

Walter Cronkite once said that “never before probably has the need for interfaith commitment been nearly as great as it is at this very moment”. While he was indeed talking about a very different context, the same sentiment still holds true when approaching the Middle East today. Many in the West black-box the Middle East, simplifying its vast cultures, religions, and languages into one monolithic being, making falling into the “us versus them” mentality exponentially easier. The same in many cases can be said for people in the Middle East and the way they view the West.

The first step to mending such a problem is creating more effective platforms for discussion and the exchange of ideas. As a student, the best place to start is right on campus. As the treasurer and event coordinator for the Persian Student Union at the University of Georgia, I am responsible for organizing and carrying out several events each semester that focus on increasing cultural awareness and intercultural dialogues, which usually include collaboration with other student organizations. We often work with our university’s chapter of Hillel as well as Athens for Justice in Palestine (AJP) not only to discuss abstract ideologies and different worldviews, but also to attempt to unite people on campus.

In my experience, many of the culturally-based organizations on campus that traditionally disagree with each other self-segregate. The lack of contact between these opposing organizations such as our Hillel chapter and AJP not only has maintained the existing suspicion and distrust between them, but has led to the intensifying of extreme mutual dislike based solely on association with a certain group. While the Persian Student Union often collaborates with both organizations separately, it is extremely difficult to collaborate with both at once.

While many may dismiss this issue as unimportant because it takes place on a smaller scale on a college campus, I believe that the fact that it is taking place on a college campus is what makes the issue all the more urgent. What better place to act and spark conversation exists than a university where ideas are being formed and one’s preconceived notions are challenged every day? Given the opportunity to participate in the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Program, I would apply lessons I learn from the program to more effectively bring groups to a platform where both sides can discuss different issues openly and freely. Such abilities in my opinion are best acquired through experiential learning, which the Ibrahim program certainly provides. Not only do I hope to be able to bring groups closer together using the tools that I learn during the Ibrahim program, but I would also like to share my specific experiences from my trip to give others the tools to facilitate formal interfaith dialogues or to simply have more open and honest interfaith discussions on a person-to-person level in everyday life.

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