Jerusalem Day 2024 – So Different, So Familiar

written by Fleur Hassan Nahoum | 09.06.2024

This Jerusalem Day was so different and yet so familiar from last year's commemoration. On the one hand, celebrations, ceremonies and our traditional march took place as usual. On the other, as with this year's Independence Day, everything was tinged with trauma and sadness. We should reflect on the ways in which what was true about Jerusalem last year has endured throughout this devastating and tumultuous year.

Last year, as Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, I presented encouraging statistics and trends regarding the Arab population in Jerusalem: I noted a significant step towards integration by Arabs in east Jerusalem who were increasingly graduating the Israeli matriculation (bagrut) exams, as opposed to the tawjihi Palestinian matriculation exams. I cited upward-bound statistics in social mobility trends, with the substantially-increased participation of Arab men and women in the workforce.

These positive trends are a point of pride for those of us who focused on Arab integration throughout the past several years on the Jerusalem City Council. We were and still are working towards the transformation of east Jerusalem into 'Silicon Wadi', a future hub for technology and innovation in Israel's most multicultural city and its eternal capital.

On October 7th, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar expected the Arabs of Jerusalem to view the scenes of death and destruction on their televisions with glee and to participate in the rampage. He could not have been more wrong. While two devastating internal terror attacks have occurred since October 7, the Arab population of Jerusalem, on the whole, has preferred to stay out of Hamas's unholy war of terror. Hamas called for unrest at the Temple Mount and al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Fridays of Ramadan as they do every year, and yet the Old City was blessedly quiet, bolstered, of course, by the strong presence of Israeli police and security forces to ensure safe worship for all.

We have long known that the majority of the Jerusalem Arab residents prefer to live under Israeli sovereignty and the Jerusalem municipality, rather than living

under some future Palestinian state. The past several years of concerted efforts towards integration and the improvement of quality of life for Arab residents have contributed to the feeling of belonging amongst Jerusalem's Arabs and to the relative calm of late.

Yet, our eyes must be open to the longstanding problem of hatred, incitement against Jews, and glorification of martyrdom that is endemic to the Palestinian educational curriculum. This curriculum is taught not only in the West Bank, but in Jerusalem as well, including in UNRWA schools, where it is even funded by the Israeli education ministry. I have long sought to convince the world of the poison of UNRWA. The extent of UNWRA's corruption and involvement in terror was made undeniable when UNRWA employees dragged Jewish bodies into Gaza, when UNRWA teachers held Israelis hostage for months, and when UNWRA sites were discovered to be covering mass stockpiles of weapons and terror tunnels.

The world may call these bad actors or a minority, but we in Jerusalem must see the moral rot of UNWRA for what it is, recognize its role in radicalizing young Palestinians, including in East Jerusalem, and do our part to quash it amongst us.

It seems hard to imagine peace with our neighbors after October 7. Nevertheless, we must fully embody the model of peace that is Jerusalem's potential. We must emphasize that deradicalization, and replacing the culture of incitement with a culture of cooperation, is key to building sustainable peace and coexistence. We must work to both deradicalize the bad actors, and maximize the shared productivity, mutual benefit, and high standard of living within our city for all its residents.

Many would have said — and indeed some still say, with their eyes closed to the everyday scenes we take for granted — that what we have in Jerusalem is not possible. Yet we know that it is. Let us improve, build, and continue to model Jerusalem despite the naysayers. With stubborn sabra determination, let us show our neighbors what coexistence look like.

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