

The Arabs are Our Brothers and Our Friends ...and Our Equals

By Emily Lodge

In a video recently released, Mitt Romney questioned the workability of a two state solution in the Middle East, the goal of every Republican and Democratic president for the last fifty years. America likes to think of itself as being on the side of truth and justice, but the occupation of Palestine begs the question. Had America continued its occupation of Germany or Japan for fifty years after World War II, would it not have been universally condemned? Consider how patient the Arabs have been with us; and how the minority who has not been so patient would suddenly have the wind taken out of its sails if the occupation were to end. The Arabs (not the Israelis) are pledged to a peaceful return to the '67 borders and they have been for the last decade.

From my perch living in Amman, Jordan, it is difficult to understand another of Mitt Romney's remark that he considers the Jewish culture superior to that of the Palestinian. We have been living in Jordan for almost six years and have been impressed by the extent of Jordanian hospitality (especially after living twenty years in France). For example, when we happened to show up at the wrong house for dinner, the owner felt obliged to ask us in to dine with him. On our return from the summer holidays to one of the hotels here, the woman at the security checkpoint welcomed us by saying, "The hotel is shining now that you are back."

Words like hospitable, kind, loyal, sentimental, industrious, devout, humorous, thoughtful and wise come to mind when I think of our Palestinian friends – hmm, qualities that also sound very... American. At our Arabic lesson on my birthday, our teacher, a Christian Arab, known for her medicinal wisdom and her culinary skill, had prepared a banana cake with four candles, (pretending I had just turned forty). She presented me with a shawl ('shall' in Arabic) embroidered with the words, "I have you in my eyes and I have you in my heart."

There are 2.2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan of the total population of 6,269,285. Many believe that those of Palestinian origin vastly outnumber the East Bank Jordanians. The perception in the West of Palestinians is of a destitute, helpless, emotional, disorganized, desperate and volatile people. In fact, the Palestinian diaspora is as cultivated as the Jewish diaspora. One just has to open one's eyes in Jordan to see a sophisticated, educated Palestinian elite at work in many different fields; and this is true in a lot of other Arab countries

such as Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. The articulate and focused Jordanian Queen is a Palestinian who grew up in Kuwait; in the West Bank and on the East Bank of Jordan, there is a strong network of highly successful doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, journalists, musicians and statesmen, many of whom have graduated from U.S. colleges and all of whom have the same goals and aspirations for their children as those in the West.

The élite of the Jordanian business community is Palestinian. Shermine Dajani, CEO of the energy company Pan-Med, and a Muslim who wears Dior, remembers her school days in pre-1967 Jerusalem when being a Muslim, Jew or Christian did not matter. Elia Nuqul, a Palestinian Jordanian, built his tissue company from scratch in 1952, is currently operating in forty-five countries. Palestinian-Jordanian Shireen Abu Khader, a graduate of Oberlin, directs the best choir in the Middle East. East Bankers like Jordanian Dr. Umayya Toukan, the man the Financial Times named "the best central bank governor of the year" for 2010, kept a tight rein on credit at a time when the rest of the world went wild. Awn Khasawneh, an expert on Arabic and Islamic legal systems, is a recent Jordanian Prime Minister and the former Middle East Judge at the International Court at the Hague. (A sometime farmer, his olive oil that is of such high quality it is sold at Harrod's in London.)

In the West Bank, Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Prime Minister, is widely regarded as an intuitive genius and a Mandela figure for Palestine. Said Khourey, president and CEO of CCC, the largest oil and gas construction firm in the Middle East, is the largest single individual donor to the Palestinian cause. Hisham Shauwa, who recently returned to Palestine after working in Europe, is president and CEO of the Bank of Palestine. Zeina Tallad whose mother died at one of the Israeli checkpoints won a fellowship to Columbia University and then returned home to Birzeit in order to help with the cause. Gaza resident Fayaz Anan has helped Gaza survive the Israeli blockade by transforming cars run on oil to run on electricity.

Americans are widely perceived here as innocents manipulated by Israel – first about Iraq now Iran. "The Iranians are chronic liars," our Arabic teacher told us. "They won't do anything. They got tired in the war with Iraq and their economy is in a shambles. How many widows are there since the war in the '80s – 700,000? Iran wants friendship with America but Israel doesn't want that. Let the US treat her own problems; she is the most important country in the world. Israel is always poisoning the US relationship with the Middle East, pretending

she is a protector of American values. Shu Hal Hacki? (What is this talk?)”

I wonder what it would take for Americans to see the Arabs as the good guys and the smart guys in the Middle East. After all, we are a nation of farmers and agrarian life began here about 10,000 years ago in Palestine, (and Phoenicia, Assyria and Sumeria). Techies know al Khwarizmi invented algebra – al-jabr-- and passed it on to Diophantus. Arabs don't complicate our foreign policy the way Israel does, depleting our treasury of \$9 billion a year. If we saw the Arabs as the good guys, maybe they would see us that way too. If we stood on the side of justice with the Palestinians, maybe extremist groups like Al Qaeda would cease to exist. It is time to realize that the Arabs are our brothers, our friends ...and our equals.

Emily Lodge is a free-lance writer living in Amman, Jordan

Word Count: 1050