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RAISING CAIN

Palestinians have found an unlikely ally in their conflict with Israel – a growing army of Jews. Christine Toomey reports

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Behind the Arab-Israeli war are a growing number of desperate Palestinian and Israeli families who want peace, not revenge. But will their voices ever be heard? Christine Toomey reports. Main photographs by John Tordai

Atta Jaber and his wife and baby stand on the site where their home was demolished by the Israeli army in 2000. The land had been in his family since the Ottoman Empire

Put aside your preconceptions of the turmoil in the Middle East. Clear your mind, for a moment, of those images that have come to define the Arab-Israeli conflict: film footage of Palestinian suicide bombers clutching Kalashnikovs while reciting from the Koran, ambulances racing from the site of the latest bomb blast in Israel, Israeli tanks bearing down on youths armed only with stones, vigilante settlers claiming divine right, scenes of shuttle diplomacy and party-political posturing.

Listen here to the voices of ordinary Palestinians and Israelis whose lives are being torn apart by the vicious cycle of violence and revenge fuelled, internally, by the fight for control of land and, externally, by international strategic interests. Some have lost children, others have lost their homes. Some are engaged in simple humanitarian work, others are committed to acts of political protest, lobbying for peace, tolerance and respect for human rights. Many are working together, Israeli alongside Palestinian, and suffering serious reprisals for taking such a stand in the prevailing political climate. They speak out because they fear that the voice of reason and justice is being lost in the wilderness of growing political extremism.

At a time when the region looks further from peace than ever, what they say may challenge your view of what is going on in the Holy Land.

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Two months before she died, 14-year-old Smadar Elhanan cut her dark hair into a short crop. She knew her father loved her hair long. So, to disarm him, she crept outside the window of their home, tapped the glass, put her head to one side and smiled. "It was her way of making a statement of her independence," recalls her father, Rami, a graphic designer, as he sits in the bright sunlight of a Jerusalem morning. "Her elder brothers used to tease her because she was such a good student. But she knew what she wanted," says her father. "She wanted to be a doctor." Smadar also loved to dance.

On the afternoon of September 4, 1997, she and her best friend, Sivane, had an audition for admission to a dance academy. That morning, Smadar had argued with her mother when she said she intended to go and buy school books in a shopping precinct in the centre of Jerusalem before the audition. "I said I would take her to another part of town to buy the books. I was worried about the increase in suicide bombings," says her mother, Nurit.

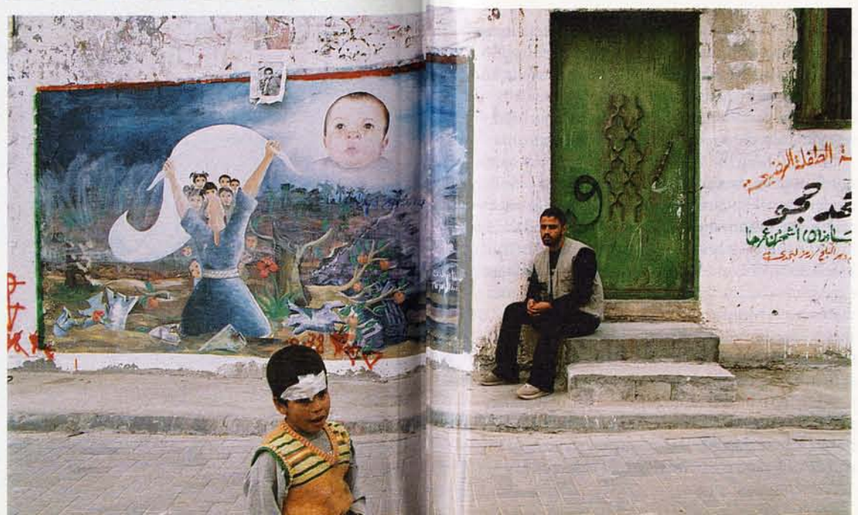
"She said, 'You can't tell me where to go in my own city.' I didn't want to argue, so I let her go."

Rami was in his car when he switched on the radio at 3pm that day to listen to the news and heard reports of a suicide bombing in Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda shopping district; three Palestinians had strolled into the crowd before turning themselves into human bombs. There were nearly 200 injured, several dead. Within minutes, Rami's mobile phone rang. Nurit was crying. She had received a call from one of their sons' friends, who had seen Smadar making her way into the Ben Yehuda mall shortly before the bombs went off. For hours, Rami and Nurit made the rounds of hospitals looking for her. "Finally a policeman suggested gently that we make our way to the mall," Rami recalls. "There, we were referred to a morgue to identify our daughter."

You might imagine that Smadar's death would incite Rami and Nurit to support the extreme measures Ariel Sharon has implemented in the name of national security since taking over as Israel's prime minister a year ago, to form the most right-wing and bellicose coalition government in Israeli history. Quite the opposite. Rami argues that if he had to endure the oppression, humiliation,

KEVIN UNGER

Rami was in the Yom Kippur War. 'I saw that war was not about honour and glory but agony and suffering'

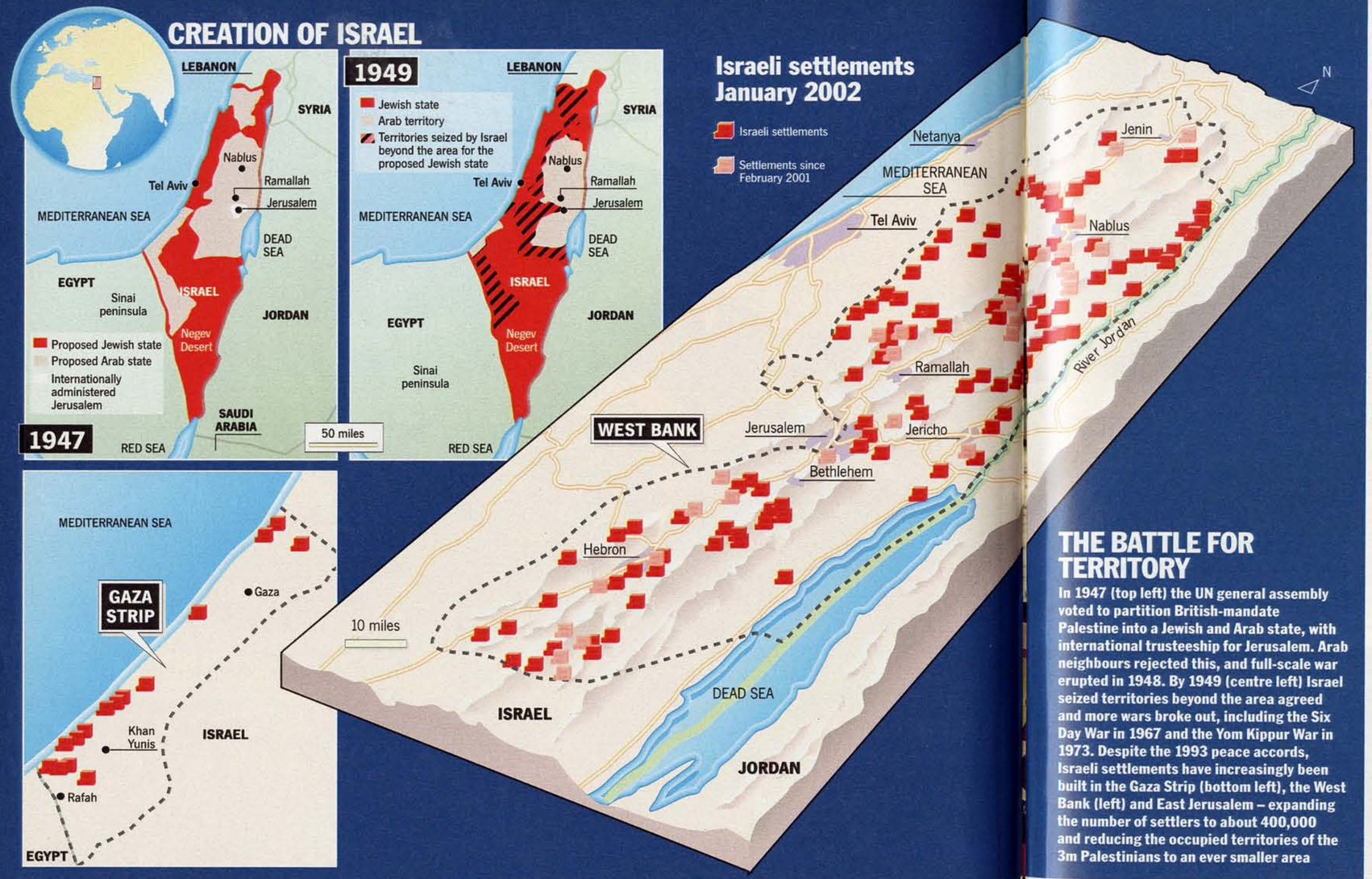


Above: Dr Rosenfeld, of Machsomwatch, negotiates with border police for the return of Palestinian ID passes. Left: Mohammed (seated) lost his baby, Iman, in mortar attacks. The mural commemorates her life. Far left: Rami and Nurit Elhanan show pictures of their daughter, Smadar, killed in 1997

discrimination and injustice meted out on a daily basis to the Palestinian people in the occupied territories, such treatment and loss of hope would incite him to violent retaliation. "It is very hard, but I make a sharp distinction between my own feelings of hatred and anger, and a realistic conception of what is going on. And I know that if I were on the other side of the fence, I would resist the occupation too. People who don't have power do what they can. What they can is terror. I don't say it is right. It is a horrific weapon," argues Rami, who blames corrupt and failing politicians for letting it come to this.

Both Rami and Nurit were raised to believe that the birth of the state of Israel as a Jewish national homeland was an act of self-preservation. Rami's father had survived Auschwitz. His grandparents, six aunts and uncles perished in the Holocaust. Nurit's grandparents moved to the Middle East from Russia after the first world war. But Rami, 52, dates the beginning of his political awareness to his time as a young army conscript following the 1967 six-day war and, later, as a reserve soldier in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. "I saw that war was not about honour and glory, but agony and suffering," says Rami. He slowly came to see Israel's 1967 victory and subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza not as the "divine intervention" it was portrayed as by many of his countrymen, particularly those who raced ahead building settlements in these areas. Instead, he argues, it was the beginning of a cancer at the heart of the state of Israel, which, he says, "diminishes us morally". "By dominating another people for the past 34 years we have corrupted ourselves. For the sake of a bunch of settlers, we have been drawn into a blood bath."

After a period of deep despair following Smadar's death, Rami was approached by another Israeli ➤➤➤



THE BATTLE FOR TERRITORY

In 1947 (top left) the UN general assembly voted to partition British-mandate Palestine into a Jewish and Arab state, with international trusteeship for Jerusalem. Arab neighbours rejected this, and full-scale war erupted in 1948. By 1949 (centre left) Israel seized territories beyond the area agreed and more wars broke out, including the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Despite the 1993 peace accords, Israeli settlements have increasingly been built in the Gaza Strip (bottom left), the West Bank (left) and East Jerusalem – expanding the number of settlers to about 400,000 and reducing the occupied territories of the 3m Palestinians to an ever smaller area

father whose son had been killed by terrorists. Yitzak Frankenthal's son Arik was kidnapped and killed by Hamas militants while completing his military service in 1994. After a meeting with the then prime minister Yitzhak Rabin – assassinated at a peace rally 16 months later by one of his own countrymen – Frankenthal contacted hundreds of other bereaved parents, Israeli and Palestinian, to form a lobby group for reconciliation, tolerance and peace. "If parents who have lost their children paid the highest price anyone can, are able to put aside their feeling of revenge and hatred and talk about reconciliation and compromise, then, I believed, we could show everyone can," says Frankenthal.

The group now comprises nearly 200 Israeli families belonging to an organisation called the Parents' Circle and a group of 140 Palestinian families, some of them parents of suicide bombers, in the Gaza Strip affiliated to the political party National Movement for Change. Both groups jointly organise educational campaigns and talks, and lobby politicians to get back to the negotiating table. Some risk being derided as traitors, or worse. Frankenthal, an Orthodox Jew, receives regular death threats from Israeli extremists who abhor any contact with Palestinians. As the situation has deteriorated, both groups have found it increasingly hard to meet each other. But they continue to speak publicly, organise poster campaigns and discussion groups and have staged displays of hundreds of coffins in public spaces to make people stop and reflect on the human cost of the conflict.

"After Arafat and Rabin shook hands at the start of the Oslo peace process in 1993, many thought we were in for a honeymoon. Ten years on, it is clear this was never about a marriage of two peoples but a divorce. As with any divorce, it is deeply painful and involves both parties giving up a lot of their dreams, making sacrifices so they can get on with their lives and live in peace," says Frankenthal. Such sacrifices, he and other like-minded Israelis argue, should be based on a greater understanding by both sides of each other's history and suffering; an appreciation by the Palestinians of how deeply the catastrophe of the Holocaust is embedded in the Israeli psyche, and an understanding by the Israelis of how great a disaster the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 – referred to as the *naqba* – was for the Palestinians.

Since joining the Parents' Circle, Rami has spent much of his spare time touring schools and talking to teenagers. He starts off by talking about Smadar and then continues with a simple story. "I tell them: imagine there is a house with 10 rooms and in this house lives Mohammed with his wife and children. One stormy night there is a knock at the door and there stands Moishe and his family, in a very bad shape. Moishe tells Mohammed he used to live in the house 2,000 years ago and proceeds to move in, at first taking over eight rooms and eventually moving into the remaining space. That remaining space, I say, represents the occupied territories. I tell the teenagers that when they go into the army, they will be called on to spend much of their time defending the rights of Jewish settlers in that space.

"I find many of them ignorant of the facts. I show them maps dating from the British mandate [the British government had declared its support for the formation of a Jewish national home in Palestine under the Balfour Declaration of 1917], through to maps of those areas of the West Bank, with its many settlements, offered to Arafat by [the then prime minister Ehud] Barak at the last Camp David talks two years ago." This offer was portrayed in the Israeli and western press as so good that Arafat betrayed his people by turning it down. But most Palestinians and Israelis, such as Rami, who have studied the offer closely, describe what was offered as a "caricature of a state". "What the teenagers see in those maps has a great impact. At that age they see quite clearly what is right and wrong."

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In the garbage-strewn streets of the Gaza Strip, one small face stands out among the posters plastered on the walls of *shahid*, or martyrs – those killed in the recent violence, some of them suicide bombers. It is that of a baby girl with a slightly startled look. She is Iman Hajjo and was just three months old when she was killed as Israeli tanks shelled her grandmother's house in the Khan Yunis refugee camp, several kilometres from her own home at Dir al-Balah. Iman escaped injury at first, lying in her cot as the first two rounds of mortars struck around 10.30am on May 7 last year, severely injuring her grandmother and two young cousins. But when a third grenade landed at their front door, as Iman's mother, Suzan, tried to escape clutching her child, the back of the baby's head and shoulders was blown away and part of one arm was severed. Suzan's lung was punctured by shrapnel and she suffered severe chest and leg injuries.

Iman's father, Mohammed, turned on the television news at 11am that day and he watched, in horror, images of his wife and her family being carried on stretchers to an ambulance. When it was reported that a baby named Iman had been killed, Mohammed collapsed. Twenty other Palestinians, including schoolchildren playing outside and medical personnel rushing to their aid, were also severely injured. Israeli reports claimed the attack was in retaliation for mortars fired from Khan Yunis on a neighbouring Jewish settlement, which had caused no injuries. The military later stated that their retaliation had been "excessive", and Sharon apologised that "an Arab baby had died".

Mohammed, whose forebears were fishermen in an area north of the Gaza Strip before being forced to flee in 1948, says that immediately following the death of his baby daughter he wanted revenge. "I felt so angry and confused. I thought, if they have killed my child, I have the right to do the same. When an Israeli child is killed, it is on the front page of newspapers around the world. When one of our children is murdered, little attention is paid." According to the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, in the 14 years from the beginning of the first *intifada* in 1987 to December 2001, a total of 443 Israeli civilians have been killed in the conflict, including 50 children. Over the same period, 2,137 Palestinian civilians have been killed, among them 432 children.

In recent months, however, Mohammed, a policeman with the Palestinian Authority, has joined the ranks of other bereaved families working with the National Movement for Change. Mohammed, like many Palestinians, refers to the militants of Hamas as "freedom fighters" and praises the network of social services the Islamic movement funds to make up for the failings of the Palestinian Authority's corrupt and repressive regime. But like most other Palestinians, he does not condone the targeting of civilians and wants to see an end to the violence. "The only hope our children have of a better future is for both sides to sit down and negotiate. There is no other way," he says. "But many Israelis look at us as little more than animals. They think we are all aggressive. They do not see where our anger comes from. They do not know what our lives are like."

Nasser Warj Agha, a local organiser for the National Movement for Change whose teenage son was shot in the back of the head by an Israeli soldier, says their work is becoming increasingly difficult. "Some bereaved families who were with us in the beginning are afraid to speak out now. As the situation gets worse, they are giving up hope."

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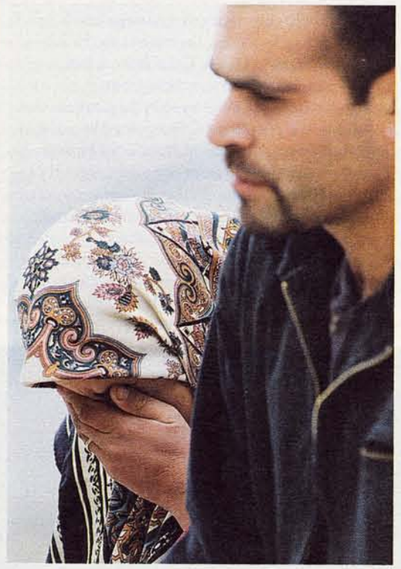
The prospect of peace and reconciliation in the current climate certainly looks bleak. At the time of writing, the temporary lull in hostilities that brought the latest US Middle East envoy, Anthony Zinni, back to the region in early January to broker ceasefire talks has come to an end. Most believe the region will continue to spin further in its vortex of bloodletting before a new line in the conflict is drawn. Sharon's tactics of targeted assassinations, declaring Arafat "irrelevant", strafing Palestinian towns and villages with helicopter gunships and bombarding key Palestinian Authority installations, plays directly, and some say deliberately, into the hands of the Islamic extremists. Allowing them to move into the power vacuum, it increases the violence, in turn used to justify an ever stronger crackdown by the Israeli military.

The position of extremists on both sides is uncompromising. The militants of Hamas and ⟶

'Many Israelis think we are aggressive. They do not see where our anger comes from or what our lives are like'



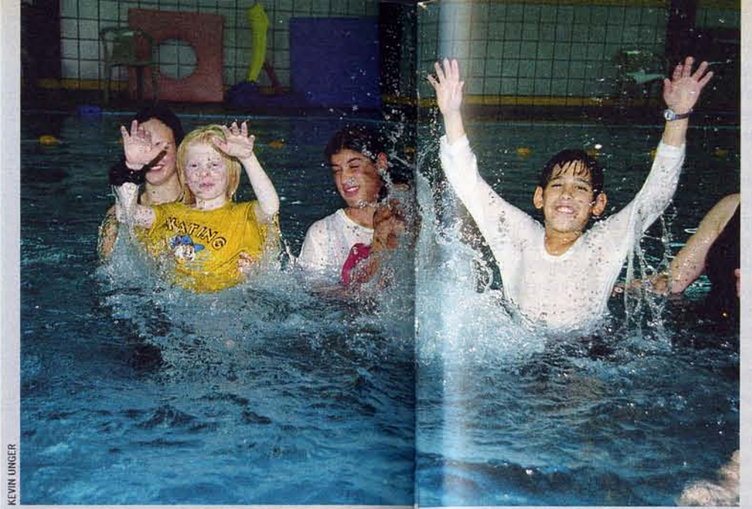
Fatima Abed-Rabo lost her baby after she and her husband, Nasser, were turned back at a checkpoint when she was in labour. The soldiers just laughed

Palestinians are relegated into ever more crowded, disconnected islands with limited supplies of water

Islamic Jihad refuse to recognise Israel's right to exist; Israeli extremists want their Jewish homeland extended east to the River Jordan. Failing this, they want Palestinians in the occupied territories confined to an ever smaller space. This, in effect, is what has been happening over the past 10 years. In violation of international law and the Oslo accords of 1993, the number of settlers who have moved into the West Bank, Gaza and annexed East Jerusalem since then has more than doubled to about 400,000. Many settlements have been built in such strategically crucial locations – and connected with a system of roads, referred to as "security highways" – that they have broken those areas of the occupied territories to which Palestinians are relegated into ever more crowded, disconnected islands with limited supplies of electricity and water. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in the number of land annexations, expropriations and demolitions of Palestinian homes, justified through a complicated maze of bureaucracy and zoning laws. At the heart of such action is a battle over demographics. Despite a chronic housing shortage among the rapidly growing Palestinian population, they are denied permission to build on the majority of land in the West Bank. Permits to build on land deemed eligible for development can take years to acquire and cost the equivalent of thousands of pounds, putting them beyond the means of most. Houses built without permission are served with demolition orders; an estimated 17,000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed in the occupied territories since 1967, and in the past year the demolition programme has accelerated.

To highlight the misery this causes, a small number of Israelis, calling themselves the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions, have formed themselves into an action group that mobilises when they are alerted by Palestinians that a demolition is imminent. Often joined by activists from another pressure group, Rabbis for Human Rights, protesters sit in front of bulldozers to try to stop demolitions. Although they do not succeed, where possible they subsequently help fund and physically rebuild the destroyed homes.

The founder of the committee, Jeff Halper, a former professor of anthropology, smoothes out map after map to illustrate what he describes as ⟫



KEVIN UNGER

FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY

Despite the worsening political situation in Israel, for these Arab and Jewish children with severe disabilities, there is hope: new schemes are giving them a chance to learn and play – together

In a brightly lit indoor swimming pool, a group of young women are coaxing a huddle of children to hold hands, form a circle and lift their feet in the water. Nervous at first, the children laugh and splash enthusiastically when they realise they can achieve more than they thought.

It is a scene played out in therapy sessions around the world, where children with severe disabilities such as cerebral palsy and Down's syndrome are stimulated to learn. But this class is taking place in Ra'anana, a town just north of Tel Aviv; the children are all Arab, the women helping them are Israeli and Arab. The 10-week swimming course and a riding programme that will follow are being funded from money raised by the London-based Jewish charity One to One. It is a beacon of fraternity between Jew and Arab – but, unfathomably, radical elements in both the local Jewish and Arab communities wish to see it extinguished.

Since the beginning of the latest *intifada* – sparked by Ariel Sharon's visit to Jerusalem's sacred Muslim Haram al-Sharif, accompanied by 200 bodyguards in September 2000 – the gap between the Arab and Jewish communities within Israel has also widened. A climate of mutual mistrust and suspicion now exists between Israel's Jewish majority and the country's approximately 1m Israeli Arabs – Arabs born in Israel who hold Israeli passports. Since many Israeli Arabs stood shoulder to shoulder with Palestinians in the Occupied Territories during the violent protests provoked by Sharon's visit, most Jews have steered clear of visiting Arab towns and villages within their country. This has deepened the deprivation of the Israeli Arab population – the majority of whom live below the poverty line, receive fewer state benefits and a poorer standard of social services and schooling. Despite this, their situation is superior to that of most in the Occupied Territories: they can still travel where they want, when they want, and their homes remain largely untouched by bulldozers and shelling. Many joint Arab-Jewish educational, social, cultural and humanitarian programmes set up in the late 1990s – when hope of peace was at its height – have been shut down, however. This makes those that do continue to operate all the more remarkable. The scheme in Ra'anana is one of a series of therapeutic centres, sponsored by the One to One Children's Fund and operated by the English Speaking Residents' Association, run by therapists and volunteers, Arabs and Jews who risk censure for it by extremists in their own communities.

"Many expect us to give up this work every time the situation heats up and hatred increases. But we simply become more determined to persevere. These severely disadvantaged children and their parents continually demonstrate the real need and desire for both communities to live together in peace," says Iris Davis, one of the Jewish volunteers. The project director, Hedy Wax, adds: "These children have such dire needs that the problems in our wider society are put to one side."

As Michael Segal, the executive director of another scheme called Eliya, a series of kindergartens for blind Arab and Jewish children in Israel, points out, "It is ironic that children with severe disabilities should show us how it is possible to go beyond our disputes and differences, show tolerance and coexist in peace."

"Whatever it looks like from outside, most Arabs and Jews want to live together without chaos and violence. We all simply want what is best for our children," says Shadi Matsarwa, an Arab-Israeli lawyer, as he sits on the floor at the Eliya centre in Jerusalem, rocking his partially sighted two-year-old son, Afif, in his arms.

Another educational programme working with older able-bodied Arab and Jewish children in Jerusalem aims to teach tolerance in a very different way. The Jerusalem Circus Association attracts a group of about 20 teenagers every week, who take lessons in juggling and acrobatics. "In a circus it is important that everyone is different. To form a human pyramid, for instance, you need some who are strong and others who are light," says Elisheva Tobiass, the founder. "What we are doing here is very modest, and sometimes the children come under great pressure not to attend. But they continue coming. They have learnt to understand, appreciate and, eventually, like each other. It is a beginning."

the "matrix of control" being imposed on the occupied territories through the programme of settlements and demolitions. He draws an analogy with a prison where inmates may occupy the majority of the space but are still effectively confined because wardens command those areas that constitute the bars and walls. This makes more sense after visiting Palestinians whose houses have been torn down and seeing their proximity to settlements and "security highways".

Salim Shawamreh says he spent the equivalent of around £7,000 applying for permission to build on a plot of land he had bought in the Arab village of Anata on the outskirts of East Jerusalem. The process dragged on for years. Endless objections were raised, including the assertion that the land was a "green area" and no development was allowed. As Salim's family grew, he built it anyway. Shortly after he, his wife and six children moved into their home in the summer of 1998, it was surrounded by soldiers and police sharpshooters. Tear gas was tossed through the windows and bulldozers moved in to demolish the building, despite attempts by Israeli activists, who were beaten and arrested, to stop the destruction. Twice more, Salim rebuilt his home with the help of Israeli volunteers. Twice more it was demolished. Standing in what remains of his home – a few pieces of twisted metal and broken lumps of concrete – Salim points a short distance away to where a settler bypass road is being carved across the landscape: "There is one law for the Jews and another for Arabs."

In a village on the outskirts of Hebron, another father cradles his baby daughter as he shows me the site where his home was demolished two years ago. Despite documents that Atta Jaber says prove his family has owned this land in the Baqa'a valley since the days of the Ottoman empire, the Israeli army declared it had the right to confiscate it on the grounds that it was needed to protect the security of the nearby settlement of Kiryat Arba. When Atta protested, he and his wife, Rudaina, were beaten in front of their children, Atta was imprisoned, their fruit trees cut down and their home demolished. When they rebuilt a house nearby with the help of international aid organisations, settlers attacked it with pickaxes, scrawled graffiti on the walls and defecated in the basement. As Atta shows me the destruction caused, a bulldozer and an armoured car from the nearby settlement circle the house, then parks less than a hundred yards away, and their drivers sit watching us through binoculars.

'I believe strongly that the minute the price of not having peace exceeds the price of peace, then peace will come'

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"I am very, very pessimistic," says Rami Elhanan. "Now we have a government in Israel that does not want peace. It concentrates its main efforts in trying to show that Osama Bin Laden and Yasser Arafat are the same. And if, as it argues, they are, there is no reason to negotiate. Sometimes I feel like a boy with his finger in the dam, talking about peace when the flood of violence and hatred has already swept away the wall. But I believe strongly that the minute the price of not having peace exceeds the price of peace, then peace will come. It might take four years or 400. It is just a question of how many more of our children must die before then. In the meantime, we continue with our work because to do nothing is to give up hope. But what we need is leaders with true vision both here and on the international stage. At the moment they are sadly lacking."

It is a sentiment echoed by others I speak to, many of whom are convinced that the cycle of violence will only be broken by strong international intervention, and not just by the United States. "Europe's position falls far below expectations. The Europeans could do a lot more, but seem constantly to be hiding behind the skirts of the Americans," said one Palestinian businessman. Talking by the light of a gas lantern in Gaza City, blacked out at night because of an Israeli strike on the area's only electrical power station, Nasser Warj Agha laid more responsibility at Britain's door. "The British are partially responsible for creating this mess; let them show more courage in helping to clear it up." Nasser was recently invited to visit London, Germany and South Africa on a speaking tour with a group of other bereaved Palestinian and Israeli parents. It never happened. Most Palestinians are denied permission to travel beyond the confines of their refugee camps in Gaza, let alone leave the country.

The crippling effect of restrictions on movement of the Palestinian population is impossible to overestimate. The system of checkpoints, curfews and unmanned roadblocks – deep trenches and massive soil ramps preventing vehicles from passing, often from one part of a town or village to another – now holds just over 3m people in a complete stranglehold. The general closure of the occupied territories, imposed in the early 1990s in response to attacks by Palestinians in Israel, and eased to some extent after the Oslo accords granted certain areas limited self-rule, was reimposed with a vengeance following the outbreak of the latest *intifada* in September 2000. (See panel, page 29.) The resulting sharp rise in unemployment, hunger and hardship among the Palestinians has created a pressure cooker of resentment, rage and thirst for retaliation.

Some senior Israeli officials admit that the system of closure does little to contribute to security. Terrorists can easily evade detection by trudging across the open hillsides of the West Bank, entering Israel through a rabbit warren of dirt tracks. Some admit that closure has more to do with control than concern for safety. After crisscrossing the West Bank in buses and taxis and witnessing the casual but consistent humiliation of Palestinians at the

Workers sit around at an Israeli checkpoint in Bethlehem. The checkpoints are where many of the bitter clashes between Israelis and Arabs occur

Israeli army checkpoints that exist on every main thoroughfare, it is hard to disagree. One journey from Hebron to Jerusalem that should have taken less than an hour turned into a tortuous three-hour ride across rough hillside tracks, which had one elderly woman vomiting with dizziness after our bus was turned back at one checkpoint because its driver and most passengers were Palestinian.

In recent months a growing number of Israeli Army reservists have refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Those who refuse, some of them senior officers in elite combat units with proud war records, face prison sentences for taking such a stand. Some have already been stripped of their command positions. Sharon has thundered that such action signals "the beginning of the end of democracy". But in an open letter published in the Israeli press recently, the reservists argue that Israel's policies in the occupied territories amount to "dominating, expelling, starving and humiliating an entire people". "There are things that a decent person just does not do," says one. "A decent person does not... treat people as if they were dirt."

As reports of abuses of Palestinians at roadblocks have grown, a group of around 70 Israeli women has formed an organisation called Machsomwatch to monitor the action of soldiers and police. The women mount vigils in small groups at principal checkpoints throughout the West Bank in the early morning and late afternoon. Judith Keshet, one of the three founders of Machsomwatch, believes the women's presence holds those at the checkpoints accountable, briefly, for their actions. "It is particularly uncomfortable for young conscripts to feel they are being watched by women, most of us old enough to be their mothers. The younger generation seems to lack any sense of what human rights are about. There is a strong racist element to the way they behave. They act as if they believe Palestinians are inherently inferior."

Practices the women regularly observe include ad-hoc strip-searches, Palestinians being forced to sit in cars or buses for hours with their windows open in the pouring rain and shut in extreme heat, or told to stand for long periods with their hands in the air after having their ID cards confiscated. Where possible, the women intervene, pleading with soldiers and police to treat those they stop ⟹

with more dignity and respect. This sometimes elicits verbal abuse. Keshet describes the women's action as "a drop in the ocean". But, she says, "in these dark days, every drop counts".

More serious abuses are monitored by doctors belonging to the Israeli pressure group Physicians for Human Rights, involving Palestinians urgently seeking medical care such as kidney dialysis and cancer treatment, or women in labour being denied safe passage. Since September 2000, the group has recorded 221 instances of ambulances bearing such patients being turned back at checkpoints, resulting in 29 deaths. The group consistently lobbies the Israeli High Court for soldiers held responsible for refusing to let patients pass through checkpoints to be arrested and tried. One such case involves the treatment of a young expectant mother called Fatima Abed-Rabo, who was stopped at a checkpoint with her husband, Nasser, as the couple tried to make their way to Bethlehem for Fatima to give birth last October. It was early in the morning when Fatima, then seven months' pregnant, started to feel the first pains of labour. Certain that his wife would give birth within hours – the couple's daughter, Arij, had been born two months prematurely – Nasser convinced a neighbour in their West Bank village of Wallaje to lend him the truck he used for transporting chickens, to get his wife to the nearest hospital in Bethlehem.

The couple had been trying for a second child for several years and undergone fertility treatment, Nasser says, after he suffered sexual problems resulting from abuse during a two-year spell in an Israeli jail. "When Fatima became pregnant," he says, "we were so happy, we celebrated by replacing the tin sheeting on our home with a concrete roof."

'The young seem to lack any sense of what human rights are about, believing Palestinians to be inherently inferior'

But when the couple, accompanied by Nasser's mother, arrived at the Israeli army checkpoint 100 yards outside their village, they were told to go home, despite the fact that Fatima had started haemorrhaging. In desperation they returned to the village and transferred to a taxi in case it might be allowed to pass. Again they were refused permission.

The couple sit huddled in a cold January wind on plastic chairs outside their one-room shack as they describe what happened next. When Nasser got out of the car and started shouting that his wife could give birth at any moment, he says the soldiers laughed, walked over to the car, took his ID card and started imitating the moaning sounds of a woman in labour. As Nasser moved to hit one of them, he was struck to the ground. "Then the driver called out to me to leave them, that it was too late, that my wife had already given birth," says the 28-year-old electrician. "One soldier walked over, threw my ID card in the blood covering the floor of the car and told us to get out. I took off my jacket to wrap up the baby while my mother tied a rag around its umbilical cord. I was crying."

After driving back some way, they abandoned the car and started walking across the fields to avoid the checkpoint and attempt to reach Bethlehem by foot. Their baby son was small, but alive. After stumbling across the rocky hillsides for just over an hour, they flagged down a car, which drove them to the Holy Family hospital. Their baby weighed 1.4kg (3lb), his condition critical. He was blue, suffering from exposure. Seven hours later, he died.

Nasser and Fatima have buried the son they called Sultan some distance from their home; they can't bear to be reminded of their loss. "The Israelis talk about combating terror. They justify everything they do in the name of security and defence. But is this not a kind of terror? Is it not a crime?" Nasser asks. We sit in silence for a while. His question hangs in the air, unanswered by the Israeli courts, and also by the international community. It is New Year's Day. Nasser breaks the silence at last: "I hope this year will be a good one for everyone. It is a lie to say we do not want peace. Everyone wants peace. But there will never be peace as long as we Palestinians are denied our basic rights as human beings." ■