



# **Ibrahim & Queens College Student Leadership and Dialogue Middle East Program**

## **Impact Statement**

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The Middle East is no longer the same. I have come to realize that prior to my visit, I didn't have a vague, let alone clear, understanding of the present-day conflicts that are defining the Middle East's future. I had perceived that as a Muslim, I understood some of the cultural and religious norms of Islamic Middle Eastern society. Even that was shattered within the first few days of the trip. The Ibrahim & Queens College Leadership Dialogue project transformed my underlying beliefs about Middle Eastern society, economy, and politics, reshaping them within a month's time. From arriving half-asleep in Jordan, to exploring vibrant areas of Israel, to understanding the Israel-Palestine conflict in Ramallah, to connecting peripheral nations with a brief visit in Oman, to leaving energized in Dubai, my mindset of the Middle East was irrevocably altered.

When the trip started, I felt a weak connection to my colleagues partly due to the fact I was unaware of their beliefs and intentions. However, every day provided a number of intellectually stimulating lectures and each lecture provided its own transformative experience. With each lecture, the Ibrahim fellows learned and through the process began to align their beliefs. Each intellectual experience brought us closer together. By the end of the trip, we all had a common set of core beliefs instilled.

The plethora of rich, formative experiences I gained on a daily basis makes it challenging to point to one specific event that stood out. Nonetheless one experience was so compelling, its images remain embedded in my memory. After our first day in Jerusalem, few of the Ibrahim fellows wanted to make a quick excursion to the Temple Mount in order to pray 'Isha, the nighttime obligatory prayer for Muslims. The minutes were numbered and as we rushed to make it to the Al-Aqsa mosque, we were stopped by

three guards, one from the PA and two from the IDF. The two women were allowed entry, but the other three male Ibrahim fellows were prevented from going any further. The guards explained how there was a high chance of violence erupting tonight and to curb any violent outbreak, all males under the age of 40 were not allowed in. With heavy hearts, we accepted our misfortune. But the night was still young. We met two young Palestinian men our age and alongside Ja'far, our Jordanian Ibrahim fellow who spoke fluent Arabic, we had the opportunity to interact with locals affected by the tense situation. Both these men guided us to a vantage point where we could see the Noble Sanctuary/Temple Mount. They expressed their frustrations how they regularly missed prayers in the Al-Aqsa mosque for what they deemed as no reason. They brought us back to the guards where we humbly prayed 'Isha on the uneven, rocky market streets. At the end of prayer, the imam (leader of the prayer) started shouting in Arabic with a dozen or so followers shouting in support "Ameen!" Due to my limited proficiency in Arabic, I could not understand what they were praying for but my senses informed me it was ill-will against the Israeli presence. I felt disturbed that my brothers in faith could have such powerful negative feelings against other humans. I stood up and in an act of compassion, I raised my hand and warmly shook all three guards' hands. I understood they were not trying to oppress civilians. They were following orders in order to promote peace and stability. More shouting resumed, this time directed at me. I glanced around and found it was coming from one of the two men I had met. This time I could discern what he was telling me: "Did you just shake their hands? Do you know what a dog is? They are worse than dogs!" In that outburst, he clearly told me what he thought of the IDF guards I had tried to show kindness towards. Ja'far dashed to my defense and within moments we fled

the tense scene. As we hurried away, I reminisced on the tangible feelings of rage, belittlement, and frustration from the Palestinian side I had felt. I now incorporate those intimate feelings into my perception of the conflict, keeping in mind how volatile the situation really is.

The situation on the Temple Mount was a learning experience but by no means a surprise. I came to Jerusalem expecting religious conflict. However when it came time for a discussion on cultural understanding in the Middle East's most liberal Islamic city, Dubai, I was jaw-dropped from what I heard. The Ibrahim & Queens College fellows had been cordially invited to participate in a casual talk with Nasif from the Sheikh Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding. We all went expecting nothing but the best. In a two-hour time frame, Nasif attempted to argue against scientific fact, belittle women's societal position, and perturbed one Ibrahim fellow to the point of tears. Nasif illustrated that he had become what he was fighting against - he had stereotyped the group's beliefs and had prepared a 'routine' to break them. He treated us as an uninformed group of Americans. Although his presentation came as a shock, it was a rude awakening how one should avoid cultural representations. (\*I hold on to the belief that Nasif represents the minority of speakers who speak in support of cultural understanding based on the follow-up discussion with other attendees.)

Despite describing two saddening experiences, the trip was full of more illuminating discussions, including a talk regarding the viability of Israeli-Palestinian land swaps. The numerous dignitaries and speeches I met and heard helped alter my ideas of conflict transformation and social entrepreneurialism. I came in with the narrow-minded view that the Palestinian and Israeli side were not seriously working on a

resolution because if they were, the conflict would not exist in today's age. The logic falters because it ignores the many complexities that surround the Israel-Palestine conflict. It was with the discussions with the dignitaries specializing in various fields that allowed me to move past simple assumptions and navigate the complexities that surround the conflict. I believed that the Israel-Palestine conflict was not a major part of daily life for Israeli citizens. My stay in Tel Aviv seemed to support this. Once we moved outside the bustling metropolis however, a different narrative unfolded. From the residents of Shilo to the members of Kibbutz Hatzor it became apparent Israeli citizens felt the psychological presence of an imminent threat. Moreover, I understood Palestinian lives were deeply connected to the conflict but I was surprised to find how strongly the conflict [literally] controlled their daily lives.

My perception of the conflict was not the only perception that changed. The group's stay in Dubai showed a more forgotten aspect of Middle Eastern society - social entrepreneurialism. I carried the notion that foreigners typically came to the Middle East to impart their notions of what is socially promising in a profitable way. This notion could not have been more wrong. I met locals who were trying to change society, including an Emirati woman battling child trafficking in the U.A.E. and foreign social entrepreneurs who developed a non-profit plan for sustainable social entrepreneurialism by teaching youth to follow their passions.

The greatest blessing of the trip was the magnitude of resources it exposed me to and the connections it helped me build. I feel it has become a mandate for me to spread the knowledge I have gained with my colleagues in my local community at Penn, West Philadelphia, and even in my hometown in Charleston, West Virginia. With the vast

amount of notes taken during the trip, I plan to filter through them, find the contacts made, and connect with them on an organizational level to facilitate bringing their message to my communities. Whether this will turn out to be through a speaker series through an already established organization or an entirely new organization with a more specific purpose has yet to be determined.

Perhaps the greatest challenge presenting itself is converting my knowledge and experiences into meaningful change. However, the Ibrahim Dialogue project provided such a strong base to work from, the task's difficulty has been diminished. My immediate plans are to return to the University of Pennsylvania and spread knowledge in the interfaith and conflict transformation realm, realms I already have connections in. I will use my position as treasurer on the Muslims Students Association's board to fund events designed for cross-cultural and religious understanding to instill values of coexistence between students. There is no question that my past experiences such as my visit to the Sheikh Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding, will impact how I will direct my presentation. Furthermore, I along with another Ibrahim fellow also attending the University of Pennsylvania have begun talking about implementing the sustainable social entrepreneurialism directive currently being applied in Dubai and transferring the plan to West Philadelphia, in which a crisis of elementary education has ensued in recent years. These plans are just the beginning. There is plenty to fix in the world and with the lessons learned through the Ibrahim Leadership Dialogue Project, I will try to fix them one-by-one.