Report on Israel and Jordan Visit

April 29, 2013

Dear University of Maryland community:

I have just returned from a week in Israel and Jordan, accompanying Governor Martin O'Malley on an educational and trade mission. The visit will benefit our campus and the State of Maryland.

I signed academic agreements and planted the seeds for expanded or new collaborations with Tel Aviv University, University of Haifa, Technion (Israel Institute of Science and Technology), Hebrew University's Robert H. Smith Faculty of Agriculture, Food, and Environment, and with the University of Jordan.

Our new collaboration with the University of Maryland, Baltimore – Mpowering the State – made its Middle East debut as President Jay Perman joined in signing some of these agreements. Dr. Ross Lewin, our AVP for International Affairs, organized these visits.

Many UMD faculty members already are engaged in research with their counterparts at some of these institutions. These agreements will provide new opportunities for study and research for our students and faculty.

Currently, every year we have about two dozen UMD students studying in Israel and about one in Jordan. Now, there will be greater student flow between UMD and these two countries. The new exchange agreements we signed will reduce the cost of studying abroad, allowing UMD students to pay Maryland rates instead of the higher costs by enrolling directly in institutions abroad.

There is simply no substitute for first-hand experience of our interdependent world. Consider the example of Carey, a junior UMD student I just met. She learned Arabic at UMD and is studying Hebrew this semester at Haifa. She is also interning in an Arab community, helping released convicts re-integrate into society. This summer she will have another internship in Jerusalem. Next fall, she will continue her studies as a Philip Merrill Scholar back in College Park. When we graduate global citizens like Carey, the student benefits and so does Maryland.

To expand international study even further, we agreed to create “global classrooms” for students at UMD and Israeli institutions. These undergraduate and graduate courses -- in areas such as conflict management, food security, water policy, innovation and entrepreneurship – will take place in real time using video conferencing to link classrooms between institutions, as well as online instruction.

Israel is known for the inspired pace of its commercialization of university-based scientific and technological research. I felt the intensity of Israel's commitment to innovation and entrepreneurship in the office of Israel's President Shimon Peres, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the Oslo Accords.

In a meeting with him that was arranged by Dr. Shibley Telhami, UMD’s Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, I asked President Peres what would help bring peace to the region. He replied, “Build 1,000 innovation incubators.” He had just returned that day from Nazareth, located in the Palestinian territories, where he had visited one of these facilities designed to launch start-up companies. Young people throughout the Middle East, he explained, need jobs and economic growth if they are to have
hope for the future.

Perhaps it is this deeply felt connection between a nation's future and its innovation that makes Israel a "Start-up Nation." In a country with few natural resources, education and creativity count for a great deal. This is a lesson I want our students to learn -- put knowledge into practice by solving the great challenges of our time: how to better feed, heal, house, educate, transport, and protect people and the environment in a globalized world.

We made a little history on this mission by signing UMD's first formal exchange with an Arab university, the oldest and most prestigious institution in Jordan. At a reception for the Maryland delegation hosted by the Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Jordan, I met other Jordanian university presidents. They also expressed interest in partnering with UMD. I was delighted when our host, Stephanie Williams, announced she is a proud Terp!

In Amman, I met with Dr. Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority, and a former political science professor. Together with Dr. Telhami, who is doing extensive public opinion polling on Israeli and Arab attitudes, we discussed the role of education and the prospects for peace in the region.

By broadening and deepening our network of university partners in the Middle East, we advanced the internationalization of UMD. At Maryland, innovation is our future, entrepreneurship is our culture, and internationalization is our touchstone.

Sincerely,

Wallace D. Loh
President, University of Maryland