



Report on Trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

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Through the trip I accomplished most of my different aims. Before taking the plane to Israel and Palestine, I thought that most of the Israeli were raised as “war hawks” under educational pressure and government policy. All the students of Israeli schools where exceptionally open-minded (the groups of students I met) and all mentioned that they wanted peace with their neighboring country. I had also thought that the Palestinians might be extremely strict about their religion and as a surprise I didn't meet any girls wearing a burqa.

Nevertheless the students of the Palestinian schools were a bit more involved in the conflict discussions and mostly all have the same type of opinion that is quite straightforward on it. But because both sides were willing to engage in discussion so sincerely it was one of the most cultural and humane experiences of my life.

I learned a lot about Israeli military service, hearing both sides' opinions on it, even if it was mostly from pupils mouths. All the students I met explained to me in detail how they deal with the conflict in their daily lives. However, I can't develop a strong opinion of my own on the conflict. It's even harder than before taking place in the trip! In another way, maybe this can show that I understood that the conflict is not only “black or white” as the students often repeated, but it is incredibly complex.

My report will be divided into three distinct groups: the first three days (Thursday excluded); Monday and Tuesday; the rest of the week in Palestine.

From when we arrived at Tel Aviv airport, I was completely impressed by the structure of the airport, high speed Wi-Fi everywhere; brand new infrastructures and very nicely decorated corridors...*are we in America?* I don't really remember the transport from the airport to Jerusalem because I slept all the way.

After a rest in the hotel, we went out, beginning the visit of the West side of the city of Jerusalem. The number of people surprised me and I intended to find way more soldiers on the street. The Mahane Yehuda market was also very overcrowded. Then came the Sabbath. To be honest when I first saw an orthodox Jew I didn't feel any respect for them with their specific clothes that were so different from what we can see in our western European countries. This impression intensified when I saw them walking on their one side of the road, walking apart from others and with the one purpose of being “pure” in their thinking. I found this hard to reconcile with the view that I heard that they are living on people's taxes. During these moments I had to work on my own perceptions, it was a really hard exercise as we learn so much each day.



The city of Jerusalem is very beautiful and the old style of the city is very well conserved. The Dome of the Rock is just majestic. The Western Wall didn't quite fill my expectations.

Being an atheist, it does not represent much more for me except as a religious place we see everywhere on a post card or an Arte TV documentary, but it is always interesting to see new types of people with different cultures; the way they pray and especially the little place reserved for women: they want to keep it as it was in the past.

In the afternoon we visited the Church of Holy Sepulchre which is I think the historical place that marked me the most. Even if I'm an atheist, to be where the Christ had been crucified is very powerful, everybody has in his head an image of Jesus on the cross, and to be in the place where everything happened (or was supposed to) is quite emotionally intense. In addition I'm always fascinated by the architecture of the church, so deeply researched. At the exit of this church we saw with our own eyes buildings occupied by the settlers. When I saw them at first I was immediately paralyzed, it just confirmed the large amount of photos I've seen before of them.

The streets were filled with lots of cameras and tower gates. The few Palestinian who are still living suffer from the settlers' aggression. I really felt that they want to keep their homes as long as they can. There is a strong devotion in this people to keep their property and don't bend under the settlers aggression.

On the next day my impression of the West Bank Wall was quite similar, the fact to see a wall separating two countries in the 21st century is quite senseless. The neighborhood leading to it was quite a sight, rubbish on the ground everywhere: it looked like their neighborhood was abandoned by the main city services.

In the Ha Nissui School I felt the students were not as relaxed as I thought; they were very engaged in the conversation and some of them directly told me which political party in Israel they supported. None of the students in all the Israeli schools we visited accepted the conditions in which the Orthodox Jews live in. They told me that they should do at least 1 year of military service and have a part-time job to support their financial everyday life. I received quite the same opinions in both classes of the Hebrew University Secondary School. What surprised me the most is that a lot of students think it is the politicians that don't do enough to end the conflict. I found that the students are very open minded and accept a lot of different interpretations of the conflict. I didn't manage to sort out why they are such big gaps between an average Israeli family and those of the Orthodox Jews. They really tried to give us the message that they didn't fear Palestinians, and they want the same from their side as well so that the two countries could leave together and prosper.

We also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. We didn't dedicate enough time to it because of our busy schedule, but everyone agreed that it had to be a fundamental part of the trip. I found the museum very objective, which is quite good because it let the visitors make their own real opinions that would not be based on Israeli propaganda.



For me the strongest moment of the museum was when we entered the room where all the name of the Jews who died in the Holocaust were collected, it's like entering a room where everything became real, all these people suffered what you just saw in the museum.

Another strong moment was when we did a minute of silence where the 18 year-old student at Ha Nissui School had been killed by a suicide bomb attack on a bus in February 2004. I found one reaction from the Israeli boy accompanying us quite strange: he refused to be put in the video footage with our group during the minute of silence because, from what I remembered, he thought that to film this moment would seem like an attempt to mediatise this event. However I don't really agree with him on this point because the mother of 18 years old victim appreciates that we commemorate his son by filming this minute of silence.

When we passed on the Palestinian side, we could see directly that the population gross income is lower than the Israeli one. The streets are not very well maintained and there didn't seem to be as much industry. However the country possesses 17 universities so that its economy can develop more quickly.

The students in the schools were more intensively affected by the conflict as they live it daily, especially for the ones who have family in the old city of Hebron. When we met with Mrs Nisreen Amro, Director of Directorate of Education in Hebron. She told us about the countries principally funding the Palestinian schools. The EU is one of the biggest funders. I was quite surprised that the American government gives out funding for Palestinian infrastructure (USAID); I had thought they only supported Israel financially.

The moment that everyone in our group remembers is when we walked with the Palestinians students along Shuhada Street in Hebron. It was very surprising to see the Israeli soldiers differenciating us from the Palestinian students. It made a strong impact on me as I was beginning to get on well with these Palestinian teenagers; the soldiers could have separated me too if I was Palestinian myself. The fact that they can't access to all areas of their city is hard to believe. Moments like this make you feel how it is to be in their shoes.

The minute of silence in by the group for Sabreen Abu Sneineh and Omran Abu Hamdieh , both students who were killed by Israeli soldiers, one by gunfire, the other beaten to death was also a very deep moment. The monuments to the dead in Israel are most of the time better decorated than the Palestinian ones. The little engraved memorial plaque for the suicide bomb attack victims in Israel was very emotional, and the minute of silence in Hebron required very deep reflection.

I will remember this trip all my life to be honest. It was such a powerful and educational experience that I would give everything to go again and visit, make contact, meet people and of course study the impact of the conflict. I'm passionate about the theme of Israel and Palestine; I would love to share it with other people. If an opportunity comes to you to go abroad to these countries I wouldn't hold you back: it's an experience to be lived though with each of your senses.