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A Great Dream, A Small Hope

A six day trip in Israel. A delegation of journalists (of which eleven members were Greek). A rich and engaging program. Many encounters with both Israelis and Palestinians. And a lot of movement—Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv. All these things were nice, but our main subject of concern was another one: How can one write about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which in Greece is treated with an almost universal, ideological and stereotypical bent? As if this is simply a clash between Good (the Palestinians) and Evil (the Israelis). But the Middle East conflict is not a cowboy movie. When will we realize this? So I continue writing on—but without stereotypes.

From all the perspectives, opinions and facts that reached my ears during this trip, I will explore two of them in-depth. Unfortunately, neither one provides an optimistic outlook for the future.

First: Bin Laden's network is up and running again...with a new base in the Gaza Strip. "I believe that a small cell of Al Qaeda is already operating in Gaza, and I fear that it will only grow larger," said the Palestinian Mohammed Dajani, a professor of political science at Al Quds University in northern Jerusalem. The same exact sentiment is shared with others, from political analysts to journalists. Fantastic. Even more nightmarish prospects.

Second: Everyone I came in contact with, whether they were Israelis or Palestinians, did not believe that the Middle East crisis would be resolved soon. They talked about "stemming the violence" and "disinheriting the violence"—but only up to there. They are scared that the situation will evolve into a perpetual conflict. They do not see a horizon of peace, or any actual solution to their problems, like the problems which exist today between Fatah and Hamas, embroiled in an "undeclared civil war."

Professor Shlomo Avineri, a politically moderate Israeli and professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, talked about the tragic mistakes that the Palestinians have made in the past, such as their rejection of the Camp David Accords of 2000, from a democratic perspective.

"The main problem," explained Avineri, "is that democracy is not expanding, not just for the Palestinians, but for the Arab population in general. The problem is not Islam, but rather the weak culture of democracy that runs throughout the Arab world. That is why the [Lech] Walesa's or the [Vaclav] Havel's or the [Mikhail] Gorbachev's do not exist for them; they cannot even muster a [Kemal] Ataturk." These are the truths which are not usually spoken aloud.

Jerusalem. In this strangely enchanting city, home of the world's three major monotheistic religions, the most emotionally stirring places for me were neither the ancient nor the revered sites of the old city; for that, I apologize. Not even the Wailing Wall, crowded mainly by the ultra-orthodox Jews. Not even the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the Christian faithful flock from all around the world (I've never seen a Japanese person cross themselves before). Not even the impressive Islamic mosques, which are visible from everywhere in the city but are not open for visitors.

The site that moved me most in Jerusalem has no relation to faith, but rather to memory—the newly constructed Yad Vashem, or Holocaust museum. Words do not suffice. When someone visits there, they are overcome with emotions, emotions which will remain with them wherever they go in life.

Haifa. Israel's third city and main port. A city with a completely heterogeneous population, in which both Arab and Jewish Israeli citizens coexist together peacefully. During last year's war with Lebanon, the city endured a trial by fire—while the citizens of the city sought refuge in bomb shelters, Hezbollah continuously rained Katusha rockets upon them.

In Haifa, early one morning, we met with the lauded author Avram Yehoshua, who also teaches Hebrew literature and writing at the city's University. His works have been translated into over 22 languages, including Greek. For years now, Avram Yehoshua has been a predominant figure in the Israeli peace movement. Like a savant, he explains his bitterness about the current situation, helpful since the people of Greece cannot truly understand the Middle East problem as they are compromised by their own one-sided arguments.

Avram Yehoshua emphasized: "it is one thing for someone to support the rights of Palestinians, but it is quite another thing to justify the attacks against defenseless Israelis." In the same tone, he continued: "it is one thing to criticize Israel, and even to subject it to hard criticism, but it is yet another thing when this anti-Israeli sentiment devolves into anti-Semitism."

How does the Israeli author envision the future? "After the Oslo Accords of 1993, I truly believed that we were going to arrive at a peace settlement. That way, I figured, I would finally be able to stop dealing primarily with the Palestinian issue and be able to finally write a novel with a central theme of love. Unfortunately, the way things turned out, my hopes were deferred."

A solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems nothing short of a miracle. However, there is a saying in Israel: "whoever doesn't believe in miracles isn't a realist." Yet others say that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is "a great dream"—a great dream yes, but one with little hope.