

My Friend is a Palestinian Bedouin: XVI. Friendship and Politics

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One of the major difficulties in our friendship is without doubt its political context, which burdens the friendship in many ways. For an Israeli, the social toll of friendship with a Palestinian can be very high. For a Palestinian Bedouin to befriend an Israeli is highly complicated as well. I will discuss here my side only. It took me many months to recuperate from the following incident, which for many Palestinians would not be anything out of the ordinary. After that I will expand on issues related to cognitive dissonance and deviations from social norms.

Stories of Friendship: Crossing the Border

Israeli/Palestinian border, October 2008. I gave Bashar, a ride, so that he would get in time for his driving test. The ride was between two Arab villages, one of which is considered by the Israeli authorities as Israeli and the other as Palestinian. The car was stopped at a checkpoint between the two villages. Both of us were detained, Bashar for being in Israel without a valid permit, and me for giving a ride to someone without a permit. We were taken to a nearby military police base. I found it hard to believe that this was real, and not a movie. I always thought of myself as a law-obeying citizen. It was a shock to be suddenly behind bars, considered a criminal. What had happened to me? Bashar was interrogated, and after about half an hour I was interrogated as well. Bashar was released without condition, since he was considered

“clean” by the security forces. My fingerprints were taken and my car was confiscated for a month. I was released on grounds of bail and informed that I will be charged in court.

Cognitive Dissonance

I believe that most friends in Western Europe or North America do not consider the relationship between their friendship and politics, even if such a relationship may exist. In Israel, national politics are more in the foreground and may create heated discussions on divergent points of view, over which friendships could fall apart. Politics are inescapable when the friendship concerns an Israeli and a Palestinian, even if the national politics are not discussed within friendship, as in our case. This could already be learned from the story about the netstick, but it never became as clear as in the story I just described.

In recent years, in many parts in the center and north of Israel one may succeed to live one's daily life relatively undisturbed –consciously - by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but when living in Jerusalem (or in the south of Israel, near Gaza) this conflict cannot be ignored. In the last years – since the building of the separation wall - things seem calmer, but even today the threat of death is always there. There were years that I feared driving behind buses, wary that they would explode by means of a suicide bomber. Once on my way to university, I had the scary experience of arriving at a bus stop at which a few hours before a bomb had exploded. Furthermore, I had friends and clients killed in terrorist attacks. In French Hill, the neighborhood I live in now, there were several terrorist attacks. From my home I can hear at nights loud noises from the adjacent Palestinian village, but I cannot always identify whether these are from fireworks at weddings or

from shooting by soldiers to disperse a riot. In order to keep one's peace of mind, one has to repress this kind of thing.

The separation wall I described in the first incident in this chapter plays a central role in our friendship; it is both a physical and symbolic way of separating between us. There are checkpoints in order to pass to the Palestinian Authority, and throughout its territory. Therefore, going regularly to the Palestinian Authority, this was not the first time I was stopped at a checkpoint. However, it was the first time I was detained. In fact, it was the first time in my life that I felt threatened by the law. From my naïve point of view, the notion that giving my friend a ride brought me to the “wrong” side of society was difficult to digest. The shock came in waves. First, there was the arrest, which by itself was humiliating. Then, there was the painful understanding that I am paying a high price for my friendship, now having a police record and facing trial. In subsequent months, dynamics of cognitive dissonance created substantial psychological discomfort (cf. Festinger, 1957) and required that I revise my self-image, the image of my friends and the image of the country I had been living in for almost thirty years. The cognitions I had of myself as an appreciated member of society, and of my environment as relatively fair and supportive, just did not fit together with what I experienced around the incident.

Deviations from the Norm and Social Support

I will focus now on what happened in my social environment; a development that took me by surprise. I shared the story of the incident with my closer circles of friends and found that it united opinions and affected my relationships. Reactions were dependent on the attribution of the

cause of the event as either internal (dispositional) or external (situational) (Heider, 1958). In other words, locus of control over the event played an important role in the evaluation of the situation (Rotter, 1975). My Palestinian friends perceived the situation as something beyond my control (external locus of control) and did not consider the event something exceptional. Arrests are part of life for Palestinian Bedouin men, and I got the impression that few were never arrested. In contrast, most of my Israeli friends perceived the situation as one that I had invited (internal locus of control). Suddenly, it was possible to discern the collectivistic views of my Israeli friends. I had broken “their rules”.

The tense situation between Israelis and Palestinians creates a great deal of mistrust. More than a few of my acquaintances would admit to the notion that Arabs are not to be trusted. Many of my Jewish friends were concerned about my actions and me; some of them expressing mistrust toward Palestinians in more subtle ways. Some of these friends condemned my behavior and some even considered the incident a rightful punishment of my behavior. They hoped it taught me a lesson of being more careful, and choosing my friends among Jews. They pointed at the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict and could not appreciate my friendship with a Palestinian, which in their view was too dangerous. Furthermore, as one Jewish friend said, she felt that in some way I am being (ab)used by Bashar. As a result, neither my Palestinian friends, nor most of my Jewish friends were particularly supportive, but for different reasons. In fact, my continuing involvement in the friendship with Bashar even after this incident put strain on and changed the relationships with some of my best Jewish friends. It needs to be noted that Bashar experienced pressure on him for befriending a Jewish Israeli as well, but to a lower degree. He explained that

Bedouins, being a nomadic people, do not so much identify nationally. They would judge a person by other measures than his nationality, like by his personality.

Social support in intercultural encounters is of utmost importance Ward et al. (2001) and luckily, not all of my Israeli friends reacted in the same negative manner. Some Jewish friends did support me during this period. Particularly striking was that my Israeli friends who originally came from the former Soviet Union were more supportive than other friends were. This compares with the finding from a study that showed that as compared to veteran Israelis, Arabs and immigrants from the former Soviet Union attributed procedural justice to law-enforcement authorities to a lesser degree. In general, immigrants from the Soviet Union felt less obliged to comply with the law, believed more strongly in the supremacy of other laws over state laws, and were more willing to take the law into their own hands when their interests seemed threatened (Yagil & Rattner, 2005). I will get back to the issue of dealing with the law in the chapter on power distance.

For Bashar it was difficult to understand why I made such a fuss about the event and shared the story with others. This was not only because he related to the event as something ordinary, but also because it involved an issue of privacy and public image. He believes that one should not share bad things about oneself, not even when one was the victim of something bad. As in the story about the netstick and our trip to Lod, in his view the incident was something to be kept private, since one's name being associated with something bad could harm one's public image. I will get back to this when describing the issue of honor. In my world, social scrutiny is lower than in his, and until this incident I was less aware of social scrutiny in my personal life.

Therefore, I could usually share major events with others in my life, while taking in account only marginally the effect of such a disclosure on my social image—but not this time.

My Experience of “Friendship and Politics”

The incident and its consequences were a shocking confrontation with how divergent perceptions can be. I felt quite deserted by several of my friends, and realized how much I was risking in this friendship - not only my social status, but also my freedom. In fact, my perception was quite divergent from that of my friends. The separation wall and the many checkpoints often gave me “recollections” of the Holocaust, in which Jews – like my parents and grandparents – were stigmatized, and had to hide, while others took part in the resistance. Despite the highly different circumstances, I experienced situations within the realm of the friendship as if I am the one taking part in the resistance, providing assistance to those Bedouins and other Palestinians in need. Whatever perspective I chose, through the incident I learned to face that as much as I try to accommodate and support the Palestinian or Bedouin way of dealing with life, ultimately I am responsible for my own behavior.

Throughout the friendship, I occasionally faced reluctance by Palestinians to become closer out of fear I would be some kind of Israeli infiltrator. I experienced the arrest as a kind of initiation ceremony, providing me greater access to Palestinians and Palestinian life. “Being arrested” felt as being more like a Palestinian. It gave me a feeling of entitlement to be accepted, with thoughts like “see what I am willing to do in order to be friends with a Palestinian”. Nonetheless, I believe that this notion of an initiation ceremony was more in my mind than in reality, and not experienced by Bashar as such.

At the time, the incident caused major tension between Bashar and me, chiefly because I experienced him too as providing little support, for reasons explained before. With such a pressure on the friendship to dissolve, I had to fight with myself and with my social environment to keep us together. As a result, the incident became a turning point in our relationship and - paradoxically - brought us closer. Not long after, we decided to travel abroad together.

Organizing this trip was a difficult endeavor for social reasons as well as for administrative reasons, but still more feasible than meeting in Israel. I will expand on the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the friendship in the chapter about power distance.