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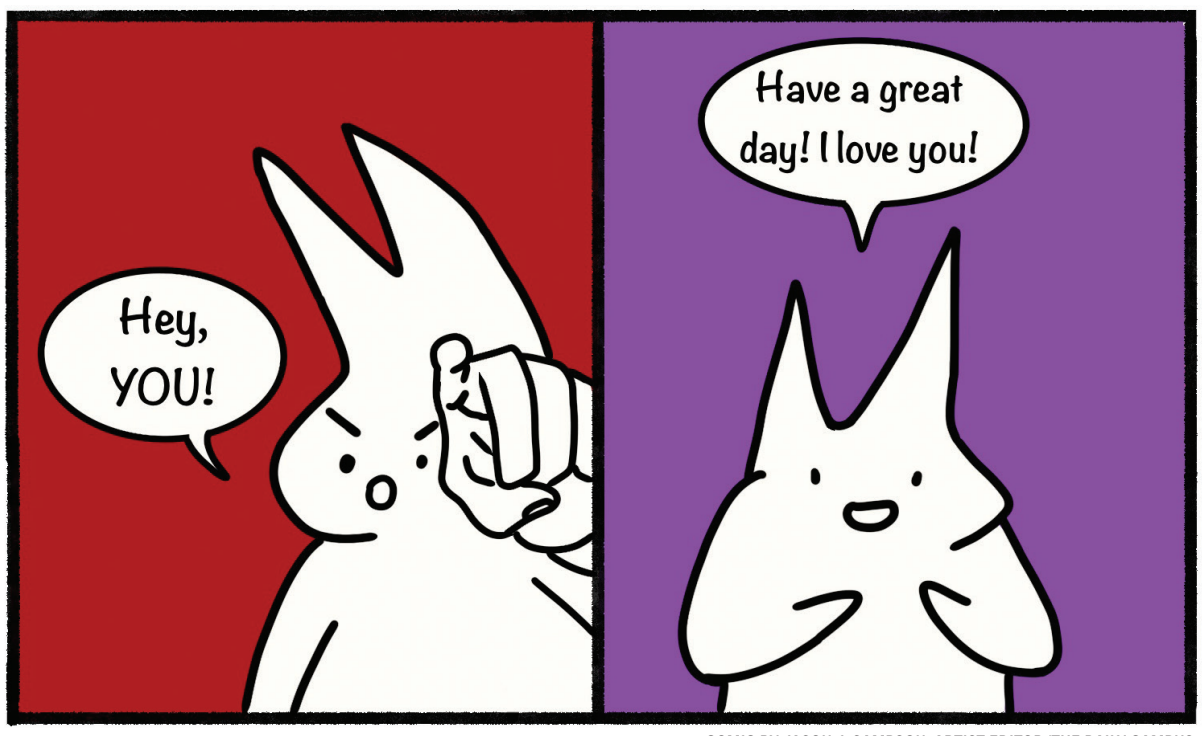
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COMIC BY JASON J. SAMPSON, ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Daily OPINION

Op-Ed: The Israel I saw beyond the headlines

by Anna Heqimi
GRAD STUDENT

"Dangerous."
"Travel apartheid."
"Genocidal."

Those were some of the words I heard when I told people I was traveling to Israel, first in January and again in May.

I understood their concerns. I had seen the images of destruction in Gaza and heard Israel repeatedly described as genocidal.

Still, I kept asking myself: What is actually happening?

I didn't want to form an opinion about an entire country or its people from thousands of miles away, so I decided to see it for myself.

My first trip was through Maccabee Task Force. I visited the sites of the Nova music festival and Kfar Aza, where I saw firsthand how the Oct. 7 massacre shattered countless lives.

What had previously been a headline became tangible: homes, communities and lives that had existed days earlier were gone in a blink of an eye. Bullet holes and collapsed walls remained where people had lived, celebrated and raised families.



Memorial for partygoers killed by Hamas during the Nova music festival on Oct. 7.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Israel is held to an unfair standard when it faces the same challenges and imperfections as every other nation. If an armed group attacked the United States, murdered our civilians, kidnapped our people and declared its intention to do it again, Americans would expect and demand our country to defend us!

Israel is not a genocidal nation. War began in national self-defense following the Oct. 7 massacre.

But if Israel was fighting Hamas, why were so many Palestinian children and families being killed?

I learned about Hamas' presence in and around civilian areas and infrastructure, allegedly using innocent Palestinians as shields, as reported by The Guardian. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies shares how Hamas repeatedly discouraged Palestinians from following Israeli evacuation instructions. I also learned more about the immense difficulty of fighting an armed group operating in densely populated civilian spaces.

I can mourn Israeli civilians murdered on Oct. 7 and innocent Palestinian civilians killed in the war. I could criticize the policies of the Israeli government without blaming Israeli citizens or Jews around the world for government actions.

One moment during a free afternoon on my second trip to Israel with Hasbara Fellowships will forever be ingrained in my memory.

I visited the Christian Quarter with two Jewish friends I'd made on the trip. At a scarf shop, we struck up a conversation with an older gentleman who sat near the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper was Muslim and the older gentleman was Jewish. They were close friends.

The shopkeeper invited us to stay for coffee and tea. We all sat together talking about life in Israel and life back in the United States. It wasn't a peace treaty or a diplomatic summit; it was conversation and warm beverages.

Additional impactful moments during my trip with Hasbara was after meeting and speaking with Israelis whose experiences challenged my assumptions.

Yahya Mahamid, an Arab Israeli, shared that he was raised to see and treat Jews as the enemy. Yet his whole perspective changed after he met one. He later voluntarily joined the Israel Defense Forces to protect the country he calls home.

Shadi Khalloul, an Aramean Christian, spoke about his deep love and connection to Israel.

Rawan Osman, a former Hezbollah supporter, explained that meeting a Jewish person completely pulverized the abhorrent views of her upbringing.

Ella Mor, the aunt of then-three-year-old Avigayil who was taken by Hamas and whose parents were murdered on Oct. 7, shared a deeply painful story of loss, trauma and perseverance.

I saw Israelis who were grieving, afraid, angry, hopeful and politically divided. I met Arab Christians, Muslims, Jews, Druze and Circassians whose experiences reflected Israel's diversity. Most importantly, I learned about the danger of generalizations and hateful narratives spewed online.

Go to Israel and talk with the people living there. See that country with your own eyes. Only then can you make an informed opinion.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH THE $99 MILLION MARKED FOR THE GAMPEL RENOVATIONS?

Here at Opinion, we have lots of arguments to make and articles to write. But sometimes, we need to step back and answer questions that have been on everyone's mind. That's why we have Roundtables!

by Patrick Minnerly
OPINION EDITOR
HE/HIM/HIS
patrick.minnerly@uconn.edu

Good news, I now have $99 million. Bad news is, I'm hungry and I want to eat somewhere, but I'm not sure I like the options. That's why I would spend the money on upgrading the dining halls. Is the South grilled cheese getting a little tiring? It never could, but what if it was made with five-star ingredients and the best-tasting bread anyone could ask for? With $99 million, all that and more could be everyone's to enjoy. Also, I would really like if one of the dining halls had a rotating top floor with glass, just like the one at the Eiffel Tower, so you could enjoy the sights of UConn. We can make that happen, right?

by Gianna Cassino
ASSOCIATE OPINION EDITOR
SHE/HER/HERS
gic23015@uconn.edu

I've had a longtime dream of creating a found footage horror movie at UConn's depot campus. Abandoned buildings, heavy metal tools, haunted puppet warehouses. . . what's not to love? About $1 million would be used to fund and market my passion project, partially so I can afford the most incredible soundtrack to grace the planet and partially so I can pay my cast and crew of broke college students. The rest of the money would be donated to the puppet arts department for their troubles. If you're with the puppet arts department and you're reading this, I'm genuinely not kidding. I WILL give you my pitch. We can't talk here. Email me.

by Colin Hamilton
WEEKLY COLUMNIST
HE/HIM/HIS
cjz24004@uconn.edu

With $99 million at my disposal, the possibilities are endless. The only thing more endless? The amount of lottery tickets that could be bought with such funds. Think about it. The Connecticut Powerball jackpot currently rests at $271 million; the Mega Millions jackpot sits slightly lower at 227 million. With ticket prices ranging from one to five dollars, the odds of winning both are surely within reach. I mean, come on. . . we'd be quadrupling our money if we won both. Which is totally manageable, right? I mean seriously; who would rig lottery odds?

In all seriousness, I would put this money back into UConn's academic- and research-based programs — both of which have seen repeated cuts in funding the past decade. Though the AAUP is working hard to protect our university's knowledge-based mission, the money could certainly do good in this fight.

by Ayden Mirabella
CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
zwj24003@uconn.edu

Now, I don't like to gamble, but I think there is a way I could double that money for UConn. I remember a quote from the Lego Batman movie, which goes a little something like this: "When playing roulette.... Always bet on black." After delivering that quote, one of the best songs in cinematic history begins. Now, if I bet $99 million on black and win, I could break out into a song just like Lego Batman. I could also not pay my taxes like him. The university gets 198 million dollars to spend and I get remembered. Though, it should be noted that they must put my name on Gampel as a sign of respect, because I had the guts to "Always bet on black."

by Victoria Hancock
STAFF WRITER
SHE/HER/HERS
vsh23002@uconn.edu

Instead of using $99 million to make Gampel bald (rest in peace, Epcot ball), I would put it to my personal UConn passion project: reasonable parking. It is diabolical that the closest parking lot to South Campus — a prevalent upper-classroom housing -- is D Lot, a 15-minute walk. After that, it is the abyss of Hilltop. I would take the starter money and build parking garages and lots by every residence hall so that more students can have cars on campus and reasonable places to park them. No more long midnight walks across campus having to wallow in your thoughts. Now, we can all end our nights and start our mornings at a reasonable distance from a motorized vehicle.



Construction continues on Gampel Pavillion in Storrs, CT. Students anticipate there will be multiple changes for the start of the basketball season.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL JEFFERS, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS