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« **It's Time** » (Tel Aviv) : Can this conference inspire a new Israeli-Palestinian peace movement ?

dimanche 30 juin 2024, par [ABU SARAH Aziz](#), [INON Maoz](#), [ZIV Oren](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 29 juin 2024).

For activists Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah, reviving a joint peace effort that learns from past obstacles is 'the biggest antidote to extremism.'



Maoz Inon (left) and Aziz Abu Sarah (right), Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. (Uri Levy)

Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah are an unlikely pair. Inon, 49, is an Israeli tourism entrepreneur and the founder of Abraham Hostels. He [lost both of his parents](#), who lived on Kibbutz Netiv HaAsara, during the Hamas-led assault on October 7.

Abu Sarah, 44, is a Palestinian peace activist, journalist, and tourism entrepreneur who founded MEJDI Tours, and a resident of East Jerusalem (and a [former +972 contributor](#)). When Aziz was 9 years old, his older brother Taiseer was arrested and held in prison for nearly a year ; shortly after his release, Taiseer died of internal injuries he sustained while being tortured in prison.

The two met after Abu Sarah wrote to Inon in the days after October 7, expressing his condolences for Inon's murdered family. Since then, they have been leading a personal and public campaign against revenge and in favor of reconciliation. They have spoken in media interviews, conferences, and home circles, held an [open conversation](#) at a TED conference, and met with diplomats and, recently, [with the Pope](#).

Together with dozens of organizations, Inon is now leading an event titled "[It's Time — The Great Peace Conference](#)," which will take place on July 1 in Tel Aviv, and is expected to be the largest formal left-wing gathering in recent decades. Delegations representing vast swaths of Israeli and Palestinian society will be in attendance, with artists, politicians, and intellectuals expected to speak. The event will screen a video message from Abu Sarah, who is currently abroad.

In an interview with +972 and Local Call, Inon and Abu Sarah discussed the new peace process they are promoting, the goals of the conference, and how they plan to convince their respective general publics to support their work. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Israeli security forces guard while Muslim worshippers arrive for the last Friday prayers of the holy month of Ramadan, in Jerusalem's Old City, April 5, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

[+972 and Local Call] Where did the idea for the conference come from ?

Inon : It all started in Geneva in March. Aziz and I were there with 70 other Palestinians and Israelis. We wrote a charter for a common future and started thinking about a road map to achieve peace between the river and the sea. This is the first step, to make the calls for peace and to build legitimacy for the peace process and for us — the leaders of the future.

The conference is the first public event in Israeli society in which Jewish and Palestinian citizens will come out publicly and begin a peace process that derives from the people. This is the first time, at least from what I remember, that more than 50 civil society organizations are working together to build the infrastructure for such a process. Since we aspire to build legitimacy, it will take place in the Menorah Hall and not in demonstrations in the streets. This is just the first event in a series of events we plan to organize.

We have seen protests against the war in recent months, as well as demonstrations calling for a ceasefire. What is the difference between that and the conference ?

Inon : We are not against anyone ; the demonstrations are important, and some of us participate in them. But this is not a demonstration. We're changing the framing and talking more about hope and the future. The idea is to build a coalition and work together.

Abu Sarah : I look at when I was a child in East Jerusalem, and, honestly, I never saw or heard from the Israeli peace movement, and there are Israelis who have never seen a Palestinian peace movement. The inability to see these movements has established a perception that there is no one on the other side who wants to bring peace, who cares about human rights, and so on. This event, which is making a lot of noise, will have thousands of people say they want to live together, to find a way to end the bloodshed, and to work with partners on the other side. This declaration itself is very strong and will be an important message to the Palestinian side.

This is something new. The only way we will have an impact is with a sort of unity, even if we are not exactly the same and there are differences here and there. A meeting of thousands of people will not end the bloodshed and will not bring peace tomorrow, but it is an important step. And if we continue on this path, and organizations learn to work together, everyone's power will double.

Israelis take part in a protest calling for the end of the war and the release of the hostages, as they march through the streets of Tel Aviv, May 09, 2024. (Arie Leib Abrams/Flash90)

One of the major obstacles to a ceasefire is the Israeli government, which refuses to make a deal. Is the event also a message to the government, meant to pressure them to agree ?

Inon : That's a good question, but I won't answer it directly. We have been kidnapped by extremists, on both sides, and those extremists thrive on bloodshed, revenge, and killing. Now is our time to draw up an alternative — ideological and political — that will change the discourse, and that's what we're doing.

I lost both my parents and so many childhood friends on October 7. I felt angry, and a desire to punish and take revenge on the Israeli government, which repeatedly promised my parents security and protection. After every cycle of bloodshed, they continued to make this promise to us. Of course, they failed, and my parents paid the price. But I decided to forgive them. I'm not interested in

punishing them, they're irrelevant to me.

We will open the event with a reading of the poem 'Revenge' by Taha Muhammad Ali. [The speaker of the poem initially imagines how he will take revenge on his father's killer]. This beautiful poem ends by saying that the revenge on his father's killer will be to ignore him as he passes by on the street. In the same way, I decided to ignore the government. They are part of the past. I prefer to focus on the future, not on one government or politician or another. Whoever wants to join, the door will always be open. Even to those who now choose violence.

Abu Sarah : I don't think many attendees support the Israeli government's policies or what Hamas has done. If the event had focused on either, it would have been bad ; we could focus on governments that have failed for decades and got us to where we are today, or we can focus on how to move forward and work together despite those obstacles.

One of the things that Israeli governments have been saying for decades is that there is no Palestinian partner on the other side. You can argue and yell that they're wrong, or you can show that it's bullshit, that there's a partner, that we're here. The existence of Maoz and me is the greatest threat to the extremists, who claim that war, bombing, and killing are the only way. We are demonstrating what the alternative is, what the road to peace will look like. When people find a meeting point, it's the biggest antidote to extremism.



Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah meeting Pope Francis in Verona, Italy, May 18, 2024. (Vatican Media)

You call for making an "All for All" deal, meaning the release of all Palestinian prisoners and all Israeli hostages. At the beginning of the war, this call was heard in Israel as well, but it has since been marginalized.

Inon : We have to go back to the 'All for All' deal that was on the table. Prisoners can play a significant role in reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Abu Sarah : If you look at who are the people who can speak on behalf of the Palestinians, who have power and legitimacy, they are all prisoners. I understand that people say, "But how is it possible, given what they did ?" But in conflict, everyone involved has blood on their hands, and they are the people who can legitimize an agreement that will last, as in Northern Ireland and South Africa. Without the prisoners, there would be no agreement.

[Former U.S. President] Barack Obama said we have to admit that everyone is to blame for not acting before October 7. When there is a ceasefire, we don't want to say, "Everything is good" and not do anything else, like before October. We don't want to say that the status quo is sustainable ; we hope to push for the status quo not to be maintained.

I was in Northern Ireland earlier this month. It seems that before the Good Friday Agreement there, there was a feeling on all sides that they had had enough. In Israel, there is a feeling that the public, or at least some of it, is still not tired of war and violence, and perhaps even the opposite, that people want to continue with all their might.

Inon : There was a poll conducted by “aChord” showing that 74 percent of Israeli citizens support a diplomatic agreement. The poll shows that maybe we’re not reading the map correctly. Besides, no one is currently offering an alternative, and that’s where we come in. For the first time in many years, we are proposing a solution to the unsustainable status quo and the ongoing bloodshed. That’s our mission.

Jews attend a prayer for the return of the Israeli hostages held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, at the Western Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem, March 21, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Abu Sarah : I worked a lot in Northern Ireland. I met soldiers and members of organizations, police officers and military personnel. At some point, they realized that peace was coming. They understood that what they did would only prolong the war and suffering, and they saw friends and family paying the price for what they had done. It took time, but once the understanding of the depth of impact on families and lives was internalized, it helped create the transformation.

To this day, the society in Northern Ireland is very fragmented. About 92 percent of schools are segregated. Nevertheless, they understood that even though the Good Friday Agreement was not perfect, the alternative was much worse. Everyone I met there said it wasn’t the agreement they dreamed of, but that it was better than the alternative. We need to get the people here to see this too.

Dialogue meetings between Palestinians and Israelis have been held since the 1990s, and there has been much criticism of them, including that they maintain the imbalance of power and serve only the strong side.

Abu Sarah : I’m a little more cynical than Maoz. I was very critical of the idea of “people to people” work. I felt it wasn’t enough, that there was a lot of talk but not much happened. This is something the peace movement needs to be careful about.

I remember in the late 1990s, when I came to the peace movement, there was a lot of hope. I remember a huge meeting of Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza in 2000, before everything exploded. But that peace movement eventually delegitimized itself, and that’s why, as Maoz said, one of our goals is to create legitimacy ourselves.

In the past, they were unable to advance beyond dialogue. What’s different now, at least for some, is that there’s more than just talk. You see it in movements like Standing Together, Combatants for Peace, Rabbis for Human Rights. You see that it’s not just dialogue, but also working together, building stronger bridges, seeing what is needed and how we can fill those needs. This movement is much stronger, and it learns from the past.

Inon : We are dreaming, but with a plan – to make peace by 2030. We need to constantly check that our actions are effective. This is exactly the formula to create hope, imagine a better future together, and make that future a reality. We have already been very effective and we are growing. The dialogue is just one phase of the plan. The goal is not dialogue, but peace.

Left-wing activists protest against the war, calling for ceasefire in Gaza, in Tel Aviv, January 18, 2024. (Itai Ron/Flash90)

Regarding a peace plan toward 2030 : do you intend to publish a concrete plan, which includes steps and demands from the parties ?

Abu Sarah : This is not the time to say exactly where the borders will be ; in my opinion, that was never the problem. The problem was mustering the will, a critical mass that would support an

agreement. The problem was that people hijacked the political process. In the field of ideas there is, for example, A Land for All [which promotes a confederation], the Geneva Initiative [which promotes two states], and more. Ideas are not what's missing.

Do you intend to deal with core issues in dispute, such as the right of return ?

Abu Sarah : I think we will look at all the issues. The basic principle we are talking about is equality, dignity, and security. It doesn't matter if that's in one country or two. There will be no peace with occupation or injustice. We are delusional if we think it is possible to talk about peace and not talk about all these issues. The question is what are the basic human values on which we agree.

People across the world have expressed their sympathy and support for your project. Do you think that at this point in time, the project can be accepted here as well, given the current political situation — in Gaza, in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in Israel, and in light of all the criticism of the peace process in the past ?

Abu Sarah : I think so. People are still very pragmatic, despite the pain and anger. One of my dearest friends from Gaza, 50 members of his family were killed — uncles, aunts, cousins, everyone is gone. I wanted to talk about this friend's story at an event, so I asked Maoz how he felt about doing so. He didn't even hesitate, and replied : "One hundred percent, that's what we need."

The reason you see polls in which many Palestinians respond against peace, or expressing support for violence or for Hamas, is because of the lack of vision or political process. Once there is a vision, that people see that there is another way, it will change. That's why I said we are the biggest threat to the extremists. Once a road is provided, it will be adopted by the vast majority of Palestinians.

In the Bible, in the book of Proverbs, it says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." And in the absence of a political vision for a peace movement, in the absence of joint work, the only alternative is violence. I have no doubt that Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza will support the movement if they see something real.

Oren Ziv

P.-S.

- +972. June 29, 2024 :
<https://www.972mag.com/jerusalem-flag-march-2024/>

A version of this article first appeared in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Oren Ziv is a photojournalist, reporter for Local Call, and a founding member of the Activestills photography collective.
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these

events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering : Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#) ? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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