

How Israel-Hamas war is impacting Jewish and Muslim relationships on Long Island



Emily Kaufman, left, at her home in Huntington on Thursday. Kaufman, a clinical psychologist who is Jewish, said she has "unlearned" some of the "false history" she was taught about Israel and Palestine. Tofique Harun, right, at his home in Albertson on Thursday. Tofique, a Muslim, went trick-or-treating with some Jewish friends and their children, and maintains good relations with them. Credit: Howard Schnapp

By **Bart Jones** bart.jones@newsday.com Updated November 12, 2023 7:25 am

Interfaith work between Jews and Muslims 40 years in the making at one mosque in Nassau County has nearly broken down. It's the same story at another interfaith group in Suffolk County.

The violence in Israel and Gaza is shattering relationships between Muslims and Jews who have been friends for years or decades. Many are struggling to hold onto those ties, though they acknowledge they have opposite viewpoints on the Middle East conflict. Others are resigning themselves to lost or frayed friendships and alliances.

"At this time, both of the communities don't know how to address or how to talk, how to bring this topic up because there is grief, there is hurt, there is anger, there is frustration," said Isma Chaudhry, a longtime leader of interfaith work at the Islamic Center of Long Island, one of the oldest mosques on Long Island. "And a narrative on both sides which is very different from the other's narrative, which makes it even more complicated.

“Everybody is walking on eggshells at this time as much as we have built friendships, which are extremely valuable,” she added.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Many in the Islamic and Jewish communities** are struggling to hold onto interfaith relationships built up over decades, while others are resigned to those bonds being lost or frayed.
- **One interfaith group on Long Island** has agreed to focus on local concerns: antisemitic and anti-Muslim attacks against children in schools.
- **There are signs of hope**, including a Muslim man from Albertson who went trick-or-treating with his Jewish friends and their children.

Amid the tensions, there are some signs of hope: a 41-year-old Muslim in Nassau County, for instance, said he went trick-or-treating with some Jewish friends and their children.

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But there does not seem to be any easy fix as the violence continues, community leaders said.

Interfaith work at the Westbury mosque dates to the 1980s, but has been nearly brought to a standstill, if not broken down completely, Chaudhry and other leaders said. Rabbis and Muslim leaders who were building bridges between the two faiths now have found it difficult at times to even talk.

“We are in different universes” regarding the situation in Israel and Gaza, said Rabbi Michael White, a longtime collaborator at the mosque who heads Temple Sinai synagogue in Roslyn.

Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,400 people and taking about 240 hostages, according to Israeli officials. That has been followed by a counteroffensive by Israel that has left more than 10,000 Palestinians dead in Hamas-run Gaza, according to the Ministry of Health. The White House on Thursday said that Israel had agreed to four-hour humanitarian pauses to facilitate civilian evacuations.

“The Muslim-Jewish relationship that was built on interfaith and mutual respect, and tried our best within our faith constraints to be each other’s keepers, have really taken a tremendous hit with the current situation,” Chaudhry said. “Both sides are hurting. Both sides have lost dear family members.”

After a few weeks of little communication, the interfaith committee met recently. It did not go seamlessly.

Muslims immediately asked Jews to support a statement calling for a cease-fire in Gaza, White said.

“I explained to them why that was a nonstarter,” he said. “ Hamas butchered, massacred our people, and their leadership, both political and military, have stated that they will not stop until they have eliminated Israel.

“So there’s no possibility of a cease-fire until Hamas is completely disarmed and has no more power,” he said.

For their part, Muslims thought the cease-fire was reasonable, since thousands of civilians, including children, are being killed by the Israeli bombings, Chaudhry said.

Amin Khwaja, president of the mosque, said he was “shocked but not surprised” the Jewish leaders would not agree to the cease-fire statement, since “the sentiments are so high right now ... The faith should be advocating for peace, and there should be a protection for all civilians.”

Focusing on local issues

In the end, the group agreed to focus on local concerns: antisemitic and anti-Muslim attacks against children in schools on Long Island.

“No child should be held accountable for geopolitical world crises that they had nothing to do with,” White said. “So we agreed to keep talking about local issues because we live in this community and we have work to do here. So that is a change, and a good one. We want to remain in relationships with each other.

“In spite of the differences, which are profound, I think there was a sense of relief that we can be in the same room together and we can talk things through, that our relationships are strong enough to be able to do that,” he added.

Another interfaith group, Abraham's Table, is undergoing similar struggles with members “caught between conflicting viewpoints and loyalties” and is striving to move forward, said its chairperson, Richard Koubek, a Catholic layperson.

The group since 2015 has tried to bring the three Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Islam and Christianity — together to celebrate their common roots and build understanding and peace.

During the war, communication has become difficult, leaders said. The group has postponed one event, a panel discussion on how the three Abrahamic faiths view the concept of mercy.

“We don’t talk as much,” said Sadri Altinok, a Muslim who is vice chair of the group and is also president of the Turkish Cultural Center in Ronkonkoma. He added that his Jewish colleagues in the group “are understandably highly emotional” and not ready to converse.

The group is “not really ready to talk heart to heart,” he said. “We understand. They lost their friends and family.”

Koubek added that the mercy program was postponed “because the current situation in Israel and Gaza made it very difficult and painful for them to define what mercy means.”

The group issued a statement to Newsday signed by its Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders stating that it “has struggled with the war in Israel and Gaza. Despite the fact that members of the Abraham’s Table Steering Committee have had differences about the progress of the war, Abraham’s Table is uniformly concerned about the rise in hatred that the war generated.”

To that end, it plans to continue organizing efforts in neighborhoods to fight a rise in antisemitic, anti-Muslim and other acts of hate.

Still, there are hopeful signs

Despite the tensions, some Long Islanders see signs of hope. They say they have not let the conflict affect or destroy their ties with people of the other faith, and that they are trying to keep events in the Middle East separate from their lives here.

Toufique Harun, a Muslim who lives in Albertson, said he has many Jewish friends, and went trick-or-treating with some of them and their children on Halloween, along with his own children.

“Everyone is definitely on edge. Maybe they are approaching each other with a certain degree of cautiousness,” he said.

But “all of us are a lot more similar than we are different. I have a whole bunch of Jewish friends, and some of them were the first ones to reach out to us” when the Israeli bombing of Gaza began, he said.

“If you want to think about Muslims and Jews that live together in peace with equal rights for all and have a great life — I live on Long Island, it happens here every day,” he said.

Other houses of worship say they have kept pushing forward with interfaith outreach.

Rabbi Howard Buechler of the Dix Hills Jewish Center said his synagogue still hopes to hold interfaith events for holiday seasons, including seder dinners that both Jews and Muslims can attend.

“What the terrorists try to do is have people look upon each other differently with fear and trepidation,” he said. “We can never give the terrorists victory in having us look with suspicion

upon any neighbor. Our faiths are stronger and the bonds of faith cannot be hijacked by the Hamas terrorists.”

Some Long Island residents have encountered tensions within their own faith group.

Emily Kaufman, a clinical psychologist in Huntington who is Jewish, said she has “unlearned” some of what she was taught about Israel and Palestine, and tried to present some of the Palestinian perspective on the current conflict to relatives and close Jewish friends.

For instance, she had never learned that in 1948 when Israel was formed, 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forcibly removed from their lands in what Palestinians still refer to as the Nakba — or “catastrophe.”

When she brings up such points with other Jews, it doesn’t always go smoothly.

“It can get very heated and very emotional. They are really hard conversations,” she said. Sometimes, “I’m breaking out into tears ... It can become yelling matches.”

Harun said he has hope for younger generations of Long Islanders and Americans who grew up in a multicultural environment. Besides growing up with Jewish friends, he also had Jewish classmates at the University of Pennsylvania.

He was their designated “elevator man” during Sabbath each week when his Orthodox Jewish classmates were not allowed to use electricity. He pushed the buttons for them.

His friends in both religions agree “that no one should be killed, harmed, or anything like that, whether they are Israeli or Palestinian, whether they are Jewish or Muslim,” he said.

“A lot of the reasons these conflicts exist is that people can’t see the humanity of each other, and they talk past each other, and not talk with each other,” he said.

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