

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Robert Shaw

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If there's one thing I learnt from my trip to the Holy Land is that it's complicated. It's as though somebody came along and put History, Religion, Race and human nature in a blender and poured the result on a little spot on the map just North East of Egypt. All of these things are in play just as they are in every country. However the degree to which each of these has affected the situation today is incredible. Two peoples of different religions both with some claim on the land struggling against each other albeit under very different circumstances.

It's brave what Schools Across Borders does bringing fifteen Irish teenagers into the centre of one of the most complex conflicts on the planet armed with a voice and an open mind. To make friends on both sides, listen to them, learn from them and return home capable of talking to everyone they meet about what they have seen. But how do you arrive at this point? Funny you should ask that.

A twelve hour flight, two airplane dinners, seven naps, several card games and two toilet cues later I was standing at the foot of the apartment block where my Israeli host family lived. The only words my numb brain could manage were a strangely mumbled salutation before shuffling after my host father who was clad in a dressing gown as it was five in the morning.

What followed was probably one of the most awkward elevator rides in my life thus far with the appropriate elevator music emphasising the lack of words being bandied. By ten in the morning however everything was getting better I had rested by head and had regained the ability to host a coherent conversation and digest plenty of food. I had arrived in Jerusalem city and it was question time.

We arrived in Hebron in the West Bank by taxi and there were met by our host families who scooped us up and brought to their respective homes. It was slightly easier to break the ice this time round because we arrived at a sane hour. My Palestinian family's English was not quite as good but we still managed to chat away. I again got on very well with my host student .

Between all the fun and games and partaking in their everyday activities there were conversations about everything and anything that popped into my head. This was only part of the experience. The other was our visits to the schools in Jerusalem City. We visited two schools in Jerusalem and six in Hebron and all of them gave different perspectives.

It is important to note that there is a large Separation Wall between Israel and the West Bank which was constructed by the Israelis. This of course is not liked at all by the Palestinians. In Israel there is military conscription which was a major talking point. The Israeli view was that it is necessary for their protection. Although some students expressed the view that there should be no soldiers in the Palestinian territories at all and that they themselves would not join the army. Others felt it was their duty to serve their country although not necessarily by being placed in the Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian students were united in their opinion that Israeli soldiers should be removed from Palestine completely. The reason for this is random house checks and the simple fact that armed men in the street is highly disconcerting.

The next big issue we discussed was that of the settlers. A settlement is any Israeli building which is over a boundary line recognised by the UN which deems settlements as illegal. It is only when you

see how close to Jerusalem City some of the settlements are that you see one of the issues. They are close enough to be suburbs and many of the Israeli students we talked to lived there and it was their home. The other extreme is the settlements which push very deeply into Palestinian territory. Some settlers even live in the heart of Hebron and are protected by the Israeli military. These particular settlers are highly religious and believe that all of the Palestinians should leave their land. They are particularly aggressive. The example of this we saw was in Hebron's Old City market street where the locals were forced to erect netting to protect themselves from various missiles launched by the settlers living above. That is why it is difficult there are two types of settlers the extreme and the ordinary people who are just trying to live their lives. Yet both are equally illegal.

When asked who they blamed, many of the Palestinian students said that they blamed the Israeli government not the people. They felt that many of them were not fully aware what life was like across the wall and of the restrictions placed upon them such as not being allowed to go to Jerusalem the second most holy site in the world for them.

When asked if peace could be achieved and if so on what terms there were many responses. From the no side some said the conflict would culminate in World War 3 others said there could never be true peace. Possibly the most radical view we received was that we need to kill them all. This came from a young girl who has lived in the conflict her whole life and suffered it all the while. When we delved deeper into the statement and talked to her more we managed to get to the root of what she meant "They need to feel our pain".

There was also those who felt could be achieved but they felt it would be a long time coming but that it would come. Others felt the only possibility for peace would come when the separation wall and the settlements were removed. Nobody however believed that to be very likely.

In my opinion, one girl's comment summed up everything we heard "If the Israelis want peace they should build bridges not walls". As I said before, it's complicated. In my opinion the chances of either side making concessions is very slim. However our goal was not to arrive and solve the conflict (although that would be nice) we established a connection with other people of our age, we learnt their stories and listened to their thoughts with the view to return home and spread the word.

We also answered any questions they had about Ireland and more specifically the conflict in the North which they had been studying. All of these talks went hand in hand with singing numerous loud songs not only in the class room but on the streets as well. This was another part of the experience.

On both sides of the wall some of the students would show us around their cities and famous sites. In Jerusalem which I found to be very European, we visited the Old City and the Ultra Orthodox area of Jerusalem. The Old City was worth it just to hear some of the thousands of years of history behind. What I personally found underwhelming was the religious sites which to me seemed too gaudy and tacky to have any sanctity at all.

The Church of The Holy Sepulchre for example is where Jesus is believed to have been crucified and buried. Run mostly by the Greek Orthodox Church, the sites are adorned with gold and other ornaments. This was not what I had anticipated and the whole experience felt very rushed and touristy especially when we saw a neon lit cross marking one of the Stations of the Cross.

The Western Wall which is the Jewish place of worship seemed to possess more of a sacred feel because it was open and accessible for everybody who wanted to pray.

The Ultra Orthodox part of the city was interesting because majority of the people wore a black religious garb with kippas and the long side-locks. We had seen this before but to see it en-masse was an entirely new experience. We also brought some Israeli students with us because very few had been in that part of the city saying that they never needed to go.

Personally my most emotional experience was when we visited the site of a suicide bomb attack where an eighteen year old boy from the school we visited lost his life. That really brought home to me the fear the Israelis had been living with for many years but which thankfully had subsided for now.

The next stop was the Holocaust museum which was felt by the Israeli students in the programme to be a vital in order to understand the Israeli mentality.

Most of the emotional aspects of this was lost on me because I had visited Auschwitz the previous year. Still it acted as a reminder and was still immensely powerful.

Jerusalem was comforting in its familiarity and yet absorbing in its differences. But it was when you crossed through the wall that it really hit home that you weren't in what felt like a European country anymore.

Hebron was the bustling image of how I had imagined a Middle-Eastern city. Cars flew up and down the roads, buildings looked slightly more ramshackle. You had arrived in Palestine and it was making sure you knew it. The main sites we saw while in the West Bank were the Abraham Mosque and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Abraham Mosque is where Abraham and his wife Sarah and all his sons are buried. In 1994 Dr. Goldstein a settler and General Practitioner entered the mosque during a time of worship and opened fire on the worshippers. The bullet holes from the travesty can still be seen in the walls. It was in this place, hearing about this crime that I really felt myself being pulled emotionally for the first time toward anger.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is where Jesus is believed to have been born. My experience here was very similar to the sites in Jerusalem. While Hebron may not have possessed the same amount of sites as Jerusalem its people and vibrant culture were more than enough.

What I have written above is a brief synopsis of my time in the Holy Land on what was possibly one of the most educational experiences of my life. But for me that is not the important thing. For me the fact that I first made friends with an entirely new group of Irish students and then befriended both Israeli and Palestinian student thus creating new connections on both sides to contact and communicate with. Hopefully though now these kids feel that people actually care and actually listen which is the message we tried to get across everywhere we went.