It is my pleasure to introduce this program, featuring the students who participated in the second Olive Tree Initiative (OTI) journey on behalf of peace and understanding.

The university remains, by a thin thread it sometimes seems, one of the few places left where understanding all sides of a problem or issue is regarded as an intellectual mandate for rational, comprehensive problem solving. Although education is not synonymous with conflict resolution, scholars generally believe that it is through study, research, and conceptual understanding that the world’s most significant problems find their solutions, from medical to socio-political crises. And it is in this spirit that the UC Irvine students of the Olive Tree Initiative have come together. OTI is not dedicated to any specific social or political or religious agenda; they independently formed with the intention of gaining knowledge as a means of widening the path to dialogue and peace in the Middle East.

We know that fighting leads to more fighting. We know that there are those who do not want peace, or who want peace only on their own narrow terms.

It was not too long ago that Barack Obama was being mercilessly criticized for his commitment to dialogue with those designated as enemies of the United States and democracy. Now, as the most recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, we are being asked to consider the importance of new approaches to international conflict resolution, and President Obama has become symbolic of a renewed hope for a new model of global cooperation, one that does not compromise our national security but that recognizes an ethical mandate to gain as much understanding of complex issues and problems as is humanly possible.

I have never met students more earnest in their desire to understand all sides of the Middle East conflict than our OTI students, and in that desire they embody all that we hope of the most rigorous scholarship and the most intellectually responsible inquiry. Reason over superstition, unfettered inquiry over uninformed judgment, knowledge over ignorance, informed independence over blind conformity – this is what education should always strive for. And it seems, what we must now stand up for, if we are to achieve authentic dialogue, and ultimately, peace.

We know that dialogue leads to more dialogue. I fervently believe we all want to see peace achieved within our lifetimes. So with that, I proudly present the students of the 2009 Olive Tree Initiative.