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Shagririm: Israeli-American Ambassadors, on Campus

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By Lauren Schmidt, *ICB* Reporter

Imagine an elite network of pro-Israel students in the region where you attend school. They host meetings, enjoy access to events both in their city and nationally, and ultimately work together to increase support of Israel.

In Southern California, this dream is a reality, through a rapidly growing initiative called Shagririm, meaning "ambassadors" in Hebrew. The program binds together activists and advocates in Los Angeles and Orange County to build support for Israel.

Shagririm caters to the large population of Israeli-Americans in Southern California and their American born children. The program connects these individuals in order to effectively generate pro-Israel programs and initiatives.

Although its goals are similar to many pro-Israel initiatives centered on young adults, Shagririm is the only program of its kind that currently functions solely on a local, multi-campus level, rather than nationwide.

"Shagririm is different in that its purpose isn't to go out when anti-Israel activities go on. Its goal is to form relationships with other clubs who can become pro-Israel," UCLA senior Barbara Efraim said. "It's a more grassroots approach because the connections we create are original."

Brett Cohen, the national program director of StandWithUs, agrees that the program is one of a kind.

"Shagririm is a different sort of fellowship from your average Israel advocacy internship," he said. "While they are responsible for many of the same things as StandWithUs Emerson Fellows [many of] the Shagririm are Israeli-Americans empowered to speak up for their country. It makes it very personal, whereas for most American supporters of Israel the connection isn't the same. We are always excited to have the Shagririm at our Israel In Focus conference because they bring a unique perspective that I feel helps American supporters of Israel understand a deeper connection that can only come from being Israeli."

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The Shagririm program, which began in 2010 with 12 students from UCLA, USC and California State University, Northridge (CSUN), has expanded to include 54 students from USC, UCLA, Santa Monica College, Cal Poly Pomona, Chapman University, UC Irvine and CSUN.

Run through the Israeli Leadership Council (ILC), an organization that works to build an active and giving Israeli-American community in Los Angeles, Shagririm seeks to secure the next generation in Israel advocacy, preserve Israel as the Jewish state, gather Israeli-Americans throughout the country, strengthen community ties through program development and target young Jewish Americans.

"Shagririm has given students the resources and the chances to form relationships with other clubs, further spreading the pro-Israel message," Efraim said. "It gives us the liberty to do whatever we wish, so all options are on the table and we can use our imagination to create the best event possible."

The student leaders are trained to build coalitions with non-Jewish campus groups by synthesizing Israeli contributions in culture, art, science, technology and more, with initiatives created by non-Jewish groups on campus; this is a skill whose power was demonstrated during the recent Israel Apartheid Week on Southern California campuses.

"Bringing all the organizations together means that we can pool a greater number of resources," Efraim noted.

UCLA senior Tomer Schwartz is president of Bruins for Israel and a Shagririm intern. He stressed that collaboration with other groups is the best way to bring a taste of Israel to non-Jewish groups and show Israel beyond the conflict.

"We try to show them that we're big supporters of Israel or Israeli and show them a different side to what being Israeli is all about," he said.

He hopes that after Shagririm participants develop connections with other campus groups, the groups' members will want to support Israel based on the positive interactions and new information they learned about the country through their coalition-building event.

Eran Hoch and Neri Johnson are Israel Fellows in Southern California and both play a key role in Shagririm. Hoch said that the program's main goal is to help participants grow and become leaders in their communities.

"We want to see these leaders go back to their campuses and have other people following them and learning from them," he said.

Beyond planning events, participants can take part in a wide range of education and training opportunities, including StandWithUs' Israel in Focus conference, AIPAC events and hearing from speakers such as Myra Clark-Siegel of Project Interchange, Israeli

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"StandWithUs is very proud to host the Shagririm at our Israel in Focus conference, because as Israeli-Americans they bring a unique perspective," Cohen said. "Our mission is to help them articulate their own powerful personal stories to help educate others about Israel.

"StandWithUs works with lots of diverse groups of people to connect them with what interests them about Israel," he continued. "With the Shagririm, it is a very natural collaboration, because as American-Israelis they can bring their personal connection to Israel into their outside interests, and share that with their peers."

Efraim added that the program has made her better understand how to target her pro-Israel message to a certain group.

"It's important to find a common starting point with an organization and then build a relationship from there," she said.

This would not be able to occur without donors who support this program. Adam Milstein is an Israeli and major donor to the program; his family's organization helped found the Israeli Leadership Council, the organization to which this program is run through.

"I've seen a big campaign against Jewish people and Israel on campus. It made sense to train our students so they can stand against and educate and debate negative elements on campus," Milstein said. "The [amount of Jewish students on campus] might be five, ten, sometimes even zero percent. We do need more organizations on campus to help us survive against the anti-Semitism on campus."

Milstein is particularly proud of the wide-ranging influence that Shagririm has on students; the program's effects continue even after participants finish college and he loves seeing students excited and motivated to do more.

"Inspiring and impacting the lives of young people is very rewarding," he said.

Milstein hopes that the program will continue to evolve and eventually span across the nation.

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