

Posted:

Can a Palestinian Muslim and a Zionist Jew be friends?

I'm discussing Jeffrey Goldberg's great new book this week in Slate. Goldberg is a reporter for The New Yorker, and our dialog now contains two posts I wrote on the book, and the responses of the author.

Here's a glimpse of some of the things I wrote. You can read the whole dialog [here](#):

"Prisoners" is the story of a redheaded Jewish boy from America - Jeffrey - who becomes a staunch Zionist, immigrates to Israel, lives on a kibbutz, and joins the Israeli armed forces, where the book really begins. Jeffrey serves as a military policeman and is charged with the unfulfilling duty of guarding Palestinian prisoners in the Ketziot prison during the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising of the late '80s.

In Ketziot, he befriends Rafiq Hijazi, a Muslim from the Jebalya refugee camp. The friendship between these two men and the many obstacles and barriers that both of them must overcome in the next 15 years or so - the years of the Oslo peace process and the years of the second, more bloody, Palestinian uprising - are the core of the book. It takes the reader to Jerusalem, Gaza, Jericho, Pakistan, Africa, Washington, Abu Dhabi, and many other places. It deals with the fundamental dichotomy of two men who like each other personally but belong to two rival tribes.

Boiling down the book this way raises the basic question: Can a Palestinian Muslim and a Zionist Jew be friends? In this first note, I want to focus on something at the end of the book - the positive, optimistic answer it gives to this question: "[I]f Rafiq and I could allow friendship to triumph over anger, then it wasn't impossible to believe that the rest of Isaac's children, and the rest of Ishmael's children, could stop their long and dismal war.

You left Israel and your personal Zionist dream, and went back to being an American. Still a Zionist - no doubt about that - but an American Zionist. And an American journalist. An American citizen. You married an American woman, and your children live safely in America. That's why you managed to travel to places no Israeli can visit and talk to leaders no Israeli can interview.

And the same can be said about Rafiq. At heart, I'm sure he is still a Palestinian, but in practice, he has also changed his place of work and residence. He studied in the United States, then went to be a teacher in Abu Dhabi. Both of you - and I'm not, in any way, expressing any criticism here - no longer share the daily anxieties of Palestinians and Israelis who choose to stay in the region or have no choice but to stay...

Which brings me back to the skepticism I expressed earlier: Is a friendship between a Jew and an Arab that is maintained outside the Middle East in any way an indication of what might be possible within that war-torn region.

Regrettably, I suspect that it isn't.

Read the dialog [here](#). Get the book [here](#). You will not regret the time you invested in it.