

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Pascal Moore

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Overall the students' trip to Jerusalem and Hebron has been successful and facilitated the key objectives of Schools Across Borders. In an empirical fashion it has given our students an exceptional opportunity to understand the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, while enhancing their sense of interdependence and empowerment.

They have also been challenged by the complexity of considering notions such as conflict resolution in a political situation where such an idea remains very problematic. Their sensitivity to the importance of children's rights has been heightened.

On a wider level, the trip has also given them first-hand experience of key religious sites, informed their understanding of issues linked to development and allowed them to keep a historical perspective on present landscapes and political conflicts. It has also enlarged their world view as they have experienced, within host families and welcoming schools across the border, other cultures and other customs.

It is important to state that the trip was a real journey for our students. While they had been through the SAB programme in their schools in Dublin, the reality of the conflict in situ, its impact on place, space and people, gradually dawned on them. They came back to Ireland having learned in the full sense of the word 'to learn'. The project was thus profoundly educational.

Saturday 19

The arrival was quite smooth. It was unfortunate that all the Irish students were not allocated Israeli host families. This will undoubtedly be addressed for future visits as it immediately helps to immerse students into Israeli life. However, the first encounter with the Middle East through East Jerusalem, Damascus Gate and the Old City, was truly impressive.

Sunday 20

The visit and session at the Hebrew University Secondary School (Leyada) went very well. Students connected very quickly as the Israeli students who had been to Ireland accompanied the new students participating to the program. Their presence formed a good bridge between the years and the classes. The discussion was led by Darran. He enabled the students to cover many aspects of the project, while keeping it light and cheerful.

The group discussion that followed was very positive and necessary, as the Irish students regrouped and focused on the purpose of their trip. They also volunteered to take a greater role in their school interventions. As a result, their leadership skills improved immensely through the trip.

The afternoon visit was dedicated to a tour of the Old City. The different quarters of the city as well as the main religious sites and their various meanings were presented in a positive and factual way. It was particularly good to have Israeli students accompanying us on the tour and presenting from time to time their perspectives and knowledge. Thus the walk down to the Western Wall, for Irish students with a Christian background, felt natural as they were accompanied by an Israeli friend. Also, they were introduced to their first site of a radical settlement by one Israeli student, Yotam.

The children enjoyed a well deserved rest all together at the end of the visit in a cafe.

Monday 21

The visit of Ha Nissui School was an eye opener in terms of school structure and pedagogical practices. However, the actual session of exchange and discussion in the library did not lead to a profound conversation. Groups of Ha Nissui students came and went, thus preventing the talks to gather momentum. Also, our students leading the discussion had not yet acquired the sufficient skills to harness the attention and focus of all. They would learn quickly.

However, the very informal moments in the entrance hall, after the meeting, amidst passing students and teachers, turned out to be rather pleasant. Chats and exchanges remained light and cheerful.

The afternoon visit of West Jerusalem, Zion Square, Machane Yehuda Market and the Mea Shearim area was very instructive for all. Once again, the Israeli students participated greatly in the tour.

Through reflexions on particular sites, we understood the deep feelings of insecurity linked to the conflict that had existed in the area. Vivid stories of suicide bomb attacks were recalled by Darran and the Israeli students. Students witnessed and experienced at first hand the great variety of Israeli socio-religious groups and political culture. Students also took ownership of their afternoon tour and discussed in a positive way what they wanted to visit, notably the Mea Shearim quarter, an ultra-orthodox area.

Tuesday 22

A very focused and deep discussion took place in Keshet School in the morning - possibly, the most constructive discussion on the Israeli side. Students and group leaders were very welcome into the school and enjoyed an interesting visit of the building. We were introduced into the school's synagogue and its use was explained to us by two students. Our students also found out that religious and non religious students attended the Rainbow school.

Conflict issues were well discussed, particularly the question of the settlements in the West Bank. Our students were in a position to speak out in public much better and handled the running of the discussion with the help of Darran.

The wealthy suburbs of Jerusalem were noted by some students on the way there, as other aspects of the conflict on the way back to the hotel. An Israeli taxi driver would not give us a lift back to Salahadin Street, as it is in the Arab part, he said quite plainly. The two students accompanying me were quite surprised.

That afternoon, we made our way to Hebron through Checkpoint 300. An issue occurred before departure, as the students realised that we would travel on the small Palestinian buses that run between East Jerusalem and the Separation/Security Wall. They felt that we should keep travelling in taxis, as the programme's information sheet stated that we would never travel by public transport. I personally believe that the issue was linked to their gradual understanding of the whole Israeli-Palestinian context. They associated the buses with public transport and would not hear that they were in actual fact different to the general Jerusalem public transport system. Wisely, the four group leaders decided to listen to the students' position. Covering the cost of taxis to the wall was not a problem. As students became gradually more aware of the details of the situation on the ground, they overcame their position and their original fears. On the way back from Hebron, we all took the bus back from Checkpoint 300 to East Jerusalem without any issues.

Crossing the wall was a shock to the group as a strong sense of changing culture and levels of development hit the children on the Palestinian Authority side of the wall. The drive in taxis to Hebron was also an eye-opener. In our taxi, the driver indicated the bits of territories and roads under Israeli authority and those under Palestinian authority. A landscape of superimposed networks and encroaching territories came to life and was communicated to the students in the car. A sense of confusion amidst a poorer country prevailed.

In this context, the welcome meeting with the Palestinian students who visited Ireland and other

students, that evening, in the presence of Adli Daana, Director of IPYL, was heart warming. Familiar faces in an unknown land meant a lot to everyone. Students met with their hosts families within the walls of the IPYL house. Such a gathering was very positive. Ideally, one would imagine a similar situation on our arrival in Jerusalem with the Israeli families to be possible. It would take an Israeli teacher or principal to coordinate it.

Wednesday 23

A very deep and constructive discussion took place in Widaad Nisredeen School in the morning. For the first time, but following on from the discussion in the Keshet School, our students were confronted with the void that separates children of their age on either side of the conflict.

Having truly connected with their Israeli hosts, they employed themselves to attempt to breach the void and express to the Widaad Nisredeen girls some of the ideas they had collected in Jerusalem. Never before had the students felt, almost physically, that they were walking on a line, a very fine line. Our girls took the fore of the discussion with the Palestinian girls. Past year students, who had been to Ireland, also facilitated the talk. All students found a way of reaching common ground, as all were eager to stay open minded and constructive. As a teacher, I was quite impressed by what happened – in French *“par ce qui s’est passé et par ce qui est passé”*.

I also think that, as our students had not yet been completely confronted to the weight of the occupation and the complexity of the situation in Hebron, they were still naive enough to want to convey some of the messages of the Israelis. There were interesting encounters that occurred between the students; for example with the Palestinian girls after crossing the wall and again meeting back with the Israeli students in Jerusalem after having been to Hebron – the two encounters were enriched by having just engaged with the others’ reality and in the others’ company.

Quickly after the first encounter, behaviours adapt and students learn not to talk too much about difficult issues. Very special attention should be given to these moments, when emotions are strongly felt.

The greeting session with Khadeeja Abdeen School went well too and stayed light and cheerful.

Ancient history and present day conflict were observed during the visit of the Old City in the afternoon. Students realised the extent of the conflictual situation born from the presence of new settlements in the Old City (H2 area). They also understood the different stages in the conflict, of which the Second Intifada. They grasped the religious significance of the Ibrahimi (Abraham) Mosque and the way religious traditions can be reinvested to express either openness or exclusion.

Checkpoints marked the division of urban space and areas of conflicting territories. The fact that the group was accompanied by volunteer members of the IPYL and then joined by some of the Palestinian students also helped. The group weren’t merely tourists – they were engaging with the situation. Ghada, Mai and Noor, three Hebron students were able to pass across a checkpoint for the first time, as part of the group.

Thursday 24

Three schools were visited that morning, with short but interesting discussions. The talks never got as deep as they did the day before – perhaps because of the lack of time, perhaps because the Irish students had already been in Hebron for too long to have the courage to convey to the Palestinians different views of the Israelis. Students had also realised at this stage that they had a lot to learn from the situation: the realities of the conflict for the Hebron students were almost overwhelming.

In Hussein Boys’ School, the students also realised how controversial it can be for Palestinians to engage in a programme which works across the board with Israelis. Merely making them want to take part in the project was already quite an achievement. One major aspect of meeting with the new

students taking part in the project was to get them interested in the exchange.

Our students also noticed how school facilities were different to those in Irish schools and also how motivated the students were, particularly the girls many of whom develop a surprisingly good level of English.

Finally, a meeting was arranged with the representative of the Palestinian Authority Department of Education in Hebron. The meeting, while official, meant a lot to the group.

After lunch, in the company of students and with the help of IPYL members, we climbed up the slopes of the Old City in the H2 area to the homes of Samah Sharabati and Jamil. Samah's house is dominated by the presence of Israeli soldiers on the roof top. The living conditions of her family and the welcome she gave us were deeply moving. Words rapidly became difficult to express. Many in our group were profoundly impressed by the situation and felt as though they had stepped into a reality of the conflict they had never envisaged. The Palestinians who accompanied us had not been up to this part of the city in a long time too and were deeply sorry for the life endured by the family.

We moved on to Jamil's house, in a beautiful site, surrounded by ancient olive trees on old terraced fields looking onto to the ancient city, is sided by the Tel Rumeida settlement. We discovered the reality of living with extreme settlers as neighbours. Borders within neighbourhoods and threats to Jamil family's presence on its own property became clear to all. We were warmly welcome with food and drinks.

Al Ibrahim mosque was also visited. Students passed through turnstiles guarded by soldiers and allowed into the mosque. The tombs of the patriarchs were viewed and common features of the mosque too. The shooting of 1994 was recalled as well. The synagogue within the mosque was presented, but not visited.

After a bit of shopping, the evening party in Ghada's house was immensely appreciated by all the students.

Friday 25

A quiet day opened with the visit of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem. Students appreciated the easy coexistence of Christianity and Islam in Bethlehem as people gathered across the square for the Friday prayer at the mosque.

A final reflection on the Separation/Security Barrier was made as we returned to Jerusalem. We met a Christian family who own a small shop beside the wall. The woman of the house informed us on how the building of the wall affected their life.

Back in Jerusalem, after sorting out bags and preparing for our return to the airport, we met up with the Israeli students in a cafe in the Armenian Quarter of the Old city near Jaffa Gate. Most Jewish places were closed as Shabbat had begun. Eager to find out what the students had discovered in the West Bank, the Israeli students made way into the Old City to meet up with them. This meeting took place informally, under our supervision but without much guidance. Some of our students, shocked by what they had seen in Hebron, spoke out very honestly and confronted the Israeli students with the realities of the occupation that they had witnessed. Others felt they were too direct. Two of the Israeli students were deeply touched and broke down into tears.

With hindsight, I felt that I had not prepared enough for this final meeting. I had not envisaged it to be so loaded with emotions linked to the conflict. I thought the students would simply enjoy one another's company a last time before the flight back to Ireland, but they quickly engaged in open discussion about the conflict, its realities and injustices. Interdependence was clearly at play, as our students became the only ones to have engaged with both sides of the wall. The Israeli students depended on the Irish students to understand what exactly the situation was for Palestinian students

in Hebron.

I do believe that if such a trip was to happen again, this final gathering would need to be more formal, at least at first, so as what is said can be monitored. Also views on the nature of the project could be addressed, so as students realise how constructive – and difficult - it is to engage with both sides. They would then have a more clear view of what SAB stands for. This has been reiterated many times, most notably during the meeting with the parents before the trip. But it is important for students to hear it again, once they have been through the whole journey of the visit. Then only are they able to effectively hear what is said.

Saturday 26

All went well on the return back to Ireland. It would be good to leave a little earlier for the airport in Tel-Aviv, just to have a little more time. Security Services thoroughly checked every bag and we did get a little pushed for time.

Presentation of the trip back to the class

A brief presentation was made on the Tuesday after our return in the Seconde classroom by Solenn and myself. Solenn prepared a powerpoint presentation which will form the basis of the report on the trip to Jerusalem and Hebron to the class.

The powerpoint presentation will also be printed out and a board will be set up in the entrance hall of the school to communicate on the trip to the whole school community (LFI and Saint Kilian's).

Solenn is also preparing an article on the trip for the school newspaper (Euronews) and the parents' association newspaper (la Gazette).

Benefits of the visit to the curriculum

The trip links with the French history and geography curriculum in many ways. In history, we approach the great religions of the Mediterranean Basin (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) at the time of the Crusades. We also study the Mediterranean at the time when Mehmet II and Suleiman the Magnificent ruled over the Ottoman Empire (XVth and XVIth centuries). Jerusalem is an excellent case study for both topics.

In geography, we study issues surrounding development, sustainable development and urban geography. The visit gives immediate experience of these issues. Jerusalem is an excellent, if complicated, case study for a class on urban geography and sustainable development. I would like to gather more information on issues surrounding water and food in the area. While I gathered sufficient information on development and sustainable development, I did not find the time to explore the question of water in enough detail.

The visit is exceptionally rich with information and encounters. The fact that SAB works with schools, teachers and students, as well as with IPYL in Hebron, turned the visit into more than an ordinary school trip. It was an experience through which the students gained in maturity and social skills. For that alone it was well worth it.

On a final note, it is important to say that the fine details of the logistics of the trip were impeccably handled by Darran. The organisation of the visit was exceptionally good. It is an essential aspect of the programme, without which the learning journey towards interdependence would not be possible for our students.