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Guest commentary on Israel
Jerusalem - Capital city of apartheid?
Sonja Dinner, philanthropist 18.11.2014,

On October 24, I returned from my last trip to Israel. Being a baptised Christian with a good knowledge of the Jewish and the Muslim religions, I often travel to Israel and Palestine and I am ultimately looking for just one thing: the humanitarian idea and a decent existence for all, irrespective of their nationality or religion. My profession is in the area of development aid and forbids me to exercise any favour on the basis of external criteria. What counts are ethical principles.

The majority wants peace

I've variously spent the last few days among the so-called higher echelons of Jewish society, had a long private meeting with Shimon Peres and visited the successful Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Jerusalem, in which half of each class consists of Jews and half of Muslims. I visited my friends in the ultra-Orthodox communities, was in Kfar Chabad and I met old friends again in East Jerusalem and Silwan – covering the whole spectrum from right to left.

Ninety percent of the people I met want peace with tolerant fellow humans and neighbours. All others – blinded by rage, injury, but even more by ignorance – are well suited for mass manipulation, for provocation and in the worst case for acts of terrorism. The fact that I had to repeat the precise wording of sections from the Talmud to some settlers provided deep insight. But let's face it, there are also many Muslims who do not know their suras.

All attempts to divide people into ethnic or religious groups in order to assess them are doomed to fail. The world should finally understand that the large majority in Israel are wonderfully tolerant Muslims, Jews and Christians, as numerous mixed demonstrations since the Gaza war have shown. It is certainly one of the biggest future challenges for all religious leaders to give such values as tolerance sufficient weighting within their own religious orientation for

these values to be also acceptable by all “others”. This also includes a reasonable approach to the sacred sites, some of which are claimed by all sides.

So where then are the main obstacles to sustainable peace?

First of all, there are the latent trouble makers; the despots, radicals and terrorists who simply do not want peace, because it would deprive them of their *raison d'être*. These include to some extent politicians, settlers, arms dealers, Hamas and the extreme right-wing parties and let it be clearly mentioned at this point: There are terrorists on Jewish and Arab sides who use religion as a ‘fig leaf’ for their misdeeds. The juvenile murder victims on both sides a few weeks ago were a reminder of this fact and all good Muslims and Jews will be ashamed of that. Then there are as I said uneducated masses that can be manipulated into action so easily, such as the women in Silwan who told me on a Sunday that every Jew is a devil. For two hours, I tried to explain to them that there are wonderful Jews who actively help the Palestinians. And there was the settler who slapped me in the face after a conversation, called me a Muslim whore and threatened me with a weapon. In the first case, my educational attempt was partially successful, but in the second I could not say too much because of the gun being held against my neck.

The dual-class Israeli society

It must also be considered that the dual system of values and law stands in the way of sustainable peace. No nation on earth – no matter how economically and morally weak it may be – will accept servitude in the long term. The fact that Jews in Israel are given preference in every way and all others are legally worse treated and represented is so deeply rooted in Jewish society that it needs a radical rethink both for every individual as well as within legislation. The article “Jerusalem, the capital of apartheid, awaits the uprising” by Gideon Levy, published in the Israeli newspaper “Haaretz” on 23 October, summarises it well. The deeply-seated conviction that especially Muslims but also Christians are second-class citizens, is partly conscious and partly unconscious reality. This view applies sometimes for all of Israel, but particularly in Jerusalem.

As a person who is interested in history, I think: How in the name of God can people who have suffered so cruelly again and again over the centuries now act in the same way towards others because of their religion? How can I condemn a person and accuse them of being evil, without knowing them, just because they are a Jew? How can I condemn a person and accuse them of being evil, without knowing them, just because they are a Muslim? But perhaps a part of the answer is in fact right there. Only whoever deals critically with their own history will recognise that not only the others are evil.

Therefore, it requires a radical change in fundamental concepts and Jews against Muslims or Christians is a concept that must be consigned to the scrapyard. The entities need to be rearranged: on the one hand, peaceful, tolerant people from all religions – and on the other hand the small remainder who live from violence and provocation.

Education and awareness, openness and tolerance are the cornerstones of the future. In my opinion, this purpose can be served in a fundamental way, especially by projects such as the Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education, of which there are now four in Israel. My personal dream for Israel? Peace by my ninetieth birthday and also ninety Hand in Hand Centers throughout Israel.

Sonja Dinner, President of the Dear Foundation, which funded coexistence projects for all sectors of the population in Israel and Palestine, was awarded the 2013 Teddy Kollek Award.