



“Soldiers For Peace”

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During secret meetings a group of 120 Israeli and Palestinian fighters forged a unique peace accord. Among them are Israeli officers and Palestinian freedom fighters. They all have blood on their hands but are convinced that only peace can still bring a solution.

"I've seen more Israeli soldiers through the sight of my rifle than in reality", says Khaled Khalidi, freedom fighter of the Palestinian militant movement "Palestinian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)" and deputy of the Palestinian Telephone service "Paltel".

He clears his way through a labyrinth of small alleys with patched houses, built on top of each other, in the Palestinian village of Beit Ur, at the border of the city of Ramallah, where he grew up.

It took Khalidi, now 36 years old, 25 years to lay down his weapons and realize that the aggression in the Middle East does not lead anywhere.

"I was terrified of Israelis, because I knew them only as soldiers", he recalls his youth as a son of a poor Palestinian refugee.

"We didn't have a normal life. There were problems every day. The school was closed because of military incursions, there was house searching and we could hardly move because of the many roadblocks and checkpoints.

I grew up with the stories of my father, who had been dissipated in 1948 from his home in Annabe, near Ramle in what is today Israel.

Actually we blamed the Jews for everything. They were the cause of all evil in our lives and our miserable conditions".

The way he looks today, with his dandy grey trousers, sportive moccasins and his black hair neatly combed to the sides, is misleading, especially for some one who joined a communist youth resistance group at the age of 11.

He explains: " I'm a child of the Palestinian revolution. It was quite normal to join such a movement at an early age. You had to memorize the objectives of the organization. There was no room for your own thoughts or ideas. In the next stage, you learned how to engage in resistance operations. A turning point in the life of every Palestinian boy is when he first experiences a military incursion in his village". Khalidi became the leader of a resistance cell and led many activities . He remains vague about the exact contents of these actions. He describes them as the usual things

Palestinian boys do and this varies from throwing stones at Israeli soldiers to things much worse .

But after the first Intifada (the Palestinian uprising between 1987 and approximately 1993) and many violent acts later Khalidi came to his senses.

"Suddenly it became clear to me that from the time of the establishment of Israel we had been constantly fighting. We lived in a situation of continuous violence, blood shed, death and destruction. Meanwhile, and fifty years later, all terror attacks had not led to peace. Instead they led to renewed waves of aggression and violence. All negotiations between the PLO- and later on the Palestinian Authorities- and the various Israeli governments had proven to be useless. The citizens were wary. They knew that they may suffer much more humiliation and that there is no end to their troubles. I realized that there had to be another way and that as long as we continue to see each other as enemies, there will be no place for negotiations or reconciliation."

History took a different course due to the second Intifada (the second Palestinian uprising in 2000). The Middle East entered into another cycle of turmoil and violence the end of which is not yet in sight.

But Khalidi knows by now that there are Israelis, who think like him; combatants, men with blood on their hands, who killed Palestinians, but came to the conclusion that violence does not solve anything.

About a year ago, with the assistance of a friend, Khalidi came into contact with a group of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian freedom fighters, who call themselves today: "Combattants for Peace".

Khalidi: "I remember the first secret meetings with the Israeli soldiers. When we started telling each other about the violent actions we had joined the atmosphere became very tense. Until today it's hard to believe that now, one year later, we are fighting together for peace".

Khalidi explains why their meetings had to be in secret: "We were not at all sure we could work with the Jews. Moreover times are turbulent and we didn't know how the outside world would react to our initiative. We wanted to be well prepared".

THE OTHER SIDE

Elik Alchanan – reserve officer of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and seven years younger than the Palestinian telephone official – sits casually in jeans and sweatshirt on a terrace of a coffee shop at the Tel Aviv University campus.

Unlike Khalidi, Alhanan was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

He is the descendent of an aristocratic Israeli line of generals, politicians and professors. His grandfather from his father's side was a general in the legendary " Haganah" movement (the underground Jewish military organization that fought for the independence of Israel) and the other grandfather was the Israeli minister of Health.

Alhanan went to the best schools – recently he graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris – and studies today for his major in Hebrew Literature at the Tel Aviv University. It was obvious that he would become an officer in one of the elite units of the IDF: "Maglan"(a special combat unit of the paratroopers).

" I participated in commando operations in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories, with the purpose to trace the terrorists who fired Katiusha missiles on Israel and if necessary liquidate them", Alhanan remembers." These actions were dangerous, but I sometimes felt that our commanders didn't take our safety too seriously. But Like all soldiers of the IDF, I was prepared to fight in order to protect my family back home. My commander said that my army service's conduct was excellent and that I would have a brilliant career in the army".

Then, on September 4, 1997, three suicide bombers of the Hamas movement blew themselves up in Ben Yehuda Street, located in downtown Jerusalem. 181 Israelis were wounded and five were killed, among them Alhanan's 14 year old sister, Smadar and her two friends.

"It changed my life", Alhanan recalls." Of course I was shocked by her sudden death, but I realized that the absurd reality of the occupation was the cause of Smadar's death and nothing else. We in Israel and Palestine had entered into a turmoil in which all concerned – both Israeli and Palestinian – had been deeply hurt and nobody saw a way out anymore. The problem is that Israelis and Palestinians are too preoccupied with themselves and their own suffering. We , the Israelis, cry that the Palestinians do not want peace, because they don't stop the violence caused by their terror organizations. We think that the only way to fight violence is to retaliate. After the death of my sister my commander wanted to send me again to Lebanon. I could take revenge for her death he said. Ridiculous, of course, because the Lebanese people were not involved in Smadar's death and anyhow, what good would revenge do to us? Palestinians do not trust us because, we, continue with military actions and the construction of new outposts and settlements in the West Bank, despite the peace agreements ".

MISSION STATEMENT

Since Smadar's death, Alhanan has been in a regular contact with Palestinians through an Israeli/ Palestinian organization called " Bereaved families". The organization represents a group of bereaved family members of victims of violence in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. This contact has changed his views.

" I am not an activist and not a refusnik (enrolled soldier who refuses service)", he emphasizes.

" I'm convinced that we need our army, but I do not believe in senseless actions with the sole purpose of showing our military superiority to the Palestinians. I believe in mutual actions between Israelis and Palestinians against violence and for a fair and lasting peace".

These are also the objectives of the union which was forged between the 120 fighters of combatants for Peace.

Their program is not new. They call for the establishment of a Palestinian state, the end of the occupation and laying down all arms. But the fact that these ideas come from the mouth of the aggressor himself, is unique for Israel and Palestine.

"This is a special breakthrough in our history and in this time of violence, and despair absolutely necessary", says Avichay Sharon, founder of 'Combatants for peace', during a meeting of the group in the Palestinian city of Annate.

He points at the renewed wave of violence in the area. The list of events seems endless. After the launching of Qassem rockets on Israel by the Islamic Jihad from Gaza, Israel performed several air attacks. Palestinian children were killed. As a reaction a member of the Jihad blew himself up in a pub in Tel Aviv. The result: 9 deaths and many wounded. The Hamas government describes it as self-defense.

Sharon: "In order to solve our conflict you have to be pragmatic. We do not have a tailor-made peace agreement, because we believe that Israelis and Palestinians will only take the possibility of such a document serious if they will dare to trust each other. You cannot enforce peace. Peace has to start from the bottom. Our governments and their experts can agree on the details later".

Sharon is convinced of the success of Combatants for Peace. "People will listen to us, because our voice is unique. It is the voice of their fighter, who is respected for his courage, who knows what violence can do and therefore rejects it. We want to see the other as a fellow human being and partner".

WITHOUT SUPPORT

One of the problems facing the group is mobility. Israelis are not allowed to visit a major part of the Westbank and Palestinians can only get a visiting permit for Israel in exceptional cases. A complicating factor is the separation wall of almost 110 kilometers and the many checkpoints.

Combatants for Peace do not expect support from the Israeli and Palestinian governments, who seems to maintain a policy of fighting or ignoring each other. During a telephone call with a spokesman of the IDF the army seems unaware of this mutiny of its men, and reacts as if he does not care: "Apparently this is a civilian initiative and not military. This does not belong to our competence".

The fundamental Hamas organization which leads the new Palestinian government and is internationally seen as a terrorist movement distanced itself from this previous military group.

Khalidi's cooperation with the peace fighters could be dangerous. Contacts with Israeli soldiers are not popular in Palestine and collaborators are sometimes liquidated or disappear. His actions could also backfire on his work or private life.

But Khalidi is determined to continue: "People like me, in particular, who have seen the results of war very closely, should not remain silent. I have to keep the dialogue

with the Israelis going. They should know that contrary to what their government tells them there is a partner for peace on the other side. This is only the beginning".■