

SALON FÜR BEGEGNUNG

vom Mittwoch 10. Februar 2021



It got us to thinking about that much-romanticized, often revived tradition of thinkers from centuries past: the salon.

Together with our guests of honor **Firas Shamsan**, journalist, photographer, blogger and peace activist from Yemen writing and fighting for peace, nonviolence and the freedom of speech, currently PEN scholar in Switzerland, and **Daniel Mekonnen**, human rights lawyer and activist from Eritrea, founding member of the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights and author of books and articles on human rights issues, we discussed the topic *Activists for Peace*.

Firas Shamsan: I started my activities in the years 2006 and 2007. I was still a student then but I already started to recognize that there were a lot of issues in my community, so I started campaigns in Yemen. You may know Yemen from the Mocca (Al-Mukhā) region that used to sell coffee out of Yemen across the world. This place is not selling coffee anymore, because it's now a place of conflict. I arrived in Switzerland on the 14th of January in 2019. 14th of January was also the date of a big armed conflict happening in my city, Aden, where the former communist comrades turned against each other. The civil war started in 1994 between the south and the north of Yemen and it was really when I came of age. Since then, the situation has become even more difficult.

In 1990, the Berlin wall collapsed and Yemen got united. But this united Yemen was really weak and collapsed in 1994 and the war began.

From 1994 until 2014 groups started to form radical movements, especially Islamic radical movements, both Sunni and Shia. They were gaining more and more power and got involved in the government, controlling education, and establishing religious schools. All these aspects caused Yemen to become one of the most failed countries in the world.

We have a lot of conflicts, not just the obvious ones covered by the international media, but also internal strife and hate speech. In 2006 I started my advocacy efforts to support the community. In Yemen they stopped growing coffee but they started growing kwat. This drug is a big problem in Yemen.

I tried to start an advocacy campaign focused on health and cultural change. In 2011, I was involved in the street movement protests during the Arab spring, but it also resulted in the emergence of radical movements. We faced a lot of failed governments in Yemen, we face a lot of radical movements who are fighting against each other to control hungry people.

To give you an example, let me mention Tawakkol Karman, the first Arab woman to get a Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. She was my neighbor and I know her personally. Now, she is not in Yemen anymore because of the situation there. Peace builders in Yemen are really struggling. NGOs built on donations are not supported by the government. If you start a

NGO or a civil movement you will get problems with the government.

In 2008, we collaborated with UN volunteers in the context of the International Youth Day. We created some banners, which were then destroyed by the government and the radical groups. Change can be achieved not just by me as a journalist trying to publish news, no, I thought I would make some change by personal involvement. I started campaigns, gathering groups of writers and journalists. During that time, it was hard to publish in a magazine, so we started YMF, a youth media forum. It was a group gathering journalists, writers. We all published stories. It was a base for young people, because at that time all media were focusing on political and religious fighters and political issues. It ended the forum being closed and me laying down work because we didn't get any funding. I tried to continue this kind of activities and I started joining regional events. I was facing arrest. I was invited for a young journalist event in Jordan, it was called Young Media Activist. It involved a lot of famous people from Arab countries and was funded and supported by the Prime Minister of Jordan. To attend the event, I crossed the border from Syria to Jordan, where I was asked about my activities and I said that I worked as a journalist. I was not a famous journalist, I was working as a freelancer. They kept me for investigation, after several hours, I could leave. But the day after, they came again after me, calling me names. My name is not popular in Yemen, it is not a typical Yemeni name. So it could not be a misunderstanding. They just wanted to show me how strong they are.

During these activities until 2010 I was one of those who were working in the Arabic segment in the internet and I was actually creating new content. After 2011 we went on the streets, protesting, we tried to spread ideas, we were talking about violence, corruption. I ended up with injuries, I got attacked on the square. There was no place to feel at peace for a young man.

After 2011 I started an awareness campaign aimed at the people using weapons. It was called: Your head is here to think and not to

explode. We tried hard to launch this campaign and we tried to find a store to print some poster for us but it was hard to get it. All these things ended up in collapse and I tried to start another project called FAN time.

Radical movements focus on media, especially on children, targeting them with religious music, religious books that should intimidate them. So we wanted to change this culture by creating content about young artists to give them a voice in public. In 2013 I went to Egypt because my hope was vanishing. Egypt for us is a base for media, it has the biggest media presence in the Middle East. So I went there, trying to create content for the media. I went to a book fair to produce a video by asking people what books they prefer. I was jailed for one and a half months. In jail I was beaten hard and tortured. We know a lot of peacemakers who end up in jail. But no force touches the radicals.

Physical torture is killing you slowly, either by torture itself or by loss of all you have. It destroys your career. I never got my certificate from university, when I went to the street in 2011. They punished me by deleting my certificate. There are two solutions: Either you accept the power of radical groups and you will then get a lot of benefits and money or as an activist you better run, you cannot survive in our countries. At home we are infidels and at my new home here I have to start as a newborn, as a baby. This is not easy.

Daniel Mekonnen: Tonight I want to speak about two interrelated aspects of peace. One is that which is related to what is currently happening in Eritrea and its neighboring country Ethiopia. Of course, many people know me as Eritrean because of my work I do for my human rights activism. All my publications and my research are related to Eritrea. I was born and raised in Eritrea but I have also family backgrounds in Ethiopia. At a personal level I identify myself as an Eritrean and Ethiopian. So, what is currently happening in both countries is also very painful in a personal way.

The second part of my speech will touch another aspect of peace. Particularly peace in the context of intercultural communication and

dialogue. As a person who has lived in exile for the last 20 years, I find it important also to discuss the importance of dialogue between different cultural groups and communities. We need to nurture a culture of dialogue, a culture of intercultural dialogue between minority communities and the host communities. For example, Switzerland is one of the leading recipient of migrants and refugees with Eritreans being on the top of the list. So I also would like to touch this because it is very much related to what we want to achieve in terms of peace and I say this because peace is, as said by the well-known philosopher Spinoza, not just the absence of war.

Some of you may know since November 2020, there is a spreading conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia, in Tigrinya, which is the immediate neighboring province to Eritrea which also speaks Tigrinya. It is the most dominant and de facto official language there. The government called this armed conflict a “law enforcement operation”, which is disturbing, because you don’t go for law enforcement with tanks, fighter jets, drones, and tens of thousands of soldiers. Exactly that was happening in Ethiopia starting November 2020. There was also an active involvement of Eritrean troops. Eritrean troops are fighting in the war supporting the Ethiopian government which is fighting a so called rebellious group in the northern part of Ethiopia, the TPLF, which is the governing body of the regional state of Tigray. This is very much related to another major war. Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a war 22 years ago in which I was also deployed as a combatant soldier. By a miracle I didn’t die in the war. I made it safely home and now here I’m speaking to you. But many of my friends, my childhood friends, my relatives died in the war or lost their limbs. And the sad part of the story is, 22 years later there is this another major devastating armed conflict happening between Eritrea and Ethiopia. So when I left Eritrea in 2001 I left partly because of a political crisis that erupted as a result of the war and the border conflicts. Eritrea was in a deep political crisis, the government was arresting opposing politicians, it shut down all the private newspapers and it was a particularly dire time. I left Eritrea for a personal higher

professional education. I never went back after that. So when I left I was not prosecuted but what I did over the last 20 years after leaving Eritrea is very much related to what I have seen happening in the country mainly in the area of human rights. All sorts of human rights violations happened in Eritrea: forced disappearances, torture, arbitrary and extrajudicial executions, affecting thousands of people. Some of you may know Eritrea was investigated by the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, not by the council itself, but by a commission of inquiry that was mandated by the Human Rights Council. And that commission came up with a very strong report in 2016, saying that the government of Eritrea is and has been committing crimes against humanity. And crimes against humanity are among the worst violations by international law. They can be prosecuted by the international criminal court. This literally means some of the high ranked political leaders in Eritrea including the president should by now be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. It’s in this context that Eritrea and Ethiopia went to another fresh border conflict in November 2020. Gross human rights violations are taking place in the region. Such as looting, pillaging, raping, sexual violence, abduction of refugees. In the northern part of Ethiopia there were more than 100’000 Eritrean refugees according to UN figures before the start of the war. As we speak now more than 20’000 of them have disappeared. The suspicion is that most of them have been abducted by Eritrean troops and were sent back to Eritrea. In the official narrative of the government this people are traitors. And according to the Eritrean government traitors have to be executed. Of course, I don’t see that happening now to this extent but the level of prosecution that this people suffer is so obvious and high. Also the Ethiopian government does nothing to protect the refugees. Once the refugees are in the territory of Ethiopia the state has an obligation to protect them. Instead of protecting the refugees, the government of Ethiopia is actually busy in denying the fact that Eritrean troops are actively involved in the conflict. Humanitarian access was completely shut down over the last few days, there was

only a limited access promised to international humanitarian agencies. But their activities and operations are extremely limited. The international pressure is growing. The Ethiopian government has to be pressured. There are people who are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance.

Eritrea was also a part in the conflict of Yemen. The Eritrean president Isayas Afewerki sent troops in support of the coalition of Gulf States like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, by providing a base in Assam for the Saudi Air Force for example. In my opinion the main problem is one man: Isayas Afewerki. I believe when this man is removed from power many things will dramatically change in the entire Horn of Africa region. Some people say this is reductionist but look at the history of this man: since he came to power he has been the mastermind of all major armed conflicts that took place in the region, in Sudan, in Yemen, in Ethiopia even in Somalia.

Second aspect: What is our understanding of peace? To achieve social cohesion I see for Switzerland one need: an urgent need for intercultural dialogue between different cultural groups. This makes the peaceful coexistence of people in this country possible. I can give you a really simple example from my own community. Eritreans are the largest non-European group in Switzerland. There are more than 35'000 Eritreans in Switzerland. Ten or fifteen years from now, there will be plus minus 60'000, because the birth rates among Eritreans are the highest. Other refugees from other communities are not included in this number. The overwhelming majority of these people are completely out of touch with their host communities. So they live in their own parallel universe and their children grow up in their own parallel societies. Can you imagine the level of social instability in fifteen or twenty years from now? It's in that context that I strongly emphasize the need for intercultural communication between migrants and their host communities.

I give you one example of a small group of Eritreans in the German speaking part of Switzerland. They rented a small house from

the local community for their weekly religious congregation. Most Eritreans are orthodox Christians which is very similar to the orthodox Christianity in Greece or Russia. The way this people worship and pray is completely different from the way other Christians do it in Europe. The prayers, the congregation, the songs, and the way the women dress, when they go to church, is completely different. So a misunderstanding between this group of Eritreans and the host community in the German speaking part of Switzerland took part. The host community thought that this Eritrean group were all Muslims. The Eritreans were informed about this possible misunderstanding on the part of the local community, so they took the initiative themselves and they went to the representatives of the town and took them along to their religious ceremonies to have them observe how things were happening inside church, and so the misunderstanding was solved. This is an example how a small misunderstanding can be cleared out before things go completely wrong - the other part of the equation not knowing enough about the situation.

Adi Blum & Lea Suter

Nächstes Treffen: Mittwoch, 10. März 2021, um 19.30 Uhr.

Am 10. Februar mit Firas Shamsan und Daniel Mekonnen waren da: Adi Blum, Anna Fatyanova, Hansuli Gerber, Kurt Gritsch, Hansruedi Hitz, Monika Hüppi, Margret Lehman, Selma Mahlknecht, Lea Suter und Andrea Zellhuber. Transkription: Stefanie Nydegger. Protokoll: Adi Blum.