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On a desert trek, former enemies form new bonds

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MUSAID, LIBYA - History was but 10 feet away.

Having crossed deserts by camel and truck, a mission of nine peace seekers from Israel and the Palestinian territories, Iraq and America, was that close to making it through passport control in Libya, a country that has always barred entrance to citizens of the Jewish state.

But when word was delivered to the group at 2 a.m. Wednesday that all were welcome except the Israelis, they didn't hesitate.

"Muslim, Christian, Jewish, we're all one team, one body, one spirit," says Palestinian Mohammad Azzam Alarjah, explaining why the mission turned back. "You can't cut your hand from off your body."

That allegiance, so contrary to the geopolitical realities of the Middle East, cost Mr. Alarjah and the rest of the group the chance to complete the physical dimension of their planned 3,417-mile, month-long desert journey from Jerusalem to Tripoli, Libya.

But it was emblematic of the bonds forged between the two Israelis, Palestinian, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, two Americans, and Ukrainian during their desert odyssey. The expedition is sponsored by the Berlin-based conflict resolution group Breaking the Ice, which seeks to promote greater peace through individual cooperation and understanding.

"We're a lot of different people and we're learning from each other and sharing experiences and building common bridges of understanding between us," says US Army Col. Ray Benson. "People are basically the same all over the world and if we can get separated from our governments and religions there's a better chance to work things out."

Throughout the trip, conflicts do erupt but friendships and understandings also form between those in this small group that might seem to be most at odds.

At a campfire one night, Latif Yahia, the former body double for Saddam Hussein's son Uday, sat across from Israeli Gil Fogiel. Mr. Fogiel began to cry as he spoke for the first time about the torture he endured in a Damascus prison for two years after being shot down over Lebanon while flying a mission in 1982.

Although ironic, Fogiel says he feels particularly comfortable around the other Middle Easterners. "We have more in common with the Arabs than with the Americans and the others," says Fogiel, who learned Arabic in prison. "There's more of a bond between us."

For his part, Mr. Yahia says that he relates to the Israelis - whom he was trained to hate growing up as an Iraqi Baathist - as a brother and sister. "We look after each other as family," says Yahia, who says he was also tortured and forced to undergo plastic surgery on his face for his assignment as Uday's body double.

Indeed, strong disagreements emerge on the trip. And

those are often between the Americans and Ukrainian on one side and the Middle Easterners on the other. Thursday when talk turned political, Yahia became angry at New York City Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan who brought up the 343 firefighters, many of whom were friends, who died in the Sept. 11 attacks on New York.

"OK, so 3,000 Americans died on 9/11," Yahia, whose sister-in-law was killed in an American bombing raid on Baghdad in 2003, said in a raised voice. "Does that give America the right to destroy my country? One hundred thousand Iraqis have died, and who is next?"

Captain Sheridan responded: "I'm just one guy, I'm not an ambassador of my country. [President] George Bush doesn't call me when he wakes up in the morning."

During the trip, Sheridan says he has encountered much less hostility toward himself and the US than he expected after seeing reports on television for the past four years about how dangerous the Arab world was.

"I was expecting to get a lot of dirty looks and snickering, and I've gotten nothing but smiles and hospitality," he says. "You can tell in their eyes they were just really happy to meet someone that was different."

Many unexpected challenges of the journey have also brought out cultural differences that proved frustrating, as well as educational.

After turning around from Libya, Afghan Yahya Wardak decided to leave the expedition, leading to accusations from Sheridan that he was "quitting when the going got tough."

Iranian Neda Sarmast, who spends half her time in New York and half in Tehran, told Mr. Wardak in front of the group that by quitting he was making a bad name for Muslims. "This is the problem with the Middle East,

whenever anything gets difficult we always break up and never maintain our unity," she said as Yahia sat next to her, nodding in agreement.

Though the final goal of the journey was to plant an olive tree brought from Jerusalem in Tripoli, the participants say the unity of the remaining members and their determination to continue spreading their message of transcultural kinship will prove far more lasting and influential than that act.

"We're just a spark, we're showing more and greater numbers of people how to take steps," Ms. Sarmast says. "The message is to show how there is solidarity among people of all nations and one thing we've all agreed is that governments do not represent the majority of people who feel we have much more in common than in conflict."

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