

Virtual Bridge Allows Strangers in Mideast to Seem Less Strange



Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times

Hamze Awawde, left, a Palestinian student, uses a Facebook page to chat with Israelis.

By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)
Published: July 9, 2011

RAMALLAH, West Bank — Moad Arqoub, a [Palestinian](#) graduate student, was bouncing around the Internet the other day and came across a site that surprised and attracted him. It was a Facebook page where Israelis and Palestinians and other Arabs were talking about everything at once: the prospects of peace, of course, but also soccer, photography and music.

Related in Opinion

[Editorial | Week Ahead: Mideast Countdown](#) (July 10, 2011)

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times

Nimrod Ben Ze'ev, an Israeli student, right, said he and Palestinians had similar frustrations.

“I joined immediately because right now, without a peace process and with Israelis and Palestinians physically separated, it is really important for us to be interacting without barriers,” Mr. Arqoub said as he sat at an outdoor cafe in this Palestinian city.

It has been nearly two years since Israeli and Palestinian leaders have negotiated their peoples’ future and, with the region in turmoil and prospects for peace dim, interaction between Israelis and Palestinians is increasingly limited to Israeli military checkpoints in the [West Bank](#).

But over the past month, the Facebook page has surprised those involved by the enthusiasm it has generated, suggesting that the Facebook-driven revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt may offer guidance for coexistence efforts as well.

Called [Facebook.com/yalaYL](https://www.facebook.com/yalaYL), [the site](#), created by a former Israeli diplomat and unambiguous about its links to [Israel](#), has had 91,000 views in its first month. Of its 22,500 active users, 60 percent are Arabs — mostly Palestinians, followed by Egyptians, Jordanians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Lebanese and Saudis.

“All communication today is on the Internet — sex, war, business — why not peace?” asked Uri Savir, the president of the [Peres Center for Peace](#) and the founder of the new site. Mr. Savir was a chief peace negotiator for Israel in the 1990s as well as the director general of its Foreign Ministry and a member of Parliament. But he said he had never been more excited about a project.

“Today we have no brave leaders on either side, so I am turning to a new generation, the Tahrir Square and Facebook generation,” Mr. Savir, 58, said as he sat in his Tel Aviv apartment running his finger over his [iPad](#) to scroll through the site. “We need to emulate Tunisia. My goal is to have 100,000 people working on Yala on joint projects that will lock our leaders into making peace.”

The YL in the site’s name stands for young leaders (Yala means “let’s go” in Arabic), and Mr. Savir said he saw the page as a place where the next generation of regional innovators could meet. It helps that he has a few connections. The page has welcome messages from Shimon Peres, Israel’s president, and Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, as well as from Tony Blair, the former British prime minister who serves as an international envoy to the Palestinians, and the actress Sharon Stone.

The site has already sponsored a photography contest — won by a Palestinian and an Israeli who will be flown to New York next month — and discussions are under way for sponsorship or involvement from the Italian government, the Barcelona soccer team and MTV. Mr. Peres and Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s founder, have chatted by phone about the effort.

But most interesting so far have been the interactions online. At a time when Arabs generally shun contact with Israelis, those on the site speak openly about their desire to learn more about one another.

“This is my first contact with Israelis,” said Lyth Sharif, an 18-year-old Palestinian student at Birzeit University in the West Bank who comes from Dura, a town near Hebron. “A friend of mine told me about it, and I think it’s cool. I joined a few days ago. It helps me understand the difference between Israel and the occupation.”

Unlike members of his parents’ generation who worked in Israel, learned some Hebrew and watched Israeli television, Mr. Sharif has never set foot inside Israel or Jerusalem, a result of the security barrier and Israeli regulations.

Mr. Arqoub, who is 29, knows Israel better. As a youth he sneaked into Israel and worked for a family he grew to love. Later he was imprisoned by the Israelis for two years without explanation, he said. But he rejected bitterness.

Salah al-Ayan, a Palestinian Authority official and a friend of Mr. Savir’s who is helping with the site, said the lack of interaction today between Israelis and Palestinians about ordinary things was alarming.

“Believe me, they don’t know each other at all,” he said in his Ramallah office.

“Our goal is to start by talking about art and sports. Since Israelis and Palestinians don’t meet face to face anymore, this is a virtual place to meet. I was happy when I saw that some Palestinians had voted for Israeli photos in the contest.”

The notes posted on the page are mostly in English, but also in Hebrew and Arabic. Some are playful, others poetic.

Most of the talk seems to be between people in Ramallah and Tel Aviv. But Hamze Awawde, a 21-year-old student here in Ramallah said he got “friend” requests on Yala from Morocco and Egypt.

He said: “I asked one Egyptian why he had contacted me and why he was taking part in this, and he said: ‘After the revolution, everything is permitted. I want to see what Israelis are like.’”

Nimrod Ben Ze’ev, a 25-year-old student of Middle Eastern studies at Tel Aviv University, said much of the interaction on the site was still rather wooden — what he called “a peace dialogue mentality.” But he is optimistic.

“I think the official letters from Peres and Blair help give the site a feeling that there is something behind it,” he said. “But what is great is that the discussions are unmediated — people aged 15 to 30 talking among ourselves. We don’t talk about a two-state solution or a one-state solution but about being a young person in Israel or Palestine. Our experiences are obviously very different, but we share a frustration about greater powers restricting us. That is very mutual.”

In one exchange, an Israeli named Alon Kadmon asked what would happen if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and Mr. Abbas of the Palestinian Authority were locked in a sealed room for a week.

Nadine Firas Yaghi, a Palestinian, replied that the two leaders would realize “that both have ears, eyes, hands and a mouth, a moment of epiphany that they share the same qualities, that before being Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish, Muslim or Christian, they are human beings.”

Another Palestinian response was sharper: “Don’t open the door.”

A version of this article appeared in print on July 10, 2011, on page A12 of the New York edition with the headline: Virtual Bridge Allows Strangers in Mideast To Seem Less Strange.

SIGN IN TO
E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

More Headlines From Around the Web

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Politics and Government](#)

[Palestinians](#)

[Facebook.com](#)

[Israel](#)