



Peace with the Gulf States is Genuine

Jews and Israelis have been conditioned to hear only bitterness from Israel's Arab neighbors; a narrative of self-pity and anger marked by complaints, false allegations, vituperation and glorification of violence against Israel.

Nevertheless, from extensive conversations I have conducted with Emirati intellectuals in Dubai, I am persuaded that the Emirati pursuit of peace with Israel is genuine. It is backed by a discourse of religious moderation and broad-mindedness that is admirable.

The Emiratis are a distinctive type of Arab Muslim. They want to redefine the self-identity and global image of Arab Muslims in a way that blends enlightenment with tradition. Affiliating with Israel fits perfectly into this agenda, aside from the security and economic benefits that will devolve from the UAE-Israel partnership.

Indeed, the Emiratis see themselves as a people and a country that successfully blends ancient tradition, culture and ethnic identity with modern progress and ambition. (That, by the way, is how they view Jews and Israel too.)

The core problem in the Middle East, say Emiratis, is that religious hatred has become the main political currency, a very volatile and hypocritically exploited currency. Iran invests heavily in religious hatred; hatred of Israel, of America and the West, and of other Muslims who do not hew to the radical Shiite line. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps relies on religious hatred to mobilize young men to its ranks. So do Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

The Abraham Accords are meant "to take religious hatred out of the

equation," and move Israel-Arab ties to the level of normal state-to-state relations, hopefully setting an example for other Arab countries in the region.

In fact, the only way to stabilize the many areas of conflict throughout the Middle East, say the Emiratis, is to make "normal life" the central pursuit of all Arab governments. I was told, for example, that it is a "normal thing" to have a choice of fruits and vegetables from India, or from Israel, in Emirati grocery stores.

More importantly, normal family life revolves around school schedules and the quality of education. At the directive of Emirati leadership, for almost two decades schools have taught religious and ethnic tolerance, and the value of scientific and critical humanistic thinking.

Therefore, Emiratis speak excellent English, study voraciously at the best universities abroad, embrace all the latest technologies in developing their country, and speak the language of multiculturalism and non-discrimination. It is, apparently, why every Emirati businessman and cultural figure I have met, says: "We have been waiting for so long for an above-the-table relationship with Israel."

The Emiratis see themselves and other Sunni Arabs as "victims of decades of media brainwashing" in support of "narrow" agendas and "immature" thinking. These deleterious discourses always need an "enemy" to hate.

"Hatred is not from G-d. It does not flow from logic. And hatred is not the future," a very senior Emirati close to UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed told me.

The Emiratis "have learned over the course of time" that boycotting Israel "makes no sense," since Israel is clearly a force for stability and an engine for prosperity in the region. The Emiratis have "matured"; unfortunately the Palestinians have not, and the Emiratis "cannot wait endlessly for the Palestinians to do so."

Emiratis are not impressed by the term "Judeo-Christian values," and they are quick to point out that in the 21st century a clearly identifiable (Orthodox) Jew can walk the streets of Dubai or Doha in much more safety and comfort than he/she can walk the streets of Berlin, London, Paris or New York.

The Emiratis prefer to speak of "Abrahamic Family values," which are less religiously divisive and more inclusive. Of course, this "Abrahamic narrative" is also meant to challenge the anti-Western and anti-Israeli agenda of Islamist extremists, as well as the mainly European and Christian hard right which sees all Muslims as inherently anti-Western, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian and all-together threatening.

Some Emiratis are even willing to say openly that Jews and Israelis should be allowed to pray on *Har HaBayit* in Jerusalem, and that prayer rights there should be extended to Christians too if they so wish. "Islam is not meant to deny others their deep connections to G-d," I was told.

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