



## YARA's "COEXIST" 2015

I, Amir Shihadeh, am the Founder & Director of YARA (Youth Association for Reality and Awareness) – an NPO which was established in 2010. Over the years, YARA has conducted dozens of campaigns on various matters: from holding interfaith & inter-religious events, securing education for out of school children, preserving the environment, empowering both youth and women, and establishing sustainable projects. As a result of YARA's impact on enhancing society, I became a Fellow for the King Abdullah Award for Youth Innovation and Achievement in 2013. In addition, YARA is the first NPO to become a member with the Jordan Strategy Forum ([www.JSF.org](http://www.JSF.org)).

In observance of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, YARA's fifth consecutive "COEXIST" for 2015 was very dynamic – for we engaged in various events from the youth to royalty to politicians (all three events are explained below). I'm deeply honored to have conducted all of this at a young age of 29 years – with a zero dollar budget. I only strive for a better world.

### AT A GLANCE

#### YARA's "COEXIST" 2015 Held at Various Schools in Jordan

*Key Speakers:* Amir Shihadeh along with 12 other classroom facilitators.

*Audience:* 650 school students – in addition to 4 school principles.

*Highlights:* poems, songs, piano, and action letters.

#### An interactive dialogue with Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan

*Key Speakers:* Her Majesty Queen Rania along with Amir Shihadeh.

*Audience:* 10 individuals ranging from a high school student to CEO's.

*Highlights:* an interactive session where inspired solutions were created.

#### Shaping Davos

*Key Speakers:* Dr Omar Razzaz and Tony Blair.

*Audience:* Local session: 65. Global session: 400. Virtual audience: 15,000

*Highlights:* Local session with a theme of, "Examining Identity: Between Culture and Religion". Global session under the topic, "Religion: a Pretext for Conflict?"

## IN DEPTH

### 1) YARA's "COEXIST" 2015 Held at Various Schools in Jordan

The main event for YARA's COEXIST 2015 was held with 650 school students from six different schools on five different days between February 3<sup>rd</sup> to February 15<sup>th</sup> – all with the help of 13 classroom facilitators.

The two hour event started in the auditorium with an introduction by Amir Shihadeh (the main facilitator). Following, students shared their COEXIST poems in front of all participating students. The poems highlighted religion, purpose of life, interfaith and inter-religious beauty, global peace, love, and serenity. Signing a song and playing the piano took place at one school.

Following, students returned to their respective classroom with a facilitator from YARA. For one hour, the facilitator engaged in an interactive session with the students while addressing the below questions:

- If we were to look around us today (from pop culture, our friends, music stars, athletes, etc.) what do you think people's most popular goals are?
- Should my personal goals take into account other people? Or should it only focus on my own aspirations?
- What do I gain and/or lose by considering others in my goals? What do I gain and/or lose by ignoring others in my goals?
- What do you think would be an example of a really inspirational, meaningful goal that people should strive for in life?
- What do you think religions teach us about "goal setting"?
- Are there specific goals that religion encourages us to attain?
- Does religion help you attain your goal or not? And why?

After engaging in an interactive discussion with the students on the above questions, the students wrote their own 'Action Letter', which mainly addressed the question, "Why are we here?" Each student sat individually and answered the below three questions in their Action Letter:

- a) What do you want your goals to be?
- b) What path will take you there?
- c) How can religion assist in this?

After the classroom session, all students from the different grades and classrooms returned to the auditorium for the closing session. Many students stood on stage one by one and read their 'Action Letters' in front of the auditorium – sharing their goals and aspirations.

YARA's "COEXIST" in schools this 2015 greatly strengthened the students' creativity as well as public speaking skills and writing skills. We greatly focused on the students' analytical thinking which resulted in an increase of tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect.

A video recap for YARA's "COEXIST" 2015 at schools was submitted with this report.

## 2) An interactive dialogue with Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan

Her Majesty Queen Rania on March 2<sup>nd</sup> met with a group of young Jordanians to discuss the importance of coexistence and interfaith harmony as part of YARA's activities.

Queen Rania was keen to show her support for the youths who are actively engaged in using platforms and media to express their opinions and ensure their voices are heard, according to a statement released by her office.

Her Majesty met with Amir Shihadeh, founder of YARA and a group of young Jordanians (almost all whom participated in YARA's "COEXIST" over the past five years), and observed examples of young people working together to improve and enhance the mindset of religious coexistence, while promoting national unity and citizenship.

Attendees spoke about the spirituality of religions, particularly Islam, and their messages of peace and coexistence. We also discussed the ways the Arab world could utilize the media in promoting the true message of Islam and its peaceful values.

A news coverage video on Jordan TV was submitted with this report.

### 3) Shaping Davos

YARA partnered with the Amman Hub of the Global Shapers Community – an initiative of the World Economic Forum – and participated in the first ever Shaping Davos event on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. The event was held at the King Hussein Business Park in Amman, Jordan.

The Amman Hub along with Frankfurt, Toronto, and Erbil brought the world to Davos via a live 75 minute session under the theme "Religion: a pretext for conflict?" The world is seeing rising conflict and intolerance between religious groups across all regions. While religious texts preach tolerance, acceptance, and justice, extremist groups are spreading fear, hatred and violence. Of the panelists on the Davos side during the live session were:

- Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
- Hamza Yusuf Hanson, Zaytuna College
- Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town
- David Rosen, American Jewish Committee

Prior to this live event, the Amman Hub held an interactive session with local panelists and an audience in Jordan under the topic, "Examining Identity: Between Culture and Religion". As a complete group, we identified the underlying factors contributing to the rise of extremist ideologies by relating the rise to a broader search for identity within the historical, cultural, and geopolitical context of the MENA region. Of the local panelists in Jordan were: Dr Omar Razzaz, Mr Sameer Petro, Mr Saed Karajah, and Mr Ahmad Zubi. Session moderated by Mr Amir Shihadeh.

The main questions posted during the discussion were:

- 1) When was the turning point in our recent Middle Eastern history where the majority of the MENA region stopped having a single common identity?
- 2) How can youth participate in the process of forming their new 21st century identities? And what role will religion play in forming this identity?
- 3) What are the main differences between youth from our MENA region and that of the West? And by differences, we mean perception of their own identity and how they see themselves.

4) What makes ISIS, with its extreme ideology, so attractive to the youth?

5) What is the role of education in defining identity? Is lack of education a precursor to extremism?

Both a video segment from the event and a white paper were submitted with this report.

In conclusion, I had an amazing time planning, organizing, and implementing the above three events over the past few months. It gives me great pleasure and honor to serve society by engaging citizens in unique and special events that allow them to think in multi-dimensional ways.

As John F. Kennedy said, "one person can make a difference, and everyone should try". Therefore, I hope I am able to inspire people around the globe to help build humanity.

Warm Regards,

**Amir Shihadeh**



March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015