

Unbowed by Oct. 7 aftermath, Israeli, Palestinian teens come together for future of troubled region

In the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks, a small nongovernmental group called Jerusalem Peacebuilders is pressing ahead with its ambitions help shape Israeli, Palestinian and American teenagers into future leaders

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GENEVA -- They are teens from the U.S. and a torn Middle East: mostly Christians, Jews and Muslims, who have been taking part in a years-long program to become leaders and peace-builders. While a lot changed on Oct. 7, they

persist in working for a better future for Israelis and Palestinians.

Unbowed by the Hamas-led attacks and Israel's ongoing military response in Gaza, the Jerusalem Peacebuilders Program, a small nongovernmental organization, have escorted 16 teens to Geneva to explore the mechanics of global institutions and diplomacy. Organizers are hoping to shape open-minded leaders who could help lead the troubled region one day.

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The group, created to help foster cross-cultural understanding after the Sept. 11 attacks by now-retired Episcopal priest Rev. Nicholas Porter and his wife Dorothy, has survived off donations and a persistence in keeping hope alive from both the teens and their parents.

“It is incredibly important at this time of war and division in the Holy Land, that there are people

who are willing to cross that line of difference,” Porter said.

Anger and a state of emergency initially led some Israeli and Arabic-speaking schools to cancel participation with the program, but “slowly they came back,” he said.

Their continued efforts come at a time when coexistence initiatives in the Middle East, which support understanding and shared land among Palestinians and Israelis, have been devastated since the attacks.

Despite the deepened divisions, the youths are focusing on their personal relationships and their futures. The weeklong trip to Geneva is part of a “Diplomacy Institute” program by JPB for 16- and 17-year-olds.

“We were so afraid for our families back in Oct. 7, but now we’re a bit calmer because we can talk with people who have been experiencing a lot of hard things — and we can, like, relate to each other,” said Tina Shammass, a 17-year-old Christian from Nazareth in northern Israel.

Of those who made the trip, six are Muslim, five are Jews, and five are Christian. They live in Israel, the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the United States.

Some are hopeful, but fear about antisemitism or anti-Arab sentiment lingers in many minds. The group has built friendships despite discussions about tough and divisive issues.

“It’s always great to disagree. I think it makes the conversation between Israelis and Palestinians and Americans healthier,” said Adileh, a 29-year-old Muslim from east Jerusalem. “If we can’t sit and talk about our narratives and acknowledge them, we will never have a brighter future.”

“I will never accept war as a solution of this conflict,” he said. “Peace is the answer.”

The 8-day visit that began Tuesday included stops at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies headquarters and U.N. offices in Geneva as well as a meeting with a Swiss diplomat who focuses on the Middle East.

Some teens on the program stayed home because they feared discrimination and racism.

“I have two friends that couldn’t come this year,” said Ali Salman, 17, a Muslim from Ghajar in the Golan Heights. “They were scared to come — because they might face discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism. They’re both Jewish.”

Ary Hammerman, a 16-year-old from White Plains, New York who attends a Jewish school and was born in Israel, said it's been hard for her to balance her secular identity with her religious one.

Some people in her community back home who might be unfamiliar with Muslim or Palestinians “don't understand any perspective, besides what they believe the terrorist perspective is,” she said. Meanwhile, some non-Jews consider Israel a

“colonial state” and “have no understanding of the Jewish connection to Israel.”

"I think that for me, finding my place in the middle of that was hard prior to October 7th. And now it's even harder," she said, alluding to tensions on college campuses in the United States over the Mideast conflict.

Other such groups have fallen on hard times, or even shut down.

A similar group with a young leaders program known as Hands of Peace -- which was also born out of a hopeful response to the Sept. 11 attacks -- closed in March.

One of its alumna was [Naama Levy](#), a 20-year-old Israeli soldier who was taken hostage on Oct. 7.

Her brother, Amit Levy, said she believed deeply in the values of the Hands of Peace mission. “She believed that through young people you could achieve things that older people hadn’t been able to achieve," he said.

Levy said that in the long term, he still dreams of peace and a lasting solution with the Palestinians. But right now he’s just focused on bringing his younger sister home.

Other groups that have similar young leaders programs with Israelis and Palestinians also remain unbowed by the aftermath of the attacks.

“Since October 7, we’ve invested in the arduous work of rebuilding trust - and trauma healing,” said Holly Morris, executive director of Tomorrow’s Women/

“This year’s cohort is particularly brave in that they are coming to stand in the fire - together - and that is not something embraced in their homeland right now,” she wrote in an e-mail. “Not everybody can move through the trauma and get back to a base of co-existence -- but most want to.”

Associated Press writer Melanie Lidman in Jerusalem contributed to this report.
