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Chemistry for peace

*This is a guest editorial by **Zafra Lerman**, president of the Malta Conferences Foundation, and **Emma Zajdela**, a PhD student at Northwestern University.*

Chemistry provides hope for peace and understanding in one of the most troubled regions of the world: the Middle East. Imagine walking into a room and encountering several round tables, each with 10 scientists from countries or regions whose governments are hostile to one another, and those scientists are discussing potential scientific collaborations with civility and friendship. At one table, for example, were representatives from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Gaza, Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan. Where else in the world can that happen? As one participant said, “Only at the Malta conferences.”

Every 2 years since 2003, the Malta conferences have provided an opportunity “to identify unique opportunities for collaboration to meet the scientific and technological challenges of the region.” The Malta IX Conference, which was held at the end of 2019 under the theme “Frontiers of Science: Innovation, Research, and Education in the Middle East,” was no different. The event gathered together scientists, entrepreneurs, postdocs, and students from 15 countries or regions from the Middle East, plus Morocco and Pakistan. These scientists participated in talks and workshops with several Nobel laureates to seek solutions to problems beyond geopolitics that this part of the world faces. To date, more than 700 Middle Eastern scientists and 16 Nobel laureates are in the Malta conferences network.

A challenge that has been a constant since the Malta conferences were launched is securing visas for participants. Although the preparations for the event started 2 years in advance, several participants from Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, Palestine, and Pakistan had still not received their visas 48 h before the conference was set to start. With the help of the Maltese minister for education and employment—and the organizers, who endured many sleepless nights—the au-

thorities at the last minute agreed to issue visas to the scientists upon their landing in Malta.

Malta IX had a makeover. Organizers implemented a new structure for the workshops to create more meaningful change for the region so that the issues of water scarcity, air pollution, environmental degradation, and more can be addressed more effectively. All the workshops were interactive and cochaired by a chemist and an entrepreneur to promote new ideas and pave the way for new startups. The Middle Eastern participants presented their research in a guided poster session, which preceded the workshops. The topics included medicinal chemistry; biotechnology; nanoscience; chemical, biological, and nuclear security; energy and materials; and more.

Representatives from different funding agencies from around the world attended the workshops and discussed the possibility of financial support for several projects.

At Malta IX, efforts to include more women from the Middle East paid off: 35% of the participants were women, which is good for a science gathering in general and for the Middle East in particular. A special forum to promote women in science in the Middle East and encourage young girls to pursue careers in science was held every lunchtime throughout the conference. Diversity efforts during Malta IX also meant that the number of young people was especially high, as the American Chemical Society subsidized the cost of attendance at the conference for 15 young people from the Middle East.

The participants of Malta IX had an opportunity to network at events hosted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, the British High Commission in Malta, and the Malta Council for Science and Technology, which sponsored the closing ceremony at the science museum.

In his speech at the opening ceremony, George Vella, president of Malta, said: “It is heartening to see representatives from so many countries from the Middle East, including Nobel laureates, coming together to discuss ways forward and cooperation in science for the well-being of the people of the region and beyond.”

Views expressed on this page are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ACS or C&EN.

