

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Seeking Jewish-Muslim understanding on a polarizing issue

By Douglas Kindschi

Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Last week, we discussed the increased polarization of the political world and introduced what might well be the most conflicted topic in the interfaith world: the Israel-Palestine conflict.

While the Kaufman Interfaith Institute has tried to avoid the political controversies in our dialogue series, we have been inspired by the Hauenstein Center's project in this arena.

Leaders of the GVSU program have led the way in seeking to bring the opposing views in the political realm together to seek common ground. They will join us at an upcoming event, where we will look at the question, "Can We Find Common Ground Between Israel and Palestine?"

This has been a passion for



Kindschi

Abdullah Antepli, the first imam at Duke University and now the chief representative for Muslim affairs at that university.

Born in southeast Turkey, not far from the Syrian border, he describes his upbringing "in a very national, chauvinist, secular home which was very, very anti-Semitic. ... I really believed for a number of years that Jews as people and Judaism as a religion were irredeemably evil."

In a desire to learn more about the Muslim faith, he entered an imam training program, where he studied the Quran and the life of Muhammad. The more he studied, the more he became aware that the basic message of Islam is not hatred but compassion and mercy.

He spent eight years living that out while working for a Muslim humanitarian relief organization, setting up schools and orphanages in Southeast Asia. In the process, he realized his anti-Semitism was a "self-destructive, toxic poison," which was freezing the willpower to do what is good

and constructive.

The next phase in his development came when he moved to the U.S. at age 30 to study to be an Islamic chaplain and received his master's degree in Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

## TRIP TO TURKEY, ISRAEL

While serving as a Muslim chaplain at Wesleyan University he became friends with the Jewish chaplain Rabbi David Leipziger. Together, they led a group of 17 Jewish and Muslim students on a trip to Turkey and Israel.

For the American Muslims on the trip, Turkey was a revelation, introducing them to the rich history of Islam.

For the Jewish students, who, following 9/11, had seen Muslims only as terrorists, now saw Muslims are not people who are wired to hate.

One student said, "the Turkey trip really challenged what they'd heard about Islam."

The Israel portion of the trip

was, however, not successful.

Discussion between Israelis and Palestinians turned into shouting matches.

But Abdullah did not give up his efforts.

"If anything, it made me more determined to make a difference. I already feel this calling from God: I am going to spend a significant part of my energy in improving Jewish-Muslim relations ... globally, but especially in the United States."

This commitment led many years later to the establishment of the Muslim Leadership Initiative in cooperation with the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

For Abdullah, "what often defines Jewish-Muslim relations is lack of knowledge and lack of trust, mainly, because of the toxic impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which polarizes us and creates a zero-sum game."

He still has not given up, however, and more of his story can be found at [goo.gl/8B44Dd](http://goo.gl/8B44Dd).

The Muslim Leadership

Initiative has become controversial in some segments of the American Muslim community and has been seen as divisive by some at a time when, unfortunately, Islamophobia is on the rise. For more on the history of the controversy, see [goo.gl/cAhFvP](http://goo.gl/cAhFvP).

## UPCOMING EVENT

Abdullah Antepli and Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, will be in Grand Rapids to engage this Jewish-Muslim effort to seek understanding on this most volatile issue. Together with the Hauenstein Center at GVSU, we will explore "Can We Find Common Ground Between Israel and Palestine?" Join us at 7 p.m. Sept. 8 in Loosmore Auditorium on the GVSU Grand Rapids campus. Seating is limited, so reservations are required.

Further information and registration is available at [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org)  
— Contact: [interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)