Introduction

We will probably remember 2023 as one of the most difficult years in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Besides the great humanitarian cost, the war posed new challenges for inter-communal relations building. Yet, after the outbreak of the war some of our groups chose to boost their activities, meeting more frequently or planning activities of mutual support besides their regular dialogue encounters. IEA Coordinators and staff worked around the clock to conduct joint and on occasion one-on-one conversations, helping participants talk through difficult feelings, while focusing on maintaining hope.

Here IEA’s methodology proved most valuable: not directly addressing political topics, but instead providing other spiritual and existential topics people could use to translate their personal experiences to others, made it possible for the vast majority of our groups to continue meeting and having sincere conversations, instead of stopping their activities or “exploding” into anger and chaos. It was also evident how most groups that had been running for a while had developed strong bonds that allowed them to discuss the situation with the “other” side as friends they had built a relationship with, instead of strangers they don’t care about.

We will continue to face the consequences of the war within our groups but we are positive that now, more than ever, our work is essential for building cross-community trust, which is the only possible way to envision a “day after” that will bring peace for all communities in the Holy Land.

HOW IT WORKS

The IEA invites people from different traditional and cultural backgrounds and faiths to join our groups. Within the groups, participants have meaningful encounters which bring them closer to each other.

Each encounter is focused on a religious/cultural theme and features a carefully planned program of joint study and dialogue. The group then coalesces into a single community that respects the unique identity of each of its “sub-communities” and participants, which helps create a long-term process of grassroots peace-building.

By constructively engaging core religious and cultural values, while initially discouraging political conversations that may close off constructive dialogue, our approach successfully involves social and political groups that may feel very uncomfortable with other approaches.
Dear friends,

2023 was sharply divided. The first nine months continued the growth from the previous year, while the last three months were heavily under the October 7th terrible events and the war that followed. IEA dedicated office team communicated with all the groups’ coordinators, to check how they were doing and encourage them to resume activity. These efforts were successful and to date 25 groups have met before the year ended, some more than once and we were even able to launch a new group on 26 October. In addition, we organized online series of events on our current activity, under the title Interfaith Talks, which attracted many hundreds of views.

 Altogether, 6 new groups started and another 3 renewed their activities after a long break. 42 groups held 479 encounters during the year, which marks 16% growth in activity, despite the war. Our group roster reached 123. Thousands of participants representing an unparalleled wide range of ages, viewpoints, social status, religions, and cultures joined our bridge-building encounters in 2023, finding mutual understanding and friendship. Our encounters offer hope for a better future and we are now looking forward to receiving many people who will join existing groups or start new ones.

The numerous group-encounters and other activities, detailed in this report, only scratch the surface of our determined and tireless work to create a foundation for sustainable peace in the Holy Land and offer an horizon of hope for "the day after". Behind the scenes, there is a lot of planning and paperwork, phone calls and, most importantly, the continued support of caring individuals, families and communities like you.

With your much-appreciated assistance, together we will continue to grow and continue to work towards our goal - a better and more peaceful future for people of all ages, genders, races and faiths. We are convinced that, with the support of our partners, it is all possible.

Our U.S.-based affiliate, Friends of IEA, is a tax-exempt charity under section 501(c)3 of the IRS code. With Rabbi Bruce Aft as the President of the Friends of IEA we are now working to renew IEA visits to North America and will appreciate any help with organizing events to present the work of IEA to audience abroad.

With the deepest respect,

Dr. Yehuda Stolov,
IEA Executive Director
In 2023 our 42 active groups organized a total of 479 interfaith encounters, including regular sessions, trips and conferences.

Some groups, like Jerusalem-Sa’ir have just started to meet, while others such as Hebron, Reut-Sadaqa and the Circle of Light and Hope have been meeting consistently for many years. The Jerusalem and Surroundings group discussed dietary laws, wedding ceremonies and different holidays, and always finished their encounters with a little oud playing. Jerusalem-Hebron group invites Jewish members to have conversations in Arabic, and Hashfela group invites its multi-faith participants to study the weekly Torah portion. Besides its regular encounters, Jaffa group had a parallel series of in-depth studying of interfaith topics, while Nablus Region and LIFE groups organized different outings and nature trips for their participants. Peace Bearer doubled the efforts of bringing food, medicine, diapers and clothes to communities who were struggling in isolated communities in the South of Mt. Hebron. Wast El Tarik Interfaith Band continued to practice weekly and to perform in IEA events. Two groups focused on studying the New Testament from different Christian and Jewish perspectives, online (Luke) and in person (Epistle to the Galatians). Our two U.S. groups, DC and beyond and Teaneck NJ, also had very successful encounters, meeting both online and in person. The Teaneck group was even the focus of a CNN piece (which you can watch here).

What we learned In 2023
-We discovered new ways in which religious, cultural and spiritual topics can be relevant for connecting during a time of conflict.
-Our staff learned new tools to better conduct our work and communication.
-Our coordinators took part in trainings and discussions that supported their work with the groups.
In 2023 we had 6 new groups, one of which started after the outbreak of the war - the Women’s Language Exchange.

In this group, women practice Hebrew and Arabic skills in informal conversations, learning from and about each other in the process. Neighboring Women of Arad - Tel Arad went on trips together and had profound conversations about personal stories, and after October 7th, the women in the group mobilized to identify needs and bring supplies to the local Bedouin community, as well as support for reporting missing persons, mental health emergencies and childcare. Midwives for Peace celebrated its 15-year anniversary together with a 2-day trip and conference. The Women of North Jordan Valley, who started meeting last year, continued their process to solidify the group, while the members of the Haifa Women’s group are already good friends and regularly meet over a nice meal to check in on each other. We also watched the renewal of the Yeruham-Rahme Women’s group, which had been inactive since the coronavirus pandemic, and the start of a new women’s group in Jerusalem.

Our participants speak

“Interfaith (encounters) give me the chance to tell who I am graciously without anger, without hatred, without making it a problem.”
Father Samuel, Hashfela Region Interfaith Encounter

“Some spoke about fear, pain, anxiety, anger and frustration (...). Yet, almost everyone spoke also about hope, love and our friendships, the power of this group that has been together for so long, the importance of it and the need to accept each other as we are since we are each different and experience life differently.
Gomer, Midwives for Peace

“In God willing I’ll continue to use all of my experiences to make a body, mind and spirit effort in participating with the IEA team members to paint our collaborative vision that will be part of a step toward peace, healing and steer us toward a long term solution between Jews and Muslims.”
Mohammed, Interfaith Encounter of Teaneck NJ
Our Youth groups also had a busy year.

We had student groups in Herzliya, Bar Ilan University, Jerusalem and Haifa, and a new group with Yeshiva students from Otniel, together with young people from Nablus region. The Young Adults group in Jerusalem discussed philosophical topics and the Fananin group held art, music and theater workshops. Debate for Peace, which trains and organizes Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze students participated in Model UN simulations in the U.S. and Cyprus, and held several local activities including visits to embassies, and religious celebrations during Ramadan and Sukkot. With the outbreak of the war the group held daily check-ins on Zoom, and also organized mental health support for its participants.

IEA also continued to organize and support encounters for 3 different groups of religious leaders, who discussed different texts and traditions on topics such as repentance and how religions relate to each other.

Get involved

- Join one of our groups or help us form a new group in your area/university
- Join our listserv and invite others to join
- Be active on our social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube)
- Partner your institution with us
- Make your Amazon shopping through our link
- Make a tax-deductible donation online or via mail, to our U.S.-based affiliate, Friends of IEA, a tax-exempt charity under section 501(c)3 of the IRS code. Mail-in donations may be sent at any time to: Friends of Interfaith Encounter Association, 6949 Conservation Dr.; Springfield, VA 22153; USA

- You are also more than welcome to join us at any of the many fun and engaging fundraising events which we will hold this year, as a donor and/or a volunteer. For more information concerning these events, please contact Bruce Aft at rabbibruce@gmail.com.
Events and projects

Our annual Iftar meal took place on a very cold and rainy evening, yet dozens of people gathered at Felm Center to celebrate and eat together. The Interfaith Encounter Day in September was an opportunity to meet friends and new faces from all over the Holy Land, and share experiences we have had this year within each group.

We had 3 music events that added new artistic and spiritual dimensions to our interfaith experience. The first, Return to the Land of your Soul, featured beautiful oud and singing performances. In sequence, we organized 2 Interfaith Jam sessions in which the public sang and danced together with our interfaith band Wast El Tarik.

After the outbreak of the war in October, we identified the need to bring to the public discussions about continuing our interfaith work amid new challenges. That is how we started a series of panels called Interfaith Talks, which we broadcasted through Facebook Live and Zoom. The first panel included 3 of our group coordinators, sharing how their groups have faced these difficult times. The second panel presented 3 senior religious leaders, Rabbi David Rosen, Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar and Qadi Mohamed Abu Obied, discussing the role of religious leaders during crises. Both panels can be watched on our Facebook page and YouTube channel.

WHAT WE LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2024

- We hope to have a more peaceful year. We will continue working to build bridges between communities in the Holy Land even when everything else seems to be working towards the opposite end.
- We are excited to work with organizations from several countries in projects aiming to advance learning for diversity and inclusion among youth.
- We are grateful for new partners who expressed their willingness to support and cooperate with our activities next year, including USAID and the European Union.