

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

## Visit Report by Stacey Aleshko

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We were introduced to this project by our Conflict Studies teacher, Mr O'Scanaill, at the start of our Transition Year which was about September.

As our classes continued, my interest in this conflict slowly arose as we learnt more about the troubles and when Darran proposed that we could host both/either an Israeli and a Palestinian I jumped at the opportunity. Therefore I got the pleasure of hosting an Israeli, who was called Maya, and a Palestinian, who was called Yara.

I had little prior contact with my Israeli student as we found out very late in the process who we would be hosting. The Israeli students came about 2 weeks after us hearing about possibly hosting them.

### **School Talk:**

The Israeli students came into our school on their first proper day in Ireland. They came to talk to us during our last four periods which was from 1:35pm to 4:05pm. The Israeli students were fairly open minded. We talked about the conflict and their side of the story. After getting acquainted, by talking about our hobbies and interests, we slowly moved on to the more severe issues of terrorist attacks, Bnayahu Zuckermann, the Intifadas and the mandatory army service.

After the Israeli students left we had a 3 month wait, in which we could prepare for the Palestinian visit. During this wait we started on a video, to which we would send to both sides, letters and posters. Once we met the Palestinians we found that many held 'right-wing' views on many things such as the Israeli occupation of many places in the West Bank. In my group, which consisted of Jack Sargent, Steffi Vollmer-Fox, Emma Haran, Fergal Hamrock, Chris Hendrick, Ryan Mejia, Jomana, Lyali and myself, we talked a lot about things such as the "Wall" or "Fence" and found that many Palestinians came very prepared with maps to show us the perimeter of the wall and help illustrate their struggle.

### **Briefing Meeting for the trip:**

Before we left for our trip we had to have a small briefing meeting with our parents in tow, so that Darran could tell us what we would be encountering on our trip to Israel& the West Bank. As well as allowing us to get an insight into what we were getting ourselves into, it also let us see the vast differences in nationalities and personalities which would be accompanying us on our journey. We found that along with Irish, another 6 nationalities would come with us.

### **The Day of the Trip:**

Before we knew it we were all at the airport waiting for our check-in desk to open. That day was the 10<sup>th</sup> of February at around 12pm. After we all said our goodbyes to our parents we left to check in and pass our security checks the reality finally set in that we were going to go on a trip that no one we knew would probably experience. It took us a four hour trip to Istanbul (and then another 2 hour

wait there) and another 2 hour flight to Tel Aviv to firstly even get to Israel. We got into Israel at around 3:30am. We were all expecting to be held up as Darran had told us beforehand that there was a high probability (practically 100%) that he would be questioned upon arrival. Yet, strangely we were all let through with no people disturbing us. Because of this we were nicknamed "The Lucky Group". We then all got hauled into two minibus taxis and headed to Jerusalem, the trip from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem took about 30 minutes, meaning we arrived in Jerusalem at around 4:30am. We all got off at different times at our host families homes and I came to my hosts house at probably around 5am. By the time I went to bed the sun was already rising and the birds were singing. The first day we came was on 'Sabbath' and therefore we had a free day to do what we liked with our host families.



*Ben Gurion airport arrivals hall.*

I woke up at around 1:30pm. Maya's (my host) mother had already left long ago for work and so we were left alone. The day was very sunny and warm, but Maya herself thought it was quite cold. We had a traditional Sabbath breakfast and Maya showed me a favourite childhood treat she and her brother would get which they called 'choco', or we more commonly know it as Chocolate Milk.



*The view from the top of the hill at Ein Karem*

After basking in the sun and talking in our pyjamas Maya got a call from one of her friends, Tamara, also a host (who hosted Keziah), and they had made plans that all four of us would meet together and go to 'Ein Karem' a visitation church. Tamara's mother took us all over to the base of the hill where Ein Karem was. At the base of the hill there was also a bar and ice cream parlour (in which we all later got ice cream at).

We stayed at the site of the visitation church in the ice cream parlour until the sun began to set and then we all headed home to get a good night's sleep and get ready for our first school talk experience.

Maya's school, which was called 'Hanissui', started at around 9:40am, but Darran wanted us to be at our hosts' schools at 9:00am. As well as Maya another three host students also went to the school, Shauli (who hosted Adrian), Yotam (who hosted Francois) and Tamara.

The four of us (the visiting students) all left a little after 9:00am to visit the Hebrew University Secondary School, in which we would have our talk for the day. The rest of the host students went to this school. Before we got started Darran talked to us in private firstly about how we were finding it

with our host students and what we did the day before and then later about what we were going to do on that day and later on, we also talked about what our aims for this trip was.

We firstly had a large group discussion with the 10<sup>th</sup> grade group, which was quite a large group. We talked primarily about if the students felt proud to be an Israeli citizen, what our project was about (as



they had not fully started the project yet) and more harsh subjects such as the Security Fence or Wall and Terrorist Attacks. They all generally (and quiet obviously and rightly) feared the terrorist attacks and (even though they didn't really want it) they felt that the Security wall offered them protection from terrorists. A majority also said that they wanted to be soldiers and felt proud to be soldiers as they felt they were protecting their country. We later had a discussion with 8<sup>th</sup> Grade students as they had actually gone to Hebron and attempted to talk to a group called "breaking the silence"(a group of ex-israeli

soldiers that want to show the discrimination in Hebron against the Palestinian citizens) but they were sadly stopped from talking to this group due to some locals protesting about this to the police. This story even got into an Israeli newspaper called the Haaretz.

We all felt that the students were very mature for their age (as we couldn't imagine ourselves being able to undertake such a serious expedition and being as old as they were) and I certainly felt that this maturity is mainly due to the conflict. I feel that the children grow up fast as they are technically living in an area of conflict where serious subjects are always discussed.

After this visit and a short period of reflection we went to see the old city of Jerusalem, which almost looked like another city within the modern-day Jerusalem as it was protected at all sides with large walls. We got a tour from Oren, who was one of the visiting students (Pippa's) sisters boyfriend. We entered through the Jaffa gate. We got to see a wealth of amazing (and very religious) sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which was built on the Calvary where Jesus was crucified and the Wailing or Western Wall (in which we all left our little notes in). Among seeing such amazing sites we also found out that you can't really date when the walls and various parts of the Old City were built. Oren told us that any guess we made was right as each generation would always build something extra or on top of the older generations buildings.

The Old City is divided into 3 quarters, , The Jewish, Armenian and Muslim quarters. At the Muslim quarters we all got to try "Kanafe" a traditional Palestinian Sweet which many of the Israelis enjoyed. Kanafe was a sticky pastry made of gooey sweet cheese sandwiched between layers of shredded Kanafe pastry. Myself and most of the students though found it sickly sweet, after attempting to eat this delicacy we went to Teddy Stadium to do some rock climbing. I did not participate because I'm dreadfully scared of heights but I still cheered for my friends as they climbed, and so we ended our day there, after all separating and going home I'm sure most of the students (especially the ones who had been Rock Climbing) all collapsed in bed to await another day.

On our second day ( Monday 13<sup>th</sup>) the visiting students whose hosts learnt at the Hebrew University Secondary School (or Leyada) got to talk more with the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade group while my group at Hanisui went to get some Coffee and finally got to see the school from the inside. The Hanisui school was a lot different from the Layada school, Maya had told me that Hanisui was an experimental school and we found out from one of her teachers, Deborah, that it was actually modelled after a boarding school in England which basically had a different method of teaching to normal schools. This way of teaching gave a lot of freedom (and I guess taught the students independence) to the students, even letting them form a contract with a teacher if the class didn't suit them. The school from the outside

was, unique in many ways, the last year students were allowed to paint the school in whatever manner they wanted.

After the visiting students from Layada finally arrived in the Hanisui school we nearly immediately started with a group discussion with the Hanisui's 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Again, we talked about issues such as the Settlements, the Security Fence and Soldiers. They explained to us that the Security Fence is not in place to prevent the Palestinians from having a country, but to protect themselves from enemies around the border. We had a more in depth conversation about the terrorist attacks and especially a student in the school called Bnayaha Zuckermann, who was tragically killed during a suicide bomb attack on a bus. The school even had a small memorial for the student (who was 18 and had just gotten his driving license).

After this discussion we all (incl. some Israeli students) left for Zion Square which was like the city centre. There we visited Montefiore's village community which was set up in the 1890's for the first Jews who come into Palestine. We even got to hear a story of Tamara's grandfather who had nearly been shot at the village and got to see the remnants of the bullet hole. We then visited a market (where we got Ice-Cream and myself and a visiting student named Cleopatra got strawberries) and some students, excluding myself, went to an Ultra-Orthodox part of the city. We then regrouped at King George street and got some time for shopping. While there Myself and Cleopatra got to try some Shawarma (which is basically a sandwich especially of sliced lamb or chicken, vegetables, and often tahini wrapped in pita bread) before doing some shopping and getting souvenirs for family members and friends.



After this we undertook a more serious tone as we went to the memorial of the victims of the 2004 suicide bomb attack on a bus which Bnayahu Zuckermann was on. Maya told us a little bit about Bnayahu and about the event and told us that the rocks we saw which surrounded the memorial was like what we do with flowers and so we all tried to get a rock and place it at the memorial and had a minute of silence.

But we were not of course going to leave on a saddening point, we all then made our way to the German Colony where we all went to a café to cheer ourselves up and have fun and thus ends the second day of a wonderful trip.

Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> was sadly the our last day in Israel and having packed our bags the night before I couldn't believe the time had gone by so fast. We were already in Israel for 4 days, and we had another 4 to go. On our last day we took our bags to Leyada where we would pick them up later and headed with some of the Israeli students to the Yad Vashem, a holocaust museum/memorial. As this was such an emotional undertaking we of course talked a bit beforehand. But since girl's tend to be more emotional than boys, we the girls were given a different talk with the two female teachers who accompanied us. We were given audio guides through the museum and headed off all at our own

pace. Which I thought was an excellent thing since this was such a tough and emotional subject, especially for the Israeli students whose grandparents might have gone through the holocaust.



The Yad Vashem I thought was a very important thing for us to do because not only is it part of our human history and the history of the Jews it was also a chance for us to try and understand the Israelis better. To understand how and why they desperately wanted a country to call their own because after the war some countries were still very anti-semitic and the Jews felt that they had no place to go to. My preferred part of the museum was the Hall of Names, which basically had a large hole dug into the

ground, so deep that you could only see black, and above it had a cone like shape that had pictures and documents of some of the Jews lost during the Holocaust and surrounding this spectacle they had large bookcases, half filled and half empty which housed the names and biographies of over 3 million Jews lost during these terrible events. The empty book cases were there waiting for more books with names to fill them.



We left after spending about 4 hours in the museum and were given another moment to reflect and talk and also to say our goodbyes to the Israeli students, who we would meet again in a couple of days.

We headed by taxi first to Leyada and then to Checkpoint 300. Where we got our first view of the Wall. Which was absolutely huge in length and in height. In length it seemed to go on forever, with watch towers every 500 metres or so. Getting into the West bank was easy, we literally just walked through, and the difference between the two sides was immense. On the Israeli side the wall was clean, paved roads led away from it with buses on them. But on the Palestinian side the wall was covered in graffiti and we basically walked into a marketplace filled with taxis. We were all silent as we got into taxis and rode off to the International Palestinian Youth League (IPYL) building where our new hosts would meet us. The journey didn't take too long, maybe half an hour and we got to see glimpses of settlements and Bethlehem while driving.

When we came to the IPYL some of the boys helped us get our bags down to the entrance (as there was some small steps we had to go down) and we soon got re-acquainted with some of the Palestinians who we had met in Ireland and then got to meet some new people who were to be hosting. When everyone got to the IPYL we then all sat down and Darran called out our names and who we would be staying with. I, obviously, already knew who I was going to stay with as I had hosted Yara and during this process I found out that Pippa was also going to stay with Yara. The first night we stayed with our Palestinian host families and got to know them a bit better.

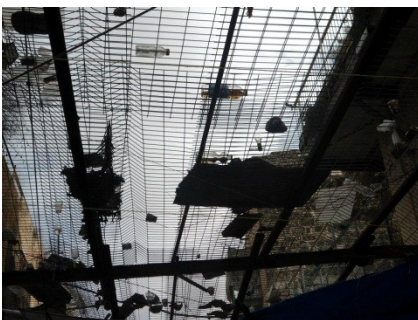
The next day (Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup>) was an early start. We had to get up at 6:00 am and had to be ready by 7:00 am to be dropped off at the IPYL. We were lucky in the weather and it was still warm but we all had to cover up to be respectful to the culture. Our first order of business was to visit the Ministry of Education Office, where we found that nothing had been prepared for our visits to the various schools and as Darran tried to sort things out we sat in the office drinking a sweet Arabic tea, which we later found we would be drinking a lot of. We ended up visiting 5 girls schools, most of which were just quick little hellos and thank yous as we had little time and a lot of schools to visit.



Our first real discussion was with the Al Qawasmeh school where we discussed about what it was like for them to be “trapped” by the Separation Wall, the Soldiers and the Settlements. When we asked how the soldiers treated them they said that soldiers attitude varied from place to place, and that some could be kind, but the ones around the Settlements were very aggressive and the Settlers the same. When asked what they thought a good solution would be, one girl said that all Israelis should be killed, but she meant this in the context of “Israelis should suffer what we suffered”, rather than just complete hatred of Israeli citizens. Also at the Al Qawartabah we got a little performance of some of the traditional songs and dances of the Palestinians and we were also given Palestinian flags as souvenirs.



We left for another school, Qurtuba, which was in the H2 area. This was our first time visiting H2 and going through the checkpoints and interacting with the soldiers. As we were tourists we didn't have a hard time passing the small checkpoint and we were soon on the eerily quiet streets of the H2 are. The first thing we saw was an empty street with closed shops and the Star of David painted on them. The Qurtuba school was slightly more special than the other schools as it was in the H2 area and the headmistress told us of how the Settlers there tried to set the school on fire and how the soldiers would make the children go through a check.



After having some lunch at a restaurant and meeting up with some of our hosts we headed off for the Old City of Hebron. There we got to see, and talk to, some of the shop owners there and we were told of how the settlers, who owned the buildings upstairs, would throw garbage, or anything really, at the Palestinians below to try and make them leave. But the Palestinians did not leave and instead the put up a protective fencing above some areas in the Old City. The Old City's streets were a mixture of wide streets and small narrow streets. We got to see a building called the Yeshiva, which was a Jewish Bible Centre which was built over the site of a Palestinian boys' School, which Adli, a Palestinian who worked in the IPYL, used to go to.



We then returned again to the alleyways of the Old City and got to visit some shops such as one that was a shop for the Women's Handcraft Association. We went on-top of a building and got a full view of the Old City of Hebron, we also got to see some soldiers which were on the rooftops, Ibrahimi Mosque and some watch towers which were dotted around the City. After this we started to go towards Ibrahimi Mosque and stopped by at a Turkish Delight shop and then had to go through another checkpoint to get to the Mosque. The building is divided into two. While in the Mosque we got to see the

tombs of Sara(the wife of Abraham) , Isaac and his wife Leah's tomb, the tomb of Abraham on the Muslim side and on the Jewish side we got to see the tombs of Joseph and Jacob. When we entered the mosque we were told to take off our shoes and the girls were gives a cloak to cover themselves with. After we were done looking at the various tombs a Palestinian told us of a tragedy that happened in Ibrahimi Mosque on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1994. This is when a Jewish extremist, called Dr. Baruch Goldstein, came into the Mosque while they were praying and started brutally killing people as they prayed, 29 people ended up dying because of this event. We had a moment of silence for the victims and headed out to explore more of the old city.

The next thing we did was pass yet another checkpoint and go to a street called the Avraham Avinu.



Usually Palestinians are forbidden to enter this street but since the host students were with a large group of tourists (even though initially the soldiers did slightly panic) they were also allowed through the street. This, as Darran would tell us, was an act to recognize the Palestinians right to walk down this street that used to be the main street of the Old City. This was the first time any of the Host Students actually walked down this street and again it was eerily quiet. After negotiating with another soldier we got to visit a little pottery shop which was still open when many

Palestinian shops had closed. The owners told us that even though they were offered millions of US Dollars to sell their shop they would not do so. Then we returned home again and we even had a little party at Yara's house. This party being all the hosts and visiting students. The hosts told us that this was the first time that there was a party which was a mixture of girls and boys and that they hoped they could do this more often in the future. The party ended at around 9-10pm and after cleaning up the house we all fell asleep quiet fast.

On Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> our second last day on the trip, we had an evaluation before we left, this was to see if we were enjoying the way that we did the group discussions and so on. I thought that the evaluation came a little bit too late since we had already pretty much done all the schools but nonetheless, we decided that we would prefer if we did it in smaller groups rather than just a large central group. We visited two schools that day, Hussein Boys' School and Mazania Girls' School. At the boys school we talked about similar topics as with the Girls' school. Although we talked a little bit about personal events that might have happened to the students or their families. They talked especially about how the soldiers would suddenly start banging on their doors, often in the early hours of the morning, and check their homes.

We also talked about how they felt about being occupied, and if it had a big impact on their daily lives. We also asked if they used any Israeli products available in the shops, and most said that unless they needed to, they would avoid these products and use Arabic products instead.

After visiting the schools we headed off with some host students to Bethlehem. While at Bethlehem we visited many other Holy Sites, But honestly, I can't particularly remember a lot of them as I was primarily taking pictures to document the event and then talking to some of the Host students to get to know them better. While at Bethlehem, before we left, we sang songs in the square. We sang songs such as Wonderwall, Galway girl, and Darran's favourite song which we didn't know the lyrics to: The Fields Of Athenry. After that we left for home. Except myself, Pippa, and Yara. We instead headed to their Aunt, who had just had a baby. While at the hospital we felt very welcomed by the Aunt and got to hold the baby and talk to her and so on.

The next day was Friday 17<sup>th</sup>, and Friday being a day of rest in the Muslim calendar we did practically nothing except relax with our families until lunch time. To pass the time, Me and Pippa would read books and doodle in our Diaries. On the day of rest the Muslims have this thing called "Upside down rice" which is basically rice with chicken and a mixture of spices which was cooked in a pot and then turned over. At lunch time we all went to the IPYL building and then to Tayseer's (a host students) house to have a farewell party as that was our last night in Palestine. The weather



had taken a turn for the worst and it was practically a storm outside with rain flowing down the street like rivers. As the party was a mixed one some of Tayseer's relatives (mainly his Uncles) didn't agree with it as they were more religious. The party ended very late and that night Pippa, Yara, Arish (Yara's Sister) and Myself stayed up talking, not about the conflict or the project, but more about normal things and we even made a pact to bake a cake in the morning as we didn't need to leave for the IPYL for a while.

And so on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> (which was also my sisters birthday!) we got up slightly early and started to bake a cake. Yara's mom told us we didn't do it properly but we didn't really care, as long as it was edible and it tasted good we didn't care what it looked like. We then left with our bags to the IPYL where we made a Schools Across Borders family tree (with the visiting students only) and had an emotional goodbye with the Palestinians. Most of us ended up crying as we didn't know whether we would see them again. We headed off a different way to Israel, where we didn't really need to go through a checkpoint, but it was as easy for us to get into Israel as it was to get out. As Saturday was Sabbath for the Jewish we stayed in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. This is when we got pretty much the longest shopping time ever. This was I think where most of us got to by presents and things for ourselves. After our shopping we left, weighed with shopping bags, to the Austrian Hospice, where we were allowed to go on the rooftop and get a spectacular view of the Old City. We had our last reflection (to the now famous Camera and Microphone Darran would use) and took pictures, although it was freezing on the rooftop so we headed downstairs to the café quickly. We then relaxed and warmed up at the café and headed off to another party at Shauli's house. We stayed there from 6-pm to around 10-pm if I remember correctly. Before the party began we sat in a large group and talked about what we did in Palestine, the messages that the Palestinians wanted to pass onto the Israelis and asked for any messages that they wanted to bring back.

After the more serious side of things we began the party, we played games such as Never would I ever while the Adults played card games. Though we primarily talked and we felt more sad as each passing hour went by as we knew we would have to leave soon, and so 10pm finally came and we had to leave for the airport. Though I think most of us would have preferred to have stayed that bit longer in Israel and Palestine, there was nothing we could do. After another emotional goodbye we left for Tel Aviv airport. Where we would have to wait a while until our plane, and that's where our trip ends and the report starts.



My opinion on the trip was that, although we had to deal with a very serious and harsh subject, we still managed to have fun with the students we talked to and I hope we made some friends with our host students and also with each other (being the students who went, and we actually are having a re-union soon). Some people would favour either the Palestinian side of the conflict or the Israeli side of the conflict, but I honestly don't really have a side, I've seen both sides and I've heard about the conflict, but these teenagers had nothing to do with it. They couldn't help being born in a country that was already at war with each other. So when I talked to the host students, I tried not to talk much about the conflict, which came easy as we were teenagers so we had plenty to talk about. So if you're a parent of a child who is considering going along for this trip, don't be scared, the cities are safe and we are safe, if the conflict gets out of hand, we would have been the first to leave the city. And to any of the kids who are reading this and contemplating going, though I don't think you can really read 10 pages of a pretty formal and I even have to say emotionless report (though that's my personal thoughts, I just can't explain what emotions we all went through during this trip on paper. ) I would fully support that you go on this trip, it's a chance of a lifetime and grab it, you may never get the chance or experience again.

