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Preparing for crisis

By JOSH HASTEN
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The Emergency Volunteers Project brings firefighters to learn about putting out a different kind of fire in the Middle East.

Entering the lounge of the Petah Tikva fire station, it is unmistakable that the handsome uniformed firefighter with features indicating distinct Hispanic lineage is from out of town. While the rest of the year Robert Gomez serves loyally as an engineer, a flight paramedic, a swiftwater rescue member and a wildfire specialist as part of the Dallas, Texas, firefighters, this week he is simply Rob, reporting for duty in Israel alongside his new Israeli counterparts.

Gomez, along with 12 other US firefighters from Texas, New York and Florida, was recently brought to Israel as a volunteer for an intense week of fire and rescue training, including actual service in the field, by an Israeli non-profit organization known as the Emergency Volunteers Project. EVP was founded in 2007 by Jerusalem paramedics Adi Zahavi and Jonathan Cilman with the goal of providing additional outside manpower on the ground in Israel in times of catastrophe including war or natural disaster.

EVP offers a variety of training sessions for emergency and non-emergency personnel throughout the United States during times of "quiet" in Israel to familiarize them with what will be needed should an emergency occur thousands of kilometers away. Following training in the US, volunteers are brought to Israel for the second half of their instruction in order to familiarize themselves firsthand with the lie of the land.

The organization also works with social workers, psychologists and even plumbers, electricians and other municipal workers, preparing them for what to expect. Zahavi, who is EVP's CEO, says that during a crisis in Israel, especially a war, people forget that in addition to worrying about security threats, essential basic needs for civilians on the home front such as water, electricity, and plumbing must be met.

Zahavi becomes emotional when he talks about what inspired him to launch the initiative. He relates that during the second intifada he was often one of the first on the scene of the horrible Jerusalem suicide bombings. But it was a personal tragedy that sticks with Zahavi until this day that caused him to take action. In 2004, his four-year-old second cousin Afik Zahavi was killed in a Kassam rocket attack in Sderot. Afik's mother was seriously wounded. Zahavi wonders if emergency services reached the little boy fast enough. "I saw a lot of bad things [as a paramedic]," he says, "but you learn to be strong. However, when it's your own family, something changes."



Two years later Zahavi volunteered in the North during the Second Lebanon War where rocket landings and subsequent fires were commonplace. He says that he saw people living in horrible conditions, lacking the very basics. It was during this stint in the North that he got the idea for EVP.

ON THIS particular EVP trip, the fire-fighters attended lectures at the Israel Fire Academy in Rishon Lezion and met with Israel's new fire chief, Shachar Ayalon. The bulk of their time was spent carrying out training maneuvers with Israeli fire crews in Ramat Gan and Petah Tikva and going on actual calls side-by-side with the Israeli crews. They also toured potential flashpoints on the country's borders to better understand what a war or major attack scenario would look like.

Zahavi says that EVP has trained over 100 US firefighters so far and that an additional 400 are on a waiting list. The goal, he says, is to reach 1,200 volunteers – equal to the total number of firefighters in Israel – so that each Israeli firefighter has a “brother” he can count on. Should a disaster arise and with it a need for deployment, the plan is that within 48 hours EVP volunteers will fly across the globe and be on the ground in Israel, already trained and prepared to spring into action.

Zahavi says that since the organization was founded his volunteers have yet to be deployed. During last year's Carmel Forest fire disaster a mission from abroad was approved, plane tickets were purchased and firefighters were on standby. But according to Zahavi it was determined by top brass that Israel wasn't short on manpower and the priority was accessing fire extinguishing aircrafts and other necessary equipment.

Therefore the EVP recruits stayed home.

The fact that that deployment never happened raises a question of whether the organization shouldn't focus more on raising funds towards training Israeli firefighters and increasing their ranks instead of relying on outside volunteers.

Ken Kleiman has been a firefighter in Netanya for 16 years and for the past two years has been EVP's head of Emergency Operations and Training. He adamantly stands by the organization's mission of bringing in outside help based on the realities in Israel during crises.

“It doesn't matter if we had a million Israeli firefighters,” he says. “In this country when there is a war, everyone gets called up for army reserve duty. So who is going to step in and help?” He adds that in a natural disaster such as an earthquake, numbers on the ground won't matter since many rescue personnel themselves could be buried under the rubble.

Kleiman also defends his organization's far-sighted thinking, citing Israel's assistance to Turkey following a deadly earthquake in 1999 and more recently Israel's rescue aid during the ravaging earthquake/tsunami that hit Japan in March. In those events, says Kleiman, Israel assisted greatly even though the forces essentially went in to those situations blind. But thanks to EVP, “our firefighters won't have to undergo any orientation.

They can be dropped anywhere [in Israel], and they will know what to do.”

Assuming that one day EVP's crews are in fact asked to respond, the question remains: “why?” Why would firefighter Rob Gomez, living a normal life in Dallas, be willing to leave his family and fly into a war zone within 48 hours of a phone call? According to Gomez, the answer is simple. “Brotherhood.” He says that “firefighting is a brotherhood, without any boundaries. We spend one third of our lives in the US as firefighters and that bond extends over here as well.”

Gomez adds that the fact that he is volunteering in Israel is merely a coincidence. He didn't know too much about the country or its people but came across some EVP literature about a Dallas training session and decided to get involved. “This could have been any other country for me. But honestly now that I'm here in Israel, I love the people here and this experience has been life changing.”

Another Dallas participant in the EVP Israel trip is Wade Decker, the organization's US-based president.

Decker, who is a maintenance contractor by trade, became interested in helping fulfill the organization's mission for a very different reason than did Gomez.

Speaking in a heavy Texas drawl, he admits that part of his motivation is faith-based. A devout Christian, Decker says that he has a strong "love of Israel and its people" and that working with EVP "is what I think God wants me to do." Decker was introduced to EVP in 2009, when he was touring Israel with a group led by John Hagee Ministries. A chance meeting in Israel with Zahavi was all it took for Decker to get on board.

Pastor John Hagee himself has also become a supporter of EVP, leaving room for controversy. Over the past several years various left-leaning Jewish organizations have censured Hagee for comments he made in regard to Jews and Israel that they viewed to be contentious.

While Zahavi says that donations come from both Jewish and non-Jewish philanthropists and foundations, he is impervious to critics of Hagee or any others who might question the fact that EVP accepts donations for its work from non-Jewish sources.

"I have a four-year-old daughter," he says. "If my daughter needed an emergency rescue, or if someone else's child needed help, would they care at that moment where the funding came from or would they care about saving that child's life? EVP is not about (religious) politics." That leads to the question of whether or not EVP would accept funding or establish relationships with known Christian missionary organizations.

Zahavi is adamant that EVP has no ties to missionary or messianic groups and says that if he received such information after establishing a relationship with such an organization, he would break off ties immediately.

In fact, Zahavi adds that with regard to the volunteers themselves his staff does a thorough screening process in the US before anyone is accepted to volunteer.

"We won't accept people with a hidden agenda," he says, referring to potential missionaries posing simply as firefighters. "We have turned down people before who wanted to help but are also missionaries. We are just about saving lives in emergencies, period."

Zahavi says that it's important to note that there are also Jewish emergency personnel that have been trained by EVP.

After a week in Israel, the firefighters will return to their home communities. Decker will go back to prepare for the next batch of trainees traveling to Israel in a few months. Zahavi notes that when his teams go back to the US they are essentially "ambassadors for Israel" since they have truly gotten to know the country and its residents.

As Gomez stands up and prepares to return to the training sessions with his new friends in Petah Tikva, he adds, "we hope peace will go on forever, but if it doesn't we are ready."

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