

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Jake Smith

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On the 10th February 2012, I, alongside several other students, teachers, and the SAB director, set off on a journey to visit Israel and Palestine. My main aim on this trip was to learn about the Israeli and Palestinian ways of life, and to learn about the personal experiences of the conflict of the young people living in both countries. I was also very interested to experience the cultures of both nations. The latter, I was sure would be fascinating to look at the differences between the countries, as they are both very heavily influenced by their different religions.

After many, *many* hours of flying, we finally arrived in Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv. In past years, this has usually been the part where Darran is taken away for interrogation for 2 or 3 hours. This year, however, everybody, Darran included, was shocked when he was allowed through security without any hassle whatsoever. And while this was great, it meant that we were now several hours ahead of schedule. Nevertheless, we all piled into two mini-buses and set off for Jerusalem at about 3am.

Roughly 2 hours later, after dropping off nearly every other student in our bus, I finally arrived at my host-family's house, where the mother, Bettina, was waiting for me. She brought me inside and showed me my room. She went back to bed and I collapsed onto mine.

When I woke up, it was around 12 o'clock, and I finally got to meet the rest of the family: Ori (my host-partner), Gaia (his little sister) and Israel (their father). Bettina showed me where food for breakfast was and, when I was finished, she and Ori took me on a drive around Jerusalem. Because it was a Saturday, it was part of the Jewish *Sabbath*. Thus, it was part of their weekend, which lasts from Friday to Saturday and many of the local places were closed. Ori, who had been at a friend's house the night before finishing a school project, promptly fell asleep in the car, but I managed to stay awake long enough to see several of the sights which Jerusalem had to offer, including the Mount of Olives and the Dome of the Rock.

The next day was our first proper day of the trip. In the morning, I went with Ori to his school, the Hebrew University Secondary School. Here, I sat through an entire class through Hebrew, which I didn't understand a word of. But, when the bell rang for the end of class, we all met up with the rest of the Irish students. We [the Irish] went around to a couple of classes, just to say hello and see what the classrooms were like. Once classes restarted, though, our Israeli host-partners returned to learning, while we went upstairs to the assembly hall. We talked together for a short while, before the first group of students began to come in. We spoke together for about 45 minutes about what they knew of the conflict between the two nations, which was surprisingly little.

After speaking with this group of students, we spoke to a group of second years, who had gone on a school trip to Hebron to meet an organisation called "Breaking the Silence". However, the media caught wind of this plan, and they were forced to change plans. They still went to Hebron, but were forced to meet with Breaking the Silence back in Jerusalem.

That afternoon, we went to visit the Old City of Jerusalem. We spent a couple of hours looking around before taking a break for lunch. Then, we moved on to the Wailing/Western Wall. It was really interesting to see the wall up close! The girls all went off to the women's section of the wall, while we [the boys] went to the men's section. There, we wrote our own personal little wishes on pieces of paper and placed them into one of the numerous cracks in the wall, as countless others had done before us. When we were leaving the wall, we stopped briefly to talk to a rabbi, who

explained to us how God is everywhere and is limitless. Following that, we were taken to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which contains three special items in several religions; first is the rock upon which Jesus was crucified; second is the stone where his body was placed while various oils were rubbed into his skin after his death; and third, the tomb where his body was placed, and from which he rose three days later.

In the evening, we all went off to the local stadium to go wall-climbing with the Israeli host-students. Unfortunately, Ori wasn't able to come with us, but I saw him that night when I arrived back at the house.

The next day was Monday and we once again went to the Hebrew University. This time, however, we left the school and travelled to Ha Nissui School, where some of the other host-students attended. Once more, we spoke of the conflict between Israel and Palestine and heard the opinions of the students. At the end of our discussion, we had a small music session, where I played "Galway Girl" for the Israeli students. We had planned to perform the song in the Hebrew University Secondary School as well, but, unfortunately, my guitar had broken a string. However, I was able to buy a new one shortly before our visit to the Old City.

After our discussion and our music, we went out to the school yard to mingle with the students. Before we left, we were shown a memorial stone which the school had for one of its ex-pupils, Bnayahu Zuckerman (I'm not sure how you would spell his first name with the Roman alphabet – in Hebrew, it is "בניה"). We were told the awful story of how he was killed when a bomb went off on the bus on which he was travelling, killing him and several others. It felt very strange and deep looking at this stone, which represented a student, not much older than we were, who had died under such tragic circumstances.

After a few moments of silence and paying our respects, we left Ha Nissui and went to visit West Jerusalem. As we made our way through the streets of Jerusalem, we passed through a market-area full of stalls. It felt like, everywhere you looked, you would see something new and different, from miniature mountains of spices to ripe fruit to freshly-baked bread. We saw things which we had no idea what they were, or whether or not they were even edible! When we finally emerged from the internal market, we found ourselves in yet *another* market-area – outdoors, this time. Darran decided, then, that this was an opportune time to go get ice-cream!

The ice-cream was lovely! Also, everybody chose different combinations of flavours. One person may have gone for the classic vanilla and chocolate combination, while another got pistachio flavour and mango. This meant that everyone, through sampling a bit from everyone else's ice-cream, we got to taste nearly every flavour available.

When we finished our ice-creams, we set off once more and finally reached the end of the market. Here, we set down our bags and decided to have our own little concert. So, I took out my guitar and played Galway Girl once again, while everyone joined in to sing along. It was a lot of fun, but also kinda weird because some random Israeli guy came over and started dancing with us. Weird, but also fun!

After the guitar was safely packed away and back on my back, continued our walk through West Jerusalem. Soon, though, we stopped again and Darran told us that we were about to walk through a very religious part of Jerusalem, so we should be slightly, not cautious, but aware that the people living in this area would take their religion very seriously. So, all of us with long sleeves rolled them down to cover our arms, while the girls all put on scarves to cover their hair. Thus properly attired, we continued on. It was very interesting to see so many people who all followed their religion so rigorously. Despite the heat (and this was the warmest day we had had so far!), nearly every man who we saw in the streets wore only black and white, and had those curly bits of hair hanging in front of their ears, known as "peyos".

Shortly after Darran deemed it safe, we rolled our sleeves back up and the girls took off their scarves, and we returned back to King George V Street. Now, we were given a bit of free time to

wander around and look in the shops, before meeting back up in the centre-square. From there, we called over several taxis to take us to another stone memorial for Beniah. This one, however, was for all of those who had been killed in the explosion. It listed the names of each victim, along with their age. We stood together for a long while, staring and thinking. We were then told that all the pebbles around the memorial were placed there as signs of respect from those who come to see it. So, of course, we all started dashing about, frantically trying to find pebbles. Fortunately, we all found at least one each and after placing them beside the memorial, we started to make our way home.

The next day was Tuesday 14th February. a.k.a. Valentine's Day. It turned out to be one of the most upsetting Valentines of my life thus far. Not because I didn't get a card (even though I didn't), but because that day we went to visit Yad Vashem – the Holocaust Museum. Initially, we were all quite excited to see the museum, as it promised us a look at World War II through the eyes of the Jewish people who had survived through it.

It was a very emotional experience for all of us. Most of us split up to move at different speeds throughout the museum, depending on what caught our eye. Thus, we all finished at different times. Personally, I found it a deeply harrowing experience. There were pictures – lots of pictures – of the cruelty suffered by the Jews at the hands of the nazis. Not only that, but there were stories from a great many who had survived. Some were quite uplifting, such as that of a table, with a top which lifted up and could be sealed from the inside. A Jew had hidden inside this very table one night when the soldiers had come knocking on his door!

Another story which caught my eye, however, was that of a little girl, whose mother had been captured by the Nazis. She had told the soldiers that her daughter was only a serving-girl, and was quickly sent off to stay with an aunt, while her mother was sent to a concentration camp. The little girl came up to the fence every day and tried to spot her mother. One day, after succeeding, there was a loud bang, and the little girl saw her mother fall. She saw her mother die in the mud.

When I came out of Yad Vashem, I felt unable to speak. I didn't know what to say to any of it. But, finally, we all finished and came together as a group to support one-another.

We took taxis back to Hebrew University one last time to collect our bags and say goodbye to our Israeli friends, then mini-buses took us all to the border between Israel and Palestine – the Wall. It was massive! Much bigger than I had imagined! But the moment you passed through, you knew that you were in a completely different land. Everything was very different on the Palestinian side of the wall than it had been on the Israeli side. The buildings were a different style, the people were louder, the streets weren't as clean. It was like stepping through a door-way to another planet.

We managed to catch a few taxis to take us to Hebron, which was about an hour-and-a-half away. Even the motorways felt different! And there were soldiers and guard-posts as well at various distances along the road. Soon enough, we arrived in Hebron. There, we travelled to the centre of The International Palestinian Youth League (IPYL), the partner organisation of Schools Across Borders in Hebron, to connect with our Palestinian hosts. My host was Taiyseer, whom I had met when he came to Ireland. He had stayed with Adrien, who was also with us, so Adrien and I were both staying with Taiyseer and his family.

On our first day in Palestine, we visited three different schools. Like in Israel, Palestine is a very religious nation. In Palestine, however, the majority of the people follow the Muslim religion, which believes in separation between men and women. Thus, the schools are either all-boy or all-girl schools. The first school we visited was Widaad Nisredeem – an all-girls school. Due to the miscommunication, we were only able to meet briefly with the headmistress and a small number of students. Our visit here lasted only about 20 minutes, before we were on our way to the second school of the day: Khadeeja Abdeen.

Khadeeja Abdeen was a very different school to Widaad, in that it is situated in H2, the side of Hebron which is primarily under Israeli control. Thus, there is much more discontent among the

people and a higher rate of violence. Indeed, the headmistress of Khadeeja told of how, when there was shooting, the students would crouch under the desks in fear. Again, we only stayed here for a short while, around 25 minutes, before we had to leave. We did, however, get to join in their sports class for a short while before leaving. At least, the girls did...

The third and final school we visited was by far the biggest. It was Al Qawasmeh School and, like the two schools before it, it was a girls' school. Here, we were able to have a proper discussion with a class. It was interesting to talk to this group, because they had much more definite opinions about the conflict. They all agreed that the Israelis needed, not necessarily to suffer for their crimes, but to feel the pain which the Palestinians have felt. Only then, will there be any chance of peace for Palestine. We spent about 40 minutes speaking with this group, before I was again called upon to play Galway Girl, which was fast becoming our theme tune. To our surprise, Darran also produced a fiddle and asked one of the girls with us, Keziah, to play an Irish jig for the girls. She tried, but gave up, saying that the fiddle was too out of tune to play.

Before we left, the students surprised us by performing several traditional Palestinian songs and dances for us. Then, as we were leaving they gave each of us a little Palestinian flag to take home with us.

In the afternoon, we went on a visit to the Old City of Hebron, which was definitely very different to the Old City in Jerusalem. At one point, we passed through a check-point from H1 into H2, where we had to go through metal detectors. As we stepped out of the check-point, the buildings around us became noticeably more run-down. There was graffiti on many of the walls and doors. The most common icon painted on was the Star of David, the symbol of the Jewish religion. They had been painted on by the Jewish settlers, who wanted nothing more than the Palestinians to get out.

It was somewhat distressing to see what these people have to live through and put up with. While we were in the Old City, we visited yet another school, which settlers had attempted – more than once! – to burn down. Fortunately, no one had been hurt in the attempts, and the school still stands today. As we walked through the crowded streets, we found ourselves in yet another market-area, with brightly-coloured stalls on both sides of the street. Unlike in Jerusalem, however, above the streets and stalls was a metal wire-mesh grid. It was placed there because the settlers would often throw objects down from their windows onto the Palestinians below. "Objects", meaning rubbish, glass bottles, bricks, eggs, used diapers. General unpleasant things which would not be pleasant to wear on your head.

After passing through more than a mile of market-stalls, we passed through another, much larger, check-point, to see the Ibrahimi Mosque, also known as the Cave of the Patriarchs. Inside, we saw several tombs, which, supposedly, hold the remains of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. However, we weren't allowed into the Jewish synagogue half of the church. Thus, we didn't get to see the tombs of Jacob or of Leah. On the plus side, we *did* get to see the tombs of Sarah, Rebecca, Isaac and Abraham.

When we came out of the Mosque, Darran took us down a short distance to a road. He told us that the area of buildings on the other side of the road all belonged to Israeli settlers and, thus, Palestinians were not allowed in. He continued to tell us that, every year, he brings the group of students, along with any Palestinian host-students who are available, through this area in a short walk as a little act of rebellion against the soldiers. So, making sure that there weren't any Israeli soldiers around, we began walking through this forbidden area, knowing that we, and particularly the Palestinian students, would never be allowed into this area again.

Once again, we were surprised. We actually made it all the way around the area that Darran wanted to show us without being sent back by soldiers, which no group had ever done before us. Only on the final hundred meters were we seen by Israeli soldiers, who came chasing after us. Darran handled them coolly, as we continued walking. They escorted us back to the point we had started from, which was where we were heading anyway. Before we fully left the area, Darran asked if we could visit a small pottery shop just across the road which was the only Palestinian-

owned building in the entire area. Apparently, the settlers had been trying to buy them out for years, offering the owners everything from millions of dollars to US passports. However, the owners had refused every time, and continued to run their store. After a bit of persuading, we finally convinced the soldiers to let everyone, including the Palestinian students, across into the shop.

The next day, Thursday, we again met in the morning in the IPYL centre, before setting off again on our school-run. The first school we went to was Hussein School, which was an all-boys school, where Taiysser and the other male host-students went to school. We stayed here for about an hour, and had a really good discussion with the students here. It was very interesting, as they told us that, while they hoped that the conflict could end peacefully, they believed, knew, even, that the conflict would end in a huge war. More than one of the students even said World War III. However, they all seemed open to the conflict ending in a peaceful manner.

While we had been in Hussein School, the heavens opened and it began to rain like a monsoon. When we came out, the streets were nearly flooded and it was still raining really heavily. Nonetheless, we braved the harsh elements and walked our way through the blankets of rain to the next school, the all-girls Mazania School – the last school of the trip.

Surprisingly, despite getting drenched nearly to the bone, we didn't drown on our way to the school, and as we stood inside, dripping in front of the headmistress's office, we began to reflect on the trip as it suddenly dawned on us that this was the last school of the visit. Of course, we were shaken from our contemplations as we were shown into a classroom full of girls, including the sister of one of the boys who had come to Ireland. The family resemblance was very striking.

Anyway, we began our talk with the girls and, as we went on, it seemed to me that the girls were much more like-minded [in regard to the conflict] with the boys in Hussein School than with the girls we had spoken to in Al Qawasmeh School.

Soon, of course, we finished our discussion and said goodbye to most of the students (a couple were hosting some of the Irish girls, so we would see them on the last day). By then, the rain had stopped and the clouds were beginning to drift away. We decided that this was a good time to go for lunch. And of course, because we were in the Middle-East, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to enjoy some cultural cuisine. So we went to a pizza-parlour.

After lunch, we all got into this big bus which took us to Bethlehem. The journey took a while, but I had my guitar with me, so we were all suitably entertained for the trip. Once we arrived, we went into the Church of the Nativity. It's said to have been built upon the spot where Jesus was born. Indeed, in a chamber beneath the altar, there is a spot marked on the floor where Jesus is supposed to have come into the world. Beside this is a small cubby in the stone, where Mary placed the newly-born Jesus into the manger.

We spent over an hour wandering around the entire church, which turned out to be a huge building, which connected to another chapel, which we came out of on the opposite side of the building than we came in. When we *did* come out of the church, we went on a walk around Bethlehem and by the time we arrived back to the square in front of the Church of the Nativity, night was falling fast. Before we got onto the bus back to Hebron, we set our bags down in the square in front of the Church of the Nativity, I took out my guitar (again) and we all sang Galway Girl (again). Then I handed the guitar over to Michael (another of the guys over from Ireland with us) and he played Wonderwall, while we all sang along also.

On the bus ride back to Hebron, we did pretty much the exact same thing, except that we played more songs than just Galway Girl and Wonderwall.

The next morning was Friday, and it was a free day which we had to ourselves. Taiysser, Adrien and I decided to make the most of the day, so we slept late, stayed home, and played video games

with Taiysser and his brother Mohanad. That afternoon, it started raining pretty heavily again. We got a taxi to the media-centre to meet up with everyone again. Then, from there, we all went back to Taiyseer's pool-house. While everyone dried off inside the pool-house (the irony was not lost on me), Taiyseer, Adrien and I helped to bring out some music (no Galway Girl tonight!), chairs, plates and cutlery. Then, as we were all settled in, Taiyseer's mother brought out the very thing we had all been waiting for: FOOD!!!! She brought out a *gigantic* pot of "upside-down rice". She turned the pot over onto a suitably large plate, then began shimmying the upside-down pot upwards, like a mould for a sand-castle. And the best part of it all? It was absolutely delicious!

By the time everybody had finished eating, the rain had evolved into hail and sleet. Luckily for us (Taiyseer, Adrien and me, that is), we were already at Taiysser's house, so we didn't exactly have very far to walk. Of course, we had to bring in the plates and whatnot, so we did have to make several trips. Even so, when we finally settled down for the night, we were all relatively dry.

Saturday was our very last day in the Middle-East. We had our bags packed and everything ready to leave. Then we looked out the window and saw that, overnight, it had *snowed!* Snow! In the Middle-East? So much for the stereotypical deserts which people associated with it.

Regardless, we trudged our way through the snow, ducking under the projectiles the local children were throwing at each other. The drive to the IPYL centre was only *slightly* terrifying. But, we arrived in one piece, and unloaded our suitcases, rushing into the warm interior. As we came in, we were just in time to say our goodbyes to everybody, before it was back out into the cold to load our luggage into a few mini-buses. Sadly, the buses didn't have a heating system for the people in the back seats, so my toes quickly became lumps of ice on the ends of my feet. But everybody in the bus huddled together, so we weren't completely freezing.

After what felt like a very long time on the bus, we finally arrived back in Jerusalem. After coming from the freezing, snowy Hebron, we were shocked to find the weather in Jerusalem to be, not only sunny, but warm! We walked to a nearby hotel, which had agreed to look after our suitcases for a couple of hours, then moved on to get a group-lunch. It was quite an emotional meal, as at the end, we each stood up and gave a short speech as to what we loved about this trip and what wonderful times we had had. Naturally, I was only second-to-last, so by the time it came to me to speak, almost everything I'd had to say had already been said. But, I managed to find a few words to say about how I had absolutely loved my time here and how I felt like everybody had really come together as a family. Looking back now, I really wish that we had been able to spend more time together, but I'm sure we'll meet again soon enough.

After we retrieved our cases from the hotel, it was time to take more buses. Not yet to the airport, but to Shauli's house (one of the Israeli host-students) for a party with our hosts. It was brilliant craic! We danced, we sang (Galway Girl, of course!), we played games. But, all good things come to an end sooner or later, and before we knew it, we were saying our last goodbyes to friends we would possibly never see again. It was a very emotional parting. Some of the hosts, including Ori, hadn't been able to be there, but I still got to say goodbye to my other Israeli friends. Then, once again, we all squeezed into the bus, and drove off to the airport. Back towards Ireland.