

Foreward: Beyond the Politics of Fear

Since its inception, the imperative of NIMEP has been to encounter the Middle East on its own terms, to eschew ideology, to be passionate in its scholarship, and compassionate in its outlook. This was the goal of its founding generation of young Emirati, Israeli, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Palestinian, Saudi, and American students. In 2002 they accepted the challenge of Ami Ayalon (the former Director of the Israeli internal security organization Shin Bet), Dr. Sari Nusseibeh (President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and former PLO representative for Jerusalem), and Roelf Meyer (former Minister of Provincial and Constitutional Affairs under South African presidents de Klerk and Mandela).

These experts urged our students to create a climate that would further understanding and transcend hatred and to travel to the region as frequently as possible to determine first-hand what is “happening on the ground.”

The vision of NIMEP has been affirmed now by four successive generations of students, with each class encouraging and educating a new cohort of young scholars and thinkers. Each year is distinctive; each year brings vigorous exchange.

NIMEP’s story is reflective of the Institute and its ongoing effort to comprehend complexity, to accept ambiguity, to seek progress, and to pursue peaceful outcomes. Serious efforts at engagement and thoughtful dialogue are often incremental, painstaking, and require a determination to stay the course. They can provoke controversy. This year, the Institute inaugurated the Robert and JoAnn Bendetson Public Diplomacy Initiative, “Iraq: Moving Forward.” The symposium created initial concerns appropriate to the highly politicized and contentious issues surrounding Iraq. However, our approach diminished these misgivings. The Institute’s signature of non-polemical, open forums became more apparent as such diverse experts as the United States Military Academy Professor (and General David Petraeus’ trusted adviser in Iraq) Lt. Colonel Ike Wilson; the former Iraqi Minister of Defense and a National Security Advisor, Ali Allawi, and Ambassador Peter Galbraith gathered to debate.

Evincing the nature of the Institute’s efforts to educate across barriers, for four days senior Iraqi military and government officials met with hard, seasoned, and ultimately courageous leaders from South Africa, Northern Ireland and Guatemala. Many were former “men of violence,” who sought to convey truthfully and fully how they had finally transcended violence and sectarian hatred. Hearing from such people was a difficult but inspiring education for our relatively sheltered students, and for our community.

In this vein, NIMEP sought to broaden its perspective while continuing to stay centered on its origins. This year therefore they focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and sought a widened dialogue with major guests and speakers. NIMEP hosted PLO Ambassador Afif Safieh at Tufts, this time at the explicit request of Harvard University officials who had originally invited him but sought shelter after the controversy surrounding their earlier hosting of Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran.

This was an interesting moment for the Institute, for we previously had worked with Safieh as a integral participant in the 1987 EPIIC program on the Future of the West Bank and Gaza on the 20th anniversary of the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War. Then the students had chosen “reconciliation, not recrimination” as the encompassing theme which allowed its diverse students, including Israelis and Palestinians, to think together for the entire academic year.

Safieh, a visiting scholar at Harvard, had fully endorsed this conception in many preparatory meetings. However, at the symposium’s opening evening, in an argument with Meron Benvenisti, the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, he angrily tried to derail the meeting, arguing that this concept was in fact, “intellectual castration.” His public views, at least were quite different this time and he argued for the continued Palestinian recognition of Israel and for seeking a non-violent political solution. It remains impossible to truly know, at a time when Hamas challenges PLO supremacy, whether this was an opportunistic tactical approach, or an intellectual and political conversion. (Some people have definitely matured in wonderful ways. Victor Assal, one of the 1987 EPIIC student program chairs, an orthodox Jew, later won the Israeli Defense Forces educator of the year award, received his M.A. at the Hebrew University, and is now a professor at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland. His co-chair, Leila Abu Gheida, now the political director of the USAID program in Nepal, has just hosted one of our current students studying refugee issues in Kathmandu. They both have returned to participate in subsequent EPIIC symposia.)

Appropriate to its credo as a non-polemical student group, the year also featured a panel dialogue with the Director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis, Dr. Shai Feldman, and senior fellow of the Crown Center and Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Research, Dr. Khalil Shikaki. NIMEP ended its year long programming with a lecture and discussion with Dr. Chuck Freilich, senior fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center and former Israeli Deputy National Security Advisor.

The Institute and NIMEP were confronted this year with interesting accusations from critics, with far narrower, and what would emerge as

vitriolic, attitudes.

When it was announced that NIMEP would visit Lebanon for its yearly fact-finding mission to the Middle East, allegations arose that the very nature of the trip, to probe and meet with the widest spectrum of leaders and political figures in the aftermath of the Israel/Hezbollah war, was inherently anti-Israeli and provided implicit support for Hezbollah. This became conflated with a controversy involving our trip advisor, Rudy Jaafar, a Lebanese-Canadian Fletcher PhD student. Rudy was initially my superb teaching assistant for EPIIC's 20th Anniversary Year theme, "Oil and Water." As a co-founder of the NGO Nahwa al-Muwatiniya (Towards Citizenship), he was accused, by a handful of Fletcher students and alumni (most of whom had never met him), of holding active pro-Hezbollah sympathies.

Our inquiries with Lebanese and American academicians, as well as senior Israeli and U.S. intelligence and political officials, debunked this. In reality, Nahwa al-Muwatiniya, while condemning the Israeli shelling of Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, as indiscriminate, is active in trying to create a Lebanon free of all external influences. It seeks a tolerant, secular, civil society, one that in the future might possess the critical political and cultural maturity necessary for rapprochement in the region.

NIMEP students' personal judgments and experiences with him in Lebanon proved him to be a person of great integrity. He knows Lebanon intimately. He helped engineer a powerful and professional trip that all our students reported was non-partisan, open, and respectful of all opinions. He provided an extraordinary breadth of interviews and unparalleled access. Most importantly, he never interjected or attempted to impose any of his own political views.

The Fletcher School's Adjunct Professor Kathleen Hammil, a lecturer at The Arab University of Beirut, helped to organize and host a powerful session of dialogue in Beirut with activists in Lebanese civil society. She wrote:

What a rigorous schedule of meetings and activities they chose to pursue during such a short time in Lebanon! It is remarkable that they managed to meet with so many influential and prominent thinkers here – including Dr. Karim Makdisi, MP Walid Jumblatt, PM Fouad Siniora, Sheikh Sayyed Fadlallah, US Amb. Jeff Feltman, Fateh Azzam, Dr. Paul Salem, Timur Goksel, and Dr. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb among others. Most people in Lebanon and in the region would have given their right arm to participate in this spectacular line-up of meetings.

NIMEP's horizons are appropriately broad and, in expanding its focus, the students also seriously considered a research trip to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Indeed several of the formidable members of the group have continued on this quest, most notably Sarah Newton who is now pursuing her research as a National Geographic Young Explorer there. (We expect to publish her work in a later NIMEP *Insights*.)

However, Lebanon was the group's ultimate choice. It was first conceived almost immediately after NIMEP's successful fact-finding trip to Turkey last year, long before the war. The attraction of Lebanon was its remarkable mosaic of peoples and cultures, the complexity of the country once considered the paragon of consensus politics and consociational nation-building, and the revival of the city of Beirut and a vibrant civil society.

Key to their interest was witnessing the efforts of the Lebanese to reconcile and to rebuild a society, and a country, struggling more with Syria (which has never acknowledged Lebanese sovereignty) than with Israel. The attraction was not Israeli/Hezbollah focused, but surely the subsequent warfare did influence the research and fact-finding agenda.

At a time of acknowledged hyper-cautious and politicized State Department advisories and ambiguous Homeland Security terror color codes, most universities are quite reluctant to send their students into the world. Tufts is surely different and distinctive. Our highly prepared students are encouraged to embrace the complexities of the World. The trip, originally planned for December/January, was postponed after careful deliberation regarding security concerns (planned demonstrations and threatened road and port blockades,) on the ground and upon the advice of the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon, another Fletcher graduate. "Prudent risk taking" in the words of our University president, Larry Bacow, mark the University's and the Institute's shared approach to the world.

There were still some interesting politically motivated challenges and obstacles to overcome, but NIMEP persevered and traveled to Lebanon. While security scrutinies were once again central to our deliberations, we knew our students had thoroughly researched their topics and the political and cultural context into which they were entering.

Graduating senior Unaza Khan's contribution to this journal, "Transition: Reflections from Lebanon," eloquently affirms why we took such efforts. It is very meaningful essay for me as her teacher, and now, as her friend. I remember anxious conversations with her as a young undergraduate, and also with her parents, over her efforts to explore the world, specifically India and Pakistan, as a Muslim woman. Her growth is wonderful, but not extraordinary. It is the essence of what we are striving for in all of our educational efforts.

I hope that as one of its lasting achievements, NIMEP will help create a campus known for sharp intellectual exchange and civility on issues surrounding the Middle East. The NIMEP students' dialogue subsequent to their Lebanon trip with a Hillel group that spent their winter break in Israel assisting in the reconstruction of the north, which was recovering from Hezbollah's shelling of civilian cities and towns, was a fruitful example

of NIMEP's reach. It was easy for them to engage, for they already respected one another. The Tufts Hillel Rabbi, Jeffrey Summit, is also distinctive, known for his intelligent, reasoned understanding of the value of dialogue. We have a University that trusts its students, parents, faculty and administrators to ultimately make intelligent decisions.

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A note of special gratitude to GL (a senior U.S. military officer, security expert, cryptologist, linguist and specialist in the Middle East) for his nuanced analysis and advice. And to others who also painstakingly researched the security risks.

Thank you to Mr. Rami Khouri, the very highly regarded analyst of the politics and society of Middle East, and director of the newly established Fares Center at the American University of Beirut, for helping our students reach Lebanon.

To Jamil Mroure, who in 1975 as a Neiman Fellow at Harvard helped create one of my publications, *Leviathan*. Now over thirty years later, as the publisher of *The Daily Star*, he hired my student, Nicki Sobacki, a young, but quickly developing professional photojournalist, who refused to be deterred by the initial postponement of our trip, and who went on her own to cover extraordinary events in Lebanon for his publication.

Ultimately thank you most of all to my NIMEP students and Rudy Jafaar, who endured months of uncertainty as they held on to their dream, one they had accomplished with élan and intelligence; and to their parents who trusted in us to not endanger their children and supported the boldness and risk taking that is essential to confront the real dangers, of chauvinism and isolation.

And special thanks to our alumni and to those of you who helped overcome the politics of fear. This issue is significant not only for its contents but because it marks a milestone in the academic life of NIMEP's founders. The founding generation has just graduated. But they have not left. The year's activities and this issue is still the yield of that community and its continuity.



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