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Placing peace-making back on the map

By Annette Young

It was a relatively simple exercise. Sonja Rauschutz asked the group of Israelis and Palestinians attending the negotiating skills workshop to write down their vision of life 10 years down the road and then to share their thoughts with a fellow group member.

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"One came up to me, shaking his head and said: 'It's striking, we share the same vision, you know, living in peace, having a normal life,'" recalled Rauschutz, a Vienna-based specialist in mediation.

"His immediate response was to check if he and his counterpart had heard the question right," she said. "Then, he queried if he might have expressed himself wrongly."

Rauschutz recounted the story this week as she sat in the courtyard of the American Colony hotel in East Jerusalem with Israeli lawyer Moty Cristal and Issa Kassissieh, a policy analyst with the Palestine Liberation Organization's Negotiations Affairs Department.

For more than two years, in a bleak landscape and during a time when the phrase "peace talks" distinctly went out of fashion, a small group of Israelis and Palestinians - including Cristal and Kassissieh along with Palestinian lawyer Nisreen Haj-Ahmad - have discreetly met for negotiation-training sessions.

Later this month, the group - which began with five participants and now has 30 - will meet in Boston for another round of training sessions organized by the Conflict Management Group (CMG) and the Vienna Conflict Management Partners, which includes Rauschutz. The CMG is a small nonprofit organization founded by Harvard Law School Prof. Roger Fisher, seen by many as a guru in the field of negotiation.

Now with the road map gathering steam, Kassissieh admitted there was "more responsibility" for those taking part in the program: "It is the only game in town and we have to take all these techniques and lessons we have learned and apply them to the current reality. Besides, we need to try to convince the Israelis that together we can change the face of the Middle East."

In the meantime, Cristal adamantly denied that even in the darkest moments of the last few years, he had ever lost hope. "We all believed that we would resume talks at some point in the future," he said.

The idea of offering negotiating-skills training first arose in September, 2000 when Cristal - then working with the negotiations management team at Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office - met with friend and former Harvard pal Rauschutz in a tapas bar in New York.

Rauschutz was then working with Fisher at the Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard Law School, and she and Cristal talked about the need for negotiations training for both senior and junior members from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We talked about how one should be trained to focus on the process itself much more than on the content," she told Anglo File this week, "such as [the necessity] of separating the brainstorming phase from the decision-making phase."

Rauschutz began to work with Fisher to contact



BUILDING BRIDGES: (From left) Sonja Rauschutz, Moty Cristal and Issa Kassissieh.

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Israelis and Palestinians, offering them the opportunity to learn such skills jointly, in an academic setting. The first meeting was held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in April 2001, and with funding from the U.S. State Department, the Austrian Government and some anonymous donors, successive meetings were held in Vienna, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Ramallah. And each time, more and more people joined.

"As Prof. Fisher often says, 'peace is not a piece of paper' but it is how you deal with the differences afterward, such as conflicting interests over land, water, jobs or sewerage," said Rauschutz. "Our mission is simply to create a network of negotiators."

The organizers believe the failure with negotiations so far derives from the use of "positional bargaining" as opposed to joint problem-solving. As a result, the program has been developed not as a forum for actual negotiations, but rather as a means of drawing together a group of professionals from both sides who wish to improve their skills. Each attends in his or her private capacity, and the participants are all mainly people who have been involved in negotiations and/or are quite likely to be in the future.

The group is mainly in their 30s and early 40s and, increasingly, from different professional backgrounds: military, government and communications. This time around, the Palestinian delegation will include a person from the private sector while Cristal will bring along people "who are less passionate about peace including those affiliated with the center of the political spectrum."

Cristal and Kassissieh talked of how the most interesting discussions often take place in corridors during breaks, with participants from both sides using the opportunity to sound out ideas and hear each other's views. "At some sessions, you'd even see Palestinians and Israelis joining coalitions on a certain position," said Cristal. "It's such a free environment intellectually."

As for the Palestinians, the meetings have offered an opportunity to see Israelis "beyond being just soldiers with guns, or oppressors," said Kassissieh.

But is the mood in favor of negotiation going to spread throughout both communities when such opportunities are geared toward the professional classes? "If we are considered to be the elite, that's okay," responded Cristal. "The elite will make the breakthrough since the masses are being directed toward confrontation."

"I come from the street," added Kassissieh. "I see myself as a messenger and our role is to be a bridge between the leadership and the street. Look, this forum proves that we can still communicate with each other when both sides are bleeding. We are marginalized at this stage but it's time for the moderate people to take the lead and mobilize others."

Both men see the sessions as an investment which "will be returned within the next five to seven years" as personal connections are made and skills are developed.

"We are close to peace but we need the political will," said Cristal. "I really do believe that our generation will not only see peace, but will be the ones to make the peace. But it will be a marathon."

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