



stichting

C.O.M.E.

COME DIALOGUE SEMINAR

**THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN
CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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COME (COmmunication Middle East)

The COME Foundation (Communication Middle East) is a private Dutch foundation that has been providing young Palestinians and Israelis with a unique opportunity to get to know each other during 10-day dialogue seminars in Cyprus for more than 40 years. The result? Humanization of the 'other', broadening perspectives, and growth of hope.

This report aims to overview COME activity throughout the years, and introduce the impact the dialogue seminar has on Israelis and Palestinians, and its role in supporting conflict resolution.

This report is written by Orel Scheinin and the COME team, with recommendation to distribute and forward this report and its findings to whom it may concern.

You can support the work of COME Foundation by contributing financially, see <https://stichting-come.nl/doe-mee/>. Or use IBAN: NL 04 INGB 0003733187, Stichting COME in Leiden. COME Foundation has an ANBI status.

More information can be found at the website: www.stichting-come.nl, or send an email to stichtingcome@gmail.com.

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Forward



Jan Halin
Chairperson

“We want to make a positive contribution to creating a positive social climate in the Middle East, in which there is more room for a political solution and constructive coexistence of Palestinians and Israelis on an individual, group and/or national level.” (Mission, strategy and vision of the COME Foundation).

“For more than 40 years COME has been committed to a hopeful future in the Middle East by organizing meetings and dialogue between groups of different representatives. Gradually, COME has focused on organizing meetings for young Israelis and Palestinians. Under the leadership of a Dutch project leader and with intensive and close cooperation with Israeli and Palestinian representatives, an annual 10-day dialogue seminar is prepared and executed. The participants discover the distortion of the narratives and that the other is also a vulnerable human being who seeks justice and happiness. Evaluations and research show that this type of encounter arises from person to person contact. Hope is born, and in the words of a previous participant, ‘everybody is a human being. Our personalities are more similar than we could imagine’.”



Maaïke Hoffer
Project Leader

“For almost 15 years I have been involved in COME Foundation by organizing dialogue seminars for Palestinians and Israelis. Before I started this work, I was skeptical about the impact and influence a dialogue activity like this seminar could have. However, during my first seminar (in 2008), which I attended as the project assistant, I was very touched by what participants said. How it made them feel (‘a life changing experience’) and think (‘they are humans, with emotions and fears, just like us’).

During 10 intense, long days, with a program that has been developed through the years based on the evaluation forms, participants get to know each other well and can discuss - in a safe and neutral space - all the topics they cannot discuss back home. Each and every year participants are challenged to open their hearts and minds for ‘the other’. Over the years I saw that the seminars became more relevant than ever, considering the polarization that is taking place. I am thankful for this research done by Orel and I invite you to read the report and contribute to our work.”

About COME

Overview

COME (Communication Middle East) Foundation is a private Dutch foundation that organizes a 10-day dialogue seminar annually for young Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis to allow them to meet and get to know each other.

The organization of COME in its current form was set up in 1991. However, seminars have been organized since 1975. In these early days, a small organization was founded, which strove to bring together students of conflicting groups in the Middle East. In these ‘meeting seminars’, the participants came together in a different place, mainly in Cyprus, and got to know one another, each in their own identity. In these ‘meeting seminars’, hundreds of Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Egyptians have had the opportunity to come closer together in a stable and safe environment.

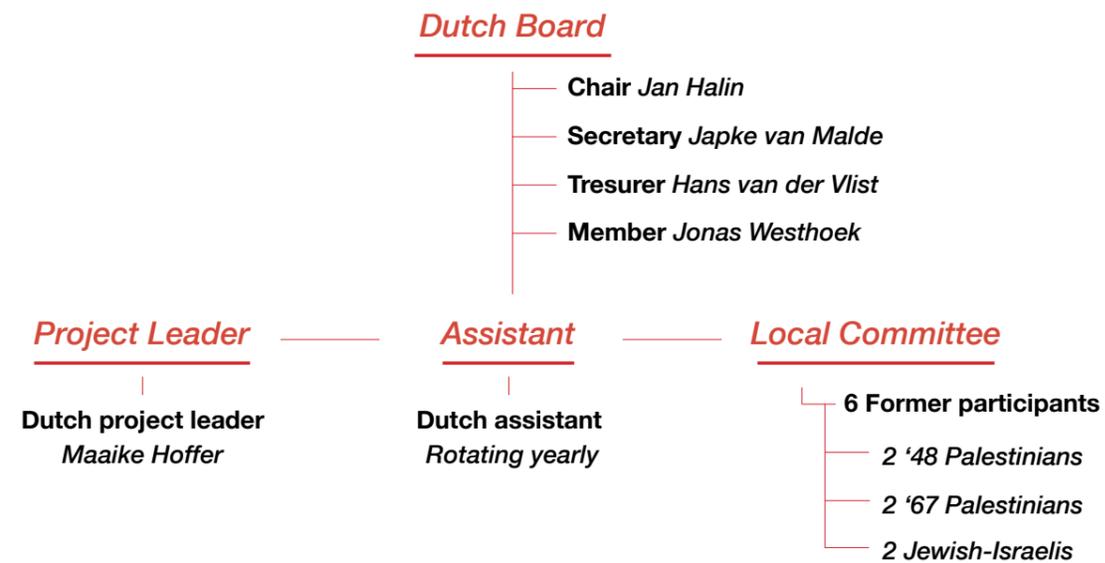
Later on, seminars were also held in Jerusalem. They were organized for theologians and those interested in theology. Europeans came to Jerusalem to study theology and meet the people of the land, both Israelis and Palestinians.

Since 1991, these two initiatives have been joined, establishing the young COME Foundation. In 2009 the last ‘Jerusalem-seminar’ was held. Over the years, the target group for the ‘meeting-seminars’ became smaller, being now mainly a meeting place for Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians.

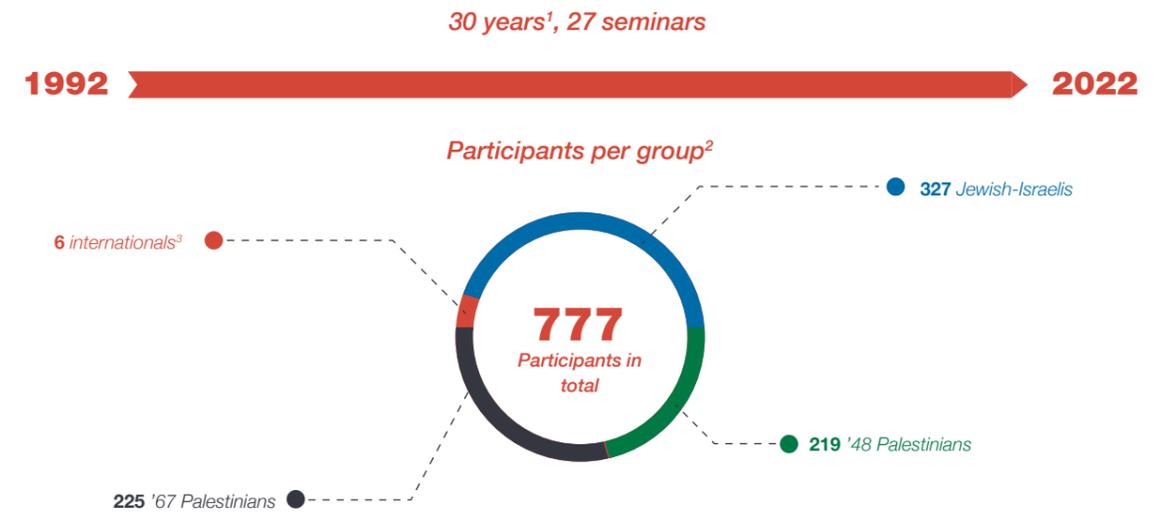
These days, the main objective of the Foundation is to organize dialogue seminars on neutral ground in which Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian youth (both living in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories) can meet each other in the context of the conflict situation in the Middle East. By organizing these seminars, COME Foundation wants to express its engagement to all sides.

Organizational Structure

The Foundation has a committee consisting of two Dutch members (one of whom is the project leader) and several Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian members. These 'local committee members' are former seminar participants. The committee is responsible for preparing and implementing the program and for the recruitment, selection, and preparation of the participants. The project leader functions as the bridge between the local committee and the Dutch board. Except for the project leader, all the committee members and board members do their work for COME Foundation on a voluntary basis.



COME in Numbers



Funds

The board of COME Foundation applies yearly for funds at several Dutch foundations. In addition, the Foundation has a few hundred individual contributors who yearly support the work of COME financially. Tens of Dutch protestant churches donate yearly to COME Foundation as well. COME Foundation does not receive money from any government (not the Dutch nor any other European government, and not the Israeli or the Palestinian authorities) nor organizations specially linked to Israel or Palestine. In this way, COME wants to maintain its impartiality and be able to determine its own course.

Partners



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¹ In 2014 a seminar was canceled due to the war between Israel and Palestine. In 2020 and 2021 the seminars were canceled due to COVID-19.
² For the reasoning behind group categorization see COME Dialogue Seminars (p.10).
³ Data before 1992 is missing. Moreover, in 2003, internationals who are neither Israelis nor Palestinians could also participate in the dialogue seminars.

COME Dialogue Seminars

Literature & Theoretical Framework

Dialogue and group encounters are plausible approaches used to reduce and solve negative stereotypes, mutual delegitimization, and miscommunication between groups in a conflict over identity and recognition⁴. Research has shown that dialogue sessions between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians improve the relations between the sides through transformative communication, helping to reduce prejudice and hostility and enhance mutual understanding between cultural groups in conflict. Transformative dialogue is a type of communication that facilitates a shift in the relationship between two parties that have conflicting views or practices. Therefore, it helps the sides to create a shared understanding, develop common ground, and build a stronger relationship⁵. The idea of transformative dialogue is heavily attributed to the contact hypothesis⁶.

Suggesting a theoretical framework to ensure positive effects and outcomes of 'true' intergroup contact, Gordon W. Allport first introduced the contact hypothesis in 1954⁷. Since then, the use of the contact hypothesis has increased significantly in the school of social psychology and intergroup relations⁸. Studies have shown intriguing findings of how prejudice and hostility might be reduced between groups when the contact hypothesis occurs. These studies include examples of intergroup relations concerning matters such as sexuality⁹, interracial contact¹⁰, and ethnicity¹¹.

Allport argues that the contact hypothesis can fully realize its potential, reduce prejudice and negative attitudes, and foster mutual understanding between groups in contact under four optimal conditions¹²:



Acquaintance

The outgroup contact should be sufficient in terms of occurrence, continuity, and closeness. However, one should bear in mind that an acquaintance could have the opposite effect: a superficial acquaintance is likely to generate negative associations, strengthening prejudice and negative attitudes between the outgroup individuals. Therefore, a 'true' acquaintance should occur.



Equal status

Groups should have equal status while coming in contact. Existing hierarchies, power dynamics, and socio-political features should be overruled to disconfirm aspects of inferiority and superiority.

4 Ellis, D. G., & Maoz, I. (2015). Dialogue and cultural communication codes between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians. *Intercultural communication: A reader*, Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publishing, (217-223).

5 Gergen, K. J., McNamee, S., & Barrett, F. J. (2006). *Towards a Vocabulary of Transformative Dialogue*.

6 Maoz, Ifat. "Multiple conflicts and competing agendas: A framework for conceptualizing structured encounters between groups in conflict-the case of a coexistence project of Jews and Palestinians in Israel." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of peace psychology* 6.2 (2000): 135-156.

7 Allport, G.W., (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

8 Hewstone, M., Stroebe, W., & Jonas, K. (Eds.). (2016). *An introduction to social psychology*. John Wiley & Sons.

9 Loehr, A., Doan, L., & Miller, L. R. (2015). The role of selection effects in the contact hypothesis: Results from a US national survey on sexual prejudice. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 44(8), 2111-2123.

10 Mancini, C., Mears, D. P., Stewart, E. A., Beaver, K. M., & Pickett, J. T. (2015). Whites' perceptions about Black criminality: A closer look at the contact hypothesis. *Crime & Delinquency*, 61(7), 996-1022.

11 Berger, R., Benatov, J., Abu-Raiya, H., & Tadmor, C. T. (2016). Reducing prejudice and promoting positive intergroup attitudes among elementary-school children in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Journal of school psychology*, 57, 53-72.

12 See note 8



Cooperation toward a common goal

Groups in contact should have a common goal or tasks to be cooperatively achieved during (or throughout) the contact. In addition, task ability and positive outcomes should be ensured to ameliorate negative attitudes during the cooperation.



Normative climate

The climate in which interactions take place affects people's attitudes as authorities establish acceptance norms. Therefore, contact should be encouraged by relevant institutions, laws, and regulations, favoring equality in the climate under which outgroup contact occurs.

However, some studies suggest that research based on the contact hypothesis must be addressed empirically, although Allport's conditions are not essential for finding significant relationships between contact and prejudice or achieving positive outcomes in intergroup contact¹³.

Research conducted by Dr. Noora Haitham Hussain in 2018 in a unique collaboration with COME aimed to observe how an intergroup encounter intervention between Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis could "encourage participants to understand each other as human beings with shared fears, hopes and rights that may surpass assumptions of the other as 'the enemy', thereby encouraging participants to 'give the other a human face'"¹⁴.

In alignment with reaching the objective, Hussain evaluated a sample population of COME's dialogue seminar from 2016, following two key aims: first, to statistically evaluate whether the encounter in the COME dialogue seminar between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians resulted in overall behavioral change, and second, through qualitative analysis of participant dialogue, to observe whether the COME seminar fostered greater understanding, perspective taking and empathy with the other.

To address the first key aim of the study, Hussain designated three subscales to measure behavioral change: global empathy, intergroup reconciliation, and openness to the other. No significant difference was indicated among the participants before and after the seminar in any of the subscales. However, changes in attitudes between outgroups were observed. In light of the second key aim, Hussain identified five master themes (and 13 subthemes) drawn on qualitative data of the participants' experience in the seminar and six months after the seminar. These subthemes revealed aspects that constitute a hindrance and/or amplifier for change, such as co-existence, impact of social identity, reconciliation and reality, seeing the conflict differently, language, and questioning reality.

Overall, the absence of a third-party intervention might hinder the chances of effective contact between outgroups that attempt to achieve effective interaction toward reconciliation. Therefore, NGOs, such as COME, play a significant role in facilitating dialogues between Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis¹⁵. COME serves as a moderator, promoting dialogue that might be translated into behavioral and attitude change, civic collaborations, and political impact.

13 Paluck, E. L., Green, S. A., & Green, D. P. (2019). The contact hypothesis re-evaluated. *Behavioural Public Policy*, 3(2), 129-158.

14 Hussain, N. (2018). *Giving the other a human face: a counseling psychology perspective on the potential benefit of an intergroup encounter intervention between Israelis and Palestinians in Cyprus* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Roehampton).

15 See note 14

COME Dialogue Seminars

For 30 years COME Foundation has invited people from one of the following ‘circumstantial groups’ to participate in the dialogue seminars:

- ‘67 Palestinians: Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, or East Jerusalem. These territories were occupied by Israel during the war in 1967.
- ‘48 Palestinians (also Arab Israelis): Palestinian residents of Israel, descendants of Palestinian Arabs that continued to live in the state of Israel upon its establishment in 1948.
- Jewish-Israelis: Israelis with Jewish identity and/or Israeli passport who do not identify as Palestinians.

This division does not reflect any political idea of COME Foundation but reflects practical issues concerning the preparation and travel arrangements of participants. In addition, former seminars have taught that with this division, participants will get the most out of the seminar’s activities. In case one of the three groups does not or cannot participate, COME Foundation cancels the seminar.

The seminars take place in Cyprus, which is close by and has a familiar atmosphere. Therefore, Cyprus constitutes a neutral ground outside the daily lives of the participants, where Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians can better reflect on themselves on both the individual and the collective levels.

The process of executing a seminar consists of the following steps:

1 *The kickoff meeting*

The program of the seminar is put together by the Local Committee. The committee consists of local (Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian) and Dutch committee members. Even though one of the Dutch members has final responsibility for the seminar, the local committee members have the most considerable influence on the program and the selection of the participants. The local members are all former participants of the seminar. Ideally, each circumstantial group has two (gender-diversified) committee members present at the seminar. During the preparation meetings (where the content of the seminar is put together and the preparation of the participants takes place), more local committee members can be involved. Every year in spring, the committee comes together to prepare the seminar, secure the program, discuss the different sections of the program, determine the theme, and talk about the selection of the participants.

2 *Applications*

Participants must fill out applications in which they share their interests, expectations, backgrounds, and goals for participating in COME dialogue seminars.

3 *Interviews*

After submitting their applications, suitable prospective participants are called in to schedule an intake interview. During the interview, the committee members meet the prospective participants, discuss their application, and ensure their readiness to participate in a dialogue seminar with the other groups. The interviews are partly conducted in English. By the end of this step, suitable prospective participants are chosen to participate in the dialogue seminar.

4 *A preparation seminar*

A preparation seminar lasts between one to two days. The preparation seminar has three main goals. The first goal aims to let each circumstantial group’s members get to know each other before participating in the seminar as a group and meeting with other groups. The second goal is to equip all prospective dialogue seminar participants with tools to optimize tolerant, inclusive, and listened-to interaction with ‘the other’: discussing the idea of narratives and overviewing nonviolent communicative means. Finally, the third goal is to introduce the participants to the schedule of the actual seminar and divide responsibilities among them, as the groups are responsible for producing and creating some of the content and the activities.

5 *The dialogue seminar*

The first two or three days of the seminar are used for making personal acquaintances, followed by national acquaintances and group-to-group meetings, after which political acquaintances and discussions can start. Each of these three phases can consist of games, meetings, discussions, presentations, leisure activities, and other specific activities. Halfway through the seminar, an excursion is organized, preferably to a town near the beach. This gives the participants a way to release any built-up tension.

The steps taken by the Foundation might suggest that the conditions indicated by Allport are met in the COME dialogue seminars.

However, under political circumstances, these conditions might be hindered. For example, Palestinians (both ‘48 and ‘67) and Jewish-Israelis go through different security procedures at the airport before the flight to Cyprus. Sometimes participants cannot obtain or access departure from the same airport. Another example would be the non-participation of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, as the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) limits Palestinians to travel out of the Gaza Strip since 2006. That means that an essential group of Palestinians cannot engage in the seminars, to begin with.

Measuring Impact

Introduction

In order to measure the impact of COME dialogue seminars, the participants are first asked to fill out an evaluation form on the last day of each seminar. In the evaluation, alongside personal data, the participants are asked to share about and rate the activities, general issues (logistics and administration), most and least meaningful activities, fifty statements underlying change in attitudes toward others, intentional changes in behavior, and more. To thoroughly measure the dialogue seminar’s impact, COME Foundation asks the alumni to fill out a second evaluation form approximately three to four months after the seminar ends.

These evaluations help the Foundation adjust the seminar’s activities, improve its content, realize its potential, and stick to its vision while maintaining the relevance and interest of all parties in COME’s dialogue seminars.

This section aims to introduce the dialogue seminar’s impact using a data sample extracted from the first evaluation forms of four seminars between 2017-2022¹⁶. Drawing on 100 responses out of 104 participants, selective and figurative findings are used to showcase COME’s impact. Finally, the results and limitations of the presented findings are briefly discussed.

Findings

General

Participants



Jewish-Israelis

**including participants who identify as Israelis, but not as Arabs, Palestinians, or Jews*

'48 Palestinians

'67 Palestinians

Other

**with no religious or group affiliation*

Gender



Women

Other

Men

Religious Affiliation



Jews

**including secular and traditional Jews*

Christians

Muslims

Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist

Other

Age

19-33 years old

16 Between 2017-2022, COME carried out four seminars (see note 1).

Statements

In the second part of the evaluation, participants were asked to fill in, to what extent they agree with each statement. The participants could choose between five answers:

- I agree completely
- I agree
- I am neutral
- I disagree
- I completely disagree

I have seen and/or heard the ideas, motivations and feelings of people from the other side of the conflict, that I would/could never see/hear at home



I have been thinking/feeling about the ideas, feelings or images that I have of other people



I have been thinking about how I can change my daily life at home



I have changed my ideas, feelings and/or images of other people



The seminar was very useful to me



The organization should continue organizing this seminar in the future



Will you advise your friends and/or relatives to participate in this seminar?



Results

- The participation percent of **51% Palestinians and 45% Jewish-Israelis in COME's dialogue seminars indicates a positive balance** of participation between the circumstantial groups.
- The gender representation in the program is **roughly equal, with 49% of the participants being men and 50% being women.**
- Most participants in the seminars (**47%**) identify as **secular, nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist.** The next largest group of participants identify as **Jews (24%),** followed by **Muslims (14%). Christians are the least represented group (13%).** There are 2 individuals who identify as belonging to "Other" religious groups. COME will consider taking action to improve participation of underrepresented groups from religious backgrounds.
- **82% of the participants had a positive experience in gaining a deeper understanding and empathy toward the perspectives and experiences of people** from other circumstantial groups, which they may not have had the opportunity to encounter in their daily lives at home.
- **65% of the participants were positively affected by the seminar** as they considered how they could make changes in their daily lives as a result of the discussions and insights gained during the seminar.
- **Unanimously, all the participants had a positive experience and found value in the seminar,** as they all agreed that the organization should continue to hold this seminar in the future. Moreover, all participants would recommend COME dialogue seminar to their friends and/or relatives.
- The average **response rate of 96% of the evaluation forms between 2017-2022** suggests that COME should stick to designating time for the participants to fill out the form as part of the seminar schedule.
- The average **response rate of 18% of the second evaluation form** between 2017-2019 asks COME to reconsider the method used for data collection.

Further findings are available upon request.

Summary

COME Foundation is devoted to engaging with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by facilitating dialogue seminars drawn on the conditions outlined in the contact hypothesis suggested by Allport. By executing seminars in light of Allport's hypothesis, the Foundation ensures the optimal environment for Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians to come together in 'true' contact and give 'the other' a human face, as supported by findings presented in this report. Therefore, COME Foundation believes its activity contributes to increasing tolerance, understanding, and acceptance between the sides through meaningful and authentic encounters.

In 2022, the board of the Foundation decided to extend COME's activity by the following:



Alumni Community

An alumni community was never established nor facilitated by COME. Yet, different initiatives took place sporadically throughout the years by alumni. Nevertheless, the Foundation has recognized that resources and funds should be directed toward an alumni community: established, managed, and carried "by the alumni for the alumni". COME will take the role of a facilitator, providing the fertilized ground where an alumni community could flourish. The process began in December 2022 with representatives from all three circumstantial groups.



COME Out of the Radar

Although the Foundation kept its activity under the radar to maintain impartiality and neutrality toward the Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian sides, COME considers investing in advertisement and social media platforms to reach out to a bigger audience. The findings will allow the Foundation to indicate the number of people who genuinely wish to have 'true' contact, contributing to fundraising and the extension of activities.



Fundraising

In recent years, the Foundation has been facing severe difficulties raising the money necessary to ensure COME's activity, let alone executing the seminars. Foreseeable restrictions might occur, resulting in downsizing and cutbacks, when COME activities and alumni communities of Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, devoted to give the other side a human face, are needed the most. Therefore, expressing the value of COME's activities and their importance through research and reports will be used to support the fundraising.

COME will continue expressing its engagement to all sides in the conflict and to extend the Foundation's activity in light of the values of dialogue and true contact. However, despite the democratic backsliding the world has been witnessing in recent years¹⁷, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region, which has suffered from this backsliding the most since 2012¹⁸, COME strives for the day its dialogue seminars and activity will not be needed anymore, when the conflict will be resolved, and peace will prevail.

17 The Economist. (2022, February 10). A new low for global democracy. https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-low-for-global-democracy?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd

18 Democracy Index 2021. (2022, February 15). Economist Intelligence Unit. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>

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It must happen in a much greater scale, with as many Israelis and Palestinians as possible.

Hope for peace. Hope for a change. Reducing stereotypes.

In the beginning I thought of it as part of the normalization, but now I wish I could repeat it.

We need this kind of seminars.

Very important, especially in the sense of educating future leaders for peace.

I think everyone should take part in this kind of seminars.

It made me confront myself with a lot of things I don't agree about with my country.

I felt relieved being able to talk freely and normalize friendships with the other side and learning more about the '48 Palestinians.

“