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## Bridging a gap a world away

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, June 28, 2006

BY MARIA ARMENTAL  
Journal Staff Writer

SOUTH KINGSTOWN -- Rawan Qudsi's drawings reflect the tangled reality of Israel.

An Israeli citizen of Muslim Palestinian descent, Qudsi is part of a group of four Israeli students of various faith and ethnic backgrounds being sponsored by the America-Israel Friendship League at the World Scholar-Athlete Games being held at the University of Rhode Island this week.

Qudsi, who is visiting the country for the first time, said she is having fun at the games, taking art workshops and getting to know people from some 155 countries and all 50 states. If she could have her way, she said, she would want to see peace and equality in Israel and beyond.

The 17-year-old explained she draws as a way of channeling her feelings. A pencil drawing that features Nazareth's marketplace brings her back home. There are no people, just a familiar sight she's seen many times. It makes her feel comfortable, she said.

Some of her other drawings, however, reveal the internal struggle she is facing. As an Israeli Muslim-Palestinian, she is caught in the midst of an ongoing struggle.

A charcoal drawing shows a map of a Palestinian man being held prisoner in an Israeli jail, still fighting for the land. Another, inspired by the construction of a wall separating Israel from the West Bank, shows a hand -- symbolizing the Palestinian people -- trying to cross over but getting caught in a barbed-wire fence. The hand is bleeding.

Yet another drawing shows a map of today's Israeli and Palestinian territories combined with a hand in the center making the victory sign. It symbolizes the victory of the Palestinians.

It's not that Qudsi doesn't like Israelis -- she is Israeli -- or Jews -- two of her teammates with whom she's become close are Jewish and are serving their compulsory military service. She is struggling with the socioeconomic and political situation in Israel and Palestine and how she fits into that reality.

Her team leader, Ilan Kowalsky, a pro basketball coach in Israel, said Qudsi's struggle perfectly exemplifies the need for events such as the World Scholar-Athlete Games to build friendships and promote peace and conflict resolution.

"It's a very difficult situation," Kowalsky said of Qudsi's struggle, adding that while Qudsi and the family of a fourth student who is being sponsored -- a Palestinian Christian who also lives in Nazareth -- knew each other, Qudsi and Rawi Awayed were not friends. The day they left for the United States, they rode to the airport in the same car, Kowalsky said, noting that was a positive sign.

Bridging the gap between Qudsi and 20-year-old Tair Kowalsky, Kowalsky's daughter, and Maayan Naimi, 19, was harder. This week, the three girls referred to each other as friends.

Ilan Kowalsky said he is looking forward to seeing which one of her drawings Qudsi will show at the final exhibit on Saturday.

"Maybe she will go out of here with another vision," Kowalsky said.

Meanwhile, Awayed, 16, has been showing students the oud, a Middle Eastern stringed instrument with a bowl-shaped body and no frets that is played with a pick.

Tair Kowalsky and Naimi, who met at the Israeli Defense Ministry where they work, have been focusing on theater, an interest they share but had to put aside while serving in the military.

In addition to exploring their interests and learning from all the other participants, the four Israeli students have been also talking extensively about the real Israel.

"I try to tell people who don't know anything about Israel what it is for me," Tair Kowalsky said.

"Israel does have a lot of problems," Kowalsky said. But beyond those, "We have a great country."

"People don't know Israel," added Naimi. "They know Israel just from the CNN.

"We actually explain" to the other participants "that it's a beautiful country, not so different from other countries."

What have they learned from their participation at the world games? "To judge people not on their religion or where they come from or their political opinion, just [based on] who they are, their personality," Awayed said.

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