

Reading as a Way of Reconciliation —The Case of Crossing Borders

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Ms. Sarah Ozacky-Lazar

Introduction

The recent violent events in the Middle East have caused Israeli and Palestinian citizens fears, anxiety and uncertainty. Communication and cooperation between the two peoples are minimal. Young peoples' lives have changed completely. Palestinians in most areas suffer from siege, curfew and lack of freedom and Israelis are threatened by suicide bombers, bury their friends who are victims of terror and are reluctant to go out and to lead a free and normal life.

Historically speaking, the gap between the two neighbouring communities is very wide. Even though they share a lot in common, there are many differences between them—among others, a language barrier. Hebrew—spoken by Israeli Jews, and Arabic—spoken by Palestinians, are two languages which come from the same origin. Their basic structure is similar, grammar is close, many roots and words are alike, both are written from right to left. But still, understanding each other is almost impossible, reading each other's literature needs long years of training, and the respective cultures differ in many ways.

In Israel, only a minority of high school students take Arabic as an elective in their studies. In Palestine, Hebrew is not taught at all in the regular school system.

As a result, when there are groups of Israelis and Palestinians who decide to meet or communicate despite the political conflict, they usually turn to English as a mediator language.

One such group of youth, who refuse to raise their hands in despair, are the young journalists of *Crossing Borders*. They believe that dialogue and not violence is the preferred path to a better future. They share the will to express their feelings and views, to read what the "other side" is writing and to be able to exchange ideas, opinions and hopes for a bet-

ter future. These are the dozens of young high school students who together create the youth magazine *Crossing Borders*. The magazine provides them with a platform for exchange and the opportunity to voice the opinion of the younger generation in the Middle East, one that is not often heard.

Project Description

There are four groups of young writers who contribute their articles and are represented on the editorial board of *Crossing Borders*: Israeli Jews, Israeli Palestinians (Arabs who have Israeli citizenship), Palestinians from the Palestinian Authority and Jordanians. Each has an adult coordinator who works closely with the participants all throughout the year.

Each group meets independently (local activity) and together (regional activity). The groups learn about each other as individuals and as representatives of their society and culture. Personal relationships are built, and gradually mutual trust and respect are gained, despite the deep differences. During their regional seminars, which are held in summer, the young people learn journalism and media skills. They are trained by professional journalists and practice different aspects of media coverage—personal interviews, editorials, news reports, opinions, reviews, literary writing, etc.

Together they choose topics for the magazine and create and edit the material. It is then sent to the editorial board, comprised of representatives of the four groups, which chooses, edits and produces the final issue.



Crossing Borders

Distribution and Reading

The magazine is distributed to high schools, educational institutions and youth organizations in the region. About 20,000 copies are sent to schools, and we estimate that each copy is read by at least 20-30 students. *Crossing Borders* has already established an initial network of more than 200 schools in the region, reaching thousands of students and educators, plus an astounding ripple effect amongst friends and family members. In addition, the magazine is distributed to NGOs, libraries and public institutions in the region and abroad.

Part of the distribution is run through teachers of the English language in the schools.

Apart from being general reading material for students and teachers, *Crossing Borders* has been incorporated into the classrooms. Today, more and more teachers are turning to *Crossing Borders* as a discussion tool in their classrooms because of its content. Past activities have included lesson plans prepared by the teachers themselves and distributed to their co-workers, and their students regularly write letters to the editor.

The teachers who use the articles as a learning material combine several goals:

- Encouraging their students to read essays written by authors their age
- Encouraging the students to write and provide them with writing skills
- Discussing current issues in class from different points of view
- Learning different cultures
- Learning to accept others' opinions
- Keeping the magazine in the school library for future reading

And a lot more.

Crossing Borders Main Objectives

The magazine is a multi-purpose project. It is a "People-to-People" programme aimed at decreasing alienation between young people in the Middle East and creating a common ground for them to write on, read about and discuss current issues.

Additional goals are to:

- Increase intercultural and multi-national contacts and trust
- Create a vehicle of communication between young people in the Middle East
- Foster a critical dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli youth, teachers and civic societies
- Overcome stereotyping and prejudice between Arab and Israeli youth
- Deal with complex human relations in a changing political environment
- Build young leadership

Website

The website (<http://www.crossingborder.org>) allows readers from all over the world to learn about the project, view issues of the magazine and contact the editors, as well as al-



Crossing Borders website

lowing participants to be in contact with one another through the Internet. By putting the entire magazine on the web, an unlimited number of readers is added to it.

The Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva

The Israeli partner in *Crossing Borders* is the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva. This is one of the first organizations in Israel, which began 40 years ago to educate for peace and coexistence and to initiate creative ways of fostering understanding and tolerance in the Middle East.

The Center initiates educational and communal projects to advance its aims, *Crossing Borders* being one of many. Many of the educational projects incorporate writing and reading, through which students and teachers can better express their minds and feelings as well as better understand the other side.

Face to Face

One such example is the encounter programme *Face to Face*. It brings together high school students from Arab and Jewish communities, who otherwise have no opportunity to meet each other and discuss common issues on an equal basis. At the end of a three-day session, we ask the students to write letters to one another. The actual writing makes the young people concentrate on their experience, summarize the knowledge and insights they have gained, and come to concise conclusions regarding the impact of the workshop on them. Thus, in a short time, while their memory is still fresh, they have to put on paper the results of the experience they went through.

On the other end—the students who receive the letters read them, sometimes in private and sometimes aloud. Reading their friends' writings affects the students in several ways: they reflect upon the meeting; they see it from the other side's eyes; they can compare their reactions to the others'; they can choose to answer and write back; they can keep the letter or throw it away; they can show it to their parents, teachers, friends, and more. Usually what they do is collect all the letters, add some drawings and titles, and bind them into a booklet to be kept in the school library. This way, it can be read by other students who were not part of the encounter.

Following is a letter that was written to the Arab students from Nazareth by a Jewish participant from a high school in Jerusalem, after the seminar at Givat Haviva in February 2002.

"The truth is that it is very hard for me to write these words but... I have so much in my mind and in my heart. We went through an amazing experience, many things surprised me, it wasn't easy but I enjoyed it a lot. I believe that meetings of this kind are very important and sensitizing to many, for many reasons. I hope that our generation will find the right way because it is obvious that in wars there are no winners. We need hope and belief, and the most important—good will. And we proved we have that (in this seminar)!

"Above all it is important to remember that we are all first human beings and we have no difference between us and there should not be any. I received from the other side a lot of information, sensitivity and empathy and I was trying to do the same. I hope that we were able to make each other understand and want to know each other more and closer, but with all the closeness there are still unopened doors I wish one day it will be possible to open.

"It is a bit difficult to finish this meeting and to know that the general situation is not up to us... I can only wait for the day that we can be influential and make the difference. So until the next time we meet I hope you remember us and the things we said, and most of all the things we agreed upon—because now we have seen that it is possible to get closer and to listen to each other's pain, fears, hopes and dreams.

"To Givat Haviva—Thank you for opening for me a different world."

Summary

In a world full of violence and uncertainties, and in a region like the Middle East which suffers from continuous conflicts and wars, it is essential for educators to find ways and techniques to ease the burden on their young students. One such way is the use of written words. Both writing and reading are vehicles of self-expression, of comfort and of hope.

Creating common platforms of writing and reading for people from two sides of the conflict lines is an innovative method that provides for the exchange of rival ideas, positions, thoughts and emotions in a more "civilized" and softer manner.

The Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva, Israel, as one of the oldest institutions of its kind in the Middle East, uses these methods daily in its educational work among Arab and Israeli youngsters and adults.

In this short article we have brought two examples of such models of communication between people across political, national and cultural lines. *Crossing Borders* is a youth magazine written and edited by young people in the region, who choose to meet, cooperate, write together and read their peers' articles and literary work, instead of shooting, throwing stones or fighting each other like the grown-ups in their respective countries.

In the *Face to Face* programme the emphasis is put on personal meetings and discussions, but at the end of these encounters the participants write letters to the other group who

read them and relate to them as part of the process of reconciliation.

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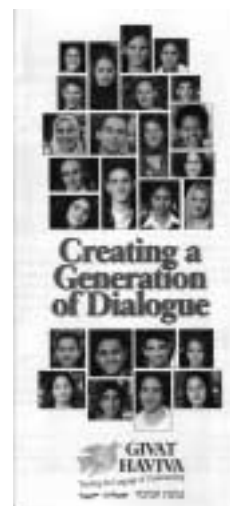
Born in Israel, 1947, and grew up in Tel Aviv. After graduating from Hebrew University, Jerusalem she worked as a researcher in the field of Israel's relations with the Arab World in governmental offices, then later taught Arabic and History at a high school. Since 1986 she has worked in the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva, and has been its Co-Director since 1997. She has written extensively on the issue of Jewish-Arab relations in both academic papers and journalism and writes regularly in the Hebrew and Arabic press. She has participated in many academic conferences and workshops domestically and abroad. In 2001, the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace, Givat Haviva received the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education for its outstanding achievements.

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Givat Haviva leaflet

The Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva

Established in 1963, the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat Haviva is Israel's oldest and largest peace education institution. Its main aims are to foster closer relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, to educate for mutual understanding, and to promote partnership and permanent dialogue between the two communities. Each year, around 25,000 people participate in its activities.

Despite the wars and upheavals of the last 38 years, the Center has made, and continues to make, an important contribution to peace through its education and research projects, its conferences and workshops, its library and information centre, and its publications, notably *Crossing Borders*, an English-language bi-monthly magazine. This magazine, financed by Denmark and the result of work by Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian youths, is one of the rare Israeli-Palestinian projects—maybe the only one—that has kept going in the current difficult climate.

(reprinted from UNESCO Press page informing the winners of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education 2001, <http://www.unesco.org/bpi/eng/unescopress/2001/01-93e.shtml>)