

Peace Builders construct accord, a pastry at a time

Jewish and Muslim women cooking together

By Jon Frosch

PARIS: At a time when a whiff of possible change has begun blowing in the Middle East, does it make sense for a group of French women — Jews and Muslims — to get together to make pastry and to ban all talk of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

It does, according to the women, who call themselves Les Bâtisseuses de Paix, or Peace Builders. Their aim is not to solve a conflict that has defied the best brains in diplomacy for decades, but rather “to block the transfer of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into France.”

Even their detractors say the aim is laudable, although the means may be inadequate to address such intractable problems.

But that has not dampened the spirit of the women. About 50 of them convened for mint tea recently at Les Jardins de la Méditerranée, or The Mediterranean Gardens, a kosher restaurant in the Paris suburb of Créteil. After kisses and compliments on hairdos, it was time for business. “Let’s get to work!” one woman shouted, as eggs, dates and other sweet ingredients were passed around.

What looked like a cooking club was created in 2002 by Annie-Paule Derczansky, a former journalist, who was troubled by a surge of anti-Semitic acts in France, the European country with the largest Muslim and Jewish populations. She says that hostility between the two communities has been fueled by “French Jews thinking they’re Israeli and French Muslims thinking they’re Palestinian.”

Peace Builders tackles this problem by throwing politics out the window, providing a neutral space for women who do not wish to be entangled in the bitter preoccupations that have often pitted the two communities against each other. From its focus on solidarity between Jews and Muslims was born the association’s golden rule: No talk of Israel and Palestine, or as Derczansky, who is Jewish, says: “The first to bring up the conflict has to leave.”

Six years after its creation, Peace

programs at major Arab and Jewish institutions, run seminars in Paris, attend conferences in Brussels and are campaigning for a plaque to be put on the Grand Mosque of Paris commemorating Jews saved by Muslims during World War II.

Prominent French Jews and Muslims praise the women’s initiatives.

“What they do is very courageous, because it’s practical work on the ground,” says Evelyn Berdugo, 60, who heads a Jewish women’s organization, *Coopération Feminine*. “Not big words and speeches, but action with regular people who aren’t well-known.”

Ghaleb Bencheikh, 47, host of a television program called “Islam,” says that women’s “tenderness and maternal sentiment” make them “the best agents for stopping conflict.”

But others criticize the association for prohibiting discussion of the elephant in the room: conflict.

“It is good to put the accent on what the two groups have in common,” said Jean-Pierre Allali, 69, who has written widely on Jewish affairs. “Unfortunately this is not the way we will succeed in solving the problems between Israelis and Palestinians or between Jews and Arabs in France.”

At some point, the subject will have to come up, he said, adding: “There’s a certain hypocrisy in not discussing it.”

Allali cited the recent beating of a Jewish teen in Paris by a gang of mainly Muslim youths as an example of the kind of obstacle facing the women. But even he was not entirely negative. “By itself this association can’t accomplish much,” Allali said. “But in multiplying these kinds of efforts, maybe something can be done.”

Derczansky, 48, is aware of the challenges. She is disheartened by derogatory comments about Muslims that she overhears in Jewish circles. But such talk only confirms her belief that, for now, the way to encourage Muslim-Jewish stability in France is to focus on simple things that the two communities can share — like recipes.



David Brabyn for the International Herald Tribune

From left: Laure Boutboul, Mary Levy, Annie-Paule Derczansky and Fahima Romane preparing almond cigars during a pastry workshop held by Peace Builders near Paris.

France counts about 5 million Muslims and 600,000 Jews, many concentrated in Paris and its suburbs, where tensions have flared most strongly. But food is something that connects these populations, since most French Jews now are Sephardic, with family ties to North Africa.

Peace Builders enables women who may be steadfast Zionists or resolutely pro-Palestinian to roll up their sleeves and join forces in the kitchen, where concerns revolve more around almonds and dough than geopolitics.

One woman who participates in the monthly pastry workshop is Nathalie Obadia, a Jew of Tunisian origin who says she does not want divisive Middle East issues poisoning relationships with her neighbors. “What’s happening over there is over there,” said Obadia, 39. “Here, we’re in France.”

Unity prevailed at the recent baking day, with the women cheering their production of “yo-yos” (like North African donuts), “cigars” (cylinders of phyllo dough rolled in sugar), and diamond-shaped cakes thick with honey and pistachios.

Whether or not such work has an impact on geopolitics, it is soon to gain an international dimension. In October, Peace Builders will go to New York to meet U.S. Jewish and Muslim women.

Within Europe there are other initiatives that try to strengthen Jewish-Muslim ties by eschewing politics in favor of culture. One British group, *All-*

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March 18, 1921 - June 29, 2008.

Who touched everyone he met,
who loved his life and his people.

Who gave of himself to us all.