

George Deek and his Rejection of the Arab Culture of Intimidation, Intolerance and Intransigence

by Norman Berdichevsky (December 2014)

Many observers of the Israeli scene are convinced that the extreme views of the elected Arab Knesset members are a true measure of the community's rejection of any accommodation of living peacefully and harmoniously with the Jewish majority. To do so is a common error in the mistaken and often ignorant understanding of Arab culture and the realities of Middle Eastern politics that characterize almost all of the so called "pundits" and reporters working in the field for major news gathering agencies. This includes the BBC at the top of the list with a huge staff of competent professionals and many years residence in the region. This short-sighted view has been put into dramatic relief by the universal praise accorded to the so called "Arab Spring" as a huge progressive step towards "democracy" and the recipient of extravagant praise from President Obama. He cavalierly abandoned his strongest ally, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood and its leader Muhammad Morsi only to see the Egyptian people rise in defiance against the islamists in what has been called the largest mass political demonstration in history.

How can one explain the apparent massive shift in sympathies and the ignorance of our State Department that continues to repeat the same mistake? Ignorance of Arab culture, language and mentality lie at the bottom of all these turnabouts.

George Deek is a young Christian Arab from Jaffa and Israel's vice ambassador to Norway who addressed a gathering hosted by the Norwegian group "With Israel for Peace" in Oslo on October 27, 2014. His speech is being characterized as "the best speech an Israeli diplomat ever delivered" and made waves for many people who had no idea that Israel has had several prominent non-Jews in its diplomatic corps. Most observers who are aware of the unrelenting hostility of Arab Knesset members do not give sufficient recognition to the prevailing opportunism that characterizes the political culture in the region of the Muslim Middle East embracing Arabs, Iranians and Turks. This means there are no real political parties, no free press or independent judiciary—hence the expression "The Arab Street," i.e., the opinion

shaped by the inability to confront the power of intimidation exercised by the prevailing majority and conventional wisdom.

In the "street," questions and issues of policy are not debated. They are manifested in street demonstrations, almost always orchestrated. In stable states with strong governments, the "people" support the government. In weak states, extremist religious and political groups capable of using force, coercion and the threat of violence hold sway because they promise greater pain and punishment than the rewards offered by the government. The 57 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) appear to be united in their crusade against "Zionism" which serves as the whipping boy and repository of all blame to explain away their failure as nation states. These attitudes have been shared in large part by the Arabs in Israel but are primarily the result of intimidation – intense pressure applied against them by neighboring regimes and terror groups to prevent any tendency to seek an accommodation.

In a masterful speech, Deek swept away all the emotional verbiage that has drowned the conflict and revealed what lies at its core, It is all the more impressive because Deek's family were refugees in 1948 and readmitted to Israel with full citizenship rights.

How come the displacement of the Jews from the Arab world was completely forgotten, while the tragedy of the Palestinians, the Nakba, is still alive in today's politics? It seems to me to be so, because the Nakba has been transformed from a humanitarian disaster to a political offensive. The commemoration of the Nakba is no longer about remembering what happened, but about resenting the mere existence of the state of Israel. It is demonstrated most clearly in the date chosen to commemorate it: The Nakba day is not April 9th – the day of the Deir Yassin massacre, Or July 13th – the day of the expulsion from Lod. The Nakba day was set on May 15th – the day after Israel proclaimed its independence.

By that the Palestinian leadership declared that the disaster of the Nakba is not the expulsion, the abandoned villages or the exile – the Nakba in their eyes is the creation of Israel. They are saddened less by the humanitarian catastrophe that befell Palestinians, and more by the revival of the Jewish state. In other words: they do not mourn the fact that my cousins are Jordanians, they mourn the fact that I am an Israeli." By doing so, the Palestinians have become slaves to the past, held captive by the chains of resentment, prisoners in the world of frustration and hate. But friends, the evident yet simple truth is – that in order not to be reduced to sorrow and bitterness, we must look forward. To put it more clearly: To mend the past, first you have to secure the future.

Regardless of what customs, traditions, ethnic origins or religious sentiments Israel's non-Jewish population groups continue to bear or even cherish, many would probably accept some formula for a unified national identity, common educational system, and full equal rights and responsibilities including conscription if a full scale peace agreement were achieved and a choice given to become citizens of a Hebrew state with a Jewish ethnic majority. A minority (but a growing one) has been willing to admit this publicly. Of course, attempts by ultra-orthodox circles in Israel to redefine Israel with an exclusivist religious character intensifies the issue. It is an unfortunate part of the more than 66 year struggle within Israel since its founding to use a halachic (Jewish religious law) definition of "Who is a Jew."

George Deek is typical of a growing number of highly educated Israeli Arabs who are fluent in Hebrew as well as Arabic. Israeli linguist Eliezer Ben-Rafael emphasizes that the native Palestinian Arabic dialect in current and popular usage in Israel differs substantially from the literary form (Modern Standard – *the fusha*) used by those with a higher education for entertainment, reading, education, listening to the media. He explains why many Israeli Arabs find it easier to use Hebrew textbooks in many subjects rather than those from Arab countries which the Ministry of Education is thus reluctant to import and are in the literary form of Arabic. Israel is a state where language is a powerful factor encouraging acculturation to values and norms traditionally ignored or despised in the Arab-Muslim culture of the Middle East such as freedom of conscience and expression, women's rights and religious liberty.

The Egyptian author, Nonie Darwish, made this clear in a [*Modern Hebrew, The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*](#) (McFarland, 2014).

Israel, like Finland or Belgium or Canada is bilingual, but the relationship between majority and minority is much more problematic and emotional. No matter how sympathetic Jews in the Diaspora may be towards the "Jewish state," the majority do not define themselves as sharing the same "nationality" and the overwhelming majority are unable to experience the reality of Israel first hand even if they have been there a number of times, thus missing out on a considerable content of jokes, word-plays, popular songs and literature. More and more Israeli Arabs have made considerable progress in their careers and education through mastery of Hebrew and would be loath to give up this advantage in a monolingual, monocultural, monoreligious Palestinian Arab state.

Even the world of fiction has begun to pay attention to the new dynamic multi-cultural Hebrew society of Israel. A recent best-seller, "The Last Israelis" by Noah Beck, creates a scenario aboard an Israeli nuclear submarine with a "mixed" crew of 35 sailors, three of whom are a

Christian Arab, a Druze and a Vietnamese-Israeli “gay,” all of whom respond loyally to the call of a common patriotic sentiment to defend their homeland and give very plausible reasons for doing so. They portray a growing sense of Israeli civil society that is more powerful than differences of origin, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation.

George Deek’s speech deserves to be heard by all.
(<http://homespunvine.com/an-incredible-speech-by-arab-israeli-diplomat-george-deek/>)

Norman Berdichevsky is the author of [*Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*](#).

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