

[Peace & Humanitarian](#)

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Palestinian and Israeli activists on what peace means to them

By [Pip Cook](#)



Eran Nissan (left) is the CEO of Mehazkim, an Israeli progressive movement, and Wasim Almasri, (right) is the director of programmes for the Alliance of the Middle East Peace (ALLMEP)

To mark International Day of Peace on Wednesday 21 September, activists from around the world travelled to Geneva for the annual Peace Talks, to share their experiences and discuss what peace means to them. We met with two activists, Wasim Almasri and Eran Nissan, to hear about their work trying to build peace for a new generation of Palestinians and Israelis.

Peace was never something Wasim Almasri experienced growing up. A third generation Palestinian refugee born in Lebanon, he and his mother fled the civil war in 1983. Raised between Syria and Gaza, his memories of his childhood are fragments; snapshots of his grandmother's vine tree in their village in southern Lebanon, food vendors in Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, the feeling of sand between his toes as he played football barefoot with his cousins in their neighbourhood in Gaza.

He only started thinking about peace when his first child was born. He and his family were still living in Gaza and he began working for the Red Cross, witnessing first hand his city turn

to ashes under the bombs of Israeli forces. Becoming a father and wanting a better future for his daughter is what led him to become a peace activist.

“I got into peacebuilding because it was part of my reality,” Almasri said. “I had my first daughter when I was living in Gaza, and when I moved to the West Bank it was very difficult to see a clear future for the next generation of Palestinians and Israelis.”

“I wanted to focus on my family and imagine that my daughter, when she grows up, will have a platform to speak her truth and to talk about the issues inside our communities and to discuss what she wants to be,” he said. “Because, obviously, in the Middle East it's difficult for her to be a woman, a Palestinian and a Muslim.”

Experiences of conflict and violence were also what drove Eran Nissan towards peacebuilding. Born and raised in Israel, he became a peace activist because of his time in the Israeli military. Mandatory for Israeli males when they turn 18, Nissan watched his two older brothers undertake three years of military service before spending four years in the special forces himself.

“It left me very angry and confused,” said Nissan. “The things that I was sent to do, the things that I did, but also the people that I lost, pushed me into saying that we need to break the cycle.”

“I saw my brothers join the army and lose friends and attend funerals during their military services, and I saw how it affected them,” he said. “I saw this cycle of our generation being sent to kill and be killed.”

Their experiences from both sides of the conflict drove Almasri and Nissan to work towards the shared goal of building a better future for the next generation of Palestinians and Israelis by bringing civil society organisations together to build peace.

As programmes director for the [Alliance for Middle East Peace](#) (ALLMEP), Almasri works with a coalition of over 160 organisations in Palestine and Israel that work towards finding a solution to the conflict. He focuses on amplifying the voice of activists on the ground who can work as “change makers inside their communities and are able to be voices of reason and moderation inside Palestinian and Israeli societies”, particularly when violence erupts.

“I view my job as an opportunity to connect different communities in Palestine and Israel and draw links to common interests between young people about the future of the conflict and the future of their society,” he said. “I try to draw on some of the shared values that they can associate with so we can find a common ground for them to have a conversation where they feel not necessarily equal but at least have the same level of understanding, which can humanise the other side.”

Nissan’s organisation [Mehazkim](#) focuses on how social media can be harnessed to “build political power and promote a progressive agenda inside Israel”, he explained.

“We're building political power around a lot of issues, but the main issue is anti-occupation and pro-peace,” he said. “We work to push more Israelis that are not very political to take a more active role in resisting the occupation and talking and demanding solutions from our politicians.”

Both Nissan and Almasri also work with international organisations such as [B8 of Hope](#), a Geneva-based non-profit that supports peacebuilding Palestinian and Israeli civil society and grassroots initiatives, and aims to amplify their voices for a global audience.

Both men agree that collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian society is essential if there is any hope of building peace in the future.

“It's important to find common ground for discussions between young Palestinians and Israelis, because I feel the majority of them are deviated from the political discussion because of the lack of political progress,” said Almasri.

“On the Palestinian side, there haven't been elections for 15 years. On the Israeli side, we've also seen a lot of the new generation of Israelis being more radicalised and polarised. Because of that, the discussion is dehumanising the other side and it makes it incredibly difficult to create consensus of what we want to rebuild and what we want for the future of Palestinians and Israelis.

“A lot of young Palestinians and Israelis basically share the same interests – employment, health care security, building a family, creating their own businesses. There's a lot of common ground, but it's divided by many different factors and misconceptions about the other side that have been created through our culture over the last 10 or 15 years.”

“But to be very clear, this is an asymmetrical conflict,” Almasri added. “There is an occupation on the ground and Palestinians understand that they're not equal to the Israelis at the same table. But finding that ground to humanise the conflict is important for me and that could happen through creating a shared narrative and understanding that we have a common goal.”

Nissan agreed: “The only way that we can create a sustainable solution is by building trust and cooperation between the two sides, and not only on a human level of friendship and empathy and compassion, but on a political level of a joint struggle of solidarity.”

After having their own lives mired in conflict and violence, Nissan and Almasri share the same goal of building a better world for the next generation.

“The reality in Israel and Palestine can be very depressing and violent and scary,” said Nissan. “But I feel that's where I draw my power and my motivation for my work from. It's something I can do to not be passive and to give others the opportunity to take an active role, and have a sense of purpose and duty.

“I see a lot of people that are hopeless about the future and they think there is no solution. When there is an escalation, in Hebrew they call it a 'cycle.' The terminology is of something deterministic, like it's always going to be like this. We want to break this cycle.”

“A conflict we pass on to our children is a conflict we lost,” he added.

In the face of such complex challenges, both Nissan and Almasri's views of peace are simple.

“Peace is something that we do together, and peace means hope, and peace means justice,” said Nissan.

“It's very difficult for me to leave my children with fear of the unknown, of what tomorrow might look like,” said Almasri. “I'm afraid that history will repeat itself and my kids will go through the same experiences that I did. For me, peace at this moment means to be liberated from these fears and to feel secure about their future and how they're going to go on and build their own lives. This is what peace means to me.”