

# Vacation From War

Dialogues across Borders



Jewish and Palestinian Israelis protesting in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem ©Dubi Moran

## Summer Bulletin 2021

Dear supporters,

The military escalation and the violent clashes of the last weeks in Israel and Palestine have shaken our partners, but also us very much. We are glad and relieved that both our partners and the former participants are well; nevertheless, the political developments remain deeply worrying, especially since riots in Jerusalem and air attacks on Gaza have just been reported once more.

Even though the pandemic situation in Germany is fortunately easing at the moment, the planning and implementation of project activities remain difficult. Thus, with a heavy heart, we decided to cancel the dialogue seminar for young women\* from Palestine and Israel planned for this August in Germany. The decisive factor, in the end, was the fact that the visa process for the Palestinian participants, which requires a lead-time of at least eight weeks, will not work out in time. Although the visa office in Ramallah has just re-opened finally, it remains unclear when entry to Germany for groups from Palestine will be possible again. In addition,

uncertainties remain about entry and quarantine regulations, both for Germany and for Jordan, through which most Palestinians have to travel.

Despite or even because of the current political situation in Israel and Palestine, our partners are determined to continue their work. However, in view of the escalation, the plans for activities on the ground have to be partly adjusted. Initially, the focus will be on uni-national meetings and workshops for former participants as well as a facilitation training for staff. From August onwards, bi-national meetings will be held locally, followed by a two-week meeting in Cyprus in December.

Last week, Ratko Mladić, one of the main perpetrators of the Srebrenica genocide, was found guilty again by the International Criminal Court and sentenced to life in prison. Following the confirmation of the sentence, there were demonstrations of nationalists in Serbia and the Bosnian Republica Srpska, who still celebrate Mladić as a war hero. Also, Milorad Dodik, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina repeated his denial of the genocide in Srebrenica.

These current events are very worrying for our partners. The developments show once again how important our partners' tireless efforts for understanding, for a joint dealing with the violent past and against nationalism continue to be.

In the former Yugoslavia, various online events of the Youth United in Peace Network have already taken place, as well as small face-to-face events and activities with locally active groups in the partner cities. Furthermore, we hope that the planned Peace Camp in Medena in Croatia this summer, the follow-up camp in Vukovar and the weekend visits in late summer and autumn can take place. We are currently in talks with the accommodation in Medena in order to develop a suitable hygiene concept for the Peace Camp. Our partners meet regularly, both digitally and in person, to exchange information about the situation, adjust plans on an ongoing basis, and implement local or digital activities.

For former participants and partners from both project regions, we will also offer an online event series with workshops and lectures on the topic

of activism in November. With this, we intend to strengthen capacities in both project regions and want to

give activists who are part of *Vacation From War* the possibility to get to know each other better and build

stronger ties with each other.

## Dialogue work after the military escalation: „I new: We *must* continue“

*The tense political situation in Palestine and Israel has again escalated militarily in recent weeks; despite the "ceasefire", the military confrontations do not seem to be over yet. Leah R.\*, Israeli coordinator of the partner organization working in the Trialogue, describes the background and context of the events*

(Text: Leah R.) Allegedly, the increasing tensions and violence between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem over the past weeks were the trigger for the military escalation. However, both the events in Jerusalem and the activities of Hamas cannot be separated from domestic politics - the formation of a government in Israel and the struggle for public opinion on the Palestinian streets. Also, it is important to take into account the common interest of right-wing parties in Israel and Hamas in preventing a two-state solution.

So what happened? During Ramadan, traditionally tens of thousands of Muslims gather at the Nablus Gate (Bab al-Amud) in Jerusalem every evening at the end of fasting

and especially during Iftar celebrations. This year, however, the so-called "Jerusalem Day" also took place during the fasting month: traditionally, far-right young people celebrate the day of the "liberation of Jerusalem" with mass marches in the Old City. These marches usually lead to violence against Palestinians; the marches were severely restricted by the government this year to prevent riots.

In addition, this month Palestinian residents were again evicted from Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in order to house Jewish families in their place. The evictions are part of the settlement expansion in East Jerusalem, driven by rich settler associations that have been operating in the city for decades - with the aim of bringing the city under the control of nationalist Jews. Moreover, Israeli law allows Jews to claim land and buildings that were Jewish-owned before 1948, but at the same time prevents Palestinians from claiming ownership of property that was in their possession at the time.

The extreme right-wing groups on the Israeli side demand, on the one hand, the extension of control in the West Bank and, on the other hand, the restriction of the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel. A demand that has found expression, among other things, in the Nationality Law passed in 2018, according to which in the Jewish state Jews precede others.

When police restricted gatherings of Muslims on the Temple Mount and at Nablus Gate and violently dispersed protests against these restrictions, the demonstrations against the eviction of Sheikh Jarrah were joined by Palestinian citizens who had been less involved in such protests before.

After years of Israeli policies aimed at dividing Palestinian society, it seems that the identification of Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank with the suffering of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and Gaza and the shared fear for the future of Al-Aqsa Mosque have actually helped strengthen ties between Palestinians. (...) The tensions that have been simmering under the surface

for years occasionally erupt into violent incidents. Usually - and this time too - it is young people who are incited by cynical politicians or who simply give expression to frustrations resulting from their social and economic situation. The psychological impact of these events is far greater than the damage to human life and property: it crumbles the ties that are repeatedly forged between Jews and Palestinians who are citi-

Jewish and Palestinian Israelis demonstrate in Haifa: "This is the home of us all", "The answer to racism: Jewish-Arab partnership"





*Palestinian Israelis in Nazareth protesting against Gaza bombings*



zens of Israel. This is also true of the consequences of the missile fire: although it resulted in relatively few deaths, it increased the sense of existential fear in Jewish society in Israel, a fear that reinforces extreme perceptions.

Sarah T.\*, an Israeli staff member of the project, describes her experience thus: "During the war, I was afraid to leave the house when missiles were fired at us from Gaza. I was also afraid of the violence of the police and right wing activists' violence during the demonstrations. (...) The transition between hope and despair is very sharp. When I participated in solidarity demonstrations and initiatives and felt their power, along with the knowledge that they were happening all over the country, hope arose in me. It hurts me a lot to see the violence of Palestinians against Jews, but I also see the causes of this violence - the oppression of Palestinians by Israel."

Several waves of protests have swept the streets of Israel in recent weeks. One wave of protests in solidarity with the Palestinians in Jerusalem and Gaza, in which Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as many Jews participated. These demonstrations were severely suppressed by the police. At the same

time, there was a right-wing Jewish wave of protest calling for a "tougher hand" against Hamas and the "Arab rioters in Israel." The third wave was Jews and Arabs, sometimes separately, but mostly together, all over the country, calling for an end to the military operation in Gaza, the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and police violence, and promoting a shared life based on equality and justice.

During the military confrontation, Karim A.\*, Palestinian coordinator of the project, wrote to us:

"The twelve days of the last war on Gaza were hurting a lot. A lot of killing of civilians who have nowhere to hide. (...) On a personal level, I experienced a moment of weakness in my heart and I started questioning myself - is the dialogue work I am doing is right or not? It was a very emotional time, but then I used my brain more than my heart to think and I started to say

to myself: "If I give up and so do the others, who will be left? What would life look like without us, the ones who want to bring about a change, who want to make this place a better place to live in?" I remembered how this work changed me personally and how it changed many peoples' minds along the years, and I knew: We *must* continue. Feelings and emotions go up and down from time to time but the more intense the situation is, the more I believe in our work."

## Meeting the challenges of the pandemic creatively:

### Collaborative online movie nights about present consequences of past wars

*(Text: Valentina Gagić and Valerija Forgić)* Due to the pandemic situation in the former Yugoslavia, we continue to have to limit our contacts. Therefore, meetings of the Youth United in Peace Network (YU-Peace) still cannot take place in the usual forms and we have to find new ways to organize activities.

All the more important are all activities we actually *are* able to im-

plement, no matter how difficult their organization may be sometimes. Through them, we maintain the continuity of our work, which is essential in these times.

Because of the pandemic, many young people feel confined at home. This leads to them also closing themselves off more, they withdraw themselves and communicate less. They also have fewer

opportunities to share their views and thoughts with others.

The young people were very excited about the online movie nights together. They were very much looking forward to it, especially to be able to hang out together and to discuss the movies with their peers.

The selected films, "Once brothers" and "Srbenka", which describes the consequences that



the war left on people in the former Yugoslavia, were well received. "Watching films online in groups was something new for me and I didn't have high expectations," confirmed Hamed, one of the youth participants. "After the screenings, I was very happy to be able to discuss the films with many different people, and I think it was a valuable experience and a great new way to connect young people."

Both films carried powerful messages.

The first film, "Once Brothers," conveys important messages to young people about friendship and ideology and the futility of broken relationships. It told realistic and emotional stories of interpersonal connections and shattered dreams. The topic was very close to us, as we have witnessed it ourselves and have been carrying it with us for generations. Many people around us live with similar consequences of wars' events.

The second film, "Srbenka", deals with the issue of Croatian cri-

mes against Serbian civilians using the example of a theater play about 12-year-old Aleksandra Zec, who was murdered by Croatian militias in 1991 along with her parents because of her ethnicity. This is a topic many people do not want to talk about. By analyzing the preparations for this play, the director of the film addresses the question of how Croatian society deals with the members of the Serbian minority today.

The film, marked by emotional tension, led to a lively discussion among the participants. They talked about the importance of dealing with the past in order not to live under its burden and accumulate injustices in society.

"The film 'Srbenka' not only shows the process of creating a play about Aleksandra Zec and her family, but also explores the question of the fate of Serbs as a minority. (...) The film has a very smart way of making viewers reflect critically not only about the Serbs, but also about other minorities and their position in society after watching it" comments Tijana, a YU-Peace activist, on the discussion.

In these difficult times, when we all long for hugs and kind, warm words, these evenings were wonderful opportunities to reconnect with each other more.

## Donate and support

*Vacation From War continues - also in Times of Corona, our work needs your support!*

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### Editorial

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