

Choreography of Conflict

by Cynthia Cohen

“The situation in Nablus? The curfew is still in effect, in fact, they are tightening it. There is still a shortage of everything in the city: no fruits, no vegetables, no freedom. The situation is boiling like a volcano.”

So writes my friend and colleague Mohammed, a professor of English, peacebuilder, and community educator living with his family in the West Bank city of Nablus.

Becoming friends with Mohammed this summer has provided me with a challenging exercise in imagination. For me, this has been an unusually relaxing summer — a few weeks to slow down, work in the yard of my old New Hampshire farm house, and swim in the lake nearby. One evening, I kayaked under a crescent moon as the sky deepened slowly from pink to purple to black.

I have relished these moments of peace and calm freedom, extraordinary in their uneventful quietness. Yet in these moments I think often of my friend Mohammed, whose situation could not be more different from mine. During these same weeks when I have found time to swim and to kayak, Mohammed has been under curfew in his house in Nablus. In the last 70 days, Mohammed and his wife and children have been allowed out of their home for approximately 40 hours. The rest of the time they have been prisoners.

Mohammed and I were brought together in a coexistence project involving Palestinian,

Israeli, and Jordanian professionals who work with youth. Over the summer I have maintained email and phone contact with all of the partners, most intensively with Mohammed, who has been largely cut off from the outside world. I have listened to him share his perspective on the death dance that has ensnared the Middle East with its all-too-repetitive twists and turns, its bloody explosions, and stifling stillnesses. I listened in hopes that he might gain some small measure of relief from his ordeal by putting

words to his experiences and shaping his frustrations into stories. “I believe in peace like I believe in God,” he once told me. I have tried to support his faith in the possibility of peace.

The dance of death catapults itself through Nablus, roaring down the streets of Mohammed’s neighborhood, smashing cars, and destroying homes. Helicopter gunships and fighter planes fill the night skies. Unable to visit a mosque or his parents in a nearby village for over two months, unable to fill his family’s refrigerator, Mohammed finds

himself hesitant to engage others in discussions of peace. “How can I talk to my children about peace now?” he asks. “The children are angry, they are shouting, they are cursing life. You won’t see a smile on their faces. They speak only words of war: they debate which weapon made which sound, they discuss the sizes of bullets from various guns.”



Many of the stories Mohammed shares with me are testaments to the resilience of the human spirit. During the first round of curfews, in April, he taught his seven-year-old son to play chess. In July, during a four-hour break in the curfew, his seventeen-year-old daughter raced to her classroom to complete the Tawjihi, her final science examination necessary for graduation from high school. Frequently, the children in his neighborhood have made kites from trash bags and paper, flying them from their verandas and their windows, joking that with their kites they will fight off the F-16s. But the young people of Nablus have had no real opportunities to be outside, to ride their bikes, or to play this summer. “We won’t let the principal count the days under curfew as part of our summer vacation,” Mohammed’s son tells him. It hardly seems fair.

In August, as restrictions on travel grow even tighter, Mohammed told me that donkeys had become the 21st century mode of transportation. With car, bus, and truck transportation banned, “you can even see donkeys carrying computers.”

And after months of living under curfew, sometimes for as many as 20 days without a break, Mohammed reports a kind of demoralization among the adults as well as the children. “Sometimes we sit all day in our pajamas, and I might not shave for three days in a row. When is the last time I wore my shoes?” With potatoes and grains the only foods remaining, the situation is becoming quite desperate.

It isn’t the short-term effects, however, that worry Mohammed the most. He worries about the future of the Middle East and that the worst may be yet to come. He worries that in 10 or 20 years, the seven-year-olds of Nablus will still be filled with hate and anger. And that leads him to worry about the future of both Israelis and Palestinians. “Where will we be in 25 or 50 or 100 years? What will the Israelis reap from the rage and the hatred they are sowing now in the hearts of the children of Nablus?”

The same coexistence project that brings me into contact with Mohammed also affords me

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opportunities to speak regularly with Shimon, a young Israeli father whose greatest joy this summer has been swimming daily with his two-year-old son. Shimon is a coexistence facilitator and student of peace and development whose capacity to imagine the perspective of the “other side” is remarkable.

Shimon stood just 10 life-preserving meters away from the blast that in August forever shattered the sense of safety at Hebrew University enjoyed alike by Arab and Jewish students and Israeli and

international scholars. Among those killed and injured in recent attacks, he counts several friends and acquaintances, including both Arabs and Jews.

Shimon worries for his own safety and for the safety of his son. Even more, Shimon worries that Israelis are somehow becoming numb to the situation, no longer even shocked by the deaths caused by suicide bombers, ignoring as much as possible the destruction and suffering in the territories. The tensions in the air – the fear, the pain, the divisions within Israeli society and between Israelis and Palestinians – seem somehow to have become normal. Like many Israelis, he lives “in the moment” as much as possible, because he feels that any moment could be his last.

Shimon has watched as this summer’s dance of death stalks his family and community, insinuating itself into their dreams, crashing obscenely into their parties, leaving in its wake only anguish, rage, and the echoes of screams. As with Mohammed, I have attempted in conversations with Shimon to support his faith in the possibility of peace – even as those around him are becoming ever more strongly embittered and it becomes harder and harder for him to

speak the word.

I listen to Mohammad’s and Shimon’s questions and worries, not only as a peace

worker, but also as a Jewish woman with anguished – but irrevocable – ties to the Jewish people. I listen also as an American, aware that we, too, are living with the burden of fear. It seems, though, that our leaders are reacting to threats against us by leaping wholeheartedly into the dance of death, rehearsing its next

moves. I worry that we are blind to the rage and hatred being sown in the hearts of children in the Middle East and elsewhere who are now, or in the future will be, caught in the crossfire of wars waged in the name of security. When these young people become the next generation of leaders, how could they not feel as justified in reacting with violence as our leaders do now? From whose example will today’s youngsters – whether living in New York or Nablus, Tel Aviv or Baghdad – learn

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Shimon’s and Mohammed’s perspectives on the conflict in the Middle East are very different from each other, and conversations between them have been difficult at times. But when I listen to them talk about their lives, I see that they are closer together than I would have imagined. They both want the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza to end. They agree that the targeting of civilians is wrong. Both of them sometimes discover themselves to be outsiders in their own communities when they dare to articulate their commitment to peace. They both yearn for better political leaders for all of the people in their region. They both wish America would intervene more effectively to interrupt the cycle of violence. And both desperately hope for a better future for their children.

Listening to Shimon and Mohammed this summer has brought the conflict in their region into my life in an immediate way. Lying under the stars by the lake, I imagine their children with their dark and questioning eyes. They are pleading with us, the adults whose actions are creating their future, to take the long view. What music will be playing when they are old enough to dance?

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Community Histories by Youth in the Middle East

Community Histories by Youth in the Middle East (CHYME), is a project that engages 15 young professionals working with Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian youth in designing and implementing community research projects that will enhance communication among young people from the three areas. The Center is collaborating with the following partners: MASAR (Jordan), Givat Haviva (Israel), the Palestinian House of Friendship (Palestine), and the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis. The first institute was held in October 2001 and the second was scheduled for July 2002. However, because of the curfew in Nablus and much of the West Bank, our Palestinian partners were unable to travel to the United States in July. The Center is very enthusiastic about the project and is happy to report that it is moving forward, with the second institute scheduled for October 27 through November 4, 2002.