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Tech2Peace Gathers Palestinians, Israelis Through Tech and Dialogue

By Noah Sheidlower, NoCamels

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Israel's tech ecosystem is world-famous, with over 6,500 active ventures listed on Start-Up Nation Central, the NGO that tracks the Israeli innovation scene. The Palestinian tech landscape is less well-known but has grown significantly over the past several years. The two sides have seen some important joint collaborations in the past decade as more Israeli companies look to hire Palestinian talent and organizations like VC firm Sadara Ventures, which exclusively targets the Palestinian tech sector, and software firm EXALT Technologies, lead the way in advancing Palestinian tech initiatives.

When it comes to bridging divides, Tech2Peace stands out as an important initiative leveraging tech education to bring the sides together. Tech2Peace is an independent initiative that connects between Arab and Jewish youths from Israel and the Palestinian territories through high-tech training and peace-building dialogue. The groups gather for two-week seminars in different cities and towns in Israel.

Two years ago, the organization was awarded the Israeli Hope Prize by Israeli President Reuven Rivlin for projects pursuing inclusion and coexistence.

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"This is a program that brings Palestinians and Israelis together to learn technology skills, and to have dialogue sessions," says Adnan

Jaber, Public Relations Coordinator, with Tech2Peace. "When we're talking about tech skills, we're talking about 3D building, 3D modeling, app development, those new trends, and when we're talking about dialogue sessions, they talk about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, they share their cultural life and experiences."

Groups of Israelis and Palestinians participate in a Tech2Peace session in Yerucham, August 2020. Photo: Micha Silverman-Tech2Peace

Founded in 2017 by a group of technology professionals and peacemakers, Tech2Peace has quickly gained traction for aiming to tackle one of the world's most intractable conflicts. According to Jaber, Tech2Peace's mission is to equip Israeli and Palestinian youths with the necessary skills to ensure greater future cooperation and coexistence. Participants attend seminars in topics like web building, Python programming, and graphic design and take part in experiential workshops that help to humanize the conflict on a grassroots level.

"Our vision is to help those participants collaborate with each other, make startups with each other, understand each other more, have empathy for each other more, because we believe only by that way, we can grow the seeds for peace in this region," Jaber tells NoCamels.

Every year, Tech2Peace runs two separate sessions with daily

training and workshops that last roughly two weeks. This summer, the organization ran a session in the southern Israeli city of Yeruham from August 9-20, and will host a second session in the northern Israeli-Arab town of Jisr az Zarqa from August 24 to September 4.

"We considered a safe place for them to be a bit far away from where they usually like to open up and speak about the things that they are usually afraid to speak about when they are in their hometowns," Jaber tells NoCamels.

And everything had to be organized in accordance with health guidelines due to the ongoing pandemic.

Israelis and Palestinians participate in a Tech2Peace session in Yerucham, August 2020. Photo: Micha Silverman- Tech2Peace

"Despite the closures of the borders, we managed to make this seminar possible with 30 participants joining us from both Palestine and Israel," Jaber adds. "It was a miracle for it to happen. It's very hard to get the permits for the policies to enter Israel and during this time."

Tech2Peace's programs foster sustainable relations between Israeli and Palestinian participants, as they not only become peace-building ambassadors but also develop skills towards a career in high-tech. Some of Tech2Peace's alumni are already working on successful cross-cultural startups, and Tech2Peace often arranges

alumni events both physically and on Zoom to maintain these relationships.

Jaber had previously arranged an event at Tel Aviv's Facebook campus and brought speakers from Facebook to discuss how technology can help mend relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Tech2Peace also operates an active alumni Facebook group whose members discuss their experiences with the program and their future endeavors.

"The participants were so happy to see each other again," Jaber says. "We had some dialogue sessions again, it helps them break this silence between them."

Additionally, Tech2Peace hosted around eight Zoom meetups over the past few months, which included dialogue sessions, tech workshops, and language exchange events. More than 50 people participated in each of these Zoom events.

Jaber also notes that many participants volunteer and work full-time for the NGO, with some even getting scholarships to work for Tech2Peace. Jaber, who grew up in East Jerusalem speaking Arabic but little Hebrew, participated in one of the organization's two-week programs years ago and soon after joined the NGO's board.

While studying IT at a university in the West Bank, Jaber realized that he wanted to get a high-tech job in Israel but lacked the connections, some of the necessary skills, and an understanding of Jewish culture. After Tech2Peace's two-week program, he says he acquired skills in technology but also shared his Palestinian perspective with his Israelis peers to help them understand him more.

Israelis and Palestinians take part in a Tech2Peace session in Yerucham, August 2020. Photo: Micha Silverman- Tech2Peace

"After those two weeks finished, I felt much stronger to move around more in Jerusalem, to our friends, and to go also to other Hebrew-speaking cities in Israel," Jaber said. "I started to discover and toured the country again in a more confident way."

Tech2peace co-founder Tomer Cohen tells NoCamels: "In a reality where Israelis and Palestinians rarely meet each other and have positive interactions, we're lucky to be able to provide a platform for future leaders in the tech industry and the public sector from both sides to build long-term friendships and partnerships."

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Over the years, Tech2Peace has partnered with organizations like Microsoft, Google for Startups, WeWork, and IWG plc, previously Regus. According to Jaber, Google for Startups organized a mini-hackathon for Tech2Peace's workshops, during which participants learned business modeling, app development, pitching, and public speaking.

"Google loved us and wanted to volunteer with us because Google believes in diversity and its importance in the workforce," Jaber tells NoCamels. "They love that we are a very diverse group of religious, non-religious, Palestinians, Israelis, [speaking] Arabic, Hebrew."

More recently, the organization was asked by the MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives to help with the implementation of its model in other locations worldwide.

Tech2Peace hopes that through its programs, participants will see how technology can be a common ground between Palestinians

and Israelis, help to foster dialogue, and may lead to closer contacts in the future.

"Tech2Peace's two-week long seminars, alongside with our Alumni Program give meaningful and useful tools for our growing community. Our mission is to have a greater impact in the years to come through our unique model of tech, entrepreneurship and dialogue training," says Cohen.