

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Francois De Decker

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One of my aims was to feel and to experience what life is like for the Palestinians. Also to learn more about personal opinions and experiences and of the conflict in greater details; to share cultures; to show that we teenagers from Europe and all parts of the world that we care. And of course to have fun and make friends on both sides. There may be not a lot of aims but they are all very significant to me.

In Jerusalem I was warmly welcomed by Yotam, his dad and his dog. The day I arrived he showed me around, once we were in an interesting area he would share his knowledge of his country. He showed me the traditional food: Falafel, hummus... During the small walk we had I managed to see (thanks to the great weather) Jordan, the coast; it made me realise how narrow the country was. Apart from the Old City, Jerusalem is a very developed place, it is very similar to Europe and America. The roads are perfect in most places, everything is in order and mainly everything is well secured; and one thing which surprised a great deal was that all the buildings had the same colour thanks to a law which forces the building to be beige. This made the city look good. The Mahane Yehuda market place was one of my favorite place in Jerusalem because of the smell, the atmosphere and the colour of various food and spices. The religious area "Mea Shearim" we went through was a very interesting area, with all the rumours which I've heard I wanted something to go wrong: for some reason I had an adrenaline rush and I wanted to run. A very important part of the trip was the visit of the Yad Vashem museum, even though we had little time to do it was very interesting and moving. I think it was a must for the trip.

When we arrived at the checkpoint 300 I was surprised of the height of the wall and that nothing was around it on the Israeli side however the city of Bethlehem started on the other side. I was surprised how easy it was to get into the West Bank. My impression of the West Bank was that it was just like cities in Morocco: noisy, dusty, disorganised... The family which very nicely welcomed me was Ahmad Mukhtar's family, they showed me a lot of the Palestinian culture such as the Friday lunch with the whole family. However all the people we met seemed happy and were nice. Being in the cave of the Patriarchs and seeing the bullet impact made me more aware of the importance of the incident. The way we went through the area where only Jews or Christians were allowed with Palestinians was a great experience, we managed to see how the soldiers felt about our little tour and how they treated us. This experience re-enforced my opinion on settlements: I do not agree with it.

Discussions:

The real discussion I actually had in Israel was in the Ha Nissui school. There we met people of our age who did not do the project which was a bit disappointing because some had no idea what they were talking about, however this showed us what the children had heard and been told. Some students such as Yotam and Shauli were against the security fence/separation wall, the settlements, and the compulsory military service, of course only a few people had the same point of view. Others on the contrary said that they were willing to go into the army because it was for them a honour and a duty to protect their country. The discussion was mainly about the army: whether Palestine should have an army, whether military service had be compulsory. The answer to these questions were simple: if Palestine had an army the war would be even bigger; the military service should not be compulsory unless you had a good reason not to take part. Their messages were "We don't need to be afraid of each other" " Lets meet before it's too late"

In Hebron we planned some questions before starting the discussions, such as:

“How’s life in Hebron?”

“What’s your opinion on the settlers and settlements? Why? How are you treated?”

“What’s your opinion on the soldiers? Why? Do you think there are nice Israelis soldiers?”

When you see the separation wall, how do you feel?”

“Do you think the conflict could end peacefully and in your lifetime?”

The answers we got were:

Settlements are just there to steal land... settlers want to invade Palestine.”

“Rarely soldiers are nice.”

“There is a difference between the government and the people.”

The present government will “never” make peace.

A very hopeful person said that the Holy land would become *one* country.

Some Palestinians would agree to make peace but only “if all the settlements, the separation wall are destroyed and that we have the right to go freely to Jerusalem, *then there will be peace.*”

Even though the Palestinians are being badly treated, they still have hope regardless of the situation. The way the Palestinian are treated affects their life, due to that some become so angry that they say stuff they don’t mean word by word. I personally witnessed this in a girls' school when a student said “Kill all Israelis.” At first, when I heard it I was surprised and a bit shocked and thought that she had no idea what she was talking about. But after her explanation it all made sense to me: this young girl lived in the old city of Hebron where the Israeli soldiers patrol and raid houses; she told us that her house had recently been occupied for hours; this might have increased her anger towards the Israelis.

The messages of the Palestinians were “ We want to see the true picture of Palestine” “Don’t trust the news”.

In conclusion, I think that the Israelis in general are very proud of their country and are willing to fight and serve it. They also defend it verbally against our questions which sometimes needed to be thought of before answering. Thanks to these questions we understood that they wanted us to think they are not entirely what the news say and that they do want to reduce the physical side of the conflict and to have peace.

The Palestinians also want peace more than anything but only if they are allowed free access to Jerusalem, and if the settlements and seperation wall/security fence are gone; but again they have been crushed by the Israeli army for a long time and therefore they want to make them feel what life is like for them under the occupation.

I think one of the most important answers to one of many questions asked was “If Israel wants to peace, they should build bridges instead of walls.” This shows that the Palestinians are willing to make links with Israelis.

On the Israeli side, one of the most important quotes is an answer to “Do you think that Palestine should be a country?” when one of the Israelis said “Yes, they’re people they deserve it and they’re equal to the Israelis.” This quote shows that not all Israelis are bad as some Palestinians think and that some Israelis support the Palestinians.

The two groups of Israeli and Palestinian students who had visited Ireland had a skype conversation in March, and they got on pretty well just talking about everything in the project. This shows that both

the Israelis and Palestinian are not different from anybody else in the world.