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Moroccan and Israeli scientists exchange plants, extend peace

**By Cat Holmes
University of Georgia**

Despite renewed outbreaks of violence that have brought Middle East peace talks to a standstill, a smaller peace project that brings Israeli and Moroccan scientists together to exchange the seeds of peace took a big step forward last week.

Scientists from the Israeli Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and Morocco's National University of Agriculture met at the University of Georgia campus in Athens on May 15 to discuss exchanging plants with potential commercial viability that grow well in the arid, saline soil conditions common to all Middle Eastern countries.

"Our goal is to find trees and other plants that have some economic benefit, whether it's nutritional, environmental or medicinal, that flourish in the Middle East," said David Lehrer, director of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. "But the real benefit is the fact that we're learning to trust each other. We are getting to know the people behind the headlines we read about in the paper."

Sustainable, collegial relationships is precisely the goal of the Middle East Regional Cooperation program of the U.S. Agency for International Development which funded the project, said Mathew Metz, a diplomacy fellow from the American

Association for the Advancement of Science.

"We don't fool ourselves that this will create peace in the Middle East," Metz said, "but projects like this can nourish relationships between people in leadership roles in these countries while peace is being built."

The project started two years ago, just as the most recent Palestinian uprising began. In the ensuing months, relations between Israel and most Arab countries in the Middle East have eroded – Morocco froze diplomatic relations with Israel – and the scientists involved in the project haven't had an easy time, Metz said.

"It has been an uncomfortable situation at times, but we want it to work," said Ali Lansari Morocco's lead researcher. "There are no relations between the two countries. But I am a scientist, and what I am doing is a benefit to my country. I am not doing politics."

Since countries in the Middle East have many common issues and problems, such as drought and rural economic development, MERC was designed to support projects in which scientists collaborate to find solutions for their mutual benefit, Metz said.

For this project, each country chose crops that are salt and drought tolerant, and have potential value as fresh food, raw materials and value-added projects.

Each country brings a certain expertise to the table. Morocco has a

collection of native plants that are both salt and drought tolerant, including the endemic *Argania spinosa*, a nut tree that produces an oil with both edible and medicinal properties.

Israel has investigated and acquired drought tolerant plants from different countries around the world, including India, Peru and South Africa. The project allows each country to benefit from the other's research.

Because Morocco and Israel don't currently have diplomatic relations, meetings have been difficult to facilitate. In fact, last week was the first time scientists from both countries met for the project, Metz said.

"We have long-term relationships with both parties," said Ed Kanemasu, director of international agriculture at UGA, who facilitated last week's meeting. "And we are not set back by the political issues that have been a constraint to both countries since the beginning of this project. Our role is to help move the project forward."

"The program was conceived for peace," Metz said. "Three years ago MERC would have insisted that partners from each country visit each other in their native countries. That is not currently a feasible requirement. Fortunately we have found some creative ways to continue direct interactions, otherwise many scientists could have been shut out by the current political climate."

