

Orthodox Jew: Why Israel's Arabs Deserve Better

If there was ever proof that Israel is not an apartheid state actively discriminating against its Arab minority, all one needs to do is look at the recent statement of Israeli Arab Knesset member Ayman Odeh. Not only does this reflect the reality that Israeli Arabs are equal parts of Israel's democracy, but also the fact that he can make statements that go against the interest and security of the state shows what a hyper-democracy Israel in fact is.

As all this has unfolded, the thought I cannot shake is how much Israel's Arabs deserve better.

Odeh used the occasion of a recent Ramadan greeting from Jerusalem's Damascus Gate, just outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, to make such outrageous remarks that the backlash is even coming from Israel's Arabs. Odeh said he hoped to see Palestinian flags flying there one day. He said he had spoken with groups of "young Palestinians with Israeli citizenship" in what he calls "occupied Arab Jerusalem," saying they were being "humiliated" by Israel's security forces.

That Odeh speaks of "Palestinians with Israeli citizenship," and does so in the capital of Israel while declaring it "occupied," underscores the earlier point of no apartheid and Israel's hyper-democracy. Such comments would never be tolerated under actual apartheid. But I digress.

Like many Israeli Arab leaders, Odeh rightly complains that the Israeli police should do more to reduce Arab crime. Israeli Arabs make up 20% of the population, but their crime rate far outpaces their percent of the population. Last year, a record 126 Israeli Arabs were killed amid Arab-on-Arab

crime, much of it stemming from Arab mafia, along with the perversely termed “honor-killings” of women. It’s correct that Israel needs to do more, and correct for Israeli Arabs (and Jews) to advocate for that.

Then, while standing in central Jerusalem, speaking freely with no threat of repercussions, Odeh crossed the line. Despite calling on Israel to do more, he called for Israeli Arabs serving in Israel’s security forces to “throw your guns in their faces and tell them our place is not with you.” Speaking of the role of Arabs in Israel, he doubled down. “It is important for me to tell you from here, the Damascus Gate, that it is a humiliation for one of our sons to join the security forces.”

Odeh called upon the “small minority” of Arabs who serve in Israel’s security forces, in fact thousands, to quit their jobs and stop “humiliating our people, humiliating our families, and humiliating everyone who comes to pray in the blessed Aqsa Mosque.”

Coming at any time, such comments are egregious and outrageous. Coming in any way as part of the celebration of the Islamic holy month is obscene. All Arabs and Muslims should be offended.

Odeh’s hateful comments also come just weeks after the murder of Amir Khoury by a Palestinian Arab terrorist. Amir was a Christian Arab Israeli policeman who is credited with shooting and neutralizing the terrorist before being mortally wounded. For most Israelis, Amir Khoury, a Christian Arab, is a hero. For Ayman Odeh, Khoury is not a hero but a humiliation.

I visited with the Khoury family for hours last week. They are proud of their son/brother. He died as he lived his life, as a hero. Odeh’s comments raise a level of incitement that cause me to worry for the Khoury family and threats they might receive because of Amir’s heroism.

Amir's father, Jeries, spoke during his mourning of seeing a historic level of unity that Amir's death has inspired. Most Israelis want unity, desperately. Ayman Odeh and his Joint List party, the largest Arab party in the Knesset, thrive on living as victims, blaming Israel, and highlighting division and divisiveness between Arabs and Jews. That's why Israel's Arabs deserve better. Their own leaders are selling them out.

Israel's Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked accused fellow MK Odeh of incitement, tweeting "Ayman Odeh incites violence against the State of Israel and its institutions. ... His place is outside the Israeli Knesset."

I look at Odeh's remarks as more than incitement, but in fact treason. He's not only actively advocating for undermining the security of the state but also jeopardizing the well-being of his own community, which is in need of even more security. And who better to provide that than Israeli Arabs who know their community.

Obscenely, the message of the leader of Israel's largest Arab party is that Arabs should not serve in their country's security forces, those that also protect their community. When controversy comes – and we have more than our fair share – Odeh's default is not to promote unity and reconciliation, not to put out the flames, but to add fuel to the fire. Rather than advocating for tax-paying Arab Israeli citizens, their children and their communities, Odeh and the Joint List set themselves as the protectors of the Aqsa Mosque and Palestinian nationalism.

It's ironic to talk about protecting "Al Aqsa" when they undermine the protection of their own communities, and Israel in general, during holy Ramadan no less.

Pundits in Israel have observed that because of the nature of their leaders, Israeli Arabs are currently withdrawing from Israeli politics. A recent poll showed that only 40% of

eligible Arab voters in Israel even planned to vote in the next election. Another poll showed that 68% of Israeli Arabs range from “somewhat” to “very” supportive of Arabs serving as part of the government, not inciting against it.

Israeli Arabs deserve better. Much better. Rather than retreating from Israeli politics, they should become active members of Israel’s mainstream nationalist parties to underscore that they wish to be part of Israeli society, not the lepers to which Odeh and his incitement subjugate them.

They should turn to the model of Amir Khoury, selflessly and without hesitation rushing into the fire because our shared destiny is far greater than the divisiveness of “leaders” like Odeh. For the most part they’ll find Israeli Jews sharing many things in common – that we all thrive, together. They’ll find most Israelis embracing their constructive worries and concerns, as well as needs and aspirations.

Conversations like this need to take place, not the scorched-earth, lose-lose perspective of Ayman Odeh and the Joint List.
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