

# FIU Jewish Muslim Dialogues: Exploring Antisemitism and Islamophobia

*By: Iqbal Akhtar*

The East-West Foundation and Florida International University

11 November 2025



**Miami, FL** – Florida International University is fostering critical interfaith conversations through an innovative dialogue series that brings together Jewish and Muslim students to develop new frameworks for understanding in the wake of heightened tensions following October 7th, 2023.

The initiative, led by Jon Warech, director of FIU Hillel, and Dr. Iqbal Akhtar, Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Politics & International Relations, recently held its fourth of six sessions focusing on "Stereotypes and Reality." The series aims to move beyond conventional interfaith approaches by encouraging participants to engage with differences rather than merely emphasizing commonalities.

"We're not here to teach each other the history of media representation," explained Warech. "We want to talk about how media representation has affected us personally."

The November session brought together a diverse group of students to discuss how media narratives and stereotypes shape perceptions of both Jewish and Muslim communities. Participants shared personal experiences of discrimination, from airport profiling to campus tensions, while grappling with the challenge of being asked to represent entire communities based on their religious identity.

### **Confronting Stereotypes and Seeking Solutions**

Students identified persistent stereotypes affecting both communities. Muslim participants described being portrayed as "barbaric" and "uncivilized" in Western media, with one student noting that in some European countries, particularly France, anti-Muslim sentiment has become institutionalized through policies targeting religious expression.

Jewish students discussed the exhaustion of constantly being asked to explain or defend Israeli policies, with one participant describing being approached at a bar in Miami Beach and immediately questioned about Middle Eastern politics rather than being greeted as an individual.

Dr. Akhtar, who recently returned from a conference in Haifa, Israel, shared his observations about the diversity within Israeli society and ongoing grassroots peace-building efforts that rarely receive mainstream media coverage. "There's a lot of people doing a lot of good work, and you just don't see it," he noted, highlighting the media's tendency to prioritize conflict over constructive dialogue.

### **The Challenge of Campus Activism**

The conversation addressed tensions around campus protests and activism, with students expressing concern that demonstrations often generate more heat than light. Several Muslim participants noted they had chosen not to participate in protests they viewed as counterproductive, with one student observing, "Where is your decency in this situation? You're agitating people more."

The group discussed how social media has democratized information sharing while simultaneously creating echo chambers where users are fed content confirming their existing beliefs. "Everybody's just stuck in their little bubbles," one participant noted, making it increasingly difficult to encounter perspectives that challenge one's worldview.

### **Moving Forward Through Personal Connection**

A central theme emerged around the importance of direct human contact in breaking down barriers. Several students shared that FIU's diversity, rather than creating more friction, actually reduces tension because people have opportunities to interact with those different from themselves.

"How are you going to hate people if you actually interact with them?" asked one Israeli student, noting that many people in conflict zones grow up without meeting anyone from the "other side."

Dr. Akhtar emphasized that substantial internal work remains necessary within both Muslim and Jewish communities before effective external dialogue can flourish. He pointed to the collapse of

religious authority in the Muslim world and the mainstreaming of antisemitism in some Muslim contexts as critical challenges requiring attention.

The dialogue series represents a departure from traditional interfaith programs that Warech and Dr. Akhtar view as often staying at the level of "pleasantries" rather than engaging substantive differences. "All religions want you to be a good person," Dr. Akhtar observed, "but that defaults to something really somewhat disingenuous."

### **Looking Ahead**

The group will hold its final session on December 3rd at the FIU Faculty Club, where participants will receive certificates recognizing their completion of the program. The initiative comes at a time when many Jewish students report experiencing fatigue with dialogue efforts that failed to prevent the surge in antisemitism following October 7th, while Muslim students navigate increased Islamophobia and pressure to distance themselves from extremism.

Despite the challenges, participants expressed cautious optimism about person-to-person connection as a path forward. As one student noted, "The only thing that happens is you sit down and talk to each other—that's where all the issues start to get resolved."

The dialogue series exemplifies FIU's commitment to creating spaces where difficult conversations can occur, even when—perhaps especially when—the broader political climate makes such exchanges increasingly rare.