

2009 United-States Syria Grassroots Diplomacy

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The United States - Syria Grassroots Diplomacy Program is AMLN's flagship program: an annual exchange that allows American and Syrian students—or "Citizen Ambassadors" as they are called by the program—to build bridges of understanding at the citizen level and create opportunities for future interaction between them.

American students travel to Syria and dorm with Syrian university students. Together, Americans and Syrians participate in dialogue sessions and media and communication workshops and go on numerous excursions to Syrian sites rich in culture and history. American students also have the opportunity to take Arabic language enhancement courses. Through these activities, all participants develop communication, negotiation, critical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving skills that allow them to be more effective grassroots diplomats.



The Roman water wheels at Hama

*"The American Mideast Leadership Network's 2009 United States-Syria Grassroots Diplomacy trip was one of the most amazing and educational trips I've ever experienced."
Denise Elnajjar*

Program Goals

The program's goals are:

To **establish** safe, open forums for participants to engage in face-to-face discussions on cultural, political, religious, and ethical issues.

To **empower** participants with necessary skills, training, and life experiences to support and inspire them as future international leaders.

To **encourage** participants to remain engaged and continue learning about each other after the formal program has ended.

Overview of the Program

Denise Elnaiir



Opening Ceremony with Syrian officials

"These meetings were so valuable to the future of a country's diplomacy because good relations can have their seeds planted among the citizens."

The American Mideast Leadership Network's 2009 United States-Syria Grassroots Diplomacy Trip was one of the most amazing and educational trips I've ever experienced. Although the trip ended in August, I still rave about the program to fellow students, professors, and colleagues, and not to mention friends and family.

The program's concept was to experience complete immersion into Syrian society and culture, and result in an exchange of ideas. Every component was an element of building bridges: Excursions to historical sites showed the face of a country. Having 12 American students and 12 Syrian students live together created a common ground for bonds of friendship and mutual respect. Dialogue sessions on Conflict Resolution created an open forum for controversial subjects to be discussed. Arabic and media classes forayed into language and current events.

Meetings with government and organizational officials and dignitaries (of Syria and the U.S. Department of State) offered an unprecedented opportunity for both American and Syrian delegations to discuss current and sometimes controversial issues. These meetings were so valuable to the future of a country's diplomacy because good relations can have their seeds planted among the citizens. From a grassroots level, this leads to better relationships between governments and better implications for society.

Aside from the day-to-night cultural experience, from the food, to the history, to dancing in a tent in the desert, there were many other experiences I'll never forget. We had the opportunity to visit the empty town of Quneitra in the Golan Heights as well as the restricted area on the border of the UNDOF Zone. I can honestly say that that moment by the border gate brought a more profound meaning to the American flag we held on our shoulders.

Our exercise of creating policy recommendations and presenting them was also one of the highest points on my list. We not only were granted access to restricted areas, literally, but with our Conflict Resolution Dialogue Sessions, we did it figuratively. Our facilitators did a fantastic job of looking at creative solutions and showing conflict through metaphors. By the end of the program, we had looked at issues ranging from economic sanctions, to portrayals in media and other social forums, to ethnic and political conflict.



The Ancient City of Palmyra

Dialogue/Conflict Resolution Sessions

Nora Gordon & Heidi Roshe

The dialogue component of AMLN's United States-Syria Grassroots Diplomacy Program was vital to the program's success. Each day the student citizen ambassadors participated in two-hour conflict transformation dialogue sessions. These comprised a combination of team-building, personal and professional development, communication and listening skills, trust-building and cultural awareness workshops.

Our opening sessions commenced with basic cultural exchange and activities designed to facilitate teamwork and develop trust amongst participants. Our team-building challenges create analogies promoting introspection and metaphorical thinking. We use analogies as a springboard into discussion of real-life circumstances, to promote cooperation and encourage creative problem solving.

The dialogue sessions used creative approaches to understanding culture, values, differences and commonalities. We spent much of our time together creating a "safe space" forum for exploring and debunking stereotypes about our respective cultures and countries. In sessions the students were able to put aside stereotypes and uncover each other's true stories and experiences.

Many of our excursions and meetings with politicians addressed contentious issues. Therefore, we spent much of the time in dialogue debriefing after meetings in order to allow participants time to express their reactions and listen to one another's views. Despite some clashing passions within the group, through the intensive trainings, participants expressed comfort in experiencing the guided, respectful political debate, using listening and communication techniques in order to maintain safe and open dialogue space.

Participants also engaged in a conflict resolution country simulation in which they worked with a fictional country conflict and the diverse perspectives of that conflict. Students took on character roles as well as mediator positions in a simulated conflict resolution dialogue session. They mapped out root causes of conflict, key actors, and effects of the conflict, and then recommended solutions, paving the way for an analysis of their own countries' situations.



American and Syrian students in a dialogue session

"In sessions the students were able to put aside stereotypes and uncover each other's true stories and experiences."



Meeting with Dr. Adnan Arbash, President of the Youth Union



Syrian student conducting an interview during a media workshop

Media Course

The overall aim of the communications course was to redefine journalism and media to be more inclusive, going far beyond the normal understanding of political comment and news. The class served also as a course in English [for Syrians students] since students were asked to read and summarize articles we used.

I used essays from the collection "Keeping the Faith", 100 personal accounts by Black Americans, edited by Tavis Smiley. Each student was required to summarize an essay, then we discussed their political message. This was part of my general aim of illustrating how 'everything is political', because it has to do with identity, self-empowerment, and the context in which it is presented. An underlying aim of my course was to help re-evaluate the word/concept 'political'. Students were introduced to media manipulation methods such as 'spin', 'editing', 'headlining', 'genres of journalism', 'sources', etc.

For media criticism itself I introduced students to 3 outstanding books—for later consultation. *Covering Islam* by Edward Said, *Manufacturing Consent*, by Noam Chomsky, and *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, by Mamdouh Mamdani. We briefly discussed only the concepts in each.

Syria: Land of great history, faith, and hospitality

Syria is home to one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Damascus (locally known as Sham), and my time here taught me that Syria not only has a long history of religious tolerance, but also a tradition of extreme generosity, and could be considered a small slice of heaven for foodies!

During our first weekend, we took a road trip to ancient Palmyra (locally known as Tadmor and dating back to the 2nd millennium BC), which was a stop on the ancient "Silk Road." Their mummified dead (a la the Egyptians) indicate that their fabrics were inspired by India. Other artifacts show one of the world's first languages translated into Greek, a remarkable theatre built during the Roman period gracing the center of the city, and the breathtaking "Temple of Bel" which was used to worship the Palmyrene's many gods appears to have been used as a Church at a later time.

The Old City of Damascus tells a similar story of religious and ideological tolerance; the Umayyad Mosque dating back to 705 AD was converted (but not destroyed) from a Church and houses the shrine of John the Baptist.

Perhaps it is this rich history and tradition that make Syrians such proud people. Syrians in fact take great pride in welcoming guests. Every meeting we have attended thus far has begun with a "shot" of coffee, continued with a cup of hot tea (served in a small tulip-shaped glass), and ending with a warm handshake. Our Syrian counterparts also have been extremely warm and welcoming, and it has been interesting getting to know them and coming to understand Syria through their eyes. Through our long meals, dialogue sessions, late night card games and long bus rides, it's amazing how well we have gotten familiar with each other after only two weeks.



The delegation meets a Syrian actor during cultural event in Damascus

Testimonials from Syrian Students

Tariq Al-Mohamad, Syrian Student

"Taking part in the United States-Syria Grassroots Diplomacy program has been a great experience. I have been learning a lot from the communication class, living with our American partners and from meeting our distinguished speakers."

Ibrahim Fayad, Syrian Student

"I've never imagined that I'll be able to sit for 3 hour in a lecture or class or even dialogue session but I did...because I really enjoy my time talking, expressing and interacting with the other participants."

Nick Jaeger, American Student

Breaking down [these] stereotypes has been a big part of this experience. Having the opportunity to learn about the educational system, the family life, and the relationship to religion, just to name a few points, of Syria and the Syrian people has been enlightening. And I expect that my colleagues have had a similar experience. While we may not have believed of ourselves that we held these stereotypes, sometimes they are so embedded in our collective experience that we cannot avoid them.



Lunch at the Sahara Resort where the program took place



American and Syrian flags raised at the opening ceremony

Note from the President

This year we hosted our most successful grassroots US-Syrian student exchange in Damascus, Syria. We accepted 12 American students and 12 Syrian students from an application pool of hundreds of interested students, and brought them together for a two and a half week intensive program in Syria. Every day, the students studied language and media, participated in Conflict Resolution Dialogue sessions, met with leaders from Syria's political and religious elite as well as US officials in Syria, and traveled the country. The outcome was more than I or the other program organizers could have imagined, especially since there is no other educational program like this in Syria. Lasting bonds of friendships were formed, an appreciation of Syrian and American cultures was established and, best of all, and the seeds of mutual respect and understanding were planted between Americans and Syrians. I couldn't have dreamt of a better outcome and response to this mission, and AMLN is determined to remain at the forefront of grassroots educational and cultural exchange programs.



Participants at the Israeli/Syrian border



Visit to American Embassy in Damascus



Meeting with the President of the Women's Union

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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