



Interview with Ibrahim Issa

‘We teach children to see others as human beings instead of enemies’

Ibrahim Issa is the director of the Hope Flowers School in the West Bank. The students receive lessons in ‘peace education’: they learn to listen to each other and to be understanding of others. Everything is aimed at ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Issa remains hopeful, even after 7 October: ‘What’s the alternative?’

By Sam de Graaff

‘Here, look, I’ll show you.’ Ibrahim Issa stands up and grabs his laptop, and for a moment the screen is blurry. Then the view from his office becomes visible. A hilly landscape under the blazing sun, with patches of green, but mostly a yellow-grey multi-storey building. ‘Eight thousand square metres,’ says Issa, not without pride.

This school is his school, the Hope Flowers School in Bethlehem. Issa is the second director after his father, Hussein Issa, who founded Hope Flowers in 1984. At that time, it was still a nursery school called ‘Al Amal’ – Arabic

for ‘hope’. Today, children up to 14 years old attend, around 380 per year. Including after-school activities, there are more than 500. Over the past decades, thousands of children have come into contact with the school.

Students receive lessons in subjects from the ‘regular’ curriculum, from history to mathematics and English. But what really makes Hope Flowers special is the ‘peace education’. The name pretty much says it all: education focused on developing qualities that should



Children playing near the Israeli-built wall in Bethlehem.



Ibrahim Issa

bring long-term peace closer. Children learn how to solve problems non-violently, how to listen to each other with empathy and to understand one another.

The school now also has a development centre that works on projects in the area. And they are working on setting up a health department with medical staff. More and more, the school is becoming a kind of regional hub for various assistance needs – also for the parents of students and the school staff, who could use a safe place too.

One of the key areas the Hope Flowers School focuses on is trauma treatment. The Hope Flowers School is located in the West Bank, near the Deheishe refugee camp, a stone's throw from the Israeli-built separation wall. Concrete barriers, towers and barbed wire are daily reminders of the conflict that has been raging here for

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many decades: a conflict that, since the Hamas attack on 7 October and Israel's subsequent response, has become even more dominant, if that were possible. 'A lot has changed,' Issa agrees. 'In almost every aspect of our lives.'

What exactly have you noticed from the war in Gaza?

'Many people have lost their income because they worked in Israel, and the borders are closed. Poverty is increasing, and with it violence and hatred. Projects we were working on in the field cannot continue due to safety concerns. We've also taken in a group of 76 children from Gaza. They are severely traumatised. Children always pay the highest price.'

And for you, how has your work changed?

'I can't make any plans; travelling is nearly impossible. It could be that an area suddenly gets closed off, and then you're stuck. I can't take that risk: I'm needed by my family, by the school. So I mostly stay indoors, behind my desk.'

'For my work, I also need to travel abroad a lot to arrange funding and make contacts. We rely on several smaller sponsors, including from the Netherlands, the United States and the United Kingdom. This year, I visited ARQ. I flew to Amsterdam via Jordan. It almost took longer to get from Bethlehem to Ramallah, 20 kilometres away, than to fly to the Netherlands.'

'I also notice that the emotional distance between people is growing. I used to see my Israeli friends weekly. I worked with them. Sometimes we'd grab a drink somewhere – coffee, a beer. I'd speak to them every week. That's all no longer possible, and yet that's precisely what's so important: that people stay in conversation. That's how you foster mutual understanding.'

At the moment, the parties are far from being in conversation. Do you feel disheartened?

'You know, Sam, in recent months people have sometimes talked about this conflict as if it began on 7 October. That's not the case. For the past two years, I've been warning of a new wave of violence – although I had no idea what form it would take, none at all; this attack was a complete surprise to me too. But as the peace process stalled, extremism grew, on both sides. That's been clear for years.'

'But your question was about hope. What alternative do we have? That's still what I think, even after 7 October. Holding onto hope is the only thing we can do. In a way, I think: the worse things get, the closer we are to a solution, cynically enough. It worked in Europe after the Second World War. Who would have thought back then that the French and Germans would ever get along again? That they, once enemies, would now be partners and work together well?'



Children receiving lessons at the Hope Flowers School.

In Hope Flowers' teaching methods, a lot of attention is also paid to cooperation, empathy and mutual understanding. Why is that so important?

'It's about actively listening to each other, with empathy. That's what we try to instil in the children; we see it as a life skill, a method they can use later in their lives as well. When I work with a mixed Israeli and Palestinian group, I notice how much understanding arises from listening to each other. An Israeli parent telling what it's like to lose a child, or a Palestinian parent. That's how we learn to see each other as human beings rather than enemies.'

For Issa, it was never a given that he would end up working at a school. He's not a teacher or educationalist. In terms of content, he's no specialist – 'I'm happy to leave that to our professionals' – and even a role in the administration wasn't an obvious choice, although he was the founder's son. Issa actually wanted to become an engineer. He went to study at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands.

It partly explains his special bond with the country. He's often here and hopes to organise a conference with Dutch experts. 'I still remember that the Dutch were already involved with the school in 1993, even before I studied in Delft. But the personal bond certainly helps. I have many Dutch friends. I find them to be warm people – although sometimes you need to gain their trust first and build a relationship.' He laughs. 'Once you've succeeded in that, you discover a lot of beauty in Dutch culture.'



Hussein Issa, founder of Hope Flowers.

As a student, Issa didn't foresee a role for himself at Hope Flowers. That changed when his father passed away in 2000. Issa returned to help the school, at first for six months, hoping to finish his studies and pursue a PhD afterwards.

But 2000 was also the year the Second Intifada began, a period of Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. In November that year, the school building was hit by an

Israeli tank, Issa explains. What should have been a safe environment became a war zone. Students stayed away and Israelis could no longer work at the school; it was too dangerous.

Issa decided to stay longer. Six months became a year, two years, three – all in an effort to save Hope Flowers, his father's life's work. The rest of the story is well-known: Issa is still the director.

Your father was an activist. Why did he choose to found a nursery school in 1984 instead of, say, organising protests?

'Hussein protested non-violently against the Israeli occupation. He believed in building bridges between Palestinians and Israelis, as people. But he also looked at the bigger picture: Where do we want to go? How do we bring about change in this region?'

What was his answer?

'By changing people. And how do you do that? Through education. We need to create a new generation of Palestinians and Israelis who believe in peace and cooperation. It wasn't easy. You know, Sam, there's something called the zero law of conflict resolution: no conflict is resolved without conflict.'

What kind of conflicts did your father face?

'At that time, in the early 1980s, many Palestinians thought non-violent resistance, where they collaborated with Israelis, was useless – let alone the idea of making peace. They found it not patriotic enough, even naïve. My father and his group were sometimes called collaborators. At the same time, Israel wasn't happy either. For Israel, it was much easier to legitimise the occupation of Palestinian land against the backdrop of the military struggle of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization,

'To solve the conflict, moderate voices are needed – no, indispensable'

headed by Yasser Arafat, ed.) in Lebanon and violence in Israel itself. The fact that a Palestinian group was calling for peaceful coexistence posed a threat to the narrative with which the Israeli government legitimised the occupation.'

So the decision to start a school was, in a sense, born out of necessity as well?

'Yes, in a way. Israel exerted a lot of pressure on non-violent activists like my father. Dr Mubarak Awad, a key figure in non-violent resistance, was expelled in the mid-1980s. He had an American passport. My father didn't. So he decided to focus on creating a generation that would bring about change – through the school.'

You yourself have experienced quite a lot. You were arrested. What happened?

'It was 2002, so I'd already been back from the Netherlands for some time. I had expected the US or Europe to ensure that the peace process got back on track, but the violence continued. Then, in December, I was arrested by Israel. I had rented out my basement to a young man who turned out to be on an Israeli list. When he was arrested, so was I, and part of my house was destroyed. I was mistreated in prison.'

And yet you continue to call for cooperation.

'The situation isn't black and white. I don't want to downplay the occupation here, but I also don't want to pretend that all Israelis are bad or all Palestinians. That would close the door to coexistence for good. To solve the conflict, moderate voices are needed – no, indispensable. We hope to create those voices with our school.'

'Recently, a former student came from the US. He's made it there as a businessman, I think you could say that: he came in his own private jet. When he was here with his family, he said, "Hope Flowers will always have a place in my heart." That touches me. Whether we can really change something with this school, I don't know. But when I hear things like that, I hold onto hope.'

Sam de Graaff – Freelance journalist who has written for Het Parool, de Volkskrant and the ANP news agency, among others.