

AMLN United States – Syria

Grassroots Diplomacy Program 2008:

Exchanges and Experiences



The American MidEast Leadership Network (AMLN) is an international exchange program non-profit organization dedicated to improving relations between the United States and the Arab world at the civic level. The Grassroots Diplomacy Program, AMLN's flagship project, is an annual exchange between Middle Eastern and American college-level students.

The AMLN Grassroots Diplomacy Program is a three-week annual cultural immersion exchange that brings together Syrian and American college students both in the United States and Syria for active dialogue, cultural excursions and language instruction. The elements are designed to promote relationships built on trust, awareness, understanding and respect while addressing misconceptions and overcoming past barriers. Through our civic-level exchanges, AMLN works to establish a foundation for the coming generation of leaders, a solid bridge on which they will build a productive, peaceful future for American-Middle Eastern relations.

The 2008 delegation of 10 young Syrians to the USA was facilitated by Rutgers University, New Jersey, and a number of committed volunteer administrators and teachers working with AMLN. So encouraged are we by the program's success that we look forward to a follow up in 2009. Concentrated in two vibrant intellectual and cultural centers, New York City and Newark, New Jersey, the 2008 exchange program offered visiting students a range of opportunities to engage with Americans and participate in institutional and social life. Here are some of the highlights of that Syrian delegation's program.

Welcome Dinner



A ceremonial welcome for the international students included a dinner attended by Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, Rutgers Chancellor Dr. Steve Diner, Dr. Steven Bronner, Dr. Clement Price and Professor Nela Navarro and other dignitaries who offered warm words of welcome. The Rutgers University reception hall was filled with students and faculty, AMLN board members and staff, family and friends. The media was also present to cover this momentous occasion. Momentous it truly was, representing the first time an international delegation of Syrian exchange students has ever visited Rutgers University. The groundbreaking visit also introduced the concept of civic ambassadorship to the United States at large. With this significant first step, Rutgers University and the American MidEast Leadership Network envision the programs continuation and expansion.

Professor Navarro, the evening's Rutgers University host, in true American fashion, invited participants to a dialogue session right after the welcoming remarks and before dinner. The eager audience did not hesitate: "What is your favorite American author? What Syrian authors would you recommend?" "What is the Iraqi refugee situation like in Syria?" "What did you think of the American elections?" The Syrian delegation was not to be outdone: "Are you politically active in the United States?" "What is your definition of terrorism?" The question and answer session evolved into a lively dialogue that would set a thought-provoking, positive tone for the entire visit.

In the Dorms at Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey

Just an hour by train from Manhattan, the Rutgers campus in Newark provided generous hospitality for the duration of the delegation's stay. Syrian students were housed in a regular dormitory hall with Rutgers students, enabling them to experience true American college life.

Meeting with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon

The Syrian delegates had an once-in-a-lifetime experience, one few American students enjoy. They were received by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon! Our Syrian students found themselves welcomed into the Secretary General's meeting room warmly welcomed by the Secretary General himself. Mr. Ban expressed keen interest in the AMLN international exchange program, stating that civic exchange programs created from the ground up, such as this, can really change public opinion between the United States and the Middle East. For our students, the meeting was truly an extraordinary and privileged event!

Trip to Atlantic City, New Jersey



Students were quickly drawn into the fast pace of American life. After brunch in New York, our delegation caught their bus back to Rutgers, quickly changed, and took another hour bus trip to the resort center of

Atlantic City! The delegation had time to explore local attractions, then the famous seaside boardwalk, enjoying the myriad sights and pulsing sounds.

Interviews with Dr. Barbara Nimri Aziz and Hugh Hamilton on WBAI Radio, with Pastor Gilford T. Monrose: 106.3FM



WBAI Radio station in Manhattan honored our delegation as in-studio guests on two separate live shows: "Tahrir: Voices of the Arab/Muslim community" hosted by, Dr. Barbara Nimri Aziz, and "Talkback!" hosted

by Hugh Hamilton. Both shows gave students the chance to interact with American listeners who called in with questions about Syria, Arab culture and politics, and inquiries into the perspective of travelers from the Middle East visiting the United States for the first time. Our delegation had another media opportunity, speaking with Pastor Monrose on his radio show, "Beyond the Headlines", on 106.3 FM. It was a great learning experience. All the students were thrilled to be a part of three live American radio shows in New York City, then archived by podcast on their radio web pages!

Columbia University, NY, Visit

After lunch and a tour of Grand Central Station, Manhattan, the delegation hopped aboard the subway for



meetings uptown at Columbia University. The university arranged for SIPA, the Arab Student Association and Conflict Resolution Working Group at Columbia, to

host a dialogue session between our delegation and

attending Columbia students. After introductions, participants wasted no time putting thought-provoking questions to our delegation. One Columbia student brought up the issue of what could be a potential resolution for the Golan Heights; this evolved into a lively debate about what Syrians and Israelis required for a peace resolution. Later a student from Columbia's Teachers College asked about the rights of women in Syria; others wanted to know what the visiting Syrians thought about the recent American election.

Our delegation eagerly put questions to their American counterparts. They wanted to know about their political involvement and their worldview of the Middle East. Later, Columbia students and our delegation mingled on a one-on-one basis, exchanging emails and contact information. The event was such a success that many regretted that it did not last longer!

Night Out in New Jersey



After the cold day in New York City, our group returned to New Jersey to relax at a cozy lounge in Paterson, New Jersey. Paterson is home to many Arab immigrants so the Syrians found comfort at a local café with hookah and familiar food! It was a peaceful ending to a crowded, exhausting, invigorating day in the city. How do the Americans do this 24/7?

Dinner Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations.

The delegation was graciously invited to the home of the Syrian Ambassador Dr. Bashar Ja'afari. They were feed with a sumptuous dinner in their honor. The dinner gave them the opportunity to meet other guests-- successful Arab Americans, Rutgers University faculty, along with AMLN program supporters from the New York metropolitan area.



Multi-Cultural Festival at Rutgers

Public transport in New York and New Jersey always furnished special experiences for the Syrian delegation



who jostled with commuters in their daily American routines. But these trips also delivered the visitors to another special experience. A subway trip downtown, then the underground PATH train took the

delegation back to New Jersey for the Multi-cultural Fest hosted at Robeson Hall. Good food, conversation with faculty and students topped by a multi-ethnic artistic experience, the Syrian students found themselves immersed in the rich diversity that the Rutgers campus represents. American ethnic performances for the visitors were followed by the Syrians' presentation of a

traditional Syrian wedding, then all joined in a Syrian-led Debka dance!

Rutgers University tops the nation as the most ethnically diverse campus in the US. With the new Syrian input, the student body now bettered their own reputation! The international guests of honor became full campus participants.

New Brunswick, New Jersey

Another Rutgers University experience took place at the New Brunswick campus in Central New Jersey. There, Syrian students joined the morning class of Dr. Bronner, which focused on the subject of imperialism. After the students watched the movie "Paradise Now", they



entered into a class discussion. Students from countries with very different histories took the opportunity to discuss the implications of imperialism, past and present.

Every encounter afforded the American students fresh exchanges with the visitors. After the delegation toured the campus, they stopped for lunch in the cafeteria, and happily engaged with more inquisitive American students. They wanted to know what the Syrians thought of their trip thus far. The Rutgers campus houses the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and the students had an opportunity to examine its Western art collection, ranging from the Renaissance to the modern era, including a large Soviet era collection. After the gallery visit, the visitors stopped by a student residence where they were invited in for pizza! It was soon time for a return trip to Manhattan and they boarded the bus for New York once again.

NYPD Museum, New York

Among the many museums in New York City, the NYPD Museum is one that houses exhibitions related to the long history of the city's police department. Located in lower Manhattan on the East River, this was a tour by special arrangement. Like so many things American, the police department is also ethnically diverse, so guess who received our delegation? Inspector Amin Kosseim. Kosseim is highest ranking Arab American in the NYPD; he's also an AMLN board member. So the delegation was honored by a private tour of the museum. Inspector Kosseim introduced our students to the long history of New York City's famous police corps, its functions, its goals, and its evolving interaction with the city's immigrant communities in particular. This was an opportunity for our students to ask about Arab and Muslim rights, having learned about difficulties these communities faced in recent years.

Festivities at the Salaam Church with the Arab American Association of New York

Another bus ride from Rutgers University to New York deposited the delegation in the borough of Brooklyn, this

time for food, fun and dancing! Here their hosts were Linda Sarsour and board members and staff of the Arab American Association of New York (AAANY). This jumping party took place at the Salaam Church in Bay Ridge, the Arab quarter of Brooklyn. With food catered by a local Middle Eastern restaurant, music provided by AAANY youth, and plenty of debke dancers, it was a night to remember!

Brunch with the Salaam Club



One early Sunday morning the bus again headed to Brooklyn where members of the Salaam Club of New York awaited the Syrian delegation. The welcoming party at the Fort Hamilton Army Base included Salaam Club notables Edward Mafoud of the famous Damascus Bakery, president Gregory Lutfey, first vice president John Abi-Habib, second vice president Albert Dekki and member George Julinos. You can't imagine-- or maybe you can-- the extravagant brunch buffet the club laid out for the visitors. After introductions all around, the hosts put many questions to the young Syrians about what they had been doing and how they felt about their many exchanges. The day ended on a bus, this time to the spectacular Verrazano Bridge at the end of Bay Ridge that joins Brooklyn to Staten Island, yet another borough of New York City. A great place for pictures!

Tanenbaum Center for Inter-Religious Understanding



Among hundreds of interfaith programs that have sprung up across the US in recent years is the Tanenbaum Center. That too is in Manhattan. So from a quick Turkish buffet lunch near the United Nations, the delegation skirted cross-town by subway to the Tanenbaum Center for Inter-Religious Understanding near Madison Square Garden. The center, dedicated to dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions in the realm of religion, was delighted to host our delegation. A chance for some meaningful dialogue with their staff and associates ensued. Tanenbaum staff spoke about the center's goals and how it works to enhance religious tolerance among the next generation of leaders. Since Syria is home to Christians, Muslims, Jews, Druze and other religious affiliations; our Syrian travelers are well-versed in inter-religious experience and were more than happy to add to the dialogue.

Tunisian Cultural Center Visit



Uptown, downtown, cross-town: our delegation was making its way through Manhattan with greater ease every day. The next stop after Tanenbaum was on the East side, so

the delegation easily shunted cross-town to the Tunisian Cultural Center, a hall tastefully decorated with Tunisian art and artifacts. Here they were treated to poetry readings by Arab American poets, then good food and conversation with the center's members. After such a busy day, the relaxing atmosphere of the Tunisian Center was just the tonic they needed. After a snack, the delegation was ready for another bus trip, this time back to the New Jersey campus that was becoming as welcome as any home.

Tour of the United Nations

The United Nations headquarters in New York is a vast complex. Few can negotiate its many departments, and fewer visitors ever see them. But Deputy Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Mazen Adi, was kindly available to offer the Syrian students a personal tour of major halls in the United Nations. He guided the students through the chambers of the Security Council and the General Assembly and other departments in this influential institution. A journalist from Al Jazeera news network spoke with the delegation, and to top off their tour, they visited the UN Press Center where hundreds of journalists from around the world are based.

Visit to Washington DC

New York City has a lot to offer the delegation, but nothing there compares with the political and historical symbolism of Washington, DC. A visit to the American capital was a must, and however exhausted by their schedule of meetings, the Syrian students energetically set off, traveling south along the coast of New Jersey, into Maryland to Washington, DC for a day of new experiences in the American capitol. Their visit included the White House, the Washington Memorial, 'downtown' Washington, and the charming suburb of

Georgetown. After the tour, they met with Syrian Ambassador, Dr. Imad Mustafa.

Short though it was, a tour of the city where so much the international media is focused was a must.

Macy's and Shopping on 34th Street

You can't visit New York without a Midtown shopping tour. Sleep in if you wish, but we're going shopping today! After breakfast, the group descended once again to the PATH that travels under the Hudson River and delivers them to Manhattan. A short subway ride took them to Herald Square and 34th Street, to the enormous Macy's Department Store with its legendary holiday window displays. The only way to manage through the crowds was to divide our delegation into smaller groups. They would meet up and compare notes at lunch, then head to Union Square for more sights and sounds. They didn't stop till we dropped, but they did drop into the bus, exhausted and ready to head back to Rutgers after such a packed day.



Dinner in Times Square

Everyone had heard about Times Square and it was time for the delegation to venture among its lights and crowds. After much anticipation, our group finally found themselves there-- standing in the heart of New York City: Times Square. The sidewalks were so packed they could hardly move; restaurants and shops of all kinds glittered at us invitingly. Our students strolled up and down Broadway Avenue, into the gigantic Toys R Us toyshop, taking plenty of photos along their route. Collapsing in T.G.I. Friday's restaurant, the students dug into some real American cuisine. Then back on the bus, another day ended with smiles and aching feet.

The American MidEast Leadership Network (AMLN) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to improving the relations between the United States and the Middle East at the civic level through culturally immersive real world exchange programs with young leaders. For more information on AMLN programming, visit our website: www.amln.org, or contact us at:



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