

why roughly 50 of the 70 students who enter the medical faculty annually apply to PNI, says Herzallah, who only accepts a few.

Finances are still tight. Herzallah says he has raised some \$150,000 from sponsors in the Arab world, including several Palestinian business executives in Jordan. But now that the NIH grant has run out, it's not enough to sustain the initiative long term, especially with PNI branching out into other neuroscience areas.

Other forms of support have been plentiful. Herzallah has set up student exchanges with scientists at Rutgers, Harvard, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne. And Edvard Moser invited Herzallah and four students to a Nordic Neuroscience meeting in Trondheim in 2015. "Palestine is now a Nordic country," quips Herzallah, who hopes one of his students will find a training opportunity in Moser's lab.

Few are willing to discuss any political dimension to their support. "I'll be blunt and say that I'm not going to talk about politics and religion," Gluck says. "I'm not going to analyze the Middle East conflict in *Science* magazine," Moser says.

PNI has no links with Israel and its vibrant neuroscience scene. Few Palestinian scientists do. After the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, when a peaceful solution seemed in sight, ties between Israeli and Palestinian academics flourished. But as violence on both sides flared, virtually all partnerships disintegrated. Al-Quds's policy since 2009 has been to not collaborate with Israel, says the university's president, Imad Abu-Kishk. Any collaboration could lead to political problems—or worse, others say. "You would immediately be labeled a traitor," Treves says. "Your life would be in danger."

The cold shoulder frustrates scientists like Yonatan Loewenstein at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who co-organizes meetings that bring together Israeli and Arab scientists (see sidebar, right) and is eager to work with Palestinian counterparts. "It doesn't make any sense that I work with researchers in the U.S. and Europe, but I can't meet colleagues who are less than 10 miles away," Loewenstein says.

Herzallah has avoided any collaboration with Israel out of what he calls "a mix of pragmatism and principle." He prefers to stay focused on building up his creation. As the sun sets and he looks out from the roof of his parents' home in Ya'bad over a West Bank valley dotted with scrubby vegetation, Herzallah is clear about his ambitions. "A full-blown institute here in Palestine, where I can pursue my scientific interests. ... That's what I want. I want to show that in spite of all of the suffering and the obstacles, we can move forward." ■

Gatherings aim to bridge a wide divide

By **Martin Enserink**, in Paris

When 20 neuroscientists from Israel and the Arab world gathered for dinner at a Left Bank bistro here in September 2015, it didn't take long for the conversation to turn from duck breast to the Middle East—and for the temperature to rise. The researchers, including two Palestinians, bickered over the Iran nuclear deal, the war in Syria, and, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The two-state solution is dead!" one Arab scientist argued. "We need to think about a one-state model." "That will never work!" an Israeli colleague shot back. As the evening wore on, the debates got more animated and louder.

The scientists didn't solve any problems that night, but at least they were talking—and that was the point.

They had assembled at Paris Descartes University for a 3-day meeting that sought to foster relationships across the political and religious fault lines dividing the Middle East. NeuroBridges, as it's called, is one of several science diplomacy efforts focused on the region; the most ambitious is SESAME, a synchrotron light source in Jordan expected to come online in 2017 that involves nine unlikely bedfellows, including Turkey, Israel, the Palestinian National Authority, Iran, and Pakistan.

NeuroBridges grew from the friendship between Ahmed El Hady, an Egyptian neuroscientist at Princeton University, and his Israeli colleague Yonatan

"We really need opportunities for dialogue."

Mehdi Khamassi,
Pierre and Marie Curie
University in Paris

Loewenstein of the Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Brain Sciences (ELSC) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. After they met in Germany, Loewenstein invited El Hady to an ELSC retreat in Ein Gedi, an oasis near the Dead Sea in Israel. During a hike, the duo agreed that science could bring more researchers together, both professionally and personally. The first NeuroBridges, later that year at the University of Göttingen in Germany, came at an awkward time: 3 weeks into the 2014 Gaza war.

Science sat in on the 2015 successor, in a monumental Parisian university hall adorned with tapestries woven for King Louis XIV. After an unusual preamble describing their own geographical, religious, or political background, attendees presented their work, which spanned a range of neuroscience areas. The mood was friendly.

"We really need opportunities for dialogue like this," says Mehdi Khamassi, a French-Tunisian researcher at the Pierre and Marie Curie University in Paris, who noted that relations between Arabs and Jews in France have deteriorated rapidly: "We seem to have imported the conflict from the Middle East." (The meeting took place 2 months before the 13 November 2015 terrorist attacks here.)

Like El Hady, almost all of the Arab participants live and work in Western countries. The mood in most Arab countries is fervently anti-Israel, and scientists there could face a political price for attending NeuroBridges, El Hady says. Mohammad Herzallah, who heads the Palestinian Neuroscience Initiative, has declined an invitation twice (see main story, p. 1158).

Critics of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories say that meetings like NeuroBridges fail to address the root issue. A mostly scientific meeting that doesn't focus on problems faced by Palestinian academics contributes to the "normalization" of the occupation, says Jonathan Rosenhead, chair of the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine in London and an advocate of an academic boycott of Israel. El Hady disagrees. "Academics are the most reasonable people," he says. "If we cut off contact with them, we lose the last resort."

This year's NeuroBridges will be at a chateau in Burgundy, France, in September. To reach a wider and younger audience, it will be a 10-day summer school in computational neuroscience. Can such meetings bring peace in the Middle East any closer? "To be honest, this is not a question that concerns me very much," Loewenstein says after a very long pause. "The question I ask myself is what I can personally do to improve the situation." ■

Science

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