

## THE FIRST AMERICAN-SYRIAN YOUTH LEADERSHIP EXCHANGE

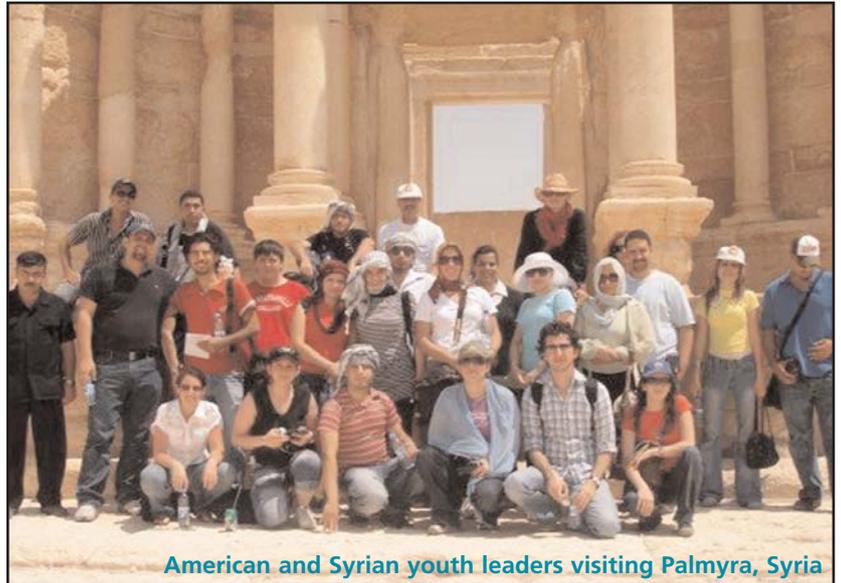
The American MidEast Leadership Network (AMLN) Youth Leadership Exchange was a two-week cultural exchange program that brought a diverse group of young American leaders to Damascus, Syria, where they met with an equally diverse group of young Syrian leaders in July 2007.

The students, both Syrian and American, stayed at a hostel in Madinat-Al-Shebab, or Youth City, courtesy of Syria's Revolutionary Youth Union. Youth City is an accommodation and entertainment complex in the Meze section of Damascus. The participants had the opportunity to interact with each other for the first time, each pairing with a member from the other delegation, and act as ambassadors for their countries.

In an environment that encourages equality, critical thinking and respect, these young leaders were encouraged to get to know one another better, to learn about each others experiences and backgrounds, and gain a better understanding of each other's beliefs and values.

The program combined excursions, presentations, skill building exercises, dialogue, and discussion with educational, religious, political and cultural leaders, as well as social outings to achieve a maximum of societal exposure. Students learned extensively about each other's countries, cultures, and religious and social lives by visiting historical sites, interacting with everyday Syrian citizens and meeting in formal conference settings.

Through intense, carefully designed dialogue sessions, the participants were guided to a deeper level of communication by sharing their values, their beliefs and personal experiences. The ultimate goal was for these young leaders to return to their communities and share the lessons they learned during the two-week exchange, thus creating a ripple effect that allows the program to



American and Syrian youth leaders visiting Palmyra, Syria

reach beyond the two-week leadership exchange. Online forums were set up upon returning home to continue this exchange, and support these young leaders with their endeavors in future dialogue. The program was designed with the utmost care and sensitivity to the groups involved and will provide these future leaders with the diplomacy skills that allow them to lead the next generation away from ignorance and toward constructive communication as the preferred medium in dealing with differences.

## THE VISION

At AMLN, we understand the crucial importance of creating cultural and civic exchanges as vehicles through which the next generation can improve relations between the United States and the Arab world. As an organization and through the individual work towards our principles, AMLN aims to strengthen the ties that unite the U.S. and the Middle East in positive ways. We believe that people-to-people contact is the best way to demonstrate the educational and cultural similarities of people who might otherwise view each other in a negative way. AMLN believes that exchange programs can debunk stereotypes that divide people, promote good governance, and build respect for cultural expression and identity in a world that is experiencing increasing intolerance despite rapid globalization.

## SELECTION PROCESS

Our program received enormous interest from American students, parents and schools. We accepted eight out of more than 100 applicants for this pilot program. Selection of the American candidates was based on their academic merit, references and a personal interview. All applicants were required to write an essay describing why they wanted to be part of this unique program and what they hoped to gain from it. One academic reference was required per application, describing academic achievement and leadership qualities and skills.

## PRE-DEPARTURE

Before departing from New York, the American delegation met to share their views and visions about the program and their expectations of this experience. During the orientation, the participants met with Syrian- American community leaders and other individuals who have traveled and engaged in cultural programs in Syria. The speakers shared their experiences and answered many questions that the American delegation had concerning a visit to Syria. Moreover, the delegation met Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, who welcomed the delegation and shared the Syrian position on some current political issues. Dr. Ja'afari reassured the participants — most of whom had never visited Syria before — and accurately predicted that the delegation would receive a warm welcome in Damascus.



The American delegation, pre-departure

## ARABIC CLASSES

Another important component of the program was a series of Arabic language class sessions that aimed to give the participant linguistic structure in the midst of complete cultural immersion. The sessions were held at the Arabic Language Teaching Institute for Non-Native Speakers in the heart of Damascus, taught by a professor from Damascus University. The institute specializes in Modern-Standard Arabic instruction, which complemented the colloquial Arabic that participants were exposed to on a daily basis. Through a variety of exercises and lesson-plans, the class encompassed a wide range of ability levels, encouraging conversation, vocabulary development, group participation and writing practice. The class was small and personal, allowing individuals to feel comfortable in expressing themselves in Arabic in an environment where



A visit to Church of St. Paul, Damascus



Arabic class

everyone could learn from each other and contribute freely. The Arabic language sessions were sponsored by the Syrian Ministry of Expatriates and the Ministry of Education.

## EXCURSIONS

Almost every day included an excursion or tours that introduced participants to various aspects of Syrian culture, society, history and contemporary concerns.

The visits included a trip to the town of Dummar to experience a Youth Camp, a trip to the Qasoun region which overlooks all of Damascus, many trips to the "Old City" and Bab Tooma, the historic districts of Damascus, a visit to the city of Palmyra to view ancient Roman and Babylonian ruins, a visit to a traditional bathhouse in Damascus, an excursion to the city of Qunaitra in the Golan region of Syria, many trips to world-famous mosques and churches and a visit to the Aramaic city of Maloula, to mention a few.

Every Syrian region, town, building and street corner is steeped in history — history that has shaped the present in ways that can only be grasped through experience and exposure. All of these excursions allowed participants to live Syria, become active participants in the landscape of Syrian culture, past and present, and to experience a deeper understanding of where Syria was, and where it may be going.

From the visit to Palmyra, walking through ruins that are thousands of years old, to the visit to Qunaitra, which embodies the continuing antagonism between Syria and Israel, participants were literally allowed to touch the pulse of the Syrian experience.

## DIALOGUE SESSIONS

The dialogue component was the core of the exchange program. During professionally facilitated two-hour daily dialogue sessions, participants discussed an entire spectrum of issues, ranging from personal beliefs and the complexity of identity to cultural stereotypes and international power dynamics.



The delegations met at the U.S. Embassy with the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to Syria, Michael Corbin, who illuminated various reasons behind the limited American diplomatic relations with Syria, but expressed optimism that public education initiatives such as the AMLN program would only serve to enhance national and cultural ties in the future.

The workshops were led by Marieke Van Woerkom, an experienced facilitator and mediator who has led similar initiatives around the world. Ms. Van Woerkom expertly guided the sessions, beginning with personal reflection and experience sharing and gradually navigating through more contentious issues such as gender roles, politics, culture, religion, stereotyping and the media. The participants gained a range of skills that allowed them to be more effective civic diplomats — skills such as communication, negotiation, critical thinking and leadership, as well as acquiring a broader sense of cultural competency and creative problem solving skills. The dialogue sessions were complemented and bolstered by all other aspects of the program and ultimately allowed strong relationships, rooted in reality and based on honesty, to be built among the two delegations.

## MEETINGS

To gain an understanding of contemporary Syrian society, the delegations met with a wide range of academic, cultural, religious and political leaders. These leaders shared their ideas about international and domestic issues and exchanged thoughts with the delegation members, encouraging discussion. One of the main themes that emerged was the long history of peaceful coexistence between religious groups in Syria, between Christian and Muslim populations. The group met the leading Islamic cleric in Syria, Grand Mufti Sheikh Badr al-Din Hassoun, who stressed the need — and possibility for — peaceful resolution to armed conflicts around the world.

A meeting and discussion with Father Elias Zehlawi, Catholic pastor of “Our Lady of Damascus Church,” also displayed the religious tolerance and cooperation that his efforts and congregation represent. The pastor gave the group an account of his perspective on current issues, including the September 11th terror attacks and the U.S. response from an Arab-Christian perspective. Pastor Zehlawi leads a world-renowned interfaith choir with the Umayyad Mosque, which was recently profiled in a short documentary by Nabil Maleh, a renowned Syrian film director. After viewing the Zehlawi documentary and Maleh’s 1993 feature film *The Extras*,

which garnered many international awards, Maleh sat down with the group for an intimate analysis of his large body of work.

The students also had the honor of a private meeting with Dr. Wael Mua’lla, president of Damascus University, Syria’s oldest and largest institution of higher learning. Dr. Mua’lla discussed the many achievements of the university as well as opportunities for cooperation between Damascus University and other American universities and students.

To further understand political concerns between Syria and the United States, the delegations met with representatives from both countries. Syrian Minister of Expatriates, Dr. Bouthaina Sha’aban (*picture at right*) discussed Syrian efforts to maintain ties with foreign nationals and their descendants. The minister also reviewed the role of women in the Middle East, relating to the students the long history of powerful women in Islam, herself an example.



Both groups also met with Dr. Adnan Arbash who chairs the Revolutionary Yourh Union in Syria, to discuss the program’s role in influencing Syria’s future generations.



Delegation meets with Grand Mufti Sheikh Badr al-Din

## AN UNPARALLELED EXPERIENCE

All of the structural components of the program served to introduce participants to multiple dimensions of Syrian society and culture. From the language component to formal meetings, and dialogue sessions to educational excursions, all aimed to better familiarize the students with a nation and a people that still remain rather nebulous in the minds of many Americans.

Although these core structural elements were essential to the development and progression of this program, the participants' interaction and "free-time" outside of the planned curriculum proved to be an invaluable experience in its own right. Participants from both the Syrian and American delegation would visit local restaurants, shopping areas and social scenes together, bonding and finding commonalities in private conversations and the group dynamic. This personal interaction among members of the delegations in unplanned activities allowed participants to increasingly feel at ease with each other, allowing for the formal dialogue sessions to progress into deeper and more contentious issues without one feeling ostracized or apprehensive. Private excursions allowed the participants to view and process the Syrian experience on an individual basis, and while the formal components were an integral part of the program, it was this individual experience that truly allowed participants to personalize this program.

The American delegation came to Syria with certain preconceptions and unspoken apprehension, and left with vivid memories and many Syrian friends. Although there are obvious differences between the United States and Syria, these personal experiences allowed the American delegation to find commonality and kinship in a place considered to be unfriendly to Americans. This undoubtedly offers a glimmer of hope for improving cultural and societal relations between the two nations.

The American Mideast Leadership Network (AMLN) was created to address, among other things, the hostility and distrust between people of the Arab world and the United States.

Through people-to-people programs, education initiatives, lectures, leadership opportunities, development goals, publications, and grassroots outreach, AMLN aims to build bridges of understanding and respect between the two communities. AMLN is committed to designing programs that help Arab and American people of different ages experience their similarities and understand their differences, and build foundations of mutual respect and understanding with the goal of improving relationships between them.

## THE AMERICAN DELEGATION



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The AMLN Youth Leadership Exchange, is one of our flagship programs, which aims to promote relationships built on trust, awareness, understanding and respect.

*The American MidEast Leadership Network is a 501(c)3 organization. All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by federal and state law.*

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