

Comment

Good Mideast News

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In the last week, you've probably heard enough bad news from the Middle East to fill you with despair and helplessness. But contrary to most of what you hear and see, there is some good news – an untold story of more than 100,000 Arabs and Jews who are taking everyday steps, large and small, toward living peaceful and normal lives as neighbors. Better yet, there's a real and productive role for you to play in their efforts.

Three weeks ago, a remarkable and exciting event occurred on Capitol Hill as a new effort to support Arab-Jewish co-existence was born. More than 250 religious, political, business and student leaders from every political and religious background came together to launch the Alliance for Middle East Peace. ALLMEP (www.allmep.org) is a coalition of 27 non-governmental organizations that build bridges every day between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East. Through ALLMEP, these NGOs have joined together to engage all of us in supporting Middle East co-existence programs.

While we may all differ on political peace efforts, which focus on where to draw borders and how to ensure security, people-to-people co-existence efforts focus on something we can all enthusiastically support: building relationships between human beings. Every day, these programs bring ordinary Palestinians and Israelis together to learn, work, play and talk.

Thanks to these programs, Arab and Jewish school children become fast friends and learn about each other in joint Arab-Jewish schools. One NGO's toll-free telephone hotline has connected more than 230,000 phone calls between Arabs and Jews, allowing those seeking to engage the other side in dialogue instead of battle to reach across the physical divide of conflict.

Several ALLMEP members bring together Arabs and Jews to research and improve their shared natural environment – the only way to solve problems that know no political boundaries (like sewage in the Jordan River or a rapidly disappearing Dead Sea). Other programs help Israeli and Palestinian teachers jointly develop lesson plans that responsibly represent the many facets of this conflict, while their students learn firsthand to seek cooperation and not confrontation.

These activities engage individuals first, but their impact quickly ripples outward. Each participant of interfaith study groups, each young athlete in a joint soccer league, each patient in a cooperative medical program becomes a grass-roots diplomat, quietly spreading the message to family, friends and community that civil relations are possible and rewarding.

Most exciting about the new ALLMEP effort is that we each have a role to play, even from many miles away. Despite our honest yearning for peace, we Americans, especially those of us who care most deeply about peace in the region, have all too often been paralyzed by a deeply rooted political stalemate.

Whether a person identifies as pro-Israel or pro-Arab, supporting co-existence enables us to join together and be simply *pro-active*. As Americans – Jews, Arabs, Muslims and Christians – we have a rare opportunity to contribute a vision of our American way and lead by example.

So, what can you do? These organizations need volunteers, supporters, advocates, program participants and, yes, financial support. Most work miracles with modest budgets but are forced to turn away Arabs and Jews who are looking for a way to reach out across conflict lines. Through ALLMEP, they are working to raise awareness about their little-known but much-needed work so that each of us will step up to the plate and contribute what we can. You can start by visiting the ALLMEP Web site to learn more about these great programs and contact us for more information.