

Israelis, Syrians Ignore Politics for Humanitarian Efforts

The other night we were watching the Hebrew news on TV when a special story was featured concerning an Israeli nongovernmental organization that was operating secretly inside of Syria.

The founder of the organization, whose face was hidden and name withheld, said, "Nobody asks permission to kill. We do not ask permission to save lives. We don't work for anybody, just for our conscience."

The founder—whom we will call "Yael"—of this amazing NGO explained that the organization is made up of some 1,200 Israelis who love their homeland and believe in a Jewish tradition and culture that values a compassionate, open-minded respect for the sanctity of human life and dignity.

"We believe we are blessed to be born in a democratic country that enables its citizens to travel to challenging and dangerous places," Yael said.

Along with this commitment to human life, the organization is also devoted to faithfully defending Israel's borders and citizens in the face of threat.

"Today, with such economic power and defense capabilities, Israel feels a moral and ethical duty to become 'the voice of the voiceless,' and, in this particular case, even if it is the voice of the vulnerable populations among some of our toughest and cruelest enemies," Yael said.

Unfortunately, the harsh reality in which the organization is operating is on behalf of the victims of Assad's atrocities,

which demands they carry out their activities below the radar and hide their identities.

They work in full cooperation with democratic secular Syrian groups who have significant presence on the ground and deliver tons of food, medicine and basic supplies to specific places according to an agreed-on distribution map.

Yael explained how the banking system collapsed in Syria and most rebel families could not access their funds. They sold their few precious items, but after two and a half years, they are destitute.

Many children have seen their mothers brutally raped, while their mothers beg them to remain silent to prevent further harm.

“We are all parents. We all have families, and we all understand the consequences if we ever get in trouble,” Yael told the *Jerusalem Post*. “There is no smart way to deal with fear. But the choice to do this, to feel that you are in the right place at the right time and that you are helping make a significant change is so rewarding.”

One of the organization’s most difficult challenges is the Muslim Brotherhood, which distributes aid in mosques but only lets specific people in to receive the aid. Then the Brotherhood fights anybody else who tries to distribute aid in other ways. The secular rebels have been attacked for bringing in their own aid supplies.

Furthermore, the Assad regime has been cutting off supplies of water in regions affected by the use of chemical weapons. Water is essential for people in those areas in order to rinse their bodies from the chemicals.

The organization has delivered hundreds of tons of basic food; sanitation items including soap, toothbrushes, women’s sanitation kits, toilet paper and tissues; vital refugee items

such as insulating material, mattresses, blankets, iron sheets to build housing units and water canteens; and 300,000 dry meals, each meant to feed five people for a week.

"I think that for most of my volunteers, what they fear more than death is indifference," Yael said. "The belief that indifference kills is stronger than any fear."

Israeli Hospitals Treat Syrians

Along with these noble and brave volunteers who are surely risking their lives, the Israeli army and northern Israel's civilian hospitals have also opened wide their arms to help wounded Syrians.

The public is not told how Syrians cross the Syrian-Israeli border, but the news is spreading in Syria that the wounded can get help in Israel.

The army has a field hospital in the Golan Heights near the Syrian border where doctors set bones, bandage up and do whatever possible to stabilize a person's medical situation before sending them back to Syria.

Those who are more seriously wounded are transferred to hospitals around northern Israel. Some need treatment for many months as they are rehabilitated and given numerous operations. The hundreds of Syrians the hospitals have treated and are treating is a drop in the sea compared to the hundreds of thousands who are victims of the civil war.

But Jewish heritage recognizes that every human being is important. The director of one hospital told of a 3-year-old girl crying days and nights for her mother. Proudly, he said, "I saw my staff doing everything they could to comfort her."

The hospitals do all in their power to make the patients feel comfortable, with Arabic-speaking staff on hand to talk with those patients who are conscious upon arrival and accompany

them through their stay.

Most of the time, patients come in alone without family and without any personal belongings and then, finding themselves in a Jewish hospital, are doubly traumatized. One little boy thought he was in Lebanon and panicked when he realized he was in Israel. But when one of the social workers spoke to him in Arabic and he saw how the doctors were going to help him, he relaxed and gained control.

Dr. Barhoum, director of the Western Galilee Hospital shares that for his staff, there is the professional aspect in which nurses and physicians do the job they were trained to do: help.

But there is also a moral aspect, he explains, in which the hospital staff has an obligation as human beings to provide humanitarian assistance to ease suffering. Barhoum believes this aspect most impacts his staff.

In another department, Dr. Sella tells of a 23-year-old Syrian man who was injured by an explosion that caused a piece of shrapnel to go through his cheek, cut through his jaw and entered his chest. He had received some kind of operation in Syria, but was bleeding from the neck so the Israeli field hospital sent him on to Dr Sella.

The staff developed a bond with him over the months, bringing him clothing, books and eventually small snacks—anything to make him feel more comfortable.

All he knew about Israel revolved around the Arab-Israeli conflict and he had no idea Arabs and Jews co-existed and have formed ties of cooperation within Israel.

When he saw that the staff included Muslims, Christians and Jews working together and treating everyone the same, he couldn't figure out what was going on. After many months he was able to leave. He cried as he said goodbye to the staff,

explaining that his time in Israel had changed his perspective on the country and the conflict.

Dr. Sella remarked, “God is in the small details, not the big ones. Go down to the small details, and that’s how you change the world.”

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