

Learning together, living together



FU Berlin/Bernd Wannemacher

The degree course “Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World” enables dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians

In the DAAD-funded Master’s course “Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World”, Palestinian, Israeli and German students all learn together. The graduation of the fourth year group was celebrated with a three-day conference.

When Sara Sviri thinks about the past year, her eyes light up intently. “This course is magical,” she says, conspiratorially. “It is much more than an academic framework for a visionary idea – things are really happening here, and it’s somehow as if magic is at play.” Sara Sviri is professor emeritus of Islamic mysticism and mystical philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has been teaching on the online-based Master’s course “Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World” offered by the Freie Universität Berlin for a year. On the course, up to 20 students focus on the diverse heritage of the Islamic world of medieval times. Eight places are reserved for Palestinians, eight for Israelis, and German students are also increasingly completing the degree course – making it unique. At the end of August 2017, graduates from all four year groups met up in Berlin for the first time for a three-day conference and graduate celebration for the fourth year group.

“I simply wanted to know more and have always been really interested in philosophy,” says 25-year-old Hala Shakhshir, explaining why she decided to study the Master’s course. Hala Shakhshir lives in Nablus, a city in the Palestinian autonomous region with around 150,000 inhabitants. She recently established a centre for art and culture there, where children aged

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5–15 can get together after school and engage in artistic activities. “Nablu has so many inhabitants, but there is nothing for the children to do after school. That’s why even primary school children play on their mobile phones or tablets for hours,” says Shakhshir. On the Master’s course, she has struck up a friendship with an Israeli woman and says: “I would never have considered it possible that that could happen one day.” But above all, it is the independent work in the online courses that has boosted her self-confidence and motivation. “I saw that I could achieve something. My motto is now: just go and get on with it.”



The Berlin-based klezmer group Bohai provided the musical accompaniment for the graduation celebration

Twice a week for three hours, the students spend time together in virtual lecture theatres, discuss topics and meet in digital group rooms to work on projects. But in actual fact, they are sitting in front of computers in Ramallah, Tel Aviv, Cairo and Hebron. The Master’s course is deliberately about crossing the disciplinary, religious, cultural and philological boundaries of disciplines such as Islamic studies, Jewish studies and Christian orientalism.

Initiated by three Islamic studies scholars

The course was set up in 2013 by three friends and colleagues who, in professional terms, embody the very nature of the Master’s course: the Islamic studies scholar and Judaist, Professor Emerita Sarah Stroumsa, former rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; German Islamic studies scholar and former diplomat, Professor Sabine Schmidtke, permanent member of faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey; and Professor of Islamic and Political Philosophy and former President of Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem, Sari Nusseibeh. “We wanted to change things and provide space for exchange, which has become rare as a result of current politics,” explains Sarah Stroumsa. “Most of all, I associate this course with hope.”





The Deputy Secretary General of the DAAD, Ulrich Grothus, and course initiator Sarah Stroumsa struck up a conversation at the graduation celebration

The three-day conference on the premises of the Freie Universität Berlin demonstrated the diversity of the graduates' fields of activity and highlighted the many friendships that have emerged from the joint course. Some alumni who are now doing a PhD presented their current research – ranging from the concept of freedom and obligation in the Bible to pedagogical aspects in the teaching of the Egyptian jurist and reformer Muhammad Abduh. The participants also visited the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and developed strategies for helping alumni to network more effectively. They also discussed the issue of how a newspaper advertisement should be worded to make students in Israel and the Palestinian territories aware of the Master's degree course.

Change through dialogue

“Outstanding and unique” was what the Deputy Secretary General of the DAAD, Ulrich Grothus, called the Master's course at the graduate celebration. The DAAD supports the Master's course with funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Grothus praised the students for learning and speaking with one another and listening to each other, despite the difficult situation in their home region. “Dialogue does not guarantee understanding, but without dialogue there can be no understanding and no peace,” he said.

From the beginning, he said, the DAAD had been keen to support the idea of students from different backgrounds coming together to learn about the numerous connections between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The DAAD supports Palestinian students with scholarships; the Yad Hanadiv Foundation, established by the Rothschild family, supports Israeli students. “The graduates will remember their fellow students and teachers and the discussions they had with them for the rest of their lives,” said Grothus. “They can make a difference, each one of them.”

Sarah Kanning (5 September 2017)

FURTHER INFORMATION

[Master's course “Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World”](http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/ieiw/)
[<http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/ieiw/>] [<http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/ieiw/>]

[Degree courses that promote dialogue](https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/further-information-on-daad-programmes/dialogue-promoting-study-programmes/) [<https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/further-information-on-daad-programmes/dialogue-promoting-study-programmes/>]

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