

# Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

## Visit Report by Michael Shaw

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Before the start of the trip I drew up a few aims that I wanted to achieve while on the trip. The aims were as follows:

- To get a better understanding of the conflict
- To spend time with both the Israeli and Palestinian host families
- To experience what life is like in Israel and Palestine
- To experience the Israeli and Palestinian culture
- To see the tourist attractions in Israel and Palestine

### Saturday 11

On my first day in Jerusalem I was extremely tired because I had been travelling the whole day and only got to bed at 6 a.m. When I woke up I didn't realise it was so late (3 p.m.). So Adi (my Israeli host student), his family and I decided to make the most of the time we had left, it being the only day I could really spend a full day with the family. They decided to show me around deserted Jerusalem (it was Sabbath) which was really interesting. I also really enjoyed it because they took me to some of their favourite places, for example, this gourmet burger place (the burgers there were quality) and Mamilla (the Grafton Street of Jerusalem). After the long day we headed home.

### Sunday 12

On the Sunday morning we visited the Hebrew University Secondary School to talk about and confirm everyone's aims for the week. After our briefing session we had a meeting with the principal of the school, Dr. Gilead Amir. He talked a little bit about the conflict and we talked to him about the project and what exactly we were doing. After the meeting we had a group discussion with a 10<sup>th</sup> grade group who were doing the project. They gave us their opinions on the conflict and a lot of them didn't agree with it but they were afraid that if they took their army out of the West Bank they wouldn't be protected. After the discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> graders we had a small break then had another discussion with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade group that had gone to Hebron for the day to see the occupation and Hebron itself.

I felt that this talk was one of the best talks I had on the trip because what the students had to say was very important. They all said that they felt that the occupation was wrong and that if they could they would take the soldiers out of Hebron. But they also said that the soldiers are needed because without the soldiers there, the settlers would be unsafe. After the trip though they all wanted to end the conflict and the occupation. This group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were also the first school group of children to ever go into Hebron. The students also asked us questions, for example, how we see the conflict and whose side we are on.

After the talk we visited The Old City of Jerusalem. Some of the Israeli students joined us and we had our own personal tour guide, Oren. We visited the Armenian Quarter; the Jewish Quarter, where we saw a lot of soldiers; The Western Wall (I put a note in the wall); the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on Calvary/ Golgotha where Jesus was crucified. We then went to the Muslim quarter, where we ate kanafe, a Palestinian sweet speciality. After that we headed to Teddy Stadium to do rock climbing with the Israeli host students.

## **Monday 13**

The students that stayed with the Israeli students went to the Hebrew University Secondary School to have another talk. This talk was focused on asking the Israeli students questions. One of the Israeli students lived in the settlements and he told us that he sees the settlement as his home. He told us that he was not living in the settlements because he was against the Palestinians; in fact he was against the conflict. We also talked about the army. The majority of the students agreed that they should join the army after school because they needed to serve and protect their country. The students also said that they didn't agree with the occupation and that they wanted the army out of the West Bank.

After the talk we went to Ha Nissui School to have another group discussion. The talk was very focused on military service and the army. Again the students did not want conflict but they said that their opinions are always changing- people are furious when there are bombs or terrorist attacks but on other days they just want peace. Here's what they had to say about military service:

"We think that we shouldn't have to do military service because there are better things to do. We think that we should join the army because we are serving our country but if you have a good excuse not to join then you don't have to join. I believe there are better ways to serve the country"

"The army is not always about killing and fighting. Palestinians and Israeli's don't need to fight. I believe that one day when our country doesn't have an army it won't be a country"

"Even though Palestinians don't have an army they still shoot and kill. If they had an army there would be a big war! It is not right or fair that Palestinians are not allowed to have an army but Israelis need to be protected"

"I really hope that Palestine will be a free country but I think it will be dangerous for them to have one"

"Palestinians should have a country but not on Israeli land. They should have a country but what is Israel and what is Palestine?"

What I thought about the talk was that the Israeli's were quite selfish only worrying about themselves. They wanted both sides to live in peace yet they were too afraid to give peace because of their own safety. Sacrifices need to be made on both sides.

We then had a break and got to have a look around the school. It was by far the most interesting school I've ever been too! It was so chilled and laid back. After the break one of the teachers from the school, Judy, showed us the memorial of Bnayahu Zuckermann, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student who was killed by a suicide bomber on a bus in February 2004. I got a feeling of how bad the conflict really was after seeing the memorial.

We then visited West Jerusalem starting from Zion Square. Some of the Israeli students like Amit and Tamara joined us. We visited the Montefiore Village community which was established from the 1890's

for the first Jews coming to then Palestine which was under Ottoman rule. Tamara showed us the spot where her grandfather was shot at by a British soldier (during the British Mandate period (1917-1947)).

We then visited the Mahane Yehuda market where we had this amazing homemade ice-cream and then sang out in the market with the whole group (a musical moment you could call it).

After that we visited Mea Shearim where the Ultra Orthodox (Hassidic) Jewish communities live. It was very interesting walking through the community. For example, there was no technology apart from lights and cars. They got their news from black and white posters that were posted up every morning; men and boys only wore black and white and women wore long dresses that covered their ankles. The clothing shops were actually very funny/strange because they only sold black and white clothing. We regrouped at the corner of King George Street and Jaffa Street and then reflected on a suicide bomb attack that happened at the Sbarro Pizzeria (now a bakery) some years ago. To see the bakery up and running showed that people were moving on. We then had some time to ourselves to shop. After shopping we went to the spot where Bnayahu Zuckermann and 7 other people were killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber on a bus, we had a moment of silence then we placed stones on the by the memorial (a Jewish tradition). We then went to a café in the German colony.

## **Tuesday 14**

We were going to leave for Hebron on this day so we took our bags to the Hebrew University Secondary school. We visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, where some of the Israeli students joined us. It was an experience going to the museum. It gave me an idea of where the Israelis were coming from. I could see from the expressions on some of the Israeli students' faces that the museum really affected them, especially Maya.

We then took a taxi to Checkpoint 300, one of the main entry points to Bethlehem. Going through the Checkpoint was extremely easy, we weren't checked at all. When we entered the West Bank it was like being in a completely different country. The people were also very different. We then took taxis to Hebron getting a glimpse of settlements, watch towers and the Palestinian country side. When we arrived in Hebron we went straight to the centre where we were welcomed by the Palestinian students and by Adli Daana whose organisation, The International Palestinian Youth League, is the partner organisation for SAB in Hebron. The students then took us home to our host families. I was staying with Majd. I had a traditional Palestinian dinner and was introduced to the rest of the family (cousins, aunts and uncles).

## **Wednesday 15**

We had to visit the Palestinian Ministry of Education Office in Hebron to get permission to visit the schools in Hebron. The first school we visited was Widaad Nisredeem Girls' School to thank the Principal for her support in the project. Yara and Jumana went to this school and met up with the group. The next school we visited was the Khadeeja Abdeen Girls' School, again to thank the Principal for her support in the project. Some of the girls in our group joined in a "high" jump PE exercise in the school yard with the Palestinian students.

We then visited the Yakoubia Girls' School to have a discussion with the best English students in the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade (6 students). They told us about how violent the soldiers were to them and about H2. One of the girls told us that soldiers raided her house in the early hours of the morning. They then asked us

questions about the conflict in Ireland and about whether the Irish were pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. The answer was pro-Palestinian.

We then visited the Al Qawasmeh School where we had a discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade girls. Here's what the girls had to say:

"We don't see settlers unless they are in the Old City. I have been in H2 and it was terrible. Settlers throw stones frequently at Palestinian houses. I have thrown stones at soldiers"

"I have choked on teargas"

"We always buy Israeli products because it is better quality than Palestinian products"

"I feel terrible and sad when I see the wall"

"I feel very angry and sad that I cannot go to the Dome of The Rock",

"I have met maybe 1 or 2 nice Israeli soldiers"

"When my father and uncle were in prison they were tortured. They were in jail for 2 years for throwing stones"

"I don't always feel the presence of Israeli soldiers"

"The U.N. is not doing anything about the conflict. Israelis should get out of Palestine",

"I would like to meet with Israelis so we can talk about the conflict",

"We don't agree with bombings".

We then gave them the messages the Israeli students gave us. They were shocked to see that the Israelis also wanted peace. The girls then sang for us and did a traditional Palestinian welcoming dance called the Dabka.

After that we went to H2 to see what it was like with the settlements there and to visit a Palestinian school, Qurtuba Girls' School, a school that was in the occupied area. It was like a ghost town going into H2. The streets were completely empty apart from students walking home from school. Soldiers holding guns were standing at checkpoints on the streets. Shops were barricaded and some buildings were destroyed. It was sad going to the school because it was covered in fencing and even with this protection they were not fully protected. Some parts of the fence that protected the school were torn off by settlers. The Principal of the school told us that the security camera was taken off the wall and smashed by settlers. Classes were tiny, having only 10 to 12 students. Some students were harassed by soldiers walking home from school.

After the discussion with the students we went to a restaurant for lunch. Some of the Palestinian students joined us. We then visited the old city of Hebron. We walked through the markets where there was wire mesh fencing above us the streets that protected the Palestinian from settlers throwing objects at them e.g. stones, rubbish and even urine. We then walked past a Yeshiva (Jewish bible study centre) that was built on a site of a Palestinian boys' school that was demolished to make room for the Yeshiva. The Yeshiva and H2 area was heavily protected with watch towers and fencing. After that we walked through the alleyways of the markets stopping by the Women's Handicraft Association shop and other shops like a one that made homemade Turkish delight.

We saw some more barricades protecting the settlers in H2 with walls as high as 6 to 7 metres. We then walked to the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee where we got a 360 degree view of Hebron from the rooftop of the centre. After that we had to pass through another checkpoint to get to the Ibrahimim mosque. I saw the tombs of Sarah, Isaac, Leah and Abraham. The mosque was divided in two parts. The other was a synagogue where the tombs of Joseph and Jacob could be found. I also saw bullet holes on the wall that were the marks of the massacre on 25 February 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein (an Israeli doctor) killed 29 people with a machine gun. We had a moment of silence and reflection.

We then continued to walk down a street (Avraham Avenue) that is forbidden for Palestinian to walk through. We did this so that the Palestinian students could recognise the right they have to walk down 200 metres of the Home town. When we turned the corner there were two soldiers standing guard at the end of the streets. When the soldiers saw us walking with the Palestinians they started to run down to us to see what was going on. Darran assured the soldiers that we were walking back to the area where Palestinians are only allowed. This was the first time the Palestinian students had ever been in this area.

We then wanted to go into a Palestinian shop that was in the same area but another soldier wouldn't allow us to go through because we were with Palestinians (Christians and Jews are only allowed to go into the area). It was ridiculous because the shop was only a few metres from the barrier. So Darran and the shopkeepers negotiated with the soldiers and they eventually let us through, for 5 minutes only though. The owners of the shop told us that they had been offered 4 million dollars and an American passport to give the shop to settlers but they refused the offer. I also bought some pottery from the shop and the owners gave us each a free pottery piece with magnet. After that I returned home where I told the mother about my day and had another traditional Palestinian meal. I also went to my host family's extended family again (they all live in the same area).

## **Thursday 16**

We had an evaluation session among ourselves at IPYL's centre just to go over what we were going to talk about in the schools we were going to go to. We visited Hussein Boys' School 11<sup>th</sup> Grade group first. We were arranged in mini groups to have our conversations and gave feedback to the whole group afterwards. The general view was that they wanted to take down the barrier wall, talk to Israelis about the conflict, take the settlers out of Hebron and that there should be peace. A lot of the students felt that the Israeli people were not the cause of the conflict but it was the Israeli government, army and settlers. They also felt that their government could not achieve peace because it was too weak. One of the big problems that they thought was stopping the peace process was deciding what Israel was and what Palestine was.

After the talk we visited the Mazania Girls' School 10<sup>th</sup> Grade group. Layali and Diana joined us. The general view was the same as the previous boys' school but when we told the girls about the messages that the Israeli students had to give them they didn't believe us. They said that the Israeli students are just saying this and don't actually mean it. We had to explain to the girls that what the Israeli students had to say was true. I'm still not sure if they all believed us in the end but we tried our best. We then went to go have lunch at the Pita Pizza restaurant. We then took a bus to Bethlehem where we played guitar and sang the entire journey. We visited the Church of Nativity where we had a personal tour of the church. I kissed the spot where Jesus was born. When we went outside we saw a lot of bullet holes on the side of the church. The church had been attacked by Israeli soldiers when Palestinian militants fled into the Church for protection. We then walked around Manger Square and through the streets of

Bethlehem. We had another musical moment in Manger Square, where Jake, Keziah and I all played a song. We returned to Hebron and to our host families.

### **Friday 17**

I had a traditional Palestinian breakfast with my host family. It was really nice and consisted of hummus, honey, halva and falafel. After the breakfast we headed over to Taysir's house for a final evening party with the Palestinian students. Taysir's mother made everyone Upside Down Rice, again a traditional Palestinian dish. I then went to my host family's spa with Neil and Jack, where there was an indoor swimming pool, steam room and sauna. I then headed home and packed my bag ready for the next day.

### **Saturday 18**

I woke up to see Hebron covered in snow. We all met at the IPYL centre for one last time to see the Palestinian students off. We got taxis to Bethlehem then a 21 Bus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. We dropped our bags off at the hotel Darran was staying in and went to go have lunch at a pizzeria in East Jerusalem. We had reflections in the restaurant. We had a final visit to the Old City and shopping in the Muslim Quarter. We then went to the Austrian Hospice where we had a fantastic view of Jerusalem and the Old City. After that we had hot chocolate and coffee. We then went to the bus station to say our final goodbyes to our host families and after that went to Shauli's house in Shoeva to spend time with the Israeli students. We had a meeting with the Israeli students about what we did in Hebron and passed on messages to them from the Palestinian students. We had our final reflections and then it was time to relax and just enjoy the rest of the night. We said our final goodbyes to the Israeli students and then went to the airport.

Security was hectic in the airport. We were stopped for about 2 hours because we had received presents from the Palestinians. They thoroughly searched one of the bags that belonged to the boys that was in our group and asked each of us questions individually. The flight had to be delayed because of this but we eventually got onto the plane. We arrived at Dublin airport at 1.25pm and I said goodbye to the group.

In all it was a life changing experience and by far one of the best trips I have ever been on. Although I achieved all the aims I wrote down there is one achievement I did not put down and did not achieve and that was to try and resolve the conflict. I know that the conflict will be resolved one day and that it is taking long to come but we have to start putting words into actions if we want there to be peace.