

# 'Shared society' initiatives bearing fruit with Arab-Jewish relations in Israel holding strong, even improving

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## GLIMMER OF HOPE

Despite incitement and incendiary remarks, 'responsible people behaving responsibly' have so far prevented mob violence like that seen in the May 2021 Gaza conflict



COURTESY/HAVE YOU SEEN THE HORIZON LATELY

A Bedouin woman and Jewish woman work together in a donation-collection facility in the southern Bedouin city of Rahat after the Oct. 7, 2023, terror attacks.

By

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The past month and a half could have been a bloody replay of May 2021.

Throughout that month, mixed Arab-Jewish cities such as Lod and Ramle — where coexistence, or at least an absence of violence, is a hard-won and easily lost reality — convulsed in a spasm of deadly rioting, clashes and vandalism, at the same time as Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups were firing thousands of rockets and mortar shells and southern and central Israel and the Israeli military was responding with hundreds of airstrikes. The convergence of attacks from outside the country and serious domestic turmoil caught Israelis — and Israeli security services — off-guard and raised concerns of similar eruptions of violence on the home front in every conflict going forward.

But in the wake of Oct. 7, despite Hamas calling for Arab Israelis to join its fight against the Jewish state and incendiary remarks by Israeli officials, including its controversial hard-right national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, there has not only been an absence of major, internecine violence on Israeli streets, but there are even significant indications of improved Arab-Jewish relations.

In the breach between Jewish and Arab residents of these mixed cities and mixed regions of the countries stand NGOs such as AJEEC, Givat Haviva and Standing Together. Almost as soon as the rioting ended in 2021, they began keeping their fingers on the pulse of the communities, like human seismographs, feeling for tremors beneath the surface and looking to prevent eruptions of violence before they occur.

So far, it has worked. And pressing on with the task of crafting a shared society — despite the horror, the pain and the deep losses following the Oct. 7 attacks — is the only way forward, coexistence activists say.

What is keeping the peace within the Jewish and Arab sectors of Israeli society now, as opposed to the riots that broke out in mixed cities in 2021, is “responsible people behaving responsibly,” said Rula Daood, co-national director of Standing Together. This time, there have so far been no serious violent incidents.

Not only that, a recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute found a 20-year high of Arab Israelis — 70% — who said they feel a part of the State of Israel and its problems. In June, that number was 48%.

In Daood’s view, not only has the government done little to heal the wounds in Arab-Jewish society since May 2021, in some instances, she believes, it has done the opposite — fomenting and facilitating violence with incendiary language and making it easier to get gun

permits and firearms. In the government's place, Daood said, civil society groups stepped up to bolster citizens' resilience and were prepared when the war broke out in October.

Officials at Givat Haviva Center for Shared Society had already established a connection with leaders, educators and activists of the Jewish and Arab communities throughout Israel, and so are able to keep their fingers on the pulse of the street in case the possibility of tensions flares up, noted Mohammad Darawshe, Givat Haviva's director of strategic planning.

"We keep in touch so we don't have too much burned territory the day after, and to keep things under control as much as possible. We try to intervene when the problem is minimal... before it takes a confrontational aspect," said Darawshe, whose family is mourning the death of his 23-year-old cousin, Awad Darawshe, a medic, who was killed by Hamas terrorists on Oct. 7 at the Nova desert dance party while trying to treat the wounded.

Givat Haviva has held three meetings of Jewish and Arab mayors for the Wadi Ara area, and everyone has shown up ready to work with goodwill and a desire to prevent a repeat of 2021, he said.

"The first thing we did was change from conflict management mode to crisis management mode, which begins with the needs of today," said Darawshe. "One unique capacity of our organization today is that we have physical space."

With a 260-bed facility, Givat Haviva has been housing evacuees from Ashkelon, in the south of Israel, providing them food, physical therapy and child care. They also extended an invitation to Bedouin residents of the Negev affected by the attacks, but they preferred to stay in their homes, Darawshe said. So far Givat Haviva is footing most of the bill itself — with help from a \$100,000 grant from the Jewish Federations of North America — but the nonprofit is hoping that at some point the government will provide a budget. Funding to shared society initiatives has also come from the UJA-Federation of New York, which immediately following the outbreak of the war announced approximately \$22 million in emergency grants to over 60 nonprofits, including to the Abraham Fund and Mosaica, which support shared society initiatives.

"This is our contribution, so people don't ask us where were you [when there was the war]," Darawshe said. "We are hoping for the best; even if we do go into debt we will worry about that later. So on the one hand we are going into debt, on the other hand we are doing what we need to do."

At the same time, Givat Haviva is continuing with their other shared society programs, including a cross-sector teaching program that places Arab and Jewish teachers in one another's schools; a university preparatory course for Arab first-year university students to

help them better navigate the Israeli university scene, which has been postponed at least until late December; and joint learning days for heads of employment companies placing Arab employees in Jewish companies.

“We feel we need to do more than anyone else because we are the biggest organization in the field,” said Darawshe. “We operate 60% of programs in Arab-Jewish relations. We don’t have time to think, we have to do now and not when dust settles.”

Israel’s Bedouin community in the south has also been affected by the war just like their Jewish neighbors, and several were killed by missiles and the terrorists, and taken hostage into Gaza.

“We need to keep optimistic and sane,” Kher Albaz, co-executive director of AJEEC-NISPED, a Jewish-Arab organization dedicated to social change in the Negev, said on Nov. 16, a day after the memorial service for co-founder Vivian Silver.

Silver, a beloved Canadian-Israeli peace activist, had been thought to have been taken hostage from her home in Kibbutz Be’eri on Oct. 7, but her body was identified earlier last week.

“We have to keep our path clear for a future of human respect. All other alternatives are too difficult and will bring us more disappointment and violence,” said Albaz. “We are in a positive place, and I am not saying that out of naivety. I am in this work all my life and I know that the alternative is catastrophic.”

A colleague of Silver’s for almost two decades, he said AJEEC is determined to honor her memory and continue on her path. Silver’s murder has only made them more determined, he said, and seeing so many people at the memorial service gave him hope.

“Yesterday...seeing people from all over the world gave us strength in the knowledge that we are not the only crazy ones who believe in peace and joint work, but there are a lot of people who feel comfortable speaking sanely again who want to work to create a shared space so we can build a better future,” he said. “We are not isolated and alone.”

The day after the terrorist attack, he said, AJEEC staff and volunteers were already setting up their operation room in the Bedouin town of Hura and hundreds of volunteers — both Jewish and Arab — came to help prepare packages for the most needy.

“As communities we Bedouin and Jews have been affected by the war. The first people to be killed by the missiles were Bedouin,” he said. Bedouin who worked in the *kibbutzim* were also killed and taken hostage. “Immediately that Sunday we jumped into action. We opened a home front in Hura. All our team came there. The Jews came as workers and also as donors with food, clothes. Private individuals collected things and brought them to the situation room. And it has continued from one day to the next.”

AJEEC has also continued with its regular programs in areas of the country where it is safe, in the north and center, with youth meetings and joint Bedouin-Jewish teachers working on programming for their classes. The group has been working to build a model for a framework of connections between communities as well and had the first meeting between two municipalities — Dimona and the Bedouin community council of Neve Midbar — in April, but unfortunately the program had to be frozen initially because of the scheduled municipal elections and now because of the war, he said.

In the meantime, AJEEC Arab and Jewish staff have met, separately and then together, to talk — and yes, sometimes to argue and disagree, but the high level of resilience they have built over the years has left them capable of withstanding differences and moving forward, he said.

After the first week of the war, the grassroots movement Standing Together realized that its members had the responsibility to keep order and peace in their cities, but they were unsure of what to expect when they put out the call for their first Arab-Jewish conference following the Hamas terrorist attack. Held in Tel Aviv on Nov. 1, they were thrilled when 400 people — both Arabs and Jews — showed up to talk, express themselves and share what they were going through.

“We were really amazed to see 400 people,” recalled co-national director Daood. “Even us, as a Jewish-Arab grassroots movement, we didn’t expect 400 people to come, sit down and speak about how to get through this period, this time of war, together.”

And they were even more surprised five days later when they held their second conference in Haifa and 800 people showed up. The third conference was held in the northern Arab town of Baqa el Gharabyeh and 400 people attended — including Jews, despite the atmosphere of fear of the other which continues to permeate the Israeli landscape.

“Many things have changed during this last month, but one thing is still there: the real fear of what we are going through and what the outcome will be. That fear is still here and very prominent,” she said. “The main thing we are dealing with as Standing Together is how do we protect the partnership we have been working on for so many years, and how do we protect our communities in time of war with so much hatred on both sides.”

The answer, she said, is one of positive energy, with more people becoming activists in Stand Together’s newly formed “Solidarity Guards,” which have been established in some 22 different villages and cities in Israel. Standing Together Solidarity Guards have visited families of people held hostage in Gaza to express their support, have paid visits to medical teams in hospitals to show their appreciation for the work that they do, have organized donations for Jewish and Arab families whose homes have been damaged by rockets, have helped in “situation rooms” making packages for those most in need and have harvested crops with farmers whose workers have left.

“We are doing anything we can do in order to say in a clear voice that all of us are going through this war together and anything that we can do to help people, we are here,” said Daood. “We understand...we have to pass these months of this horrific war, and we have to strengthen the partnership of Arabs and Jews. The real work we are going to need to do will be the day after the war. Many things have changed after the Hamas attack and politics will change also after October 7.”

Tension and violence are not new in Jerusalem, noted Israel Haas, director of activity of Runners Without Borders, which has continued to bring its young teen runners to training following the massacre and the outbreak of war.

(<https://runnerswithoutborders.org/donateeo/>)

“We are not peace activists,” he said. “We are just moderate people who want people to be a bit more tolerant to each other.”

In the early days of the war, it was difficult to convince the parents — both Palestinian and Israeli — that it was safe for the young people to meet. For the first week the East Jerusalem communities were under blockade, and then Palestinian parents were fearful of their children being targeted on public transportation to and from practices. The Israeli parents were afraid of their children being in open spaces without bomb shelters. In order to continue with the joint training sessions, they arranged for private transportation for the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, and are now holding sessions in an indoor bomb shelter.

Their planned trip to the Venice Marathon on Oct. 21 was canceled, so the group is disappointed, but having run together for over a year, they have bonded well and are dedicated to their sport and their meetings, said Haas. In normal times, they have had extra activities outside of training, going to practices on the beach and competing in local races. Now, because of the situation, they have turned more inward and continue to socialize after training, playing Ping-Pong and talking.

The first day they returned to practice not all the team members came, noted Moutaz Abu Chameh, 23, the group coordinator who not too long ago was a member of the team.

“But after a week of not running, everyone was happy to see each other and they all hugged,” he said. “We understand that sport brings happiness.”

Recently, as practice sessions have begun to return to normal, he sat down with the team members to speak about the difficult situation they were all going through.

“I was happy that some of them spoke. They talked about their disappointment about the trip being canceled. Those who spoke, spoke carefully and tried not to hurt each other [with their words,]” said Abu Chameh. “They know we are all in this situation together.”