

Marketing Middle East peace through the products offered in Western supermarkets

By Donald H. Harrison



SAN DIEGO—Sanford Ehrlich (photo at right) is the Qualcomm executive director of the Entrepreneurial Management Center in San Diego State University's School of Business. He is a man who helps teach

students how to develop an idea and then to grow it, whether in the private or public sector.

At the invitation of Dr. Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the Hansen Center for World Peace (a unit of the San Diego State University Research Foundation), Ehrlich has been focusing on a project in which students may help stimulate cooperative relations among Israelis, Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries.

Here's a question for consumers: If a brand of olive oil blended from olives produced and sponsored both by Israel and the Palestinian Authority were to come to market, under a label identifying it as a peace product, would you be likely to give it a try?

In a recent interview, Ehrlich said he believed people who want peace in the Middle East would be willing to buy the product, at least once, to give peace a boost. However, for such cause-related marketing to merit continuing sales, the product would have to be both tasty and superior to what already is on the market.

For years, Israel quietly has been cooperating with such Arab neighbors as Egypt and Jordan on before-market techniques for improving the quality of such agricultural products as olives, tomatoes, dates, and potatoes. Using a process known as Integrated Crop Management (ICM), a program co-sponsored by the Hansen Institute and the Peres Center for Peace in Israel has brought Arab and Israeli farmers and technicians to work together in such areas as irrigation, pest control, seed development, management of those seeds, and proper management of the crops in order to assure the crops' high quality.

Now, with Ehrlich's help, the Hansen Foundation and the Peres Center are embarking on another phase of the project: developing a plan for the marketing of products grown cooperatively by Middle Eastern countries.

"For example, in looking at any one of these crop products, what type of derivative food products can be obtained from those crop products and placed in the European markets?" Ehrlich asked. "There are a lot of products that can be developed from dates, from tomatoes, potatoes, olives—there are derivative products that we can innovate with."

With the help of [Marvin Spira](#), a consultant with wide experience in the food industry, Ehrlich is seeking to bring together "the farmer and the distributor and the marketer... with the end corporation which buys this, whether it is a supermarket chain, or whole-food stores." He wants to identify: "Who is going to be growing



and producing it? Who is going to be distributing it? Who is going to be marketing it? Who is going to do the P-R (public relations)? Who is going to do the branding? There is an array of service providers. The idea is to have that whole value chain in countries collaborating together to put something in the EU market that would be innovative and branded as a Middle East collaboration.”

Graduate students in agriculture, technology, marketing and business in the various countries—including in the United States, at San Diego State University—can help pave the way for Middle East cooperation, assuming sufficient grants are attracted, Ehrlich said.

“We would look for those students to characterize the markets within their own countries and within the European Union,” Ehrlich said. “How much could they sell? Where do opportunities lie? We would like to put together teams of students that would be cross-country who would begin the work to determine what are the opportunities, and what are the niche markets.”

As an example of a niche market, Ehrlich said there is “a company that is producing a product made from tomatoes that you can use to wrap sandwiches, so it is basically like a sandwich wrap and it has great properties associated with it.”

While all this may sound like a long-term process, Ehrlich believes some products can be brought to market in a relatively short time frame.

“I think the olive-oil project could come together fairly soon,” he said. “If we engage the right producers, distributors, *etcetera*, it could come about fairly quickly. There is already a German woman whom we met in France last year who puts together a three-box set of olive oil—French, Israeli and Palestinian. In that case, you have a Palestinian and Israeli farmer who collaborated with each other to have their olive oil bottled. Those two farmers in themselves form the beginning of the blended olive oil market, so I don’t think that would be too difficult to get off the ground.”

Ehrlich expresses enthusiasm for the role students can play. “What is particularly exciting for me is having students from all across the Middle East—all of whom probably have some preconceived stereotypes about each other, not only Arabs and Israelis, but also about other countries of the Middle East—and getting these students to collaborate with one another. On the basis of their collaboration, they can become entrepreneurs because all of them have an interest in starting businesses and growing businesses.”

Ehrlich, who is Jewish and was raised and educated in upstate New York, has had the opportunity to meet and work with Arab business executives in a collaboration with the Beyster Institute (named for SAIC Founder Robert Beyster) at UCSD’s Rady School of Business.

From 2004 to 2007, different representatives of Arab countries across the Middle East, as well as some Arabs from Israel, spent three weeks in San Diego in a U.S. State Department-sponsored program in which “we were teaching marketing and marketing-based approaches, granting, marketing positioning, leadership,” Ehrlich said. “Within leadership we were talking about values, building culture, ethics, all the various approaches to the way an American company operates.”

The program involved “two weeks of theory and three-day internships in an American company to observe practices and see how they might employ them within their own country. They also provided a presentation within the company about their country,” he said.

Ehrlich said as the teacher in such a program, he learned a lot from his students:

“You sit down with someone from Saudi Arabia, or Iraq, or wherever it is, and you make the connection and you see they are just trying to live their lives like you are trying to live your life. And they think the stuff that is going on (terrorism) is as crazy as you think it is. They also think that a lot of what is going on here is crazy.”

For himself—and possibly for others who come together in the program—the process of encounter “has been life changing,” Ehrlich said. “This (the Middle East) is a part of the world that I have heard about all my life, but with a uni-dimensional ear. If you are American, you get what is fed to you by the American press. If you are Jewish, you get what is fed by the Jewish press and so that obviously prompts you to form certain judgments.”

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