Discovering Israel At War
The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel in Summer 2014

Gaza Fighting Intensifies as Cease-Fire Falls Apart

Birthright Trips To Israel Continue Despite Mideast Conflict

Airlines Suspend Flights to Israel After Hamas Rocket Falls Near Main Airport
The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high-quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.
Discovering Israel at War

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The present study is part of a program of research designed to examine the trajectory of Jewish identity among a generation of young adults and to understand the role that Taglit plays in fostering it. We are grateful to Taglit’s professional leadership and consultants, including Gidi Mark (CEO), Prof. Barry Chazan (Educational Consultant), Prof. Gil Troy (Chair, Education Committee), Prof. Ada Spitzer (Vice President), and Dr. Zohar Raviv (Director of Education) for continuing to encourage our work and allowing us to function as independent scholars. In addition, we thank Taglit’s founding philanthropists, Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, whose efforts to create Taglit made this endeavor possible.

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Executive Summary

The present report, focusing on findings from a study of summer 2014 Taglit-Birthright Israel applicants and participants, is the latest in a series of studies examining the short-term impact of the Taglit. The findings are derived from a pair of online surveys conducted with applicants and participants both before the trip (March 2014) and after the trip (August-September 2014).

For Taglit, summer 2014 was notable for three reasons. First, the summer trips attracted more than 40,000 applicants from North America, the largest group of applicants from this region since the program’s inception. Second, for the first time, applicants who had had a peer educational experience in Israel during their high school years were eligible to apply to the program. This group constituted about 12 percent of the entire applicant pool for the summer trips. Both of these factors contributed to a highly diverse applicant pool in terms of their Jewish involvement and engagement with Israel. Third, the program occurred during a six-week war in which missiles were fired from Gaza into Israeli population centers and Israel responded with a military intervention in Gaza, “Operation Protective Edge.”

In addition to describing participants’ reactions to the trip and the short-term impact of Taglit, the report focuses on:

- Understanding the degree to which the change in the applicant pool affected perceptions of the trip experience and the impact of the trip itself on connection to Israel and sense of Jewish identity.
- Understanding the impact of the conflict in Gaza on trip experiences and trip impact.

Among the findings:

- Participants viewed the trips very favorably. They highly rated the bus atmosphere, the tour guide, and the mifgash experience.
- Participants stressed the educational value of the trip. Eighty percent viewed the trip as “very much” a learning experience and 58 percent said the trip was “very much” a life-changing experience. Participants, overall, reported that the trip included thoughtful discussion of Jewish history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Participants demonstrated significant increases in connection to Israel, their Jewish identity, and their Jewish community as a result of the combined influence of the Gaza conflict and the Taglit trip.
- Both participants and nonparticipants demonstrated high levels of support for Israel and its actions during Operation Protective Edge, with participants demonstrating higher levels of support: seventy percent of participants said they “very much” felt support for Israel compared to 61 percent among nonparticipants. Even among those who described themselves as “Extremely liberal” or “Liberal,” levels of support for Israel were high: 52 percent “very much” felt support for Israel and 28 percent reported feeling “somewhat” supportive.
- Those who had had a peer educational experience in Israel during their high school years and were newly eligible for Taglit had...
very similar Jewish backgrounds to those who had visited Israel under other circumstances (e.g., visits with family) and had always been eligible for Taglit.

- There was no evidence to suggest that the inclusion of newly eligible individuals detracted from the experience of other participants. Both those with and without prior Israel experience had very positive views of the trip. The majority of those with prior Israel experience found the trip to be “very much” a learning experience, an intellectually engaging experience, an encounter with the real Israel and a life-changing experience, and most said that the trip included thoughtful discussions about Jewish ideas and values, Jewish history, and Zionism. Scores on these measures were even higher among participants who had never been to Israel, likely due to their lack of prior exposure to these topics.

- Participants who were on trips during Operation Protective Edge were more likely to report that they were concerned about safety compared to those who were in Israel earlier that summer, yet for the most part they did not feel personally threatened. Those who were on the trips during Operation Protective Edge were more likely to report that the trip included thoughtful discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict compared to those who participated earlier in the summer.

The present study represents a short-term assessment of the impact of Taglit. The degree to which participation in Taglit during a period of conflict affects long-term outcomes is still to be determined. What is clear, however, is that the 2014 summer participants were dramatically affected by their experience. How they maintain their connection with one another and engage with Israel on an on-going basis will be the focus of further study.
Discovering Israel at War

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 Baptized in blood: the generation gap in Aliyah and Israeli Citizenship

Acholi, Those Who Have to Return: Encounter and Emancipation in South Sudan

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- The findings show that participation in the program did not reduce the experience of the other participants. Those who had never visited Israel before Taglit and those who had visited, expressed positive attitudes towards their participation in Taglit. A lower percentage of participants who had already visited Israel reported that the trip was a "very significant educational experience, an intellectually exciting meeting with authentic Israel, or an experience that changed their lives. Similarly, a lower percentage of participants from this group reported that the program included in-depth discussions on Jewish and Israeli values, history, and Zionism. It may be that the reason for this is their early exposure to the topics mentioned above.

- Participants who stayed in Israel during Operation Cast Lead reported that they were more concerned about their safety than those who visited Israel earlier in the summer, but in general, they did not feel personally threatened. Participants who stayed in Israel during Operation Cast Lead reported that the program included more in-depth discussions on Jewish and Israeli history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than participants who visited Israel earlier in the summer.

- Research was conducted to examine the impact of the Taglit program within a short time frame. It remains to be seen how participation in the Taglit program during wartime affects the participants in the long run. It can be said for sure that the participants of summer 2014 were significantly affected by the experience they went through. Future research will examine the extent to which the relationships formed among the participants themselves and the way they continue their connection to Israel.
Summer 2014 marked a turning point in Taglit-Birthright Israel’s reach among young adult Jews in Canada and the United States. More than 40,000 eligible applicants, the largest group ever from North America, sought to participate in one of Taglit’s ten-day peer educational trips to Israel. Despite the violence that broke out between Israel and Hamas during the summer, more than 20,000 North American participants visited Israel under Taglit’s auspices. The participant group was eight percent larger than the summer 2013 participant group and was the second largest cohort ever (matched only by the 2008 cohort, which was the first after a dramatic program expansion).

One reason for the increase in the number of applicants in summer 2014 is that eligibility requirements were altered to allow applicants who had had a prior peer educational experience in Israel during their high school years to participate in the program. This group constituted about 12 percent of the entire applicant pool for the summer trips. Although the applicant pool had always included individuals who had previously been to Israel (e.g., on family trips, etc.), this change increased the overall proportion of applicants with prior Israel experience compared to previous years. At the same time, the absolute number of applicants with no Israel experience increased, and both developments contributed to the record high application rates. The degree to which this change in the applicant pool impacted the program is examined in this report both with respect to perceptions of trip experience and to the impact of the trip on connection to Israel and Jewish identity.

The summer of 2014 was poised to be the largest and most inclusive of trips, but Taglit was faced with challenges in operating the program under the cloud of renewed violence between Israel and Hamas. A six-week war began in early July, during which missiles were fired from Gaza into Israeli population centers, and Israel responded with a military intervention in Gaza called “Operation Protective Edge” (*Tzuk Eitan*). Although no trips were cancelled due to the situation, a number of participants elected to withdraw from the program. Participants who were in Israel in July and August experienced trips that were to some extent different from trips that took place earlier in the summer, and itineraries were changed to accommodate security concerns.

In addition, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians took center stage in the educational curriculum and in discussions among trip participants, leaders, guides, and Israelis. The summer 2014 conflict in Gaza also brought the situation in Israel to the forefront of media attention worldwide. Although, overall, U.S. young adults seemed to be critical of Israel’s conduct in the war, a study of 2011-2013 Taglit applicants conducted in early August of 2014 revealed that Jewish young adults overall demonstrated strong and positive feelings of connection and support for Israel (Shain, Hecht & Saxe, 2014). Understanding the degree to which both the conflict and Taglit affect feelings towards Israel is a major focus of this report.
The present report, which presents findings from a study of summer 2014 applicants and participants, is the latest in a series of studies examining the short-term impact of Taglit (see, e.g., Saxe et al., 2008). The reported findings are derived from data collected in two online surveys; the first conducted pre-trip, targeting all applicants in March 2014 and the second, targeting participants and nonparticipants in late August and September of 2014. The report examines the characteristics of the applicant pool, the trip experience for those who participated, and the impact of the trip on attitudes to Israel and to Jewish identity using a pre- and post-trip comparison. Because of the unusual situation this summer resulting from the Gaza conflict, special attention is given to understanding the impact of the trip in this context.
The Applicant Pool

The summer 2014 Taglit-Birthright Israel trips attracted over 40,000 eligible applicants from North America, including over 37,000 (92 percent) from the United States and over 3,000 (8 percent) from Canada. This is the largest cohort of applicants in the program’s history. This section describes these applicants in terms of their demographic characteristics and Jewish background.

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of the applicant pool (57 percent) was female. Applicants ranged in age from 18 to 26, with the majority of all applicants (57 percent) being 22 years old or younger. Just over half of the applicant pool consisted of undergraduate students, and another third were college graduates who were either attending graduate school or working (Figure 1). Finally, four percent of Taglit applicants were married or cohabiting.

Jewish Background and Experiences

Taglit applicants included individuals with a wide range of Jewish backgrounds and experiences. Some applicants had no Jewish education, while others had extensive Jewish education. Canadian applicants demonstrated stronger Jewish backgrounds and experiences than U.S. applicants on all measures (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Education status of Taglit applicants

Note: Taglit participants must have completed high school by the time of their trip, but a small proportion of applicants are high school seniors at the time of application. Source: Taglit registration system.
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Figure 2. Jewish background and experiences of Taglit applicants

U.S. applicants can be compared to all U.S. Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26 using data from the Pew Research Center’s 2013 survey of U.S. Jews. The biggest difference between the Taglit applicant pool and the larger population of Jewish young adults was that children of two Jewish parents were overrepresented: 70 percent of Taglit applicants had two Jewish parents, compared to only 51 percent of all U.S. Jews in that age cohort. Another difference was that only 27 percent of Taglit applicants had been to Israel, compared to 39 percent of all Jews in that age cohort. This difference, however, is attributable to the presence of Taglit alumni in the larger population.

Source: Taglit registration system.
Participants and Nonparticipants

About half (53 percent) of the summer 2014 Taglit applicants ultimately participated in a Taglit trip. Among the applicants, several groups were less likely to go on the trip (Figure 3). First-time applicants were less likely to go, as the registration process gives preference to individuals who applied previously. Newly eligible applicants who had already had an educational peer experience in Israel were also less likely to go (see box on page 11). Those with no formal Jewish education, those with Jewish day school education, and those raised Orthodox were less likely to go; those with Jewish supplementary education were more likely to go. These differences, which were largely absent in the first decade of the program, reflect that fact that procedures for assigning applicants to trips have become more complex in recent years.

Figure 3. Characteristics of Taglit nonparticipants v. participants

Source: Taglit registration system.
Applicants Who Had Already Been to Israel

Historically, Taglit’s eligibility criteria excluded individuals who had already had an educational peer experience in Israel. However, a small proportion of applicants who had already been to Israel—usually on family trips—have always been included in the applicant pool. Starting with the summer 2014 trips, individuals who already participated in an educational peer experience in Israel also became eligible for Taglit, provided that the experience lasted no more than three months and occurred before the applicant turned 18.

The increase in the number of applicants to the summer 2014 trips compared to summer 2013 was due in part to the change in eligibility criteria. Nearly 5,000 applicants were newly eligible to the program. There was, however, also an increase among those who were previously eligible to the program (Figure 4). Although the proportion of applicants with prior Israel experience was larger in summer 2014 than in previous years, applicants with no Israel experience still constituted the majority of all applicants.

Figure 4. Prior Israel experience of Taglit applicants: Summer 2013 and summer 2014

Applicants with prior Israel experience—including both newly eligible applicants and always eligible applicants—had significantly stronger Jewish backgrounds than applicants with no Israel experience. However, among applicants with prior Israel experience, the newly eligible and always eligible applicants were very similar in terms of their Jewish backgrounds (including parental inmarriage and Jewish education). In examining the impact of the Taglit trip, all applicants with prior Israel experience are thus considered as a single group. However, to examine their impressions of the trip, the newly eligible applicants and always eligible applicants are considered separately.
The majority of the summer 2014 Taglit trips took place prior to the onset of the conflict between Israel and Hamas and Israel’s military intervention in Gaza, Operation Protective Edge. Nearly a third of all participants, however, were in Israel during military operations. For some participants, travel plans or itineraries were disrupted by the conflict. This section will describe participants’ overall impressions and evaluations of the trip, the role of the mifgash, the “encounter” with Israelis, and the nature of trip extensions. However, due to the context in which these trips took place, special attention will also be paid to understanding the experiences and impressions of those participants who were in Israel during Operation Protective Edge.

Overall Impressions and Evaluations

To evaluate the perceived quality of the trips, participants were asked a series of nine questions focusing on the quality of the bus community, the Israeli tour educator, and the mifgash (encounter) experience. These questions were combined into a general index of trip quality. Scores were very high across the board, with a mean quality score of 2.6 on a scale of 0 to 3.

Participants also reported very positive views of their trip (Figure 5). Fifty-eight percent said it was “very much” a life-changing experience, and an additional 23 percent said it was “somewhat” a life-changing experience. In contrast, only a small minority felt it was even
“somewhat” a disappointment. Furthermore, the most prominent views of the trip related to learning. Most participants described the trip as a learning experience, an intellectually engaging experience, and a group Jewish experience—indicating that the trip provides high-quality Jewish education.

Participants were also asked about the substance of their learning (Figure 6). Two-thirds of participants said that the trip “very much” included thoughtful discussions about Jewish history, and nearly that many said that the trip “very much” included thoughtful discussions about Jewish ideas and values as well as contemporary Israeli society.

**The Mifgash**

Every Taglit trip includes a *mifgash*, an “encounter,” with Israelis who join the trips for five to ten days. These Israelis are roughly the same age as the Taglit participants and are usually IDF soldiers. Sixty-five percent of participants said that they interacted “very much” with the Israelis who joined their bus, and another 25 percent said that they interacted “somewhat” with the Israelis. Participants described their interactions with the Israelis as overwhelmingly positive, leading to feelings of personal connection with their Israeli peers (Figure 7).

**Figure 6. Extent to which the trip included thoughtful discussions about…**

![Bar chart showing the extent to which the trip included thoughtful discussions about various topics.]

Note: Taglit participants only.
Figure 7. Extent to which interactions with the Israelis on the bus…

Prior to the trip, about half (53 percent) of participants said that they had no friends living in Israel; after their return from Israel, 57 percent of those who had no friends in Israel prior to their trip said that they did have friends living in Israel.

In response to several open-ended questions in the post-trip survey, some participants commented on the impact of the *mifgash* experience:

I never before could empathize with Israelis about the conflict. Connecting with Israeli peers and feeling the pain and frustration of war through them pushed me to understand why Israel needs to exist, and how the conflicts that keep arising continue to complicate matters. I used to describe myself as extremely liberal, and now I’m not so sure.

(female participant, age 25)

After meeting the soldiers and hearing their stories about the war, my heart was 100% with the people of Israel…My Birthright trip has transformed me into a man that is very passionate about Jewish culture and the events that are happening in Israel. I’m very confident with my abilities to defend the actions of the IDF:

(male participant, age 22)
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Trip Extensions

Some Taglit participants extend their trips to Israel after the ten-day Taglit program. In the years 2007-10, 25 percent of U.S. participants and 50 percent of Canadian participants chose to extend their trips (Saxe, et al., 2011). The proportions were similar in summer 2014, with 27 percent of U.S. participants and 62 percent of Canadian participants extending their trips. Most participants who extended their trips travelled around Israel (80 percent) or visited friends or family in Israel (77 percent). The participants who were most likely to extend their trips were those with two Jewish parents, those with a Jewish day school education, and those with prior Israel experience. Those who were on the Taglit trips during Operation Protective Edge were less likely to extend their trips.5

Operation Protective Edge

Operation Protective Edge, the Israeli military operation in Gaza, was launched on July 8, 2014 and continued through the summer. Thirty percent of Taglit’s summer 2014 participants were on trips during Operation Protective Edge. Although these participants were more likely than participants who were in Israel before the military operation to feel concerned about their personal safety, the majority were “not at all” concerned. Furthermore, the majority of participants who were in Israel during Operation Protective Edge did not feel personally threatened while on the trip (Figure 8). Participants who were on trips during that time were slightly more likely to keep in contact with their parents while on the trip. Thirty-six percent of participants who were on trips during Operation Protective Edge called their parents every day or almost every day, compared to 22 percent of participants who were on trips before Operation Protective Edge.6

For the most part, participants who were on the trip during Operation Protective Edge had the same impressions of the trip as participants who were on the trip before the conflict began. The only significant, substantive differences between the two groups of participants were that 63 percent of those who were on the trip during Operation Protective Edge said that their trip “very much” included thoughtful discussions about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, compared to only 40 percent of those who were on the trip earlier in the summer. Seventy percent of those who were on the trip during Operation Protective Edge said that their trip very much included thoughtful discussions about Jewish history, compared to only 63 percent of those who were on the trip before.7 It is likely that the conflict in Gaza stimulated discussion of these topics.

When asked how their experience on Taglit-Birthright Israel affected their feelings about the conflict between Israel and Hamas, participants who were on trips during Operation Protective Edge reflected:

Having experienced the rockets and the need to hide in a shelter, I found that the conflict made me much more aware of what living in Israel is like. It also opened my eyes to how biased the news outlets are, and how intensely pro-Palestine the world view of the conflict became. (female participant, age 24)

While my political beliefs didn’t shift, being in Israel during a war with Israelis that I connected with gave me a whole new understanding of the conflict. It became something much more tangible and relatable, not just something I read about in the news. Though I might not agree with many of the actions of Israel against Palestinians, I now completely understand the pride Israelis have for the IDF and their nation. (female participant, age 27)
Figure 8. Perceptions of safety among participants who were on trips before and during Operation Protective Edge (OPE)

Note: Taglit participants only. The differences between those who went before and during OPE in on these two measures were both confirmed statistically by chi square tests with three degrees of freedom: Feeling concerned about safety (p<.001) and feeling personally threatened (p<.01).
Experience of Participants Who Had Already Been to Israel

Like other participants, participants who had already been to Israel before their Taglit trip had very positive evaluations of the Taglit trip. They had a mean score of 2.6 on the general index of trip quality, the same score as participants without prior Israel experience; and more than four-fifths of each group said that the trip was “not at all” a disappointment.

However, participants with prior Israel experience had slightly different impressions of the trip. They were somewhat less likely to say that it was “very much” a learning experience, an intellectually engaging experience, an encounter with the real Israel, or a life-changing experience. They were also somewhat less likely to say that the trip included thoughtful discussions about Jewish ideas and values, Jewish history, and Zionism. These differences are likely a product of the more intensive Jewish educational background of participants with prior Israel experience, including their previous experiences in Israel, which meant that they had already been exposed to some of the content of the trips.

In the post-trip survey, participants with prior Israel experience were asked an open-ended question: “In brief, how did your Taglit-Birthright Israel trip affect you compared to your previous trip(s) to Israel?” Most (86 percent) provided a response. Responses were coded and examined for both newly eligible participants and other participants with prior Israel experience. The most common responses were, first, that the Taglit trip was more educational (25 percent), and second, that the Taglit trip allowed the participants to make friends and connect with a group (17 percent). Both of these responses were more prevalent among the applicants who had not yet had a peer educational experience in Israel. For example:

On my previous trips I had been to Israel to visit family, but when I went on Taglit I was able to experience Israel as a tourist. I was able to see the parts of Israel my family never took me to. I was able to connect to a whole new family of Americans and Israelis with mixed knowledge and values on Jewish culture and Israel.
(female participant, age 18)

(Taglit) was more educational, as well as spiritual, and I actually felt closer to Israel as a whole. This trip allowed me to see Israel as a young adult with other people who share the same values as me and together we were able to learn and experience the country as a community.
(female participant, age 23)

Among the newly eligible applicants, who had already had an educational peer experience in Israel, another common response was that they were more mature at the time of the Taglit trip and, thus, able to appreciate it more than their previous trip. Twenty percent of newly eligible applicants mentioned this difference. For example:

It gave me the ability to gain a deeper appreciation of Israeli life and culture as an adult (instead of my cursory introduction as a teenager). It also opened the door to re-evaluating my relationship to both Israel and my Jewish life stateside.
(female participant, age 25)

It is also worth noting that, although the majority of responses were positive, the newly eligible applicants were significantly more likely to be in the minority that said the Taglit trip was less educational or worse in some way than their previous trip.
The Impact of the Trip

This section explores Taglit’s impact on participants’ connection to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish community. Because the time between the pre-trip and post-trip surveys encompassed both the Taglit trips and the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, this section also addresses the impact of the conflict on both participants and nonparticipants. As noted earlier (see page 10), a larger proportion of nonparticipants had been to Israel, had a Jewish day school education, and were raised Orthodox. Thus, before the Taglit trip, nonparticipants were more strongly connected to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish community than participants. To isolate the impact of the trip itself, it is thus necessary to look at how participants changed between the pre- and post-trip surveys, relative to how nonparticipants changed over the same period. Any change observed in the nonparticipant population during this period can likely be attributed to the impact of the Gaza conflict, and it can be imagined that participants would have experienced a similarly sized percentage change even if they had not gone on the trip. However, any additional change among participants, above and beyond what was experienced by the nonparticipants, can be attributed to the impact of the trip itself.\footnote{Note that, in the analyses presented below, Taglit’s impact on participants was the same regardless of whether they were on trips before or during Operation Protective Edge.}

A separate survey conducted in early August of 2011-13 Taglit applicants, and reported elsewhere, indicated that they were concerned about the Gaza conflict and generally supportive of Israel’s actions. Compared to all applicants, Taglit participants were even more supportive of Israel (Shain, Hecht, & Saxe, 2014). The present report bolsters these earlier findings, showing that nonparticipants became somewhat more connected to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish community over the summer months. Participants demonstrated even more dramatic increases on these measures as a result of the combined influence of the Gaza conflict and the Taglit trip.

Connection to Israel

In both the pre- and post-trip surveys, applicants were asked to what extent they felt a connection to Israel. Among nonparticipants, the proportion who “very much” felt a connection to Israel increased from 33 percent to 39 percent. Among participants, that proportion increased much more dramatically, from 24 percent to 52 percent (Figure 9). While the Gaza conflict contributed to both participants and nonparticipants feeling more connected to Israel, going on Taglit had an independent effect of greatly amplifying these feelings for participants.

The frequency of seeking news about Israel and confidence in explaining the situation in Israel also increased dramatically as a result of the Gaza conflict; for participants, these measures increased even more as a result of the trip. Both participants and nonparticipants showed dramatic increases in news consumption, with participants showing a slightly stronger increase (Figure 10). In the post-trip survey, applicants who sought news about Israel at least once in the past month were asked about the sources from which they sought news. Controlling for pre-trip differences, Taglit participants were far more likely than nonparticipants to use Israeli news media (e.g., Ha’aretz, Ynet, etc.) and slightly more likely than nonparticipants to use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Sixty-two percent of participants used Israeli news media, compared to 51 percent of nonparticipants; and 86 percent of participants used social media, compared to 81 percent of nonparticipants.\footnote{The Impact of the Trip}
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Figure 9. Extent to which feel a connection to Israel

Note: The independent effects of both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B4 in Technical Appendix B.

Figure 10. Frequency of seeking news about Israel in the past month

Note: The independent effects of both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B4 in Technical Appendix B.
Both nonparticipants and participants also showed dramatic increases in their confidence explaining the current situation in Israel (Figure 11). Participants showed a slightly larger increase than nonparticipants.

Applicants were asked about their impressions of Israel in both the pre- and post-trip surveys (Figure 12). Both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were associated with significant increases in the proportion who agreed that Israel is under constant threat from hostile neighbors who seek its destruction, is a world center of high-tech innovation, and was established as a refuge for persecuted Jews. Only Taglit participants demonstrated a significant increase in the proportion who agreed that Israel upholds the social and political equality of all its citizens. On the other hand, participants and nonparticipants demonstrated equal increases in the proportion who agreed that Israel is guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people, indicating that movement on this measure was a result of the Gaza conflict and not the Taglit trip. There was no significant change in the proportion who agreed that Israel is part of God’s plan for the Jewish people.

**Figure 11. Confidence in ability to explain the current situation in Israel**

Note - The independent effects of both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B4 in Technical Appendix B.
Figure 12. “Strongly agree” or “Agree” with various statements about Israel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Pre-trip</th>
<th>Post-trip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel is under constant threat from hostile neighbors who seek its destruction</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel is a world center of high tech innovation</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel was established as a refuge for persecuted Jews</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel upholds the social and political equality of all its citizens</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel is part of God’s plan for the Jewish people</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel is guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *: The independent effect of Taglit participation was confirmed statistically for these items using longitudinal regression modeling; see Tables B5 and B6 in Technical Appendix B.
†: The independent effect of the Gaza conflict was confirmed statistically for these items using longitudinal regression modeling; see Tables B5 and B6 in Technical Appendix B.
Reactions to the Gaza Conflict

In the post-trip survey, applicants were asked a number of questions about the conflict in Gaza. Controlling for pre-existing differences between the two groups, Taglit participants viewed Israel more favorably than did nonparticipants. Thus, Taglit participants were more likely to think that Hamas was most responsible for the conflict (Figure 13), that Israel’s actions in the conflict were “mostly” or “completely justified” (Figure 14), and that Israel’s response was “about right” (Figure 15).

Figure 13. "Who do you think was most responsible for the conflict in Gaza?"

Note: The independent effect of Taglit participation was confirmed statistically using regression modeling. See Table B7 in Technical Appendix B.
The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel

Figure 14. “Do you think the Israeli actions in the recent conflict with Hamas were…?”

Note: The independent effect of Taglit participation was confirmed statistically using regression modeling. See Table B8 in Technical Appendix B.

Figure 15. “What do you think about how Israel responded in the recent conflict in Gaza?”

Note: The independent effect of Taglit participation was confirmed statistically using regression modeling. See Table B9 in Technical Appendix B.
These views of the Gaza conflict stand in stark contrast to the views of all U.S. young adults (see Shain et al., 2014). While the majority of Taglit applicants saw Hamas as most responsible for the conflict, only 21 percent of all U.S. adults ages 18-29 saw Hamas as most responsible (Pew Research Center, 2014). Furthermore, while more than four-fifths of Taglit applicants viewed Israel’s actions as justified, only one-quarter of all U.S. adults ages 18-29 saw Israel’s actions similarly (Jones, 2014, July 24).

In addition to having a favorable assessment of Israel’s actions during the Gaza conflict, Taglit participants also reported feeling positive toward Israel during the conflict. Taglit participants were more likely to feel support for Israel and less likely to feel estranged from Israel during the conflict. This is true even when controlling for pre-existing differences between the two groups (Figure 16).

Finally, Taglit participants were more likely to do something in response to the conflict in Gaza. Fifty-six percent posted or forwarded articles about the conflict and 69 percent tweeted, blogged, or otherwise made public their own thoughts about the situation (compared to 49 percent and 59 percent among nonparticipants, respectively). Twelve percent of both participants and nonparticipants attended a rally or event supporting Israel during the conflict, and a similar proportion in both groups donated to a charity on behalf of Israel.

**Figure 16. Feelings toward Israel during the conflict**

Note: The independent effect of Taglit participation was confirmed statistically using regression modeling. See Table B10 in Technical Appendix B.
What Participants and Nonparticipants say about the Gaza Conflict

At the end of the post-trip survey, participants were asked an open-ended question: “How did your experience on Taglit-Birthright Israel affect your feelings about the conflict between Israel and Hamas?” Most (66 percent) provided a response, yielding over 3,000 individual responses. A random 25 percent of these responses were coded and examined for their content.14

The most common responses were that the trip increased their support for or connection to Israel (37 percent) and that the trip increased their understanding of Israel or Israelis (37 percent). Other common responses were that the trip made them feel more connected to the conflict because of personal connections made with Israelis during the trip (14 percent) and that the trip motivated them to learn more about Israel (13 percent). While many of these comments expressed unqualified support for Israel and its actions in Gaza, others emphasized the complexity of the situation:

Before the trip, the only view I had was based on the news we received here in North America. My Taglit experience really filled me in on both sides, and where the conflict started from. It made me better understand the viewpoint of Israel and its needs to defend itself. It became very clear that in this situation, Israel is being actively threatened and doing what it can to curb serious security concerns against the country and its people.
(male participant, age 26)

Being there at the beginning of the war, and being with the soldiers on our trip, brought out a profound understanding of what Israel goes through every day when these wars break out. I developed an even stronger feeling of unity with Israel and the Israeli people.
(male participant, age 26)

I understand it much better now and feel much more connected to what is going on in Israel. Whether I agree with what Israel is doing or not, I understand where they are coming from and the kind of pressure they feel around them. I feel much more qualified to have discussions about Israel and the conflicts they engage in. Going to Israel has allowed me to form deeper, more nuanced opinions about Israel and given me confidence to express them to Jews and non-Jews alike.
(female participant, age 23)

These impacts can also be seen in the pre- to post-trip increases in the proportion of participants who “very much” feel a connection to Israel (Figure 9) and feel confident in explaining the situation in Israel (Figure 11).

In the post-trip survey, nonparticipants were asked an open-ended question: “Do you have anything to add about your feelings with respect to the conflict between Israel and Hamas?” About one-fifth (22 percent) provided a response, and these responses were coded and examined for their content.15 About 30 percent expressed unqualified support for Israel:

Israel is completely justified in defending itself and its people and taking whatever means necessary to do so.
(female nonparticipant, age 18)

Only 4 percent of nonparticipants expressed unqualified criticism of Israel, but another 20 percent of nonparticipants expressed a more nuanced view. Among these more circumspect comments, a common theme was that Hamas does not represent the views of the Palestinian people:

I think that both sides have done bad and I do feel a little bit for both sides. However, when I say both sides I mean both the Israeli people and the Palestinian people, not Hamas.
(female nonparticipant, age 20)
Impact of the Gaza Conflict on Liberal Jewish Young Adults

Some observers have suggested that the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has caused distancing from Israel among politically liberal Jewish young adults. Journalism professor Peter Beinart, for example, has described the war as an “equal opportunity radicalizer” that “pushed hawkish Jews further right and dovish Jews further left” (Beinart, 2014). Data collected from Taglit participants and nonparticipants before Operation Protective Edge did indicate that applicants who identified as “liberal” or “extremely liberal” reported feeling somewhat less connected to Israel than their peers who identified as “slightly liberal” or “moderate” and substantially less connected to Israel than their peers who identified as conservative (Figure 17). However, data collected from these same individuals after Operation Protective Edge indicated that applicants across the political spectrum—including those on the extreme left—showed substantial increases in connection to Israel as a result of the conflict in Gaza (Figure 17). The Gaza conflict did not widen the gap between liberals and conservatives; instead, it increased connection to Israel among both groups.

Figure 17. Extent to which feel a connection to Israel by political orientation

Note: The independent effect of the Gaza conflict for those of different political orientations was confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B13 in Technical Appendix B.
Furthermore, although the most liberal applicants were less likely to feel support for Israel and more likely to feel estranged from Israel during the conflict in Gaza, over half (52 percent) of the most liberal applicants “very much” felt support for Israel, and almost half (46 percent) reported feeling “not at all” estranged from Israel (Figure 18). Strong feelings of estrangement were relatively rare, even among the most liberal applicants.

Note: The relationship between political orientation and support for Israel and the relationship between political orientation and estrangement from Israel were both confirmed statistically by chi square tests with 6 degrees of freedom. In both cases the chi square tests were significant at p<.001.
Jewish Identity and Community

The Taglit trip is meant to increase participants’ connections not only to Israel, but also to Jewish identity and Jewish community. Taglit participants did demonstrate significant increases in feeling part of a worldwide Jewish community (Figure 19) and feeling a connection to Jewish history (Figure 20). Nonparticipants also demonstrated smaller, but still significant, increases in these items, as well as in their feelings of connection to their local Jewish community, to Jewish traditions and customs, and to their Jewish peers. This indicates that the Gaza conflict strengthened Jewish identity for North American Jewish young adults as a whole.

Figure 19. Extent to which feel part of a worldwide Jewish community

Note: The independent effects of both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B12 in Technical Appendix B.
The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel

Figure 20. Extent to which feel a connection to Jewish history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-trip</th>
<th>Post-trip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The independent effects of both Taglit participation and the Gaza conflict were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. See Table B13 in Technical Appendix B.

Taglit’s Impact on Participants Who Had Already Been to Israel

Did the trip have a different impact on participants with prior Israel experience, compared to those with no prior Israel experience? In terms of most outcomes—feelings of connection to Israel, frequency of checking news about Israel, confidence in explaining the current situation in Israel, Israel as a world center of high-tech innovation, Israel as under constant threat, and Israel as guilty of violating human rights, feelings of connection to Jewish history, feeling part of a worldwide Jewish community—Taglit had a smaller impact on participants with prior Israel experience. This is likely because of a “ceiling effect”: participants with prior Israel experience had more pro-Israel views before the trip began, and thus had less potential for impact.17
Antisemitism

One somewhat surprising finding from the post-trip survey was the extent to which Taglit applicants viewed antisemitism as a problem around the world. Fully 41 percent said that antisemitism was a fairly or very big problem in the United States; 69 percent said the same about both Eastern and Western Europe; and 86 percent said the same about the Middle East (Figure 22). Anti-Semitism was also a topic that arose among nonparticipants when they were asked in an open-ended way about their feelings with respect to the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Survey respondents offered these thoughts:

I am appalled at how the world reacts to Israel and ignores the atrocities committed by Hamas and always forgets how far Israel has always been willing to go out of its way for peace. I never realized people still hate Jews this much until this war.
(male nonparticipant, age 19)

I hadn’t realized just how virulent and pervasive anti-Semitism still was in the modern world before reading about Europeans’ reaction to this conflict. Obviously, Israel didn’t do enough to minimize civilian casualties, but the vitriol spewed against the country and against the Jewish people was appalling—the violence and the vandalism even worse.
(male nonparticipant, age 27)

Once I returned to the States and the conflict worsened I felt extreme anti-Semitism coming from several outlets, including people I am friends with on Facebook. This reaffirmed and even increased my strong belief in the importance of the Jewish state. I plan on returning to Israel for a longer period of time (10-month program) after I graduate with no doubt.
(female participant, age 20)
The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel
The summer 2014 Taglit trips to Israel attracted not only the largest, but the most diverse pool of applicants in the 15-year history of the program. Among the more than 40,000 applicants from North America who met the program’s eligibility criteria were those with little or no prior Jewish education or engagement with Israel, those with some education and involvement, and those with substantial prior engagement with Jewish life and Israel. Initially, there was concern about Taglit’s ability to manage an educational program of this scale, particularly given the wide gaps between the participants in terms of Jewish background. Later, the concern shifted to whether or not the program could continue to operate in the face of the violent conflict between Israel and Hamas. Taglit had to ensure the safety of a very large number of young adults, most of whom had never experienced a country at war and who came with tenuous ties to their Jewish identities. Simultaneously, Taglit had to adapt its educational program to help participants understand what, after July 7, became a rapidly changing situation.

By the end of the summer, more than 21,000 individuals from the applicant pool had participated in a Taglit trip. The present evaluation of the summer trips, based on data collected from applicants both pre- and post-trip, provides an interesting and detailed portrait of the impact of the Taglit experience. The findings demonstrate that the concern that these particular trips would not be as successful was unwarranted. The trips were effective in meeting their educational goals and in engaging participants with their Jewish identities and Israel. If anything, the circumstances of this summer enhanced the efficacy of Taglit’s educational program by provoking a deeper understanding of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

The mifgash element of the trip played a particularly powerful role in this regard.

The pre- and post-trip data collected in this study also provide a glimpse into how young American Jews as a whole reacted to the conflict between Israel and Hamas, a subject which has engendered much speculation in the media. First, public opinion polls of the general U.S. population showed American young adults as generally unsympathetic to the Israeli position. Was this the case for Jewish young adults, as well? On the contrary, the present report shows that nonparticipants became somewhat more connected to Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish community over the summer months. Participants demonstrated even more dramatic increases in connection as a result of the combined influence of the Gaza conflict and the Taglit trip. These findings bolster those of a survey of 2011-13 Taglit applicants conducted in early August, which indicated that Jewish young adults were concerned about the Gaza conflict and generally supportive of Israel’s actions (Shain et al., 2014).

Second, some commentators have claimed that the summer’s events rallied “hawkish” Jewish young adults but alienated the “dovish” (Beinart, 2014). The data presented here clearly indicate connection to Israel increased over the summer among Taglit applicants from across the political spectrum, including the most liberal applicants. Furthermore, even among the most liberal applicants, only a very small minority reported feeling strong feelings of estrangement from Israel during the conflict. Thus, the data indicate that the Gaza conflict increased levels of connection to Israel among young Jewish adults, regardless of political orientation.
These findings on the war’s impact in the United States help to resolve an enduring mystery in the study of American Jewish opinion. Observers of the American Jewish scene have long disagreed about the impact of Israel’s recent wars—which have engendered contentious media commentary in the United States and Europe—on diaspora Jewish opinion. One perspective holds that the younger generation, having grown up in the context of negative media coverage of the Second Intifada and 2006 Lebanon war, has become less connected to Israel (Cohen and Kelman, 2007). In this view, Israel’s recent conflicts have served to alienate young adult American Jews from the Jewish state. The other perspective holds that Israel’s recent wars, no less than the 1967 Six Day War or the 1973 Yom Kippur War, prompt American Jews to set aside their chronic disagreements over Israeli policies and express broad solidarity with the Jewish state (Rosenthal, 2001). The present research comes down squarely on the side of the latter perspective, suggesting that Israel’s “hot” conflicts with its neighbors spark unity rather than division, at least in the short term that we were able to measure.

The present study represents a short-term assessment of the impact of the Gaza conflict on Jewish young adults and the impact of Taglit on participants. How long the elevated feelings of connection to Israel that followed the conflict will persist, and the degree to which participation in Taglit during a period of conflict affects long-term outcomes, is still to be determined. Future studies will investigate how Taglit’s 2014 summer participants will maintain their connections with one another, with Israel, and with the less well-educated young Jews who form the majority of the population served by Taglit.
Notes about Methodology

The findings reported here are derived from a pair of surveys conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. The pre-trip survey was conducted in April 2014, and the post-trip survey was conducted in August-September 2014. Data from both surveys were collected via online questionnaires, and respondents to each survey were offered an opportunity to win one of two $100 Amazon.com gift cards. All 40,619 eligible applicants to summer 2014 Taglit trips were surveyed, including those who applied to go on the trip but did not go. For the post-trip survey, some individuals were called and encouraged to complete the survey online. A total of 12,948 individuals responded to the pre survey, and 6,315 responded to the post survey. The response rate for the pre survey was 31.88% and the response rate for the post survey was 15.58% (AAPOR Response Rate 4). Weights were calculated to adjust for differences between the characteristics of respondents and known characteristics of the population and were applied to each analysis as appropriate. Additional Methodological information can be found in Technical Appendix A. Throughout the report, where descriptive statistics (such as two-way tables of frequencies) are presented, the substantive relationships between the variables has been confirmed by a number of more sophisticated analytic paradigms, including regression analysis and multi-level modeling to account for repeated observations of the same individual over time. The results of all these additional analyses can be found in Technical Appendix B.
Notes

1 See Figure B1 in Technical Appendix B.
2 See Table B1 in Technical Appendix B for a logistic regression model which describes factors associated with Taglit participation.
3 See Figure B2 in Technical Appendix B. The relationship between Jewish background and prior Israel experience is also documented using multinomial logistic regression, presented in Table B2 of Technical Appendix B.
4 To what extent… Did your bus feel like a group of friends? Did your bus feel like a community? Did the group atmosphere enhance your experience? Was your Israeli tour guide friendly? Did your Israeli tour guide create a feeling of community on the bus? Was your Israeli tour guide open to concerns and questions? Did your interactions with the Israelis on your bus lead to personal connections? Did your interactions with the Israelis on your bus make you feel connected to your Israeli peers? Did your interactions with the Israelis on your bus make you aware of what you had in common?
5 See Table B3 of Technical Appendix B for a logistic regression model which describes factors associated with extending the trip.
6 This difference for participants who were on the trip during Operation protective Edge was confirmed statistically by a chi square test with three degrees of freedom (p<.001).
7 The differences discussed for participants who were on the trip during Operation protective Edge were confirmed statistically by logistic regression modeling. The results of these analyses are available upon request.
8 The differences discussed for participants with prior Israel experience were confirmed statistically by logistic regression modeling. The results of these analyses are available upon request.
9 Two hundred responses were coded by two unique raters, and the Cohen’s $\kappa$ coefficient measure of inter-rater agreement was calculated. Almost all codes had excellent inter-rater agreement ($\kappa > 0.75$). The remaining responses were coded by a single rater.
10 See Figure B3 in Technical Appendix B.
11 This form of analysis is known as “difference in differences.” The figures presented in the body of the report reflect cross-tabulations of pre- and post-trip survey responses for participants and nonparticipants. The results of the analyses presented in this report were confirmed using more sophisticated statistical techniques, including multi-level regression analysis, which accounts for the clustering of multiple observations within individuals, and controls for the impact of additional background variables. Tables showing the results of these analyses can be found in Technical Appendix B.
12 These findings were confirmed statistically using regression modeling. Regression analysis results available upon request.
13 These findings were confirmed statistically using regression modeling. Regression analysis results available upon request.
14 See Figure B4 in Technical Appendix B.
The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel

15 See Figure B5 in Technical Appendix B.

16 See Tables B12 and B13 in Technical Appendix B.

17 The findings discussed in this section about Taglit’s impact on those with prior Israel experience, and those who were in Israel during Operation Protective Edge were confirmed statistically using longitudinal regression modeling. Regression analysis results available upon request.
References

Beinart, P. The Israel conversation that Jewish leaders aren’t willing to have. Haaretz, October 14, 2014. http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-1.620778


The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI), hosted at CMJS, uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.