

Meet the Israeli and Palestinian teenage girls risking jail time to be friends – and to march for peace in the region

Every time Palestinian Yara Amayra and Israeli Noa Gur Golan meet up, the pals are breaking the law – but their friendship is worth the risk



By Steven Davidson

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The Two Women Israeli and Palestinian That Break The Law Every Time They Meet. Friends Yara Amayra, 19, and Noa Gur Golan, 20, at the cafe in Ramallah. (Photo: Steven Davidson)

Every time friends Yara Amayra, 19, and Noa Gur Golan, 20, see each other, they break the law. Their most recent encounter was no different.

Before Christmas, Noa had entered Ramallah, an illegal act for Israelis like herself, to visit her friend for the first time in more than six months. Amidst all the violence and despair regularly flooding the news, Yara had one immediate topic in mind when Noa arrived.

“I need to bring you to campus tomorrow,” she exclaimed. “There are, like, 10 cute boys you’ve got to see.”



The i newsletter cut through the noise

In a vacuum, there’s nothing extraordinary about Yara and Noa’s late-teenage friendship – they gossip about crushes, groan of annoying brothers and giggle through stories of late-night embarrassment.

And that’s what’s most profound.

Noa, after all, hadn’t ever met a Palestinian before she was 16. And for Yara, Noa “was the first Israeli I actually spoke to, not a soldier where I was like, ‘here’s my ID, don’t arrest me please!’”

A herculean task

Although the two are separated by less than 30 miles, walls and laws made this meet-up among friends, legally and logistically speaking, a herculean task. Yara, a Palestinian resident of the West Bank, can’t go to Israel without a permit, and Noa, an Israeli, can’t, by Israeli law, visit Yara in Area A, the 18 per cent of the West Bank fully administered by the Palestinian Authority.

Both grew up in open-minded families, but without personal interaction, Noa felt “tension” seeing Arabs on the bus, and Yara struggled when the only Israelis she met were soldiers preventing her from visiting the sea. It was only when Noa attended an international high school in Italy that she met a Palestinian.

“I realised, ‘Wow, I actually don’t know anything about the conflict. I don’t know anything about where I live,’” said Noa.



Palestinian youth sit facing Israeli troops after a house belonging to a Palestinian accused of killing an Israeli soldier a few months ago was blown up in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on December 15, 2018. (Photo: Getty)

After returning to Israel, Noa was asked to give a speech for a planned March for Peace. She demanded she do the speech with a Palestinian girl, however, and was put in touch with Yara, whose aunt was involved in the march.

Yara and Noa met for the first time when they marched together in Area C of the West Bank, the area containing IDF military zones and Israeli settlements but also some roads that can be used by both Israelis and Palestinians.

“We didn’t even really talk about [our backgrounds or the conflict]” remarked Noa. “It was just so normal.”

Jail bird

In their joint speech in front of thousands, they called for people to stop thinking of the situation as a “conflict between nations,” but rather as a “conflict between humans.”

The march was to finish in Jerusalem, where Yara couldn’t legally go. So Noa’s mother smuggled Yara in the back of their car – their first lawbreaking endeavour of friendship.

In the months that followed, Yara and Noa continued to talk online. Through emojis and LOLs, they largely discussed all the normal stuff teenagers do. But they also occasionally spoke about Noa’s impending decision – whether to refuse her mandatory IDF service.

World focus

When US President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital — a key issue to resolve in any final agreement — Palestinian officials said the US was no longer a viable partner in peace talks.

Since March, Gazans have protested at the Israeli border fence, with over 150 Palestinians killed, thousands injured, and one IDF soldier killed by Hamas sniper fire. Heavy rocket exchange flared up between Gaza and Israel in November, which ended in a truce.

Earlier this month, the Israeli military temporarily sealed Ramallah’s entrances after Palestinian shootings left two soldiers and a three-month-old baby dead, leading to an eruption of violence.

And with both governments expected to pander to hardliners in approaching elections, the prospect of any kind of political breakthrough appears distant.

Though aspiring to be a fighter pilot since she was little, Noa’s newfound friendships with Palestinians prompted a moral dilemma. Denied an exemption on conscientious grounds, Noa decided to publicly refuse to serve in the military, spending 98 days in military prison for doing so.

“You shouldn’t have to go to prison because you don’t want to point a gun at someone,” said Yara to Noa. “It’s so not fair.”

She began to cry.

“I love you.”

Risking it all

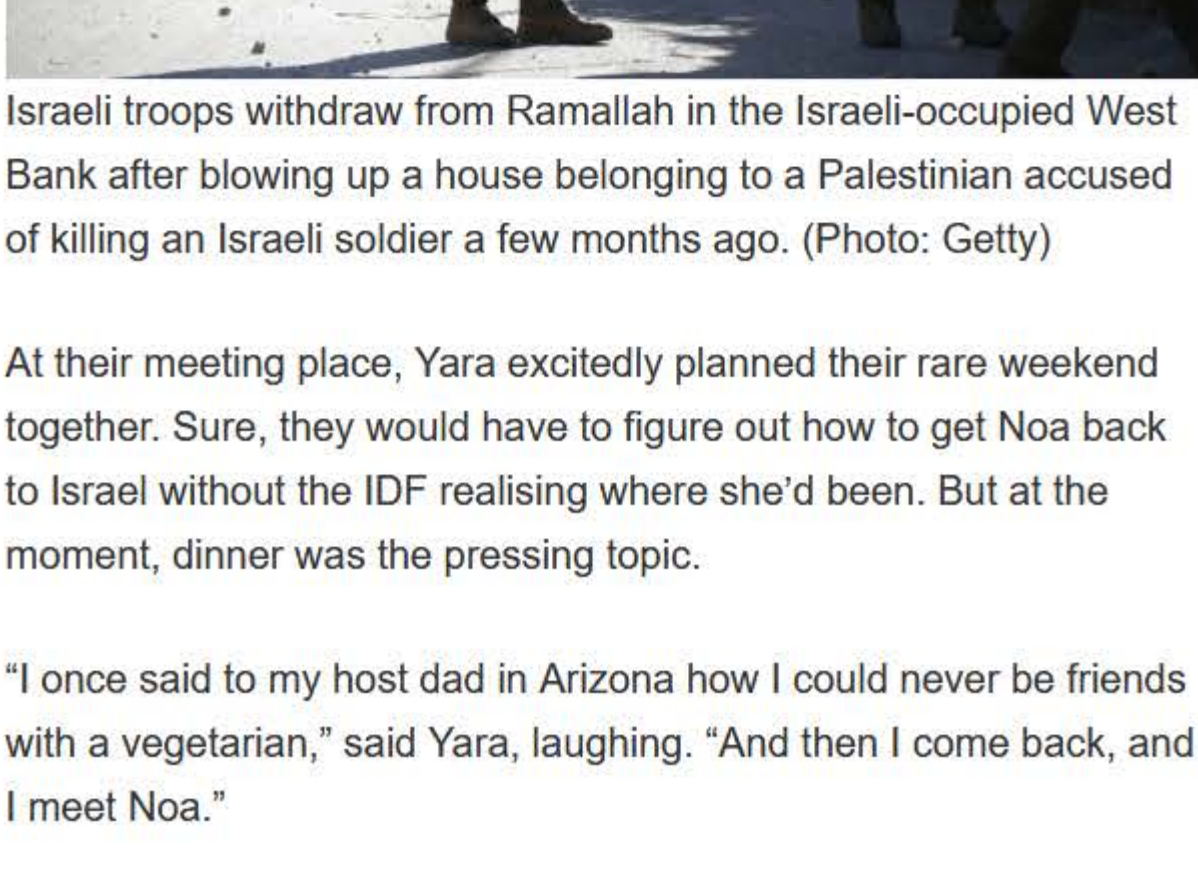
With Yara unable to receive a permit to go to Israel, any plans to meet necessitate further law-breaking.

“At first, I felt tense, like I lost control,” said Noa of going to the off-limits Palestinian areas. “But I then realised there was no reason to.”

At the wall that separates Israel from the West Bank, the two cried and hugged. They spray-painted on it what the wall had tried to make impossible: “Noa + Yara.”

Yara described her vision for a future with equal rights and access for everyone.

“We need to know each other as human beings. Nothing will change if we don’t,” she said.



Israeli troops withdraw from Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank after blowing up a house belonging to a Palestinian accused of killing an Israeli soldier a few months ago. (Photo: Getty)

At their meeting place, Yara excitedly planned their rare weekend together. Sure, they would have to figure out how to get Noa back to Israel without the IDF realising where she’d been. But at the moment, dinner was the pressing topic.

“I once said to my host dad in Arizona how I could never be friends with a vegetarian,” said Yara, laughing. “And then I come back, and I meet Noa.”

“What is worse – that I’m an Israeli, or that I’m a vegetarian?” asked Noa.

“Probably that you’re vegetarian.”