



Report on the trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

Sarah Kobbité - Lycée Français d'Irlande

After being selected by school, we went in Israel and Palestine for 8 days, during the mid-term break, from Thursday February 7th to Friday February 15th

My aims for the trip were to know more about the conflict and the lifestyle of Palestinians and Israelis students, and more precisely: how do they live in the conflict? What do they feel?

This trip was more than amazing, and I will explain in details. what we did, what I thought, felt and what was the opinion of the students we met.

On Thursday, at school, we did a video session with school groups, and we collected all their letters and posters for the Israeli and Palestinian students. We left school around 1 pm, after lunch. We went to the airport, and spent all the night in planes, with Turkish Airlines. We did a stop-over at Istanbul, and around 3 am on Friday morning, we arrived at Tel-Aviv in Israel. We took the taxi to get to Jerusalem.

At 1 pm on Friday, we did a tour in East Jerusalem first, because our hotel was situated there. We walked through Jerusalem and went eating on the West side of Jerusalem, in a café. We went to the Mahane Yehuda market. It was beautiful. It's original, we saw a lot of Jews with kippas, and also Orthodox Jewish. They were closing their shops because it was Friday, the day of Shabbat. Jews don't have to work during this period (to Saturday afternoon), as it is a time to pray to Go...though not all Jews pray.

We stopped at an ice cream shop and we went to the historic quarter of Mishkenot Sha'ananim.

In the evening, we went back to East Jerusalem and went to the old city for a little time, by Damascus gate, the biggest gate of the wall which surrounds the old city.

We saw a lot of Jewish people going to the Western Wall, where they pray, in particular during the shabbat. For them, it's the first holiest place in the world, as it is at the base of the Temple Mount which is where the temples of Solomon and Herod were once located

Some Jews passed through the Palestinian side of the city to reach Damascus Gate. Indeed, these were mainly Orthodox Jews who probably live in Mea Shearim and so Damascus Gate is the nearest gate for them to reach the Western wall.

They were walking on the middle of the street, without looking at anybody. They were actually focused on going to pray. It was impressive!

Finally, we went to have dinner in a restaurant close to the hotel, where we first tasted the special food of Israel and Palestine: brochetts of meat for example.

On Saturday morning, we went first to the Austrian Hospice, a Christian hospice in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, but in area of several Christian sites such as the Via Dolorosa. We had a «class» on Jerusalem's history. Then we went onto the roof where we could see the Old City of Jerusalem, and we took some pictures. The views were magnificent!



We walked in the Old City and arrived at a security check. We had to pass through it to go to the Western Wall.

We saw then from the side of the Old City the wall which separates the West Bank. Afterwards, we wanted to eat in the Jewish Quarter but everything was closed, because of the Shabbat.

During the afternoon, we went to the church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Old City, first built in honour of Helen, Emperor Constantine's mother. 6 Christian religions manage the Church. This church is where Jesus was taken from the rock of Golgotha where he was crucified and he was buried in this place. Therefore, it's a very important place for Christians.

Just above this church, there were the Ethiopian Coptic priests' stone dwellings (on the roof), St. Catherine's Well and the Roman Catholic community's apartments.

Afterwards, we went just next to the church and did some reflections about what we saw. The church was magnificent, and it was amazing to see all these people come and kiss the rock! From this place, we had a view of an occupied building with play area on rooftop. The Palestinian Muslim houses were occupied by Jewish settlers!

It was for us a first view of an Israeli settlement issue.

We also went to the place where Jesus was incarcerated, with a robber, Barabas.

After all these Christian sites, we went back to East Jerusalem, and we stopped at a café next to the French Cultural Institute in East Jerusalem.

We met some Palestinian girls who were taking a class of French. We introduced ourselves and spoke to them for a while. I could see that these girls were very motivated by their work, and they really wanted to learn this language.

We had tickets for the Palestinian Youth Circus show at the Palestinian National Theatre. It was really cool!

On Sunday, we woke up very early, around 7 am.

We went back to the Western Wall, but this time, we touched it. Girls went to the women's side of the wall and boys to their side. The women's one was much more smaller.

Alexia and I left a message in the wall. We had to cover our heads. The Jewish girls were very «into it». It was incredible! Then, they had to come back, but facing the wall! I loved being there, it made me see another religion and culture. It was very emotional and amazing. I didn't feel like it was a holy presence, but I felt the emotion of all this people.

Just behind this wall, there is the third holiest place in the world for Muslims: Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. This monument is just incredibly beautiful!! It is in gold, with a lot of writings of all colours. It was the monument that I preferred in this trip.

Then, we climbed the Mount of Olives to have a big view of Jerusalem. It was amazing! We could see the Old City, East and West Jerusalem, with also a Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives.

We met an ex-student who did the programme last year.

Then, we went eating, and saw a camel. I had already seen a camel before, but some of the students hadn't, and were amazed.

We passed through the mainly working-class neighborhood At-Tur of Jerusalem. People looked at us, intrigued, because they were not used to seeing tourists like us in the middle of their streets.



We arrived at the West Bank Barrier, we were not too far from it and could see it well. We did some reflections, and went back to the hotel. This day was very interesting and enriching.

On Monday morning, we met students for the first time. It was at Ha Nissui School school, (10th Grade) in West Jerusalem. This Israeli school was special, it's an experimental school, not strict at all, where students can come and go when they want to.

Darran, the group leader, did an introduction on School Across Borders, and then, we formed some small groups: 2 of our visiting students and around 5 Israelis students in each group.

We first introduced ourselves, and then, we asked them about some important issues: Israeli settlements, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank barrier, Palestinians, Jerusalem and Israeli military service, and core concepts like human rights, conflict resolution...etc.

These students were amazing, they answered very well, and I was very impressed. I really want to see them again! I have kept contact with some of them. Just after, we met another school: Hebrew University Secondary School. The students were in 9th grade, so one year younger than us. We did like previously, but the students were more argumentative, they had many more things to say about the conflict, real opinions etc. They seemed more aware than the other students did.

During the lunch, some Israeli students that we met joined us, and stayed with us during the afternoon. They were very kind. We did a walk into West Jerusalem, (Zion Square and Mahane Yehuda market) where they live, and then we went to Mea Shearim and the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood. I was impressed. All these Jews were dressed uniquely in black and white, with a kind of costume (for men) and dresses (for women) with a hat and curls. Some of these people don't live with TV, computers, even the news is posted in the street!! They chose this way of life, very different than ours, and it was interesting to know that. On the other hand, some of them used their mobile phones, so some of them are not totally cut off from technology.

Also, Israelis must do 2 years of military service for girls and 3 for boys, after finishing school; but the Orthodox Jewish don't want to do it, and they have a special exemption from the government. Indeed, this is also a political issue and the new Israeli government has to deal with it as a lot of Israelis would like to see a change in the law in order to impose at least some measure of military service on Orthodox Jews.

We then went to the site of the old Sbarro restaurant on the corner of Jaffa and King George streets where there was a suicide bomb attack, in August 2001, in which 15 civilians were killed, including 7 children and a pregnant woman, and 130 wounded.

Then, we left this neighbor and went, by taxi where there was another suicide bomb attack, at a bus stop. Bnayahu Zuckermann a 18 year-old student who was at Ha Nissui school was killed there by a terrorist suicide bomb attack on the 22nd February, 2004. There was a big stone plaque with the victim's names close to this bus stop and we did a minute of silence. Finally, we put a little stone each beside the plaque, to pay homage to the victims.

After this other big day, we went to eat in a restaurant with other Israeli students. I remember that the food was excellent, and it changed from the usual «kebab» that we used to eat. These students did the program two years ago and they were very interesting. I enjoyed talking with them.



Indeed, they knew a lot of the conflict and they had already been to Ireland. It was a great evening!

Tuesday, we began our day by paying visit to Ms Dympna Hayes, the Irish Government Representative to Palestinian Authority at in Palestine. She welcomed us very well.

This woman was very interesting, she taught us a lot about her job, what she does, how it's going on...etc.

After that, we met the 10th grade students of Hebrew University Secondary School. Like the 9th grade, they were very informative, and interesting to listen to.

In the afternoon, we chose to go to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. I almost crie, seeing all the horrors that Jews underwent. All this racism and the massacres, in the concentration and extermination camps for example It was very painful to see that. It was very moving. Afterwards, we did our reflections on what we saw and felt.

This visit was the last one in Jerusalem.

We took the taxi to the Separation Wall. We had to pass the checkpoint and saw a lot of workers passing through it too. They are Palestinian workers who work in Israel, and have a special permission to go to that side of the land. After passing all the security, we were very close to the wall!!! It is very high, and you could see Bethlehem from there. We also did some reflections about what we've done. Finally, we took again the taxi into Hebron.

There, Adli Dana, Director of The International Palestinian Youth League, the partner of the organisation welcomed us.

On Wednesday, we visited Mazania and Qawasmeh School schools, two Palestinian schools for girls. The Qawasmeh school did a show for us, they danced and sang. In our discussion, the students were angry and spoke with passion. We asked them the same questions as to the Israelis, but it was more difficult to speak with them because of their English. Also, we spent more time discussing Human Rights: they said that the most important was freedom, but that they don't have it, and that scares them. These two girl groups were very interesting, because they were the two first in Palestine, and it showed my a first preview of what they leave everyday. They were really nice too, and I was happy to talk with them, and know more about them.

Afterwards, we met Mrs Nisreen Amro, the Director of Directorate of Education in Hebron (representative of Ministry of Education in charge of secondary schools).

We spent the afternoon with Palestinian students: we visited the Old City of Hebron from the souk (market) in H1 area to H2.

We saw a lot of blocked streets, Israeli army watch posts on rooftops, street checkpoints and Israeli settlement buildings. That showed us what the Palestinians live through everyday.



Also, Israeli settlers who live in the buildings above the streets have thrown rubbish and rocks on the shops, and heads of Palestinians. That's very hard for them to live through that and I was a bit shocked.

We went onto the rooftop of the Hebron Rehabilitation Centre to have a view. We saw Israeli army watch-towers and also the Cave of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque/Ha Machpela. It was beautiful. Then, we were still with Palestinians students from the last years and we walked with them down Shuhada street until soldiers disallowed the Palestinian students from going any further. It was shocking and a bit scary. Also, I felt angry, because it was so unfair for them. That's the moment which marked me the most in this trip.

To finish the day, we visited Jameel Abu Heikal's home beside Tel Rumeida settlement. He is an ex-student who did the SAB program. He told us what does he live everyday, and had a lot of passion and anger in his voice.

On Thursday, we visited two boys schools: Hussein School (11th Grade) and UGU Boys' School (10th Grade). We asked them the same questions, and most of time, they said that one day, Palestine will be free, and all the lands will come back to them.

I would like to talk about how the different student groups answered my questions.

First, there was a real difference between Israelis and Palestinians students.

The Israeli students are more like us culturally, they have in majority the same kind of activities, and live their life normally. Also, they were not very affected by the conflict anymore because Jerusalem is now quite a safe city. They don't think about the conflict as much as the Palestinians do. Palestinians are living it every day, and don't have as much free time and activities as we and Israelis students have. They are also scared.

Some Israeli students said that they didn't agree with the Separation Wall, which is «stopping the peace process», others said that it was good for security. And most of them didn't agree at all about Israeli settlements, for the same reasons.

But one thing is sure, they all said that they wanted to stop the conflict, and hoped one day there will be peace. When we said that to Palestinians, they didn't believe it, which is understandable. They said that if Israelis wanted peace, why did they act like that? Why did they make them feel scary and unsafe everyday? Palestinians wanted acts, not only words from them.

We also asked them about a one country or two-countries solution. The opinions were divided for the Israelis, some wanted one country for themselves because they thought that they couldn't live with Palestinians, there would be too much problems. I remember some Israeli girls wanted one country united, which is also my opinion for this conflict, I think that it could be an amazing country united, with many cultures and religions.



As for the Palestinians, the majority think the land is Palestine, and only Palestine. Boys had hope, they said that they have to be patient and strong.

My core concept was human rights. Israelis think they have freedom and all the rights they should have, but not the Palestinians. One told me «We live in a big jail, which is the West Bank».

The Palestinian side was more touching than the Israeli side, because Palestinians live through very hard things, and also because we had a better opportunity to talk to them, we spent a lot of time with them, in the city for example.

In the afternoon, we visited the Old City of Hebron. We went to the Cave of the Patriarchs Ibrahim Mosque and Ha Machpela.. This is a holy place for Jews, Muslims and Christians. We went first to the Jewish synagogue and then, to the Muslim mosque side. In there, there was the place, according to Muslims, Jews and Christians. where Isaac, Abraham and Rebecca are buried.

Later, we visited the Fakhouri pottery shop, I tried to do pottery, and it was very funny. The man was very friendly and welcoming.

Like we had done in Jerusalem, we did a minute's silence for Sabreen Abu Sneineh (9 years old, killed by Israeli army gunfire August 2001) and Omran Abu Hamdieh (17 years old, beaten to death by 3 Israeli soldiers, December 2002). That was also for 29 other victims and the many wounded of the Ibrahim Massacre. This massacre took place in February 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a Hebron settler opened fire with machine gun on the Palestinian worshippers.

After this sad moment, we did more shopping in the Old City, and we walked down Shuhada street. The evening was special, we went to a Palestinian girl's house. There were some of their friends and her family. We played and talked with them, it was great!

On Friday morning, for once, we woke up later. We really needed this time because we were very tired.

We began our activities the afternoon, in Bethlehem, the city between Jerusalem and Hebron, very close to the West Bank Barrier.

First, we visited Church of the Nativity, where Jesus was born and then, we stopped a while to see the Har Homa settlement. From where we were, the view was beautiful.

After lunch, we went to Aida refugee camp, one of the three refugee camps in Bethlehem. From there, we could see the West Bank barrier.

In this refugee camp, there was a lot of graffiti. The drawings were amazing, they shocked me, that made me understand a bit more the situation. Indeed, there were some drawings with sentences like «Here, only butterflies and birds are free», «Here, only tigers can survive». Also, there was a big list named «We will return» with all the villages' names that the people are from.



We just had left the refugee camp when we smelled tear gas. Israeli soldiers had thrown them a few minutes before. This made me realize how hard and dangerous this conflict is. I saw the extreme conditions the Palestinians live in. I was shocked, but I think it was very important for me to live this moment, because it's also a part of Palestine, that we shouldn't hide from.

Finally, we returned to Hebron and did a final reflection which was very emotional.

We took the taxis to the airports around midnight.
After the return flight back, we arrived to Dublin Airport at 3.55 pm

To conclude, I learnt a lot of things: I knew informations about the conflict before coming of course, but only theoretic. Now, I know what students think, leave and feel everyday, and that was my aims coming over there. If I can, I will go back there without hesitate because I met great people, I saw magnificent monuments (churches, mosques, walls...). Also, It made me really realize that life is not as easy everywhere. This trip was amazing and I loved it!