

## A Growing Schism

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*Coexistence groups reeling in wake of war that pitted Israeli Jews against Israeli Arabs.*

**Stewart Ain - Staff Writer**

Israeli Jews escaped the barrage of Katyusha rockets by huddling in bomb shelters often equipped with cable TV. Israeli Arabs just a few miles away had no shelters, no hospitals and often had difficulty getting food.

Israeli Jews cheered on the Israel Defense Forces, hoping they would inflict a decisive blow against Hezbollah terrorists. Israeli Arabs prayed for the war to stop so that it would end the suffering among the civilians of Israel and Lebanon.

The number of Israeli civilians killed was 43 — split almost equally between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. Another 116 Israeli soldiers also died, and at least 789 people in Lebanon were reportedly killed during the 4 ½ weeks of fighting.

The war in Lebanon had such a traumatic effect — exacerbating societal divisions and heightening tensions between Israeli Jews and Arabs — that the leaders of Jewish-Arab coexistence groups had to first heal themselves before they could begin healing others.

“Within the coexistence community there has been a lot of angst,” said Ami Nahshon, president and CEO of the New York-based Abraham Fund Initiatives, a non-partisan organization that since 1989 has worked to advance coexistence, equality and cooperation among Israel’s Jewish and Arab citizens. “The Abraham Fund has been working very hard to do almost family counseling.”

He said that after the Israeli Arab riots of October 2000 in which 12 Israeli Arabs, one Palestinian Arab and one Jew were killed, “it took a significant amount of time for the coexistence movement to begin to take hold again in Israeli society. ... We learned that [the strains] can’t be allowed to fester. We have to get first responders out there doing their work of holding society together. And if they themselves are paralyzed, they need to work through their issues and get back to the work of healing.”

Eli Rekhess, director of the Center for Jewish-Arab Cooperation and a senior consultant to the Abraham Fund, said during a conference call last week that the war had widened the “divide and tensions between Jews and Arabs. ... From the Arab public we continue hearing harsh statements against Israeli policy and in support of [Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan] Nasrallah.”

“You hear harsh voices in the Jewish community too — expressions of hatred that had not been heard before,” Rekhess added.

Hanna Swaid, a member of the Knesset from the Arab party Hadash, said he was

particularly upset about the suffering of civilians in Lebanon.

“The people in Lebanon are humans and Arabs like me, and I don’t want my state to be involved in massacres, just like I don’t want soldiers killed in the war,” he said.

Swaid added that the vitriolic comments heard from Israeli Arabs do not reflect “disloyalty to the state or hatred to Jewish society. We would like Israel to be a normal state that lives in peace with its Arab neighbors. That is our aspiration.”

Nadia Hilous, another Israeli Arab member of the Knesset who is a member of the Labor Party, said she had called on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to nominate a minister of welfare “to give support to citizens and civil society. ... There are a lack of shelters [for Israel Arabs], games for the children and in some cases food.

“Sadly, I found myself since the beginning of the war at funerals. I saw Jews and Arabs crying together. It was very sad. We have to think about the day after. We have to strengthen civil society and not dividing us is the key to getting through this. We must move towards equality and coexistence for all citizens.”

Amnono Be’eri-Sulitzeanu, executive director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives-Israel, pointed out that the entire “premise of coexistence in Israel is under attack” because of the war.

“Arabs refused to take sides and chose to condemn the war, which generated strong response from the Jewish side,” he said. “So we launched a campaign calling on both sides for tolerance.”

Its ad, which was co-sponsored by the New Israel Fund and ran in the Hebrew, English and Arabic press in Israel, said in bold letters: “Israel is Everyone’s Home. Together We Will Get Through the Crisis. Together We Will Continue to Live Here.” It went on to say that Arabs and Jews share a common destiny and “must demonstrate responsibility and mutual respect.”

Another group that fosters equality and understanding between Jews and Arabs, the Givat Haviva Educational Foundation, took a different approach in its Internet ad. It read: “How to Deal with Hatred. ... Now more than ever, peaceful coexistence between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs must be fostered. At Givat Haviva, the hope is that by beginning with children, we will see it bloom in adults.”

Hiam Simon, the group’s executive director, said the ad was more for informational purposes rather than solicitation, but he said it brought in several thousand dollars in donations.

“Our goal is to use this time to begin to close the gap between the elements of Israeli society because the gap has become so much more visible,” he said.

Simon said it was “hard to say” what impact harsh statements by Israeli Arabs will have on those who have contributed in the past.

A poll conducted July 31 and Aug. 1 by Tel Aviv University’s Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research found that 68 percent of Israeli Arabs believed Israel’s war in Lebanon was unjustified. Another 79 percent believed Israel’s air war also unjustified. And 56 percent said they believed Nasrallah’s declarations were credible, while 53 percent found Israel’s military statements not credible. Similar polls of Israeli Jews showed that the vast majority supported the war.

Simon said he hopes to get donations from “citizens of good conscience around the world, Zionists here in the U.S. who want to see Israel as a just society, as a Jewish state that treats all of its citizens equally. .... Those people who are predisposed to improving society will continue to contribute, and those more ethnocentric will circle the wagons and think of themselves first.”

**Rami Nuseir, executive director of the New York chapter of Ishmael & Isaac, a Cleveland-based group dedicated to uniting American Palestinians and American Jews through joint fundraising and awareness projects, said the war “absolutely is going to make it more difficult to raise money.”**

**“We have to convince the Arab and Jewish sides to talk to each other and to re-establish trust,” he said. “The war has added more challenges to what we are trying to do. The dislike between the Arab and Jewish community is very serious here and having the war and the violence certainly has given those who don’t like our work a stronger reason to challenge us.**

**“We want to find moderates on both sides who believe in healing and bridging,” Nuseir added.**

**Anita Gray, the group’s national president, said it is now raising money to be divided evenly among the Lebanese Red Cross, Mercy Corps (an American organization working in the West Bank and Gaza) and the United Jewish Community’s Israel Emergency Campaign.**

**“People who donate to us are people who feel badly about what is happening and don’t want to take sides in this war,” she said. “These are people who have seen enough suffering on both sides. We don’t expect to raise a huge amount of money. What is more important to us is the fact you have a group of Jews, Arabs and Lebanese Christians who are raising money together. This is a statement we would like the world to see.”**