

## An Egyptian American View on Israel

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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### An Egyptian student reflects on how living and studying in Israel helped reshape everything he had been taught about 'the enemy.'

**A**s the commencement speaker for Tel Aviv University's graduating class on August 13, I invited my classmates to take a moment to reflect on the beginning of their adventure in Israel. Did they remember receiving their acceptance letter? When they did, they were probably excited to come to Tel Aviv until they actually started telling people they were coming to Israel. Almost everybody in the room had a friend or a family member who warned him or her not to come to Israel.

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"There's war there!"

"Aren't you afraid of being blown up?"

"Do they even have water there?"

But if my classmates thought that they heard a million reasons why they shouldn't come to Israel, I heard a million and a half. Growing up in Egypt, I learned that my entire country had opinions about Israel, and none of them were positive. All we knew was that our country and theirs had fought bloody wars, and that they were not like us.

Other than these opinions, my only exposure to Israel came through music and television. On the radio, there were anthems about the destruction Israel had caused. In our movies, Israelis were spies and thieves. In spite of the fact that our countries struck a famous peace accord in 1979, the Israelis, I was told, were our eternal enemies.

A recent Egyptian box-office hit called *Cousins* told the story of an Israeli spy who marries an Egyptian woman. They have a family together, but the spy ultimately kidnaps his wife and children and brings them to Israel. When I told my mom I was coming to study in Israel, she was understandably terrified that I would get a girlfriend.

So I arrived in Israel knowing nothing about the country except what I had learned in the movies and media. When the security official at Ben-Gurion airport asked why I decided to come here, I said, "I always heard the Jews are bad people, and I came to see this for myself."

I had expected to find that people in Israel were unfriendly and especially unhappy to meet Egyptians, but I was pleasantly surprised by the exact opposite reaction. I was invited everywhere, from Shabbat dinners to Ramadan Iftar meals, to plays and even political gatherings. And the diversity I found here was as surprising as the warmth of the people.

On my very first day here at the university, I saw men in kippas and women in headscarves and hijabs. I saw soldiers walking peacefully among crowds of lively students. I learned there were people of every kind on campus, and that the university had a space for all of them -- Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, and even international students.

I discovered that the diversity of the campus was reflected in Tel Aviv as well. How fascinating is it to be in a country where you can go to a beach in central Tel Aviv and see a Muslim woman, a gay couple kissing, and a Hasidic Jew sharing the same small space? Where else can you find a Christian Arab whose apartment is decorated with posters of Mao and Lenin? Where else can you see a Bedouin IDF soldier reading the Quran on the train during Ramadan? Where else can you see Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews arguing about whether or not Ashkenazi families had kidnaped Yemenite babies in the 1950s?

To be sure, my experience here has been defined by the unexpected. While traveling beyond Tel Aviv, one cannot help but notice the proximity of kibbutzim to Arab villages and the easy relationship they seem to share with each other.

Perhaps the greatest revelation of my stay was that in spite of all the conflicting histories and identities, people are still able to live their daily lives in a spirit of cooperation. One particular instance stands out for me when I think of the paradox that plays out in Israel on a day-to-day basis. In my first weeks here, I had a conversation with a congenial Arab Israeli student, wherein she lectured me on the importance of Arab nations boycotting Israel. As our conversation came to a close, a Jewish boy who was about eight years old skipped over to us, excited to see this woman -- his teacher. She gave him a big hug and a kiss on his cheek. Their affection looked like an exchange between brother and sister. I could see how much she truly loved the boy, and how that boy returned her affection. No matter how deeply rooted the conflicts, this human side always manages to prevail.

I often reflect on the strangeness of coming to this country, where the people I was taught to think of as enemies were transformed into my teachers, classmates, vendors, doctors, and guidance counselors. When Israelis ask me, "How does it feel for you to be in this country?" I have to be honest. I tell them, "Before I knew you, I didn't like you." But I never considered that my "enemies" would accept me into their school, their country, and moreover their society.

And at the end of my experience at the university, the most extraordinary development occurred not in Israel, but in Egypt. Each year during Ramadan, there is a special series of soap operas that families all over the Arab world gather to watch after breaking the fast. One of this year's top soap operas was called "Haret al-Yahoud" -- "The Jewish Quarter." It told the story of Egyptian Jews in the wake of Israel's establishment. The series dealt seriously and thoughtfully with questions of identity and politics, featuring a cast of Jewish and Muslim characters -- there is even an inter-religious love affair.

As a student of history, I can't say that the series was perfectly historically accurate. Nevertheless, for the first time in many decades, this series presented a depiction of Jews in Egyptian media as true human beings with a love of family and country, rather than mortal enemies. This Egyptian show is nothing short of extraordinary. And while Egypt has a ways to go before accepting Israel as a friend, perhaps this series will inspire more Egyptians to at least wonder about and perhaps rethink their perceptions of "the enemy."

After a year of countless surprises, I came to realize that there is a lesson in all of this, one that I think we all can use. I think it is something that Tel Aviv master's students, who strive to understand things precisely and without generalizations, uniquely understand: We must always question our assumptions. Being here in Israel has taught me that life is full of paradoxes and complexities -- that nothing is straightforward, and that things are often not as they are made to seem. No matter how much education and life experience we acquire, we must always dig deeper.

So, today, as I celebrate the end of a great year with my classmates, let's also remember to go forward with a sense of renewed curiosity, knowing the only thing one should truly expect in life is for life to defy your expectations. ❖

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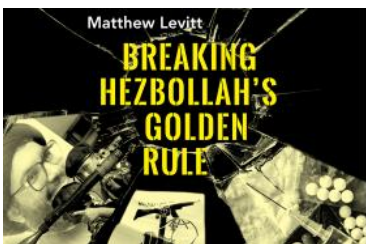
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