

THE GREAT DIVIDE

DEEP IN THE HEART OF THE WEST BANK, A GROUP OF FORMER HARDLINE ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS ARE TRYING TO RESCUE SOMETHING FROM THE WRECKAGE OF VIOLENCE AND MISTRUST THAT DIVIDES THIS TROUBLED LAND

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNE USHER

IT'S 1 P.M. ON A FRIDAY IN JANUARY IN BEIT JALA, ten kilometres south of Jerusalem, and several dozen men and a handful of women who have occupied the far-right outposts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are seated around the perimeter of a sunlit room. For the next few hours, the mostly greying Israelis and younger Palestinians sit shoulder to shoulder, drinking rounds of Nescafé or bitter Turkish coffee.

As they have for the past three years, these former soldiers and militants engage in an act their politicians have abandoned: discussing the toughest subjects that divide their people, while trying to heal their own emotional wounds. There's no talk of how the perennially stalled peace process might be restarted. For these men and women, members of a group called Crossing Borders, just being here and daring to participate is enough.

"Breathe deeply," Yuval Carni, a Jewish mediator with a holistic bent, tells the group in Hebrew, as another mediator translates his words into Arabic. He tries to draw them out, to put the hardened lot — from Kibbutzim in Jerusalem and refugee camps in Ramallah — in each other's shoes. Pairing them off, Muslim to Jew, he urges the men and women to give each other a few minutes to say whatever they want, "...in order to release the pressure and anger."

They have been at this, most of them, for almost three years. The meetings, deliberately kept out of the spotlight, are an effort to build bridges between people who have borne the brunt of the decades-long conflict and to help heal their deep emotional wounds.

But Carni notes there is still lingering distrust. He motions to Sulaiman Khatib, the lean, unflappable leader of the Palestinian side, to sit opposite him in the centre of the room. Khatib slouches slightly in his Adidas tracksuit as Carni asks him to say whatever's on his mind. His often light-hearted features form a frown as he expresses bitterness about having to endure an Israeli Army checkpoint in order to get to this town, about fifteen kilometres from his village south of Ramallah.

"The soldiers could be coming from Russia," he says. "Some barely speak Hebrew. But they are able to stop us and sometimes humiliate us. It's so hard. People think: *What is this f***ing Russian, or whatever he is, doing for us here? We were born here but we have no freedom.*"

Yuval tries to mirror his words — and sentiment.

"Did I capture your feelings?" he asks when Khatib finishes. "Yes."

Khatib retakes his seat as the group looks on supportively. There's a pause and then the other members turn to their neighbour and try to do the same.



THE MEETINGS ARE STILL FRAUGHT WITH EMOTION, but they have sparked some radical shifts in outlook among the group's members. More importantly, this is now being matched by actions on each other's behalf. As violent attacks have increased recently on both sides, touching some of them personally, they are standing in solidarity. "It's a long process," says Gadi Kenny, the group's Israeli leader. "But if we are successful, we can set an example for Israeli society."

It's an unprecedented undertaking. The group's only precursor, Combatants for Peace, co-founded in 2005 by Sulaiman Khatib, is comprised on the Israeli side of young men and women who have refused further service in the army. This means the two sides are already more in sync with each other. The Israelis in Wounded Crossing Borders, however,

tend to support the right-wing government's policies, primarily due to security concerns. "Most Israelis are very removed from any talk of peace," says Kenny. "They want to look away from the seemingly unsolvable problems. It's tragic but I can understand it. At the end of the day it's important for this group to reach the mainstream."

That mainstream, reflected in polls and the current Benjamin Netanyahu-led government, is increasingly far-right and nationalistic. Kenny's military experience mirrors that of many Israelis. After his required three years of army service, he was called up for reserve duty to join the fighting in Lebanon. For two weeks each year, from 1983 to 1987, he served in Lebanon, directing helicopters to

landing sites in the mountains as part of a secret unit called The Owls. Then in 1990, he entered the Gaza Strip during what he describes as "the worst days of the first Intifada," the Palestinian uprising against Israeli military occupation.

"I was a different person under the helmet and the hot sun," says the fifty-year-old Tel Aviv native, admitting to having fired rubber bullets at militants after some throw stones. "I never like to remember my reserve duties. I did what I had to do but I wanted to go on with life, as if it were just a passing episode."

But it wasn't something Kenny could forget. Out of uniform, in 2005, he entered the West Bank illegally with a small international group to meet with Zakaria Zubeidi, a leader of the militant Palestinian Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. The encounter sparked a profound change in his outlook. "I began to rethink everything," he says.

Among his realisations was the mental toll that military service placed on young Israelis; the repeated breaks from normal life to don a uniform and head out to the territories, quickly landing in extreme "not-normal" situations.

"It's crazy, and we all suffer, even if it doesn't always show on the surface. But it gets in the hearts and minds and souls," he says. "Now I can see the big price we all pay. So I'm doing what I can to change this terrible reality; for the sake of both the Israelis and the Palestinians."

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DAVID "DUDU" SHILO, the group's Israeli founder, made a similar about-face. Raised to be a Kabbalah rabbi, he says he volunteered to be paratrooper instead, serving in the Suez and the Sinai in the early 1970s before retiring as a major in 1982. His wartime experiences make for a grim roll call. A cousin died in the Yom Kippur war and his own first operation as a paratrooper, a night operation in 1970 in the Suez, ended in trauma. After the man next to him was wounded in the shoulder, Shilo was told to fire forward at what an officer believed was a squad of Egyptians. Three Israelis were killed.



David "Dudu" Shilo (left), the Israeli founder of Wounded Crossing Borders, and Ahmed Helou, formerly with Hamas, listen to another member during a group therapy session in January.

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West Bank city of Hebron. It wasn't long before he began taking an interest in the motivations of his Palestinian inmates, he says, and began using the Arabic he picked up in the army and his university studies to chat with some of them. One of them was a teenager called Abu Sneineh (he can't — and doesn't want to try to — remember the boy's first name) who he guessed was about sixteen. One morning, Shilo was called urgently to the cell the boy shared with fifteen others. When he opened the door, a basketball-sized object was thrown at him. Wrapped in a bloodied shirt was the teen's head, severed overnight with a razor blade.

"I had to appear strong in front of them. I took it back to my office and put it down." Shilo stares at me, his face drawn in pain. A thirty-year-old confessed, he says. "I asked him why he did it and the man replied, 'To throw it at you in the morning.'"

That trauma was followed by the deaths of one nephew in a commando raid in Nablus and another in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. Both were nineteen.

Shilo eventually joined a Jerusalem-area club, Bet Halochem, for wounded veterans and began talking to his friends about trying to reach out to Palestinians. "Most refused. It led to many conflicts with this group," he says. "They said to me, 'How can you be with those who tried to kill you?'"

From a total of about 2,500 members of Bet Halochem, Shilo gathered about fifteen people who were willing to reach across the divide. After meeting fellow veteran Gadi Kenny and Sulaiman Khatib, the three christened their new group Wounded Crossing Borders, in January 2008 at the Dead Sea.

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THE CORE GROUP of Palestinians in Wounded Crossing Borders are also men who had taken up arms against the other side. A younger cadre, they include many former Fatah members from a scattering of cities, villages and refugee camps across the West Bank. Nearly all have been imprisoned, one for twenty years in Hebron. Two still carry bullets inside them from skirmishes with Israeli soldiers.

Shilo was forced to carry one of them three kilometres to a rear position. Later, his commander was shot in the head and died instantly as their helicopter landed under fire. And he had his own brush with death when the tank he was travelling in was hit with an explosive round, leaving him with deep wounds to his legs and back that still cause him pain.

Over coffee in the living room of his house, set high in the hills outside Jerusalem, the otherwise fit and occasionally cheeky sixty-year-old recounts his life story. Then he stops abruptly and moves to a sunlit corner of the room to sit down by a small table and light a cigarette.

He resumes haltingly a few minutes later, telling me that after leaving the army he became a warden at an Israeli military prison in the southern

Sulaiman Khatib took up his personal battle against the Israelis from a particularly tender age. At the age of twelve, the West Bank youth from the village of Hezma, near Ramallah, formed a group of students to struggle against the Israeli occupation at a time when the word "Palestine" was not used and it was illegal to possess a Palestinian flag at school.

His time on the streets — throwing stones, writing slogans and prepping Molotov cocktails — did not last long. In 1986, aged fourteen, he and another teen attacked several off-duty soldiers who had been touring a site on the outskirts of Jerusalem, wounding a couple of them with knives. The army placed his village under curfew and Khatib was soon arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. "I didn't show any regret," he admits. "I wanted to kill the Israelis."

Khatib spent the next decade of his life in jails in Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus. During those years, he became a member of the nationalist Fatah party, its leaders at that time exiled in Tunisia. But he also charted a new course, reading works by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi and studying Hebrew and Jewish history. "Prison was my university," he says proudly. In January 1997 he was released early for good behaviour and became a Fatah party manager in Ramallah.

Khatib says he had "mostly" embraced non-violence when the second Intifada began three years later. But he didn't really get to know any Israelis, he says, until 2003 when a German organisation, Breaking The Ice, chose him to be one of four Palestinians to live together for three weeks in Antarctica with four Israelis.

Over a dish of tomato-basted fried eggs on a rare trip to Tel Aviv, chasing an elusive visa at the U.S. embassy, he smiles at the recollection. "I'm a big fan of change. When I was in prison, there were some 'holy things' regarding the Palestinian struggle that I still respect... but it is kind of the past."

He met Kenny while on a speaking tour for Combatants for Peace in Washington in 2006 and they immediately hit it off. A year and a half later, Khatib used his street credentials to recruit a handful of other Palestinians to the first meeting of Wounded Crossing Borders, held at a restaurant near Jericho.

Some of the Palestinians he has recruited since, "follow you because they trust you, it's our culture," he says. Cocking his head slightly as he stubs out a cigarette, he says, "Charisma is very important, not just ideas, and I think I have it. It's hard to say it, but people tell me this."



MANY OF THE RECRUITS on both sides initially came out of curiosity, but have kept coming back. Khatib says that simply overcoming Israeli checkpoints to attend meetings has occupied much of the Palestinians' energy. Most of the meetings have been held in Beit Jala or other locations near Jerusalem because the Palestinians need to apply for permits to enter Israel.

"The Israelis are more motivated. They want to get to know each other and talk." The Palestinians, he says, especially at the beginning, have wanted to draw a clear line in the sand with one question: *Are you with the occupation or not?*

"Everyone has a hard story," Khatib explains. "Some lost people in the wars in Gaza and they feel victimised." Palestinians in general, he says, don't see Israelis as having problems. "In the beginning, you felt your voice was not heard."

The atmosphere, he tells me, was often charged and efforts to speak candidly were occasionally met with shouts of disagreement; a fact that wasn't really surprising given that the only thing the men had in common initially was extreme nationalism.

Soon after the first meeting of ten Israelis and Palestinians, in April 2008, the fledgling group visited several West Bank villages, a trip that involved passing through an Israeli-manned checkpoint near Nablus. This, says Kenny, was "a big deal psychologically for the Israelis." The following month, thirty-three Israelis and Palestinians travelled to Bosnia to continue their dialogue in neutral territory, a trip Kenny helped pay for out of his own pocket.

For Palestinian member Jamal Miqbel, meeting with fellow Muslims, who lost tens of thousands of people in the 1992-95 war between themselves and ethnic Serbs and Croats, deepened his own engagement with the group. "Now, their country is open, quiet and people are working," the stocky thirty-nine-year-old father of five says. "I thought to myself: Maybe we can have some of this." Wounded Crossing Borders has since met every two to three months and took a second overseas trip, to Switzerland, in March of 2009.

But it hasn't been a smooth journey towards reconciliation. The group's solidarity was first tested in April 2010, when Miqbel's nephew, Ibrahim, was arrested by Israeli soldiers and imprisoned for a week after throwing stones at an army vehicle. The fourteen-year-old told his family that his jailers had hit him and threatened to sexually torture him with electrodes.

Jamal Miqbel's village, Beit Ommar, is the scene of weekly demonstrations against Israeli settlements in the area. His home — about three-hundred metres from the Jewish settlement of Karmey Tzur — has often been threatened with demolition and he himself has been jailed multiple times. A hero in the eyes of his village for this reason, his wife initially begged him not to join the group. After hearing the story of Miqbel's nephew, some of the group's Israelis sent a "strongly worded" letter to the presiding Israeli army judge and in November they appeared at Ibrahim's hearing. Shilo testified on the boy's behalf, saying he knew his uncle very well. The judge released Ibrahim after the boy's family paid a \$140 fine and pledged to return him to the court quickly if he was wanted for questioning. "I felt they supported me a lot," Miqbel says now.

The action was just one measure of how far the group has come. The battle-scarred Israelis now use the word "occupation" to describe Israel's continued hold on the West Bank. And the Palestinians acknowledge that they bear some responsibility for their lack of nationhood. "Now, even if you disagree, you can listen and recognise that the other side suffers," says Khatib. "It's marginal change, but it's good."

But of course there are lingering hurdles. One is age: the Palestinians are hoping younger Israelis will join. Then there are the psychological techniques used at meetings. "This is not Arab culture," says Khatib. He says his guys have grown more comfortable with it. But Yuval Carni, the Jewish psychologist, was found to be "too spiritual" and has been asked to leave.



THE NIGHT BEFORE THAT FRIDAY MEETING in January, the group marked its three-year anniversary with its first social gathering. It was a remarkable evening, which even saw the once-hardened men dancing together with their families as musicians played Jewish and Arab folk songs.

However, Miqbel admits that he is occasionally ill at ease with the group. "Every day there is violence," he says. "Some neighbours have said, 'You are meeting the people shooting us, cutting off our roads, forcing curfews. Then you leave to meet, dance and be with them?'" Miqbel has lost most of his customers at the barbershop he runs and parted ways with many friends and even family members.

A week after the party, Elya Shmaya, a greying Israeli who had initially borne the most hardened views against Palestinians, brought his wife and two sons to Miqbel's barbershop on a visit with Kenny, along with a Jewish settler, Eyal Beeri. For months after joining, Shmaya had carried a revolver when he visited the Palestinians in the West Bank.

"I didn't think Palestinians were entitled to have any part of this land because it was our fathers' land and we came back," he says. "But now I understand the Palestinians. We need to live together; to be safe for our children, so that they won't suffer the same things we did."

Buoyed by the unusual visit, Miqbel took an equally bold move: he visited Beeri's settlement,

Beit El, near Ramallah, last month and attended prayers at his synagogue. "Many words I didn't understand," Miqbel says, referring to Beeri as "a new friend." To conceal his identity, Miqbel covered his thick, dark hair with a kippah. "No one knew I was a Palestinian," he says.

Miqbel also travelled with group leader Gadi Kenny to Sderot, a small city in southern Israel's Negev desert, and met with Israelis who described the trauma of rocket and mortar attacks launched from just a mile away in Gaza. In late March, Palestinian militants fired about seventy rockets and mortar shells into Israel, injuring three people. The attacks ended a relative period of calm since the end of the 2008-09 Gaza War. The Islamic Jihad militant organisation said the attacks were a reprisal for the killing of eight Palestinians near Gaza City earlier that same month.

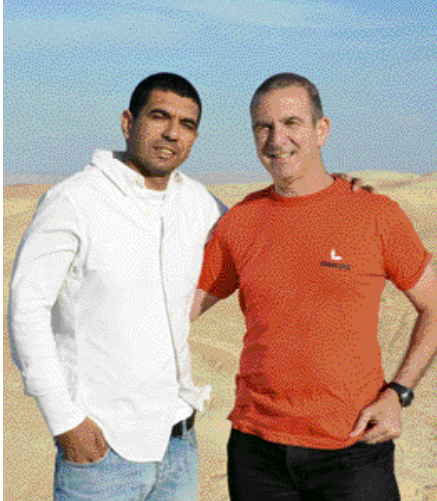
Four of those killed, including two children, were distant relatives of Ahmed Helou, a Palestinian member of the group at the time. A while back Helou, a former member of Hamas, had been so moved by the group that he had created "Visit Palestine" tours for Israelis. He has now left.

The day before the rocket attacks, a bomb detonated at a bus station in Jerusalem killing one person and injuring at least twenty-four others. It was the worst attack in the city in four years. Israeli member Frida Tarrab was in a taxi that had driven alongside the bus when the bomb exploded. Luckily the blast came from the far side of the bus, meaning she was shielded from the carnage. She was unscathed, but in shock for days.

This explosion, along with the recent murder of a family of five in the West Bank settlement of Itamar, brought back bitter memories of the two Intifadas, when acts of terrorism were a regular occurrence. "I stood there and my stomach didn't want to believe it," she tells me. Yet Tarrab is still standing firm with the group. For their part, several of the Palestinians e-mailed the Israeli members after the Jerusalem attack, condemning the actions of their brethren.



THEN, A DAY LATER, one of their own was arrested. Bassem Tamimi had been coordinating weekly non-violent protests over the expansion of a Jewish settlement on land that once belonged to his village, Nabi Saleh, near Ramallah. Back in January, as one of the newer members of the group, the forty-three year



Sulaiman Khatib (left) and Gadi Kenny stand near the Dead Sea site where they hope to one day build a restaurant that will be an oasis of peace in the desert.

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old had been prodded to share the details of the last time that he had been arrested, in November of 1993, after a killing near his village. Speaking quietly, his eyes searching the room, Tamimi said that Israeli interrogators had tied him to a chair, beaten him, shook his head and grabbed his neck when he continued to deny the charges. He lost consciousness and was left partially paralysed for about a week. "I was disintegrating," he told the group, adding he still has ulcers.

Five days later, he was released, only to learn that his sister had died in a court room in his absence, though the exact circumstances were unclear.

The Israelis listened to his testimony in silence. Then one of them, a former policeman, admitted they had used wrong methods and

tried to ask more about the case. A mediator cut off such probing. "We're not leading an investigation," she said.

Shimeon Assayag, an emotive, older Israeli who has lost three family members to the conflict, approached Tamimi afterwards and spoke to him, his eyes still moist with tears.

"What do you need from me?" he asked.

"Lots."

"Right now... is a hug enough?"

"Yes."

Assayag wrapped him in a tight embrace.



BASSEM TAMIMI WENT TO COURT on April 12. He is now back home, awaiting trial later this month. Jamal Miqbel's village, Beit Ommar, has become a closed military zone. Some children had thrown rocks at settlers, he says, and a settler — on the heels of the Itamar killing — had fired on village stores and wounded two local Palestinian men. Kenny says he snuck in illegally, spending two nights at Miqbel's home and also meeting with the village mayor, "to show solidarity."

The group, he says, has decided to meet more often — now once a month — and the Palestinians are waiting to see if they can secure permits for a visit to Jerusalem to tour the Holocaust memorial in Yad Vashem.

Sulaiman Khatib and Gadi Kenny have decided they want to push the agenda a step further. They are finalising a written agreement, which they plan to present soon. It states that the men and women of Wounded Crossing Borders support the ending of occupation and the creation of an independent Palestinian state, side by side with Israel: "Two states for two people."

"We want to come out publicly and say it loud," Kenny tells me.

Miqbel has given them the nod, on the basis that it would mean the end of checkpoints and Israeli settlements. "We need to meet and open our minds and hearts and help to change something," he says. "If we stop because of bombs, we help Hamas and others to make more bombs. If we work together, we can help stop this. We can show how we can live together."

For his part, Dudu, who now teaches Kabbalah and has renounced all violence, says, "I hope that one day, when our governments make peace, we will be each other's ambassadors." ☺