

Opinion, Steve Oshana, Executive Director  
This Week in Washington: The Price of Unity

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This week, those of us in the United States celebrated Thanksgiving, a holiday that asks us to reflect on the things we are thankful for. I spent the week in Chicago visiting family, meeting with community leaders, and, in the spirit of A Demand for Action (ADFA), sought to build alliances by bringing our fractured communities together. At one round table, I addressed a group of about twenty organizational and community leaders. During the Q&A session, a gentleman asked a question that puzzled me.

At one point, I noted that my work with our people was cross-denominational and inclusive of those who identify not only as Assyrian, but also as Chaldean and Syriac. In response, the man asked me to “name names” of the Chaldeans I was working with in Detroit. I was caught off-guard by this question, but I assumed that the man’s point was that since I wasn’t working directly with his organization, ADFA’s mission to achieve unity was somehow inauthentic.

Fair enough, I suppose. I opened my reply with as sincere an answer as I could muster. I stated unequivocally that I wanted his organization to join our efforts at ADFA, seeing as we agree on 98% of our policy, and that I was willing to work together to ensure consistent messaging if they were willing to work with us. I later learned that there were questions about whom exactly I was working with—that since I was working with this or that individual, we must be aligned with this or that political party or church. To that notion, I gave another honest response: poppycock.

To put it plainly, our people need to get over the idea that anyone who does not conform to their brand of nationalism or policy is somehow a traitor, or that by simply working with someone with whom they disagree, they have been lured to the “dark side.” I don’t believe in purity tests, and even if I did, I do not consider myself qualified to administer one. I come from a professional background where compromise is king. Likewise, our constitutional democracy in the United States was built this way by design, and it’s not about reaching some sort of ideological symmetry for the sake of agreeing, but rather, seeing where our interests align, working together where they do, and learning to coexist where they don’t.

This is our ethos at ADFA, and it seems to be working. Already, we have united hundreds of thousands of people, and have active members from all denominations, churches, and political groups. We have a diverse supporter base ranging from Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac icons, to first-time activists, to Snoop Dogg. We span nineteen countries, have reached the EU, Australian MF, 10 Downing Street, and even the President of the United States. We’ve had UFC Champions and Australian award-winning musicians acknowledge ADFA after their greatest career victories, Patriarchs give us shout-outs in their interviews following their meeting with President Obama, and we have seen our #DemandForAction go viral on Facebook and Twitter.

This type of unprecedented support is not something that happens by accident, but through the legitimate desire to bring people together put into practice—and, it should go without saying, it's highly unlikely that each participant has found their interests 100% represented every step of the way. Still, we have been able to raise awareness of our peoples' plight on an international level, and we achieved this by listening, learning, and showing compassion for the views and beliefs of others.

Most importantly, we have achieved it by creating an environment where everyone feels welcome to participate and make their voices heard, and where even a guitar-playing vegetarian with crooked glasses and a dry sense of humor, who never quite fit in with Assyrians, has a place to express his nationalism (yes, that would be me). As for my brother at the meeting in Chicago—you know who you are—I hope you take me up on my offer and join the hundreds of thousands who have found a way to come together to affect a positive change for our people.

So, when asked what I was thankful for this Thanksgiving, I found myself thinking about our ADFA team, and all the selfless individuals who give so much to make what I do possible. While coming to work for ADFA has been one of the biggest personal sacrifices I have ever made, it has also been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and even though I miss my old life sometimes, I can't imagine a day without my ADFA family. Ultimately, I guess what I'm thankful for is, well, all of you.