

## IMAJN and the RRNMF Neuromuscular Journal Richard J. Barohn, MD

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion, too*

*Imagine all the people  
Livin' life in peace*

*You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one*

From John Lennon's "Imagine"

The news from the Middle East this past week is as bad as it can be. There does not seem to be any solution to stem the violence and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, something needs to be done to improve the grave situation on the ground and literally in the air. I am a physician and neuroscientist and I know very little about the problems in the Middle East. Being raised in a secular Jewish American family in a middle-class St. Louis suburb shielded me from the growing problems in the Middle East while I grew up in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. It was not until I left active duty in the U.S. Air Force in 1989 and began rising through the academic ranks in the University of Texas Health Systems in San Antonio and then Dallas that I began to work closely with Arab and Muslim physicians. Over the years, as the situation in the Middle East kept getting worse and worse, I met more and more colleagues from the region who came to the U.S. for a variety of reasons to further their medical career and who would become close friends. But at its root, the reasons to come to the U.S. were similar to how my great grandparents left Eastern Europe to move to the U.S. at the turn of the 19th century: both groups of immigrants wanted a better life. The USA for so many immigrants has become a melting pot of numerous cultures and the lines of division between various religions that occur in their homelands of origin are largely diffused in the U.S. Here, in whatever field you choose to enter, what should count is what you do in your work and career, not what tribe you came from. So I am blessed with many Arab and non-Arab Mediterranean friends, some Muslim and some Christian, from many countries, who I work with, see patients with, write papers and grants with, put on courses with, and socialize with. And while I know the issues in Israel and Palestine are deep-rooted and do not lend themselves to easy solutions, I take solace in the close network of neuromuscular neurologists from all religions and regions we have created that really do work as a team and network to advance our field and to help patients.

About ten years ago, after a similar major upheaval in the Middle East when I was again pondering "What can be done?", I had an idea called IMAJN: Initiative for Muslim and Arab and Jewish Neurologists. The idea was to create a scientific forum for us to work together that could be in the form of meetings or work groups or training programs. The idea was to show how Muslims, Arabs and Jews could work productively together at least in our narrow field of neurology, and in particular, neuromuscular diseases. I ran it by one of my very close Arab/Muslim friends, Dr. Aziz Shabani, who many of you know. He nicely and kindly told me, "Rick, it's a nice thought but I don't think this is a good plan." And I think he was worried that if we announced such a program then the next step is: ok, now what do we do? I am sure he felt I was setting myself up for a big disappointment. And Aziz has emphasized to me over the years that the problem is not religion. People of various religious backgrounds have been able to coexist under the same country and city throughout civilization. Aziz recently wrote to me: "Mandela did not resist the apartheid because of religion; the Indians did not resist the British because of religion; the Iraqis resisted the Iranian and Turkish occupation despite the occupiers were Muslims. Arabs in Andalusia cherished Jewish contributions for hundreds of years (Maimonides, etc.) with no regard to religion." And, of course, Dr. Shabani is right. The problem is not religion. The problem occurs when one group does not consider another group fully human, or treat them and respect them as fully human beings. It is an ethical issue. As Dr. Shabani further stated in a note to me: "Condemnation of the settler-colonial project, instead of equating the victimizer with the victim, is the only way for justice." So, I kept my idea quiet between the two of us and we went about our business working closely together as we always have, advancing our field, and becoming closer and closer friends.

After reading, seeing, hearing the news over the last week from Palestine and Israel, I again thought of IMAJN. But now it is ten years later and I realized that through our continued work in the RRNMF website, the RRNMF Neuromuscular Journal, and the Neuromuscular course that we do in many cities around the country (virtually for the last year), I think we have our IMAJN. We have many forums where Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists or nonbelievers all vigorously participate. And while there are large groups such as the AAN and AANMEM that many of us are members of, these smaller projects that we have developed via the website, journal, and the course really allow us to know each other so much better and work together more intimately.

So I think we really have our IMAJN in our small neuromuscular neurology world. I just wish it was that easy for the Middle East. Once again, as Aziz said to me: "The good friendships that you mentioned confirm that the issue is not religion."

Rick