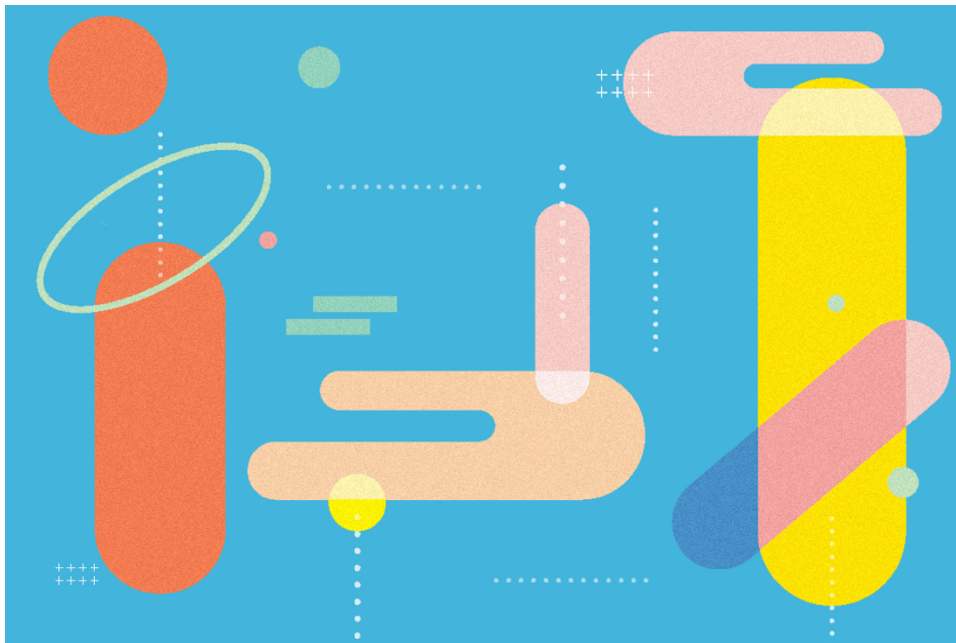


CHRIS WRIGHT | TECHNOLOGY | JANUARY 28

These labs make tech to promote hope, not hostility

From amplifying social division to fomenting terrorism, digital comms have been blamed for most of the world's ills. Now, in the Middle East and beyond, a new generation of peace tech activists wants to change that.



WHEN WE THINK of technology in relation to global conflict, our thoughts tend to migrate to things like combat drones, state-sponsored hackers, or hypersonic missiles. There is an international movement gaining ground, though, whose aim is to change all that.

Spearheading the effort is the US-based organization PeaceTech Lab, which nurtures an international network of people using all the tools at their disposal—mobile apps, Wikipedia, GPS, social media, digital games—to promote peace and security.

An alliance of activists, data scientists, community leaders, and journalists, PeaceTech was founded in 2014 with the promise, as chief executive Sheldon Himelfarb puts it, “to amplify technology’s power for good above its power for harm and hatred.” It has since worked with

2,000 individuals and organizations across 30 countries, with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Part think tank, part accelerator, and part educational facility, the lab also serves as a kind of global publicist for the peace tech movement—everyone from MovieWeb to *Billboard*, for instance, covered the announcement of its International Peace Honors event, which celebrates the likes of actor Forest Whitaker and *Humans of New York* author Brandon Stanton. “Part of our job is to raise awareness,” Himelfarb says. “But there is nothing black-tie about this. We’re hosting it online. It would blow you away how cheaply we put all this together.”

The lab’s most important work lies in the grassroots efforts it inspires, facilitates, and sometimes funds, the majority of which have never been anywhere near a newspaper headline. “Our laser focus is putting innovative tech tools into the hands of local change makers,” Himelfarb says. “The really cool thing—or not cool, profound—is the number of ordinary citizens who have become interested in this. I’m not talking digital engineers or AI developers, but everyday people who are realizing that they have this awesome supercomputer in their pocket. Every day I hear about another person in another place doing something really interesting.”



Sheldon Himelfarb wants to “amplify technology’s power for good.” (LUIS VAZQUEZ)

Among the “courageous missions” Himelfarb describes is a mobile app in Syria that maps the trajectory of missiles, a digital network in the US to help evacuate and resettle displaced Afghans, an interactive map that tracks attacks on Iraqi citizen journalists, and an app in India that sends an alarm and location details to the friends and family of gender violence victims—the latter developed by a small group of 13-year-old girls using a free online app maker.

“We are always mindful that we must remain in the background, in a supporting role, as they pursue their courageous missions,” says Himelfarb, who made headlines recently with a passionate call for the establishment of a global body to fight misinformation. “I usually run the other way when it comes to getting the lab bogged down in policy issues,” he says. “But I cannot turn away when it comes to this, because it undercuts everything else we are trying to do. Misinformation is the problem that stops us from solving every other problem.”

Himelfarb insists, however, that these sorts of public to-dos don’t distract him from his main mission: to ignite a global, self-motivated movement of digital peaceniks. The lab is currently seeking to codify this approach, launching a campaign titled Generation PeaceTech, whose aim is to have a billion people using its techniques and technologies by 2030. “This will be the first generation in human history with the power to send powerful ideas, life-saving information, and vital funds around the world with the push of a button,” says Himelfarb. “At the very moment when the threats we face are growing in frequency and intensity, billions of people already have the tech tools they need to secure positive change.”

When presented with the prospect of billions of people running around willy-nilly, creating crowdmaps and mass text messaging systems, Himelfarb adds a word of caution. “Yes, we are trying to introduce a degree of intentionality,” he says. “The movement has to have a North Star. We all know about the unintended consequences of technology. We have to think about who owns the data, about privacy issues and the potential for misinformation. The bad guys are pretty well organized, and to beat them, to take technology back, we will have to be as well.”

When Abeer Bandak first encountered Uri Rosenberg in the early 2000s, things did not get off to a particularly smooth start. “They met in a conflict mediation seminar,” says Jake Shapiro at

the joint Israeli-Palestinian non-profit Tech2Peace. “Uri had been working in tech and Abeer was a Palestinian activist—she basically came to yell at the other side.” Even so, the pair kept in touch and, along with a later arrival named Tomer Cohen—who’d worked in electronic warfare with the IDF—they teamed up to form Tech2Peace in 2017.



Jake Shapiro works at Tech2Peace, which brings together young Palestinians and Israelis. (LUIS VAZQUEZ)

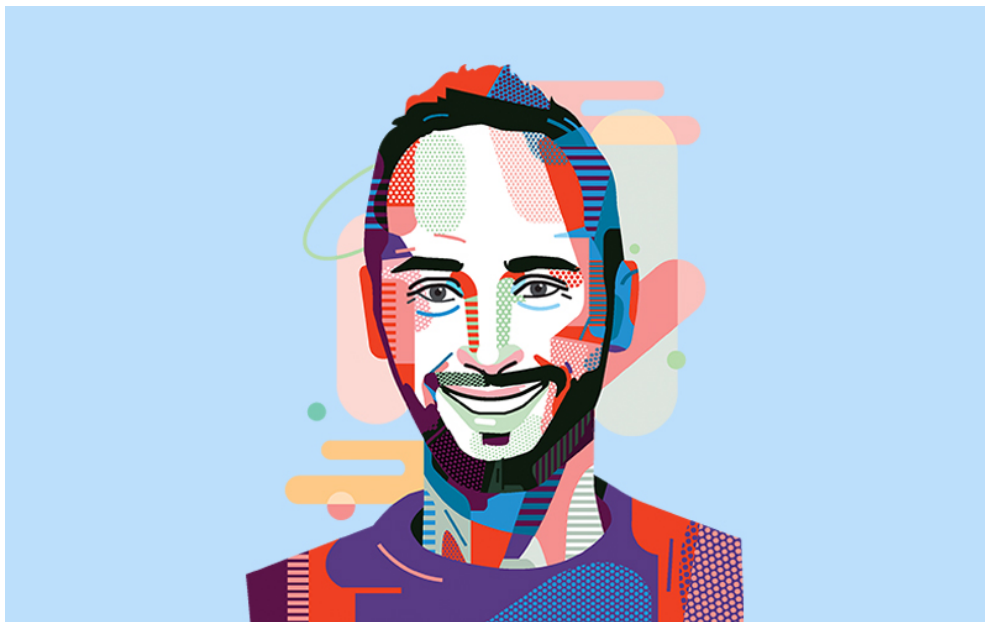
Ostensibly, the aim of the organization is to provide training, networking opportunities, and support to young Palestinians and Israelis looking to get a start in the tech field. “This is aimed at people in marginalized communities on both sides of the divide,” says Shapiro, “those who struggle the most and have less of a reason to attend a peace program—people who might not be interested in dialogue but who are in economic opportunities. These are people who have never known hope, or peace. They feel stuck.”

It’s telling that Shapiro uses words like “peace” and “dialogue” here—because, along with teaching stuff like app development and data programming, Tech2Peace is also in the business of conflict resolution. “People often come here having never met someone from the other side,” he says. “So we start out with games to establish feelings of positive cooperation, but then we heat things up. We talk about cultural identity, stereotypes, stories that are told in very different ways.

What happens is that people start out fighting and yelling and crying, then you see them quietly working together. It's beautiful."

The ultimate goal of Tech2Peace is to have these kids create projects as a team, allowing them to put aside their differences for a while, to think about solutions to problems that have nothing to do with the violence and misery that surrounds them—and, crucially, to promote genuine cooperation among participants rather than grudging compromise.

"We want to create a cycle where relationships are built on shared goals and common humanity," says Shapiro. "People tend to think you have to make sacrifices or concessions to work with the other side, but we're showing that both sides can benefit from cooperation, that you don't have to agree on everything to work together."



Adnan Jaber (LUIS VAZQUEZ)

Adnan Jaber, who joined Tech2Peace a few years ago after seeing an ad on Facebook, was not sold on the idea at first. "It wasn't an easy decision to apply to this program, because it has the word 'peace' in it, and that word is difficult for me as a Palestinian," he says. "I was worried my friends might see me as a traitor or a normalizer. But I wanted to make connections, I wanted to

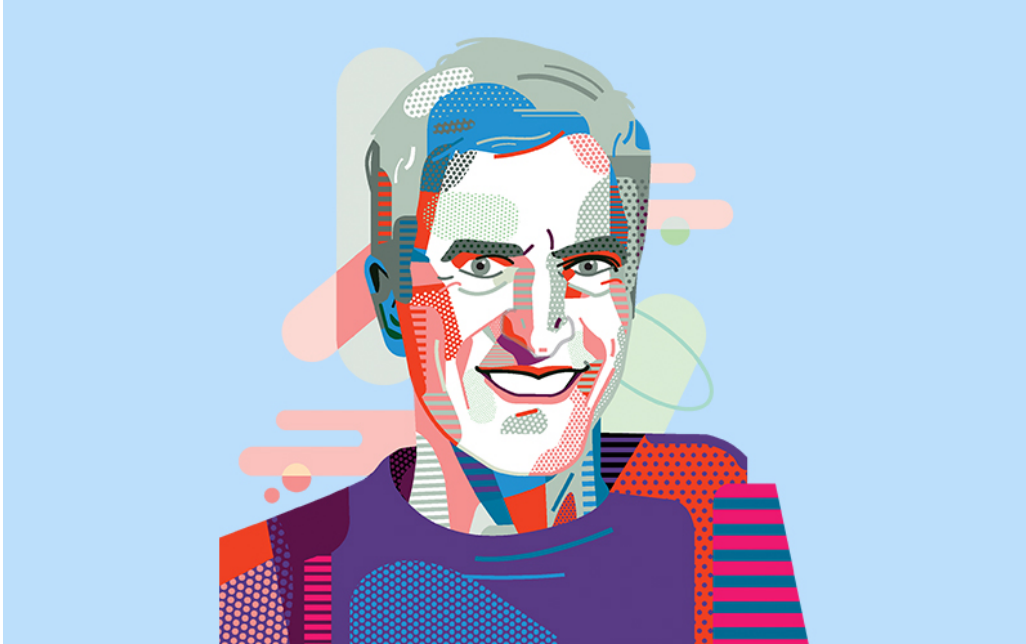
get a job. Also, I am from Jerusalem—I see Jewish Israelis every day, in the market, on the street, so I felt this would allow me to form a better understanding of my community.”

Despite his early misgivings, Jaber took to the sessions immediately. “I remember on my first day, there were people from all over, religious and not religious, nationalist and not nationalist,” he says. “It was great for me to hear everyone’s views—for the first time, I heard stories from Israeli soldiers, how they live their daily lives. Sometimes it was tough, but I think the organizers were smart in the way they started by building trust between us before we got into the hard topics. We talked about everything: checkpoints, Hamas, Zionism.”

Today, Jaber stands as one of the program’s success stories. He has already developed his own Arabic fitness app, Yalla, and in 2020 organized the first Arab-Jewish hackathon in Jerusalem. “I learned so much on the tech level and the dialogue level,” he says. “I came away feeling much more confident and I wanted my friends to have the same experience, so I started volunteering at Tech2Peace, and later joined the board.” He adds, laughing, “I also joined about 20 other dialogue programs.”

Another enterprise to emerge from Tech2Peace is Dana, an accelerator that supports women-led startups in desert tech, and which is now thriving in its Abu Dhabi headquarters. One graduate is using an AI algorithm to create a new script that can be understood by both Arabic and Hebrew readers. “It’s so exciting to see these young people succeed, the power of the world at their fingertips,” says Shapiro. “Many of them come from the socioeconomic periphery. Some didn’t really understand what a startup is.”

Picking up from where Tech2Peace leaves off is Israeli-American investor Yadin Kaufmann, whose Sadara Ventures is the first venture capital firm to target the Palestinian tech sector. He has also launched an internship program that connects “the best and brightest young Palestinians” with key players in the flourishing Israeli startup field. While he wouldn’t describe himself as a peace activist, Kaufmann allows that his work has potential benefits beyond the accrual of profit.



Yadin Kaufmann co-founded the first VC firm to target Palestinian tech. (LUIS VAZQUEZ)

“This isn’t going to solve the conflict, but we are demonstrating that it’s possible for people to work toward a common goal, and to build relationships that are the basis for any viable political solution,” Kaufmann says. “Tech entrepreneurship can be an engine for growth in an otherwise largely stagnant Palestinian economy. I believe strongly that both Palestinians and Israelis are much better served by a Palestinian economy that can offer opportunity, success, and hope.”

And, as with the people at Tech2Peace, Kaufmann has watched these business partnerships develop into something deeper. “Participants have invited each other to Shabbat dinners and Ramadan celebrations,” he says. “While this isn’t the main goal of the program, these friendships are a natural outcome of people with similar interests and aspirations working together and are wonderful to see.”

Adnan Jaber has first-hand knowledge of the “true friendships” that can grow out of this environment. According to Shapiro, the same could be said for most of the 270-odd Tech2Peace alumni. “We hold regular alumni networking activities,” he says. “We have communities in all the major cities. But they have informal gatherings, too. Businesses grow out of this, but so do lasting friendships. The spirit among them is full of love. They describe themselves as a family.”

Shapiro goes on to recall the violence that flared up this past May, a spate of tit-for-tat rocket attacks and air strikes that killed hundreds of people, mostly Palestinians. “Many of our alumni were struggling and angry, all these people dying, all this horror,” he says. “There was a guy, a Palestinian, who said he was so angry and scared he was ready to do violence. Then he got a text from a Jewish alumnus, who just wanted to see how he was, and he changed his mind. A lot of them came to us and said they were thinking about their friends on the other side, what they must be going through.”

Some graduates even dared to connect in person, despite the risks involved. “I had a Palestinian colleague stay with me for two weeks during the fighting,” says Shapiro. “We spent it together, sad and worrying, talking about what was happening. But a lot of the time we just cooked and hung out, this crazy little bubble in this terrible war.” One evening, Shapiro and a few others gathered for a picnic outside of Jerusalem. “We were laughing and eating together, but then we had to run, to get away from the rockets. You don’t easily forget these kinds of relationships.”

A moment later, Shapiro leads me on a virtual tour of a house in Bern, Switzerland, where a fresh crop is undergoing a remote workshop. In one room, a couple of young women are dancing to music. In the next room over, a guy is giving another guy a haircut. I jokingly ask Shapiro if he staged all this and he laughs. “No, this is real.”

Quratulain Fatima knows more than most about the miseries of conflict. Before she began working for development agencies, Fatima spent eight years an officer in the Pakistani Air Force, directing missions over the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. “I have seen my home bombed and all the terrors of war,” she says. “After this, I decided that I want to be able to contribute to peace.”

Since leaving the military, Fatima has been a vocal proponent of peace tech—such as the geotagging and spatial technology she has used to map water disputes in arid areas of the Punjab region, where she has been working for the last decade or so. As one of the few women doing this kind of work, Fatima has often talked with female farmers, who are forbidden from

interacting with men. She has found the women to be willing and able allies, she says, who “open their houses for mediation... and become pivotal to the peace process.”



Quratulain Fatima, formerly of Pakistan's Air Force, now directs peace-tech missions.

In 2017, buoyed by these experiences, Fatima co-founded Women4PeaceTech, an advocacy group that provides technological training for women in rural areas. “We work on the principle of positive peace, not just the absence of violence,” she says, “Pakistan is a very patriarchal country, so while some of the work we do is negotiating in water disputes, it’s mostly helping women find opportunities for economic security. We also use technology to help them find refuge from domestic violence.”

Predictably, perhaps, such activities haven’t endeared Fatima to every sector of Pakistani society, but she refuses to be deterred. “My military experience has made me resilient,” she says. “I don’t back down.”

Beyond running her organization, Fatima continues to advocate for peace tech. Too often, she says, we blame technology for society’s ills—terrorism, social divisions, hate speech, fake news—and she has taken it upon herself to try to change people’s minds. “People eye technology with suspicion,” she says. “But it is a tool. It can also be used for good.”

Himelfarb, for his part, points to the way technology was used to mitigate the “nightmare” Afghans faced when the US withdrew from their country in August. “People of all kinds came together to figure out ways to get people out, to raise money, to get information to people about where they needed to go to be safe,” he says. “The positives get drowned out by the tech-lash narrative, that social media is responsible for all the evil in the world and so on. But there are two sides to the story. Afghanistan showed how people can come together and, through the use of technology, pick up the slack where governments have failed.”