

Nov 04, 2016 by Naomi Leight-Give'on

Identity Crisis: Israel in the Middle East ^[1]

Over the last century or so, Israelis have worked to make Israel a part of the Middle East. Israeli *sabras* (native born Israelis) with their argumentative attitudes; take no prisoners mentality; love for hummus, falafel and “Israeli” salad; tan skin; the *yalla* (let’s go) and no-translation needed *‘tseh* (tongue hiss) live up to the Middle Eastern stereotypes and fit in with regional commonalities. If a tourist was dropped off in a nightclub or beach in Beirut or Tel Aviv, the only notable difference between the patrons would be the spoken language. Cultural similarities are not the only commonalities between Israel and her neighbors. Take Lebanon as another example--both in Israel and in Lebanon, the ultra-religious parties have a large say in the government. Even the root words, in both Arabic and Hebrew, for religious school are the same—*madrasa* and *midrasha*. Please do not think I am comparing Hezbollah to Shas—but that, simply, some parallels can be drawn. The democratic governments of Israel and Lebanon allow for religious parties to gain power and representation, Egypt’s autocracy has a long standing ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, so that the religious political group could not gain a foothold in the government.

While these parallels are not often addressed in the context of Israeli-Arab relations, because of obvious circumstances, they should be noted as important tools of public diplomacy to bring Israel and her Arab neighbors closer together. It is better that Israel and Lebanon fight battles with *chickpeas* and *tehina* (tahini) than with guns and bombs.

Similarities aside, there is one drastic difference that has stuck in my head since the surge of pro-democracy protests began on January 25th -- that while almost all the various publics in the Middle East are supporting the people of Egypt -- the people of Israel are quiet and scared, not sharing their support for their Egyptian neighbors, but focused on the fear that they might have to face if Hosni Mubarak can no longer maintain control over the cold peace between the countries. But, what if, for a moment, the Israeli public was just like any other Middle Eastern population? What if Israelis demonstrated *en masse* in *Kikar Rabin* (Rabin Square), Tel Aviv or on Ben Yehuda Street, Jerusalem in support of democracy throughout the Middle East? What message does that send to the people of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan? What would that public diplomacy action represent? That all people of the Middle East deserve a representative democracy, freedom of speech, religion, gender equality, personal security. If Israelis could send that message and the 80% of the Israeli Jewish population in support of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could pressure the democratically elected government of Israel to create peace with her Palestinian partners—then, what would Israel have to worry about in the region? Where would be the fear and the threats? There would be the same amount as in every Middle Eastern country afraid of Al Qaeda (just as Israel is afraid of Hamas). Israel would be truly Middle Eastern.

Identity crisis solved.
