

“A New Middle East: South Lebanon Army Veterans, Arab Christians, Jews and East Jerusalem Muslims Celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut Together”

by Hagay Hoberman



Jews, Druze, Muslims, Christians unite to celebrate Israel



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You will not find as diverse a group of Yom Haatzmaut (Israel Independence Day) celebrants anywhere in Israel: Lebanese Arab families of SLA soldiers (the IDF's allies in fighting Hezbollah in South Lebanon), Druze, Bedouins, and both Christian and Muslim IDF soldiers from East Jerusalem joined together for Yom Haatzmaut this past Friday at Jerusalem's Sha"i Agnon Synagogue and at the home of American immigrant Rabbi Yaakov Kermaier. The event was the initiative of the Yakir organization, founded by Kermaier, who previously served as rabbi of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Synagogue and, before that, as rabbi of the Jewish community of Hong Kong.

Among the hundreds of participants were: representatives of the SLA Foundation for Bereaved Families of Fallen Soldiers; the father of Druze Police Officer Zidan Seif ob"m, who was killed fighting the terrorists of the Har Nof Synagogue massacre; former Druze Member of Knesset Shakib Shinan, the father of fallen officer Kamil Shinan ob"m, along with many other representatives from the Druze community; Bedouin representatives, including Zarzir native Nur Mazarad, a 24-year IDF veteran and nephew of Amos Yarkoni, who is considered the “father of Bedouin IDF tracker units”; the head of the Galilee Christian Forum for IDF Service, Sumer Djeris, a senior border police commander, who, in the past, was the first Christian IDF paratrooper.

The surprise of the event was the participation of three IDF soldiers from Jerusalem's Christian Quarter, in addition to an IDF officer-in-training from the Muslim neighborhood of Jabel Mukaber. The names of these soldiers cannot be publicized out of concern for the safety of their families.

Rabbi Kermaier invited to the front of the Synagogue members of each ethnic/religious group, and each shared his personal story - the education with which he was raised, what led to his support of the State of Israel, and how he plans to influence others to follow in this path. Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem Yael Entebbe shared with the audience a recent project that she championed, the inauguration of the “Druze Warrior Plaza” in Jerusalem.

At the event's formal ceremony, distributed to all participants was a pamphlet, which included prayers for the State of Israel and the IDF, in both Hebrew and Arabic. The participants concluded with the rousing singing of Hatikva.

The participants proceeded to a holiday feast at the Kermaier home, where Jewish-Arabic ensemble, *Hilawaat*, performed. Among the celebrants at the Kermaier home were Uri Borovsky, the Senior Advisor for Arab Affairs to the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, *One Jerusalem* directors Aviad Gutman and Yair Dan, attorney Ilana Hillman from Likud, and many others.