

Israelis and Palestinians Remember the Slain, Home Alone or Online En Masse

With Israel's cemeteries closed, Memorial Day mourning had to adapt to the coronavirus lockdown. An alternative ceremony bringing together Israelis and Palestinians attracted 170,000 people online.



By David M. Halbfinger

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JERUSALEM — Civil-defense sirens sounded at 8 p.m. to mark the start of Israel's solemn Memorial Day observance, but unlike in ordinary years, when the moment is marked by a sudden halt to traffic and an abrupt quieting of nightlife, Monday night's remembrance of fallen soldiers or victims of terrorism came with most of the country already on lockdown.

At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, spoke before a small coterie of socially distanced troops and officials and sought to console those Israelis who were mourning alone, at home, rather than being “wrapped in the embrace of those who love them.”

Graveside gatherings on Memorial Day are a binding ritual in a country where wars and conflict have touched nearly everyone, but Israel's cemeteries were ordered closed to avoid crowds and prevent the spread of the coronavirus. “Every Israeli home will be a memorial this year,” Mr. Rivlin said, adding: “We will embrace you, beloved families, from afar, our hearts with yours.”

The coronavirus was a boon, however, to an alternative ceremony that for 15 years has drawn together bereaved families from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With Israelis in a studio in Tel Aviv and Palestinians speaking from Ramallah, on the West Bank, the live-streamed event reached its biggest audience yet, organizers said: At least 170,000 people watched worldwide on more than 60 different online channels like YouTube and Facebook. A single Arabic page had 20,000 viewers, a Hebrew one 22,000. By contrast, last year's event in Tel Aviv drew 10,000 attendees and 20,000

online.

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John Lyndon, director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, called it the biggest joint Israeli-Palestinian event in history.



Names of fallen Israeli soldiers projected on the walls of Jerusalem's Old City. Ahmad Gharabli/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Afterward, breakout sessions over Zoom, the videoconferencing app, allowed people to pose questions to Israelis and Palestinians who have suffered losses over the years — though at least one interloper hijacked the chat feature of one such session, profanely denouncing the participants as “terrorists” and forcing it to be shut down.

Nickolay Mladenov, the United Nations Middle East envoy, praised the participants in the alternative ceremony for proceeding despite the pandemic. “We’ve seen

cooperation, we've seen confrontation, but what we really need to see is Palestinians and Israelis coming together," he said in a taped address. "Not just to fight the virus, but to fight for peace. And fighting for peace perhaps may be even more difficult."

The roster of speakers at the joint ceremony — which was sponsored by Combatants for Peace and the Parents Circle Families Forum, two Israeli-Palestinian organizations — lacked participants from the Gaza Strip. Members of the Gaza Youth Committee, an activist group featured in last year's ceremony, were arrested recently by Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza, for holding a Zoom meeting with pro-peace Israelis.

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Over 90 minutes Monday night, poems and songs in Hebrew and Arabic punctuated heartfelt testimonials by people like Hagai Yoel, an Israeli whose older brother was killed in 2002 on a military rescue mission in Jenin in the West Bank, and who said he couldn't bear to imagine his own 13-year-old son in uniform when he turns 18.

"I know that in order to resolve a conflict, both sides have to give up on something, because if I take it all, the other side will remain frustrated and despairing," Mr. Yoel said. "Such a situation will condemn us to perpetual war."

And Yaqub al-Rabi, a Palestinian whose wife, Aisha, was killed in 2018 by Israeli settlers who stoned their car just before their daughter's wedding, said he believed in "divine justice" but that, "even after paying such a huge price, I will not let my anger lead me to revenge."

"I want to convey to Israeli society, and to the whole world, a message born from my bleeding wound," Mr. al-Rabi said. "We all lose victims to this conflict. It doesn't tell

apart soldiers and civilians, women and men, children and adults. Or those taking part and bystanders. This conflict is man-made. And humans can end it.”