

Special Recognition What Happened on the Way to Damascus? – Deeyah Khan at 40

Kjell Skjellstad⁺ Editor in Chief

A terrorist is on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus. I know that road from one of my early visits walking through the Bazaars of East Jerusalem and passing through the imposing structure of the Damascus gate. The goal for my travel was not Damascus but Jericho to see for my own eyes the walls that according to the Bible story were brought down through music.

This man however was going to Damascus to build new sectarian walls on his mission of religious terrorism, an extremist on a mission of persecution, His aim was to cleanse the Middle East of Christians, destroying churches, dragging people out of their homes, taking them hostage to face prison and death.

Then what happened on the road to Damascus?

A transformative experience you never would believe could happen. A total and sudden all embracive peak experience, an overwhelming attack on all of his senses. In the middle of an explosion of light he heard an ear deafening thunderous voice echoing from the hills around.

Saul, Saul, Saul: Why Do You Persecute Me?

When did this happen? You already guessed it? The event happened in the year 36

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AD, three years after the crucifixion of Christ. It was later recreated through music by the German composer Heinrich Schütz in the Dresden Church of the Cross using multiple choirs and orchestras three years after the end of the 30 Years War that ended in 1648 as a musical manifesto for reconciliation in the aftermath of 30 years of religious terrorism.

As one learns from the Bible story, Saul at that moment through a transformative experience became a changed man. He even changed his name to Paul, the Apostle now continuing into Damascus preaching the gospel of Belief, Hope and Love as the only principles that can replace Doubt, Despair and Hate that has triggered terrorism to this day.

Young people today pass many gates and follow many roads. What happens when immigrants and refugees in our western countries choose to enter and walk through the Damascus gate in their own minds on a pilgrimage of extremism and violence?

How can we reprogram their inner GPS set for Syria and other arenas of Jihadism?

Members of the community of arts aiming at restoring and rebuilding social spaces and opportunities are faced with walls to tear down in a transformative process that could take just as a long time than it took to build up the walls of social discrimination and racism that our societies have helped create from both sides of the ethnic and social divide

This is exactly what Deeyah Khan has set out to do. In the year of her 40th birthday she is back in the United States confronting the new wave of right wing radicalization and racist inspired violence. As in her latest project leading up to the release of her internationally hailed documentary *Jihad*, her interview approach is not one of head on condemnation. Her aim is to search out the social and cultural background leading up to the process of radicalization, seeking out the personal experiences at play.



Figure 1. Deeyah Khan.

Deeyah Khan has spent the past year putting together a film about white supremacism in America in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump. Like her

earlier film *Jihad and Emmy* & Peabody award winning *Banaz: A Love Story*, this new documentary will explore the people within extremist movements, exploring tensions between race and class in an era of identity politics. The film involves former and current members of extremist movements, including the most significant neo-Nazi group, the National Socialist Movement, as the skinhead group Hammerskins, which is notorious for its violence. Through gaining intimate access to individuals at high positions in the white supremacist movement, Deeyah was able to directly challenge their racist views, and attempt to understand the reasons why people join hate movements. Deeyah is the founder of the Fuuse media organization focusing on marginalized people.

Sister-hood, her award-winning online magazine for women of Muslim heritage, has continued to expand, providing an alternative to the stereotypes of Muslim women presented in the media as either victims or terrorists. It enables women of Muslim heritage to express themselves both through its online magazine at sister-hood.com, and live events. Sister-hood publishes first time writers and established figures in order to amplify the diverse voices of women of Muslim heritage. In 2016 Deeyah became the inaugural UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Artistic Freedom and Creativity and was appointed a new member of the Norwegian Council of Culture.

For more information on Deeyah's work and free downloading of her social documentaries we kindly refer our readers to an extensive report on her activities at www.fuuse.net. Below is the list of related appearances in previous issues of JUCR:

- CD review: A Megaphone for the Disenfranchised, JUCR vol 2 (2011) pp. 116-25
- CD review: Nordic Woman, JUCR vol.4 (2012) pp. 120-23
- The Human Face of Radicalization (Fuuse Forum Oslo, September 2015), JUCR vol 11 (2015) pp. 118-9
- Website review Fuuse.net JUCR vol.13 (2016-2) pp. 140-1

Quotations:

Art is a free space where we can work creatively, see problems from different perspectives, using the power of imagination to address contemporary issues, challenging us in a way that engages our feelings directly. I believe in freedom of expression through my role in the United Nations.

Art allows for an important alternative sources of information when main stream media are being censored, where people live in fear and suppression.

Art becomes a space where you can imagine a better world.

Note: Kjell Skjellstad, Editor in Chief is currently a Senior Project Consultant of Fuuse.

