

“Promoting Systemic Change in the Middle East: The MIT Way”

Mens et Manus et Israel and Palestine: An MIT Course

“The Institute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world’s great challenges.”

“MISTI empowers MIT students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve the world’s great challenges by connecting them with researchers, companies, and other partners around the world.”

One of the world’s most challenging regions is the Middle East. MIT programs have been committed to building scalable methodologies through which students and the broader MIT community can learn and make an impact while working alongside others across cultures to support change aligned with their needs.

Committed to this opportunity and challenge, in Spring 2021, we launched the [Leaders Journey workshop](#) in which MIT students along with Palestinian and Israeli alumni of three associate organizations, Middle East Entrepreneurs for Tomorrow ([MEET](#)), Our Generation Speaks ([OGS](#)), and [Tech2Peace](#), met once a month to engage with speakers and work with one another to explore how to leverage science, technology and entrepreneurship across borders.

Building on the 2021 workshop, we launched a pilot for-credit course which consisted of 2 main components: presentations by subject matter experts and 5 mini-consulting projects working with 5 different stakeholders from the region covering topics in climate, healthcare and economic development. The course was co-instructed by [Kathleen Schwind](#) ’19, [Sinan Abushanab](#) and myself, with a leadership team from our associate organizations ([Marah Sarji](#), representative of OGS, and Nir Ben Dror), MIT CIS/ MISTI Research Affiliate [Steven Koltai](#) and MISTI Coordinator [Rachel Buonaiuto](#).

In that spirit, we developed a series of aims and a methodology that would enrich MIT students and their peers in the region and support the important efforts of Israelis and Palestinians to make systemic change. Specifically the goals we had for our participants were to:

- Decode the unique challenges and opportunities in the Israeli and Palestinian ecosystems with a special focus on cross-border collaboration;
- Develop an understanding of three specific verticals (water, healthcare, economic development) and their importance in the region;
- Provide insights into the unique opportunities and challenges facing entrepreneurs, NGO’s and businesses in Israel and Palestine;
- Gain hands-on experience working collaboratively with senior leadership in an established and/or growing NGO, startup, or business;
- Develop integrated problem framing and solving skills, and an understanding of how organizations in complex environments move to action;

- Open the door to further in-country MISTI experiences (for MIT students) and access to MIT (for international participants)

The course was developed in the “space” of Covid-19 with a more intense culture of online engagement than we as a society have ever had before. We made an effort to leverage this unique environment by creating a course that had multiple components and layers that reinforced one another. Pedagogically the structure was inspired by multiple MIT methodologies: MISTI preparation and training; Sloan Action Learning; REAP/REAL multi-party stakeholder model; the Media Lab Learning Initiative; and the multi-cultural framework of our associate organizations.

The layers are:

- In-person engagement:
On-campus classes for MIT students and one gathering for Israeli and Palestinian participants from the region in Jerusalem. During the on campus sessions MIT students explored the political and historical complexities of the region and explored the meaning of being a global leader and entrepreneur. Guest presenters included: [Prof. Peter Krause](#), [Gilad Rosenzweig](#) (MIT designX) , [Ari Jacobovits](#) (MIT- Africa) , and [Mollie Laffin-Rose Agbiboa](#) (MIT- REAP).
- Team projects done online in mixed MIT, Israeli and Palestinian groups:
Group projects focused on topics that fell under three verticals that are key to the region: water, healthcare and economic development. The teams were given a technical or business challenge they were tasked with solving. These challenges were sourced directly from for-profit and non-profit organizations in the region ([Alliance for Middle East Peace](#); [Dodo Smart](#) , [EcoPeace Middle East](#); [Physicians for Human Rights Israel](#); and more) . Two examples of projects:

ALLMEP is the largest and fastest growing network of Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders (over 150 organizations) and works to increase its members’ financial and human resources. Based on over a decade of advocacy the U.S. congress passed a bill through which \$250 million will be disbursed over the next five years toward Israeli and Palestinian joint grassroots peacebuilding—a culmination of a campaign by ALLMEP arguing that for diplomatic peacemaking to work it must be complemented by an equally meaningful investment in peacebuilding on the ground between both societies. In order to ensure that this financial support would really be transformative to the member organizations, ALLMEP needed a “Platform for Everything” that would offer:

- Free, online NGO impact management platform
- Close the gap in technological capabilities between smaller and bigger NGOs
- Explore partnerships and facilitate opportunities for catalyzing impact.
- Capture the current state of the field

The team was tasked with developing the next steps towards setting up this infrastructure.

Founded in 1994, EcoPeace was the first organization to bring together Israeli, Jordanian, and

Palestinian environmentalists. Its mission is to further sustainable development, environmental conservation, and peace in the region in order to protect its shared environmental heritage. The people of that region are dependent on natural resources and therefore have a shared interest in protecting the water and land that they all need in order to survive. EcoPeace developed a virtual reality teaching tool, involving a series of interactive games and tasks that show different facets of the water crisis and the voices of all three sides of the water conflict. EcoPeace had piloted the games in a few university classrooms and aims to expand the program in the Middle East.

The team was asked to propose the technical changes needed to be done to the game and what steps needed to be taken so that EcoPeace's vision could happen.

Participants' final presentations took the form of a zoom event in which teams: pitched their solutions; received feedback; and in preparation for the event continued to deepen experience in cross-cultural team work. Their final presentations included: an overview of organization and of challenge/problem statement; the team's methodology for researching/addressing the problem; a description of solutions and how the solutions should be applied; why the solution would work: what is needed to execute the idea itself; potential challenges; and a bibliography/List of sources/references/interviews

- Joint sessions with MIT guest speakers:
On (water, healthcare, economic development) and their importance in the region. Speakers included: [Mohamed Aburawi](#)., [Dr. Phil Budden](#) (MIT- REAP) [Steven Koltaj](#), [Shari Loessberg](#) ,[Dina Sherif](#) (MIT Legatum Center) , [Greg Sixt](#) (J-WAFS), and [Shriya Srinivasan](#).
- Reflective assignments: for individuals and teams
- Independent Research:
Half of the MIT students also did independent research projects anchored in the course material with several of the students doing summer internships in the region.

Three additional layers were added in order to ensure the learning objectives were met and participants gained project management experience and professional development opportunities:

Mentors: Each team was assigned a mentor whom they met with throughout the course. The mentors were all MIT alumni who participated in the MIT-MEET program (and as such had experience in working in the region with Palestinian- Israeli teams) and had worked in consulting. The mentors

coached the teams on methods for working on a client projects and on collaborating for the successful completion of the project. In order to support the mentors Steven Koltai was assigned Lead mentor and led group sessions with the mentors.

Facilitators: each team was assigned a facilitator, who was a fellow member of the group. Facilitators oversaw the process side of the project: managing workstreams, ensuring deadlines are met, and any group disagreements were resolved. Facilitators also served as the main point of contact with their team's mentor and course organizers. The class team supported the facilitators as individuals and as a group.

Whole course leadership team meetings: which included MIT staff and Israeli and Palestinian leadership of the partner organizations. In these meetings we discussed process, content, the geopolitical developments and how to adapt the class to the ongoing changing situation.

As a whole, this experience enabled participants to learn about the region and one another's perspectives; gain insight into the unique opportunities and challenges facing entrepreneurs, NGO's and businesses in Israel and Palestine; develop experience working collaboratively across cultures and form a basis for integrated problem framing and solving skills. This project work was not always easy – for lots of different reasons. And we did not expect it to be easy. Partly because of these challenges, we hope all of the class participants, grew personally and professionally. Based on post-course surveys, they did:

“This was a unique opportunity for me to learn so much about the area I live in, work on a project together with people from the "other side", MIT students and incredible mentors. Furthermore, getting a glimpse to the world of MIT was a great experience for me”. -Participant from the region

“This course has broadened my knowledge of conflicts, relationships, and how the geography plays an important role in the region. Moving forward, I feel more confident in working with business and organizations to develop solutions for problems in real-time, using the skills that I have to supplement the project work.” -MIT student participant

Beyond that basic hope, this multi-leveled, cross-cultural mode of engagement is, I believe, the only way that we can move towards real change in the region (and in the world). We need to understand one another; leverage what each of us can bring to the table; prioritize systemic change; and take concrete steps that impact people's lives. While doing this work, we need to find ways to ensure that we are inclusive of as many people and opinions as possible- and this is also not always an easy task. As a member of the MIT community, I also believe that it is our responsibility to leverage all that we have at MIT and can do to support those in the region and our students on that path on making regional and global impact. We were able to do this through this multifaceted course as our partner organizations stated:



“The superb work of the MISTI group gave us a critical eye and made significant headway on a product that can hopefully be a game changer to over 150 Israeli and Palestinian organizations.” -ALLMEP representative

“As an education manager I needed guidance with these digital tools and how to approach them, the MIT program provided me with clear deliverables that I can now implement in my teams work. - EcoPeace representative

The topic of Palestine/Israel is contentious: globally, in the region and also, at times, on the MIT campus. I question myself and all of us how can we, with our partners from the region, make systemic impact. How can we be side by side on that journey while also “working wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind”? Myself, along with those involved in the course, have seen first-hand how this multi-layered model can actually work. One of our MIT alumni mentors explained:

“The program is unlike any other I've come across. The chance for MIT students to work directly with peers from the region, to propose and create technical solutions to real problems on the ground, and partner with local organizations is an incredibly meaningful opportunity. I wish I had been able to participate in something like this when I was at MIT.”

At MISTI, MIT’s hub for global experiences, we offer experiential learning programs that provide students with immersive international experiences that prepare them **for lives of impact, service, and leadership in an interconnected global society.** The MISTI Middle East Cross-boundary Leadership and Development course aimed to do exactly that.

MIT MISTI Invites you

LEADER'S JOURNEY

Middle East Cross-border Development and Leadership Program

OFFERING AN OPPORTUNITY TO COOPERATE & GROW PROFESSIONALLY BY DELIVERING SOLUTIONS FOR CHALLENGES FACED BY THE PEOPLE OF PALESTINE & ISRAEL.



GRADUATION CEREMONY

Dear MIT students, Alumni of OGS, MEET, TECH2PEACE, Mentors, Partners & speakers, you are cordially invited to join our Graduation Ceremony of 2022 Leader's Journey - MECDL

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2022

07:00 PM-JSLM / 12:00 PM-EDT

ON ZOOM

For questions & details, reach out to:
rbuon@mit.edu

[Click here to RSVP](#)



