



Peace Through Tennis: An Alluring Idea

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Across the Middle East, hopes for Arab-Israeli peace face obstacles that, of late, are rising on multiple fronts.

Fatah and Hamas are working toward a coalition government, which will further empower a terrorist group that's sworn to Israel's destruction and isolate Palestinian moderates; a candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood is assuming the presidency in Egypt while the emerging government is threatening to upend the longstanding Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty; and an Iranian regime that increasingly threatens Israel's destruction continues to make progress toward nuclear weaponry.

All is not lost, however, for peace between Israelis and Arabs need not come just from the top down -- not just when leaders across this turbulent region cast aside their weapons and sign treaties. Peace can build from the bottom up -- when average people across this torturous divide come together.

It is here, on the ground, where good people on both sides of the divide work to build bridges outside the glare of publicity. It is here, on the ground, where I found an inspiring young Israeli Arab by the name of Nadine Fahoum.

Fahoum, from Haifa, is 22 and a product of the Israel Tennis Centers Foundation. Launched in 1976, the ITC uses tennis to help underserved Israeli children of all religions and backgrounds. With locations in 14 cities -- from Kiryat Shmona near the Lebanese border in the north to Beer Sheva near the Negev in the south -- the ITC claims to be the world's largest tennis school, serving more than 20,000 children each week.

With tennis at the core of each of its initiatives, the ITC runs co-existence programs for Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Bedouin kids; holistic welfare programs for more than 1,000 at-risk children each week; structured physical education programs for children with developmental and physical disabilities; and sports and education workshops to help immigrant children integrate into Israeli society.

Because the programs are open to Jews and Arabs, they nurture tolerance and collaboration, promoting a future of peaceful coexistence.

As for Fahoum, she began playing tennis at the ITC's Haifa location when she was nine -- pushed by a fearless mother who had dreamed of playing tennis as a child but never got the chance. At the time, Fahoum and her brother, then seven, were the only two Arab kids there. (Her mother also sent her to a Hebrew school because it was the best school available, making her the school's only Arab student.)

Fahoum spent all of her free time at the center and soon was representing Israel at international events, playing in more than 30 countries from the United States to South America, Europe to Asia. She reached the second round in a 14-and-under tournament and the finals in an 18-and-under tournament. She attended Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA on a full scholarship and, in her junior year, transferred to Duke where she played first singles and ranked as high as fourth in the nation in Division I.

Fahoum is not the ITC's most decorated athlete, however. The school has produced a 2006 Wimbledon mixed doubles champion, others with strong showings at tennis' "major" tournaments, Israeli national champions, and Davis Cup veterans. But, Fahoum's story extends far beyond tennis.

After graduating with a political science degree, she began work in ITC's New York office as, naturally, its first Arab. I caught up with her the other day in Bethesda, MD where she and a few ITC kids showed off their tennis as part of a U.S. fundraising tour.

We chatted under an umbrella as light rain sprinkled the courts, and I came away struck less by how she slams a forehand than how she volleyed my questions. I asked about obstacles to peace; she responded with impatience. I asked about ethnic and religious differences; she highlighted commonalities.

"I want to see progress now, and it starts on the ground," she said, turning toward me as we sat in wooden lawn chairs. "I'm not different," she said when I asked about tensions between Israel's Jews and Arabs. "We all want the same thing."

Yes, she said, her mother faced criticism from Arabs for sending her daughter to the ITC. Before long, though, other Arabs were doing the same.

I asked about inter-group hostilities that date back decades. "If we keep looking back," she replied, "we won't get anywhere."

The ITC seems to be getting somewhere. With tennis at its core, it's running programs that create opportunities for, and nurture collaboration among, Jews and Arabs alike across a land that they struggle to share.

Peace through tennis? An alluring idea.

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