Former Palestinian fighter chooses nonviolence

by Christa Case Bryant in the July 22, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) It was the year 2000, and the second Palestinian intifada had just broken out. Ali Abu Awwad was in Saudi Arabia, recovering from an Israeli drive-by shooting, when he received word that an Israeli soldier had shot his brother Youssef in the head at close range.

“He left us a son and a daughter and this huge package of pain and loss and anger,” Abu Awwad said, recalling how part of him wanted revenge. “Then you ask yourself, how many people shall I kill? What could be enough dead Israelis to heal this pain?”

Then his mother, a Palestinian activist who was close to Palestinian fighter-turned-president Yasser Arafat, received a group of bereaved Israeli parents into her home.

“For me, it was shocking to see an Israeli crying,” said Abu Awwad, who had been given a ten-year sentence as a teenager for his involvement in the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising. “I couldn’t imagine that Jewish people have tears.”

Abu Awwad has since advocated nonviolence as the best way to end the Israeli occupation. For more than a decade, he worked with peace organizations, even touring the world with an Israeli mother whose peace-activist son was killed by a Palestinian sniper.

But in the past couple of years, he has come to the conclusion that peace will not be made by the Israeli left, which is anchored in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv.

“We have more than 600,000 settlers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank—who’s going to talk to these people?” he asked, sitting under a makeshift canopy on his family’s land between Bethlehem and Hebron, surrounded by settlements. “The peace movement is not courageous enough to act where the heart of the problem is. The heart of the problem is here, not Tel Aviv.”

So Abu Awwad decided that in order to achieve Palestinian rights, he would need to engage Israeli settlers, who live outside of the internationally recognized border of Israeli sovereignty. As word got out, Hanan Schlesinger, a rabbi from nearby Alon

Shvut, came to meet him. Though the rabbi had lived in the neighborhood for decades, it was the first time he had ever heard a Palestinian account of life under Israeli occupation.

“It was offensive, it was jarring, it was challenging, and it made me feel attacked,” Schlesinger said. “But he wasn’t angry, and he wasn’t full of resentment or hate. He was telling the story of his life.”

Schlesinger went back to talk with Abu Awwad again. And again.

They were joined by Israelis from nearby Tekoa, home of the late Menachem Froman, a rabbi who had cultivated ties with Palestinian leaders, including Arafat and Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Last year, the growing movement established Roots, which doesn’t endorse a particular political solution but rather the values of respect, nonviolence, and honoring both sides’ deep connection to the land. So far, it has hosted more than 6,000 visitors, including 600 Israeli pre-army students.

“This is the right way,” said Gal Rosenberg, a student and right-wing voter, after hearing Abu Awwad speak. “This is the dream.”

Abu Awwad toured the United States in May and June with Schlesinger. And Roots, along with Froman, is featured in a documentary, *A Third Way*, which will screen in the United States and Western Europe this fall.

“Hopefully the film . . . models for audiences this process of dialogue,” said director Harvey Stein, who noted it challenged his own “typical leftist” views. He hopes to hold screenings of the film followed by audience conversations—perhaps mirroring some of the characters’ discussions.

For now, many of those engaging with Roots are foreigners, and they tend to be more enthralled with talking than locals who deal with tensions, checkpoints, and attacks. There’s also a strong religious Zionist movement that teaches that the whole land belongs to Jews, contrary to Froman’s teaching that Jews belong to the land.

“It’s about catalyzing people to take responsibility against the violence—whether it’s local teachers working against hatred within their students, visiting victims of attacks in solidarity, or challenging the mantra that ‘there’s no one to talk to’ on the

other side," said Shaul Judelman, one of Froman's students.

Logistically, it's not easy to get Israelis and Palestinians together in the West Bank, since they are largely barred from entering each other's communities. Abu Awwad's land is a rare place where both are welcome. Just a few minutes away is the hitchhiking stop where last summer three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped by Palestinians and killed, sparking an escalation that led to the Gaza war.

Schlesinger has hosted Abu Awwad in his living room to talk with his neighbors twice. Some accused him of bringing a "terrorist" to their community, but dozens came and listened. One left saying, "It's hard not to be convinced."

Abu Awwad is modest about the fruits of his work thus far, emphasizing that nonviolence is a means, not an end, and Palestinian rights have yet to be achieved.

"But I think nonviolence is the celebration of my existence," he said. "I used to wake up, and I [would] wish that I was not born. Today I wake up and I celebrate."

This article was edited on July 6, 2015.