

~YOUTH VIEWS~ College students search for innovative methods of peace  
Daniel Armanios

The president and founder of Session: Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh, Daniel Armanios, counters the overwhelming hopelessness many feel towards the situation in the Middle East through simulation. In the spring, 22 diverse U.S. college students came together in Pennsylvania to counter the current complacency with the status quo and to reinvigorate the search for peace. “[T]hese student participants met with their many diverse peers in Pittsburgh with only the mutual and sincere desire for peaceful regional progress and cooperation. Participants left with an understanding not just of the causes for regional tension and conflict in the present day but of the ‘other’, those whose shoes they rarely get to walk in, let alone take the journey with. They left knowing that they have the tools to generate much-needed creativity and hope in a region and society mired in seemingly unchanging despair.”  
(Source: Common Ground News Service (CGNews), 19 September 2006)

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania –In the aftermath of the recent Hizbullah-Israeli conflict and with continued violence in the Gaza strip, the days of Yitzhak Rabin, Anwar el-Sadat, King Hussein, and even the Oslo-days of Yassir Arafat, days of hope for peace, seem a distant nostalgic memory.

From 31 March to 2 April 2006, twenty-two U.S. college students from across the country came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to genuinely change the prevailing sense of despair about Middle Eastern conflicts. They came together because they felt it was time to sincerely recognise the profound 1977 words of Anwar el-Sadat at the Knesset: “No one can build his happiness at the expense of the misery of others.” Together they decided to defy the hopelessness that seems the norm in the Middle East by finding new innovative methods to rejuvenate the quest for permanent regional peace. Together, American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) interns, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) members, Palestine refugee activists, college Democrats and Republicans, Central Asians, Christians, Jews and Muslims decided the time to change complacency with the status quo was now.

Through a forum called Session: Middle East, founded at the University of Pittsburgh, the successes of the 1978-1979 Camp David Summit and the 1991 Madrid Conference and, yes, even the failures of Camp David II in 2000, were considered in light of current events to help promote new grassroots methods for peace. Student participants role-played not just leaders intimately involved in the conflict but also journalists, scientists, and others devoted to regional awareness and peace. Unlike other conventional simulation methods, for participants to understand the “other”, role reversals were conducted so that those holding pro-Israeli views were often asked to adopt Arab positions and vice versa.

The results of this simulation were as diverse and creative as the participants involved. Israel employed a series of good-faith measures towards the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) such as increased water from Israeli reserves and joint management of permanent check points in return for a PNA-issued immediate cease fire. Lebanon recognised Israel as a state so long as Israel joined in talks regarding its status in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (PNA), respect of

Lebanese sovereignty, and the Palestinian right of return. Through all these events, student journalists chronicled events, as mock reporters for the Jerusalem Post and Al-Hayat. Student scientific experts, simulating the roles of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), provided technical assistance for scientific aspects of the agreed-upon resolutions.

For the observer, this was truly an investment in hope for the future. Just as Sadat boldly appeared before the Knesset, these student participants met with their many diverse peers in Pittsburgh with only the mutual and sincere desire for peaceful regional progress and cooperation. Participants left with an understanding not just of the causes for regional tension and conflict in the present day but of the “other”, those whose shoes they rarely get to walk in, let alone take the journey with. They left knowing that they have the tools to generate much-needed creativity and hope in a region and society mired in seemingly unchanging despair.

This student-initiated and student-run movement for genuine and innovative methods for peace is spreading across the United States and Canada. The student bodies of the University of Georgia, the University of California at Irvine, and the University of Toronto in Scarborough have all expressed interest in constructing similar forums amongst students in their respective regions. Hopefully, more will find their own personalised versions of the regions leaders and hold dear to the knowledge that they can create change today that will last well into tomorrow.

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