

ISRAEL AT SIXTY

From Modest Beginnings to a Vibrant State

1948–2008

- *web extra* -

More “Faces of Israel”

THE BEDOUIN IN ISRAEL



S.F.'s newest consul enjoys being Bedouin, proud to be Israeli.

Ishmael Khaldi, who began life as a nomad, is first Muslim envoy to rise through ranks Matthew Kalman, Chronicle Foreign Service, Friday, November 24, 2006

(11-24 06- Jerusalem -- Ishmael Khaldi lived in a Bedouin tent until he was 8 years old, walked 4 miles round trip to school each day and still goes home on weekends to what he calls the “Middle Ages” to tend to flocks of sheep.

But next Saturday, Khaldi will leave his tiny village of Khawalid -- population 450 -- in the northern Galilee region and fly to San Francisco to become Israel's first Bedouin diplomat and the nation's first Muslim to rise through the ranks of the Israeli foreign service.

Of the more than 1 million Israeli Arabs, only 170,000 are Bedouins, many of whom were once nomadic desert dwellers. In recent years, Arab radicals in the Israeli parliament and Islamic movements who deplore the existence of the Jewish state have dominated Israeli-Arab relations, and the 6-year-long Palestinian intifada has stretched their allegiance to Israel to a breaking point. But Khaldi, while conceding that the situation of Arabs in Israel “is not perfect,” is an unrepentant Israeli who says he is not betraying his Arab “brothers” by becoming the new Israeli consul to San Francisco.

“Many of us are proud to describe ourselves as Israelis. Everyone who lives here is an Israeli,” Khaldi told The Chronicle in an exclusive interview on the eve of his departure for San Francisco. “Israel is in a clash with the Arab world, with our fellow Muslim brothers, with the Palestinians. It's a big challenge. But I am sure that Israel's enemies are not Arab culture, nor Arab heritage, nor the Muslim religion. It's a political situation.”

Khaldi, 35, is no newcomer to the United States or the Bay Area. He arrived in the United States after the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 and was soon in demand as a speaker at college campuses. “I'm a Bedouin and we are nomads, so I felt at home traveling coast to coast on a Greyhound bus. Twice,” he said.

During his stay in the United States, Khaldi said he was shocked to discover that American students were unaware of Israel's large Arab minority and the fact they have the right to vote, elect members to parliament, and become judges, professors and senior army officers.

Khaldi said his family's ties with its Jewish neighbors go back to the days of the early Zionist pioneers from Eastern Europe who settled in the Galilee region in the 1920s. “From the late 1920s

until 1948 when the state was established, the first pioneers came and lived mainly in the north, building kibbutzim,” or collective farms, Khaldi said. “The people who came were very sophisticated. They were mainly Yiddish speakers. ... Local Bedouins established very close relations with them, even though they were two different cultures and two different worlds with almost nothing in common. It’s something that not many people know.

“My grandmother, who passed away only last year, spoke Yiddish. She was a shepherdess, she never went to school, but she had human contact almost every day with the people from (the next-door kibbutz) Kfar Hamaccabi. She worked with them while they were planting orchards.”

Khaldi was born into a family of six brothers and five sisters. Each day after school, they tended to the family’s sheep, goats and cows. Because the village only got running water and electricity five years ago, Khaldi did his homework hunched over a gas lamp. Such privations might have alienated the young man, but by the time he entered a prestigious Arab high school in Haifa at age 14, two of his brothers already were serving in the Israeli army.

“Of course, there is a lot of frustration, and we are facing a lot of problems. But to make it into hatred and a grudge? We must go one step forward.”

Khaldi said there is still a long way to go before the Bedouin minority achieves full equality in Israeli society, but he noted that more Bedouins are graduating from high school, entering universities and getting better jobs than ever before.

“You can look at the differences and say: ‘The government treats us as second- or third-class citizens,’ or it can be a challenge. It’s our challenge to use the differences and try to understand and combine the best of both worlds. The way is long. It’s not easy,” he said.

Khaldi first encountered anti-Zionist radicalism in high school, he said, and didn’t like it. Once during a memorial day for Israel’s fallen soldiers, Khaldi and two classmates stood at attention to mark two minutes of silent tribute. The gesture provoked derision and insults from fellow Arab students. “There was a clash with the rest of the Arab kids. They were not respectful,” he said.

In following years, Khaldi was turned down twice for an Israeli Foreign Ministry training course before finally being accepted. Meanwhile, he acquired a bachelor’s degree in political science from Haifa University and a master’s degree in international relations from Tel Aviv University. He has served as a border police officer in Jerusalem and as an official in the Israeli Defense Ministry.

Khaldi also has begun a project called “Hike and Learn with Bedouins in the Galilee” that has brought thousands of young Jews to Khawalid to learn about Bedouin culture and history. He said these encounters inspired him to become a diplomat. But even after an intensive six-month Foreign Ministry diplomatic training course, he says he still looks to village traditions for guidance.

“I come from a culture where negotiations are the best way to understanding,” he said. “The tribes used to live and compete with each other and fight and kill each other, but at the end of the day they would have to make sulha (a peace pact). This is the way. ... At the end of the road, you need to find a common ground, you need to find a solution. Something that will satisfy both sides.”

Khaldi is well aware that he will be treated with suspicion by Israeli critics but believes his story presents a true picture of modern Israel.

“I am always torn,” he said. “I am torn between modernity and tradition. I am torn between two totally different worlds. I am Israeli above everything.”

Listen to Ismail Khaldi speak to The Alaska World Affairs Council on “Pluralism and Israel through the Eyes of a Bedouin Israeli” given April 25, 2008.

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AARON JACOB- FROM INDIA TO ISRAEL



Aaron Jacob has been associate director of International Affairs for American Jewish Community since 2002. Immediately prior to this position, he served as Israel's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations at the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary from 1998 to 2002. In this capacity, he worked closely with AJC and the Jewish community on UN-related activities, in particular, AJC's campaign to gain acceptance of Israel in one of the five regional groups at the UN. The effort resulted in temporary membership in the Western Europe and Others Group (WEOG) in New York, a landmark for Israel's ongoing struggle to be treated fairly as a UN member.

Born in Mumbai (Bombay), India, Ambassador Jacob immigrated to Israel with his family in 1957. A graduate of Ben-Gurion University who completed advanced studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he began his career with the Israel Foreign Service in 1977.

He served three tours at the Israeli Mission to the UN in New York, in addition to other diplomatic assignments.

He has received awards such as “Exceptional Diplomat in the Foreign Service” and the “Director General's Prize for Excellence” from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Profile Courtesy: The American Jewish Committee