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Returning From Gaza War in Despair, Army Vet Created Israeli-Palestinian Incubator

Israeli army vet Ohad Elhelo returned from battle in despair, began lecturing about the conflict, stressing need for immediate change. Some lectures went viral, and he set up incubator OGS: Our Generation Speaks

Eliran Rubin Published on 25.05.2017 | 24.04.2018 Follow



The OGS incubator in Boston. Credit: Rana Abu Farha

The order to report for reserves during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 caught Ohad Elhelo at a very inconvenient time.

Just six months before, he had received a dream scholarship: a million shekels (about \$280,000) to study for a bachelor's degree in economics at Brandeis University in Boston. The scholarship is awarded once a year by the Abraham Fund to two students, a Jew and an Arab, with leadership potential and the ability to possibly influence the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, Elhelo's plan to promote coexistence was forced to wait for the fighting to end.

"I returned from Operation Protective Edge in despair," Elhelo says, speaking by phone from his home in Boston. A Palestinian child doesn't care whose missile hit his house, just that he has no house any more, he pointed out. But mainly he realized that salvation wasn't going to come from politicians, because there is no leadership on either side.

So he thought to create a meeting of minds that didn't involve politicians.

Elhelo began to lecture about the conflict and his insights from the battlefield, stressing the need for immediate change. Some of his lectures went viral, and in 2015 he took his idea to the next stage, setting up OGS: Our Generation Speaks, a startups incubator for Israelis and Palestinians.

While some organizations try to bring different communities together, his concept was to build something together that would serve the communities afterwards, Elhelo explains.

In no time Elhelo had built a team and pulled in investors, including Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots football team, and Aron Ain, CEO of Kronos. To date he's raised \$4 million for the project, which is also supported by Brandeis University and the international accelerator MassChallenge.

Imad Telhami, CEO of Babcom Centers, which runs call centers, is on the OGS board. He explains why he joined. "When people get up in the morning and have a common project, they focus on each other's strong points and on things they can get done together. The obstacles fall away. In my vision, peace will come from joint economic actions."

The incubator's first "class" began a year ago. Out of 300 applications submitted by Israeli and Palestinian applicants, 70 passed the initial screening and were invited to interviews in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Haifa, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Finally 22 were selected. "The only candidates we did not meet face-to-face were the interviewees from Gaza. We had to make Skype calls," says Elhelo.

They have roughly equal numbers of Israelis and Palestinians, men and women; recently they decided that the team, board of directors, mentors and investors will be composed equally of Palestinians and Israelis.

Each entrepreneur is given a mentor, usually the founder or CEO of a big company. OGS has a wrinkle rarely found among other accelerators and incubators: It will accept ideas still in the briefcase, as they say here, while most incubators will only let in existing companies.

Elhelo, originally from Ashdod, runs the program jointly with Sinan Abu Shanab, originally from Bethlehem. They met in Boston in 2013, after Abu Shanab stayed in the city after was taking part in a student exchange program between Al Quds University and Brandeis.

"I bring a Palestinian perspective to the venture," he says.



Ohad Elhelo and Sinan Abu Shanab from the OGS incubator in Boston Credit: David J. Weinstein

Going after Bedouin genetic disease

The first round of OGS resulted in three projects. The first is a non-profit organization called Genesis, a social-technological enterprise to solve the problem of genetic diseases in the Bedouin population in Israel's south. The

project, established by seven of the 22 participants in the round, had three people on board, a Bedouin and two Jewish women (one observant, one secular).

It is reasonable to assume that, like the meeting between Elhelo and Abu Shanab, the initiators of the project – Yasmeeen Abu-Fraiha, Maria Deichel and Naomi Avraham, wouldn't have met otherwise.

The rate of hereditary disease in Israel's Bedouin is 10 times greater than that of the general population. Abu-Fraiha, a doctor at Soroka hospital in Be'er Sheva, was the project's initiator. Hereditary disease because of inbreeding is also common in Gaza and the West Bank, she says.

The Israeli Health Ministry provides some genetic tests for married couples, but they're not mandatory and the Bedouins tend not to do them, whether because of floating mistrust or inaccessibility, though over 100 genetic diseases are known among the Negev population. "95% of Bedouin women who do these tests do so only after a sick child is born," says Abu-Fraiha. "We want to prevent them from having that first sick child."

How? By having them go to schools, mosques and community centers, offering the tests there, and building a genetic database for the Bedouin.

Another incubator startup, operating out of Ramallah, is Qual.IT, which supplies software quality testing for Israeli companies. This has seven partners: two Israelis, two Israeli Arabs and three Palestinians, one from Gaza. The venture has exactly one customer so far. The hope is to use the Israeli marketplace as a springboard to the rest of the world.

What's it like to work with Israelis? "It's a life-changer," says the Gazan, Mahmoud, who declines to disclose his surname. "It was tough for me at first, because the only thing I knew about you is army uniforms. I didn't know a thing about life and culture in Israel and am sure you don't

know about ours. Gradually we got to know one another and we realized that this program is a key to change. Maybe we can't resolve the conflict now, but if more and more Israelis and Palestinians get to know one another, we'll make it."

A third incubator venture is Mvpeer, with six parents – three Israelis and three Palestinians. The company has four employees, of whom two are founders. The development team is in Ramallah and the company is run from Jerusalem. The company supplies MVP (minimum viable product) to young startups – which in English means it helps them develop their first products.

The West Bank has plenty of computer science grads and programmers, but unemployment is over 40%, says Daniel Shoshani, a partner in Mvpeer. He too attests that when it comes to business, the conflict vanishes: "When an Israeli entrepreneur talks with a Palestinian development manager, a new way for the two peoples to meet is created. We believe Ramallah could become a little Tel Aviv. Connecting the Palestinians to Startup Nation could be a terrific growth driver."

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