



**EDIE MADDY-WEITZMAN** currently serves as the college counselor at the Walworth Barbour American International School in Israel. She has also served as a faculty member of the College Board Summer Institute for international school counselors. She completed her doctorate at Boston University (MA) in 2005. The title of her dissertation is: "Waging Peace in the Holy Land: A Qualitative Study of Seeds of Peace 1993-2004."

# Educating the Future Leaders of the Middle East

Over the past five years, even during the darkest periods of the al-Aqsa Intifada, I have been a volunteer college counselor for Palestinian and Israeli members of “Seeds of Peace”—students who want to study in the U.S. Working with these youths as they embark upon their voyage to acquire a U.S. university education has been a profoundly inspirational experience. While the media continually broadcast scenes of violence and despair from the Middle East, I have been privy to another story—one in which Israeli and Palestinian youth constructively interact with one another.

Founded in 1993 by the late John Wallach, Seeds of Peace is a peace education program for young people from conflict regions. Teenagers from regions of conflict attend a three-week summer camp in Maine and have opportunities for follow-up participation at home. Participants are nominated by their schools, must be able to converse in English, and undergo a rigorous selection process held by their governments. Indeed, according to the acceptance rate, it is harder to get into Seeds of Peace than the most selective American universities!

My involvement with Seeds of Peace began in January 2000. In order to commemorate Martin Luther King Day at the American International School in Israel, where I work as the college counselor, we invited a group of Israeli and Palestinian Seeds of Peace graduates to speak to our students.

I was so moved by their stories that I inquired where these students (who often refer to themselves as “Seeds”) attend university. I learned that many of the graduates were interested in studying abroad and would welcome my college counseling services. A few months later, I met with 40 Palestinians and Israelis at the Seeds of Peace Jerusalem Center to explain the application process to U.S. universities. The very next morning violence erupted, marking the beginning of what became known as the al-Aqsa Intifada, characterized initially by daily clashes between Israelis and Palestinians,

and evolving into a low-intensity, albeit armed, violent conflict. For several months, the college-counseling program I had begun was suspended, while the Seeds of Peace participants witnessed the deadly hostility surrounding their lives.

## Aya\*

In the summer of 2001, I was able to resume the college-counseling program. Riding in a van to Jerusalem with Sami, a Palestinian Seeds of Peace staff member, we were picking up some of the future applicants to U.S. universities. As we sped towards Tulkarm, a Palestinian city in the West Bank where Aya waited for us, I anxiously asked Sami, “But we’re not actually going into Tulkarm, are we?” At that time, many Israelis viewed Tulkarm as a hotbed of terrorism. Two left-wing Israelis, supporters of coexistence with the Palestinians, had been murdered there a few weeks earlier while dining at a local restaurant. Nobody had thought to ask the Israeli diners about their political views before they were targeted. If I crossed into Tulkarm and someone looked in my wallet they would find an Israeli identity card, instantly marking me as an Israeli—it didn’t matter that I also held American citizenship.

\*Pseudonyms for the Seeds of Peace participants are used.

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“What made Aya take such risks in order to apply to U.S. universities? During the current Intifada, getting to university every day in the West Bank and Gaza is no mean feat. Palestinian students and professors have to pass through checkpoints or circumvent them on primitive roads; on many occasions they are not allowed through.”

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Sami reassured me that we were not actually entering Tulkarm. We would be picking up Aya, despite her being a Palestinian, on the Israeli side of the barricade. I could clearly see the barricades blocking all traffic to and from Tulkarm. How, I wondered, would Aya be able to leave her city when there was a closure?

But there she was standing on the side of the road. She quickly jumped into the van, leaving her anxious mother to wait for many hours in the car in the baking July sun until we returned. Aya told me that her mother, who is originally from Bulgaria, had thought that having a Bulgarian passport would convince the Israeli soldiers to let them through the checkpoint, but they were turned back. Following recent attacks against Israelis emanating from Tulkarm, the Israeli army was not allowing any Palestinian to officially enter or leave the city. So instead, Aya and her mother did what hundreds of other Tulkarm residents did each morning: they bypassed the roadblock by driving over sand and dirt. Aya told me she had never been so frightened as on that morning, even during F-16 attacks on her city. She was sure that at any moment Israeli soldiers would shoot at her and her mother.

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checkpoints or circumvent them on primitive roads; on many occasions they are not allowed through. During periods of prolonged closures, the Palestinian universities are not able to operate, causing students to miss many classes. Like many other Palestinians in Seeds of Peace, Aya was looking for a way to attend school on a daily basis without having to experience fear. Her city had been the scene of a great deal of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. As she wrote in *The Olive Branch*, the Seeds of Peace youth magazine, “Every time planes go over our house, it terrifies us. We have no idea if one will shoot and there is nothing to do. The terror is with us all the time.” She called for both Israelis and Palestinians to stop their attacks, “because my life is affected by the violence too.”

It was late July and most universities had long stopped accepting applications for the coming school year, but Aya was desperate to pursue higher education in a safer environment as soon as possible. I decided to send an email to the director of the Center for International Studies at Hiram College, a small liberal arts college in Ohio. I believed she and a Hiram professor who had visited my school would be sensitive to Aya’s predicament. I wrote:

“I know this is a highly unusual request, but it is an unusual situation, and unfortunately extremely difficult times in this corner of the world call for some creative thinking... if there is any way at all that her application could be considered at this late date, you would be performing a *mitzvah* (Hebrew for ‘good deed’).”

Based on my encounter with Aya and information provided by a Seeds of Peace staff member, I was able to present Hiram College with detailed information. Although Aya has lived under extremely difficult circumstances, first in a refugee camp in Syria and then in the West Bank, she had worked to promote peace through her involvement in Seeds of Peace. In addition to top scores on the *Tawjihi* (matriculation exams) and fluency in Arabic, Bulgarian, and English, Aya was active in her community. She initiated an English Club in her school and also sang, danced and acted. Maintaining great pride in her combined heritage, she especially enjoyed performing traditional Arab music and Bulgarian dances. Furthermore, she embroidered Palestinian handicrafts such as pillows and clothing. The past year had been very harrowing for Aya, as she witnessed war all around her. Despite the traumas, in my meeting with Aya I saw a mature and motivated young woman with a very positive outlook on life.

The director responded, “I’m intrigued by your ‘unorthodox’ idea. It would be wonderful if we could do something for Aya. If we succeed, it would border on being miraculous!” Thus, although highly unusual, Hiram College welcomed an application from Aya, provided all of the application materials arrived within a week.

We had just a couple days to prepare everything. Aya did not have reliable access to the Internet, so we planned

to send everything via express mail. In one evening she completed the Common Application. On the phone she read to me her beautifully written essay, in which she poignantly described her life circumstances, quoting Shakespeare at one point. Adam, a Seeds of Peace staff member, was to drive to Tulkarm to pick up Aya's application and bring it to Jerusalem to both fax it and send a hard copy via Fed Ex. As if the experience of rushing through the application wasn't enough stress, there was an unexpected glitch—a terrorist bombing in Jerusalem led to the West Bank being closed. Adam was stuck in Ramallah with Aya's application, but her academic records and recommendations were in Jerusalem. Fortunately a day later, Adam was able to reach his goal.

After reviewing the application, Hiram College immediately accepted Aya, offering her a generous scholarship. I was ecstatic, all the more so after receiving the following email from the director at Hiram. "Please instruct Aya to go to the baggage claim area once she arrives, and a student driver, holding a 'Hiram College' sign, will meet her there and drive her to campus. We are all eager to meet Aya!"

### The Counseling Process

Despite the ongoing conflict, I have been able to meet with Palestinians and Israelis at the Seeds of Peace Jerusalem Center for college counseling. For those unable to reach the Center due to closures or the danger of travel, I maintain contact via email. In contrast to the college counseling procedures I use when working with students from the American International School, the advising program I employ at Seeds of Peace works at high speed and in reverse order. The Seeds of Peace applicants, most of whom I meet for the first time when they are already in grade 12, have not had time to conduct a college search. Typically I only have a couple months to take them through the entire process. In the case of Aya, I had only one week! Often with Seeds of Peace applicants, the process of deciding where to apply is usually the last step, after completion of the Common Application.

My first step in working with the students is to have them sign up for the TOEFL and SAT. They are often faced with obstacles in registering, reaching the test center and receiving the results. In grade 12, both Israelis and Palestinians are usually too busy studying for their matriculation exams to adequately prepare for these admission tests. On the math section of the SAT, the content is not as difficult as the whole new vocabulary that must be acquired. Algebraic and geometric terminology, such as "circumference" and "acute angle," must be learned in English. Although the easiest way to sign up for these exams is on the Web, using an international credit card, not all families have access to one. For Palestinians, getting to the test center on the day of the exam can pose a challenge. On several occasions, students living in one part of the Gaza Strip found on the morning of the test that they were unable to reach the test center due to a closure.

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Sometimes, having jumped all these hurdles, students don't receive the scores. Fortunately, the staff at the Educational Testing Services has been able to untangle some of the bureaucracy and retrieve the results.

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The most important consideration in selection of a school is whether significant financial aid and scholarships are available to international students. Such schools are

rare, but over the years I have managed to compile such a list (Doug Thompson's serves as a good start and can be found at [www.oacac.com](http://www.oacac.com)). In addition to several of the Ivies, my list includes schools that have been very generous to participants in the Seeds of Peace program (e.g. Bates College (ME), Bowdoin College (ME), Brandeis University (MA), Earlham College (IN), Hamilton College (NY), Hartwick College (NY), Hiram College (OH), Lehigh University (PA), Macalester College (MN), Manhattanville College (NY), Middlebury College (VT), Mount Holyoke College (MA), Smith College (MA), Swarthmore College (PA), University of Southern Maine (ME), Wesleyan University (CT)); have special scholarships earmarked for applicants from conflict regions (e.g., Brandeis offers the Slifka Coexistence Scholarship for Israeli Arabs and Jews, Georgetown University (DC) has the Aruppe Scholarship for Peace, and the University of Denver (CO) has the Fraiberg scholarship for an Israeli and a Palestinian); or scholarships for which international students are eligible (e.g., Emory Scholars Program, University of Virginia Jefferson Scholars).

Part of the Seeds of Peace counseling process entails getting into the uncomfortable area of finding out how much money parents can contribute to their child's education. I explain that only a handful of universities are "need blind" for international students. If two international students from the same region have approximately equal credentials, then colleges are apt to accept the student who can pay more. I also have to define and sell the concept of a liberal arts education; many of the parents want their children to begin their studies by immediately preparing for a prestigious profession, such as medicine and engineering. I inform them that while they may be able to study pre-med, as international students it is next to impossible to be accepted into a U.S. medical school.

In the meantime, students work on those all important college essays. Engaging with the "enemy" through Seeds of Peace is no easy task, especially during the current Intifada. Many write poignantly and insightfully about their lives, the tragedies they have known, the relationships they formed with "the other side," and their commitment to work for a better future.

## Reem

At a Seeds of Peace conference "Uprooting Hatred and Terror," held at the United Nations in November 2001, I had the opportunity to meet Reem, a Palestinian from Ramallah. Reem interacted with Israelis and teens from other conflict areas around the world to write a charter on how to eradicate hatred and terror. This charter was later presented to Kofi Annan. I was most impressed with Reem, who admirably represented the cause of her people and at the same time sought to find solutions to the

conflict. At a time when it was not viewed as acceptable by the Palestinian community to be engaging in normalization activities with Israelis, Reem had chosen to continue her involvement in Seeds of Peace. She was part of a group of Palestinian Seeds who participated in a video exchange project with Israeli Seeds. On this videotape, Reem powerfully spoke about her life under siege and how a friend was beaten by Israelis at a checkpoint. Yet, at the end of her message, she said hello to her Israeli friends, telling them that she missed them.

Reem contacted me and said she wanted to attend a university in the U.S. I wrote to the dean of admission at the University of Virginia, telling him about this unique student, hoping she could be considered for a Jefferson Scholarship. He responded that Reem could add immeasurably to a university campus.

A month later she was selected as a semi-finalist and as such was invited to fly to Virginia, all expenses paid, for a few days, in order to undergo a series of interviews and to meet the scholarship committee members.

Reem came to my house near Tel Aviv a few hours before her flight to prepare for the interview. This took place during the early spring of 2002, a particularly bloody and violent time period. She had just left war-ravaged Ramallah after Israeli forces had taken over the area. She spent three days in her house, some of that time lying under the bed with her family. They barely had enough food and water. Reem told me, "The people of Ramallah are tired. They just want to go back to the situation the way it was before the Intifada when there were negotiations."

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In preparing for the interview, Reem and I discussed Seeds of Peace and its influence on her. She said that she had learned how to become a good listener and how to put herself in the shoes of the person talking to her. These communication skills have served her well in many situations. When I asked Reem what she had learned about Israelis, she said that before she met them at Seeds of Peace, she believed that they had stolen the land from the Palestinians, that they knew this was wrong, that they were lying about their claims to the land, and that they knew they were lying. Once she had a chance to interact with Israelis on a daily basis and hear their stories, she began to realize that the Israelis believed with the same degree of fervor that the same land belonged to them. She became aware that both sides felt equally attached to the land. As a result of this discovery, Reem became convinced that both sides needed to compromise.

After dinner, there was a knock on the door and in came Shiri and Lior, two Israelis from Seeds of Peace who lived nearby. They had heard that Reem was at my house and they just had to come see her and wish her luck. After several

long hugs, they sat down and talked and joked together. Shiri mentioned that she knew the teenager who had been gunned down by a Palestinian in the neighboring city of Kfar Saba earlier in the day. A suicide bomber had also exploded himself in Jerusalem right near the Seeds of Peace Center. Reem described to Lior and Shiri what she had been living through and concluded with a statement that both sides have suffered too much.

I was incredulous of the exchange that was taking place between this Palestinian and two Israeli Seeds. Reem had just come out of a war zone, yet she could hug members of the enemy of her people. Shiri knew the girl killed by a Palestinian a few hours earlier, yet she invited Reem to her house. The visit also allowed for exchanges of information. Lior asked Reem several questions of the nature, “Is it true that Palestinians feel...” He was able to hear firsthand from a Palestinian, whom he trusted, what was motivating the Palestinian people. In discussing political leaders, Lior asked Reem who she would like to see come to power. Reem immediately answered, “Me!” I knew the University of Virginia was going to be very taken with Reem, as indeed they were. A month later Reem was notified that she was accepted as a Jefferson scholar and she enrolled at UVA.

#### Eyal

When I first met Eyal, an Israeli participant in Seeds of Peace, he was finishing up the final months of his three-year mandatory military service in the Israel Defense Forces. Eyal was raised in a poor neighborhood in South Tel Aviv in a small apartment. His parents were divorced and his mother worked as a caregiver for the elderly in their homes. Eyal was determined to study in the U.S. He had already studied abroad during his final two years of high school at one of the United World Colleges where he had completed the IB program with superior marks. Now after a three year hiatus, he wanted to continue his education in English. He also liked the fact that at American universities students did not need to commit to a major ahead of time, as they do when applying to Israeli universities. Instead he was looking forward to sampling a variety of subjects before choosing a major.

When Eyal approached 18, he was faced with a major dilemma. His interactions and friendships with Palestinian teenagers posed a quandary for Eyal as he contemplated his military service. As Eyal wrote in one of his college essays, “I could have been posted in many different jobs where I would have found myself standing in front of a Palestinian friend, either at a military checkpoint, or even through the lens of an M16 rifle. I do not know how I would have handled that.” Eyal said that he did not want to accept any position that dealt with governing the Palestinian people, whether at checkpoints or through issuing visas. In researching various units, he found a non-combat unit that didn’t deal with Palestinians at all. As part of this unit, he served as a liaison between Israelis

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and Jordanians. He wrote about this experience as part of his college application essay.

“I found a unit in the army I thought would fit into my perception... The unit is called the Liaison and Foreign Relations Division and, as its name hints, it is in charge of the Israeli army’s foreign relations... I started my service on the border with Jordan, liaising with Jordanian officers on a variety of topics. My office was only 100 meters away from the office of Major Khaled, the Palestinian-Jordanian liaison officer. We crossed to each other’s sides very often for work-related issues, but also to talk about life, always being careful with what we say and how. Nonetheless, I always enjoyed his warm hospitality and nature. I started learning Arabic and major Khaled started learning Hebrew, and so we taught each other some of our own language and culture.”

During the final months of his military service, on home leaves, Eyal managed to prepare for and take the SATs and

TOEFL, write numerous college essays and fill out the various application forms. His hard work paid off when he was accepted to Yale (CT) with a generous scholarship. He would be the first member of his family to go to college.

Eyal’s and Reem’s paths crossed as they both applied to college. After Reem left my house on the way to the airport for her interview at UVA, she and Ned, a Seeds of Peace staff member, stopped at Eyal’s apartment in order to drop off some of the organization’s literature. Eyal and Reem had never met prior to this visit, although they had the Seeds of Peace experience in common. Since the Intifada had begun, Eyal had not met face-to-face with Palestinians. He welcomed Reem and Ned to his apartment where his mother was fast asleep. They had a long conversation about life in Ramallah, life in Israel, and the fact that they both wanted to study in the U.S. After Reem left, Eyal realized how incredible it was that a Palestinian had just been in his home saying, “She kind of stepped into my world and my reality and that was quite amazing.”

The next morning Eyal’s mother, unaware of Reem’s visit, asked him if he would be interacting with Arabs when he went to university in the U.S. When he said, of course, just as he had met with Arabs in Seeds of Peace, she beseeched him to be careful. At that point he told his mother, “You know Mom, last night when you were asleep, Reem was sitting in our living room. She’s a Palestinian girl from Ramallah.” Eyal told me that his mother was initially quite surprised to hear this, but then became filled with hope at the courage of a Palestinian girl to come to an Israeli home as the Intifada raged outside.

### Preparing Future Leaders

It is important to prepare the prospective students for what awaits them at American universities. One summer I was able to conduct a pre-departure program for several Palestinians and Israelis at the Jerusalem Seeds of Peace Center. In addition to talking about the typical issues that would pertain to any student—what to bring, dorm life, cafeteria food, academics, safety on campus, drugs and alcohol—the Palestinians were particularly concerned about the treatment of Muslims/Arabs on U.S. campuses following 9/11.

For many of the Seeds of Peace students, it is not easy to leave their families behind during a time of danger. They often suffer from guilt as news of the violence their families are experiencing back home reaches them. As a Palestinian from Nablus expressed in *The Olive Branch*, “Leaving my city Nablus under siege to study in the faraway land of Iowa left me feeling guilty, trapped and incapable.” Eyal said that whenever terrorist attacks occur at home, “I am really afraid for my family, for my friends.”

Once the students arrive in the U.S., the Seeds of Peace organization maintains contact with them through its Education Program. Workshops are offered for the Seeds of Peace

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college students during holidays. Participants support each other as they discuss challenges they face on U.S. campuses such as coping with culture shock, adjusting to life in the U.S., and dealing with roommates. An Israeli wrote in *The Olive Branch*, “Coming from similar backgrounds, we all shared a certain sense of culture shock, and were encountering a new kind of lifestyle that took some adjusting to.” A Palestinian from Gaza advised, “Be open-minded and at the same time remember who you are and what you are here for.”

Since part of the mission of Seeds of Peace is to train future leaders, staff members create programs which will further develop leadership skills. For example, in 2003, during a Thanksgiving retreat, 50 Palestinian and Israeli students participated in a workshop whose theme was global leadership. They brainstormed ways in which they could bring the Seeds of Peace spirit to their campuses.

Indeed, many of the Seeds of Peace alumni attending U.S. universities contribute in a major way to campus life and to promoting coexistence. Some of the activities that they initiate and implement include: Jewish-Arab dialogue groups, conflict resolution workshops, activities whose purpose is to raise awareness about Middle East issues, and events that bring Middle East culture to college campuses. A Palestinian from Nablus founded an organization called Leading Education and Relief for Nablus (LEARN), which raises money for Palestinian students unable to pay the registration fee for matriculation exams. Two students from Seeds of Peace organized a Symposium on Peace, Activism, Reconciliation, and Cooperation at Georgetown, which brought together DC area students interested in peace in the Middle East. Eyal and a Palestinian member of Seeds of Peace jointly led a workshop

on the topic of peace and reconciliation for Japanese university students. Another student, Tamer, worked with an Israeli to lead a panel discussion in which they presented the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. He solicited the support of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and the Muslim Students Association to sponsor a joint dinner of Kosher and Halal food. As he wrote in *The Olive Branch*, “That will bring people from the two organizations together in order to socialize and break the ice. It will help in removing tensions, and will encourage the tolerance of both religions toward each other.” Hassan, a Palestinian pursuing graduate studies at Stanford University (CA) on a Fulbright Scholarship, was instrumental in bringing a Deheishe refugee camp dance troupe on a tour of several U.S. college campuses.

Many of the teenagers choose majors in international relations and political science, as well as conflict resolution studies, education and engineering. One Palestinian student studying at Manhattanville College indicated that she wanted to do something to improve the situation back home and viewed children as an important target of change. One of her future goals is to help reform the Palestinian educational system, particularly the way history is taught. She wants to “make sure that people are taught history but they’re not also given a message to hate or be prejudiced, or feel superior.”

A common sentiment expressed by many of the Seeds studying in the U.S. was the expectation that their education will enable them, upon their return home, to play an important role in the future as community leaders. Karam, a Palestinian currently studying at Earlham, indicated that as a result of Seeds of Peace he is trying to get the best education possible so that he can go back home and make changes, possibly through participation in politics, “I feel like I’m here on a mission, because I’m trying to accomplish something that I can use when I go back home... I definitely want to be a leader in my community.” Hassan hopes to learn how to “play a leading role in my nation as a promising engineer and as an advocate for peace.” Rafi, an Israeli who will be attending Harvard, said, “We’re supposed to be the leaders. We’re supposed to show everyone how we can make peace. If we can’t do it, then who can?”

With this question spurring them, today, over 120 Seeds of Peace alumni are enrolled in 50 U.S. universities. Perhaps one day, with support from the counseling community and our admission counterparts, future Israeli and Palestinian leaders will emerge from this group of hopeful, bright students, finding a way to make peace between their peoples.

*\*The author will be presenting that session “Waging Peace in the Holy Land: The Seeds of Peace Program” at the 2006 NACAC National Conference (Pittsburgh, PA). The session discusses the program and will include a short video depicting the camp.*