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Finding Mideast Unity in the Classroom

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Israeli, Palestinian Develop Friendship Through Years of Teaching U-Md. Course

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Every detail had to be negotiated when an Israeli and a Palestinian started team-teaching a class on the Middle East. They haggled over the syllabus, the readings, the maps, even the words used: Was 1948, when Israel was formed, the War of Liberation -- or the Catastrophe?

Now, 12 summers and many debates later, professors Edy Kaufman and Manuel Hassassian have learned to share not only the lectern in their six-week University of Maryland course but also an office, a house near campus and an unexpected friendship.

Their class teaches the narratives of each side, the way history is retold and how news is understood, with the hope of bringing the sides together. "There is no military solution to this conflict," said Hassassian, a Palestinian Christian and an ambassador to the United Kingdom. "Only dialogue."

When Kaufman, 64, and Hassassian, 52, started teaching together in 1993, they thought peace in the Middle East was within reach. This year, as Kaufman and his wife arrived in the United States from Jerusalem, they heard news blaring from the airport TVs with reports of kidnappings, Katyusha rockets, funerals -- the worst fighting in years.

So as the class meets this month and next, their lessons in conflict management seem more important than ever. Or are they more futile?

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Like everyone in the Middle East, the professors have their own narratives, stories intertwined with the history of the region, memories that laden the fighting, the negotiations, the land itself with meaning.

Kaufman left his whole life behind in Argentina in 1960, when he was 18, to help build a new country. "I was very much in love with Israel," said Kaufman, whose parents were ardent Zionists.

He met his wife there, a sixth-generation Jerusalemite whose father disappeared during an attack in 1948 when she was about 4. Lisa Kaufman remembers a city under siege, not having enough food and how she kept talking to her father, long after he was gone.

Now the Kaufmans have children of their own, whom they raised in Jerusalem through years of war, bloody attacks and tension. Their son, a doctor at a hospital in Haifa, is delivering babies now with rockets crashing into the city around him; he recently lost a close friend.

Hassassian was born in Jerusalem, in a neighborhood that came under Israeli control after the war in 1967, when he was 13. His wife, Samira, remembers her father putting on his doctor's coat and telling the Israeli soldiers in her town near Bethlehem that the Palestinians would not leave.

The Hassassians raised three children, through years of occupation and checkpoints, curfews and intifada,

while Manuel Hassassian taught at and helped lead Bethlehem University. A few years ago, during crossfire between Palestinian and Israeli forces, a bullet shattered a window of their house while Samira was making dinner. She gathered the family to pray to the Virgin Mary in thanks that no one had been hurt, she said, and at that moment, an explosion sent glass shattering, her children screaming.

A missile had hit their house, they said, demolishing one side of it but sparing them.

Days later, a bomber blew himself up in the cafeteria of Hebrew University, Kaufman said, about 15 yards from the Harry S. Truman Peace Institute that he led. Nine students died.

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The first team-teaching attempt was a failure. Kaufman had asked a Palestinian scholar to teach with him in 1985 at UCLA, but -- as he remembers it -- his colleague kept getting angry at students' confrontational questions. Then a threat came from overseas, warning against collaboration with Israelis.

Years later, when Kaufman asked Hassassian to teach with him, it was a tough decision, Hassassian said, very controversial: Many Palestinians were arguing against normalizing relations with Israelis.

But Hassassian, like Kaufman, believed that finding common ground was the only hope for resolution.

They started the class -- offered through U-Md.'s Center for International Development and Conflict Management -- with rules of engagement, avoiding certain terms, ensuring that either could ask for a timeout.

Kaufman, a longtime professor at Hebrew University, lectures on the Israeli version of events. Then Hassassian tells the Palestinian side. Both speak as scholars, analyzing the official rhetoric; both are moderates.

Still, the first summer was tense and adversarial, Hassassian said, as each tried to score points in class.

Lisa Kaufman could tell Hassassian wasn't happy in his little dorm room, and after talking, the Kaufmans invited him to stay with them.

In the classroom, the professors made more rules, boundaries not to cross. And at home, after initially giving each other lots of space, they found that they both loved classical music. They started going to the gym together and watching soccer.

Each summer, events changed the tenor of the class. A peace accord was signed in 1993. The Israeli prime minister was assassinated in 1995. In 2000, Kaufman had to find another professor because Hassassian was helping with negotiations over Jerusalem. Talks collapsed. A new intifada began.

Hassassian suggested a role reversal for the students: Partway through the course, they choose sides and argue a case, then switch.

As the summers went by, the professors ate sushi together, went to movies and threw parties. Kaufman would sit with Hassassian while he smoked his after-dinner cigar, talking politics or telling jokes, slapping hands and cracking up. Hassassian started imitating his friend's Israeli expression of surprise -- first to make Kaufman laugh, then unconsciously using it himself.

* * *

With a sweep of chalk on the blackboard last week in Tydings Hall, Kaufman drew the arc of war and peace, starting in 1948. "With the declaration of independence by Israel, simultaneously seven countries declared war on Israel," he said.

After nearly an hour, Hassassian glanced at his watch, pointedly. He took over, and the tone switched from lecture to oratory. He paced, waved his arms, punched out words. "When Dr. Kaufman said seven! Armies!" he said, and paused, mustache twitching. "The Jews had much more sophisticated weapons. . . . It was a piece of cake for Israel to win that war!"

Kaufman, sitting nearby, scratched a note to himself with a half-smile on his face. When Hassassian stopped later, he said quietly, "It was not a piece of cake in terms of casualties."

And he told the class about a massacre of Arab villagers by Zionists and about the attack soon afterward by Arabs on a convoy of Jewish doctors and professors. "Many were killed there," Kaufman said. "Including my wife's father."

Heads snapped up; students' fingers paused, frozen over their laptops.

* * *

Every morning after he wakes, Hassassian asks Kaufman: What news? They call family members to see whether they are safe. Samira Hassassian said by phone from near Bethlehem that it is worse now, worse than it has ever been.

Hassassian is angry. Kaufman is worried.

If a cease-fire doesn't happen soon, "the hatred that is mounting among these people will continue forever," Hassassian said. It's essential to ensure that people in the United States hear all sides, he said.

"It's very tough. You lose your hope sometimes," Kaufman said. The class is worth it, "but it is such a small drop in the ocean, it is really frustrating."

After class late that night, they drove home to cook dinner. Lisa Kaufman was peeling squash. Edy Kaufman sliced onions. Hassassian brought ice to the table, and they sat down to a family dinner, passing the couscous from hand to hand, telling stories.

A small thing. But there it is: a peaceful coexistence.

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