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## Meanwhile, In Yonkers, Israelis, Palestinians Meet

Carefully structured Dialogue Project aims to promote understanding on both sides.  
[09/19/11](#) | [Doug Chandler](#) | [Jewish Week Correspondent](#)

As Israeli and Palestinian officials made preparations for this week's showdown at the United Nations, a small group of Jews and Muslims gathered in Yonkers last week to sort through their own feelings and see if they could better understand the views of the other side.

Meeting under the auspices of the Dialogue Project, a 10-year-old venture to build relationships between different ethnic and religious groups, the 15 participants at last week's gathering included a handful of local Israelis and Palestinians.

Their very involvement in the project is an indication that they all share the desire to know people who, for many of their compatriots, still represent part of an "enemy" and who they themselves, in years past, might have avoided. Many of them also share the same goal of seeing two states for two peoples. But the meeting also underscored how good and decent people from both sides of the conflict can become stymied in their search for a solution, no matter much they share or how much they yearn for peace.

"The most moderate people on both sides favor a two-state solution," Ali Salhab told other participants toward the end of last week's meeting. But all the details involved in reaching that solution make things "blurry," prompting second thoughts in many of those who strive for peace, said Salhab, a Jordanian-born immigrant to the States.

Salhab's comments seemed to summarize an emotional meeting aimed at discussing recent developments in the Middle East, including the Palestinian decision to seek statehood through the United Nations. The 15 participants, most of whom have known each other for years, differed not only over that issue, but over one of the conflict's most basic and heated questions: how to address the Palestinian refugee problem.

The group in Yonkers, launched in 2002, is one of five "circles" now being run by the Dialogue Project, said Marcia Kannry, the organization's founder. Three of them are devoted to Middle East issues and draw Israelis, Palestinians and others who, in Kannry's words, "have a direct connection to the region." A fourth group brings together new immigrants and longtime residents of Brownstone Brooklyn, where

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Kannry lives, and the fifth group involves the study of different faiths and the values that flow out of them.

While the Middle East dialogues certainly touch on political issues, they're structured in a way that emphasizes personal connection, said Kannry, who established her organization in 2001, motivated, in part, by her own experience in dialogue. "They're about people sharing stories, sharing experiences and listening to narratives that they never heard about each other."

To encourage that, the groups follow guidelines that Kannry said came out of her theater background, including "reflection," or repeating back to others what you believe you heard them say, and speaking from the "I," a recognition that no participant can talk for anyone other than himself.

"You can't be authentic or real on stage if you're not aware of how the other actors are feeling, emotionally or physically," said Kannry, who lived in Israel and, at one point, worked for the Jewish National Fund. "What I want is for people to listen, as we do in theater. I wanted that same type of experience for people who are wedded to their own script, whether it's Israel or Palestine." The ultimate goal, she added, is for participants to build enough mutual trust that they acknowledge each other's existence and aspirations.

In Yonkers, those guidelines appeared to bog down the discussion at times, leading one participant to express her frustration that the conversation hadn't been as deep or flowing as it might have been. But the structure also helped to prevent participants from shouting at each other or engaging in polemics, even as they spoke from the gut. A reporter from The Jewish Week was allowed to observe the meeting provided the paper quote no one by their full name without first obtaining their permission.

Following that structure, members of the group told each other what they most wanted to hear from the other side. A young woman, the daughter of Palestinians and the only Palestinian-American at a local college, said that, as a Palestinian, she'd appreciate if one of the Israeli or Jewish-American participants said they understood that the Palestinians have the right to a homeland, whatever they feel about the UN gambit. "I personally don't agree with the UN vote," said the woman, Scheherazad, who has been involved before in interfaith dialogue.

An Israeli woman, Naama, now studying for a Ph.D. in the States, said she would like to hear Arabs in the group acknowledge that their side, too, is responsible for the escalation of tension and violence in the region, including the riot that erupted at the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. She hears voices in Israel disagreeing with their government, she said, but she rarely hears Palestinians disagreeing with their leaders.

Oren Neria, an Israeli who recently graduated from Columbia University, said he wanted others to know that Israel is divided over the proper course of action. And Dergham Alkhatib, a 43-year-old businessman who spent much of his childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, spoke of his concern for Palestinian refugees and his hope that their situation would be addressed in any resolution to the conflict.

Many of those comments elicited positive responses from other participants. Cantor Gerald Coen, for instance, said he agreed with Scheherazad on the need for a Palestinian state. "For me, personally, it's very easy to hear," said Cohen, who serves a Conservative synagogue in Scarsdale, who called himself a "strong advocate of a two-state solution." "That need presents no problem for me."

Other members of the group also had no problem condemning the violence in Egypt, with one, a woman who lived in Egypt and whose husband is Egyptian, saying she knows of no one who hasn't denounced it.

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But Alkhatib's comment drew an emotional response from Cari Gardner, 66, who said any reference to refugees or a Palestinian "right of return" is something that "triggers" her. She has no idea what "right of return" means, she told Alkhatib, known to friends as Leo. Does it mean that all Palestinian refugees should return, she asked, and, if so, to where — to the West Bank or to within Israel's pre-1967 borders? Finally, she asked, can't the refugees simply go on with their lives?

That, in turn, drew an emotional response from Lori, an American convert to Islam whose late husband was Palestinian. Turning to Gardner, Lori said that, while she understands her concern, she likens the feelings of Israelis who fear a massive influx of Palestinian refugees to the feelings of Palestinians in 1948 who witnessed a massive influx of Jews. "How did they feel seeing all these people coming in?" she asked.

Some might see such exchanges, especially between people who know and like each other, as a dismal sign. And many Jews and Muslims believe that such dialogues achieve little, if anything, and serve only to legitimize abhorrent points of view. Even within dialogue circles, some members see their efforts as limited. Those in her group are all "lovely people," said Naama, who grew up in an Orthodox family in Jerusalem. "I've always believed there are good people on the other side who want peace." What's "problematic," she continued, is the leadership "and the fact that at least some leaders aren't willing to recognize Israel."

Nevertheless, members of the Yonkers group, including Naama, said participating in the dialogue over the years has changed their perception of the other group. Alkhatib, whose parents came from a village close to Lod and Ramle, said in an interview with The Jewish Week that he was "conditioned to hate Jews" and went through an angry period. But he's "come around to understanding human nature and the need to be respected and recognized," he added. Salhab, too, said his "vision has evolved" over the years, especially after he left Jordan and began seeing the rest of the world. Speaking of Palestinian refugees, he said he understands their frustration, but also understands that a "right of return" represents "a huge demographic threat" to Israel. He also believes that talk among Palestinians about returning to their family's ancestral homes or villages is just that -- talk -- and that a compromise can be worked out.

"We have to overcome this miserable history, instead of looking at all Palestinians as terrorists and all Zionists as people who want to steal Palestinian homes."

As for the refugee issue, he said, the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank would pretty much solve that. The "right of return" would involve "going back to the West Bank."

Karen, the American married to an Egyptian, said she joined the group eight years ago because she loves people "on both sides of this issue" and wanted to better understand the conflict and how it might be solved.

"Ultimately," she continued, "you need to be reminded of the humanity on both sides, and I prefer to do that." n

Last Update: 09/24/2011 - 18:49

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Submitted by [Scheherazad](#) (not verified) on Sat, 09/24/2011 - 00:13.

I was also quoted in this article. While I did initially give this reporter permission to quote my statements during this meeting, I feel my comment has been completely taken out of context. Therefore, I would like to make my opinions clear: I am Palestinian. I desperately want a homeland for my people. I desperately want peace for my people. I feel that Abbas's U.N. appeal was made in desperation to achieve these goals. I do not feel that this appeal was intended to invalidate Israel in any way, but I do understand Israel's security concerns. I see this measure, not as a hindrance to peace, but simply as a wish to be validated as a state, as human, and as a people. I am pro-peace. I am pro-Palestine and I am pro-Israeli-Palestinian co-existence. I feel that I have been misquoted in this article. Only a fragment of my statement was

reported, I am not "against the U.N. vote." During the dialogue, I said that I wasn't sure that this appeal was made at the right time or through the right measures (as to come to a peaceful resolution) but I very much view the two-state solution as a reasonable and attainable goal. Though in the ideal world, if I could have my dreams come true, the Israeli and Palestinian people would live together in one land, under one government with shared traditions and mutual appreciation of cultural values.

Submitted by Dergham Alkhatib (not verified) on Thu, 09/22/2011 - 16:37.

I made the interview with the Jewish Week and I'd like to clarify a point. I have no right whatsoever to suggest that the Palestinian refugees settle on the Westbank. I was questioning why would the government of Netanyahu not accept a Palestinian State...after all, the biggest obstacle to an agreement between the two people are Refugees, settlements on the Westbank and East Jerusalem. As a Palestinian refugee I don't care for a Palestinian State. I have no problem living under the Israeli government so long as I'm given full equal rights and citizenship. I want to have free access to the land that both of us love. I want to swim in Tel Aviv and dine its restaurants at night. I recognize that a Jewish family was born and raised in my grandfathers house but why can't I live in the neighborhood? There is no threat from an arm-less Palestinian refugee living among the Jewish people; he will be a deterrent from any nuclear threat to the State and Israel will control its military defence. Weren't the leaders of Zionism going to incorporate the Palestinians into the State of Israel? I accept you, why can't you accept me? Russia lost 20million soldiers to Nazi Germany, and now it's a different era where Germany has good relationship with its neighbors even with Israel after the holocaust. This is the 21st century where co-existence is the only way.



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