

Hamza Ali Alamoosh, Jordan. **A project descriptive essay on bridging Islamic and Christian cultures**

Black Iris: The Earth Charter as a Common Vision for Muslim and Christian Youth in Jordan



Hamza Ali Alamoosh participated in the Global Youth Reporters Program at the IUCN Congress in Amman in 2000. In the same year, he founded Jordan's

first Environmental Students Conference. In 2003, Hamza joined the Earth Charter Youth Initiative. Since 2004, Hamza has been a member of the core-group that coordinates the network activities worldwide. On national level, Hamza played a vital role in the formulation of the National Youth Strategy. In 2004, Hamza had the honor of accompanying His Majesty King Abdullah II on an official visit to the USA. Since 2005, Hamza is a member of the Third Chamber, the Dutch Shadow Parliament established to raise awareness of the Dutch people on issues of international development and cooperation. He is also a member of the Technical Committee of Jordan Youth Parliament Institution which he hopes will stand as a voice and a legitimate representative of the young Jordanians.

Being centred in the Middle East, the largest area of conflict in the world, Jordan is surrounded by war and violence from East and West. The existence of many social, economic, and environmental difficulties is added to the burdens of poverty, pollution, leakage of water, and violent conflict. Over sixty percent of the population in Jordan – nearly three million people – are currently under the age of twenty-five.

Many of these are between sixteen and twenty-four. The high percentage of unemployment among young people and the feelings of depression induced by injustice and difficult life conditions have turned the Middle East into a very dangerous place. Such aspects of the global situation, described in the Preamble, are part of everyday life for Arab youth.

Despite these perilous trends, the threat of a “clash of civilization” does not hold true in the Jordanian context. On the contrary, Jordan's rich and diverse religious history can be considered a model for harmony among religions, especially between Christians and Muslims. The land around the Jordan River valley and the Dead Sea plain is revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was baptized in its river, very close to the city of Madaba. During the difficult times of the endless wars between the Roman and Persian empires, the Arab families stood by the early Christians and protected them. Since then, Christianity has been deeply rooted in Jordan's society.

When Islam was introduced around six centuries later, its message was understood as a continuation of what the other sent Messenger had started, completing the universal call to justice, freedom, and care for nature and one's fellow human beings. Therefore, the people who adopted the new religion paid their full respect to Christianity. This is underlined by the new heritage

findings which prove that no Christian sites were disturbed by the Muslims. All the churches and other holy sites are preserved. Thus, the old churches along with the historic mosques, tell a story about the common call towards universal brotherhood among all people. United Jordanian Muslims and Christians sacrificed much of their lives, energies, and efforts together to achieve these humanitarian principles, which currently are globally threatened by conflicts and mistrust. Jordan's history of tolerance, and its people's motivation towards building a just and sustainable life continued with the support shown for the Earth Charter, when it was endorsed by all ninety-nine municipalities under the leadership of Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Talal, the Earth Charter Commissioner from the Middle East and North Africa. This strong movement helps the individuals and organizations who are looking forward to implementing the Earth Charter, not for only its ethical framework, but for the vision it has for sustainability. The Black Iris is looking now to join the municipal councils in order to develop a wide partnership to disseminate the vision of the Earth Charter, and to get involved in their projects.

When the Earth Charter was introduced among Jordanian youth, it was not seen as a threat to their traditions or faiths. On the contrary, it was considered a new opportunity to reflect on our aspirations for a better world. Many young Jordanians saw that the Charter's inclusive,

ethical vision is very much in line with the guiding values of our religious ancestors. Therefore, its call was easily accepted and widely respected by those who got its message.

As the harmony between Muslim and Christian Jordanians is still as alive and strong as ever, the story of the Black Iris Earth Charter Youth Group Jordan, which was created in 2003, is only another chapter added to the success story of fruitful interreligious cooperation in Jordan.

Named after the black iris of Jordan, a flower which is the national symbol for growth and renewal, Black Iris is a network of various Jordanian youth bodies, including both governmental and non-governmental entities, and focuses on the creation of synergy effects between them. Restructured in September 2004, Black Iris is now coordinated by a core group of seven youth leaders from different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds affiliated with different youth organizations in Jordan. These seven Muslim and Christian youth are mainly students from different universities who disseminate the Earth Charter in their respective communities. They are working together to provide a common national platform for youth non governmental organizations to study the principles of the Earth Charter, and to encourage the creation of youth-led initiatives that foster youth participation in all levels of community life. Black Iris receives passionate support from Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Talal, who provides the group with the legal backing of her Princess Basma Youth Resource Centre, which is part of the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development.

The network has already managed to spread the Earth Charter idea to important organs and projects. As an outcome of a national survey, the Higher Council of Youth in Jordan has set up nine main themes as youth concerns and issues, and in March 2005 the Jordanian King presented the Council's



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strategy on how to reach various youth-oriented goals in a five-year perspective. As a result of Black Iris' work, the Earth Charter has been recognized as one of the international references in the Higher Council's youth and environment theme, and has been highlighted as one of the pioneer global calls for sustainable development. In addition, some group members have been able to foster discussions on youth participation guided by Earth Charter principles in the NGO called Jordan Forum for Youth and Culture, which is an umbrella organization for youth-based initiatives. The members of Black Iris also contribute articles to the Youth Section in the Jordanian newspaper *Alrai*, discussing topics such as international development issues, youth development issues, and democracy. In addition, the Black Iris members express their convictions in the Earth Charter by doing voluntary work, such as giving free lessons to orphans and non-privileged students at school and university levels; running exchange programs for including youth with physical and social barriers in different bodies of youth representation; protecting the local environment; and participating in youth forums, non-formal university activities, and international youth settings.

Being a young citizen in the Middle East is truly not an easy thing, and a lot of young Jordanians believe that they are not living in the Middle East by accident. To most of them, it appears that they are here for the purpose of building a secure homeland in a peaceful region and of building a fair world. Exactly this goal, which forges both Christian and Muslim youth together, is reflected in the Earth Charter's inclusive, ethical vision of justice, sustainability, and peace. ●