If you want to understand life in the Middle East these days, stand as I did six weeks ago in a canyon above the busy Jordanian port of Aqabba, on the shores of the Red Sea, and look at hundreds of Japanese cars on trailer trucks, awaiting transport to Iraq.

Or talk with a middle-aged Jordanian man, a retired military officer and former airport security official, who cannot understand why his request for a visa to visit the United States has been turned down after 10 previous visits to this country.

Or sit with the mayor of Yavne, a suburb of Tel Aviv, and listen to him thank you for coming to Israel and continuing student exchanges with his country when so many Americans have been scared away by violence and terrorism.

These are three of many memories I carry with me after a weeklong trip I made to Jordan and Israel with a delegation from the University of Hartford. While there, we signed a three-way agreement among Emek Yezreel College in the Galilee region of Israel, Central Connecticut State University, and the University of Hartford. Student exchanges begin this summer, and faculty exchanges will begin next fall.

We also began substantive discussions between the University of Hartford and the University of Jordan, which I am confident will lead to future faculty and student exchanges.

We visited the Jubilee School in Amman, where King Hussein Scholarships—established three years ago with the visit of Queen Noor to Hartford—have brought four outstanding students to study at the University so far. After this visit, I am sure many more will follow.

This was an important visit for the University. Universities are laboratories for the future in many ways—in the new knowledge our faculty create, in the new understanding our faculty bring to the past, and in creating in our students the leaders of tomorrow. As such, we as a university should be involved in the most difficult and complex problems of today,
whether in politics, the arts, or science.

The Middle East surely qualifies as one of the most complicated and deeply vexed regions in the world, and it is precisely for those reasons that we, as University citizens and as Americans, need to become more, not less, involved. I fear that the constant news stories we see in the national and regional media will keep us away, either because we fear violence in the region or feel that there is widespread anti-American sentiment.

But life in the Middle East is far more complex than that. To be sure, violence and anti-American sentiment are there. But peace, growing prosperity in a still developing area of the world, and strong pro-American sentiment are also there. As Americans, we need to understand that complexity, because as the world’s lone superpower, we have a responsibility to lead the world, not only in military matters but also in business, education, medicine, and trade.

The world is a different place after Sept. 11, 2001, and the events that have followed those unspeakable acts threaten to drive a wedge between the Arab world and the West. I saw that quite clearly in two separate conversations, one with a Jordanian engineer who asked me directly about the war in Iraq: “Why would America want to make enemies when it could just as easily make friends?” Later in our trip, an Israeli archaeologist said, as we were driving through Tel Aviv, “Over 90 percent of Israelis supported the war. Remember: Saddam Hussein aimed his scud missiles at Tel Aviv during the Gulf War.”

Attitudes toward America are just one of the complexities that divide the Middle East. There are many, many others. It is important that we, as Americans and educators, learn to understand them for ourselves, to go beyond the surface of news stories. Not all of us can visit this region, but all of us should try to understand it. This is not a time to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. It is time to embrace it; at the very least, to try to understand it.

That, in part, is what our partnerships in Israel and Jordan are meant to encourage. By engaging in student and faculty exchanges, and developing joint programming, the University of Hartford is taking the lead in encouraging our students, our future leaders, to understand their world. They are, after all, our greatest investment in the future.

Speaking of investments in the future, this issue of The Observer features the two most significant commitments the University has received in the past 14 months: a $1 million gift toward the Performing Arts Education Center from Mort and Irma Handel and a $2 million gift toward the Home Field Advantage Campaign from Tom and Suzy Reich.

These wonderful people have been active in the University community for many years, Mort and Tom having served for many years as members of the Board of Regents. All four are close friends and trusted advisers of mine.

What has motivated Mort, Irma, Tom, and Suzy is more than personal connections, however. They understand and embrace the important role this University plays in creating the leaders of tomorrow. They understand that new performing arts facilities and new athletic fields are absolutely necessary if we are to continue to fulfill this important part of the University’s mission.

They also understand the important role that their leadership gifts play in challenging others to give to the Campaign of Commitment. Not everyone can give at this level, of course, but both the Handels and the Reiches want their gifts to act as catalysts for others. So, as you read about their gifts, please reflect on the importance of your own gift to the Campaign of Commitment.

Just like understanding the complexities of the Middle East, a gift to the University of Hartford represents an investment in a better future for us all.