



Hakan Can

# MUSLIMS. JEWS. TOGETHER

**Hakan Can** is the Deputy Head of the Department for Fostering Austrian-Jewish Cultural Heritage and Combatting Antisemitism at the Federal Chancellery of Austria. **Prof. Uriya Shavit**, Head of the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, has conducted field studies and researched Islam in Europe for the past 17 years. In the aftermath of October 7, they discussed the future of Jewish-Muslim relations in Austria and the continent at large.

**Prof. Shavit:** A lot of people have the impression that the Muslims of Europe, with a definite article, are the enemies of Israel and of the Jews. Do you believe that is the case?

**Mr. Can:** That is far too complex a statement for me to be able to simply agree or disagree because “the Muslim” does not exist. Who would you mean? Me, my wife, someone else?

The Islamic religious community in Austria (*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft*) condemned the acts of violence and blatant human rights violations of October 7 in strong terms. It also responded to the Pro-Palestinian protests in Austria by calling for the cessation of any form of glorification of violence.

You have to consider that in Austria we have 16 recognized religious communities (*Religionsgemeinschaften*). One of them is the Jewish community (*Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft*). Another is the Muslim community (*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft*). Ninety percent of the mosques in Austria are under the umbrella of that community, and they condemned Hamas. We also have the Alevi community (*Alevitische Glaubensgemeinschaft*), not to be confused with the Alawites from Syria. These are Alevi Muslims who primarily come from Turkey.

The existence of religious communities with the status of public bodies enables the state to talk directly to their representatives. We are, however, aware that they do not represent everyone. There are around 700,000 Muslims in Austria and the vast majority of them are not under the umbrella of the Islamic Community. Some are secular. Some, even if they attend mosques, are still not members of the official community.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Austria are typically attended by approximately 500 to 700 people. A relatively small number if you consider that there are around 700,000 Muslims in the country. If they were all anti-Israeli, you would see bigger demonstrations.

Note that the majority of Muslims in the country are of Turkish descent. Other significant ethnic groups within the Muslim population include Bosniaks, Albanians and North Macedonians with Albanian roots. Arabs constitute a minority within the broader Muslim community.

**Prof. Shavit:** Muslims in Europe are divided along so many different lines. Ethnicity creates a major division. It matters whether you are a Turk, a Pakistani, a Bosnian or a Moroccan. It matters a great deal in terms of how you manifest your Islam. Ideologies matter, and personal differences matter. Religio-legal orientations matter. Political orientations matter.

When it comes to relations with Judaism and approaches to Israel, my impression has been that there is great resentment among some people, but more commonly, there is indifference. It is just not something that preoccupies people. There are some European Muslims, including North Africans, who are interested in forging relations with Jewish communities because they realize that they have shared interests and shared experiences. I feel that European Jewish communities and the State of Israel are not exhausting the potential of that goodwill.

**Mr. Can:** I would like to give you an example of the relations between our religious communities.

Last April, roughly ten Austrian imams and ten representatives of the Islamic community, along with ten representatives from the Jewish community, visited Auschwitz together. The President of the Islamic Community recited from the Quran next to the crematorium, honoring those who were brutally murdered by the Nazi regime.

We also plan to have imams dedicate one day each year to addressing antisemitism in their mosques. This initiative has not been implemented yet, but the intention is there.

In Austria, I can confidently say that the relations between religious communities, particularly between the Jewish and Muslim communities, are good. Some representatives share strong friendships, like one of our imams who, together with a rabbi, visited schools in Austria to talk with students about interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

It is those interpersonal encounters that we need to promote in order to break down prejudices and build mutual trust. We are proud of those relations. You might not, however, have those in countries like France – an example of fractured relations because of the separation between state and religion.

**Prof. Shavit:** Am I correct that Islam in Austria is more state-supervised and state-regulated than in other European countries? For example, you do not allow the importation of imams?

**Mr. Can:** After we disallowed this importation, I observed that the youth tend to gravitate towards other mosques with less educated imams. Simply having imams with insufficient education, as opposed to imported imams, is not an ideal alternative, in my opinion.

While I comprehend the rationale behind the policy – aiming for imams who are familiar with Austrian society and proficient in the German language – it is evident that we still face challenges in having a sufficient number of qualified imams.

Personally, I would have preferred an interim solution to address this gap. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that Austria, as a state, is justified in wanting to avoid external influences in religious matters.

**Prof. Shavit:** There are shared interests between Jews and Muslims. For example, regarding the debates on Halal and Kosher butchering, circumcision, and wearing headscarves.

**Mr. Can:** Yes, indeed. However, while these issues were previously subjects of debate in Austria, this is no longer the case. There is no sense of urgency among the Jewish and Muslim communities in terms of cooperation on these particular matters.

**Prof. Shavit:** Tell me something: How does a nice Austrian Muslim boy of Turkish extraction end up being the person responsible for fighting antisemitism in Austria?

**Mr. Can:** Well, I am an example of the good relations between the communities.

Here is how it happened. In 2010, for my civil service, I spent one year in Jerusalem and volunteered at the Austrian Pilgrimage Hospice.

I chose Israel for a reason. This was right after the Freedom Party had become the second largest political party in Austria and entered the coalition government. One of the items on their agenda was to segregate Austrian children based on ethnicity from other kids in schools. At least that was the claim made during discussions within the Muslim community.

I vividly recall the evening when we were around the dinner table at home.

My mother expressed concern to my father, telling him that if they actually separated children at school, we would move back to Turkey the next day. Attempting to reassure her, I responded, “Mom, it’s just schools.”

She retorted, “That’s how it started with the Jews in Austria; it started with state-regulated separation and culminated in a genocide. At that time, there was no Israel. Now, they have Israel, and it serves as life insurance for all Jews around the world. Our insurance is Turkey.” At the time, we had Turkish citizenship.

This conversation sparked my curiosity about the Jewish people and that is how I found my way to volunteering at the Pilgrimage Hospice.

I worked at the reception, I washed dishes, and I served as a waiter at the hospice’s charming Viennese coffeehouse. You could truly savor the classic Viennese coffee Melange alongside the traditional Austrian Sacher cake.

After that, I studied Political Science at the University of Vienna and then embarked on a diverse professional journey that included a tenure at the Austrian Embassy in Ankara. There I served as an officer for science and cultural affairs.

During a period marked by strained relations between Austria and Turkey, I sought collaborative initiatives and found like-minded people facing similar challenges, particularly among colleagues at the Israeli Embassy. The collaboration led me to delve into the complex issues of antisemitism in both Austria and the Muslim world.

When I returned to Austria, I began working at the Office of Religious Affairs at the Federal Chancellery and specifically engaged with the Muslim community. When the government announced a national strategy for combatting antisemitism, I was entrusted with a pivotal role in that initiative.

**Prof. Shavit:** Did you ever experience anyone from the Jewish community feeling uncomfortable with a Muslim being the one responsible for combatting antisemitism?

**Mr. Can:** No, absolutely not. I am very close to the Jewish community. They invite me to relevant events, and I also participate in events hosted by the Israeli Embassy.

The vast majority of Muslims in Austria harbor no issues with Jews. In 2022, we had 719 antisemitic incidents, and 55% of them were attributed to the right, with 20% to the left and only 9% to the Muslim community.

While I certainly don't want to downplay the significance of those 9%, since every percentage is too much, the figures clearly show that antisemitism in Austria stems from various quarters, not just the Islamist scene.

**Prof. Shavit:** The Turkish public discourse is not devoid of antisemitism. Were you exposed to antisemitism as a child?

**Mr. Can:** No, never. During my childhood, I regularly attended a mosque and there was never any sign of antisemitism there.

I closely follow Turkish media, and while there is considerable coverage of Erdogan's anti-Israel and antisemitic rhetoric, there are also opposition leaders in parliament who denounce the Hamas attacks as acts of terror.

**Prof. Shavit:** Is it more dangerous to be visibly identifiable as a Jew in Austria since October 7? Not only in regard to Muslims, but also in general?

**Mr. Can:** I would say it is. The Reporting Centre for Antisemitism (Antisemitismus-Meldestelle) of the Jewish Community of Vienna (IKG Wien) noted a 300% increase in antisemitic incidents from the month following October 7 to mid-November. This is compared to the same period the previous year.

The days immediately after the attacks, 70% of Jewish parents did not send their kids to school. If they feel that their children are not safe, then I would say yes, there is danger.

**Prof. Shavit:** In all the years of knowing Israel, Israelis and Jews, what surprised you the most?

**Mr. Can:** I was surprised at how similar Israelis and Turks are. Very loud and very emotional.

That was my biggest surprise. Realizing the striking similarities between those two groups. The tension between secularists and religious people in both societies is particularly reminiscent. That there is solidarity when it is needed. Turkey, in many ways, resembles Israel more than it does Syria.

What are your thoughts? I assume you have visited Turkey?

**Prof. Shavit:** I always felt that the two countries are like twins separated at birth. But you know, sometimes the most vicious fights are within the family...

**Mr. Can:** Indeed, that is true.

When Turks discuss the Ottoman era and the Empire, they often express immense pride that the Sultan invited the Jews who were expelled from Spain to the Ottoman Empire. They take pride that the Jews felt comfortable living in the Empire. It is interesting that individuals can express pride in the kindness their ancestors showed to Jews, and yet, in the next sentence, some make antisemitic comments.

When I visited Israel, I also noted how similar Judaism and Islam are.

While recognizing their differences, I experienced the close affinity between these two religions. I noted the practice of some women abstaining from shaking hands with men due to religious convictions. The shared prohibition on pork and the tradition of circumcision, too. As a political scientist, I posit that Israel is not in Europe, but from Europe. I believe that Turkey is not from Europe, but in Europe.

**Prof. Shavit:** Did you ever get any negative response from the Muslim community about your job?

**Mr. Can:** Never. I am often told that it is commendable to have a Muslim in my position as it serves to counter the misconception that all Muslims are antisemitic.

I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize a crucial point.

In 2023, if we cannot collectively protect a minority that has been persecuted numerous times throughout history, then we, as humanity, have failed.

If Jews are not safe in public spaces, then we have gone 80 years back in time. We are all aware of the dire consequences that followed. World War II was not only a catastrophe for the Jews, but for all of humanity.

We, therefore, have to dedicate every effort to fighting antisemitism, racism and discrimination at large.

While people may hold varying opinions on Israeli policies, with settlements and related issues often cropping up, it is crucial to separate those discussions from the events of October 7. The world witnessed an act of terror, and it must be unequivocally condemned as such. I expect every community to denounce it. The terrorist who attacks you today may target me tomorrow.