



Report on the trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

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Introduction

My aim on going on this trip was to learn more about the conflict, the everyday life and beliefs of young Israelis and Palestinians. Now I feel I have achieved these aims.

Day1.

On the 8th of February, me, my brother and 6 other students from St.Kilians and Lycée Français and the 2 principals of both schools, met together in Dublin Airport, ready to go on this exciting trip. Firstly we got the plane in Dublin Airport, in the evening. Then we got off in Istanbul. Waited 5 hours and then got the plane to Tel Aviv. I was really excited as I have never been outside Europe before, so I did not know what was going to happen and what I was going to see during my stay of 9 days in Jerusalem and Hebron. As we arrived at the airport, we went to get our bags, but as usual one was missing; by chance the principal's bag. So we went to the Office of the Lost and Found , and we sorted the lost bag. Then, we went outside to get a taxi. As we got to the Hotel, we went straight to our rooms , and rested until afternoon later in the day as the journey was very exhausting.

Day 2.

Later in the day, we visited the Mahane Yehuda market, before the Sabbath. It was a very busy market, as there were lots of people buying their food before the Sabbath. After walking through the market and seeing different types of food , we decided to have an ice-cream, as Darran specified thta it was the best in whole of Jerusalem. Then, we visited the historic-quarter of Mishkneot Sha'ananim. It felt really peaceful and quiet compared to the market, because it was a really calm place with few people around, but many cats.

As we made our way back to the hotel, we prepared for the evening dinner in a hotel nearby. Afterwards , we spent most of the time in our rooms.

Day3.

The next day, we started by visiting Damascus Gate in the Old City. This is a Gate which brings you in the Old City. As we were walking through the small shops, I could hear all people shouting loudly tring to sell us their goods by getting our attention.

We got a quick coffee in the Austrian Hospice, and then we took down some notes about the history and background.

After that, we approached the Western Wall. It was a wonderful feeling of respect seeing all those people, children and adults praying in front of this huge wall. We also left a message in the wall, and made our way to a certain point up the hill where we could see perfectly the Golden Dome of the Dome of the Rock, The Al Aqsa Mosque, The West Bank barrier and Silwan. It was amazing and unexpected to see all these different and important places from just one point in the city. We queued to see the Dome of the Rock. As we got inside, I saw this huge Golden Dome, and I thought wow, it's gigantic. We walked nearer the Dome and took some group pictures. We walked around it and then Darran told us about it. We then made our way out, in order to find our cameraman, as he was not allowed in because of the size of his camera. We went back to the entrance, and he was not there. We tried to call him, but he was not answering at the phone. We then decided to continue our plan and visit the rest of the City. We stopped for lunch and then started again with our plan.

Then, we went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which was built on the site of Golgotha, where Jesus is said to have been crucified. It is kind of strange to think that 6 different Christian religions manage this church. We also saw the tomb of Jesus, where he was buried and rose from the dead. After seeing the church from the inside and leaving a message of thanksgiving, we made our way to the St. Catherine's well and we also saw a Ethiopian Coptic priest coming out of his apartment, which is on top of the church itself. After that, we walked out and reflected about the Jewish settlers occupying a Palestinian Muslim House. I felt sorry for them to a point where I wanted to help to move out the settlers from that Palestinian house.

Then, we made our way to the Prison of Christ and went inside to see his cell. It was much smaller than what I expected. I also saw another cell where the two other men to be crucified with Jesus were kept. It was a very dim and wet place. I had the feeling that I needed air after a few minutes in the cell.

As we approached our last task of the day, we made our way to the Palestinian National Theatre to see the Palestinian Youth Circus Show.

Day 4.

The day after, we went again to see the Western Wall, The Dome of the Rock and The Al Aqsa Mosque and went to the top of the Mount of Olives where we could see a really nice panoramic view of the Dome of the Rock, The Church of The Holy Sepulchre, Al Aqsa Mosque, West Bank Barrier. After this, we had a quick lunch and made our way to At-Tur neighbourhood, and walked down the hill. I could see the West Bank barrier perfectly. A huge and grey raw wall cutting narrowly through some houses which were now cut off from Jerusalem and were in the other part called West Bank. It was a really emotional feeling because seeing this massive wall and thinking that some people living in those houses in the West Bank now and which used to live in Jerusalem and can't do anything about it is really hard to think about and understand.

Our second day of visit was coming to an end and we needed to rest and eat, so we went to Alice's Restaurant in West Jerusalem. Here we relaxed, talked and reflected with one another.

Day5.

As another day was starting, we had a quick group discussion before going to the school and then had breakfast. We went to the first group - 10th Grade students at Ha Nissui Secondary School – and they seemed quite excited to see us. I was excited too in fairness and quite nervous, but after a while I settled and gained control and started with questions about their life and hobbies and then with some heavy ones. I found a difference in some students. Some knew the topic well and some others knew the language well. But this is normal. As our group discussion was going great with the first group, we then had a brief moment of reflection together about what we talked about and what we achieved from that. We took a group picture and said goodbye sadly. We had to move fast from one school to another as we had to meet with another group at Hebrew University Secondary School the same morning. We started with the second group. It felt quite hard at times as they were 9th grade, but were perfectly mature as a 10th grade, as they proved by answering in perfect English and by pointing out different points and opinions. They told us about the trip to Hebron last year with some students, an experience that was covered in a national newspaper.

As we needed lunch, we decided to go to a place called Burgers Bar. We ate a Burger and then followed the Israeli students as they were like tour guides for us. They brought us to Zion Square and then to the Mahane Yeudha market and told us the history. Then we walked through the Mea Shearim (Ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood). As we were walking one of the Israeli students told me he was a bit scared walking through here as he was Jewish and he was entering an Ultra Orthodox area.

We then stopped to a place called Sbarro restaurant suicide bomb attack on the corner of Jaffa and George's Street in August 2001, in which 15 people were killed, including 7 children, a pregnant woman and 130 wounded. Here they also told us the story; Some of them were telling the story with sadness, others with anger, one of them instead said " Life's goes on as you can see", which seems like a desire to forget about this attack. We made our way to another site of a suicide bomb attack which happened in February 2004. Here Bnayahu Zuckermann a 18 year old student from Ha Nissui school was killed. We had a minute's silence at the spot and placed a stone at the memorial. I felt it was important to show my respect. I also thought and reflected about the phrase one of the Israeli student said during the evening: that Palestinians are violent and we have to defend ourselves. I personally reflected that everyone has their own reasons to hate someone without reaching the core of the problem.

For dinner, we went to a restaurant where some of the Israeli students who went to Ireland with SAB in 2011. It was a wonderful time. We talked and had great fun.

Day6.

The next morning we had to meet the Irish Government Representative to Palestinian Authority, Ms. Dymrna Hayes from 10.00 till 11.00 o'clock. We talked about our aims and what were our goals by going on this trip.

We then rushed to the same school as the day before (Hebrew Secondary School), and met with the 10th grade (our year). We talked and shared ideas and covering different aims.

We spent the afternoon in the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. As I saw the first pictures I started becoming emotional. During all the tour of the museum I was holding all the sad things in as I was reading more and more stories of people. I think it was amazing to learn more and get a better understanding of this tragic event in history.

As our stay was done in Jerusalem , we moved to Hebron. We passed through the West Bank Barrier. We saw all the Palestinians workers coming home from building sites. They were rushing home as we could see. Walking through this huge wall of concrete my personal experience about the West Bank Barrier is that it does not solve any problems like suicide bombers entering the Israeli State , but it creates more and more problems like feelings of anger and revenge by Palestinians to Israelis.

Afterwards , we arranged taxis and then got to the Al Amaneh Hotel, in Hebron. We met the Director of the International Youth League. He was telling us about how important it is to go on an educational trip like this, and learn more about the conflict and the solutions to it.

Day7.

We had a brief meeting before going to the schools. We first went to Mazania girls school. Here we covered some other topics and they also told us about their feelings about the conflict and how it affects their everyday life. I found this group really honest and easy to understand, as if they wanted to show their suffering about the conflict.

We then moved to another girls school called the Qawasmeh school , 10th grade. We asked them some light questions in order to engage with them like what they do in their free time, what type of music they listen to etc. We then moved to some more heavy questions related to our core concepts like universal values and beliefs. With some difficulties I had a chat with some of them and about the refugee camps. These were camps where Palestinians where and are kept still today because of a resolution of the United Nations many years ago in the hope that they have a right to return to their homelands

My thoughts of this group is that I found them a bit shy and they seemed not to understand English. They then accompanied us to the music room where other younger girls played several songs including dancing. It was truly amazing and surprising, as I did not expect these girls of such a young age to be able to dance like they were able to. We said goodbye and moved on to meet Mrs Nisreen Amro, the Director of state of Education in Hebron. Here she told us her story and then as usual we talked about our aims and our goals during our stay here.

After that, we had lunch in the souk area, and then we spend an afternoon with Palestinians students . We visited the Old city Of Hebron from the market (souk) in H1 area to H2.

My first feelings and thoughts about the blocked streets was as if there was a curfew going on at that time. Also the street checkpoints seemed like the one in the movies, because I could not believe the real situation they were living through. And the soldiers on the roofs of the houses were also very scary at first sight as if they were going to shoot at anyone that would walk through on the streets. What struck me the most was the main market street that was blocked in order to protect Israelis settlers.

The thing that also shocked me was the throwing of rubbish and stones in the street as if it was a rubbish collection area.

We then , went onto the roof of Hebron Rehabilitation Centre. The view was amazing as far as I remember. I could see the watch towers on the Hills controlling the whole City and I saw for the first time the Cave of the Patriarchs, Ibrahimi Mosque and the Ha Machpela. It's just wonderful.

As we approached the middle of the afternoon, we went with the Palestinian students to Shuhada Street. As soldiers gave us the OK sign to walk down the abandoned and surveyed street we started walking until another soldier stopped us for an identification check. Suddenly I turned around and I see 5 soldiers armed with machine guns running towards us. I was worrying as I did not know what was going on, but Darran had everything under control and reassured me about the situation. Afterwards they checked our ID, and told us that we could have continued down the road and that the Palestinian students had to go back. We then decided to go back with them as we could not separate from the group.

Later that day, we went up a hill in Hebron to Jameel Abu Heikal's home beside Tel Rumeida settlement. He told us about his life and his stories. I also reflected on what he was living through and what he had lived through. It was really wonderful and necessary to meet these people, in order to understand better more about the conflict situation.

Day 8.

The second last day, we first visited Hussein boys' school, 11th grade. I found this group really straight forward and really understanding of the situation about the conflict. We talked about Israeli army service and about the refugee camps and conflict issue and resolutions. Then that day we moved to the UGU's Boys School, 10th grade. Here, we shared ideas and exchanged some different points of view. They seem not to understand English, but to know a lot about the conflict. Actually, I was told that most of the students were too shy to speak English as their English teacher present.

Later in the afternoon , we visited the Old City of Hebron: The Cave of The Patriarchs, The Ibrahimi Mosque, Ha Machpela; we started with the Jewish synagogue side and then after went to the Muslim Mosque side. It was really sad to think there was a bloody massacre not many years ago, were about 29 people were killed in 1994.

After visiting all that, we went to the Fakhouri pottery shop; here we tried to create a vase with our bare hands by a spinning wheel and some clay. I went first; since it was the first time doing it , it was quite a challenge trying to get the touch and feel how much pressure to put on it.

After taking all the fun in, we quickly moved to a spot were Darran told us all about Sabreen Abu Sneineh (9 years old, killed by Israeli army gunfire August 2001 , Omran Abu Hamdieh (17 years old, beaten to death by 3 Israeli soldiers, Dec. 2002), the 29 victims and many wounded o Ibrahimi Massacre (Feb. 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a Hebron settler opened fire with machine gun on worshippers); We then had a minute of silence for these people and all victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict who tragically lost their lives. The atmosphere during that 60 seconds was truly touching as if they were still there beside us.

Because it was our last day , we started shopping and I particularly got many different small things from many shops. From pottery to spices to dates. We then walked through Shuhada Street for one last time, during our stay.

For dinner, we went to the home of one of the Palestinian girls who had visited Ireland with SAB in 2011 a small party in a local restaurant before going to the hotel.

Day 9.

The next and final day , we had a good rest. We then, visited the Bethlehem Church: of the nativity during the afternoon. We also had a clear view of the Har Homa settlement. After we had lunch and then bought final souvenirs.

We had a really good view of the wall. We then visited Aida refugee camp, one of three refugee camps in Bethlehem. We got on a rooftop of a house. The view was truly spectacular. Behind the wall you could see paradise, literally. It was like 2 completely different worlds. As we were walking down, beside the wall, we turned the corner and we smelt gas. Suddenly we realised it was tear gas floating in the air. We quickly rushed into a shop. The shopkeeper gave us perfume to counteract the gas. It was the most unpredictable experience I had experienced during the trip; but it was fine in the end. We got the bus back to the hotel in Hebron, where we did our final reflections. We then waited for taxis at about midnight to come and bring us to Tel-Aviv Airport.

Conclusion and final thoughts about the trip.

This ten day journey has been for me a very unforgettable, emotional experience. In my motivation letter I had some goals to reach, in particular the possibility of sharing experiences with pupils of my age with regard their feelings, opinions and next steps to overcome the conflict and its issues. In addition, I was attracted by the differences between countries and ways of life.

Indeed we, with our school principals, had the opportunity to hear directly from the Israeli and Palestinian students about the conflict. My impression was that everybody would have liked to live in peace and to reach this goal, but there were different ways of achieving it. For instance some of the Israelis supported the idea that you don't need peace in order to end a war or conflict, but you just need weapons.

Others, Israeli or Palestinian , were of the opinion that a peace process must be undertaken, in order to create conditions of relationship to be reinforced peacefully, without conflict. My perception from some Palestinians response is that most of the time the military army has an arrogant approach against Palestinians which does not help relationships to improve, instead it creates more and more anger.

Within the ten days, we shared both in Israel and Palestine countries so that I could see differences between both sides. In particular Israel cities, For example: Tel-Aviv, which looks like a very modern city, with the very latest architecture design whereas Palestinian city, Hebron for instance is typical Arabic and like southern Europe cities: noisy, chaotic and busy. The characteristics between the people of the two countries are that Israelis schools seem more normal to Europe's standards, whereas Palestinians schools seems more run down, less looked after and much smaller classrooms. I also found differences between people on the streets, for example Israeli people seems to come out only for purchases and for

needs, whereas Palestinians like to share their own life in the street, for example chatting, discussing together.

Jerusalem can be considered a mix of two cities, because of the old and new part. The old looks close to Hebron, with markets and lots of people in the street, the new meets other European city, For example, public transportation such as the tram, like the Luas in Dublin, and very few people in the streets.

My final thoughts about the trip are that I found it very emotional the passing from the Israeli state to the Palestinian state, because as I was standing in the Israeli state, it seemed all calm and a bit dead, and suddenly a group of Palestinians builders, coming back from work and rushing home, passing through the wall; because as Darran mentioned they were going to work at 5 clock in the morning until 5 in the afternoon. As I passed through the wall checkpoint and made my way in Palestinian territory, I was suddenly struck in seeing many taxies and markets on open streets.

In addition, my thought about the West Bank barrier is that it does not solve problems , but it creates more and more for other people.

In the end I have to thank my teacher Tadhg Ó Scanaill, the Deputy Principal of St. Kilian's Elizabeth O'Brien, the Principal of LFI Sarah Magadoux, the Director of SAB, Darran Irvine, the cameraman Ben Jones and the students from LFI and St.Kilian's who shared this amazing experience with me.