



# Arab Culture

A JOURNALIST'S VIEW FROM WITHIN

with Zvi Yehezkeli

**During May 2021's Operation Guardian of the Walls, waves of violent protests and riots broke out across Israel. In an exclusive interview, HaMizrachi spoke with Zvi Yehezkeli, an Israeli television journalist and one of Israel's top Arab affairs correspondents, to answer our most pressing questions.**



**How could this have happened?**

My understanding stems from 25 years of experience surveying Arabs and living among them, sometimes even living undercover in places like Chevron and Jenin. What I'm going to tell you has not been reported. They are concepts you won't find in the news because Western culture cannot recognize and understand the processes that occur in Middle-Eastern or Islamic society. In trying to understand these events, we must attempt to understand a lifestyle that does not exist in our rationale as Westerners.

Since ancient times, the Middle East was a place where everyone fought over wells. A well owner did not give it up and was not forgiving toward thirsty enemies. Someone who wanted to live in the Middle East needed to be forceful and assertive.

There is a phrase in Arabic: "My brother and I against my cousin, my cousin and I against my neighbor, my neighbor and I against the stranger." It's always "against." A tribe lives in a constant struggle, whether it's national or familial. It's not necessarily Islamic; it's pre-Islamic, nomadic Arab tribes who, due to economic and historical conditions, had to use violence, even within the family,

to keep order within and without the tribe.

Our concepts of strength and power – the army, police, weapons – are not always perceived as strength or power by the other side. What is viewed as power by the Arabs is not the weapon itself but how and when the weapon is used.

Let's take the Treaty of Hudaibiyah as an example – Muhammad made a peace treaty with a neighboring tribe, only to break the deal and massacre them a few years later. When I'm weak, I sign a treaty; when I amass strength and the other side falls asleep, I rise. That's what happened in Israel.

Israeli Arabs, Palestinians living in the West Bank and the surrounding Arabs in neighboring countries – all carefully observe Israel's activities to find our weak spots. For 20 years the Arabs have seen that we are slowly neglecting authoritative rule. When the weakness is clear, the Arab conclusion is that they can take advantage of it. Any time there is any sort of weakness on our part, we are attacked in a way meant to weaken us over time.





If a youth from East Jerusalem can make vulgar gestures at police officers and get away with it; if they burn police cars in Lod but the response is that both Muslims and Jews perpetrate terror and the media blames the violence on Jewish right-wing groups – the Arabs and Islam view this as a huge success. I was not surprised regarding the riots – I suspected it would happen sooner or later, since our control and deterrence, whether within Israeli cities or outside, declined.

### Is poverty part of the reason for the violence and crime?

The West always assigns a reason for everything. According to Western thinking, a terrorist commits a suicide attack because his father was stopped at a checkpoint and the occupation denied him his rights. When a brother murders his sister for dating a non-Muslim in what the Muslims call an “honor killing,” we call it a domestic or romantic homicide. We say thievery of Bedouins in the Negev has a criminal basis and breaking into houses in Lod is called property theft.

But really, these are not separate issues. There is one element – the tribe. The tribe has clear rules. Violence institutes the rule of the tribe, and if you allow me to steal from you, I steal. Bedouin thievery in the Negev, agricultural terror, attacks on Jews, stealing cars, even unlawful driving – none of these are separate issues. It’s a way of testing the weak spots of the enemy, of testing Israel. The solution: to wake up.

By the way, “honor killings” are also violence – violence is violence. Israel is beginning to understand that domestic violence turns into violence in the streets.

### Is coexistence possible?

Of course. There are plenty of Islamic communities that live under non-Islamic rule. The question is how much we clarify and institute the laws.

Addressing the refugees fleeing the Middle East to Europe, Egyptian President Al-Sisi

said “You are in the neighbor’s living room; respect their rules.” Islam sees itself as morally and culturally superior to other nations. But, as Al-Sisi said, they do know how to respect the laws of the host.

But the host cannot earn respect for its laws, traditions, or even life if they don’t do so with strict enforcement. The West has an aversion to the use of force. But coexistence is possible only under very clear conditions. We need to break off of our Western thinking and connect to Middle Eastern thinking, to view the Middle East as it views itself. There are many ways to live next to Muslim neighbors who are citizens in peaceful communities when there is no amassment of arms and there is no violent energy that is not dealt with and then comes out against you.

### Is there a difference between religious and secular Muslims?

There is no such thing as “secular” Muslims. An Arab teenager in Lod told me: “I drink alcohol [prohibited in Islam] and have never been to Al Aksa in my life. But I would give my life for it.” Why? Because there is a concept of the nation, one tribe. We think, “They’re secular, they’re enlightened and advanced, they wear Western clothing and symbols.” We must differentiate between Western symbols and Arabic thinking.

### What about the Christian Arabs – here do they stand?

The Arab Christians understand the language of the Muslims; they can understand the underlying messages of the Muslim community. They fear for their lives because they are loyal to Israel, while the loyalty of the Muslim community is doubtful. The Palestinians, many of the Israeli Arabs and the surrounding Arabs such as Hezbollah have not truly accepted the existence of Israel. The Christians are another story. They see the country as their own, but they know what will happen if Israel does not enforce the rule of law – they will be the first to pay the price.

### Where is the situation in Israel headed?

Toward a crossroad. Each side is testing the other. The continued attacks in Lod showed that there was not enough of a response. These kinds of events may reoccur because Israel did not respond with enough force. Nothing changed. The Arabs will continue to be a part of society as if nothing happened. But they are testing us; it’s a test for Israel and Israel needs to know how to act. Unfortunately, it will continue until Israel accepts the fact that there is a strategic problem.

An important part of dealing with any problem is to recognize the problem. What is the story? Is this an appropriate story, what the media is telling, what Israel tells itself – according to the problem? No. Our lack of recognition in terms of what is happening is one of the biggest problems. The protests all have the same message: you are a Jew. It does not matter if you are left or right or religious or not – you are a Jew and we will pelt you with stones. I think the Jews in Europe are starting to understand the same thing.

A Jew is a Jew; Jews need to take responsibility and recognize that what is happening to them happened to their grandparents. My grandfather lived in Iraq in complete coexistence with the Arabs. On Shavuot eve, 1941, the Arabs rose and killed 200 Jews, maiming many others. We can’t search for acceptance from other nations. We have to just be Jews. To be who we are, who we are meant to be.

### Can you give us any parting words?

*Am Yisrael* has always gone through these kinds of things. *Ein ye’ush*, there is no despair. We are still here, we are fighting. Someone who thinks the war is over will be taken by surprise. Someone who knows they are a warrior will be prepared even if the war changes face and pace. The last *bracha* of the *Shemonah Esrei* is for peace. One who wants peace knows that sometimes we must fight for it. ■