

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Adele Verre

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Schools across Borders is a project I decided to participate to discover and find out more on the realities of the conflict. Finding out how their everyday life is seems essential for me, by comparing and contrasting with our own life in Dublin, and even comparing between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I feel it is also important to share our stories and our different cultures such as food, traditions, religion... Finally, an important aspect of the project, if the Israeli and Palestinians agree and wish to participate, is to pass on messages and feelings of both sides to each-other. It is a delicate, but important task for us, so that our understanding of the conflict is not biased, and also for the students we met in both places, Jerusalem and Hebron. During my week in Israel and the West Bank I felt that I accomplished all the aims or goals that I imposed to myself. We weren't just tourists, we are people who wish to show both sides that they are not lonely in this conflicts, people from all over the world care and mostly, not everybody is biased. These aims reflect the idea of not taking sides in regards to the conflict.

I think it was a great privilege to be hosted in Israeli and Palestinian families as each family has stories and different opinions on the conflict. My families shared these with me, that I shared with the other members of the the group and then we all shared them and still do back home nowadays. All the places we visited, all the faces we met, contributed to my discovery as we had to chance to talk to implicated people from both sides. Indeed, we met Israeli students who shared their vision on the conflict, most defending their country, as well as Palestinian students who equally shared their views, defending their country, which is human. Human relationships, something we have developed thoroughly during the week. Indeed, during all our group discussion I had to find the right words as we could never predict their reaction. To add to this, many friendships were born during the trip, between Israelis, Palestinians and even Dubliners!

In my opinion, the group that travelled with me was great, dynamic, caring and we all got along well together. In a week we lived so many emotional moments together that it created bonds between all of us, that I will never forget. I had the feeling that I new these people for 2 years, but realistically, just for 3 days. Many students from lots of schools shared their vision on the conflict, some mentioning how the Israeli army is crucial for the protection of everyone, and others going against the army saying it has an oppressive consequence on Palestinians. I realized that many differences exist between the opinions of Israelis and Palestinians, but it is normal, it is human, they defend their country, they defend their identity, who they are. However, their hobbies are similar, same sports, same interests.. In a week I realized that the only element that prevents young Israelis and Palestinians is the conflict, and to a certain extent, religion.

Culture is one of the main elements we have discovered daily during the week in February. Firstly it was mainly present in our families, where I stayed everyday. Indeed, we ate food, new to my eyes, Jewish and Muslim customs and beliefs... Each family did as they could to share how life is for most of the people in their society. For example, in Jerusalem Amits family cooked traditional food, and made me taste Halvas, Saclab. Layali's family shared their religious customs, by informing me on the meaning of their prayers, of the Koran, all by respecting my different beliefs. Even small details in their everyday life were meaningful to me, such as eating for my hands and without cutlery. Each time I had the opportunity to experience something new I took the opportunity because I was aware that this trip was a life time experience that I couldn't relive the same way.

In the streets of Jerusalem and Hebron culture was constantly present. Indeed, by this I mean the clothing men, women and children wear in certain neighborhoods indicating their religion. As we

walked down the streets I also noticed the difference in architecture. A law forces all buildings to be beige in Jerusalem which forms a homogeneous landscape. In Hebron, their standard of living isn't as developed, and it was noticeable in the first five minutes present in the West Bank. These elements helped me to accomplish one of my numerous aims, to compare everyday life in Israel, the West Bank, Dublin and even France.

During the whole week, we did our possible to visit as many places as we could taking into account our time limit. Including, religious places, historical places and many more.. Each place, and even each street helped us realize the presence of the conflict in Jerusalem and Hebron. I was particularly surprised by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as I think it is a place that many people of different churches, have always imagined in their minds, but I never thought of the fact it still exists.

It was an eye-opening experience to visit this church, as I have never considered the fact that the place where the crucifixion of Jesus actually exists. This was a place we visited that I will always remember, but it is definitely not the only one. I could name each one of them as for me they were all as amazing and memorable. Going from the airport, to the old city of Jerusalem, to the separation wall, to the Ibrahimi Mosque, to our homes, or our family homes, to all the schools we visited, to Yad Vashem... Each place whatever it was, was meaningful to me and my understanding of the conflict.

As we walked down the streets of Hebron, the atmosphere it conveyed filled the boxes for me that allowed me to complete my full comprehension on the Palestinian opinions on the conflict. As a matter of fact, the presence of Israeli soldiers and all the stories of them intruding in their lives contribute to that understanding. On the other hand, the numerous security measures imposed by the Israelis, at the entrances of malls, universities, also made me realize that their life could be threatened everyday, that the conflict is a possible danger to them, to innocent people. All these moments, in these places, prevented me from being biased in regards to the conflict as I was able to live, just like the Israelis and Palestinians, their lives and experience how it is to live under threat and occupation.

Everyday, we created links together, links that were built together rapidly because of all the emotions and the experiences we lived together. A moment that was very emotional for me was the Yad Vashem museum. During our visit the story of the holocaust was a vision that mostly shocked me, but I think the part that was the most emotional in my opinion was the reaction of the Israelis as we left the museum. Their own background on the holocaust is a subject that is still fresh in their minds, and that most think about daily because most of them know or have ancient relatives that had to live the horrors done against the Jews. We also had a few moments, that for me represented the whole project, that I appreciated and made the most of it when it occurred, was the group songs. In Jerusalem and in Bethlehem we stopped in the middle of the street to sing songs. These songs represented for me schools across borders, our solidarity among ourselves, our involvement in the project, our hope for a better future for the Israelis and the Palestinians and much more...

"Understand", a word I have used a lot, as I participated to the project to learn more on the conflict, and I can assure anybody, that I learnt more than I could have expected. During the trip I learned how to develop human relationships, how to always see both sides in an issue, I learned so many aspects on the conflict, I learned to pursue my aims, I learned to make the most of the present as we can, and I know that these elements will always have an impact on my vision of things in my future.