

## **No Simple Answers:** Tufts students explore the complexities of the Arab-Israeli Conflict<sup>1</sup>

*Matan Chorev and Negar Razavi*

Our trip began with the tired, teary eyes of an Israeli father whose 14-year old daughter's life was taken by a suicide bomber. Sitting immediately to the father's right is a Palestinian man who, since the beginning of the second *intifada*, has lost three family members at the hands of Israeli soldiers. Their stories—honed for groups and told hundreds, if not thousands of times—is slightly tired. But the look in their eyes, the burning, the pain, this look is not tired. This look never goes away. It is griping; it is terrible. This same look, this same burning, would return to haunt us throughout our travels.

THESE WERE THE WORDS of Matthew Edmundson, one of the 11 Tufts undergraduates who traveled to Israel and the West Bank in the winter of 2004. The trip, organized in collaboration with Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (FFIPP) co-founder Yoav Elinevsky and joined by MIT professor Michael M.J. Fischer, a renowned anthropologist and expert on Iran, provided students with the opportunity to engage in intensive study of the conflict and the human repercussions for both Israelis and Palestinians. Over the course of 10 days, NIMEP members met with practitioners, politicians, students, journalists, activists, and academics while visiting the region's most charged sites.

“If there is anything I concluded from this tremendous trip, it is that things are more complicated than I had realized,” said Aaron Markowitz-Shulman, one of the founding members of NIMEP. In a region that often enflames passionate debate and solidifies ideological positions, the group strove to embrace complexity and ambiguity, delving into the underlying issues from many perspectives.

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article originally appeared in the February 13, 2004 issue of the *Tufts Observer*.

NIMEP's first day in the West Bank began with a detailed presentation by Jad Isaac, a scholar at the Applied Research Center in Bethlehem. Using GIS technology and satellite images, the delegation learned of issues caused by the construction and route of the security fence. Isaac described the fence as an example of Sharon's "land grab" and outlined what he saw as a reality of cantonization and "ghettoization" of the West Bank.

Several days later, the students met with the mayor of Haifa, Yona Yahav, who offered a different perspective on the wall, describing it as a desperate

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attempt at safety. Haifa is 20% Arab and has developed a unique environment of coexistence. During Yahav's tenure as mayor, the city has suffered four suicide bombings, each an attempt to destroy this co-existence. For Yahav, a longtime Labor party member and supporter of the peace camp, the fence is an unfortunate yet necessary reality. He stressed his opposition to the fence's deviation from the 1967 border, but citing his commitment to his daughter's safety, still supported its construction.

A few hours later, the delegation visited the fence, described by one member as "a gargantuan complex," in the town of Baka al-Sharkia. As the group filmed and photographed the wall at Baka al-Sharkia, Palestinians approached with their own stories. The first man, a father and teacher said, "Look at what the Israelis are doing! They are dividing us. How am I supposed to teach peace in my school if this is what my students see?" Another Palestinian man recounted the demolition of his house on the morning of his wedding, because it stood in the path of construction. The Israeli soldiers admitted that while the fence has caused hardship to the Palestinians, it is necessary due to the amount of shooting at civilian Israeli vehicles on the Israeli side of the border. The NIMEP group had to leave by sundown because the area was not considered safe after dark.

In addition to traveling throughout Israel's major cities and the Negev region, the delegation was able to visit areas in the West Bank often inaccessible to Israelis themselves, including Daheisha refugee camp, Ramallah, and Hebron. In the West Bank, the students visited Manger Square, the site of a 36-day standoff between the Israeli army and Palestinians who hid in the Church of the Nativity. The room in the Bethlehem Peace Center, where we met with its curator, served as the central command of the Israeli Army during the standoff.

On the outskirts of Hebron, students toured H-I, a fully autonomous territory of the Palestinian Authority. After meeting with the mayor of Hebron, students toured the Old City, accompanied by an *al-Jazeera* reporter. The streets were winding and narrow, the shops closed. On the walls were posters of martyrs juxtaposed with anti-Arab graffiti scrawled by settlers. The tour culminated in a visit to the Ibrahimi Mosque, a site holy to both Jews and Muslims. The Mosque sits above the Cave of Machpelah, or Tomb of the Patriarchs, the most ancient Jewish site and second holiest place for the Jewish people after the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The cave was purchased by Abraham as a burial place for his wife Sarah some 3,700 years ago and is, according to Jewish tradition, the final resting place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, and Leah. Muslims believe that Joseph was also buried there. The Mosque is the site of a 1994 massacre of dozens of Muslim worshippers by Dr. Baruch Goldstein. On the final day of the trip, the delegation went to Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah—a “surreal experience.” The buildings inside the *Muqata* were heavily damaged, and Arafat's rather aggressive security force spilled out from behind destroyed buildings, AK-47s in tote.

In Jerusalem, the students walked along Ben Yehuda street, the popular pedestrian mall and the site of numerous terrorist attacks. After visiting the Old City, Rachel Leven said, “The aura inside the walls of the old city was truly unique and holy but was not exempt from the harshness of the political reality. The most sacrosanct places in the world are being corrupted by the hand of human irresponsibility.” Later, students met with Benjamin Pogrund, head of the Yakar Center for Social Concern, who compared his experiences as a journalist during the apartheid era in South Africa to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While he sympathized with the Palestinians, he expressed offense at creating a parallel between their predicament and that of the Blacks in South Africa.

Some of the most powerful moments on the trip were the least formal. The last day of the trip included a meeting with students and faculty at Birzeit University, described by one Israeli as a “hornet's nest” of Hamas. For Markowitz-Shulman, it was “a very strange experience. On one hand, you are sitting in

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a comfortable and modern conference room. On the other, you are listening to descriptions of army raids and violence. Reconciling this dichotomy is a challenge, and perhaps impossible for an outsider.” There was a definite split between the tone of the faculty and the tone of the students, which was very encouraging. Even though they shared similar politics in many cases, the students were optimistic, or at least determined, to continue their studies and focus on the future. Rachel Brandenburg also described the experience as “very strange,” but for different reasons. “The students at Birzeit are much like ourselves in many ways, but the atmosphere in which they live is a completely different reality from anything we know. Whereas students at Tufts, for example, involve themselves in student groups such

as Tufts Democrats or Republicans, their equivalent political action groups include Hamas, Fatah, and Islamic Jihad. What we consider cultural groups here are only beginning to appear on their campus. Because life for them is so directly impacted by politics, the political sentiment on the Birzeit campus is considered a representative microcosm of political sentiment in the city of Ramallah. This is completely different from politics on college campuses in the U.S.”

There was a diversity of political opinion at Birzeit regarding the options for a peaceful future. Some advocated the Geneva Accords and a

two-state solution, while others said they would prefer a bi-national state. The faculty tended to focus on the past and current political climate, while the students generally talked about their studies and, in some cases, chances for reconciliation and peace. As Yoav Elinevsky put it, “If these are the hornets, then I am encouraged.”

NIMEP is committed to working with the students in future projects. The group’s partnership with Soliya, Inc. has facilitated an international program that fosters dialogue between American and Middle Eastern university students throughout the region. Similar connections were established at Haifa University where the delegation met with a coexistence project called the “Arab-Jewish Center for Dialogue.”

NIMEP members also attended a two-day conference focused on

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international exchange among academics committed to an “end of the occupation” and a “just peace.” The conference provided an opportunity to think about the occupation with distinguished individuals from around the world. Students met Hanan Ashrawi, former member of Palestinian National Council and a leading figure in internal Palestinian reform; Peter Hansen, Commissioner General of UNRWA; Luisa Morgantini, a member of the European Parliament; and activists Mustafa Barghouti, Shulamit Aloni, and Professor Naomi Chazan. Although the conference was insightful, its tone reflected some of the general frustration of the students. Leven said that “too great a percentage of the time was spent decrying the situation rather than working towards solutions.” Another student referred to the peace camp as “dangerously impotent and guilty of perpetuating the occupation.”

For each student the trip involved a very personal journey. Alia Hamid, Tufts alumna, is the daughter of a Palestinian refugee. She commented, “It was disconcerting to walk through the country where my father and grandparents were born, knowing it is impossible for them to return to or even visit the land they left behind. My U.S. passport enabled me to do what many Diaspora Palestinians today can only dream of.” For some, this was the first trip to the region, and for others it was a new way to experience their homeland. As an Iranian, Negar Razavi had a slightly different experience than the others on the trip:

It was difficult for me to be in Israel given the historical tensions between Iran and Israel. Very few Muslim Iranians have ever traveled to Israel or to the West Bank, yet they all have very set opinions on the conflict. The most important thing that I took from this trip, and which I have been sharing with my community, has been my realization that moral relativism is dangerous in this conflict. What is happening to the Palestinian people is a tragedy. They are being denied their basic rights as humans: freedom, security, and dignity. I myself experienced some of the humiliation that they are subjected to, simply because of my nationality. However, at the same time, Israelis are living in constant fear of suicide attacks and have had to watch their innocent civilians being killed. This is a tragedy as well. If we cannot accept both as such, then there is no hope for peace.