

Brandeis University-Al Quds University Student Dialogue Initiative Final Report

Eli Philip and Catriona Stewart

September 2014

Section I

The goal of the project was to initiate long-term student dialogue between Brandeis University and Al Quds University through a five-day intensive student exchange at Al Quds University in the West Bank. No other funds were raised to contribute to this project.

The bulk of our project took place during a five-day trip based around Al Quds University in Abu Dis, a town in the West Bank. The participants from Brandeis were all Jewish students, and most were spending the summer in Israel interning or traveling. The participants from Al Quds were selected by Al Quds Student Exchange Forum leaders, and were a diverse group of ten students from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Together, we spent time touring the Al Quds campus, engaging in structured and informal dialogue sessions, visiting Ramallah and Jericho, and getting to know one another on a personal level. The atmosphere throughout the trip was positive – as young students interested in cross-cultural exchange and promoting peace, we shared a lot in common – despite religious, political and cultural differences. Through these activities, everyone in the group developed strong personal relationships with each other. Al Quds University was very generous and welcoming in all aspects, and hosted us for many meals. We were also able to meet with top-level administrators, including Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, and Palestinian Authority officials.

While the budget was sufficient to cover the costs of the program itself, we lacked the funds to subsidize flights of Brandeis students to come to Israel, which limited our choice of participants to students who planned on being in the region for the summer. Thus, the group of Brandeis students was not as diverse or large as it could have been. The Brandeis participants found it difficult at times to be completely open about their identity and political beliefs – specifically identifying as Zionists, or talking about their summer plans living in Israel. There is a stigma among Palestinians about interacting with Zionists or Israelis, and some of the dialogue sessions were not as productive as we wanted them to be because many students were not always forthcoming about their views or background. Due to the strong hosting culture in Palestine, the Al Quds students and faculty expected to create the entire schedule and programming for our visit, including the dialogue sessions. We were able to have some input into the schedule, but would have liked to have more dialogue sessions and less touring. Furthermore, some of the dialogue sessions which focused on specific political issues caused the participants from the respective schools to become defensive regarding their political beliefs and identities. Sessions which did not have a direct political focus, but instead centered around big ideas such as identity, art, and values, were much more productive and brought out a more honest political discussion.

Outside of the program itself, the most serious difficulty was the military operation in the West Bank and subsequent war in Gaza, which broke out the day after our official program ended. The political climate, as well as the inability to guarantee the safety of our participants, meant that we were only able to meet with the Al Quds students once more after the official program ended – for an Iftar meal in Ramallah. The media attention on the war also made it more difficult to raise awareness about the project's success.

Beyond the political aspect of the program, there was also an important exchange of cultures. Many of the Brandeis participants met Palestinians and experienced Arab and Muslim culture for the first time, and many of the Al Quds students met Jews or Americans for the first time. Though there were clearly cultural differences and some language gaps, the exchange was productive and meaningful on both a political and cultural level.

The program directly benefitted the participants, their families and friends, and the staff and administration involved on both campuses. Throughout this year, and in the long term, it will also benefit the Brandeis and Al Quds university student bodies and institutions themselves. We also hope that beyond creating long-lasting friendships and reestablishing ties between our two universities, the project will serve as a model for other institutions to positively impact and engage with this conflict.

Section II

Peace is the absence of violence. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is not clear what will bring peace, or how long it will take until peace is achieved. This summer in the region very clearly demonstrated to us what a lack of sustainable peace looks like; violence, war, hatred, and oppression were the norm in Israel and Palestine. But on our program, we caught glimpses – often fleeting – of what peace looks like. Many times these moments of peace were disrupted by the systematic violence inherent in this conflict.

On the final evening of the project, we gathered for dinner and a bonfire at the Ramallah family home of one the Al Quds participants. Her father, a Christian Palestinian, told us he had been waiting his whole life to host Jews, Christians and Muslims under his roof. In this moment, we felt what peace could look like; all of us, from different corners of the world with religious and cultural backgrounds, sitting together and talking about our lives. Those moments were profound, and were our small contribution to peace in the short-term. The big picture is more difficult. As we sat around the bonfire singing folk songs about peace, three Israeli students hitchhiking in the West Bank were kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian terrorists, setting off a still ongoing cycle of violence. These horrific incidents of violence don't negate the fact that we found moments of peace together, but it did make us feel helpless in our ability to bring any lasting peace to the region. Whether or not our project will have any impact on the conflict, it gave us an image of what peace could look like, and a sense of urgency to work to end the tremendous suffering caused by this protracted conflict.

As liberal Jews who support a two state solution to the conflict, this project fundamentally challenged our views on how this conflict can be resolved. The Palestinian students' vision for peace was oftentimes incompatible with ours – many of them simply wanted to be equal citizens in a single, democratic state that encompassed both Israel and the Palestinian territories. They rejected the idea of separate self-determination for Jews and for Palestinians. That was difficult for us, as people who wholly believed in our vision for peace and who invest large amounts of time and energy in attempts to end this conflict. The contrast between these two visions of peace made us fundamentally consider the tension between supporting the existence of a Jewish state while also supporting civil rights for everyone in the region.

Catriona Stewart: The most meaningful part of the project for me was being able to create and embody a very small-scale version of my vision for peace in Israel/Palestine. My experiences made the reality of the injustice and conflict on the ground seem even more intractable and difficult, but also motivated me to continue pursuing peace on a larger scale.

Eli Philip: The Davis Project for Peace grant allowed me to take a step towards a more peaceful reality in the region, and make a small but direct positive contribution. Through working on the project, I was inspired and inspired others to pursue and enact our vision for peace.

Brandeis University-Al Quds University Student Dialogue Initiative
Palestine

Brandeis University

Eli Philip, USA, Brandeis '15; Catriona Stewart, USA, Brandeis '16

<https://www.facebook.com/BrandeisandAQUStudentDialogueInitiative>

