



Common Ground News Service - Middle East

Reaching across the divide (VIII)

by Akiva Eldar
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TEL AVIV -

Dear Salameh,

When the good people from Search for Common Ground suggested the challenge of my participating in an exchange of letters between us, I momentarily hesitated. I was concerned that this singular task would turn into yet another battleground between Israelis and Arabs. In addition, I didn't want to be drawn into a situation, in this forum, where I would defend a policy that I have openly criticized in the pages of "Ha'aretz", in media interviews and at overseas conferences to which I've been invited in order to present my views. Your letters, and particularly the last one, prove that there was no basis to my concern. I have come to recognize that my "pen-pal" is a courageous journalist, a worthy intellectual and an Arab who pursues peace and does not hesitate to point out the failings of the Arab leadership. I have found in you, dear Salameh, not only a faithful colleague in the professional arena, blessed with a healthy and realistic vision, but I feel privileged to have gotten to know a close partner who shares my fears for the fate of our region and the future of our children.

Indeed, as you have written in your latest letter, the Arab-Israeli dispute in general and the violent conflict between us and the Palestinians in particular, have been removed from the top rung of the ladder as the greatest threat to peace and stability in the Middle East by even bigger threats. Yes, the strategic mistakes of the Bush administration in relation to its dealings on the Iraqi and Iranian fronts, have given the sign for the beginning of a mad race for hegemony over the Middle East between radical Shi'ism and global jihad. Both Israeli and Palestinian fundamentalists are taking part in this race, whose end, as you have written, is likely to result in total destruction. Even if their role is not central, the tensions, the violence and the atmosphere of despair that they disseminate, turn "our" conflict into a key cause for "their" conflict.

There are two ways of relating to the link between the local Israeli-Arab conflict and the regional Muslim-Muslim one. One path is to disconnect this link and to convince ourselves that a just and agreed solution to the battle over borders and the refugee problem will not influence the Sunni-Shiite enmity and will not contribute much to Middle East stability. The second path is to renew, with even greater urgency, the Arab-Israeli political process and to make Arab-Israeli peace a model for regional peace. Widening the circle of peace by adding together the Palestinians, as well as Syria and Lebanon, to Egypt and Jordan, which already signed peace treaties with Israel, will drive out and supplant the destructive weeds like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Al Qaeda's leader, Osama Bin Laden. All those who flourish in the swamps of poverty, distress and hatred. On the other hand, an atmosphere of peace that will allow for the diversion of resources from the arms race to infrastructures and industries, is the most effective fertilizer for economic growth and for attracting investors and tourists. An atmosphere of peace that will allow for the diversion of resources from the arms race to infrastructures and industries, is the most effective fertilizer for economic growth and for attracting investors and tourists.

Unfortunately, Salameh, I learn from your letter that despair pushes even good and wise people like you along the first path, a way that leads, in my opinion, directly to the abyss. I also don't have illusions that an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, including a compromise on Jerusalem's holy sites, will bring an end to bloodshed in Iraq. I don't believe that flying the Israeli flag in Damascus will persuade Iran to give up its nuclear program and its expansionist ambitions in the region. But I do believe that if Al Jazeera, instead of broadcasting pictures of bleeding Palestinian children to hundreds of millions of Muslim homes, would broadcast a soccer match between the premier youth divisions of Israel and Palestine, Hassan Nasrallah's ratings would fall exponentially.

Dear Salameh, as you have written, with great sorrow, the international community is not adequately estimating the extent of the threat hovering over it as a result of the Iraqi chaos on the one hand and the occupation of Palestinian territory on the other. The world is not giving the weight it deserves to the words of Jordanian King Abdullah that warns repeatedly that this chaos will result in the collapse of the pragmatic regimes in the region. The international community does not know how to evaluate the importance of Saudi King Abdullah's initiative that pushed Hamas and Fatah to the Mecca agreement. This agreement paved the way to a national unity government, and from there to the Arab summit in Riyadh that will revivify the Arab Initiative of March 2002.

You are right, dear Salameh. The Olmert-Peretz government is lacking the courage to embrace the Arab Initiative and doesn't enjoy anywhere near the public support required for a political process built on this historic opportunity. It's true that the man sitting in the White House is not displaying readiness to use the power of the only super power in the world to take this important opportunity and fulfil his vision - a vision of two states for two peoples. But for the future of our region is too important to leave in the hands of politicians who come and go. Peace is too precious for you and me to surrender to despair. Cheer up my friend.

Akiva

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