

A New Day is Dawning on Israel's 70th Birthday

By: Bassem Eid*

In the coming days, the Israeli people will celebrate their 70th year of independence and the Palestinians will celebrate their 70th year of 'Nakba,' as this ceremonial event since 1948 has become ingrained into local tradition. Israel today is completely different from even 20 years ago. Israel is a fully developed country with solid economic growth and a strong defense. Today several Arab States that have opposed Israel's existence over most of the last 70 years are now effectively partners with Israel in fighting the greatest common threat in the region - Iran.

I remember the Arab League meeting in 1968 in Sudan when the Arab leaders announced their three major "no's." No recognition, no peace and no normalization. This slogan has today largely disappeared. The very public relationship that Israel has with some Arab countries now is no longer a secret. Recently, in Greece, pilots from the Israeli Air Force and United Arab Emirates Air Force held 'red flag' training exercises, even though there are no official diplomatic relations.

In recent weeks, the White House convened a meeting to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, inviting representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as several European nations. Notably absent was the Palestinian Authority, which boycotted this event over Trump's Jerusalem declaration. Israel, however, did participate in this historic meeting, discussing with the Arab leaders a plan to provide assistance to Gaza.

As a Palestinian, I believe that Israel wants more and more to help the Palestinians, to build their identity. The obstacle today is not the Palestinian people, it is Palestinian political leadership. If we will go back to 2005, when Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian leaders start running from one TV channel to another TV channel, announcing that if Israel withdraw from Gaza, 'we will make from Gaza a new Singapore.' Instead, Hamas took control of Gaza And has inflicted misery on the people ever since.

Hamas has taken the opportunity presented by the Gaza withdrawal and turned it in to disaster. Look to the situation in Gaza these days and how 2 million Palestinians are suffering because they are being held by the Hamas regime as hostages. Sadly, much of the international community has taken a blind eye to the situation there. And now, the Trump administration is changing the playing field, by diverting support from the PA and UNRWA, while looking to regional neighbors to step in and change the status quo.

The status quo that we have lived with for far too long, is the unending tyrannical totalitarianism of the Palestinian Authority that is desperately clinging to power, despite Abbas now turning 84 a few days ago. With no new leadership in sight, the PA continues its' damaging policies of incitement, educating Palestinian youth in PA and UNRWA schools with ideology aimed at continuing the conflict, demonization and no recognition of Israel. UNRWA also has played a

huge part in the continuation of this status quo, as the refugees are kept as hostages for 70 years in the refugee camps with no solution in sight. Religious libels are also used as fuel, to ignite the hearts and minds of the Palestinians against their Israeli neighbors, as we saw in the 'knife intifada.' And the world is now beginning to hold the PA accountable for its' funding and sponsorship of terror and murders of innocent Israelis, as the U.S. now passed the landmark 'Taylor Force Act' which bans the use of international aid to the PA for its role in paying salaries to killers.

If we will look today to the map of the Middle East and how Islamic terror is increasing, we will find that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most contained conflict in the Middle East. Look at what is going on in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen and compare it to our 70 years of war and the differences are staggering. Israel is saving the lives of its' Syrian 'enemies' on a daily basis, while Mahmoud Abbas was quoted as saying that he prefers that Palestinians living in Syrian refugee camps should 'die' rather than flee the refugee camps and possibly losing their UNRWA refugee 'right of return' status.

Today, the Arab countries are realizing that Israel is not their mortal enemy and can instead be an important ally. Palestinian leadership can greatly benefit the Palestinian people by doing the same. Instead, ordinary Palestinians have no voice in the political process.

We Palestinians have to start coming to terms with the facts on the ground. Israel exists and is here to stay. When Yasser Arafat, in the late 1990's, called for a confederation between Jordan and Palestine, I called for a confederation between Israel and Palestine. Israel these days, is benefitting all of the world. Look to high tech, biotechnology and the military/security industry, Israel is a world leader.

I remember three years ago, when I was in Vietnam and I mentioned to the Vietnamese that I came from Israel, they told me 'wow Israel, the second country ranked for technology in Vietnam, after Japan.' If this is the story, let us the Arabs look to ourselves and start realizing how we can hold the key for a better life. Our greatest asset can be the proximity to our neighbors, who could be our greatest friend, rather than our greatest enemy.

Today, the Israeli passport can enter 147 countries without a visa or visa upon arrival. Show me one Arab passport who holds the same power?

I want to congratulate my Israeli friends for their 70th independence day, while sending a message to my Arab brothers and sisters of hope and optimism that a new day is arriving. Trump is setting new trends in the world, that many have been afraid to encounter, that people were afraid to say, that the PA will eventually exit the negotiating table and that more moderate Arab leaders and countries will enter the stage and bring us closer to the three "Yes's" - Yes to recognition, yes to normalization and yes for peace with Israel!

* Bassem Eid is a Jerusalem-based political analyst, human rights pioneer and expert commentator in Arab and Palestinian affairs.
For more information, visit www.bassemeid.com