Camp prepares advocates of peace as conflict rages

Local program gives young Israeli, Palestinian women skills to take back home to Mideast

By Phaedra Haywood
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Shirit Milikovski, 20, has been hearing alarms warning of incoming rocket strikes since she was a child growing up in Sderot, a small city in southern Israel near the Gaza border. Aia Khalailay, 21, grew up in Sakhnin, a small town in northern Israel made up mostly of Muslim Arabs but surrounded by Jewish villages. Deema Yusuf is an 18-year-old Palestinian from Ramallah, West Bank.

Camp participants include, from left, Deema Yusuf, 18, from Ramallah, West Bank; Aia Khalailay, 20, a Palestinian who lives in Khakt Sakher Sachnin, Israel, and Shirit Milikovski, 20, from Sderot, Israel.

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Palestinians and Israelis are flaring. This latest escalation has been especially raw, with reports of child casualties on both sides.

More than 200 young women, mostly teenagers, have participated in the program since the camp began. Milikowski, Khalaily and Sakhnin are former campers who returned this year to help lead groups as part of the program’s ongoing Young Leader program. On Friday, they sat around a kitchen table together with a reporter to share some of their experiences growing up in a region of the world that has been caught in conflict for decades.

The conversation, amiable at moments, tense at others, underscores the importance and challenges of programs like this.

As told to the reporter:

Asked what she wants the world to know about the conflict raging in her part of the world, Yusuf hesitated.

“I don’t want to be rude,” she said, casting a quick glance at Milikowski. “I don’t want her to misunderstand me, but I want the world to know that Palestine is ours. Jerusalem is our capital. I was born with it. I’m going to fight for it.”

Yusuf’s frustration was palpable when she talked about being comfortable speaking her own language (Arabic) freely in many parts of what she considers her rightful homeland.

“My mom freaks out a lot,” Yusuf said. “Every time we go somewhere, she’ll say, ‘OK, now we have to speak English’ to avoid being identified as Palestinian. ‘I refuse to speak English,’ she tells them.”

The young women stressed the importance of sharing their story.

“I have to bear witness to what I see and hear,” Yusuf said.

“People need to know about this,” Khalaily said.

“I want to share it with the world,” Sakhnin said.
“You have to buy into the idea that in a conflict that has lasted this long, change is made one person at a time,” said Dottie Indyke, executive director of Creativity for Peace. “I believe, bottom line, that these young women are already part of the change. We may not see the change until after my time, but it will last them for the rest of their lives.”

Milikowski said that in the past few weeks, as many as 70 rockets have fallen every day in her hometown near the border of Gaza. Alarms sound off as many as five times an hour, alerting civilians that they have 15 seconds to take shelter before another rocket lands.

“‘We have to run really fast,’” said Milikowski, who arrived in the U.S. late last week. “‘No matter where we are, we have to be close [to a shelter]. There is no one who is not thinking about getting somewhere close.’

All new homes built in Israel must have bomb shelters, she said, and when civilians hear the alarm while away from their own home, they will run into the home of a stranger without even asking “because everyone understands.”

“If you hear an alarm while driving,” she said, “you have to get out of the car and lay on the ground with your hands on your head.”

“It’s so scary,” she said. “When you hear it, you don’t know where it will fall, you just need to pray that nothing bad will happen.”

Yusuf said her late grandmother’s wish was to be buried in Jerusalem, “but the Israelis wouldn’t allow that.”

“She is now a dead body and we are just trying to take it from one place to another,” she said. “If Israel can’t allow that, it really disgusts me and I don’t want to understand.”

Khalaile, a Palestinian who attends the University of Jerusalem, described the Jews whose villages surround her mostly Muslim Arab hometown in northern Israel as “good” and “kind” people who “engaged” with the Arabs. She said they’re not like those she described as “extreme” whom she has begun to encounter around Jerusalem.

“A lot of people just hate you,” she said.

For the first time lately, she’s felt afraid to speak Arabic when she goes to the market or travels on public buses. She knows Hebrew, but instead of switching her language, “I prefer not to speak.”

Asked what she saw as the biggest obstacle toward peace, Khalaile said, “The bad people on both sides. Kidnapping kids, burning kids — those are the things that are destroying everything we are trying to make toward peace.”

All three women said they blame bad leaders on both sides of the conflict for being extreme, racist and cruel.

Milikowski used to be a swimmer but gave it up because she couldn’t hear the sirens or the rockets underwater.
Even at home, she and her sister take turns listening for the alarm while the other showers. Older people can’t hear the alarms as well or move as quickly, she said. She realized for the first time recently that her grandmother isn’t strong enough to “close the iron layer” that protects the windows of her home.

As they sat around the table Friday, any one of the three of the women could have been mistaken for an American teenager with ombre-dyed hair, short shorts, tank tops and distressed denim.

Yusuf received a two-year scholarship from the nonprofit to study peace at Lane Community College in Eugene, Ore. She said she’s lucky.

Because her father is from Nazareth, she and her family have Blue identification cards, which allow them to move about the country more freely than her Palestinian friends whose green identification cards restrict them from going where they want to go.

“I can go to Jerusalem,” she said. “But my Palestinian friends cannot.”

Her mother and sister travel between their West Bank home in Ramallah and Jerusalem for work, passing twice daily through major checkpoints set up by the Israelis.

“If I was to talk to you about what happens at the checkpoints and in the airports, I would never finish,” she said.

“You worry about it all the time,” she said. “You can’t live a regular life.”

Amplified warnings drone “tveza adom, tveza adom, tveza adom,” which means the color red in Hebrew. But before the recorded words begin, there is a “click.”

Even in the safety of the camp compound near Glorieta, Milikovski said, she panics if she hears a similar clicking sound.

“It’s intense from the inside,” she said Friday. “I’m not calm. It’s so deep inside me that I can’t fight it. More than anytime before, I feel so exhausted from the situation.”

Back home, Milikovski said, most of her friends are Jewish Israelis. The only Palestinians she really knows she has met through the Creativity for Peace camp.

It has been the same for Yusuf. Before the camp, she never had an Israeli friend. Now, when violence flares, she finds herself worrying not only about her own people, but also about the Israeli friends she has made at the camp, including one who is now her college roommate in Oregon.

The hardest part of the camp, she said, is returning to reality once it is over.

“Here we can eat together and be friends,” she said. “But back home, it’s just the opposite.”

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