

Hannah Arnaud – Israel and Palestine, Summer 2018

This summer I was lucky enough to take part in Yachad's student trip from the 1st to the 6th of September. Yachad describe themselves as a pro-Israel, pro-peace organisation who work to mobilise British Jews in support of a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On the first full day of the trip we spent the majority of the day being shown around the West Bank by Machsom Watch who are a volunteer organisation of Israeli women who monitor the situation at checkpoints as part of their work towards a peaceful solution. As part of the tour we visited a Palestinian farmer whose land is located in what is described as the seam zone, a strip of land between the green line and the separation barrier. In the evening we meet with members of the Parents Circle Families Forum - a grassroots organisation which was established in 1994 to bring together Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost immediate family members in the conflict. This was particularly interesting as it raised the idea that the shared trauma experienced by the two sides might be a productive point for opening dialogue.

The next day we visited Hebron with Breaking the Silence - a grassroots organisation established by former members of the Israel Defence Force during the Second Intifada with the aim of "exposing the Israeli public to the reality of life in the Occupied Territories". Hebron can be looked at as the most extreme example of the divide between the Palestinian and the Israeli population; roads are given different gradings which determine who is allowed to walk on them and there are 850 settlers living in the middle of a Palestinian city who are deemed to require the constant protection of 500-600 soldiers. While there we were able to visit the Tomb of the Patriarchs, known to Muslims as the Sanctuary of Abraham or the Ibrahimi Mosque, the separate entrances for the two groups highlighting the seeming impossibility of cooperation. Yet this impression was combated by the organisation the Path of Hope and Peace, a project that brings together individuals and families from both side of the Green Line, with whom we spent the evening.

We met with Military Court Watch early on Tuesday morning for a briefing on how Palestinian young people are treated within the military judicial system. After this we met with Yesh Din, an organisation focussing on three main areas - takeover of land, mistreatment of Palestinians by the military and violence of Israeli settlers, who took us to the Palestinian villages of Sinjil and Turmes Aiya. At one point our conversation with the mayor of Sinjil required translation from Arabic into Hebrew and then Hebrew into English which made me question how we can hope to have a nuanced conversation when we rely on other people to communicate. In the afternoon we visited we were guided round the archaeological site of ancient Shiloh and then met with an ideological settler who lives in the modern town established near the biblical site.

On Wednesday we travelled to the Gaza border region with Noa Galili from Gisha, the NGO Legal Center for Freedom of Movement. One of the interesting points raised was that when the people living in the Gaza strip are referred to as Gazans rather than Palestinians that language plays into a particular narrative aiming prevent the unifying of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. We were unfortunately unable to meet with COGAT for a briefing from the IDF but were able to spend some time talking to the Deputy British Ambassador Tony Kay who spoke to us about the role of the international community in the peace process. Our last speakers of the day were a group of up-and-coming political activists in Israel: Ori Kol, Sany Arazi, Yael Patir and Ethan Schwartz with whom our conversation focussed on stigmatization of the Israeli left and why it is currently failing to form an effective opposition.

Finally we were taken on a tour of East Jerusalem by the organisation Ir Amim which seeks to ensure the "dignity and welfare of all its residents and that safeguards their holy places, as well as their historical and cultural heritages." Despite having spent considerable amounts of time in Jerusalem prior to this particular visit, I had never had the opportunity to see the other half of the city. There we began to question the politics of archaeology in regards to current development of Ir David. We also discussed the conflicting narratives surrounding different incidents of violence within the city.