

Juan Antonio Muñoz

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## **LIFE IN ISRAEL: EVERYBODY WANTS PEACE**

Peace is invoked by Jewish and Palestinian organizations, by civilians and by the army, by old and young. Children pray for it daily. It is also expressed as a wish by the international community, by the governments of the world and of the spirit. However, the suicide bomb attack of this week corroborates that violence is far from being virtual. These are times of a war which seems to last forever and which threatens to become part of "normal life" in a society that has never lived without it.

"Optimists and pessimists die in the same way, but they live very differently". These are the words of the researcher at the Institute for Counterterrorism of Tel Aviv, Ely Karmon, which added to the words from Rabbi Daniel Tropper, president of Gesher, the largest learning organization of Israel, shows what it means to live in this small state of Asia Minor. What Tropper says is simply that "the more you analyze what is happening here, the less you understand it. Israel is something you have to experience and with the passing of time understanding is incorporated in an organic way".

But there is something that is clear: everybody around here wants peace. From the soldier who stands at the barrier which allows access to Bethlehem to Ziad Abu-Zayyad, ex Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, and Nabila Espanioly, founder of Al-Tufula, Women's Pedagogical Center and Early Childhood Education Center, an indefatigable worker for the rights of Arabs.

There are stark contrasts. When one arrives at the luxurious David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem, there are extreme safety measures. All passengers and visitors are checked on entering the hotel. Inside, life goes on as usual. There are many Bar Mitzvahs (initiation to adult life of young Jewish boys) during this season and entire families proceeding from every continent walk around in their stern costumes or elegantly dressed. The most orthodox ones generally have a lot of children and even the smallest ones wander to and fro in total freedom and go up and down in the elevators. The confidence is striking. Adults look after their own and others' children. They know they are the future.

Some meters away, there is a great dinner going on because it is Shabbat (day of rest). And here we can see Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the extreme right-wing party Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel, our home), with his family. There are roasted eggplants on the table, hummus (a delicious and nourishing food made of mashed chickpeas) and falafel (small croquettes of mashed chick peas and parsley). But there is also a bodyguard. Lieberman talks and laughs, but as soon as he gets out of his chair the operation is immediately activated. Nobody pays any attention to the matter, except non-Jewish foreigners.

### **The "City of Peace"**

From the Mount of Olives or from the viewpoint in the vicinity which commemorates the Our Father, there is an unbeatable view of the old town. The white cemetery, the Dormition Abbey. Nearer, Gethsemane, the Russian Orthodox convent of Mary Magdalene, the old temple stairs, the Damascus Gate. And in the midst of this world of stone, Qubbat al-Sakhra, the Dome of the Rock, blue and golden. And forbidden.

Everything is linked: the rock on which Abraham was about to sacrifice his son and from where Muhammad started his night journey. This is the third most sacred place of Islam. The dome stands some thirty meters high on the Rock and its inscription in the Arabic-Islamic language proceed from the Quran and includes an extract dedicated to... Jesus and Mary.

The mosque is a focus of color in this grim Hebrew world presided by the Western Wall (the Wall of Lamentations), with its thousands of written petitions imbedded in the stone; Yad Vashem,

the impressive memorial to the Holocaust and the Knesset (Parliament) with its remarkable and huge triptych of gobelin donated by Marc Chagall.

Nobody can doubt that Jerusalem is a Jewish city. Although in dispute. Streets bear names like Albert Einstein or Ben Gurion; the road signs are in Hebrew, English and Arab. But the old city already shows a division in neighborhoods and sectors, and that spreads beyond the walls of Suleiman the Magnificent. The Christian, Armenian, Jewish and Muslim sectors that coexist in a circumspect and well-intentioned cordiality in the world's epicenter of monotheistic religions, do not get that well along with each other a little further out. Jerusalem (for some, its translation is "City of Peace") is the great center of dispute.

The Arabs claim for themselves the Eastern part of the city as the capital for the pending Palestine state; it is an area where there are markets and the population is Muslim. Checks by Israelis are very frequent there.

Eran Lerman, director of the American Jewish Committee, says that for Israel it would be best to have a Palestinian state because that would mean relating with a peer, but Ziad Abu-Zayyad, of the Palestinian Authority, while defending the need of a state for his people, asks himself "why does Israel pretend to create a Palestinian state without the collaboration of the Palestinians themselves?"

The questions are endless, because although there are many Palestinians who clamor for the creation of a state, there is no certainty that the greater part of the population would want to live in it if it should exist. That is the case, for instance, of the Christians who live today on lands that have a vast majority of Muslim population.

Recently, an important number of Christian families from Bethlehem decided to talk openly about what they describe as a persecution from the Muslims. Parents said they had written letters to the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and to the Vatican, complaining about the attacks, but that their claims had not been attended to yet.

According to their complaints, Christians have feared for a long time to say what is going on for the possible reprisals. "We could be labeled as collaborators with Israel".

"The situation is very dangerous", Samir Qumsiyeh, owner of the private TV station Mahd (Nativity), located in Beit Sahur, told "The Jerusalem Post" on January 25, 2007. "I think that 15 years from now there will be no more Christians left in Bethlehem. You will have to look for them with a torch. It's a very sad situation".

This contrasts with other viewpoints that consider Israel as a neighbor who is in control of the water and electricity of the Arab villages. One that has also created a vast safety fence all along the Judean-Samaritan frontier. The southwest part of Jerusalem is a large area which has remained isolated by the building of the "wall". One can frequently see in the vicinity protests headed by foreigners with posters saying "The wall must fall".

There is also Abu Dis, a district to the east of the old city. The cement blocks of more than 4 meters high extend themselves throughout Shayah Street, thus dividing the city. There are insulting graffiti on one side and total neatness on the other.

### **The "Danse Macabre"**

Haifa is about to become the most important port on the Mediterranean and Tel Aviv makes an impression with its mixture of high-tech cosmopolitan city and expensive resort. On its wide waterfront, there are myriads of five-star hotels and apartment buildings facing the skyline appear as if by magic. Many rich foreigners are buying apartments here, in particular French citizens. This has made prices rise up to a point in which they have become forbidding even for the wealthiest Israelites.

Tel Aviv's open market is something glorious to behold. A whole square of alleyways where dates and hundred different kinds of cheeses mingle with saffron, cardamom, cinnamon and curry. But also together with fake Barbies, Levi's jeans, Timberland polo shirts and Turkish Delight. Tamir, the owner of a stand, sings wholeheartedly "Happy Birthday" while he beguiles his clients with his label jeans for a little more than US\$ 5. He vouchsafes their authenticity. It is the commercial feast of the masses and there is no check of the persons entering or leaving the place.

However, from this same area one can have access to a fair of fine artisans with Neva jewels, in gold and silver; bronze kaleidoscopes with clever combinations, and many wooden

ornaments and toys for children. The atmosphere here is more select and there is a check kept on this at the entrance.

In spite of the 3 dead in Eilat (on Monday, January 29), due to a suicide bomb attack, life in Tel Aviv goes on. It is a crystal calm which can be shattered in a minute, as also occurs in beautiful Haifa, further up north, where there were 30 days of war during July-August 2006.

It is not that Eilat and the spilt blood are not noticed. A few hours after the attack, the Jewish Air Force bombed a tunnel between Gaza and the territory of Israel, in what was considered as an act of retaliation. It was reported that the attack was intended to avoid Palestinians from staging another attack.

Yona Yahav is a "star" mayor. Haifa, his city, is at his feet. They adore him and many consider him as a future prime minister or president. "When I assumed, I knew that I had to be prepared for an earthquake (it is an area of intense seismic activity), but although it may seem strange in these latitudes, I didn't think about war and nowadays it is that that worries me", he says.

Lebanon is so close that you can see from the city the lights of that country. During the 2006 attacks it was common to see people out on the balconies of the buildings of the high area, commenting on the course of the missiles. "A macabre spectacle", states Yahav.

Those were days in which children's summer camps had to be cancelled and schools closed. What could one do with the children? The mayor found a solution. Haifa is a city with seven commercial malls. Each one with big underground parking lots. In the minus 7 floor sirens weren't heard and there they set up huge nursery schools that worked from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. Parents were allowed to stay. As Haifa is a city known for its good relationships with Arabs (a cultural project of integration that has worked for years), the nursery schools were full of Arab children, too.

The other great problem is the senior citizens. The municipality received thousands of phone calls because the pensioners couldn't go out to change their paychecks in the banks. Yahav then created a system of 2500 volunteers who went to the houses of the elderly, cashed their cheques in the banks and came back with the cash. There were no complaints about the service.

"Our union and our strength are this way in daily life; even more so when there is a conflict that depends on us as a country", stresses the mayor.

Israel and Yahav believe that the war or the threat of attacks cannot immobilize Israel. That is why Haifa already has a plan for schoolchildren in case it should happen again. "I'm not going to send my 16-year old daughter to school", says the mayor. "I decided to create a gigantic studies' network. Each one of the teachers will give lessons to his or her pupils and thus they won't lose any time. Implementing the system costs a million dollars which we will obtain through donations. This is much cheaper and safer than fortifying schools".

The municipality of Haifa has a budget of US\$ 500 million.

### **The terror and the mission**

One cannot isolate the "Palestinian problem" from the "Arab problem". But there is in addition the "Muslim problem" (Iran) encircling the Arab-Israeli problem. The truth is that Israel struggles daily for survival in a complex world.

It is a state that is a frontier between Africa, Asia and Europe. A democracy which allows Arabs to argue in the Knesset, in a place of the world where there are no democracies. Israel is surrounded by monarchic governments or dictatorships. "Israel's gross domestic product is very strong and it is inserted in an environment where the distribution of the gross domestic product is nefarious", comments Sergio Gryn, from the Latin American and Caribbean Division of the International Institute-Histadrut (see box with figures).

To this we can add the fact that it is a Judeo-Christian world which is a frontier with the Muslim world with which it has idiomatic, economic and political differences.

Gryn makes an exercise. He asks what the safety fence (the wall) means for Israel. The answer is "safety", "life" and "protection". And then what it means for the Arab world. For them, it's "jail", "poverty" and "discrimination".

"That is the reality, but we have to look after our children and live in safety. Up to now we have played the game of losing-losing. Israel and the Palestinians have to play the game of winning-winning", assures Gryn. But that is not an easy task.

War is one aspect, but the terrorism it entails is another. In Tzur-Igal, some 20 kms from Tel Aviv, they had to build a wall because a missile from Kalkilya hit a school. "In every school of Israel there are guards bearing arms", corroborates Gryn.

Ely Karmon, an expert on terrorism, says that "without the support of a state the possibility of international terrorism does not exist". And he tries hard to make a distinction. "Suicide terrorism is not only religious, as the press leads us often to believe. It's an invention of the Iranians put into practice by Hezbollah (see box). It is the myth of martyrdom destined to train terrorists. An efficient operating method, a military strategy and not only a religious phenomenon".

In his opinion, the biggest problem is Iran which destabilizes the region. "One of Bush's goals is to neutralize Iran's conduct".

Karmon remembers a sentence of Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States, after the 9/11 attacks: "If Hezbollah is the A-team, Iran is the team owner and Syria is the coach".

For Ely Karmon, the present crisis "according to some scenarios, could lead to an expanded war involving Syria. This should give us an idea of how the Middle East could look if Iran achieves a nuclear umbrella to cover its destabilizing "revolutionary" role in the Muslim world".

For that end, in his opinion, three strategic goals should guide the international community: to stop the Iranian nuclear project at all costs, to neutralize the very negative role of Syria in the region and to put maximum pressure on its regime, (a focal point at this stage due to its central position in the destabilization of the Palestinian and Lebanese arenas, and not permit the victory of Hizballah and Hamas on their respective arenas, with e risk of seeing this as a signal of weakness of he moderate forces in the region and a boost to all radical Islamist movements globally.

In spite of all of this, the Kfar Saba Immigration and Absorption Center is full. There are hundreds of young men who arrive there every year to study Hebrew and incorporate themselves to life in Israel, to its political and religious conditions. There are almost no desertions,

Lubja, Eliah, Asa and Alex are four Russian teenagers who abandoned their native land and felt the call of what they consider their real country. They had sufficient money to study in Moldavia, Novgorod, Moscow or Siberia, but they asked their parents to "return" to Israel. Their origins are Jewish and they feel that there lies their road.

"We assume this reality. I am going to do my military service. I want to be an army photographer" says Lubja (17).

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#### **GENERAL DATA:**

Capital: Jerusalem.

Official languages: Hebrew and Arab.

Form of government: Parliamentary Republic.

Surface: 22,145 square kms.

GDP per capita: US\$ 23,416.

Growth rate: 4, 8%.