relationships through programs, grants, internships, and a leadership council for high school students.

For both NewGround and the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, the goal was to bridge a gap between two faith groups that share a rich history and experience as religious minorities in Christian-majority America.

Crossing the boundaries of faith to form relationships around those shared realities not only allows Muslim and Jewish Americans to hear and understand each other’s stories. It also helps them create a community that can together compose a more powerful narrative about their place in American society, said Brie Loskota,

executive director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

“Groups that are willing to talk and learn and still maintain their identities and distinctiveness represent a real promise for what a pluralistic society looks like,” she said. “If every disagreement is an existential disagreement, then the work of knitting together a society of 300 million people becomes almost impossible.”

For decades, Jews and Muslims in the United States have clashed on the issue of Israel-Palestine, and it’s no different with the new Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council, which debuted just days after the election. Its members often stand on opposite ends of the conflict, yet all of them are dedicated to promoting both communities’ concerns in the United States, said Robert Silverman, U.S. director of Muslim-Jewish relations for the American Jewish Committee.

The council’s work can bolster grassroots efforts like the Sisterhood and NewGround, he said.

“This new council adds a leadership, national-level body that can talk about things happening throughout the country and get some change done,” he said. “You have to have community-based organizations; otherwise it’s just a bunch of talking heads. But if it’s only grassroots groups, it stays limited. You need both to work.”

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