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Mohammed Rizwan: What I, a Muslim, did not know about Israel

To Muslims around the world, I would say the story of Israel is worth emulating

By **Mohammed Rizwan**, **Special to National Post**
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Mohammed Rizwan offers prayers inside the Al Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem. PHOTO BY MOHAMMED RIZWAN

Walking down a beautiful corniche walkway along Mediterranean in Jaffa district not far from downtown Tel Aviv, criss-crossing my way amidst evening joggers and jovial teenagers, I suddenly froze, as I heard sound of Azan — an Islamic call to prayer — blaring from a nearby mosque. None from my group of visiting Canadian journalists took much notice, as few of them have already been to Israel, but for me, it was a shocker. I live in Canada, where religious freedoms are guaranteed and enshrined, but I never heard Azan blaring from loudspeakers here, or in Europe or the United States, even though there are mosques, churches, synagogues, temples that remain busy throughout the year there.

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It heard it in Israel. A supposedly Muslim-enemy state, a Jewish national home, an "apartheid" state that has been at war with

its Muslim Arab neighbours for the last 75 years.

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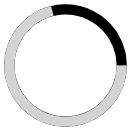

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So, which Israel is real? The one that allows Azan to play from loudspeakers for its two-million Muslim population, the one that employs a Muslim IDF soldier, who I met at the Lebanese border, or one that houses a large and affluent Muslim population in Haifa.

OR

The Israel that bombs women and children in Gaza and is hell-bent on wiping out the

entire Muslim population from the planet?

The problem lies in perception and perspective, I would say.

People around the world see Israel through their television screens and in context of a 75-year-old conflict, territorial disputes, and the Palestinian question. For most of the world, this is the only lens they hold to look at Israel. Depending on where you live in the world, and what world outlook you grew up with, one essentially looks at Israel through a geo-political binary.

I think this is not the only way to look at the history and national character of a country. But to look at Israel differently has a prerequisite: leave your preconceived notions out of the bubble you currently live in, get to know the country first-hand, wear the hat of tolerance and love for all faiths, and then try and see the Israel story.

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There is a good chance that you would still see enough to criticize foreign policy choices Israel has made over the years, or, if you know enough context, one should be able to see why those choices were made, when they were made, over the last few decades.

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Take for example two-state solution theory. How many people care to remember that there were three occasions in history when Israel agreed to and accepted a two-state solution (1948, 1991, 2000) but Palestinians refused. And finally, when they got the autonomy for Gaza and West Bank (which, in a way, was two-state, what else?), they used that autonomy and aid to perpetuate terrorism.

But my point for this submission is entirely different. What really amazed me while

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travelling the length and breadth of the country and meeting people was the mindset of this nation. Israel is a small strip of land squeezed from all sides by West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon — not exactly a great neighbourhood if you are a Jewish state. They have had four major wars and almost perpetual conflicts ever since 1948, yet this nation managed to send 100 per cent of their children to schools, with the majority going to universities as well as completing their compulsory military service.

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Take the economy. As of 2023, Israel had a per capita income of $52,642 USD with a high-tech and medical export base of $63 billion USD mostly in tech and defence sector. Our group visited a mid-level Israeli defence contractor and their export sheet showed $8 billion worth of high-tech military

software and hardware sales, mostly to the Pentagon.

The country's tech prowess rightly earned it a nickname of "Start-up Nation." This small nation of just over 9.5 million people, embroiled in perpetual conflicts, has a GDP per capita much higher than almost all BRICS countries and is on par with wealthier European countries. To put it in perspective, in 2023, China had a GDP per capita of $12,614, Russia $13,817 and India $2,480. And remember, this country does not have natural resources like oil and gas. They mine diamonds, but major GDP earners are tech sector and knowledge economy.

Due to constant wars and conflicts, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have a huge presence in the society (also because of compulsory military service) but astonishingly, they do not have any front-row role in Israeli politics. The country has always been a democracy — albeit, a messy one, but with strong democratic traditions and institutions nonetheless. As someone who has seen Pakistan fall into the military's lap due to its enmity with India, this distinction is remarkable.

To Muslims around the world, I would say the story of Israel is worth emulating. Its an

inspirational success story that must be appreciated not hated.

Mohammed Rizwan is an op-ed writer and director of Toronto-based Council of Muslims Against Antisemitism (CMAA).

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