



A Kosher Iftar meal in Hebron with settlers and Palestinians. (photo credit: TOVAH LAZAROFF)

Eying Trump, Palestinians, settlers hold kosher Hebron Iftar celebration

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05/14/2019

“We drank [Turkish] coffee together. We all love the same coffee...I think we have arrived at the days of the Messiah.”

With an eye toward the White House, settlers and Palestinians held a kosher Iftar celebration in the contentious West Bank city of Hebron on Monday.

Sitting in a spacious tent set up outside the home of businessman Ashraf Jabari, settler leaders shook hands and embraced Palestinian and Israeli-Arab businessmen, wishing them Ramadan karim, just as if peace had already sprung.

Then everyone enjoyed a kosher banquet of chicken, rice, potatoes and string beans catered from the nearby settlement of Kiryat Arba for the traditional evening feast by which Muslims break their dawn to dusk fast during Ramadan.

Among the Jewish guests, many of whom wore skullcaps, was Hebron Jewish community spokesman Naom Arnon, who was respectfully referred to as an unofficial “foreign minister.”

“We drank [Turkish] coffee together. We all love the same coffee,” Arnon said in Hebrew, which was translated into Arabic. “I think we have arrived at the days of the Messiah,” he added.

The event was organized and sponsored by the Judea and Samaria Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a joint Israeli-Palestinian group that wants to strengthen economic ties between Palestinians and Jews in the West Bank.

Jabari, who is one of the founding members of the group, wore a blue suit and red tie for the occasion.

He said, “We want to build a united front, to create a breakthrough on the economic issue. We are issuing a clear call to separate between economics and politics, and hope to have fruitful cooperation on the subject.

“From our point of view, we need to strengthen the connection between the US legislature and activity that promotes economic equality here,” Jabari said.

“This meal is meant to reinforce the growing trend in which economic-business connections can strengthen relations and friendship, by way of leading people to a more positive place,” he said.

“Breaking the fast together, at a joint meal in the city of Hebron, clearly symbolizes our ability to bridge any type of gaps,” he said.

The event was held a month before the anticipated release of US President Donald Trump’s peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump’s envoys have spoken of the importance economics will play in their plan. The chamber and participants at the meal are hoping to maximize US interest in building economic ties between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Iftar feast, however, was a private affair and was not connected in any way to the Trump administration.

Heather Johnston, executive-director of the US-Israel Education Association, told the group, “Each of you have played a role in helping to build this integrated business movement.”

“You have made sacrifices. You have gone into the unknown. You have been willing to take risks in business and in relationships. And this is what it takes to pioneer something that will one day be a humongous success,” she said.

“I have been involved in Samaria for the last 22 years. I believe there is more hope today for this important relationship to actually succeed than ever before,” she said.

Samaria Regional Council head Yossi Dagan told Johnston that the Palestinian Authority was making it difficult for joint Israeli-Palestinian ventures.

The primary problem is the PA, “which is trying to separate people – and we are trying to connect people,” Dagan said.

The secondary problem is bias, he explained. People in Israel and the United States have not yet understood the impact of such connections between Jews and Arabs in Judea and Samaria, Dagan said.

Israeli-Arab Sara Zoabi, one of the few women at the gathering, spoke of the importance of co-existence.

The conflict between Jews and Arabs in Hebron is disturbing world peace, she said.

“No agreement will help... unless it is also in the hearts of the people,” Zoabi said. In light of the suffering on both sides, “I call for ‘soul searching’ on the part of both peoples,” she said.

Palestinian Abdallah Dajani, a Jerusalem resident who works for Delta Airlines, said that it was important to remember that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”

It is important to acknowledge – that way each side sees the other.

“Everyone here wants peace. I see that economics and politics go hand-in-hand,” he said. “People as people. We care for each other. We want to live in peace; war has no place.”

But there are obvious problems for Palestinians, Dajani said.

“We feel like we are second-class citizens. We are treated differently. Even though I am an Israeli resident; even though I have been living here my whole life,” he said.

“What do you think are the real steps toward economic growth, stability and peace, with one person toward another?”

Chamber president Avi Zimmerman, of the Ariel settlement, said that unlike a political deal that remains at the governmental level, or an event with nice phrases, business has measurable targets and goals.

“We can measure progress at a people-to-people level, at every business transaction,” Zimmerman said.

“Every time I get up and say ‘this is only about economics, it is not about peace,’ everyone starts talking about peace. Which makes me believe that if everyone keeps talking about peace when we speak of economics, that these incremental, measured steps toward mutual interest are actually what will birth the peace.

“They can birth a political process, but it will not happen the other way around,” he said. “We have learned for 70 years that it is not going to be the other way. It has to start this way.”

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