

To the editor:

Your March 31 article "UC Irvine students met with Hamas leader" neglects to provide the context for the Olive Tree Initiative program.

The Olive Tree Initiative was created by UC Irvine students to bring together Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and unaffiliated students to explore peaceful resolutions and answers to the tensions in the Middle East.

Each year students, faculty and community members travel to the Middle East to meet with dozens of individuals from a wide variety of perspectives, during an academically intense fortnight.

During the 2009 trip a scheduled appointment with a Palestinian Authority representative for the group was cancelled at the last minute, and the students were offered a substitute meeting with Dr. Aziz Duwaik in his capacity as the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) at the PLC office in Ramallah. Dr. Duwaik is also a political representative of Hamas in the Westbank. The on-site leadership and students agreed to the meeting, which was outside the planned itinerary. The meeting should not have happened. This was discussed at length with the Olive Tree Initiative leadership and board after returning to the United States, and scheduling policies were tightened to prevent this from happening during subsequent trips.

We are proud that the Olive Tree Initiative has been honored by the Orange County Human Relations Commission, the U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy and the U.S. State Department. It has provided the spark to many similar academic initiatives across the country with the hope of generating a better understanding of the issues. The Olive Tree Initiative is a remarkable and inspired innovation. It brings together young, open minds who are willing to bridge deeper interfaith understanding towards shaping and creating a world where disagreements and hostilities are peacefully resolved.

Larry Kugelman and Professor David Snow

on behalf of the Olive Tree Initiative board at UC Irvine