

Sometimes A Picture Really Is Worth A Thousand Words

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Look at this photo showing the backs of seated dignitaries waiting for Trump to arrive at Ben Gurion Airport. You may remember – it was last week, after all – the photos of Trump and Company being welcomed on the tarmac at Riyadh. The welcoming party was a very limited group of people: all of them males, all of them Muslims, all of them Sunnis, all of them Arabs, all of them very rich indeed, and many of them, unsurprisingly, members of the very same family. There was one odd man out, an odd man out precisely because, you see, she wasn't a man but a woman, a foreign photographer, snapping away both for ephemeral posts and for posterity.

The rest of the visit offered the same narrow range of dramatis personae. The audience for Trump's speech consisted only of Muslims, that is, of Sunni Muslims, and almost entirely of male Sunni Muslims, that is, of male Sunni Muslims

who were either despots themselves, or representatives of despots. I did make out one, possibly two, females in the audience – either despots themselves, or representatives of a despot. To sum that audience up: no females (unless the head of a Muslim state, or his deputy), no Christians, no Jews, no Hindus, no Shi'a, no atheists, no democrats (in the Periclean not Clintonian sense).

Then there was the Ardah Sword Dance outside the Murabba Palace. Small Wilbur Ross, tall Rex Tillerson, and very briefly, Trump himself, all tried their hand at the ceremonial ardah dance, traditionally performed before battle, a symbolic celebration of male martial prowess, but now performed on all sorts of occasions. ("Available for weddings, but not yet bar mitzvahs," as a future skit on Saturday Night Live will have it). They linked arms with their Saudi hosts, and briefly moved their swords out toward the floor, then up, at a 90-degree angle to the floor, and again, all the while swaying slightly. Their Saudi hosts, including King Salman, were bemused. As at the airport, the Americans found themselves in a sea of Sunni Muslim males, many of them members of the ruling family, the Al-Saud. But what else would one expect in a country named after the Wahhabi founding family, "Saudi" Arabia? And in any case, the Dance of the Sword isn't what frightens us about the Saudis and their coreligionists – it's the Verse of the Sword. As for the American guests and their eager-to-please hosts – all that glitters in the kingdom, it turns out, is gold, and a good and lavish and over-the-top time was had by all. After all, the Saudis have only one request to make of the Americans right now. All the Saudis want is for the Americans to keep those Rafidite dogs in Tehran on a short leash. Even the real "solution" to the permanent problem of Israel – not its size, but its existence – the Saudis are now willing to postpone for a later date, an attitude that President Trump and others have misinterpreted as a Sunni Arab "readiness for peace." And what will the United States get in return for dealing with Iran? Well,

spending hundreds of billions on arms from the Americans is the best way the Saudis have to show their appreciation, and they've already started to spend.

I was prompted to muse on these matters when I saw the photographs of those awaiting Trump at the tarmac in Tel Aviv and compared them with what had just happened in Saudi Arabia. The Israeli soldiers at the airport included machine-gun-toting girls. This was Israel, after all, where, since 1949, military service has been mandatory for both sexes. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, women cannot drive, and cannot travel abroad, and are not supposed to even leave the house alone, without a male relative's permission. And even the time spent by a woman with male fellow workers is deliberately limited. The religious police, the mutawwa, are everywhere present to insure that the Shari'a is observed.

One photograph, the one above, taken at Ben Gurion Airport, particularly struck me. It was taken from behind a group of seated dignitaries, with their varied head coverings. I saw a bearded, orthodox Jew, whose face was caught in profile. Then there was a high Catholic prelate – a bishop, to judge by his red skull cap, or zucchetto. Several Greek Orthodox priests, with their distinctive dress – perhaps one of them was Russian Orthodox. A Druze, with his white cylindrical cap, though no Druze women with tantours in evidence. And then others whom I could not identify from behind – Protestants perhaps, of varied denominations, Orthodox or secular Jews, Christian or Muslim Arabs almost certainly. For despite all the BDS talk of Israel as an “apartheid state,” Muslim and Christian Arabs are everywhere in Israeli political life. A dozen of them are members of the Knesset; they serve on the Supreme Court (one of them, Salim Joubran, has lifetime tenure); they serve in the Israeli foreign service, and two of them are presently ambassadors, with many more at the consular levels. Others serve as judges at the local level. There are Muslim and Christian Arabs in the Knesset. There are Christian and Muslim

Arabs serving, as volunteers (for unlike Jews they are exempt from mandatory service) in the Israeli military. Of particular note and value are the nearly 2,000 Bedouin in the Israeli army, famous for their skills as desert trackers.

That's what Israel has to offer. It does not have a Dance of the Sword. Nor a Verse of the Sword. It does have the Hatikvah. It does have complete equality of the sexes. Israel cannot spend hundreds of billions of dollars on American arms, but Israelis have proven invaluable in helping in the development of some of the most advanced American weapons, including the Arrow missile system, the F-35 "Adir" stealth fighter plane, and the Tactical High Energy Laser (Nautilus). One wonders if, in the vast Saudi arms arsenal, there is even a single item that the Saudis themselves managed to produce. And as for intelligence sharing, in the Middle East it is the United States that depends on Israel, more than Israel on the United States, for no other country has the intelligence-gathering abilities in the Middle East equal to those of the Israelis.

The photograph of Sunni Muslim males, dripping with gold chains, who owe their fabulous wealth not to hard work, nor inventive talent, nor entrepreneurial flair, but only to an accident of geology, and who greeted Trump's plane in Riyadh, tell one story. The airport welcome by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, both men and women, who met Trump's plane in Tel Aviv, tell quite another.

That's what that photograph, the one which I put at the beginning of this piece, the one taken at the tarmac at Tel Aviv, prompted me to think about. I thought I'd share those thoughts with you.

First published in