

Technology project crosses Jerusalem's divide

Sharmila Devi

Published: October 1 2006 17:16 | Last updated: October 1 2006 17:16

The city of Jerusalem is, more than ever, associated with ethnic strife. But just next to the Old City's walls, practically on the line that used to divide Jerusalem, a group of Israelis and Palestinians is busy planning a hi-tech future.

The [Middle East Education Through Technology \(Meet\)](#) project was set up in 2003 to bring together Israeli and Palestinian high school youths, with the help of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Under a three-year programme, students undergo three intensive summer schools focused on computer science and business skills and also work throughout the year on their own projects. The first class - graduated this summer and [Meet](#) is attracting growing interest from the private and public sectors.

"I am an Israeli from quite a liberal background but even I never met a Palestinian all the time I was growing up," says Assaf Harlap, one of Meet's founders, who recently graduated from London's School of Oriental and African Studies, where he majored in Japanese studies. "When I would call home from abroad, people would tell me how bad the situation was and I thought I had to do something."

Mr Harlap joined forces with Anat and Yaron Binur, an Israeli brother-and-sister team who have both studied at [MIT](#). They drew their inspiration from an [MIT](#) programme that brings computer science courses to Kenya to help to bridge the digital divide.

The [Meet](#) curriculum is based on methodology developed from the [MIT](#) computer science and artificial intelligence laboratory and [MIT's Sloan School of Management](#).

[Meet](#) uses technology to try to bring together young people from diverse backgrounds in a common endeavour. "We call ourselves a social start-up," says Mr Harlap. "Growing up in the 1990s, I saw many peace programmes but we wanted something with more substantial content and focused on the long-term, not just bringing people together for two weeks."

The approach appears to have worked. "Some students have come to us because of the [MIT](#) connection and the technology component, not because they necessarily want to meet the other side," says Abeer Hazboun, one of Meet's co-directors.

Politics is not part of the curriculum but does inform practically every aspect of daily life in the Holy Land. The outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in 2000 has hardened attitudes on both sides, which are physically divided by the West Bank separation barrier and a system of checkpoints and army positions in the occupied territories.

Despite logistical difficulties, [Meet](#) has achieved its ambition of bringing together Israelis and Palestinians from Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh in Israel and Ramallah and Bethlehem on the West Bank. Students gather for the annual summer schools and are expected to meet once a week in Jerusalem to work on projects in small groups.

Tali Dowek, another [Meet](#) co-director, is hoping for a more regular system of permits from the Israeli military authorities that control the occupied territories. Palestinian students are granted permits to travel from the West Bank to Jerusalem on a case-by-case basis, sometimes only for a few hours.

From time to time, Israel imposes full closure on the territories, meaning no travel at all. [Meet](#) had to exclude students from the Gaza Strip because of its distance and the extreme difficulty of gaining travel permits for Palestinians there.

“The kids use online facilities when they can’t travel but it doesn’t change the fact that they need to come here,” says Ms Dowek.

The students, who start the course at the age of 14, undergo a rigorous selection procedure that tests proficiency in English – the course language – general knowledge and aptitude. Students receive a full scholarship, valued at some \$2,500 (£1,330), to cover the cost of tuition, transport and materials.

All [Meet](#) workers and [MIT](#) students and alumni who teach at the summer schools in Jerusalem participate on a volunteer basis. Mr Harlap says the budget has risen from \$50,000 for the pilot study to some \$400,000, including donations of cash and equipment from the private sector. International and local academic and business supporters include [MIT](#), the Hebrew and Al-Quds universities, DaimlerChrysler and Sun Microsystems. Some private sector Palestinian supporters prefer to keep their involvement anonymous because of political sensitivities.

Past and present [Meet](#) students are gushing in their praise.

Mohammad Wari, 17, who is from east Jerusalem and hopes to study computer science at MIT, says: “[Meet](#) was an experience that you can’t get anywhere else and I learnt lots of skills.” The rigorous work schedule, on top of his regular schoolwork, forced him to be disciplined, he adds.

Shlomo Gradman is an Israeli member of [Meet’s](#) advisory board and chairman of the High Tech CEO Forum at the Israeli Centre for Management. He has provided strategic advice and support to Meet almost since its start.

“I think [Meet](#) is a great initiative and needs to continue growing. I’m trying to bring in as many big names as I can to help them.”

Current political realities mean many of [Meet’s](#) graduates will pursue separate paths unless, by coincidence, they find themselves at the same university abroad. But [Meet](#) hopes that their shared experience will make it more likely that one day they will work together again as social, business and even political partners.

“Our vision is to create leaders who have a professional language and shared common interests,”, says Ms Hazboun.