

Studying together for Peace and Democracy even in times of crisis

Two weeks ago, the Israeli school Shaar Hanegev was hit by a Qassam rocket fired from the Northern Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, the Israeli teachers find it more important than ever to cooperate with the Palestinian teachers in Gaza

For more than two weeks now, the fighting between radical Palestinian groups has been escalating. At the same time, Hamas has intensified the shelling of Israel with Qassam rockets. More than 200 rockets have hit Israel's Western Negev during the last two weeks. The Israeli army is confining itself to specific actions against Hamas activists in order to contain the shelling of Qassam rockets.

In April, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has started a new project co-funded by the EU. In this framework, first teachers and later also students from Israel, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories including Gaza and Jordan will be trained in Democracy Education in their respective schools as well as in joint seminars. The project has started with great enthusiasm.

With the escalation of the fighting, its impact on the joint project was discussed. On Thursday, May 17th 2007, a Qassam rocket from Gaza hit our partner school Shaar Hanegev and damaged one classroom severely. Luckily, the classroom was not occupied at that time but final exams in bible studies took place in the adjoining room and final exams in civic education in the next building.

Immediately, the coordinators of the project in Sderot/Shaar Hanegev High School as well as in Gaza announced their continuation of the project. The Palestinian coordinator from Ramallah instantly called the Shaar Hanegev High School to apologize "in the name of the Palestinians" for the attack.

A few days after the shelling of the rocket on Shaar Hanegev High School on May 27th, we wanted to get a first hand impression of the situation ourselves. First we were told about the difficult situation of the school: it is located at about 3 km from the border to the Gaza Strip and therefore under a daily threat from Qassam rockets. A zeppelin floating above the border is watching over the situation, reporting the launching of rockets and activating – in most cases – a warning via loud speakers: "Red Color!" – standing for red alert. Then the students have at most 20 seconds to reach protected areas. Currently, there are 55 classrooms for 1200 students of which only 17 classrooms are protected against the rockets so far. The authorities consider also the adjoining classrooms as protected because the students are expected to be able to find refuge in these adjoining rooms in case of alert.

But relocating a class of around 30 students in 20 seconds to an adjoining classroom is almost impossible - even with best discipline.



One classroom was severely damaged by a Qassam rocket



Damage also in the adjoining room

Consequently, the decision was taken to bus pupils to secure schools in the area where they can study special programs. The final exams are taking place there as well. This is not only a logistic challenge but one that is also causing many parents to refuse sending their children to school because of the long waiting hours outside at the bus stops. Many families have fled Sderot so far. There is only limited psychological support and this is mainly for the teachers.

One of the biggest problems for the schools is the lack of short-term and long-term planning strategies. For the short term it is unclear when classes can be held again in the Shaar Hanegev High School. At present, the classrooms are being fortified and protected with iron plates on the roofs. Other rooms like computer and chemistry labs are planned to be secured during the summer break. In the long run, it is unclear how many students will stay in Sderot: It is expected that many parents will move away or will register their children in schools, which are outside the range of the rockets.



Teachers discussing interim solutions with the school principal and the head of the Regional Council



The classrooms are now being protected by special steel constructions

The situation is especially difficult for the students. Besides protected classrooms they most particularly need stability. The erratic day to day planning and the daily improvised school schedule are stressing the students almost as much as the continuous threat of Qassam rockets.

Alon Schuster, head of the Shaar Hanegev Regional Council, reported: "Unlike the situation in the North during the Lebanon war, we can't expect a fundamental change of situation here but simply hope that there will be fewer rockets. This is difficult to deal with for the people. People can deal with difficult situations when they know that there is an end to it. But this is not the case here and from the media the people understand that nothing will change in the near future." Asking him how the inhabitants of Sderot view their neighbors in Gaza now, he answered: "Most people see that we have to differentiate between the terrorists and the broader population of Gaza because they know that the population there is taken hostage by the extremists."

This is the reason why, according to Schuster, joint projects are important in order to see the complexity of the reality also in difficult times and to enable a humane view of the circumstances of all involved.

The project coordinator of the school explained to us: "Especially now we have to talk; we are not politicians." It makes no sense, according to the coordinator, to argue who is suffering more. Everybody is 100% a victim. One teacher said that too many times the military takes political decisions, which hinder a humane point of view. According to her, Israel needs three things: firstly, dialogue and encounter with the Palestinians, but also secondly its army and military power and last but not least thirdly a political solution by courageous leading personalities. Another teacher is convinced that talking with the neighbors is necessary and that "the main problem is that there is no peace narrative anymore in the Israeli society. Instead, it is replaced by contemplations on how to better fight the next war."

When talking a day later with the coordinator in Gaza, he told us on the phone: "Here in Gaza the schools are functioning normally. But all the people are traumatized, especially little children." He doesn't see any danger for the joint project with the Israelis. Quite the contrary: Now it is essential to enforce the peace and democracy education and to live accordingly: "We are doing this in our own interest and for our own sake. We owe this to our children and their future."

Dr. Lars Hänsel