

# Finding love in war

The Middle Eastern crisis continues while Israelis and Palestinians commit seemingly endless atrocities on each other. Yet, in the midst of this bitter dispute, one couple has found love that transcends political and religious prejudice, writes **Paula Slier**.

**"T**here wasn't much happiness at our wedding. Even my husband noticed it. I said to him: 'Please don't cry - we mustn't cry now. We can do it later.'" Sara Hatzgich Qabamami smiles wistfully as she carefully turns another page of the blue wedding album fanned out across her knees. A photograph of her husband smiles up at us.

"It was his eyes," she tells me. "The moment I first saw them, the world stopped for me. He was my first love and meeting him was like having a building fall down on my head. I knew immediately that one day he'd be my husband."

Theirs is a love story that transcends racial barriers, generations of religious prejudice and decades of oppression.

Sara Hatzgich Qabamami is 26 years old, an Israeli Jew, who immigrated to Israel from Russia with her parents and eight siblings when she was six.

Her husband, Jamil Qabamami, 29, is a Palestinian who grew up in the village of Sawaneh in East (Arab) Jerusalem.

"We're back with the photo album. It took them four hours to do my make-up," she giggles, pointing to a close-up photograph of her grinning into the lens.

"She's so cute," cuts in Jamil who's sitting opposite us, smoking his third cigarette in as many minutes. Their first meeting three years ago had the same effect on him.

"I walked into the shop where she worked and there she was, standing behind the counter. It was as if my whole world came to a standstill. I knew she was Jewish straight away because we spoke in Hebrew, but that wasn't a problem for me. My parents, though, were unhappy. They told me I mustn't marry a Jew because the Jews were keeping us under occupation. I told them I'd never marry if I didn't marry her."

Jamil's threat worked: not only did his parents soon agree to the marriage, but his father, Mousa, has since become Sara's greatest admirer.

"He was worried I'd be like other Israeli women and wear tight pants and short skirts," laughs Sara. "I really think my father-in-law was scared I'd show up in a bikini with my bottom exposed for all the world to see!"

We turn another page of the album and Jamil's mother, Fathya, stares up at us from the wedding reception less than four months ago.

"All I pray for is that God puts His eyes on them and makes the best for them," she tells me. "All I pray for is for them to be happy."

Mousa agrees: "I just want the best for my son - to see him comfortable and happy." The two live a stone's throw away from Sara and Jamil, in the same village the family has inhabited for generations. Not religious, Jamil and his four siblings grew up in the shadow of the first *intifada* (Palestinian uprising) that began in 1987.

"Maybe the first time I threw stones it was because I'd watched television and had seen people in Gaza throwing stones," he says.

"But, after they put us in prison, we sat there with people who'd organised the *intifada* who explained to us why we were throwing stones. Years later I interviewed a young boy who said that while he knew the stones didn't damage the tanks, it sent out a message that he lived there and this was his land."

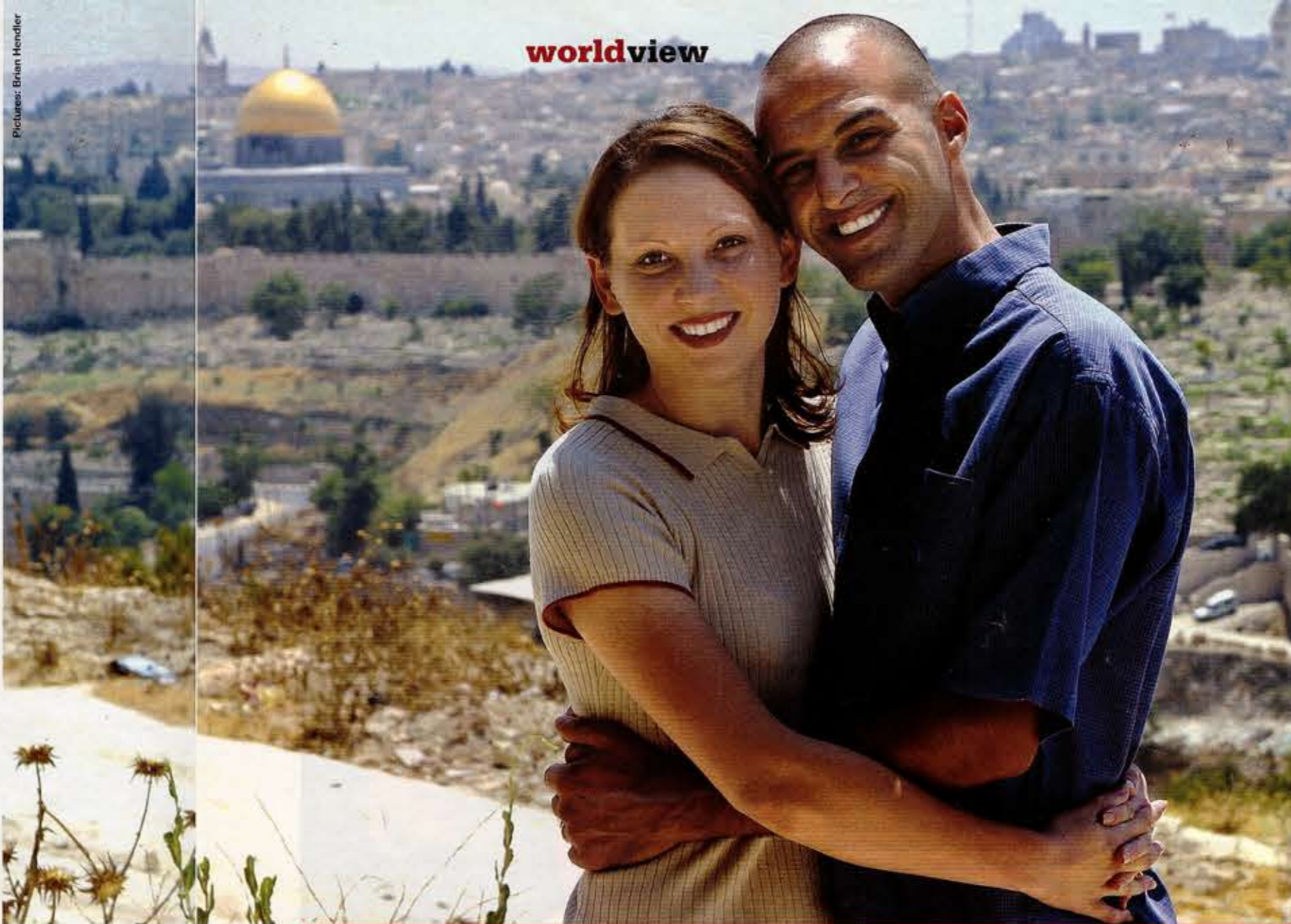
Jamil was 13 the first time he was arrested.

"I was sent to jail for six months without a trial. After I got out, the Israelis would arrest me every two or three months, each time children from the village were caught throwing stones. They believed we were all involved. They treated us very badly because they wanted to make sure we wouldn't throw stones again. I got hit a lot, but it didn't work. The worse they treated me, the more I wanted to do it again."

By the time he dropped out of school at the age of 16, Jamil had been imprisoned 13 times. The worst period was the 36 days he spent in solitary confinement with his hands tied behind his back. His spine, neck and ribs are cracked to this day. After joining his father in his electrical business, he worked for 18 months as a bodyguard for the Palestinian security body before becoming a cameraman with the Abu Dhabi Arab television network. That was when Sara met him.

"At first I thought he was Christian, but it made no difference to me when I found out he was Muslim," she reflects. "But my family had a problem with it. My dad wasn't worried about the religion; he'd brought us up to be open-minded and treat all

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Sara and Jamil Qabamami... a love story in a place of implacable hatred.

people as equal. But he was worried about the fact that many Muslim men have more than one wife."

It's a fear Timothy Hatzgich, Sara's father, has long since forgotten. "Jamil's a good man," he says in his strong Russian accent, smiling broadly. "If they stick to God, it will be much better for them. God will look after them."

Sara's parents live in the Jewish settlement of Gilo, a 20-minute drive away from Sawaneh, not far from Bethlehem. "If she's happy, I'm happy," smiles Sara's mother, Sheira, while balancing a tray brimming over with tea and home-made Russian biscuits.

"My mother had more problems with the marriage than my dad," Sara tells me later. "She's very staunchly Zionist and believes this land belongs to the Jews. I remember her saying: 'The Arabs have so many countries to choose from - why pick this one?'"

Although brought up in a proudly Jewish and Zionist family, for Sara, religion is something deeply personal.

"I'm very touched every time I see Muslims kneeling on the ground to pray. I've asked Jamil many times to take me to the mosque. The problem here isn't religion: it's Israelis *versus* Arabs. The soldiers often stop Jamil to ask for his papers because he's an

Arab, not because he's a Muslim."

Jamil disagrees. He firmly believes the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict has its roots in religion.

"The Jews believe God gave them this land. The Koran also believes that, but it says God asked the Jews to come and fight to take it, and they didn't. It's Muslim *versus* Jew - that I learnt in prison."

Since meeting Sara, though, he's mellowed and the anger of his youth has been replaced with an all-encompassing desire to live a quiet life. While reluctant to admit it, there was a time when Jamil sympathised with suicide bombers. The attacks would hurt the Israelis as much as the Palestinians were already hurting, he believed.

"Everything changed after I smelt dead bodies. It was the first suicide bombing I filmed and all around me were dead children, in their school uniforms, lying on the ground..." There was also an occasion when he thought Sara had been killed in a suicide attack.

"It was 1997 and I'd left work 20 minutes late," recalls Sara. "I saw three people and I remember thinking they looked odd. I didn't think much of it, though, until 10 minutes later, when >

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< I heard an explosion. A friend grabbed my hand and pulled me into a store. We then heard two more explosions. When we walked outside, everything was black. I saw someone's hand lying on the ground, then a head, and then pieces of a throat... A while later, the bus I normally catch to work, the number 32, blew up. I was supposed to have been on it. It's not easy living like this, always afraid something will happen."

The situation has deteriorated to such an extent that Sara would like nothing more than to emigrate, but Jamil won't hear of it. "This is my country," he argues, "and it's where I want to live and die."

"I also love this country," concedes Sara, "but I've seen too much blood. I hate this racism, the titles they give people, the fact that by marrying a certain person you become a 'second-class citizen'. People here aren't kind. Many of my friends said to me: 'You're so pretty and smart, why take him? You're marrying the lowest of the low!' A lot of them turned their backs on me when I married Jamil."

Unlike other Israeli-Arabs, Jamil doesn't qualify for an Israeli passport because of his prison record. He also can't vote. However, the fact that his features aren't overtly Arabic prevents people staring at him and Sara when they hold hands in public.

"It's only when his cellphone rings and he starts talking that people turn around, because he speaks Hebrew with an accent," laughs Sara. "Israelis feel OK about dating Arabs and even having sex with them, but meeting the family and developing a relationship is taboo. The Arab is the enemy - and you can't marry the enemy. On the other side, Jamil's female friends look at me as if I've taken one of theirs. They often make threatening phone calls late at night." Jamil's male friends, by comparison, are very supportive of their relationship, she says.

Nevertheless, the couple's relationship is one they can't openly display to the world. Married in court, they were only able to do so after Sara obtained a certificate claiming she was Muslim.

"Jews and Muslims aren't allowed to marry in this country. We'll have problems when I want to change my surname and status," she points out. (The state of Israel doesn't recognise marriages involving Jews which aren't performed and ordained by the rabbinat. Sara is likely to have problems, as she won't be able to prove she's Muslim. There is no civic marriage for Jews in Israel.)

But this doesn't disturb her as much as the Arab culture she's now married into, which expects her to stay at home during the day.

"I really want to go back to college and work with handicapped children because I feel I can give them something. It's important to me to feel I can contribute and help."

Jamil supports her desire to work but worries for her safety. "Arab men, particularly in our village, aren't used to seeing women on the streets because it's forbidden. When it does happen, they don't know how to behave. Whereas Israeli men like to just look, Arab men like to touch. This kind of sexual harassment has been going on for generations."

We're nearing the end of the photo album and I promise to visit again when next I'm in the country. "Who knows," winks Sara, "by then there might just be another one of us!"

Sara's adamant that once she does have children, she won't impose any religion on them. "I'll teach them how to pray, although I want them to be like their dad - Palestinians. Whether they choose to be Christian or Muslim is up to them. I strongly doubt they'll want to be Jewish."

Jamil crushes his last cigarette in a nearby ashtray and reflects: "Sometimes I feel weird having married a Jewish girl, but it's taught me that people can live together if they really want to."

For Sara, her union with Jamil represents the hope that, "maybe, if not me, then my children will be able to see a person as a person, first and foremost - not as somebody defined by their nationality, skin colour or the shape of their eyes. I find it hard to believe this day will come, but I hope it will."

It's a hope both of them share as the wedding album is finally closed and a new chapter in their lives begins... ■



Sara and Jamil walk along the road leading out of their home in Sawaneh, East Jerusalem.



Sara and Jamil on their wedding day.