

Was it a historic breakthrough in Israel when Jews and non-Jews marched together for rights?

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By Chibli Mallat

One grows naturally cynical about peace in the Middle East, so it is with guarded trepidation that I read the article of Noam Sheizaf in thebrowser.com, which has grown to be my favorite web readers's digest for Robert Cottrell and his colleagues' choice of English texts across the globe. Not surprisingly, Shazaf's article appeared next to a heart-wrenching article by Tony Judt about his debilitating terminal illness. Judt started a few years ago the conversation in prominent Jewish circles in New York that is slowly replacing the two-state solution with a democratic Israel-Palestine.

The US debate is important, but it is the Israeli one that matters. Did we see a historic breakthrough in Israel on December 11 when a few thousand Israeli Jews and non-Jews marched together for human rights and equality?

The cynic may well brush away the demonstration as an insignificant event. I like to think otherwise, but much depends on how much importance it is given, and the dialogue that follows it.

For the first time, a stubborn attachment to a solution to the conflict based on human rights and equality, as opposed to the horrendous walls built up in law and concrete across Israel and Palestine, seems to be vindicated.

An email exchange with my great and endearing colleague, Professor Noam Chomsky, he reminded me of the stark difficulty of the one-state solution – which I prefer to call a federal Israel or Israel-Palestine. "The number of Israeli Jews who could even contemplate a one-state solution could fit into a telephone booth, and there's no prospect that that will change in the relevant future," Chomsky wrote. Maybe this is changing. The Tel Aviv demonstration shows that there are enough decent Israelis to begin the conversation.

I know from personal experience, from Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and in Iraq, that a handful of people can start something different, and succeed.

On the evening of February 15, 2005, the day after Hariri's assassination, I engaged a gloomy Walid Jumblatt with a handful of courageous young men and women who were to be dramatically transformed two weeks later by refusing to obey the order to disband Emile Lahoud and his goons had issued. And while the Cedar Revolution did not succeed quite as we wished, it underlined the power of non-violence in the Middle East.

It is now a matter of time before the non-violent tide sweeps away many of the local dictators of the Lahoud and Ahmadi-Nejad type.

In August 1990, I started with the Najaf leader, Sayyed Muhammd Bahr al-Ulum and Richard Murphy the long road to a federal Iraq. A democratic, federal Iraq is now a reality, despite the tremendous price paid. I hope that the Iraqi leaders, including President Jalal Talibani with whom I recently had a conversation on the virtues of federalism for Palestine, will continue to

build their democracy on federalism. This will in turn encourage the federal solution in Israel-Palestine.

So yes, I am thrilled by the appearance in Tel Aviv of more people than needed to fill a phone booth for a different type of Arab-Israeli peace, and I wrote accordingly to Noam Sheizaf. I hope we can develop that conversation to make it succeed.

So how can we take this forward? One important avenue is to engage Palestinian constituencies everywhere on this issue. President Carter has recently conveyed a newly-found language amongst the Palestinian leaders in Ramallah, where the talk of a one-state solution has become the preferred solution.

We should start thinking aloud, with our Palestinian friends, and engage in a structured set of political and academic conversations with them over the roads not taken, from the abandonment around 1974 of the democratic platform of the Palestinian movement in favour for a separate state to the Oslo failure. The Palestinian covenant of 1964, which preceded the 1967 Israeli expansion, has language that deserves to be revived in the spirit which lawyer Ahmad al-Shuqairi conveyed against the putschist mentality of Yaser Arafat.

It is not a matter of winding up the clock backwards to a vain competition between departed Palestinian figures, rather it's a matter of understanding what went wrong, where the bifurcation away from equality between Jews and non-Jews took place, and why.

Second, Israeli Arabs were in the driving seat in Tel Aviv, and they should be in the driving seat of the whole Palestinian movement. One of the arguments that Chomsky did not dispute was that Israeli Arabs will have to start the process, and it seems that the Israeli Arab street is finally moving in the right direction. No less intriguing is Sheizaf's mention of the Tel Aviv football fans in that demonstration. When sports fans, and household women, take to the street, serious change is afoot in society.

I have written harshly about the legal nature of the Israeli state, but there is little doubt that the freedom of speech inside Israel is far superior to that in the majority of Arab states. I have far more confidence in the opportunity of such a debate and its integrity in Israel than in a place like Gaza or Jordan, so let's pursue it in Israel, and in Lebanon where freedom of the press always ranks high.

Third, we must bring down the barrier with Jewish Israelis. By "we" I mean Arab citizens across the region, and not our governments, which will fight any talk of democracy that might rub off on them. But Arab governments are bankrupt, and they are unable to withhold the tide of human rights and democracy.

The bottom line in the shift in our language and strategy is this: we cannot advocate equality between Jews and non-Jews in Israel-Palestine whilst pursuing violence against people we are calling upon to live with us. This is not easy, as extremes in Israel feed on extremes among us. I have carried the message of non-violence in my presidential campaign to the heart of Tyre and Nabatiyeh, and this non-violent message is at the heart of my continued disagreement with the Hizbullah leadership and their supporters. All the rockets in the world will fail to liberate an inch of the Galilee, indeed they have succeeded in killing more Arabs than Jews in northern Israel during the ill-conceived war of 2006.

Instead of the iron wall in the south of Lebanon, we need a common message across the border, and this is also true of Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan. Non-violence is an absolute key to efficiency in solving the conflict.

Enough said for this starting salvo in this conversation with Sheizaf and his colleagues, whose courage I salute. I should just add that one does not need to be on the left to share it, and the language of equality has sometimes been better served by leaders from the right. In Israel curiously, it was the left that hardened the divide over decades of advocacy by Labor that ignored the Arabs on the pretext of not exploiting them. And it is the right-wing neocons who liberated Iraqis from Saddam Hussein.

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