

# The Israel That Arabs Don't Know

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## Articles & Testimony

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When the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited me to visit Israel as part of a delegation of European-based Arab journalists and media representatives, I accepted without hesitation. The goal of the invitation was to provide us with an opportunity to freely explore the different dimensions to life inside the state of Israel. Located in the heart of the Middle East and one of the region's central and enduring conflicts, Israel receives a large amount of attention from neighboring peoples curious about the state itself and its management. Although major developments in international communication and accessibility of knowledge have transformed the world into a connected community that now sometimes resembles a small village, Arab media coverage of Israel continues to be characterized by a lack of clarity and misrepresentation, making it difficult for Arab citizens to truly understand the country. The persistent and recurring problems in the West Bank and Gaza are of major concern to many Arabs, but media sources often conflate the State's controversial foreign policy with life inside the the country itself and produce dystopian visions of life inside its borders.

While not an article or analysis, the following is an honest testimony of what I saw during my visit, without influence by any person or institution. I hope to present an alternative perspective from other Arab media outlets that I have found to exaggerate and mischaracterize the realities of Israeli life.

On my flight from Rome to Tel Aviv on Israel's El Al airlines, I thought about what awaited me and what I would see. Although I had an idea of what Israel was like and friends who have told me of their experiences working there, memories of the accumulated assumptions about the place that I had gained throughout my childhood in Egypt presented a conflicting counter narrative. I wondered which was the truth: what I now knew, or what had been instilled in us Egyptians as children. Do the "Jews" in Israel actually hate Arabs? If they found out I was Egyptian, would treat me poorly? Would I be verbally or physically abused if Israelis heard me speaking Arabic?

Halting my train of thought, a man sitting next to me with his wife asked me something in Hebrew. In English, I explained that I didn't understand the language. The man then apologized and asked in English, "Where are you from?" When I answered that I was from Egypt, he and his wife smiled genuinely and welcomingly. These were not the fake smiles our schools, society, television, and film had attributed to Israelis and Jews.

When I arrived in Israel's financial capital, Tel Aviv, the airport's clean atmosphere and facilities left me wondering whether I had left Europe. Its modernity left little doubt that I had entered a developed country.

On the road from the Ben Gurion Airport to Jerusalem (al-Quds)—Israel's political capital—I saw wide, clean roads, filled with trees and captivating natural scenery. I took notes on everything, in line with my mission to relay the truth of life inside Israel. Once I had arrived in the political capital, I visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Knesset, and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum.

I met with both Arabs and Jews of Arab origin, and they recounted their memories of life in Iraq, Egypt, and the other countries from which they had come. I listened to how they had left those countries after bitter experiences of incitement and hatred. Life had brought them to a place where they peacefully coexisted. Unfortunately, the truth of coexistence has been muddled with the help of many media organizations.

In another repudiation of another false claim, my visits to places of worship were not stopped or barred from entry by either the Israeli army or police force, as they have been rumored to do, despite the escalating incitement and violence in the city. Life in the holy city goes on, filled with vitality during all hours of the night and day. It is a city that does not sleep, filled with people from all over the world.

After spending two days in Jerusalem (al-Quds), my journalist colleagues and I headed to Tel Aviv, a capital of technology, money, and business. I was astounded by the presence of such a huge number of both local and international communications and technology companies, whose numbers have helped the city earn its nickname: Israel's "Silicon Valley."

Besides the bustling business, life in Tel Aviv is filled with activity. In the morning, people walk, run, and ride bicycles in designated bicycle areas along the many beaches of the Mediterranean, all of which are equipped for people to enjoy their time there. At night, restaurants and cafes are filled with both city residents and international tourists. Like Jerusalem, Tel Aviv is an international and welcoming city that blends a variety of cultural influences. Tel Aviv-Jaffa is not only a center for trade and business, but also a city of relaxation that offers the pleasures of the sea, the balmy weather, and modernity.

In the beautiful coastal city of Haifa, I visited the large educational edifice of the University of Haifa. Its towering buildings and libraries hold over two million books and periodicals, and the university has departments for the disabled and the blind. What caught my attention was the children's library in its center. Children pay visits to the library in order to learn how to conduct research and to be instilled with a love of reading and discovery at a very young age. The University of Haifa is considered a model and reflection of Israeli society. Within its walls, students of Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Circassian origin study together. It appeared to me that Muslims, Christians, Druze, Baha'is, and atheists are all given equal opportunities based on the principle of equality and without discrimination or segregation based on race or religion.

In Haifa, I also visited the village of Daliyat al-Karmel nestled on the al-Karmel mountain, where I met with Druze elders. They recalled the experience of Druze integration into Israeli society and informed me that they now preferred to call themselves Israelis instead of Arab citizens of Israel. Because they hold Israeli citizenship, enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces, and are treated as full citizens with equal rights, they have no reason to deny their Israeli nationality.

In the evening, I found dinner on Ben Gurion Street, which looks out onto the magnificent Baha'i gardens on one end and leads to the famous port of Haifa on the other. The street is filled with Arab cafes and restaurants, identifiable by the songs they play and their customers' conversations. I struck up discussions with various restaurant patrons and employees regarding life here in Israel, and I asked them whether there was differentiation between citizens of non-Jewish origin and Jewish citizens. In every instance, I was told that this was not the case, and these Arab Israelis

informed me that in Israel, the law is equally applied to everyone without distinction or discrimination.

At the end of my trip, I had spent five days between Jerusalem (al-Quds), Tel Aviv, and Haifa. I had visited official state, national, social, and educational institutions and heard from Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Bedouin segments of Israeli. After my experience there, I can now say that in my eyes, Israel is the only true democracy in the Middle East, and is a country open and accepting of religious and ethnic minorities. I heard the call to prayer from mosques in various cities – a religious expression that is banned in Europe. I saw Christians with crosses on their chests who had no fear of exposing their identities, a marked contrast to some neighboring states. I saw Baha'i gardens and memorials the like of which exist nowhere else in the world.

Through these experiences, I saw a recently formed state that has become a democratic institution rivaling the oldest democracies in the world. Despite the youth of the new Israeli state, I saw, without exaggeration, a bright flame in a pitch-black region. I realized that without a doubt, the secret to Israeli's existence in spite of all the dangers and controversy that surround it is the democracy and freedom of Israeli society, a society composed of so many different yet coexisting segments and components.

*Ramy Aziz is an Egyptian journalist based in Europe. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8877\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8877). ❖*

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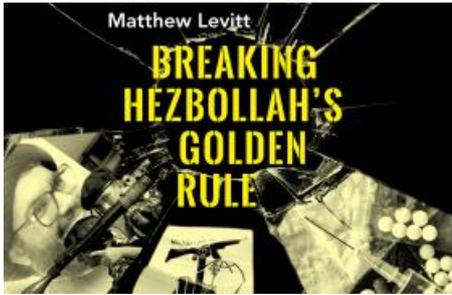
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