

# MERED: Middle Eastern Resolution through Education, Action, and Dialogue

## July 2015

Last summer, in July 2014, the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza propelled Yale students to form MERED: Middle Eastern Resolution through Education, Action and Dialogue. The casualties on both sides and the destruction the war caused shattered apathy that had taken hold on many of us connected to the region. In that month, the horror of war was demonstrated to us; we saw the fear of violence and the terror of insecurity that plagued the lives of Palestinians, Israelis, and Arabs in surrounding countries. We realized the dire consequences of the failed peace process when violence became the default. We had seen brutally illustrated that the stakes were too high for cynicism.

So, we have spent the last year engaging with students at Yale who are connected to every community affected by the Arab-Israeli conflict; the group consists not only of Israelis and Palestinians, but also of Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians, Saudi Arabians, Americans and more. We have learned how to talk with one another, and – despite radically different opinions – how to gain an understanding of one another’s perspective. The end goal of this process is to develop a program that could meaningfully contribute to peace in the region. In order to contribute, we have turned our attention to our own community. Across the United States students on college campuses are at war with each other over this conflict. Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions initiatives square off against pro-Israeli and Jewish groups. Future policy leaders in the United States, Israel, Palestine, and the neighboring Arab states are being educated at American universities and participating in all sides of this struggle. They also, through the connections and resources afforded by their education, have access to policymakers and influencers in all of the aforementioned communities.

We believe that by engaging those passionate about the issue within the college population in the United States and, perhaps, throughout the world, we can help set the groundwork for peaceful, mutually-beneficial resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Similar programs to this have been undertaken in the past such as J-Street U or Seeds of Peace with varying success. However, such programs often tend to attract either likeminded individuals with similar goals and opinions even if they come from diverse backgrounds, or include only Israelis and Palestinians; meanwhile, the failed attempts to a bi-lateral peace process have made it clear that resolution likely must be through a multi-lateral agreement involving the Arab world and the U.S. Thus these other programs can become merely echo chambers that marginalize the peace movement and limit its efficacy. In contrast, MERED tries to actively recruit participants who are sincere but radically opposed to one another’s views. We have put the Yale Students for Justice in Palestine president in dialogue with the head of the Yale Friends of Israel, and we have in the same room American and Arab students with ideas in opposition to one another. In doing so, we hope not to encourage empathy or personal affection but rather *working trust*. We plan to provide a forum for people to articulate their needs and goals and then brainstorm with each other how these needs can be mutually accommodated. In doing so we endeavor for people connected to the Arab-Israeli conflict to start to grasp the other parties’ thinking and recognize points of convergence that can be developed further.

This approach is modeled on the example of Professor Herbert Kelman, who pioneered the technique as a Track-II Diplomacy approach in the run up to the Oslo Accords. The force of this method lies in the understanding that *working trust* is a preliminary condition to any peace agreement. We must be willing to trust that the other side will follow up its part of an agreement. Working trust, as described by Kelman, is a trust built upon an understanding of the interests of the other side. Once the motivations for each other’s actions are made clear, and the parties are able to move past the conviction that the one defining motivator of your enemy is to harm you, the issues at hand can be addressed rationally and confidently.

Of course, this will not solve the Arab-Israeli conflict over night. We believe, however, that a young leadership that understands the motivations and thinking of the other sides while maintaining credibility within their own communities has the potential for revolutionizing the framework for the conflict and dramatically increases the scope for a peaceful resolution. In order to avoid war, we must create the tools to craft peace.