

“WHEN ANY HUMAN BEING SUFFERS, WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO HELP”

Sheikh Mohamad Al Bukai

• *By Sara Baptista* •

Sheikh Mohamad Al Bukai left his country in peace, but from a distance he saw his homeland be destroyed by war. When he left Syria in 2007 to answer the call of the Islamic community of Sao Paulo and become Sheikh of the Mosque of Pari in the capital of Sao Paulo state, he had no idea that his country would be disputed by different forces and intensely bombarded.

Mohamad Al Bukai is a theologian and his trajectory is marked by migration. In addition to his native Syria, he has studied in Egypt and Malaysia, and now he lives in Brazil, where he is an imam of the Brazil Mosque, founded by the Muslim Beneficent Society of Sao Paulo (Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana, SBM), in Cambuci, south of the city, and the Director of Islamic Affairs of the National Union of Islamic Entities of Brazil (União Nacional das Entidades Islâmicas do Brasil, UNI).

As a religious leader, the sheikh uses his faith to fight for human rights. He explains that one of the Islamic principles is to consider that a human being is a worthy creature, regardless of his or her race or religion. “So when any human being suffers, we have an obligation to help,” he says.

His words are translated into deeds and his struggle takes place mainly in favor of migrants and refugees. In Brazil, the sheikh did his best to help the Syrians who fled the Syrian War and arrived there. Since 2011, millions of his countrymen have also had to leave their



homes, but unlike Mohamad Al Bukai, they have done so for lack of choices. With the violent repression of the uprising of the population against the dictatorial government of Bashar Al Assad, at the same time that the Islamic State was trying to dominate the region, Syria was seized by a great war that lasts up to these days.

In 2013, when Brazil began granting humanitarian visas to Syrians, a large wave of these migrants began to head for the Latin American country. Those who disembarked at Cumbica Airport in Greater Sao Paulo, however, could not find a proper welcome. Unable to speak Portuguese, the immigrants did not know where to go, so they sought the Mosque of Guarulhos, where they were finally able to communicate in Arabic with Sheikh Mohamad Al Bukai, who was serving there at the time.

Following his belief, the sheikh opened the temple doors to receive these refugees. He says that he housed even around 300 people at the same time inside the mosque. There, besides a roof, he offered food, clothes and help with documentation and Portuguese. With the increasing number of refugees, this aid provided by the mosque had to be formalized in order to facilitate intermediation between the Syrians and the Brazilian government. From this need came the NGO Oasis Solidario, which acts in the reception and integration of refugees in Sao Paulo.

“I remember I chose this name because ‘oasis’ is a word that means ‘the place where the passengers, the migrants, take a break to rest for a while, then they go and get on with their lives,’” says the sheikh. The organization created by demand of Syrian refugees has extended to serve immigrants from various parts of the world, and today also serves people from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and many other places on the African continent, for example. After all, limiting the NGO’s practice would contradict the philosophy advocated by the

sheikh, who has difficulty seeing a world divided by geographical boundaries. For him, “peace has to be everywhere in the world. We cannot have peace in one place and accept war in another one.” “We do not accept borders, human rights have no borders,” he adds.

The sheikh, who lives closely with the pain of those forced to leave and feels daily what it is to be a foreigner, likes to remember that “anyone can become a refugee at any time.” He also calls for appropriate reception: “If you choose to host, you must treat well.”

Mohamad Al Bukai has chosen to call Brazil as his home for over ten years, but despite considering the country receptive, he has some caveats. “Brazil is a very receptive country, very generous. I have never had a problem with the Brazilian people, the nature of these people is to help. However, when this story began to be politicized, some people began publishing that refugees are terrorists, especially Muslims, that they wanted to Islamize Brazil, so the refugees’ image was tarnished,” he says.

However, this theme, that is so dear to a religion of which calendar begins with the migration of the prophet Mohammed, is not the only one that Mohamad Al Bukai is dedicated to. The sheikh also works to demystify prejudices against practitioners of Islam who have been suffering from the spread of fear of their religion since 9/11.

Throughout the western world, the association between Islam and terrorism is still common. As the sheikh says in his lectures and interviews, however, Islam’s values are consistent with democracy, peace and human rights, as they defend justice and equality. In this scenario, the sheikh believes that meetings and dialogue need to be valued for a more effective fight against intolerance.

It was precisely through the conversation that he chose to fight against the image that the Muslims are linked to violence and religious repression. In addition to helping the production of soap operas on the subject, such as “Salve Jorge” and “Órfãos da Terra” (both from TV Globo), Mohamad Al Bukai has been organizing, together with other leaders, interfaith meetings to promote tolerance, even though, as he says, religions coexist well in Brazil in general.

In the midst of advances and setbacks, the sheikh believes the world is currently experiencing a crisis of values. “Today the world has seas of poor people and islands of rich people. There has to be a cultural change, we need to help people,” he claims.

Translated by Claudia Sander



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