

## The State We're In: Unlikely Friends



Mona Sbouh is a bubbly 17-year-old. She lives in Nablus, where checkpoints and daily humiliation are a part of life for every Palestinian.

"When I see an Israeli, I see someone who hates me, so I'll keep away from him, not talk to him," she says.

Yaara Tal is also 17 and bubbly. She lives in Sderot city and her daily life can include a siren that warns her that there's 20 seconds to hide from incoming Hamas rockets. She has lost a school friend because of those rockets, but her response is surprising...

"Of course I have an anger, but I wanted to tell them what I'm feeling — its not fair when they hear my side from the media and I hear their side through the media, so I think we need to hear each other face to face."

Of all the intractable conflicts in the world, perhaps the one that fires the most heated emotions is the one between Israelis and Palestinians. Generations of Jews and Arabs have grown up to regard the other as the enemy.

But an organization called Creativity for Peace is working to try to change that — one young mind at a time. It organizes summer camps for young Israeli and Palestinian women in New Mexico for a few weeks each year, so they can talk to and learn about each other. The girls are required to share rooms, participate in daily dialogue sessions where sometimes the discussions are teary and emotional. But through the daily contact, slowly the blurred image of the enemy is replaced by a clearer one of an individual with a face, a name, humanity.

When they go home, girls are encouraged to keep up the friendships.

Mona and Yaara met each other at this camp and they've forged a powerful friendship that seems to be flourishing despite the cultural pressures each one faces. Mona says if her teachers ever found out that she's friends with an Israeli, she'd be thrown out of school. Yaara is still determined to do her army service, but insists that she'll never treat Palestinians rudely because she now sees them as people just like her.

Unlike teenagers around the world, Mona and Yaara can't just meet up for a movie and a milkshake. Mona can only go to Israel after going through the paperwork two weeks in advance. Each longs to take the other to their home and introduce them to their family, but both realize that for now at least, this small ambition remains an impossible dream. But they communicate daily via the internet — the digital world is the only facet of their life without borders.

Radio Netherlands Worldwide wanted to bring them together for an interview, but Mona couldn't get a visa. On a phone connection, they chat excitedly together describing how their friendship started and flourished.

At the end of the phone call when they're asked if they want to say anything else, Yaara lets go of the last of her restraint and yells over the phone "Mona I love you, and I miss you."

"I miss you too" her friend says. A few words from a couple of young girls that are as yet, not much more than pinpricks in the wall that divides a land. But pinpricks let in the light nevertheless.

Mona and Yaara have learnt that their so-called enemy has a face.

If others could learn that as well, then perhaps this, the most intractable of conflicts, may still have a chance of resolution some distant day.

Radio Netherlands Worldwide  
January 4, 2010