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| Drury University, Springfield,Missouri |
| Arab-Israeli Conflict |
| Reflections from Camp David III Seminar |
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| After attending an Arab-Israeli Conflict seminar in WashingtonD.C.I was able to incorporate my coursework at Drury University into an increased understanding of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East by hearing from representatives on both sides of the issue. My analytical thinking was challenged, along with a desire to continue my studies in strategic conflict resolve and diplomatic brokering.  |

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 Comparing the position of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the United States, is a complex puzzle of peace process inconsistencies, a cycle of hard-line rhetoric, and a refusal from both areas of conflict to take on more elements of responsibility. However, hearing from the speakers from all sides and continuing my research after the Camp David III seminar through the Washington Center in Washington, D.C. last month, I was able to utilize their arguments with additional information into an analysis of why there has not been a quick fix in resolving the hostilities, in addition to different components of opinion within each delegation.

 The perception of all parties involved include ethnic, religious, class, and gender lines that lead to various political attitudes and contribute to the divisions and tensions on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian issue (Bickerton & Klausner, 2005). Both portray themselves as victims over the moral and historic rights of the same land. I will explain the positions from the representatives that were invited to speak during the seminar, and who each distinguished their arguments in an eloquent and passionate manner with presentations that allowed me to absorb a broader, scholarly approach without oversimplification. I consider the ambitions, rivalries, and passions from both sides a legitimate framework for continued perseverance and negotiations among the delegations involved, but with a refreshed approach from their realistic characteristics and interpretations that should increase awareness of the international community and prompt the United States to be a vital, diplomatic facilitator and consistent, active participant among both groups in order to expand the peace process dimensions.

 Israel considers the blockades of Gaza a necessity and declares the region a hostile entity. The military aggression from Hamas, in addition to the rocket and mortar attacks from other militant groups operating inside Gaza, has forced Israel to implement the blockades and considers the defense a program of sanctions, not a blockade. Israel recognizes the strategy as a legitimate retaliation in preventing terrorist action and defends its right for security since the 2007 election of Hamas. The desired outcome from the Israeli position is to sanction Gaza civilians enough to install new leaders and oust Hamas. In response to the Hamas takeover of Gaza, Israel sharply restricts the flow of people and goods into and out of Gaza so they will not be subjected to terrorism. The purpose and justification of the initial blockade was to pressure Hamas into ending rocket attacks and deprive them of the supplies necessary for the continuation of rocket attacks and, hopefully, remedy extremist activity. During our seminar visit to the Israeli Embassy, spokesperson Jonathan Peled, defended the blockade strategy, and rejected claims that essential goods are prevented from reaching Gaza. He stated that Israel is doing its best to ensure humanitarian aid and reiterated the fact that basic supplies are being allowed in, especially after being questioned from my two passionate and forthcoming Palestinian colleagues about the continued blockade.

 In addition to a land blockade along Gaza’s borders with Egypt and Israel, the Israeli navy also maintains a sea blockade from three nautical miles offshore to thwart any vessels or fisherman’s boats that may be carrying goods used to make arms. (Israeli Blockade Strangling Gaza Fishing Economy, 2010). Israel claims it has a right to guard the area with regular security and states that Israeli marines shoot at Palestinian boats which are suspected of smuggling arms into Gaza. Israel denies harassing fisherman and states they allow fisherman to do their jobs

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peacefully. However, Israel remains skeptical about any civilian fishing boats, as they could be cooperating with terrorist organizations for smuggling purposes by disguising barrels with explosive devices (Israeli Blockade Strangling Gaza Fishing Economy, 2010).

 Attacks by Israeli gunboats patroling the waters, along with the tightening restrictions on the fishing waters, put Palestinians out of work. The sea blockade has crippled the Gaza fishing industry. The Oslo Accords mandated Palestinian fisherman to be able to fish twenty nautical miles from shore, but since the Second Intifada in 2000, Israel has imposed the three mile zone. The Hamas-Israeli War also destroyed civil infrastructure, including waterworks and sewage treatments, resulting in sixty million liters of untreated sewage to flow into Gaza fishing waters each day (Israeli Blockade Strangling Gaza Fishing Economy, 2010). The Israeli blockade also keeps tools and materials from entering Gaza, resulting in an inability to repair water treatment facilities. From the Palestinian perspective, the Gaza blockade is a violation of humanitarian rights. Joe Stork, acting director of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East division states “Israel’s rightful self-defense against unlawful rocket attacks does not justify a blockade that denies civilians the food, fuel, and medicine needed to survive, a policy amounting to collective punishment” (Israel/Gaza Israeli Blockade Unlawful Despite Gaza Border Breach, 2008). The Palestinian position is that Israel is the occupying power and remains responsible for the well-being of Gaza residents. Gazans are completely dependent on Israel for essential commodities like food, fuel, electricity, and medicine.

 The United States stands publicly in favor of opening the Gaza crossings and encourages Israel to allow more supplies to pass through. State Department spokesperson Jeffrey Giauque stated during our visit that it was bad economics not to open up the blockades and the blockades should not stop humanitarian and economic progress. The United States recently made suggestions to Israel that easing the Gaza blockade would help counter the fallout from the Goldstone Report on allegations of war crimes during Operation Cast Lead last year (Navid, 2010). A foreign ministry delegation met last week with senior officials at the State Department and White House, where the message from U.S. officials to Israel was about the international criticism of the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the push from the critics to move forward with the Goldstone Report in order for it to reach the International Criminal Court in the Hague (Navid, 2010). The Americans stated at the meeting that they do not support the policy of preventing goods from reaching the Gaza population because of the political situation there. Also, on January 21, a congressional letter was sent to the White House consisting of fifty-four signatories and sponsored by Democratic representatives Keith Ellison of Minnesota and Jim McDermott of Washington, encouraging the Obama Administration to address the Israeli security issue without imposing a collective punishment on the Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip. Americans for Peace Now, who also spoke at our seminar andwere represented very well by Lara Friedman, also report on their website in support of this congressional letter. Their official statement is that besides essential needs being restricted causing a horrific humanitarian crisis, imports like raw materials are being banned, which halts any rebuilding of the thousands of homes destroyed during Operation Cast lead, which darkens the private sector and increases uemployment. The letter calls on the president to press for immediate relief for the citizens of Gaza (Shelef, 2010).

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 The West Bank Jewish settlements also remain at the top of the list for stalling concessions in the peace negotiations. When Israel won the Six Day War in 1967, they gained control of the Gaza Strip and established Jewish settlements to act as buffers against Arab enemies and also solidify the disputed territory with a Jewish majority (The Struggle Over Israel's Settlements, 2009). While most settlements are legal under Israeli law, they are widely regarded as illegal in the eyes of the international community under the Geneva Convention, which bars the settling of civilians in occupied territory (The Struggle Over Israel's Settlements, 2009). Israel’s government argues that the settlements serve as a legitimate means of self-defense and keeps hostile Palestinians away from Israel proper. Israel also views the settlements as bargaining chips, only to be traded if Palestinians renounce terrorism and recognize Israel’s right to exist. According to the Israeli government, the settlements are crucial for “natural growth”, which is intended to allow the adult children of settlers set up their homes and apartments. A religious identity remains a priority also for Israel, as the Hebrew Bible refers to the territory from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River as a designated homeland and a promise to Abraham from God to be a permanent home for the Jewish people.

 Palestinians have refused to resume peace talks with Israel unless settlement growth is completely frozen. The more these settlements spread and become permanent, the less capable the Palestinian’s feel they can create a contiguous and viable state. According to Dr.Amal Jadou, Deputy Chief of Mission with the PLO Mission in the United States, Israel also controlling the water resources on the Palestinian side remains a hardship on everyday life, with people going without water up to twenty-one days while the Israeli settlements have plenty of water to fill their pools and water their lawns. It is an undignified treatment that further victimizes the Palestinians under occupation. The ten month moratorium imposed by Israel on halting expansion is considered by the Palestinians as propaganda and deception by Netanyahu because no policies have changed (Kessler, 2009).

 President Obama has demanded that Israel fulfill a commitment in the 2003 Road Map Peace Plan for a full settlement freeze, including a halt of expansion to accommodate natural growth. The State Department claims that the ten month moratorium imposed is a step beyond what Israel has done before and no new housing construction is a positive step that could have substantial significance on the ground. Jeffrey Giauque says that the United States encourages progress where they see movement and this temporary halt to expansion could evolve into an understanding of a sustained freeze, even though no official agreement has been made between the United States and Israel. The State Department is encouraged by this small initiative and hope it serves as a lure for the Palestinians to come back to the negotiation table for at least some low- level talks and parallel discussion between the disputing parties.

The situation on the final status of Jerusalem is also a key issue in negotiations. Although encouraged by small steps on a temporary 10 month building freeze excluding East Jerusalem, the United States stands by its condemnation of any additional settlements. Despite the strong rhetoric last year about opposing settlements, the Obama administration’s immediate objective is to get both parties back to the negotiating table. U.S. officials are hopeful that persuasion from the Arab states will persuade Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to give up his desire for a

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complete settlement freeze at this time and at least talk to Israel.Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is hopeful negotiations will begin “shortly” (Mohammed & Quinn, 2010).However, with a plan from Israel to build 900 more homes on occupied territory in East Jerusalem, the United States has urged the Israeli government to refrain from taking action that undermines trust, demonstrates counterproductivity, and stalls a new start to peace negotiations (Sawasta, 2010).

 For the state of Israel, Jerusalem is its eternal and undivided capital. The position is based on religious, historical, and political claims to the holy city. Israel claims that only the unity of the city under its sovereignty will guarantee freedom of religion, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claiming that Jerusalem belongs to the Jewish people and has refused to extend a freeze on building in East Jerusalem (Yellin, 2010).

 The Palestinian National Authority claims East Jerusalem is an occupied territory and should be subjected to permanent status negotiations. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said last Thursday that the Palestinians would not accept Abu Dis, which is controlled by the PA, as their future state’s capital, but would insist on receiving control over East Jerusalem and have clarification on which part of the capital belongs to the Palestinians and which part belongs to Israel (Jerusalem Will Be Palestinian Capital, 2010). Abbas also mentioned that peace talks could not resume with Israel until construction stopped in East Jerusalem. Our guest speaker, Dr. Amal Jadou, suggested during her presentation that East Jerusalem should belong to the Palestinians, with both having access to religious sites. West Jerusalem could be the capital of Israel and the entire city should be open. Her point, as a Palestinian, was made clear to me how Americans can come visit Jerusalem much easier than Palestinians. The city is a cradle of three faiths and therefore should be open and accommodating in a manner that is equal to all of them.

 Lara Friedman from Americans for Peace Now agrees that Jerusalem is the tipping point of the negotiation process and how very hard it is to figure out what to do with it because the map looks like DNA. Discussing Jerusalem used to be taboo, but now the cat is out of the bag to talk about it and shift towards how to divide it. Now three months into the moratorium,APN is concerned about the good faith of the Israeli government by calling into question their recent actions of continued settlement building and the rhetoric of the Israeli government to challenege the Palestinians on peace negotiations by passing the burden entirely onto them to come to the negotiating table (Friedman, 2010).APN’s position on Jerusalem supports a negotiated solution to competing claims in Jerusalem (Policies and Positions). If a Palestinian capital in Arab areas of Jerusalem would emerge, it would not undermine Israel’s claim to Jerusalem as its capital. Lara Friedman believes that based on the principle of sharing a politically divided city is possible. APN supports any proposed solutions for the future status of Jerusalem placing Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian control, Jewish neighborhoods under Israel’s control, and the Old City under significant arrangements that are agreed upon by both Palestinian and Israeli leaders (Policies and Positions). APN gives a clear statement that Jerusalem may appear as an undivided city, but on the ground it is already technically geographically divided, just not legally (Policies and Positions). For example, the patterns of life have been separated since 1967 with Palestinians and Israelis living separately. However, the Israeli security barrier that is relatively oblivious to Israel still runs through Palestinians neighborhoods. The barrier divides families and communites, while cutting off Palestinians in Jersualem form the city’s West Bank hinterland (Policies and Positions). Lara Friedman represents APN with a clear position that views a

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Palestinian capital a positive way for the global community to recognize Jewish Jerusalem as Israel’s capital once a distinction is legal between both sides. An Israeli capital as part of Jerusalem would define it as a more Jewish city and solidify Israel’s sovereignty over it, easing Israel’s burden of ruling over the thousands of Palestinians that do not have the desire to be Israeli citizens.

 Egypt’s prime position in the Israeli Palestinian conflict and its relations to all sides involved has been as mediator. However, it is also fully intended to serve as a protective entity for their state. Acting on behalf of the United States, Egypt has taken a direct step as chief negotiator. After visiting the Egyptian Embassy and hearing Ambassador Sameh Shoukry speak, I sensed more pride from the Egyptian delegation than I did frustration. In fact, one of my questions to His Excellency when we spoke afterwards was about the perceived lack of consistency from the United States last year to move forward after such an ambitious speech in Cairo. The ambassador was quick to point out that although the Egyptian delegation is disappointed with a slower pace from the Obama administration than was expected, the government remains optimistic about the president’s second year in office and the United States’ commitment as mediators working alongside Egypt. The Egyptian Embassy was extremely welcoming with open questions, concerns, and inquiries about the stalled negotiations and maintained that sense of pride in pursuing more discussions this year. The delegation was very clear that they will not walk away from their responsibility. The lack of positive media coverage was the only area of frustration the ambassador was vocal about, as he feels the news outlets could do a much better job in conveying to the international community even the small, positive steps that are achieved in the peace process. The steps may not be breaking news, but some acknowledgement of what may seem as minor work, could be better addressed to the public and increase consistent global reinforcement in diplomatic relations.

 What about failed efforts to join the PA and Hamas to form a national unity government? An Egyptian brokered peace deal came close to an agreement between Fatah and Hamas last October, but collapsed at the very end. Low level talks are expected to continue, but Hamas feels frustrated with Egypt because they claim to be transforming into a more goal oriented player in the peace process and fail to be recognized as legitimate representatives of the Palestinians (Gerges, 2010). Hamas claims that the deal fell through based on Cairo’s unilateral revision of the final agreed upon text that Hamas’s negotiating team was not consulted regarding the last draft. Second, some Palestinians feel Egypt is purposefully taking its time to conclude Fatah-Hamas talks because it is an important regional asset that solidifies Egypt’s relationship with Washington (Gerges, 2010). According to Amal Jadou, one of the reasons the PA and Hamas have not formed a unified government is because Hamas tried to sabotage any positive steps toward unity and is always looking out for their sole political interests in order to stay in power.

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 Another issue the Egyptian government is dealing with is the prisoner exchange failure. Last week, campaigners vowed to intensify pressure on the Israeli government fearing talks with Hamas had collapsed to free captured soldier Gilad Shalit. Hamas declared that the talks were in a deep freeze as a means of retaliation to the assassination of a senior Hamas man in Duba because they hold Israel responsible (Khoury, 2010). Under the indirect mediation of Egyptian officials and a German mediator, Hamas would exchange Shalit for roughly one thousand Palestinian prisoners currently held in Israeli jails, including many who are convicted of deadly terrorist attacks against Israelis. The negotiation team has remained deadlocked over the release of these heavyweight prisoners. A trade did take place last year for twenty Palestinian women to be released in exchange for a video showing Shalit was still alive, but the mediation remains deadlocked over any convicted terrorist release.

 With deadlock over any breakthrough regarding prisoner exchange and the release of Shalit, Egypt is unwilling to deal too closely with a declared transformed Hamas, especially being under the United States diplomatic microscope. Hamas wants to be referred to as an elected, social movement representing the Palestinian population, but Egypt has decided to steer their strategy into putting more pressure on Hamas by building a steel, underground barrier to cut off the smuggling business going into Gaza. The smuggling industry has added a financial edge to Hamas to maintain military weapons and extend a financial lifeline. By putting this underground wall in place, the balance of power could shift tremendously and stop the flow of arms that may entice militant groups to organize a regime in Egypt (Laub, 2010). However, the Hamas mayor of the Gaza border town of Rafah says that nearly four hundred tunnels run under Gaza’s border with Egypt. It employs fifteen thousand people and brings in a million dollars of goods a day (Laub, 2010). The anti-tunnel Egypt is building would affect Gazans livelihood who rely on the smuggling business as their only means of survival. Egypt defends the steel barrier as a security measure and hopes that it will cripple the Hamas organization. However, the possibility has also been discussed that the smugglers may dig deeper by going below the underground wall and undermining Egypt’s efforts. The smuggling industry contributes to the Gaza Strip economy and the recovery of the civilian infrastructure. Hamas has stated that the Gaza Strip poses no threat to Egypt’s security and accused Egypt of collaborating with Israel and the United States to smother the Palestinian residents. Hamas has vowed to find alternative ways to smuggle the weapons that they need to maintain military control. Egypt is determined to complete the barrier, despite Hamas rhetoric, and define the wall as an important security and political interest, hoping to prevent the spread of Hamas influence to Islamic opposition within their own state.

 The Obama administration made an emotional and admirable attempt within the president’s first few months in office to offer a renewed effort to negotiate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and extend an olive branch to the Arab culture as a means of a refreshed approach towards positive engagement. His speech was intended to break the former administration’s tensions and past discrepancies, while also representing a personal touch with the Cairo visit on behalf of the Western world. President Obama administered a balance within the content of the speech, citing the persecution of Jews and recognizing the right for their peace. He also acknowledged the

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persecution of Palestinians, whether they were Muslims or Christians, in regard to dislocation, daily intolerance, and undignified treatment caused by occupation. The speech clearly outlined the historical situation and failed attempts by the United States, along with the rest of the global community, to obtain resolve and move forward with shared interests. The rhetoric was a gallant step for the new administration to recognize the realistic challenges ahead, but convey to the rest of the Arab world that the fight is not with Islam, but the small percentage of potent extremists. The United States took responsibility about not being consistent, and vowed to not push aside the plight of the conflict. According to the president addressing the Muslim world in Cairo, the peace talks need to go beyond formal, administrative rhetoric among nations. President Obama signified every positive and energetic intention to facilitate initiatives and obtain favorable outcomes for both sides.It was a refreshing and public renewal of commitment from the United States that declared the “time is now” to resolve the issue and defined a “new beginning” between the Arab world and the West (President Obama Addresses Muslim World in Cairo, 2009).

 The speech in Cairo was a promising start to revisit negotiations, but domestic issues like the economy and complex healthcare debate became a dominating factor on President Obama’s agenda during the remainder of his first year. Work had begun on implementing further, ambitious initiatives pertaining to the conflict, but new issues emerging in the Middle East like Iran’s corrupt elections, defiance regarding uranium enrichment, and a concern pertaining to Yemen becoming a new base for Al-Qaeda, sidetracked the importance of achieving substantial progress on other Middle East goals that eventually got pushed into the second year agenda.

 The State Department addressed the 2010 commitment and emphasized the Obama administration’s commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian issue with an intention to make progress this year with an unwavering sense of resolve. Spokesperson Jeffrey Giauque praised Special Envoy George Mitchell’s work so far within the Middle East and mentioned that he visits the region at least once a month. According to Giauque, the media is somewhat of a frustration for the mission because it portrays a misleading entity about the everyday work actually being done. However, the State Department stands behind Mitchell and commends his ambitious effort throughout the first year. Progress is measured not only by breakthrough operations, but low level telephone or written diplomacy. The European Union was also mentioned, as Mitchell’s work was also praised with coordinating work with the Quartet. It is a beneficial effort to have this organization so the international community can speak with one voice and be effective with principles encouraging Hamas to accept viable reconciliation. Another contribution from the State Department perspective is a 2010 commitment to the peace process and a two year time frame for negotiations. People to people diplomacy, according to Giauque, is crucial, with consistent contact among government officials to keep the doors of communication open and increase cultural ties. When asked about Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s high profile role, Jeffrey said that she supports Mitchell in his daily work formulating policy, but will step in as a visible facilitator if a log jam needs to be broken. The founding of a Palestinian state is a national interest of the United States and President Obama is expecting a fresh push this year from Mitchell because the Palestinians expect the United States to do more arm- twisting with Israel to carry out diplomatic obligation and vigorously pursue a two state solution (Service, 2009).

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 Lara Friedman agrees that George Mitchell has the power to influence negotiations with complete confidence and trust from President Obama. His authority reflects the will of the president, but the question that she raised during the seminar was how much political capital is he willing to spend enraging the American Jewish community and upsetting the Israel Lobby. Friedman acknowledges that Israeli Jews do not like Obama, so if the administration is going to take a hit anyway, it might as well be for playing hardball with Israel. However, Americans for Peace Now does state that it is very difficult to sell peace to the Palestinian and Israeli Diaspora, so the Obama administration should get tougher as the main mediating actor. All participants, according to Friedman’s position, know how to solve the problem. Brokering negotiations is just a lack of political will.

President Obama stated in his Cairo speech that the United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements, claiming they are a violation of past agreements and serve as a deterrence for peace efforts that will not make Israel safer and only infuriate the Palestinians (Bronner, 2009). The United States remains consistent in condemning unilateral Israeli steps in East Jerusalem. However U.S. policy was criticized last year by Arab League Chief Moussa, stating that mediations should be a group effort that is objective (Arab League: More U.N. Less U.S. Mideast Peace Bids, 2009). Moussa’s point was that more mediators should be present that can accommodate the needs of both parties. His suggestion was that the U.N. should play a bigger role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, rather than the U.S. taking the visible lead because past policies have deadlocked due to partiality. If more mediators are involved, it could accelerate the process from the initial American framework and build on the initial foundation of the negotiations that serve both sides. But, even with a trim down of proposed settlements from 1100 to 900 in Pisgat Zeev, a Jewish neighborhood in east Jerusalem, the United States is continuing to openly criticize Israel as being unhelpful with their coalition with Egypt to attempt any relaunch of negotiations. Special Envoy George Mitchell has been consistent with back and forth diplomacy, making numerous trips to the region, but Israel continues to inch construction on the land, inferiorating the Palestinians and pushing them further away from talking.

 The Obama administration also has the support of the European Union who want to see a peace deal as soon as possible. The delegation favors a timeline while utilizing a real involvement of actors. The agreement with the United States also consists of condemning settlements, considering them illegal. According to Brice de Schietere at the European Union, the organization has surpassed its pledge to solidify support, but will reinforce that support by committing to financial post conflict arrangements and maintain a status of acting as the highest contributor so far in the efforts. A plan is also in place for future compensation of officials once a permanent situation of a two state solution is signed. The United States continues to work very closely with the Quartet and the rest of the international community to stay on task and meet negotiation objectives this year. All negotiating parties involved, including Egypt, are confident that 2010 will be a definitive year of progress and historical negotiations if everyone remains committed and persistent.

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 The next steps the Obama administration should take is a tougher rhetoric and a specific time and place for both sides to meet, while holding everyone accountable for public statements and actions. George Mitchell has been doing the footwork with Egypt as the go-between, but now the United States should declare an official call to action and rally the international community to organize some presence, while getting both parties to recognize their own responsibility and take a stronger initiative. The State Department and European Unions are driving forces for a two year timetable, so 2010 should be a vehicle year of activity on both sides. Two years is a sufficient amount of time to set aside pre-conditions and initiate numerous summits with host mediators, along with official state locations to gather, discuss, and resolve.

As a personal summary to my experience in Washington, D.C., my passion for conflict resolve and cross-cultural understanding was fueled to a higher level and gave me a renewed energy to raise the bar even higher on my academic participation for the future in pursuing a government career. During the seminar, I was able to observe and interact with an entire roomful of energetic people with various ideas, vocabularies, and interpretations. I began the week with what I thought was a basic knowledge of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the instructional content of the seminar, along with the wide variety of guest speaker’s perspective, proved to be extremely intense and moved me to a higher level based on the knowledge that I already had coming into the program. The contrasting policy views gave me a lot to consider in formulating an actual theory on some of the missing ingredients to a peace process movement. The provacative ideas and options also interrupted my consistent thinking and allowed me to consider a refreshed approach. I heard several well structured questions among my colleagues who came from all types of ethnic and academic backgrounds. I witnessed a camaraderie and academic bond starting to form among the group by the end of the week and realized that I will never stop learning.

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