Abbas Aroua *is a medical and health physicist by training, and adjunct professor at the Lausanne Faculty of Medicine. He is the founding director of Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI), dedicated since 2002 to the prevention of violence, conflict transformation and peace promotion in societies involving Muslims – building on local capacities to empower people, promote dialogue and offer safe mediation spaces. CPI works in North Africa, West Asia, the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, West Africa and the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Abbas has authored books and research papers on public health and peacebuilding.*

An edited interview with Abbas Aroua, Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva

There is growing interest in peace mediation among Muslim states, multilateral bodies and civil society. Insights from my own experience in peacemaking with the Cordoba Peace Institute (CPI) and more broadly have shown me how traditional Islamic mediation principles and practice can contribute to resolving contemporary conflict challenges.

QUR'ĀNIC PEACEMAKING CONCEPTS CAN RESONATE WITH MUSLIM SOCIETIES WHERE CONCEPTS SUCH AS HUMAN RIGHTS, HUMANITARIAN ACTION, CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION, EXTREMISM AND MODERATION MAY BE LESS FAMILIAR.

Concepts and language that are widely accepted in Muslim societies help ensure peacemaking practice is inclusive and locally embedded. Qur'ānic peacemaking concepts such as *karama* (human dignity), *'amal al-khayr* (charity work), *islāhu thātil-bayn* (bond mending), *ghuluw* (zealotry) and *wasatiya* (centrism) can resonate with Muslim societies, where concepts such as human rights, humanitarian action, conflict transformation, extremism and moderation may be less familiar.

continued...



Participants at a CPI workshop in Casablanca, Morocco discuss developments in the Middle East and North Africa in the first year of the 'Arab Spring', 3 May 2012. © Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva

In Islam, peacemaking is highly regarded and is seen the duty of any private citizen – not restricted to 'formal' mediators. In the Islamic tradition, conflict refers to broken relationships between two or more parties, where the parties are not necessarily bad in themselves. Peace mediation is correspondingly understood in terms of 'bond mending' (*islāhu thātil-bayn*), whereby the broken relationship between the parties can be restored. The Qur'ān praises the righteous who engage in 'mending the bonds between people,' (II:224 and IV:114) while the Prophet also highlighted bond mending as 'more valuable than fasting, praying, and almsgiving'. Peace mediation is regarded as an act of charity, and peace mediators eligible for *zakat* (religious mandatory almsgiving). Mediation is a religious duty for every Muslim man and woman; it is even more so an obligation for Islamic scholars, who are considered as the heirs of the prophets.

Muslim women are actively working for peace across a wide range of Islamic contexts. Famous examples include Dekha Ibrahim Abdi of Kenya, who was awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2007 as someone whose 'religious and spiritual identity as a Muslim formed a strong foundation for her peace work'; and Moroccan peace practitioner Houda Abadi, who straddles modern and traditional approaches in her work. Ferdaous Bouhlel has been engaged in peacemaking in the Sahel for many years to help establish a sustainable dialogue with armed groups in Mali, and has succeeded in gaining trust and respect of the most radical religious and tribal leaders in the region. She told us 'women should be recognised and accepted as peace mediators because of their competences and skills and not because they fit into a gender quota'.

Religious scholars are key to peacemaking in Islamic societies – both 'moderate' and more 'radical' scholars. CPI has recently been involved with the Fiqhi Pathways initiative, which in a number of different contexts is facilitating frank and respectful Islamic jurisprudential exchanges between scholars close to armed groups, and other prominent credible Islamic scholars who are respected and trusted in these contexts. Exchanges focus on matters related to the conduct of hostilities, governance and attitudes to dialogue, and aim to broaden knowledge, generate options, and provide alternative interpretations of religious texts, taking into account the local and international context.

In practice there are many synergies between Islamic and secular approaches to peacemaking. For example, CPI supported a two-year initiative to promote social cohesion in the Middle East and North Africa, involving participants from across the ideological spectrum and with some deep differences among them. The initiative used the contemporary theoretical peacemaking tool of 'overlapping consensus' to find areas of agreement among the diverse participants on principles of justice, as well as methods from the traditional Islamic model of the Medina Charter, which is believed to have formalised the leading role of the prophet Muhammad in the community of Medina. The process led to the signature by the participants of a *Memorandum towards a common action space.*

IN PRACTICE THERE ARE MANY SYNERGIES BETWEEN ISLAMIC AND SECULAR APPROACHES TO PEACEMAKING.

Peacemakers today should take advantage of the fact that peace mediation is a civil obligation as well as a religious duty in Islam in order to engage all stakeholders in peace processes, using where possible locally owned concepts and language, and local peace resources – including Islamic scholars and women.