



Report on Trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

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Firstly, it has to be stated that my main objectives in coming to the region were met; in that all my preconceived opinions were validated. I spoke with people of all backgrounds from both sides, and attempted to deduce the humours and mentalities which characterised this conflict. I feel that I have done this quite successfully.

The trip initially started on Thursday the 7th of February, on the day we were supposed to leave for Tel Aviv, when we filmed our students messages for the Schools in Palestine and Israel; we collected any written messages from our classmates; in the end, filmed interviews were conducted with the students about to leave.

On Friday the 8th, we arrived at Ben Gurion airport (named after Israel's founder, David Ben Gurion) at 2.55 am, and after strenuous negotiations with the local Taxi drivers, we drove all the way to the New Victoria Hotel in East Jerusalem, where we temporarily lost all of our filming equipment in the taxi we came in. Later on in the day, we visited Mahane Yehuda market, where we met one of the students who had participated in the project many years ago. She had now become an intelligence officer in the Israeli army. We then went on to visit the historic quarter of Mishkenot Sha'ananim, where the epidemic of cats became evident (for some reason, there are more cats in Israel/Palestine than there are people). That evening, Darran brought us to a nearby restaurant where we ate kebabs. This would remain the staple food diet for the remainder of the trip.

The next day, Saturday the 9th, we visited the Old City of Jerusalem, through Damascus gate. I was surprised to see Orthodox Jews walking amongst Muslims, but then again they're only walking, and the police is always standing by. Another thing we saw were settlers who had taken over houses right in the middle of the Muslim quarter. Aside from protection from the police, they themselves are armed, unlike the Orthodox/Haredim Jews.

Beside on such settlement was a 19th Century Austrian Hospice, built by emperor Ferdinand of Austria, and in it we went through the history of Jerusalem, from ancient times up to now, and why all the great empires wanted it. Ironically, the Hospice was built as a friendly gesture by the Ottoman Emperor Abdul-Aziz.

Later on that day, we visited the western wall, which we had to approach wearing kippas. If I was ever out of my comfort zone, it was now. From there we also viewed the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. We then went on to view the site of Silwan, (Siloam in the Bible). It was also the first time we saw the West Bank barrier. Near the western wall, we visited the church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was built on the site of Golgotha, is managed by 6 different Christian sects, who often scuffle with each other. For the Orthodox and Catholic Christians, this is the site of Jesus' burial.



Protestants believe it is situated outside the city of Jerusalem. Another feature of this church is that of the Ethiopian Christians who have lived in stone huts on the roof of the Church. At the end of the day, we visited the prison cell in which Jesus Christ was held before his Crucifixion. That evening we watched a show by the Palestinian Youth Circus at the Palestinian National Theatre. I'm not sure what message it was supposed to convey, but it seemed to portray a turf war between Cosa Nostra and the homeless.

The next day we went to visit the city of Jerusalem, starting with the western wall, and going on to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, where Abraham supposedly came near to sacrificing his son, on the Temple mount, where the Temple of Jerusalem used to be before the Romans burnt it down. We later walked up to the Mount of Olives, to observe the Orthodox Jewish cemetery, where Orthodox Jews want to be buried, so that when the Messiah comes, they will rise from their tombs and take the Temple Mount back for Judaism. It is for this reason that the Muslims had built a wall around the Temple Mount should this occur. Further into the day we visited the At-Tur neighbourhood, which was lacking in any public services because it was totally ignored by the Jerusalem municipality. It was from there that we had gotten our closest look at the West Bank barrier so far.

On Monday the 11th we had a group briefing session as to what our aims were for the rest of the week. We also discussed our discussion formats that were to be applied during our interviews of the students. We went to the Ha Nissui experimental school, where we questioned the Transition Year students; one thing to note was that they were very direct and very opinionated (as is expected, considering their position); they had no qualms as to expressing their political affiliations and how they see the conflict. Some had lived in settlements as children, and some still do. The same was true for the younger students at the Hebrew University School. What was original about the Ha Nissui experimental school was that the students were totally free to come and go as they pleased, to decide which classes they went to, when to leave, whether to come...etc, etc. The Hebrew University School, although more traditional in structure, concentrated much of its efforts on the artistic development of its pupils. The rest of the day was spent with some of the Ha Nissui students who took us on a tour of West Jerusalem Zion square, Mahane Yehuda market, Mea Sharim (Ultra-Orthodox/Haredi Jewish neighbourhood). We then went on to visit the site of the Sbarro suicide bomb attack, on the corner of Jaffa and King George streets, in August 2001, in which 15 civilians were killed, including 7 children and a pregnant woman, and 130 wounded. Later on in the day we went to see the site of a suicide bomb attack on bus where Benayahu Zuckermann (18 year-old student at Ha Nissui school) was killed in 2004; a minute's silence was held by the group. Later that evening we met with some of the Israeli students who went to Ireland in 2011.

The next day, Tuesday, we went to the Irish consulate in the Palestinian Authority and met with Dymrna Hayes, the Irish government representative to the Palestinian Authority. A short while later we had group discussions with the Transition Year students in the Hebrew University School. These students were even more open than their younger predecessors. We then went to visit the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. Initial reaction was to be expected: horror mixed with contextual irony (I mean this in the largest sense possible; although the Palestinian plight is one of the most dramatic, for the moment it cannot be equated with the Holocaust). Some students had their reflexions caught on camera afterwards.



In the evening we passed through checkpoint 300, one of the main entrances into Bethlehem through the West Bank barrier; we noticed a lot of Palestinians going through from Israel, where many Palestinians work. We then travelled to the Al-Amaneh Hotel in Hebron, where we met Adli Dana, Director of the International Palestinian Youth League.

The next morning, we held another group briefing as to what we were going to do during our time in Hebron. We went on to have group discussions with the Mazania and Qawasmeh girl Schools. Although their English was not as good as the Israeli students', the Palestinian girls were much more passionate about their views on the conflict; as for political affiliations, the nature of Palestinian politics meant no such affiliations were expressed (In the West bank, Fatah is the only legal party, whilst Hamas is only legal in Gaza).

We then went on to meet Mrs Nisreen Amro, the Director of the Directorate of Education in Hebron (representative of Ministry of Education in charge of secondary schools), who explained to us the situation of Palestinian students and their prospects for the future (they weren't that good).

We went on to visit the old city of Hebron from the H1 souk to the H2 area: Some streets were completely blocked off, and were therefore settler property; others were just void of any activity: the shops were closed and bolted up, and their owners long gone; the buildings above were inhabited by settlers, who were protected by the Israeli army; there were watchtowers on every building; a boys primary school had been turned into a Yeshiva. One story was that of a Palestinian boy who was playing in the area, when a group of settlers grabbed him, held him down, and poured an acidic substance onto his face; he is still alive, but he can't hear or see anymore. This was told to us by a local who witnessed this.

The shopkeepers who remain have had to put an iron grill over their streets, because the settlers above keep throwing garbage, stones and sometimes acid on the Palestinian pedestrians and shopkeepers. A short while later, we went to the rooftop of the Hebron Rehabilitation Centre, where we had a view of the Israeli army watchtowers, as well as a view of the Cave of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque/Ha Machpela Synagogue. One incident occurred when we decided to walk down Shuhada Street with the Palestinian students. All was going well until a settler came up in her car and said that "they" didn't want any Arabs in "their" neighbourhood. A group of Israeli soldiers came by, and allowed us to move on, but without the Palestinians. We decided to head back rather than to continue on without the Palestinians.

Later that evening we went to visit Jameel Abu Heikal's home (Jameel is an ex-SAB student from 2011) beside Tel Rumeida settlement. Jameel told us stories of how the Israeli army shot at his house, and how when his grandmother had a heart attack, when the ambulance was called, it didn't arrive. When a whole day had passed, Jameel and his family had to carry their grandmother down to the hospital themselves. The ambulance arrived two days later.

Next morning we held group discussions with the students from Hussein boys' School and the UGU boys' school. As in the Girls' Schools, the students were very passionate about their views, more so than the Israeli students. This is probably due to their closer proximity to the conflict. It has to be noted that most of the Palestinian students we talked to expressed exacerbation and anger at the helplessness of the situation, and were less and less willing to talk peace with people who in a few years would be



smashing down their doors at 3 in the morning.

In the afternoon we visited the Old City of Hebron: we visited the Cave of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque/Ha Machpela Synagogue, the latter in which we had an interesting discussion with an elderly worshipper about the virtues of a Jewish state.

We then visited the Fakhouri pottery shop, which the Fakhouri family has owned since before the Israeli invasion. Since then, the Israeli's have proposed him money (4 million), which he refused, before they shone bright light and played excruciatingly loud music to chase him out. That didn't work either, and he still runs the shop just as before.

Outside the Al-Ibrahimi mosque, a minute's silence was held for Sabreen Abu Sneineh, 9 years old, who was shot in the head by Israeli soldiers on the rooftop of her house looking for her brother in 2001; her grandmother would die of a heart attack upon hearing this; Omran Abu Hamdieh, 17 years old, who in 2002 was beaten to death by Israeli soldiers who wanted to film it as a revenge killing for the mother of one of their friends who was killed recently in combat; and for the 39 killed in the Al-Ibrahimi massacre when Dr. Baruch Goldstein, an American Jewish family physician who became a radical settler, walked into the Al-Ibrahimi mosque and shot 29 Muslims while they were praying. A further 10 were shot when the panicking crowd alarmed the Israeli soldiers posted there who started shooting randomly. A further eighteen people were killed in Israel when Hamas committed a series of retaliatory suicide bombings in night clubs (1994).

The next day, Friday, was spent in a visit to Bethlehem and the Church of the nativity, which was under the control of the Armenian Orthodox Church, before finishing with a view of Har Homa settlement. Finally we visited Aida refugee camp, one of the three refugee camps in Bethlehem, which was up against the separation barrier, which had now been turned into an 8 meter tall mural. There were paintings on the wall of every village of origin of the refugees surrounding the camp. In the evening we do our final reflections on camera. We then drive all the way back to Tel-Aviv airport, and arrive at Dublin at 3.55 pm.