

Starting the Conversation

By Garrett Nada ('10)

Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue in Turkey

Garrett Nada recounts his participation in a trip to Istanbul, Turkey where students from Brandeis University and Al-Quds University discussed what makes a good society. He reveals the tensions and wonders of interacting with Palestinian students as a Zionist and an American Jew.

THIS PAST SUMMER I WAS selected to be one of eight Brandeis students to participate in a pilot program along with eight students from Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem (Al-Quds University provides higher education for Palestinians of East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The institutions president, Sari Nusseibeh, is a long time political activist committed to peace and has played a significant role in the unique, ongoing partnership between Brandeis and Al-Quds which initially began to take shape in 1997. The collaboration has three primary goals. The first is to improve the administrative and infrastructure capacities at Al-Quds, one of Palestine's nascent civic institutions. The second is to strengthen academics and offer opportunities for faculty, staff, and students at both institutions. The third is to educate the two campuses about the advantages of cooperation, goodwill, and understanding). We spent ten days together in Istanbul, discussing political philosophy, sightseeing, and debating. The aim of the program was for us to engage in an academic dialogue regarding, "What makes

a good society?" At the end of the summer, before leaving for Istanbul, we, along with the Palestinians were required to read literature by Socrates, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Martin Luther King Jr., the UN Commission on Human Rights, Machiavelli and other pieces involving political philosophy. We discussed this material in seminar sessions throughout our time in Istanbul.

From the beginning of our journey, the reality of the situation in East Jerusalem was made apparent. On our first day, a number of the Palestinian students remained in the hotel and slept until dinnertime, as their journey from the West Bank to Turkey took them 48 hours. A number of them had to go over the bridge to Amman, Jordan to fly to Turkey. Only two had the necessary paperwork and identification to fly through Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel-Aviv. One of the girls originally selected to go on the trip had to drop out at the last minute because she lacked the correct travel documents. This was the first example we encountered of how their daily lives are constantly affected by the difficult circumstances they face.

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On our first day, we shared what we had to offer to the program, what we hoped to accomplish during the trip and what our apprehensions were. One Palestinian girl was eager to get to know Americans because she realized that her impression of the US was shaped solely by movies and on television. Another expressed her desire to share her story as a refugee with others.

Undoubtedly, some of the students from Al-Quds wanted to convince us that "their side" was the correct one, but as the trip continued, they were exposed to the breadth of knowledge we have amassed about the history of the conflict and about the history of the region in general. Some of the Palestinians

had a difficult time understanding both why we were invested in Israel and why we spend time learning about Middle Eastern politics.

One of the most difficult aspects of the program was being confronted with preconceived notions that some of the Al-Quds students had developed about Americans and Jews. I did not hear any new stereotypes or conspiracy theories but it was the first time that I met face to face with and had to live with people who believed in them. What was most frustrating was that these Palestinian are very intelligent and bright university students, but in regard to the topic of Jews, Israel, and America they have been exposed to one point of view in their primary schools,

through the news, and from their peers and mentors. In some cases, their personal experiences or encounters with Americans or Israelis have unfortunately supported and confirmed their misguided beliefs.

We were able to re-educate the students on a number of issues and I think in many cases we had a positive impact on many of them and their perceptions.

For example, one Palestinian girl had been taught that the Jews of Europe had chosen to live in ghettos because they thought they were superior to everyone else. After we explained the nature of Jewish society, the Palestinian understood that in order to maintain their culture and community, observant Jews had to live near each other.

Watching how one Orthodox Jewish girl from Brandeis brought her own kosher food to every meal helped her understand this specific point. The Israeli who was on the trip from Brandeis was able to show the Palestinians a point of view that they had never been exposed to first hand. She recounted the many times she had gone to bomb shelters growing up, and told them how a bus was blown up a block away from her.

The Palestinians also shared many stories with us about their own lives, some of which have changed how I look at situations and circumstances; not necessarily my stance on issues but rather my thought process. I learned profound lessons from one of the Palestinian girls.



A GROUP PHOTOGRAPH of all of the participants from Brandeis and Al-Quds.

She lives in a refugee camp near Bethlehem. Her father makes a good living and therefore she went to a private school for a few years but was always teased and embarrassed about where she came from. Her family has the resources to move out of the refugee camp to the city but her father does not want her or her siblings to forget that they lost their land. She identifies very strongly as a refugee and she is conscious of that identity but also admitted that her father's mentality does not best suit her. She wants to move out of the camp and build a better life for herself. This girl is extremely progressive, interested in woman's rights, dresses fashionably, has been to the US and Europe, speaks English well and has just finished law school at Al-Quds.

One of her stories had a significant impact on me. She went to the border crossing to get into Jerusalem to take her final exams, but before even getting to the crossing an Israeli soldier pulled up in front of her in a Jeep, demanded to see her identification and travel documents. In broken Arabic, he called her a whore and told her to go home; she did not get to take her exams that day. Another Palestinian girl told me that she had never met a nice Jew and that she was glad she went on the program because she made friends with some. Unfortunately, for some of

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the Palestinians, their only contact with Israelis is at border crossings and their experiences there are sometimes humiliating. For many of the students, it takes hours to get to school as a result of the various checkpoints they must pass through to get to Al-Quds. Al-Quds itself is made up of several smaller campuses or buildings around East Jerusalem and Abu Dis. It is extremely frustrating for them because it takes a long time to travel such short distances. As a result, they often miss

their classes or their teachers are late. But just like many other inconveniences, it has become the norm.

Another Palestinian from Ramallah told me how he and his friends sometimes load up a car to travel

to the beach, get to the checkpoint, are turned around. When they return home, they pretend that they went to the beach and talk about what a good time they had, just so they do not go crazy. The front door of his house was broken down by soldiers when he was four years old and his father was taken to prison for eleven years for passing out pamphlets in support of Fatah in the 1980s. One would think that this student would be hateful toward Israel. On the contrary, though, his family has always had many Jewish friends and he seemed to be the most optimistic about peace of all the Al-Quds students. He also was one of the few Palestinians who was confident enough to talk negatively about Arafat and other Arab leaders not fulfilling the wishes of their people. In discussing Machiavelli in one of the seminars, he said, "Machiavelli is describing all the Arab leaders; they're all power hungry dictators that gobble up their people." When I heard statements like these, I felt a bit more optimistic about the future. These are elite university students, and if they are able to gain significant positions of leadership, the region would be a better place as result.

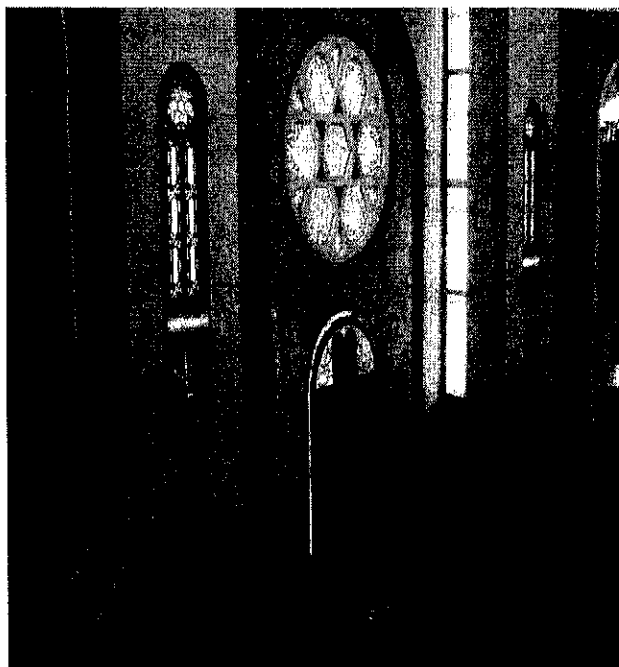
About the Author

Garrett Nada is a member of the class of 2010. He hails from Irvine, California and is double majoring in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. His favorite Israeli food is shawarma with plenty of amba and schug.

Despite clear differences in our daily lives, I was able to connect with the Palestinian students through common interests, such as music. My roommate, who as Jewish friends and speaks fluent Hebrew, and I spent one night singing along to Israeli Hebrew songs we both know and love. Even though this student harbors many grudges against Israel, he is still able to see the good in Israeli society and is able to separate the decisions of army officials and politicians from the common citizen.

One evening I went to the cinema with six of the Palestinians to see the latest installment of "Harry Potter" followed by dinner. Sharing that experience with them, laughing at the same jokes, getting startled by the same loud noises, reminded me that no one is born a hateful person and that everyone is to some extent a product of their environment. At the core we are still very much the same and want the same things. I noticed throughout the trip that the Palestinians usually wanted to stay out later than the Americans did. Since so many of them live under curfews and are deprived of basic freedoms that we take for granted, they appreciated the simplicity of walking the streets late at night.

Later that same night I had a conversation with two of the Palestinian girls who told me that when they return home it will be very different when they think about the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians because personal experience has showed them that Jews also want to live in peace and safety. One went further to say that knowing about the human qualities of someone who you are "supposed" to perceive as your enemy makes things more difficult. She said that on one hand she believes her land is under an unjust occupation and on the other, she knows that the soldiers who humiliate her have the job of protecting people like her that want to go about their lives in as "regular" a way as possible. It was easier to just think that Israelis are all expansionist militant settlers. Ultimately she was



THE NEVE SHALOM Synagogue in the Galata District of Istanbul.

happy that she had met all of us, even if doing so would force her to think twice about things in the future.

Looking back, I feel that the Brandeis students succeeded at starting to pick apart preconceived notions about Jews, Americans, and Westerners. It is hard to generalize the differences we made in the lives of the Palestinians. Obviously, their daily lives and their individual living situations have not changed. However, I believe that at least a few of the Palestinian students will think about the circumstances of Jews as well as their own in a slightly different light.

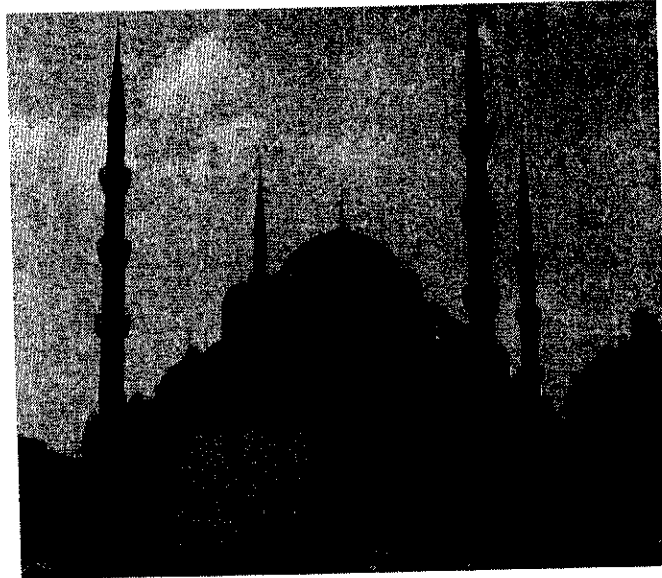
There are many reasons why peace does not yet exist between Israelis and Palestinians. One issue is that there are segments of both populations that deny the other peoplehood. Some Israeli Jews refuse to acknowledge that the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza have a distinct identity different from that of Arabs in Jordan and Egypt. But whether or not this Palestinian nationality existed pre-1948, post-1948, pre-1967 or at any specific point in time is not relevant to a discus-

sion surrounding mutual respect. The reality is that there is a distinct Palestinian identity today and people must come to terms with the fact that those who identify as such are not going to be absorbed into other Arab countries. Not one neighboring Arab country has a clean record in dealing with Palestinian refugees and some are guilty of using the Palestinians as political pawns.

On the other hand, some Palestinians refuse to acknowledge that Jews are a people, much less a people with a viable claim to a homeland in what they consider Palestinian land. Neither of these views are conducive to peace. One way to begin to create positive relationships is to provide people with the time and space to meet each other. Though this trip was only ten days, Istanbul provided us with a

neutral location for interaction to begin to see each other through a more human lens. The students on the program were able to focus on individuals rather than the collective conflict. I think this was a very significant experience for the Palestinians, especially those who had never had positive contact with Jews.

In the end, the most significant thing I gained from this experience was direct insight into Palestinian identity (at least that of residents of East Jerusalem and the West Bank). I am friends with Israeli-Arabs on campus and have read everything from Antonius to Darwish, Habiby to Nusseibeh, but this trip filled in the



THE SULTAN AHMED Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque, in Istanbul, Turkey the group visited.

blanks of my perception of Palestinians in a way that no amount of reading could. My conversations with the Al-Quds students combined into a crash course in understanding what a person experiences by living in the West Bank and how people there perceive the rest of the world from their position. Getting to know such a diverse group of students, all of whom live under differing conditions and circumstances, has given me the impression that Palestinians are as diverse as any other people. However, no matter what one's political affiliation, occupation, area of residence, religion, or gender is, there is a common core of culture and identity, and to a lesser extent a common national memory of the conflict. I returned home from Istanbul with a new type of cautious optimism about the future.

Suggested Further Reading

No Trumpets, No Drums: A Two-State Settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by Mark A. Heller and Sari Nusseibeh. Hill and Wang. October 7, 1993.

Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life by Sari Nusseibeh and Anthony David. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. March 29, 2007.