

Israeli Diplomacy's Diverse Face

A SHIFT FROM THE HISTORICAL STATUS QUO



Israeli diplomats (from left) Deputy Consul General in Houston Belaynesh Zevadia; Consul General in Atlanta Reda Mansour; and Ambassador to Greece Ali Yihya.

Photos courtesy of the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

By Hillel Kuttler

Israel's consul general in Atlanta writes Hebrew poetry and once chaired his B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) branch. The deputy consul general in San Francisco worked for an Israeli police department, the Ministry of Defense, and as an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) political analyst. The ambassador to Greece headed the Ulpan Akiva institute for Hebrew language study in Netanya.

None of the three is Jewish.

Reda Mansour, a Druze, in Atlanta; Ishmael Khaldi, a Bedouin, in San Francisco; and Ali Yahya, a Muslim-Arab Israeli, in Athens are emblematic of demographic changes in Israel's diplomatic corps.

No longer is the country's official face abroad exclusively Jewish, white, or male. Belaynesh Zevadia serves as deputy consul general in Houston, and Elias Inbram is second secretary at the embassy in South Africa—both are Ethiopian Jews. Walid Mansour, a Druze, is ambassador to Peru. Druze diplomats Raslan Abu Roukou and Walid Abu Haya are, respectively, deputy chief of mission in Nepal and counselor on the Israeli delegation to the United Nations' (U.N.) Geneva office.

Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not keep records of employees' gender, religious, or ethnic breakdowns, but the diplomatic demographic shift is well-acknowledged. Ministry officials say the change occurred so gradually that no assignment can be said to have marked a turning point.

But officials do note steps several Israeli

foreign ministers took that, in retrospect, were groundbreaking. Moshe Arens recruited Druze in the late 1980s, and Shimon Peres (now Israel's president) ushered in Arab Israelis in the 1990s. As Peres's deputy, Yossi Beilin dispatched openly homosexual employees. Silvan Shalom sought out career IDF officers, including those from minority groups. The current foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, has accelerated the recruitment of women.

"The situation is not what it once was in the 1960s, when the population going into the foreign ministry and government service was more homogeneous. In the 1970s, there was a general awareness in Israeli society of the need to [be] open to different sectors, and that also has affected the foreign ministry," says ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor.

Those changes, he continues, "go to show what any observer of Israeli society would know: that there's a growing consciousness of the diversity of Israeli society. We've come a long way. There's recognition of the need to integrate all sectors of society and all branches of government, and—all the more so—the representatives of the government.

"We're not recruiting people on the basis of color, but candidates do come from different backgrounds, and it's a welcome development," Palmor says.

Cynics might accuse Israel of exploiting members of minority groups to score public relations points. Palmor disagrees.

"I don't think that this does anything: good or bad," he says of the increased diversity. "People sometimes around the world can't

accept the fact that a Muslim can represent Israel, but that's their problem. Does it change anything if someone has a typically Pakistani name but is a Canadian diplomat? Maybe, for a few minutes, but then you have to work with him. Same thing for Israel."

Beyond Ashkenazi, Sephardic

Houston's deputy consul general Zevadia notes that Israel and the United States share legacies of diverse immigration. But, she adds, when Americans think of Israelis, especially representatives of the Jewish state, they expect an Ashkenazi or Sephardi. "They forget that there are 100,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel."

She is one of them. Zevadia is three years into a four-year posting at the Israeli consulate in Houston. She previously served as consul in Chicago for six years and briefly at Israel's mission to the U.N.

Zevadia left Ethiopia for Israel as a teenager, nearly 25 years ago. She comes from a strong Jewish and Zionist background: Her father Geta was a *kes* (chief rabbi) in the Gondar region of their hometown, Ambover; her brothers Joseph and David preceded her to Israel.

In Chicago and now in Houston, Zevadia has enjoyed appearing at Jewish organizations, synagogues, churches, and colleges to explain Israeli policy and society. She also speaks occasionally before African-American groups.

Zevadia considers herself a symbol—more an example of Israeli multiculturalism than a representative of only Ethiopian Israelis. "I love who I am. I am very proud of whom I am and the country I represent," she says.



"It's important for me to represent Israel here, to say that, yes, Israel absorbs immigrants and that many people live in Israel who come from different backgrounds," she says.

"It's the same as in the United States. In Israel you'll see people with Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Far Eastern, and African backgrounds. Israel is a young country and so many people participate in government life—and that's good."

When audiences ask about Ethiopian Jewry, Zevadia screens a film on Operation Solomon, the 1991 airlift of 14,000 people from Ethiopia to Israel. She points to the exodus as an example of "Israeli pride," she says, but only one of many.

Zevadia is determined to expand Americans' horizons when thinking of Israel—to draw first perceptions toward Israeli technological advances and culture, "the good things Israel does to benefit the world," as she puts it. That means scheduling appearances by Israeli artists and musical troupes and highlighting Israel's worldwide disaster relief missions.

"I represent Israel, so it's worth taking advantage of [my background]," she says. "I have no problem emphasizing that. Ethiopians are a part of Israeli society and culture, and there's a need to show it here so that the story gets out and people know."

The BBYO Druze

Imagine: a young man in Isfiya, a 12,000-resident Druze town near Haifa, becoming a BBYO activist, working as a counselor at American Jewish summer camps, and, at age 35, becoming Israel's youngest ambassador ever. That is the progression of Reda Mansour's career.

From seventh grade through the end of high school, Mansour was involved in

BBYO, chairing his branch for one year and participating in national leadership programs. The experience exposed him to Israel's broader society and, eventually, to the world.

"It was very impressive, a great experience in my life, for a kid from the village to go to meetings in Tel Aviv," says Mansour, who has run Israel's Atlanta consulate since 2006.

"What BBYO gave me was the connection to other Israeli youth through mutual visits. It also did many projects in the village: fixing public buildings, cleaning the streets, cleaning nature sites," he adds. "B'nai B'rith was a way to launch my public action from a young age. It was an activity I was involved in for many years. It was my social club. All my friends were there."

His involvement led Mansour to working at summer camps in Maryland and Vancouver, British Columbia. At the latter, his co-worker, a friend from Hebrew University, told Mansour of the foreign ministry's outreach to Druze. Mansour wrote a letter of inquiry. He didn't know what to expect, remembering that, while he served in the military, many IDF units had been closed to non-Jews.

The foreign ministry accepted his application.

"It wasn't something you aspired to because there was no Druze who was a career diplomat, [although] there were two or three who were political appointees. I think that I'm the first who went out for the course. Each year, 3,000 people try for it and 10–15 are selected," Mansour explains.

"When I entered, the media gave it a lot of attention. Then I'd get calls from young Druze who heard about it and wanted to know if the foreign ministry was making it such that they could see this as a career path."

More than that: When Mansour served as ambassador to Ecuador, two members of his extended clan—Walid Mansour and Bahij Mansour—were Israeli ambassadors to Vietnam and Angola, respectively. Two Isfiya natives, including Abu Roukou, later entered the diplomatic corps, leading an Israeli newspaper to dub it "the ambassador's village."

Mansour has dealt with those he called the "extreme fringes" in the United States: Jews who objected to his appointments and Arab students who shout "Traitor." At one San

"The situation is not what it once was in the 1960s, when the population going into the foreign ministry and government service was more homogeneous. In the 1970s, there was a general awareness in Israeli society of the need to [be] open to different sectors, and that also has affected the foreign ministry," says ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor.

Photo far left: Israel's Ambassador to Greece, Ali Yihya, with the Greek Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Theodoros Kassimis. Photo right: Consul General in Atlanta, Reda Mansour, speaking at a Holocaust memorial ceremony at Greenwood Cemetery's Memorial to the Six Million in Atlanta.

Francisco event (while in the job that Khaldi now occupies), he required a police escort.

Despite such moments, Mansour believes that his background plays well in America because of parallels between the two countries.

"It's the fulfillment of the Israeli and American dreams to come from a family of farmers, not from a central place, but, because of the access, to a good education, [to] achieve good things and social mobility," he says. "That is comparable to America: the possibility of advancing through hard work and education. It says something about the quality of our democracy."

Of helping to open the field to Druze Israelis, Mansour says, "I feel great." Still, being abroad has been hard because of the tight traditional bonds in Isfiya that are lacking in the diplomat's life. Maya, at four years old the youngest of his three children, "doesn't know which is home."

The Hebrew Teacher

In the early 1990s, Ali Yihya's friends wanted to know why he was not a diplomat. His reply: "I already am."

An Israeli-Arab teacher who hails from Kfar Kara in the north, Yihya spent 25 years as director of Netanyahu's Ulpan Akiva. He ran across foreigners every day: the adult students who came to study Hebrew and Arabic and learn about Israel and its cultures. Educating tens of thousands of students from all walks of life and more than 100 countries, "you have to be a diplomat," Yihya says. "I was exposed to the international community."

Yihya relishes his roles. Speaking by telephone from the embassy office in Athens, Yihya projects confidence in his manner, dignity in his words, and so much enthusiasm for the topic that a conversation he hesitated to have ran 90 minutes and, he said, "could have gone on for hundreds of pages."

He spoke of being a proud citizen of Israel who stands for coexistence, dialogue, and cultural understanding within Israel and

Diplomacy, continued on pg. 45

Looking for that Special Program?

- ☆ Exciting Singers, Comedians & Specialty Acts
- ☆ Jewish Programs
- ☆ National and International Artists

Please visit our new expanded website at www.lentalentusa.com

Call Len Schlosberg at 800-517-6500



LEONARD TALENT ASSOCIATES, INC.

Contact us for a brochure, CD or DVD Demos
lentalent@aol.com



Freddie Roman



Ruth Kaye



Hal Jeffrin



Naomi Miller
And Many More!

Sell Your Unwanted, Costly Life Insurance Policy

If you've been thinking of surrendering it back to the company or letting it lapse, there may be a far better option available.

You may be able to SELL Your Policy for as much as three to four times cash surrender value!

Well-capitalized investment banks and pension funds are lining up to buy these policies in the secondary market. Term policies can be purchased as well.

As a licensed broker with an obligation to represent you, the policyholder, we'll "shop" for competitive bids throughout our network of twenty-two qualified institutional investors, to secure the highest possible cash offer for your valuable life insurance asset.

There's no cost or obligation.

To see if you qualify, please call **Stanley Silverman** TODAY for a **FREE** Consultation

888-55-ASSET (27738)

ADVANCED FUNDING CORP. • HAVERTOWN, PA

Note: The net proceeds from the sale of your policy can be used as you see fit, with no restrictions. Some or all of the proceeds of the sale may be taxable under federal or state income tax laws. Advice from a professional tax advisor is recommended.

The average purchase price obtained by sellers within the past six months is approximately twenty-three percent of the face amount of a qualified life insurance policy.

Advanced Funding Corp. is the trade name of SJS Investment Associates, Inc., a PA-licensed settlement broker with associates licensed in all states where transactions are regulated, except Montana.



The Freshest Ideas in Produce.



**Melissa's can create
signature gourmet gift
baskets to fit any
theme or occasion!**

www.melissas.com
1-800-588-0151

ELAN
F · U · R · S

www.elantur.com

Barth Wind Elan
6740 W. Dempster
MORTON GROVE
847-967-8444

Elan Furs
675 N. Michigan Ave.
CHICAGO
312-640-0707

Elan Furs
2727 E. 86th St.
INDIANAPOLIS
317-255-6100

**This space
could be
yours!**

To advertise in our
Mart Sections,
call 866-612-4295.

Diplomacy, continued from pg. 25

abroad. Representing Ulpan Akiva at such international forums as UNESCO first afforded Yihya the opportunity to promote Israel, particularly its successful absorption of immigrants, he says.

Yihya takes pride in the recognition of his work: becoming, in the late 1980s, the first Israeli Arab to light the famed Yom HaAtzmaut torch on Mt. Herzl; receiving the Speaker of the Knesset's Prize and the Histadrut Prize for Coexistence; and being named ambassador to Finland in 1995—the first diplomatic posting for an Israeli Arab.

"I see myself, all my life, as a diplomat," he says. "I've been an ambassador three times: from my society to Jewish society, from Jewish society to Arab society, and abroad for all Israelis.

"You have to have confidence in yourself to see the differences between you and others— [that they're] not less than you, just different," he continues. "The beauty of the rainbow is the [many] colors; the beauty of life is the different faces. Differences should be respected. Ignorance is the reason for hatred: You don't know, you hate.

"I see myself representing Israel in all its parts, all its religions. The State of Israel is a state of such variety. That's its beauty: Druze, Jews, Arabs. There are always groups that are 'anti.' That doesn't mean that there are no problems, but show me one country in the world where there are no problems. You have to be a good citizen in [any] country."

When he encounters demonstrators in his travels, including in the United States, Yihya has a ready retort. He calls them "shallow" for seeing the world in black and white while "my country is full of colors." He said that he is "the first speaker" against extremism and offered an unsolicited denunciation of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for "destroying Islam." Ahmadinejad, he says, "is not just an Israeli issue but an issue for the world."

On the other side are the ambassadors of Arab countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations. They tell Yihya, "Your country is smart to appoint an Arab-Israeli to represent it."

For that, and in realizing that others will follow him, Yihya says, "I just have this wonderful feeling that I opened the gate." 🗨️

Point of View

Point of View, continued from pg. 7

sprout 20 and more stories high, just a short distance from homes that may not have seen a coat of paint since the revolution officially began on January 1, 1959, when Fidel Castro was installed in power.

Two economies exist side by side: one for tourists and another for citizens. In this dual environment, a highly educated professor can earn a top salary of 34 pesos a month, while a taxi driver or hotel bellman, for example, can add to his meager income by accumulating multiple tips.

One highly educated woman, an engineer, confided in me how difficult life in Cuba was. Her son became a bar mitzvah the weekend we visited. She described the years of savings

required to hold the celebration. In doing so, she fulfilled a promise to her late husband.

Trip leader Marc Fleischer, vice chair of the B'nai B'rith Cuban Jewish Relief Project, completing his 15th trip to the island, commented that continuing efforts like this really do make a difference in the lives of the community.

"We do more than provide money to old people," he noted, referring to the tzedakah project. "We recently brought two torahs to separate communities, donated by congregations in Cleveland and in New Jersey. On this trip, we brought in more than 600 pounds of clothes and thousands of dollars in medicines.

"Above all," he concluded, "B'nai B'rith also provides hope." 🗨️