

**Impact Statement**  
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**Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Project – 2014**

Looking back upon our three-week journey throughout Middle East, it was initially very difficult for me to distinguish, amongst a procession of exciting, gripping, even painful experiences, *the* single most compelling experience from the trip. However, the more I thought through the most notable occurrences on the trip, the more I kept coming back to one moment in particular. Listening to Ahmed Al-Mukhaini during our first morning in Oman, I was struck by his discussion of the Sultanate's prevailing culture of acceptance that traverses religious and ethnic lines.

Of course, considering his position at the Oman State Council, he easily could have been putting forth a clean, favorable generalization. However, the Sultanate's formal prohibition of religious discrimination, in which the act of dishonoring any religious symbol is considered a legal offense, certainly points to an overriding principle of religious tolerance.

He then continued on, speaking of Oman's large population of migrant workers and how this particular demographic is affected by the Sultanate's policy of Omanization. He told us that, although high youth unemployment rates had driven the government to introduce this policy, Oman as a whole attempts to remain accommodating to these migrant workers – albeit smaller, more regulated numbers of them. After all, “migrant workers helped make Oman what it is today,” he told us.

But it was not this discussion in isolation that had such a profound impact on me. Rather, what proved to be so compelling was this discussion of religious and ethnic tolerance in juxtaposition with my experiences in Israel.

A little over twenty-four hours ago, we had been taking our last group walk around the Old City after dinner. Shortly after we began our walk, we ran into a group of young Palestinian boys who soon joined us, speaking mostly to the fluent Arabic-speakers of our group. As we navigated the narrow streets, I noticed that security within the walls had been stepped up; there seemed to be clusters of green uniforms at the turn of almost every corner. While the presence of these soldiers certainly introduced a heightened air of tension, I tried to simply enjoy my last few hours in Jerusalem. However, I couldn't help but notice the small groups of armed soldiers staring back at us, ogling at what certainly must have been – at least, in their eyes – one highly unconventional band of individuals.

We kept walking forward from the Damascus Gate, eventually reaching the Jewish Quarter. The streets were still full with shoppers, and a number of Orthodox Jews hustled past us on their way to pray. As we began to wrap up our walk, one of the boys that had joined us managed to tell me that, in all his life, he had never been inside the Jewish Quarter. To be clear, him telling me this was an amazing feat on his part,

considering my almost laughable Arabic language skills. However, what also amazed me was that, despite his close proximity to virtually every part of this tiny walled city, there existed such a stark cognitive division that even a young boy felt discomfort in venturing into this foreign quarter.

As soon as he revealed this, a number of memories came flooding back – Danny Seidemann’s assertion that, at this moment, a line could be drawn down the Jerusalem municipality without the possibility of anyone crossing it; the realization that the parents of the Bialik-Rogozin School children may be the very people forced to put up with the often-voiced classification of ‘infiltrator’; witnessing the monstrosity of a checkpoint that hordes of Palestinians must pass through to receive medical treatment, visit friends, or simply go to work; even the blatant profiling that our own group faced at Ben-Gurion Airport upon arrival. I believe this was the part of the trip that, for me, was the most surprising and emotionally stirring.

Thus, as I took in Mr. Al-Mukhaini’s reverence for Omani tolerance and coexistence, the realization of a vast disparity in societal ethos swept over me. I suddenly took notice of an intense visceral dissonance, as we shifted from an atmosphere of suffocating rigidity and tension to that of relative tolerance and leniency. In that moment, it became exceedingly clear to me how the ongoing realities of occupation and de facto segregation could promote an inward-looking and paranoid Israeli society. Indeed, it was *proven* to me multiple times during our experiences in Israel and the West Bank. The implicit danger in this paranoia has been made clear during the recent upsurge in violence, where signs of hyper-nationalistic tendencies have begun to materialize. While I desperately want to be proud of a state that millions of Jews today call home, I find that I can only truly be proud of a state that makes *sincere* attempts to function upon the highest possible levels of morality and human concern.

Naturally, the continued occupation is immensely isolating for the Palestinian population as well. Paired with a diminished capacity for many to physically travel in and out of the West Bank and Gaza, the low prospects for socio-economic mobility within the regional and global spheres segregates the Palestinian population from its surroundings. It is clear that a continued occupation is toxic for both Palestinian and Israeli society, for this mutual isolation works to obstruct an overarching culture of coexistence and pluralism.

The aforementioned experience simply reinforced the significance of our three key themes – interfaith relations, conflict transformation, and social entrepreneurialism – and under each of these themes were a number of particular instances that profoundly shaped my overall take-away from the trip.

Beginning with interfaith relations, I was most taken aback by Moshe Halbertal’s discussion of religion, politics, and the relationship between the two. Before our conversation with him, I often found myself wondering if religion truly was the crux of many contemporary issues within the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. I simply couldn't shake the image of radicals on both sides assessing the world and its politics through a lens of extreme religious ideals. However, during Mr. Halbertal's discussion, he began to speak of the rampant phenomenon of individuals politicizing religion.

This assertion struck a chord with me. I realized then that my previous equation of religiously-driven politics could perhaps be reversed – a situation in which religion is usurped and molded to, in the end, attain *political* ends. After all, considering the enduring global conception that land equals power, it is clear that every conflict over land is inherently political in nature. The key issue, therefore, is that individuals use religion as a mechanism to absolutize radical political aims. Suddenly, Mr. Halbertal's call for heightened political participation among dovish, yet observant individuals became all the more profound.

It was our conversation with Khalil Shikaki that, to me, proved most insightful regarding the second theme of conflict transformation. I have always feared the seeming intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this fear was certainly intensified after the fallout of the most recent round of negotiations. However, of all the difficult final status compromises that must be made to reach a two state solution, the one particular final status issue that seemed the most politically and morally taxing was the issue of refugees. For this reason, I was shocked when Mr. Shikaki asserted that, according to his surveys, the Palestinian right of return was not a deal-breaker for the Palestinian population.

He told us that he had conducted a survey of 4,500 refugee families, asking them what their first choice for their exercise of the right of return would be. Of the various commonly-proposed options surrounding the right of return, a return to Israel was chosen by 10 percent. However, when further caveats that likely mirrored today's reality were introduced, only a small fraction of this initial 10 percent wanted to return to their original homes.

Despite the undeniably tragic nature of this reality, these findings certainly injected a bit more hope back into my previously-deflated confidence in the two state solution's final status parameters. I thought back to Danny Seidemann's assertion that the Jerusalem municipality is already divided within the minds of its inhabitants, and then to Dan Rothem's affirmation that a comprehensive plan on borders, including land swaps, has already been worked out by a number of experts. I realized that – in the event that a security arrangement between the key parties could be reached – all four parameters of a final status agreement could, in theory, be met.

Prior to the trip, it was the third theme of social entrepreneurialism that I knew the least about. While a few of my past economics courses introduced me to the role of non-governmental organizations and small business ventures in developing economies, I found I was largely unacquainted with the nature of entrepreneurial ventures in the Middle East in general, and in Israel and Palestine in particular. Stemming from my

involvement with groups like J Street U, my approach to assessing regional occurrences had always been top-down, looking primarily at important political happenings. However, Sami Aburoza's discussion of his disillusionment with top-down diplomacy truly resonated with me, especially in the wake of a failed negotiations process. He spoke of a chronic state of disconnect between the people and the officials that represent them, and asserted that the young people of Ramallah "have a passion to be part of the bigger world." He told us that they have long since realized that "they cannot just blame the occupation, that change and development has to come from within."

This prompted me to revisit our experiences at Rawabi and the Bialik-Rogozin School – the former promoting an environment of development and entrepreneurialism within Palestinian society, and the latter promoting an environment of acceptance and pluralism within Israeli society. Despite their unique aims, both ventures were promoting the same core principle – societal empowerment from the bottom-up. I began to realize that, for a comprehensive and sustainable peace to be reached, one must not simply focus on the politics. Instead, the negotiating bodies and their respective societies must meet somewhere in the middle, putting forth a unified call for prosperity and peace. All of a sudden, I realized just how critical these entrepreneurial ventures were.

Taken together, the lessons I learned on this trip suggest that this conflict may not be as hopeless as it seems upon first glance. Of course, our visit to Shiloh and the outposts, our time in the Qalandia refugee camp, and our various run-ins with the undeniable tension that saturates Jerusalem were certainly sobering and disenchanting experiences. And, of course, the situation on the ground has changed immensely following, first, the uprisings in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and, second, the initiation of a third Gaza war. Certainly, everyone invested in Israel and Palestine will have to thoroughly reevaluate the situation once the immediate violence comes to an end. However, I find some element of comfort in knowing that the core parameters of a political solution remain widely-known and attainable in theory. Moreover, I find even further comfort in knowing that there remain people on the ground who will continue to base their livelihoods on their faith in a more prosperous, pluralistic, and peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis.

From these lessons, I have derived three core objectives that I plan to take back to campus with me: to assure those invested in Israeli and Palestinian futures that, contrary to what some may suggest, a mutually-agreed-upon two state solution is not 'dead' and still remains theoretically attainable; to assist in the empowerment of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices in the political and economic spheres; and to strive for an increased sense of pluralism within Israeli society and the Jewish community at large.

My primary step in applying these three objectives to my campus environment is relaying the various experiences from which these objectives were originally drawn. I currently have an agreement with one of the university's newsletters that allows me to write and submit articles while overseas during my junior year. The goal is to

communicate my experiences in the Middle East, obviously while still remaining politically cognizant and mindful of the content I submit. I plan center a number of articles around my three aforementioned objectives, allowing me to share this knowledge with the Hopkins student body during my time abroad.

In addition, despite my absence on campus, I plan to remain in close contact with the board members of my J Street U chapter at Johns Hopkins. This will provide me with a means of working toward my first objective – assuring the Hopkins student body that a peaceful permanent status agreement can still eventually be reached. We are currently in the midst of planning our first event, which will include a panel of Hopkins professors that are particularly well-versed in the conflict. The primary topics of the panel will be, first, an assessment of where the conflict stands today, and, second, and the prospects for moving forward. Through biweekly Skype conferences with the other board members, I plan to stay highly involved in J Street U's efforts at my university.

Upon my return to Hopkins for my senior year, I have developed a three-pronged approach that will function to address each of my aforementioned objectives. I will continue to address my first objective – promoting a sense of cautious optimism regarding the solvability of the conflict – by continuing my involvement with Hopkins J Street U and J Street U National. While the unpredictability of the conflict prevents me from proposing any concrete strategies for when I return to campus, I plan to resume both my role as co-president of the Hopkins chapter, as well as my involvement in J Street U National's Southeast Regional Leadership team. This way, I can resume my participation in both the formulation and the execution of national campaigns, while at the same time plan chapter-specific events on campus. I feel that by remaining within this particular political niche – or, more specifically, the Jewish American lobby for a more leftist American policy on Israel and Palestine – I can most effectively mobilize myself and others toward an end goal of conflict transformation and resolution.

To address my second objective – assisting in the empowerment of pro-Palestinian voices – I plan have J Street U co-sponsor a large number of events with the Hopkins chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine. While J Street U is fairly well-established on campus and has thus gained a relatively large following, the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter has only recently been started. Therefore, by co-sponsoring these events, it is my hope that Students for Justice in Palestine will gain more recognition among J Street U's left-wing followers who, at this point in time, may be overlooking this organization. Although, organizationally, the viewpoints of J Street U and Students for Justice in Palestine do not align completely, I have been lucky enough to maintain a great working relationship with the president thus far, and I certainly plan to continue this cooperation.

In keeping with the theme of Palestinian empowerment, one specific idea is to co-host a series of events centered around Palestinian socio-economic development. Amongst the many possibilities for this series, I currently envision screenings of

documentaries such as *Two Schools in Nablus*, as well as inviting speakers such as Leila El-Haddad to present at Hopkins. Ms. El-Haddad is an award-winning blogger, documentary co-director, and social activist of Palestinian origin that happens to be know one of the Students for Justice in Palestine members. The experience she, and those like her, have had in social entrepreneurialism would certainly prove to be amazing content for an event.

To address my third and final objective – striving for an increased sense of pluralism within the American Jewish community – I believe that the best place to begin is at my campus Hillel. Our J Street U chapter has continued to maintain a fantastic relationship with our Hillel director. This stems from both frequent communication and the sheer luck of having a particularly left-wing director. However, while we enjoy a wonderful relationship with the Hillel staff, it is J Street U's relationship with many *students* of the Hillel community that proves to be our greatest challenge. The reality is that these students – whom I know as the progressive, tolerant individuals they most certainly are – often seem to check these very values at the door when it comes to a discussion of the Israeli political situation. Thus, I believe that Hillel is the ideal place to strive toward an enhanced sense of plurality within the American Jewish community.

One of Hopkins J Street U's most notable accomplishments during this past year was our hosting of Breaking the Silence within the Hillel building. The event had an impressive turnout, and many students were visibly affected by the presentation's content. More specifically, while some students were reflective, others quickly turned defensive. However, the goal of this presentation had clearly been met – to have our audience seriously contemplate the morality of the Israeli occupation.

The principal assertion of the Breaking the Silence organization – that the occupation is toxic for both Israeli and Palestinian society – aligns entirely with one of my primary conclusions I have drawn from our trip. Furthermore, following the event last year, a number of Jewish students expressed their gratitude that such an event, which catered to their leftist viewpoints, was finally held within Hillel. Thus, I view these events as a significant step in enhancing the ethos of plurality within the Hopkins Hillel community. For these reasons, I see the continuation of these events within the Hillel building as absolutely vital. J Street U anticipates hosting a Breaking the Silence event both this coming academic year and the next, and I would like for this arrangement to continue until it ceases to be needed.

Despite the success of Breaking the Silence at our Hillel, I have been consistently reminded by J Street U students throughout the country that Hopkins' situation remains the exception. Many Hillels throughout the country have turned down proposals to hold manifestly leftist events in their facilities, for fear of the politically divisive and 'controversial' nature of these events. It is for this reason that I plan to begin my involvement in the Open Hillel campaign. Open Hillel is a relatively new, student-run campaign that seeks to change Hillel International's guidelines regarding "standards for

partnership.” As of today, these guidelines prevent Hillels from initiating event co-sponsorship and dialogue with campus groups that support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign.

Quite clearly, these guidelines effectively eliminate dialogue with virtually every pro-Palestinian organization of significance. The exclusionary ideals implicit in these guidelines are hugely significant – while formal Hillel groups cannot create meaningful dialogue with organizations like Students for Justice in Palestine, *Jewish* members of such organizations as Jewish Voices for Peace are themselves barred from the Hillel community. Considering the increased following these organizations have gained in the midst of this third Gaza war, I believe that these guidelines will pose a serious issue within the coming years.

To change this, Open Hillel has created a petition that asks Hillel International to remove its guidelines for the standards of partnership for campus Israel activities. If Open Hillel’s end goal is achieved, campus Hillels worldwide could begin to promote heightened pluralism and tolerance surrounding the issue of Israel and Palestine. Thus, upon my return, I plan to campaign within the Hopkins community for support of this petition. To be clear, I am not certain of Hopkins Hillel’s formal position on this campaign. Thus, I will be mindful to maintain constant communication with our Hillel director, so as to not soil any positive relationships.

It is also worth pointing out that, on the Hopkins campus and beyond, a number these pro-Palestinian advocates are also members of religious and cultural organizations, such as the Muslim Student Association and various Arab student unions. Thus, the elimination of these guidelines would create enormous space for meaningful, albeit politically-oriented, inter-religious and intercultural dialogue.

The reason I know that this inter-religious and intercultural dialogue is certainly something worth fighting for is because we often facilitated this very sort of dialogue during our trip – and it was immensely uniting. Out of our many conversations, I believe that our group bonded most over our emotional conversation in the Jerusalem hotel. Despite my previous admiration of the tolerance, dedication, and overall brilliance of my fellow group members, it was at this moment that my admiration grew tenfold. Never before had I been surrounded by people so passionate about a cause and so willing to speak about something as personal as their own identities. I saw that, regardless of our different backgrounds, interests, and political stances, we were all working toward the same end goal of a more tolerant and pluralistic Middle East. It is *this* kind of conversation that I believe should be happening in campus Hillels and on college campuses more generally. For equipping our generation with a heightened ethos of acceptance is indeed the *only* way to ensure that conflicts fraught with intolerance, such as that in Israel and Palestine, come to an eventual end.