



Report on Educational Visit to Israel and Palestine 2013

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Contrasts and similarities – that I think is the phrase that I would use to summarise my entire experience in Israel and Palestine. Contrasts and similarities between Ireland and Israel, Ireland and Palestine, Israel and Palestine themselves, between us, European teenagers and Israeli teenagers, us and the Palestinian young people and finally the Israeli and the Palestinian students. We went on a journey to a completely different world and yet there were things, thoughts and emotions to relate to. That however leaves a lot unsaid and through this report I will try convey my memories, thoughts and feelings in order to try to put across to you, the reader, the depth of the experiences that we had during our trip. Before I start however I must warn you, if you have not been to Israel and Palestine you cannot and will not fully or even mostly understand what I will try to express here.

Before the start of this trip I stated that my aims were to find out how the Israeli and the Palestinian young people see their own and their nations' futures. I wanted to learn about what resolutions they saw to the conflict. I think that I have achieved in that, I have in my notepad many notes about the thoughts, feelings and plans of the Israeli and Palestinian students. They do not contain two opinions split on national lines, there is a multitude. One frequently occurring opinion though, which comes from both sides is that despite there being hope for a peaceful resolution, there is little faith in it. Nearly all foresee a big war but they all want peace and I think that is the important thing. If there's a will there's a way.

The first thing that struck me when we got off the plane at Tel-Aviv airport were the advertisements in Hebrew, unlike anywhere I had been in Europe I could make absolutely no sense of what the writing meant which was a first sign of the contrast between where we had come and Europe, otherwise the airport was very much similar to any European airport. It was nothing that hit me with "You're in the Middle East". The next thing that helped the Middle Eastern feel sink in was hearing the Muslim call to prayer that morning. This was something that I had never before experienced first-hand. In the afternoon we walked into the streets of East Jerusalem, a great example of a central area in any Arab city, the streets were dirty and filled with salesmen selling food, souvenirs and counterfeit goods. There was a great atmosphere and a real sense of being immersed in the Middle East.

We continued our walk and after only a few hundred meters we were back in Europe. We had arrived in West Jerusalem, an area which in cleanliness and modernity rivals some of the best-kept cities in Europe, it was European albeit some details of Jewish culture and society which seeped through. The most striking of these details was the presence of Orthodox Jews. Before coming to Israel I had only seen Orthodox Jews in videos of Poland before the Second World War. Seeing these people was a very interesting experience as not only did they seem out of place in this modern city but also appeared to be locked in a world of their own. The horn beginning the Sabbath was another thing which was completely new to me and to a certain extent it surprised me how loudly and clearly it resounded through the city. Next we briefly visited the Old City and saw a prime example of



how isolated the Orthodox community is. Streams of men dressed in black and white passed by us, all always looking ahead, never turning their heads to look at anyone. They wanted to avoid any contact on their way to prayer at the Western Wall.

We spent the next two days exploring the Old City. The narrow, often covered streets gave a real sense of the ancientness of the place. They seemed in many ways locked in time with traditional Middle Eastern goods being sold, apart from the occasional shop selling humorous t-shirts and quite common sight of fakes of western products, it was as if nothing had changed in centuries. Like outside the Old City walls, inside too there were striking elements. The houses in the Muslim Quarter taken over by Israelis were among those things. Adorned with Israeli flags and with the residents spending a lot of their free time on the roofs they stuck out like sore thumbs in the city skyline. To learn that they were once Palestinian houses and more often than not taken over illegally was shocking and puzzling. Two questions sprang to mind: why would a democratic country like Israel allow this to happen and why do the settlers bother? Despite the support that they receive from the Israeli government they seemed very isolated in their determination to make the Old City Israeli.

Another thing that stuck out was the difference between the Jewish and Muslim parts of the Old City. Like in the other parts of the city the Jewish area was clean and calm while the Muslim area was crowded and noisy. The greatest emotions in the Old City were however to be felt at the religious sites. The thing that struck me most during our stay in Jerusalem was the irony of the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. The Western Wall which is considered by most Jews to be their holiest religious site is only meters away from the Al-aqsa Mosque, the third holiest place for Islam. They are there praying so close to each other, to who they recognise to be the same God and yet they are locked in this bitter conflict. Standing at the Western Wall I could only think of one suitable message: "Za pokój i zrozumienie. For peace and understanding. Pour la paix et la compréhension." (all 3 mean the same thing, the first language is Polish, the third is French).

Another hint of irony hit me when we were on the Temple Mount. The Temple Mount is a very peaceful, quiet place seemingly isolated from the conflict outside. In this, access to which the Palestinians fight for is on a normal day a refuge of peace (there was a confrontation between Muslims and Israeli soldiers shortly after we left the country so you can see the conflict sometimes seeps through there too and occasionally even ignites there as with the Second Intifada).

Our visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was also a very interesting experience. Six denominations of the Christian faith are represented there. It is sad and to a certain extent irritating to see that these 6 branches of the same religion struggle for control of the holiest place in the world for Christians. There is however a sense of great significance and eternity to the place. The crosses etched into the wall by the Crusaders shows how important it was already 1000 years ago.

The next day we began to do what we had come to Israel to do in the first place. In the next two days we had our school visits, to the 10th Grade class of Ha Nissui school and the 10th and 9th Grade classes of Hebrew University school. In these schools they were used to the presence of westerners.



Like us they travel on holidays and exchanges to Europe, they have similar hobbies and pastimes. There is however one easily noticeable difference between Irish and Israeli teenagers. Whilst in Ireland to find a teenager who is interested in or at least understands the world of politics is a difficult task, almost all Israeli young people are very politicised. They know exactly which political party they support and many volunteer for the youth wing of that party as part of extra-curricular activities. We came across political views from nearly the entire Israeli political spectrum from those who sympathised heavily with the Palestinians to fervent followers of the Netanyahu administration.

Despite this great divide almost all are happy and proud to do the military service required of them by law, their country is very important to them. The visits were a great insight into the lives and mentality of the young people of Israel, we learned too much to describe in this report. However there were two messages that students in mine and Ben's groups asked us to pass on more than once: the media makes everything seem worse than it is and they stressed that they do not live in a warzone. One thing that for me was very interesting was seeing that many of the students had Polish connections. It made me think of the part of Polish culture and society lost as a result of the Second World War.

On these two days visiting schools was not the only thing we did. We walked through an Ultra-Orthodox area of West Jerusalem known as Mea Shearim. This was a great example of the mix of tradition and modernity in this part of the world. The residents were all wearing traditional Orthodox clothing but they used mobile phones and there were cars on the roads. It was a very strange experience as this was the only place with a clear Orthodox majority that we saw apart from the Western Wall.

We had a minute's silence for Bnayahu Zuckerman, a student from Ha Nissui and all other Israelis who lost their lives in Palestinian suicide bombings. Thinking of that helps you understand the strong need for strict security measures felt by many Israelis.

Our visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum was a powerful experience for me. The whole visit but especially the references to ghettos and concentration camps in Poland made me think of how much my, the Polish nation, and the Jewish nation lost because of the war. I emerged moved and with an emotional understanding of the mentality of most Jewish people- never again, anything so that it would never happen again. This experience was a large part of what kept me from swaying completely to the Palestinian side despite the unacceptable actions of Israeli settlers in Hebron which we witnessed later.

We also met with Ms Dympna Hayes the Irish Representative to the Palestinian Authority. This was very interesting for me as I am very interested in international relations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for meeting with us.



We then headed to the West Bank. Crossing through checkpoint 300 we were passed by waves of those West Bank Palestinians who are lucky enough to have a permit to work in Israel. They were hurrying home as their day started very early. One thing I noticed was that they didn't talk to each other, they were just trying to get home as quickly as possible. It was strange and sad to think that these people are the lucky few who earn Israeli wages which are significantly better than Palestinian wages and who unlike most Palestinians can at least maybe try to visit the Temple Mount, though almost never have the time to.

Checkpoint 300 is at the most imposing part of the West Bank Barrier. It is at the section where Israel and the West Bank are separated by an 8 metre high wall. It winds into the West Bank standing nearly next to the houses of Bethlehem taking all of the town's northern and western hinterland for Israel. It simply cuts off the West Bank from the rest of the world. The Palestinian side of the wall is covered in graffiti, this I think is a great symbol of Palestinian resistance. After a few minutes of taking pictures and letting it all sink in, we continued to Hebron.

Our next two days were divided between sightseeing and school visits in Hebron. The Old City of Hebron though with nowhere near as many historical sights of the Old City of Jerusalem really brought home to us the reality of the conflict for the Palestinians. The first example of the behaviour of Israeli settlers in Hebron was the grate over the market street. Settlers who live in the houses above the market area frequently throw rubbish, urine, bottles, acid and dirty water down onto the street below, shockingly they are never punished or arrested. Because of this the shopkeepers below erected a metal grate to protect themselves from this abuse. Still the settlers have not stopped and this unjustifiable behaviour continues, there is absolutely no reason that they could be doing this apart from pure racism and discrimination. Those shopkeepers are however quite lucky compared to the rest. Most shops have been forced to close by the Israeli army as they supposedly are a security risk to the settlers. The streets are similar to those of the Old City of Jerusalem but with the shops closed it feels like a ghost town.

On our first visit to the Old City we were accompanied by a group of former Palestinian Schools Across Borders students. At one stage of our walking tour we arrived at Shuhada Street which is normally highly restricted to Palestinians, they can only walk to a certain point. Having obtained permission from two young Israeli soldiers we all walked together and passed that point. Soon after we were stopped by a larger group of soldiers led by an officer. They split us into 2 groups based on whether we were tourists or Palestinians and as the officer contemplated his decision, a Jewish settler drove up and complained about the presence of the Palestinians, the officer then immediately announced his decision. We, the tourists could keep going whilst the Palestinians had to go back. We didn't want to split up so we all returned to the start of the street. This was a fairly intimidating experience and how the soldiers split the group in two gave a feeling of apartheid.

That evening we visited the house of one of the former SAB students- Jameel. Jameel lives beside the Tel Rumeida settlement overlooking the Israeli-controlled part of Hebron. As his house is next to settlers' houses he and his family suffer from a lot of abuse. He told us of incidents when even bullets were fired at the house.



The next day we continued our sightseeing alone and among other things visited the Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of the Patriarchs. This is the most significant religious site in Hebron and it is one which is very important to the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) but especially to Jews and Muslims. It is therefore divided between a mosque and a synagogue section. The significance is that it contains the symbolic tombs and supposedly is located above the actual tombs of the Founding Fathers and Mothers of the three faiths. All three religions trace their beginnings to Abraham and his children and this I find to be another example of this great irony surrounding this conflict, the two opposing sides believe that they stem from the same family.

The building is also of great importance to Palestinians for another reason: a massacre took place here in 1994 when Jewish settler Dr. Baruch Goldstein walked into the mosque and opened fire with his machine gun. Because of this 29 Palestinians lost their lives and more were killed and injured in the resulting chaos. After leaving the building we held a minute's silence to remember Sabreen Abu Sneineh and Omran Abu Hamdieh, students from schools that SAB has worked in as well as all Palestinians who died as a result of the massacre and of Israel army activity in Hebron.

In Hebron we met with 4 school groups. Here the schools were divided along gender lines so we visited two girls' and two boys' schools. Our presence was a much more significant event than when we visited the Israeli schools. Every visit entailed a reception at the principal's office and refreshments at some stage of our visit. In one girls' school (Qawasmeh) we were given the full celebrity treatment. After being invited to the principal's office and having a chat with her we were filmed by a teacher as we walked to the classroom where we met with the students. We were offered snacks and after our discussion we were shown to the school hall (again with our every step caught on camera) and high-quality traditional Palestinian dance and music were performed for us and Arabic coffee was offered. It was a slightly strange experience but I'd like to thank the students and teachers of Qwasmeh and indeed all the Palestinian schools for making us feel welcome.

Like in the Israeli schools there was no one opinion of the students, there were many. However they all wanted peace and nearly all wanted full independence for Palestine, a few though in addition did not even acknowledge Israel's right to exist. The students were very passionate and we could see that they saw our visit as a great opportunity to gain support for their cause. Like in the Israeli schools we focused on certain issues such as the Israeli settlements and what they see as the future of the conflict. Despite a sometimes quite strong language barrier we were never met with silence. All the students had opinions to convey and felt strongly about them. Once again we learned a lot and gained a great insight into the lives and thoughts of the young people.

We spent the final day of our visit in Bethlehem. After visiting the Church of the Nativity, the place of Jesus' birth and the main religious site in the town we headed to Aida refugee camp. Aida is located directly beside the West Bank Barrier. Refugees and their families from 27 Palestinian villages which are now part of Israel live in the camp. It is the most impoverished and crowded place that we visited in the entirety of our trip. In many places in the camp there is graffiti detailing the opinions of the refugees. Some symbolise how difficult life is for the residents of the camp, others that they are not free and there are those which show their determination to



one day return to their villages. These last paintings do not recognise Israel as a state and see all of Israel as part of Palestine. Keys in the forms of sculptures and paintings symbolise this will to return, the origin of this symbol is that when the refugees were fleeing their homes they always took their keys in the hope of a haste return. It is in this area that we came closest to experiencing the conflict first-hand. As we walked down one of the streets we heard a bang and saw young boys running in all directions. It turned out Israeli soldiers had thrown a stun grenade. Later as we walked down another street, directly beside the wall we felt a strange smell. It turned out that some time earlier soldiers had thrown tear gas in order to disperse a crowd.

When we landed in Tel-Aviv airport on our way to baggage reclaim we saw what we at the time thought to be a very cool fountain in the departures area. Nine days later at four o'clock in the morning, we sat near that fountain with it now being a complete nuisance to those of us who were trying to make sense of what we thought and felt about what we had seen during our trip. The mental process that was then beginning for me is still not fully over. I really feel for the Palestinians, they have very difficult lives, on the other hand though to a certain extent I understand the Israelis, they have had a turbulent history. I want both to enjoy freedom and the full extent of their rights but I think neither would be happy with that solution. Both have some claim over the entire area. Jerusalem is a Holy City for both, Hebron, despite being in the West Bank is very important to the Israelis and Jaffa though now surrounded completely by Tel-Aviv is still in the hearts of the Palestinians. I hoped that I would get answers or could come up with a theory of how to resolve this conflict as part of this trip. In that I have failed. Both groups want peace though, that gives me hope.

This was a trip like no other. Not only did it entail crossing the whole of Europe and beyond, it also stimulated the senses and pulled at feelings. I have to say again, even if you, dear reader think you understand the full extent of this experience, you do not. To understand you must see the country for yourself and not only that, you must keep your eyes open and go beyond what the typical tourist or pilgrim does. You must not only visit it but also experience it. I feel very lucky to have had this experience and would like to thank Schools Across Borders for what was not only an educational visit but also an unforgettable emotional rollercoaster.