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Update 2: Eclectic Group Crosses Sahara for Peace

By LAUREN FRAYER, 03.19.2006, 09:28 PM

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Ex-Israeli fighter pilot Gil Fogiel rarely talked about being a prisoner of war in Syria until he sat across a campfire in the middle of the desert with people he long considered his worst enemies - Iraqis, Iranians and Palestinians.

Breaking down into tears, he recounted being shot down over Syria-controlled Lebanon in 1982, parachuting from 14,000 feet up while his co-pilot crashed and spending two years being tortured in a Damascus prison.

Now 49, Fogiel is one of 10 people - including a former body double for Saddam Hussein's son, Uday; a Palestinian accounting student; and a New York City firefighter who survived the Sept. 11 attacks - trekking from Israel across the Sahara Desert to Libya on a mission to promote Mideast peace.

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The expedition is sponsored by Breaking the Ice, a Berlin-based nonprofit conflict resolution group that wants participants to confront divisive religious and political issues in a setting where they depend on each other for survival.

Traveling by camel, foot and in two 1960s-era German trucks, the group left Jerusalem on March 7 and hopes to reach the Libyan border by Tuesday. If Fogiel and a second Israeli on the expedition are permitted to enter Libya, which does not have diplomatic ties with the Jewish state, they would be the first Israelis to enter the desert country.

Carrying an olive tree from Jerusalem as a gesture of peace, the travelers hope to plant it in Tripoli at the end of their more than 3,400-mile journey. If the Israelis are denied entry, the group will stay together in Egypt.

"If attitudes change from my actions, I'm honored," Fogiel said. "Somebody's got to make that first step."

After an overnight ferry ride across the Red Sea, a day touring Cairo's pyramids and three days in Egypt's white desert, the team began the difficult task of crossing the Sahara's barren dunes.

A truck's diesel tank ruptured in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, delaying the group an extra day. Two main roads running to Libya were suddenly declared closed military zones when the team came through. The red tape and long car rides quickly took their toll.

"It was a honeymoon at first, with people feeling like brothers and sisters. It was beautiful," said Stanford Siver, a team mediator who is a Ph.D. candidate in the psychology of conflict.

But after the hectic travel schedule, "people started to get a little cranky and more interpersonal stuff came up," he said.

"They're laughing and sharing one another's music and jokes, but deep down, some closely held views aren't being challenged," Siver said. "They're not testing the waters and interacting on things that are more complicated."

They are, however, taking the first step of becoming friends and sharing personal experiences.

Latif Yahia is a former Iraqi army captain who was forced in 1987 to undergo plastic surgery and training to act as Uday Hussein's body double. After leaving Uday's employ, he became embroiled in a feud with his former boss and his family, and he was shot in one altercation.

Yahia says Uday Hussein shot him on several occasions in fits of temper, and he still carries the shrapnel in his body.

"I've been tortured, I was in prison, and after I left Iraq, Uday Hussein killed my father," said Yahia, 41, who now owns a detective agency in Ireland. "War never brings anything good to people. That's why I'm here."

In the Sahara Desert, Yahia and Fogiel find themselves in an incongruous relationship - joking around and protecting each other, when 20 years ago they could have just as easily killed one another.

"There is a basic hatred, but much of it is only because of brainwashing. People are told to hate and then they hate. But if you just change the message, peace is possible," Fogiel said.

Daniel Patrick Sheridan, a captain in the New York Fire Department who lost 343 comrades in the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, is still looking for answers. He wants to know what possessed the perpetrators of the attack to fly airplanes into buildings.

"I'd like to not only find out about them, but let them find out about me," Sheridan said. "I was hoping there'd be a real bin Laden-type guy here, someone I couldn't communicate with at all. But all these people are so friendly and nice. It's like this is 'conflict lite.'"

Heskel Nathaniel, 44, an Israeli businessman living in Germany, founded Breaking the Ice in 2003 after surviving leukemia. A year later, he took four Israelis and four Palestinians to Antarctica.

The idea is for participants to shatter stereotypes even after they leave the desert, a mission that seems too complicated for Col. Raymond Benson, 61.

After serving in the U.S. Army for 22 years and surviving two tours in Vietnam, "I myself am pretty set in my ways," Benson said.

"Is this going to change the world? No, but there are a lot of people doing nothing. We're doing something," he said. "When you remove politics and religion, we can get along out in the desert alone."

Neda Sarmast, 37, an Iranian-American, went to Iran for a two-month summer vacation in the early 1980s. Denied an exit permit by the Iranians to return to her studies in the United States, Sarmast spent the next two years dodging gun battles at the height of the country's eight-year-long war with Iraq.

Now, Sarmast is joking and sharing Bedouin food with Yahia, who was on the other side of the guns' sights during that war.

"If we can cross this terrain together, we become ambassadors of peace, showing other people that if we can do this, anybody else can, too," Sarmast said.