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On an Optimistic Note

Some good news for a change. But what are we to make of it?

Uriya Shavit

Last month I attended a "Prayer for Peace" at "Our Lady of Arabia" Cathedral near Manama, Bahrain. The event was held under the patronage of King Hamad. A majority of the hundreds present were migrant workers from the subcontinent.

Suddenly, it all seemed so normal: taking a direct flight from Ben Gurion to Manama, being invited to a religious ceremony there, complaining about the weather in the Arab Gulf.

One by one, local spiritual leaders, representing different religions, conveyed messages of coexistence. When the imam spoke about Islam as a religion of peace, the smartphone broke the news about a terror attack in the heart of Tel Aviv.

The Jewish speaker at the event was Abraham Nonoo, a sixty-two-year-old businessman and a former member of the upper house of the Bahraini Parliament, where one seat is reserved for a Jew.

Nonoo turned out to be an exceptionally kind man. Two days later, visiting the small synagogue he leads in the heart of the capital, "The House of the Ten Commandments," I learned that the local Jewish community numbers only around 50 members.

On a Saturday morning, there were two Jews present at the synagogue – Nonoo and his wife. Also present was a young Bahraini who wants to major in Jewish studies.

The few Bahraini Jews from the younger generation are moving to Europe, so the community, which mainly originated from Iraq and Iran, may cease to exist in a few decades.

Nonoo explained that keeping the synagogue alive, no matter what, was a promise he made to his father. As long as the candle is burning.

In recent months, the Bahraini regime has gone out of its way to show that Israel is a true friend and that the small Kingdom will not tolerate violence or hostility towards

Jews. Bahrain even adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, meaning that denying the right of Israel to exist is unacceptable.

I was expecting warmth. I did not expect Bahrainis to speak about Iran as an enemy, Israel as an ally, and the Palestinians as the all but forgotten.

Bahraini officials insist that their Emirate turned Kingdom has always been a beacon of moderation.

This is not entirely true – especially not regarding Israel.

There were hundreds of Jews in the country in 1947. Most of them were forced to flee, following violent attacks during Israel's War of Independence. There was little effort to encourage them to return.

The café at the National Museum has some old books. One of them, published just a decade ago, is filled with hate poems against the Zionist entity.

So, we learn once again that conflicting voices speak for Islam.

Which represents its true nature?

The question is almost meaningless.

Read the new book by **Dr. Ofir Winter of the Institute for National Security Studies**, who also contributes to our Center, *Peace in the Name of Allah: Islamic Discourses on Treaties with Israel*.

There is only one Quran and only one al-Azhar University, and yet the book shows how some graduates of al-Azhar read in the Quran justifications for peace with Israel, and some read in it why the war with Zionism must go on.

People have the remarkable capacity to locate in texts, and in their realities, whatever affirms their long-held convictions.

Last week, dozens of leading media platforms across the world reported on our Center's Antisemitism Worldwide Report, which presented alarming data and analysis for 2021.

Hundreds of comments were published on websites with explanations as to why antisemitism is on the rise. And all of those who wrote them were convinced that the data proved they were right all along.

Hawks blamed the bad news on doves, while doves blamed it on hawks. The religious on secularists, the secularists on the religious. Anti-vax activists on governments, advocates of the vaccines (or science and commonsense) on anti-vax activists.

So there is no point in asking what true Islam is (or Christianity or Judaism). It is what people make of it.

The more useful question is: what can we learn from the Bahraini experience about the conditions that allow for transformations?

What can encourage other Arab societies to interpret Islam in a way that facilitates adopting a realistic and friendly approach to Israel and committing to combating poisonous anti-Jewish propaganda?

The answer is encouraging – and frustrating.

Encouraging, because Bahrain demonstrates this can happen. Frustrating, because it also demonstrates this is not really in our hands and requires patience

Bahrain had strong incentives to join the Abraham Accords wholeheartedly.

Understanding the gravity of the Iranian threat, the regime needed to strengthen its alliance with the United States. Seeing the decline of American power in the region, it needed new strong friends.

There was fatigue with Palestinian corruption and endless illusionary naysaying. With the discrediting of the Muslim Brothers following the Arab Spring, the regime could pay less attention to the fiercest rival of Zionism. A benevolent autocracy that relies on Saudi patronage, it did not need to pay too much attention to public opinion. The public, which had limited exposure to Palestinian refugees and was never in direct conflict with Israel, had other priorities anyhow.

This brings me to the other enabler, the less evident one.

The most impressive aspect of identifying as an Israeli on Bahraini streets today is not that people warm up to you – but that the response would not have been different if they thought you were Dutch or Argentinian.

There is one crucial difference between the peace treaties of the Abraham Accords and those signed with Egypt and Jordan. The latter were between governments, and abrupt. Following their signing, there was a short honeymoon also in terms of tourism and culture, but it was hesitant, contested, and soon ended.

The late and great Bernard Lewis told me once that the tragedy of the conflict is that it involves the most polite and impolite nations on earth. After the peace treaty was signed in 1994, he visited Jordan, and vendors told him Israeli tourists acted arrogantly and triumphantly. Lewis tried to convince them that this is how Israeli tourists treat everyone, not just Arabs.

The case of the Abraham Accords is different. Already some years before they were signed, Israeli professionals, businesspersons, and officials were welcomed in the Gulf, even if not openly. They spoke Hebrew. They signed deals. They made friends and contacts. They were not just tourists.

You are less likely to maintain the notion that Jews have horns when you have them as business partners, or as instructors.

The Abraham Accords made formal a reality that was built bottom-up, gradually, patiently, and in relative secrecy. That is part of the reason why Israelis are not regarded as party-crashers or hostile aliens in Bahrain and the Emirates. That is why their presence there projects such normalcy.

On the 74th birthday of their state, Israelis yearn for more of that normalcy.

Prof. Uriya Shavit is Head of the Center.

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