

**I didn't know what to expect on my first trip to Palestine.** Among family, friends and colleagues it was common to question my decision to join a political delegation of millennials. Would I be safe? Growing up attending Jewish day school, I was immersed in the Israeli narrative centered in self-determination after millennia of persecution. I remain a proud Zionist. I marvel at Israel's remarkable achievements as an economically advanced liberal and social democracy.

I went to deepen my understanding of the conflict and hear Palestinian perspectives. Discussions about the conflict can be difficult among otherwise like-minded friends from different cultural backgrounds. The trip afforded the unique opportunity to see and explore a side of Israel young American Jews are not commonly exposed to. The delegation was organized by the Israel Policy Forum, a non-partisan advocacy group that advocates for a two-state solution to the conflict. Over the course of a week we visited the Gaza border, Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Nablus.

As a university student, I studied historical accounts of what the Palestinians call "Nakba" (literally "disaster") that turned hundreds of thousands into refugees in 1948. Seeing history up close was emotional. The delegation visited the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem. The camp abuts the security barrier Israel constructed during the Second Intifada ("uprising"). The graffiti on the wall gives a sense for the prevailing sentiment. It pictures Israeli soldiers aiming their machine guns and arresting a blindfolded Palestinian man. The quotation next to the illustration reads, "We can't live so we are waiting to die." As we walked, we could not escape the smell of burning garbage. The entrance to the densely-populated camp features the symbol of the Nakba, a key to the homes the refugees were either forced, compelled, or chose to leave behind during the war for Israel's independence and survival. We watched a film

portraying life as a refugee in a community room. The residents I spoke to conveyed their genuine desire and expectation to eventually return to their homes. It's impossible to visit such a place and not feel the pain and anguish inflicted on those living there.

Our first stop after arriving in Tel Aviv was the Gaza border. After touring the Kerem Shalom border crossing we had the opportunity to meet a young Palestinian technology entrepreneur. Due to the security situation his name or enterprise cannot be made public for fear of retaliation by Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007. He, like most of his peers, is highly educated. He turned down a job offer from a top consulting firm to help make life better by training and empowering other technology entrepreneurs in Gaza. It was a risk for the young man to even speak with us. His voice exuded hunger for opportunity for himself and other young people. Palestinians have some of the highest levels of education in the Middle East. Gaza is also very young. There is virtually no private sector. The youth unemployment rate stands at 70%. The young man spoke about having Jewish friends in America. His English was perfect. Despite Gaza's isolation he is managing to build his enterprise with limited resources. One could not come away without a sense of respect and admiration for his efforts.

We had our first opportunity to meet a Palestinian leader in an East Jerusalem bookstore. Mahmoud owns the bookstore, which, he explained, makes him a cultural leader because there are no other spaces for leaders to emerge. The over 400,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem take on a unique identity. They are neither citizens of Israel nor were eligible to vote in the last Palestinian national election in 2006. They have the right to vote in Jerusalem municipal elections but collectively choose not to so as not to recognize Israel's claim of sovereignty over the entire city. As such, 40% of Jerusalem residents are unrepresented on the city council. In the realm of buying cars, obtaining health insurance and freedom to travel

throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories, East Jerusalem residents assume an Israeli identity. At the same time, in the realm of security checkpoints and interactions with law enforcement they assume a Palestinian identity.

Mahmoud pointedly made clear he cannot and does not claim to represent anyone. That said, his bookstore is a gathering spot for community discussion. He was quite eloquent and intellectual. He would be a charismatic politician. He presented the Palestinian narrative of the past and present situation. His lack of political agency underpins his pessimism and cynicism. He lamented the occupation's division of Palestinian society. His lack of faith in the Palestinian authority was pronounced. These were the main sentiments when speaking to young Palestinians on the street. Mahmoud allowed us to take stock of the past and present from his community's standpoint.

We met our first Israeli soldier in Hebron. Nadav served in the West Bank as a spotter in a sniper unit. His family has lived in Israel since the nation's founding. His military service led him to expose what he views as the immorality of the occupation. He led us on a tour of Hebron. We started next to the Tomb of Patriarchs. As Nadav walked down a shuttered commercial center, a settler approached and started taking videos of Nadav in a display of thinly veiled hostility. Words were exchanged. It was impossible not to feel the tension. In fact, this very settler had punched Nadav a few months prior. After our tour ended, we learned Nadav was once again attacked this time by children. There were no arrests or charges.

Hebron is where the occupation strains rationality and justification most. Under the Oslo Accords, signed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 1995, Hebron, a city of over 200,000 Palestinian residents is governed by the Palestinian Authority. Nevertheless, 800 Jewish settlers reside in four settlements separate and apart from the rest of Hebron but geographically

located in the heart of the city. It is religious conviction that brings the settlers to Hebron. Their presence necessitates 1,000 Israeli soldiers stationed adjacent to the settlements and the Tomb of the Patriarchs. As a result, Palestinian businesses in a key commercial corridor were forced to shut down in order to ensure safe passageway for the settlers. The settlers insist they would remain if the soldiers were to leave.

Back in Tel Aviv we met with the leaders of Women Wage Peace, a grassroots group that promotes a political agreement to resolve the conflict and to include women in all aspects of decision-making. It is the largest movement in Israel. It has more than 40,000 members. The co-leader spoke poignantly about having lost her son, a soldier, to the conflict. She was joined by Israelis from Christian and Arab backgrounds. Twenty percent of Israeli citizens are Arab Palestinian. There are tens of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians helping each other and working together every day in this land. It isn't spoken about because it conflicts with the predominant narratives of the current political leadership on both sides.

I come away from this immersion humbled. The conflict has a way of forcing people to one particular side or narrative that typically leads to either unquestioned support for Israel or a misguided boycott. But that does not reflect the mosaic of opinion among Israelis and Palestinians or reality on the ground. The conversation becomes stale and disconnected when we hunker down into our respective corners. This conflict won't be resolved overnight. But there are ways to make the situation tangibly better for both peoples in the interim, especially in Gaza. Let us commit to progress for the sake of peace and justice.

***- Ethan Felder, 2019 IPF Atid Delegate (New York, NY)***