

This Op-Ed was published in today's JTA Daily Briefing. It was written by Reda Mansour, an Israeli Druze and the consul general of Israel to the southeastern United States, living in Atlanta.

A few years ago I began an initiative at the Israeli Foreign Ministry aimed at opening a dialogue with Muslim communities in the West. When the first delegations of European and American Muslims started to arrive, they were amazed at the coexistence between Arabs and Jews in Israel.

For many outside of Israel, their perception of the country has been framed by the international media. They have allowed their opinions to be shaped by a constant stream of pictures and articles with one main idea: Between Arabs and Jews there can be only hatred and violence.

With this mind-set, the delegates traveled to Haifa, Israel, one of the most beautiful cities on Earth, a place where beauty is about more than geography. In Haifa, the Muslim delegations visited a major university with an Arab Muslim vice president and many Arab students. They went to markets and offices and observed Arabs and Jews peacefully going about their simple daily lives.

The delegations heard the call to prayer of the muezzin. They visited the mosque of the Ahmadi Islamic sect, Muslims persecuted in many parts of the world who have flourished in Israel, and traveled near the world Baha'i religious center, a faith persecuted in Iran. They met some of the more than 100 Islamic family court judges and talked with the imams who provide religious services; both groups are paid by the Israeli government.

In a regular Israeli parliament session, there are an average of 15 Arab members, some of whom are part of self-proclaimed Zionist parties. Israel has Arab members of parliament and in the Cabinet; it has Arab ambassadors and high-ranking Arab officers in the military.

Yet despite examples of diversity like these, some critics persist in trying to apply the terrible adjective of apartheid to the State of Israel. The facts on the ground, however, show nothing even remotely close to a racist system. For while one can claim that Arabs in Israel do not receive enough government attention or investment in their community, or one can argue that the situation for Israeli Arabs is sensitive as a minority in a country that has gone to war with its Arab neighbors, all of these issues are political and have nothing to do with race.

There is no apartheid in Israel. Nor is there apartheid in Gaza and the West Bank. The territories came under Israeli control in 1967 following the Six-Day War, and over the next 20 years Israel controlled them with nearly no security measures: almost no checkpoints, no fences and no controlled roads.

However, during the first Palestinian uprising in 1987 and again during the 1990s, Israel was forced to toughen its security measures. The country had to protect its citizens because the terrorists of Hamas made suicide bombing their tactic of choice and shopping malls, night clubs, schools and hotels their primary targets. Before the uprising began, more than 120,000 Palestinians worked in Israel. In every Palestinian household there was at least one person who worked in Israel. The workers entered the country freely and their standard of living was among the highest in the Middle East.

Only after 25 years of controlling the territories and having its citizens targeted by terror did Israel begin to institute the security measures that some are trying to call "apartheid." That is why it has been so hard to make the charges stick. Israel, like any other country, is not perfect. The country and its diverse population still admittedly face political and security issues. But apartheid? You must be joking. Israel and the international community are ready for Palestinian freedom and independence. The question is, are the Palestinians?

The greatest problem facing the Palestinians today is not Israel or illusionary "apartheid" but a lack of unified and visionary leadership. Palestinians need to understand that violent action will never yield the results they want and that serving as a useful distraction for the regime in Tehran will never bring prosperity. The Palestinians need to produce their own Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi -- a leader who will demonstrate to them that nonviolence is a much more successful tool for freedom and coexistence.

From Rabbi Bat-Or:

As we enter this season of Pesah, may all of us continue to liberate ourselves from our prejudices.