

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Jack Sargent

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Introduction

My interest in the conflict began in 2008, watching operation Cast Lead on T.V. over the week or so it ran for. That was the first time I had experienced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It captured my interest and wouldn't let go.

This would expand to include the history of the region, namely the history of the state of Israel. For my Transition Year project, I did the history of the state of Israel. From this I developed a considerable amount of knowledge on the Israeli mindset. This would be of great use when talking with both the Israeli and Palestinian students.

I did not host an Israeli student, therefore I did not host a Palestinian either student to try and avoid bias.

I was not put off in the slightest, although finding out quite late on who I was staying with was irritating to say the least.

School Talk

The Israelis were, with few exceptions, quite open-minded and pleasant. Within my group (me, an Israeli student named Maya as well as five Irish students) we discussed hobbies, interests and the effects the conflict had on the students, namely the aftermath of the consecutive Intifadas. Lastly, we talked about mandatory military service and their views on it.

Unlike the Israelis, a large amount of Palestinians held quite serious views on the occupation of what they considered their land. This meant that they would shift the focus of the talk in the direction of the conflict whenever possible. It would suffice to say that they came prepared. Some Palestinian students treated it as more of a presentation than a chance to understand the similarities of their present conflict and our past conflict.

Briefing before trip to Israel

Before we left, we attended a small meeting of all the students who are travelling to Israel and the West Bank. This allowed us to get to know each other and the vastly different cultures that were present in both Israel and Palestine.

Istanbul

The sun over Istanbul at approx. 80,000 feet. Our flight to Istanbul was long and relatively uneventful. We broke down the social barriers and developed into a single, cohesive and welcoming group.

We couldn't hide our excitement in Istanbul airport. We wandered around, openly discussing anything on our minds. Whether it was host families, past experiences or school life - nothing was out of bounds. We gathered in our terminal and discussed the pros and cons of going to the Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem.

Israel

We landed in Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv at 2:00 A.M.

A four hour taxi drive and phone calls to host families told us we were far from what we called home.

When I finally reached my host family, I was very grateful for their hospitality.

After sleeping until 1:00 P.M. I was brought around Jerusalem, midday, I was brought around the area by Shachar my host and his friend, Aviv.

We then went bowling and after realising how good the Israelis were, Sachar and I headed home at about 7 P.M. When we got back, we played computer games for two hours before going to sleep, as we had to get up at 6:30 A.M. the following morning.

The following morning I absorbed Jerusalem from the window of a car. The collage of trees, bright blue sky and dark green army uniforms was unique. You can't help but feel a sense of impending war, this struck home as Shachar told me about watching tanks traversing the same roads we were 6 years ago.

I arrived at his school not long after.. The Hebrew University School was quite big and open, reminiscent of the 1980s with Israeli flags adorning its interior. Overall it had a welcoming vibe.

When we talked with Israeli students, in general, it became very clear that they were uncomfortable with the topic of the separation wall and the situation in the West Bank. Some would respond negatively while others wouldn't respond at all. Most refused to admit that the I.D.F. had committed war crimes in the occupied lands.

Unfortunately this trend continued for most of the Israeli school groups. Only one group was different. They were a group of students in 8th Grade, who did not refrain from speaking openly about the occupation.

We learnt more from them than any other group in Israel. Under the watchful eye of Deborah their year head, we learnt about how they attempted to meet "Breaking the Silence", a group of soldiers who spoke about their experience as soldiers in Hebron.

Before crossing checkpoint 300 to Hebron we visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum. The Israeli students were deeply, deeply affected by it, most had relatives who had lived through it. In my opinion it was a great way to end the experience in Israel as we gained a better understanding of the Israeli mindset.

Hebron/Palestine

I have to admit that Hebron is not as enticing as Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Few places are. Checkpoint 300 serves as a good indication of what to expect; fences soldiers and discrimination.

"No Israeli citizens beyond this point." The bright yellow signpost is the first thing you see when going through the checkpoint.

Hebron is a city divided into two, H1 and H2. H2 is under complete military control. Going into the city, the first thing I noticed was the Israeli Army watchtowers. On every elevated point there was a watchtower. Big ugly and crude, they were intimidating to say the least.

Our Palestinian hosts were, for the most part, very wealthy. We estimated that they were in the top 1% of income levels in Hebron. Their generosity was unparalleled, we were literally showered with gifts.

When we began visiting schools, I was intrigued by the fact that the girls were the ones with the hardline or extremist views, while the boys on the other hand believed that the conflict could be resolved by talking.

On one particular day we decided we would, in the words of Darran, the SAB Director, help the Palestinian students with us to express their human rights. This involved us walking a loop a few hundred metres down from the Ibrahimi Mosque. This area was completely closed off by the Israeli Army to Palestinians. We expected to be stopped almost immediately. We managed to complete the loop, although we were chased by Israeli soldiers towards the end. It was the first time that the Palestinian hosts had ever been around there.

Conclusion

As I'm writing this, I can see an Israeli Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon stalk its prey through the dense urban jungle that is Gaza. Suddenly it breaks and rolls hard, pulling into a loop. Two cylindrical objects drop from its wings. They are 250 pound smart bombs.

The ensuing death is nothing out of the ordinary in Gaza. The fighter pilot will tell himself that he was targeting rocket launchers aimed at civilian population centres. The natives of Gaza will tell us that it was an attack on innocent civilians.

Fortunately, I'm thousands of miles away watching Sky news on my TV. It's been two weeks since I left Israel and the West Bank. I still ask myself will the fighting stop. My conscious tells me yes, that both sides will eventually realise that the tit for tat bombing is pointless, but if they only communicate through the medium of violence it will only get worse.

I believe that we, as students and part of the Schools Across Borders programme have made a difference. We have helped Israeli and Palestinian students to communicate with words instead of violence.