



Report on the trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

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Introduction

I was looking forward to accomplishing a lot of aims when going on this trip.

Firstly, I wanted to explore the similarities and the differences between the Israeli and the Palestinian populations including their customs, and improve my knowledge of attitudes and feelings of these populations.

Moreover I wanted to learn and expand on what young people from both sides felt about the conflict, the wall, the settlements and the social instability in both territories.

I wanted to take both points of view on board without being judgmental and without siding with anyone. This trip was set to be a very important and interesting trip and the more my questions were answered the more I wanted to know. The response and the feedback was good from both the Israeli students and the Palestinian students and I got a lot out of this trip.

Departure

On the 7th of February, the day we were going to leave, we did some video-recording in the classroom with some of our classmates, and of course, Darran, our guide, and Ben, our cameraman.

We talked about how this trip was going to be significant to us, and shared some of our worries, opinions and feelings in the classes. We thought about some messages to write and some students told them in different languages. These messages were very deep and powerful and reflected just how this project was important for everyone, and was not just an effort for us who were the 'voyagers'.

A lot of letters had been written before with messages to send to the Palestinians and Israeli students, and many posters were drawn from both the students in our school and students from other schools in Dublin and Ireland.

We were very excited about this trip, and this showed in our pre-trip interviews where we talked about our aims and what we wanted to achieve and take from this trip.

The flight to Istanbul was quite long and it wasn't the end.

We arrived at night and then took the flight to Tel Aviv which was much shorter.

We arrived in Israel at around 3 am and, despite having slept during the flight in the airplane, it didn't help, and we were all really tired.

First view of East Jerusalem

We got on a mini bus that took us from the airport to our hotel in East Jerusalem. We got our rooms and we went straight to sleep.



The morning after we took our time and had a long rest until mid day. We then walked for a while in the surroundings of East Jerusalem. The place was very crowded with a lot of people who were very different from us.

On the street, there were a lot of stalls and stands selling mainly foods and fruit, and sometimes merchandise.

We took a walk to West Jerusalem which was quite close. It was like going into a completely different world. While in the East it was all messy, there was a lot of trash on the ground and there were a lot of people and it was very noisy, the West was very tidy and westernised and seemed much like a normal European city.

We visited the Mahane Yehuda market, and as expected it was very crowded, a bit because it was a market, of course, but also because everyone was getting the last supplies before 5pm, when Sabbath started.

There were so many strange food products, especially breads, that were being sold.

We went down a side road and we bought a delicious ice cream from a shop.

Soon we saw a man walking around and calling everyone to close their shops for Sabbath.

Old City

The Old City of Jerusalem is a walled area and there are some entrances to it through a gate.

We entered the Old City of Jerusalem from Damascus gate which is the biggest entrance to the Old City. It essentially is a big market. As we walk down there are many shops with a huge variety of goods. There were many food and spice shops, and shops with gadgets, souvenirs, and T-Shirts.

It was really crowded and we as a group struggled to keep together.

It was interesting to see how different the way of living and trading was there.

We stopped at a coffee shop for a short pause and we talked a bit about our first impressions of the Old City and our plan for the day.

Western Wall

The same day we visited the Western Wall. It is the most sacred site recognised by the Jewish faith apart from, of course, the Temple Mount itself. There were a lot of tourists. After the security checks we entered into a massive plaza.

However, I expected to be more 'awestruck', when first entered and, although the place is of great religious importance, it struck me as commercialised.

A lot of Jewish believers were praying at the Wall. There was a male side, and a female side. They were separated by a little fence, and the female side was much smaller than the male side.



To get in, we had to wear kippas (Jewish hats to be worn in sites of religious importance) which were provided to us.
We were told to never face our back to the Wall, and we showed respect by not doing that.
We also had the option of writing a message on a piece of paper and putting it into a crevice in the wall.

Mount of Olives

We took a walk on the Mount of Olives.
From there we saw the great panorama of Jerusalem. We could see the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Dome of the Rock, two important sites for Islamic culture.
From there, we could also see a first glimpse of the West Bank Barrier, the famous wall of conflict which separates Palestine from Israel.
We could also see the Silwan neighbourhood, the Palestinian neighbourhood just beside the Old City.

Church of the Holy Sepulchre

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is one of the holiest and most important religious sites for Christians. According to some beliefs, it is the purported site where Jesus was buried and where he rose from the dead.
It is built on the site of Golgotha. It is managed by 6 Christian denomination communities, and there is sometimes a slight conflict between them. Inside, it was a very beautiful and decorated church, there were a lot of mosaics.
There were a lot of tourists, too.
There was a stone which was believed to be a part of the the tomb (sepulchre), in which Jesus was buried. People would go and kiss it as a tradition.
There was also a side of the tomb where we could stick our messages in a piece of paper, like at the Western Wall.

When back outside, we saw some rooftops of buildings. There were Jewish settlements of Palestinian housing and there was a lot of fencing to keep the original house owners from returning. We saw the roofs full of barbed wire and high fencing, and the buildings were crammed together very tightly.
There was a small playground that belonged to the Jewish settlers, and it was very sad to think that small children would be used to play with so many fences around.



Prison of Christ

We visited the Prison of Christ where Jesus was taken to before being crucified. There was also the prison where the two thieves stayed before being crucified with Jesus. Jesus's prison was really little. It was a very small room with a seat where his legs were chained. The ceiling was also very low. There was a mosaic representing how Jesus was immobilized.

Palestinian circus

The same evening we also went to a Palestinian circus in Jerusalem, where a play was set up with many acrobatics. It had a political meaning and showed how they were devoted to getting their message across.

Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock is a shrine on the Temple Mount. It is a great place of importance for Muslims in the Islamic religion. The site's significance comes from religious traditions regarding the rock, known as the Foundation Stone, at its heart. It's the centre of an even greater Muslim shrine, which Muslims believe it symbolises Muhammad's 'Night Journey', his ascension into Heaven. When we went there, there were again some security checks. Our cameraman wasn't allowed inside because of his big camera. It was a huge place and you could feel that it was important for Muslims, and that Muslims treated it as it should be. The Dome itself was covered with stone and mosaics, with a golden roof. The roof was originally made of solid gold but was replaced since then. The plaza was immense.

Ha Nissui School

On our first school visit we went to the Ha Nissui school in the Jewish West Jerusalem. We stopped for a minute of silence at the stone that was placed in the school's courtyard, that commemorated a past pupil who had been killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in a public bus. We were greeted by a group of students of 10th grade (our age) who had a lot of interesting stories to tell us. We split into smaller groups with a small number of students for every two of us.



They looked like normal teenagers. They told us many different things which I was surprised about. For example that most of them didn't follow Sabbath, or weren't particularly interested in religion at all. Most of the times their parents tried to influence their political beliefs. It was very interesting and enjoyable to talk to them. I was surprised because they were really not different from us, and I was a bit more motivated now because I knew better the kind of people to expect, and how to talk to them.

Hebrew University

We went to our second school which was the Hebrew University Secondary school. We met both students of 9th and 10th grades. In this school, I got the expectation that the pupils were very prepared and had strong political beliefs. They seemed very interested in the political issues going on. They had mixed feelings towards the conflict and the Palestinians and the settlements. Some said that the settlements shouldn't be there in the first place, and that the settlers should have just left the place. However some of them justified the settlements, saying it was their home. A thing that really impressed me was that they didn't agree with the government, yet some of them claimed that their interests were more important than the Palestinian interests. They also felt that they wouldn't move away from Israel, or if they did, they would return to live their life there, because they said that they wouldn't leave this conflict to its destiny without trying what they thought was right.

In the afternoon we walked with the Israeli students through the streets of West Jerusalem. They told us some stories about the suicide bombing events and it was very shocking to hear them.

We also did another minute of silence on the site where the same Ha Nissui student was killed by suicide bombing in 2004.

Meeting with Irish Government Representative

We met Ms Dympna Hayes, the Irish Government Representative to the Palestinian Authority at her residence in Jerusalem. She welcomed us inside where we left our luggage, and she offered us refreshments and pastries while we had a conversation. She talked to us about her job and as expected she was very prepared about the subject. It was quite an interesting conversation and at a point we had to leave because it was getting too late!

Yad Vashem

Before our journey to Hebron, we went to the Yad Vashem museum.



The Yad Vashem is the museum of the Holocaust.

It has a lot of first hand information and sources that were very interesting and some of which I had never heard before.

I also saw shocking videos like the one of Lithuanian Nazi soldiers lining up some Jewish people and shooting them. I had never thought this had even been taped.

There were a lot of stories of survivors that told about when the Nazi soldiers knocked on the door, and their parents saying 'Goodbye' to them and telling them to hide in the closet before opening the door and getting brought to the concentration camp.

It was so interesting but it would have taken us too much time to go through the whole museum in full so in the end we had to stop at every section for a short period of time.

When we went back outside we sat down on the benches and reflected a bit on what we had just seen.

The people who felt like doing an open reflection shared their thoughts.

It was very shocking but a significant part of this trip.

Hebron

We travelled with taxis to Hebron and already, on the other side of the wall, it was completely different. While Israel seemed all nice, green fields, peaceful, you just had to cross the border to see a lot of confusion, and felt as if everything was kind of crammed together.

We reached the hotel in Hebron in the evening and we were welcomed by the Director of the International Palestinian Youth League who gave us a speech on what their job is and what they do. After that we had dinner at the hotel and then went to bed.

Girls' schools

First we visited the Mazania school in Hebron. We split up into groups and started asking our questions. They had many different stories about the conflict and their lives in the conflict. It was so shocking to hear that some people could only see their relatives once a year because of the conflict. They had a great hospitality.

We went to the other girls' school, the Qawasmeh school. When we first went there we were welcomed by their principal who brought us to a room where we would have asked our questions. Then they brought the best English speakers from 10th Grade so that we wouldn't have had any trouble with understanding. Again, they were very interesting and had many stories, which were quite dreadful as well.

One thing I really noticed is that they were very patriotic and would have given up their lives for their country, in order to solve this conflict.

A lot of them had many messages to bring across and we were struggling to keep them calm.

After the discussion the girls at Qawasmeh school did a traditional dance for us.



Old City

In the afternoon we visited the Old City of Hebron with some students. They were very informative and explained to us all about the blocked streets and the settlements. There was much graffiti about the conflicts and some posters on the closed gates and near the settlements. In the main street there was a market. There was an overhead fence protecting the market from the Jewish settlers that would throw any waste, like acid, urine, garbage, organic, bottles, down on the Palestinians as if it was a garbage bin. They try to make life difficult for the Palestinians so that they would leave.

There were many Israeli army watch towers and posts on the roofs of houses and a lot of checkpoints on the street along the way.

We proceeded into the Old City on to the road leading by two of the Jewish settlement buildings. We were allowed by soldiers at the checkpoint to walk down the street with some Palestinian students. We continued until we were stopped by some other soldiers, not much later. They were all carrying machine guns and helmets. They checked our passports and then split us up into two groups: the Europeans and the Palestinians. We were allowed to proceed but refused to because we were being guided by the Palestinians through the city.

Cave of the Patriarchs and Ibrahimi Mosque

We visited the Cave of the Patriarchs in the Jewish settlement part of the city, where only tourists and the Jewish settlers were allowed.

It is claimed that the shrine of Abraham is there in the cave below the synagogue. It is shared with the Ibrahimi Mosque.

In the Ibrahimi Mosque, we weren't allowed to enter with our shoes and so we took them off. Women had to wear cloaks in order to cover most of their body as with the Islamic tradition.

We also visited the Palestinian pottery shop in the out-of-bounds zone, where only Jews and tourists were allowed to enter. All the other shops had closed down but he resisted, especially when there was an issue with the settlers playing very loud music in front of his shop. Having a lawyer who brought the case to court and won.

The shop has been there for over 40 years.

After that we did the minute of silence for the Palestinians killed in the Ibrahimi massacre, and especially two kids (secondary school students who were in schools where SAB had its project) who had been killed by the the brutality of the Israeli forces.

Visit to Jameel's house

We visited Jameel's house on a hill near Hebron. Jameel is an ex-SAB student who visited Ireland in 2011. He lives beside the Tel Rumeida settlement. At the gate that links his house to the settlement, there is always a soldier patrolling everything, who was trying not to be seen by us as we were listening to



Jameel. Jameel told us that he couldn't even go to his garden that the soldiers would shout at him to go back inside. Every day he has to do a lot of security clearances which sometimes can last many many hours. We saw some bullet holes on his door steps.

Boys' schools

First we went to the Hussein school. We were welcomed by the principal and he showed us the way to a really big hall. There were a lot of students there, who were one year older than us. They were very enthusiastic about talking with us, with people from a completely different background.

Again, they had many interesting stories to tell us and had a lot of political views regarding the matter. We talked for a lot and then they insisted on taking pictures with us.

Then we went to the UGU's school. We met a classroom of student who were just in the class of English. We couldn't split into groups at this time because there wasn't enough space in the classroom, so we asked them some questions. There were a couple people who were willing to talk and talked quite a lot. One of them was the brother of a girl we met the day before.

Our last (proper) night in Palestine, we were invited by a Palestinian girl to her house for a party. It was very entertaining to talk with them, and for once about something more cheerful than the conflict. We played cards while there were some traditional foods to be tried.

Last day

On our last day we visited Bethlehem. We went to visit the Church of the Nativity.

Built by Emperor Constantine, it is believed to be the oldest Christian Church in the world, and was built directly over the place where supposedly Jesus was born.

Then we went to the Palestinian Aida refugee camp which is right beside the barrier.

These people were kicked out of their original hometowns in Palestine, because of the 1948 war and they were all given homes here.

The gate was a giant keyhole with a key on the top.-It symbolises the key of the original house, to remind people that they never forget the right to return to their homelands.

Around the camp there was much patriotic graffiti and controversial graffiti. There were written all the towns they were kicked out of, and saying that, no matter what, when, or how 'They will return'.

We were brought by a Palestinian student from the day we visited the boys' school (two days earlier), on a rooftop of a building. Since Bethlehem is just about outside Israel, the wall was easy to see, winding its way through and up the hill and the towns. We took many pictures because now we really saw the clear difference from both sides of the wall at the same time. When back down again, we were just walking through the refugee camp. We found out there was a kindergarten there.

Soon after we heard a slight bang (but that came from far away), and we saw a big group of children, kids of all ages running towards and past us, like a stampede. One of the Palestinian students went to ask



for clarification and apparently a soldier had just thrown a stun grenade to scare the group off. You could just feel how those people lived in terror. It was so strange a feeling to be there and to experience that.

When we were walking back we got affected by a floating cloud of tear gas. We were immediately told by a shopkeeper to come into his shop. That was just an experience I wanted to tell.

After that, we went back on the bus and returned to Hebron and did our final reflection in the youth centre.

It was very sad to leave this place after all we had been through and I felt like the time was too short.

We waited around midnight to hop back on the bus that would have brought us to the airport and back home.

Conclusion

Looking back on this trip I think it was a very unique experience. Sometimes, I felt it was quite challenging to keep up with the pace of everything really. It was really interesting to hear both sides of the story from the young people. There were so many different points of view that I didn't even imagine there would be before going on this trip.

It was quite pleasant to see the different cultures, styles, and customs. Not just between the Palestinian and Israeli cultures, but the fact that they were so different to ours.

Overall, I can honestly say I fully exceeded my expectations and my aims were greatly surpassed, and reached new ones beyond my initial list.

But I feel that now, there needs to be actions because we can talk all we like, but if we don't act, this conflict will not be solved.