

A new kind of desert storm

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It is the only training camp of its kind in the Middle East desert.

A Palestinian raised in Saudi Arabia, an imam from Ramallah and the former body-double of Saddam Hussein's son are among a group of Middle Eastern Muslims joining forces this week in a Jordanian desert camp with Jewish Israelis and armed forces members from the West to take Middle East diplomacy on a new route.

As headlines ask if the Middle East peace process is once again at loggerheads, the unlikely crew of 10 is learning desert survival and conflict resolution skills at an unnamed location, before heading on a 5,500 kilometer-long desert trek across the Sahara to Tripoli, Libya.

The trek-mates hope to serve as an example of what is possible when rivals look past strong political opinions and painful and angry personal histories to help one another survive across unforgiving terrain.

Jordan's King Abdullah gave his blessing for the mission and pushed all the necessary paperwork through his ministries.

Closely guarding its plans over the last months for security reasons, the team plans to publicly announce the participants and its activities on February 1 in Amman, in advance of the month-long journey, according to the international not-for-profit sponsoring organization, Breaking the Ice.

"For security purposes, we cannot reveal exact dates and locations until one day after the team has been there," spokesperson Alex Stayden told *The Jerusalem Post* from Amman.

The 10 participants include: Israeli pilot Gil Fogel, a prisoner-of-war in Lebanon from 1982-84, which included six months in solitary confinement; Israeli activist Galit Oren, whose mother was killed in a terrorist attack; West Bank Palestinian Muhammad Azzam Alarjah, who received his Islamic education in Saudi Arabia; Ramallah imam Ishaq Abd El-Jawwa Taha, who preaches across the West Bank and at the Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem; a New York City firefighter who lost many friends in 2001's September 11 attacks; a highly decorated retired American military officer, who led investigations on a Muslim group that beheaded Christian teenagers in Indonesia; Iraqi Latif Yahia, who survived several assassination attempts after fleeing his nation and job as the body-double to Saddam Hussein's son Uday, and who later adopted his niece and nephew when their parents were killed during US attacks in Iraq; a Soviet soldier in the Ukrainian Army and expert on modern terrorism; and an Iranian expatriate who lost her best friend during the Iran-Iraq war.

"Islam versus Western ideology is the biggest conflict right now, and its results can be felt all over the world," Stayden said.

The group met each other for the first time in Jordan this week. During the first meetings there were accusations, tempers and tears.

"There is a lot of emotion," said Hezkel Nathaniel, an Israeli founder of Breaking the Ice, with the group in Jordan. "Some people have said they never believed they could take part in something with 'that composition' of people. It's taking time for them to adjust."

Training and humor is apparently helping to keep tensions at bay. During the first argument, Iraqi native Yahia broke out a box of fine cigars, asking everyone to celebrate that they are human beings. At a campfire on Monday night, Israelis taught Taha from Ramallah some Hassidic dancing.

Once they all begin the journey, a team of camels will help lead the way, while a zen master and an unnamed UN diplomat will play referee. Many angry debates about Israel's military actions, Palestinian terrorist attacks and American foreign policy in Iraq are expected, organizers say.

Breaking the Ice brings together peoples in conflict for extreme sports adventures. In 2004, it was launched with eight Israelis and Palestinians braving the elements during an Antarctica adventure. The trip reached its dramatic climax when group members broke into tears as Israeli and Palestinian flags were planted side-by-side on a previously unclimbed mountain. Though those participants disagreed on many political and historical issues, they came to each other's aid through seasickness, violent winds, freezing temperatures and near-zero visibility.

This year, the elements will also be extreme, including sand storms, severe heat and foraging for food and water in the parched soil. But the landscape will have more historical relevance.

"The participants will confront physical and spiritual terrain that has witnessed conflict throughout the centuries," said a statement from the organization. "Testing themselves against the challenges of their surroundings and their own conflicting relationships, they can only succeed if they rely on and trust one another."

Although they have received positive signals, the group is still awaiting a final okay from Libyan officials for the final leg of their journey.

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