

Does Ahmed Know?

Recently, as negotiations ended without any marked achievements to bring Syrian government and anti-government sides to an agreement, ending a civil war going into its fifth year and leaving hundreds of thousands dead and injured, millions uprooted from their homes, and with no end in sight, I can't stop thinking about Ahmed.

As an Orthodox Israeli Jew, I can't help but chuckle reading my own words, as if it were the start of a joke.

As an undergrad at Emory in the 1980s, I became aware of the phenomena of anti-Israel protests raging on campuses across the U.S. and was grateful that we did not have that problem. As president of Hillel, I reached out to Muslim and Christian student groups to build alliances on things we had in common and hopefully create enough goodwill to prevent an explosion of things that divide us.

I reached out to the Muslim Student Association, whose president, Ahmed, was a Sunni Syrian medical student. They refused to sit with Christians because they believed that Christians are not monotheistic, so a relationship developed between our two organizations, mostly embodied by our relationship personally. We developed a mutual respect and friendship.

Ahmed was a bit radical from my perspective, a devout Sunni who was not particularly supportive of then Syrian President Hafez Assad. I was impressed that he actually shared that with me.

Ahmed denied Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. He had a fundamental problem with Israel as a Jewish state on what he deemed Muslim land and did not acknowledge the historical reality or biblical tradition that Islam tended to delegitimize.

Ahmed also had a problem that, while he claimed Jews were not a people promised or entitled to its own state, as a religion he cited things in Israel like women in bikinis, suggestive advertising and other forms of (what he considered) immorality that decreased our de facto right to a state.

Once, at his request, we went to see Rabbi Meir Kahane, the well-known Jewish nationalist whose answer to the Arab-Israel conflict was simple: Expel the Arabs. Kahane was a member of Israel's Knesset who was later thrown out because of his racist views. Ahmed and I listened to him together in a suburban Atlanta home. Fully aware that there was an Arab in the room, Kahane spared nothing in his presentation to be kinder or gentler.

Kahane did not represent my views. But on the drive back to campus, Ahmed said, "If I were a Jew, that's how I'd be."

I lost touch with Ahmed after leaving Atlanta. Presumably, he got his medical degree and returned to Syria. But he's been on my mind the past three years. Given the depth of the human tragedy, I wonder if he's even alive.

As a Sunni and no fan of President Hafez Assad, nor presumably Assad's son and current president, Bashar Assad, I have to imagine that Ahmed would be perfectly happy for the Assad dictatorial dynasty to end.

I imagine Ahmed working in a Syrian hospital, treating victims of his country's civil war, doing his best to keep people alive and healthy albeit under horrible conditions. I imagine Ahmed being called upon to treat anti-Assad rebels, Syrians and those fighting from the myriad of other countries, each with their own ideological reason to want to overthrow Assad.

But I wonder whether Ahmed, as a doctor, has any awareness of the humanitarian aid provided in and by Israel, the country whose very existence he delegitimized, for victims of *his* country's civil war. If he is aware, I wonder if he even

cares.

Does Ahmed know that the Israeli soldiers responsible for securing the Syrian border have also been involved in many humanitarian efforts to assist and treat Syrians, including at a field hospital, for those lucky and smart enough to make it to the Israeli border where they know they will receive the care they need?

Does Ahmed know that Israeli soldiers and medical personnel have treated and transferred several hundred Syrians to Israeli hospitals where they are treated equally alongside Israeli Arab and Jewish patients, professionally, by Israeli Arab and Jewish doctors and nurses?

Does Ahmed know of the many humanitarian relief efforts undertaken by Israeli civilians to provide aid for hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees? Albeit that we remove labels with Hebrew writing, which I think is wrong, does he know of the warm clothing, food and medical supplies that Israelis donate to help these Syrians?

Is it possible that Ahmed or his friend was the doctor who treated one particular Syrian patient and, knowing that he couldn't do any more, wrote a note about his patient's condition, what he had done, and helped the patient get to the Israeli border where he knew his patient would be treated professionally and well cared for?

Is it possible that Ahmed sees the abundant morality in, and emanating from, Israel to benefit his own people and now realizes that Israel is not part of the problem but part of the solution?

Hopefully, Ahmed is well and is aware of these and many other roles that Israel has played to aid Syrians. Hopefully this has changed his thinking and, if not undermining the religious foundation in Islam that Israel has no legitimacy and cannot exist as a Jewish state, at least that the things he deemed

immodest are superseded by the value Israel and the Jewish people place on life.

Maybe this gives Ahmed the ability to see that Israel has a right to exist and plays a positive role in this region. Maybe he and others like him can get beyond centuries of religious doctrine and decades of anti-Israel hatred and come to terms with Israel, aspire to coexist for our mutual benefit, and even, just maybe, consider the notion that we can live in peace.

Peace be with you, Ahmed. Salaam. Shalom.

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