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Impact Statement

1. What was the most memorable and compelling experience from the trip and what makes it stand out?

The most compelling and memorable experience for me was during our stay in Jerusalem. I will never forget the things I saw and the way I felt in this city. As a Muslim, this city is near and dear to me for religious purposes. The Dome of the Rock is where Muhammad ascended into heaven and was given the 5 pillars of Islam from Allah. Jerusalem was also the first qiblah, the place towards which Muslims turn for prayer. The moment we entered Jerusalem, I could already feel a sense of spiritual uplifting. I felt connected to my faith, but I also felt connected to the other Abrahamic faiths that are historically attached to the city—Christianity and Judaism.

To be honest, I had never seen so many Jews and Muslims together in the same area. In Old City, Jews and Muslims literally walk side by side everyday. They are neighbors. That's why it astonishes me how the Jews and Muslims of Jerusalem are able to live side by side and go to prayers everyday in the same place (Old City), pray to the same God, yet still have so much animosity towards each other. In the holy land, there is a culture that breeds hate, and that is the biggest problem that I saw. Both sides are taught to view each other as enemies, not brothers. Both sides claim that the other is transgressing on their land. This kind of mentality leads to deep-rooted hate, and this hatred is taught to children, and passed on. It's rare that you'll see a Jewish boy playing with a Palestinian boy, let alone be friends. I actually struggled with this concept a lot during my stay in Israel. I felt that Jews didn't want to be seen talking to me because it was not normal. That it was not socially accepted for me to be interacting with a Jewish person in public. I guess I was being overly hopeful, but I wanted to erase that stigma. In Tel Aviv, there was a brief moment where I did. Daniel was riding Louisa Kahn's bike and asked if I wanted to hop on. I said of course! So I sat behind Daniel as he biked me down the streets of Tel Aviv. It was a rare sight, an Orthodox Jewish boy and a hijab-wearing Muslim girl riding a bike together. But it was one of the highlights of the trip for me, and it was the way I wish everything could be.

Sometimes I would be walking down the streets of Jerusalem, near Old City, and I would see a fully dressed woman walking ahead of me, and from the back I wouldn't even be able to tell if she was a Muslim or an Orthodox Jew. As I got closer, I would realize she was an Orthodox Jewish woman. We practically looked the same though, and we probably had more things in common than differences. Except, I couldn't just go up to her and start a conversation because she probably hated me without even knowing me. And that's what hurts the most.

I remember Danny Seidemann made a comment about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict saying that, “it started in Jerusalem, and it will end in Jerusalem”. This comment really struck out to me, because I feel as though there is a lot of truth to this statement. There will be no real solution to this conflict without peace in Jerusalem. The heart of this conflict lies in Jerusalem, and from what I’ve seen and experienced there, there is very little room for peace right now. I feel that it is possible, but it has to start internally, as is the case with most conflicts. The people of Jerusalem have to want it, and whether they like it or not, this culture of “hate” has to stop. We must educate love.

When we had made it to Temple Mount and I first laid my eyes on the lustrous gold dome of the Dome of the Rock, I stopped in my tracks without even realizing it. My eyes were fixated on the dome. I had always seen it in pictures and my parents had always talked about it, but I couldn’t actually believe I was there. Some people dream about being in the place where I was at that moment, but they will never have the chance. I, on the other hand, was standing on Temple Mount and it felt incredibly surreal.

I fell in love with Jerusalem. But it’s not a place that I feel safe in. I want to see a Jerusalem where I can walk down the street and smile at a Jewish family, and they’ll smile back at me. I want to see a Jerusalem where, as a hijab-wearing Muslim, I don’t have to fear for my life when I’m walking down the streets of West Jerusalem or be called derogatory words by passing cars—because that’s happened. I want to see a Jerusalem where anyone can enter Temple Mount regardless of their faith, and young people can go pray in Al-Aqsa mosque without being interrogated. Of the entire trip, my time in Jerusalem had the most impact on me. And it’s the reason why now more than ever I want peace in this region.

2. What was the most surprising experience on the trip?

There were many surprises on the trip for me, but I will mention a few very salient moments. The first time I remember being surprised on this trip was in Tel Aviv. I was really taken aback by how modern and secular Tel Aviv was. Except for the Israeli flags and Hebrew writing, I could barely tell I was in the Middle East. I had always imagined most people in Israel to be religious Jews. But in Tel Aviv, that was not the case. In fact, one of the Orthodox Jewish girls on the trip expressed to me how sometimes even she felt uncomfortable going to the beach in Tel Aviv because everyone could tell she was an Orthodox Jew and she would feel judged for it. This really surprised me. I thought, how could a Jew feel uncomfortable in Israel? It turns out it’s possible.

Another thing that surprised me a lot was the amount of tension and fear there is in Jerusalem, as I touched upon previously. It should be noted that we were there during the time right before the third Israel-Gaza war. Tension might have been higher than usual, but there is still obvious polarization in Jerusalem. Not only can you see it, you can literally feel the tension between Muslims and Jews. One of my first encounters with this polarization occurred when we were getting a tour of Jerusalem with Jerusalem expert, Danny Seidemann. At one point Danny took us to the Jerusalem border overlooking a

plot of land called 'E1' in the West Bank. As Danny spoke, we clustered around him. I happened to be on the edge of the cluster. I noticed that not too far away behind me were a couple of Palestinian boys watching us—more specifically, watching me. I naturally assumed they were wondering why I, a Muslim, was with a group of foreigners (even though I was a foreigner myself). I paid them little attention, until I saw them approaching us. They casually walked past us, which relieved me a bit. But the next thing that happened was something that I'll never forget and put a lot of things into perspective for me. We were on a hill with a barrier. The boys went around the barrier and when they were once again in close proximity to me, one of them came up to me and asked, "Are you Muslim?" I replied "Yes." The boy then gave me a thumbs up and said, "You are good." For a moment I just stood there speechless. And then slowly what he said had sunk in, and I began to feel uncomfortable and even embarrassed. This young boy had just validated me based on my religion. He didn't say anything mean or degrade me. In fact, he did quite the opposite. He placed me on a pedestal for being Muslim, and told me that I was following the correct religion. In other words, I was "good" for being Muslim, and Jews were bad for being Jews. I felt uncomfortable for many reasons, one being that I do not see myself as better than a Jew. It would be wrong to say that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is solely a religious one. But to these kids, that's exactly what it is: Muslims fighting Jews. So they view Jews as the enemy, and Muslims as the good people, thus why I was called "good" for being Muslim. So another reason why I felt uncomfortable is because they assumed my political ideologies for me; that since I'm a Muslim I must think Jews are the enemy. But I don't.

And the last reason why I felt uncomfortable is because I was asked this question many times throughout Jerusalem, believe it or not. Whenever I would enter shops in Old City and engage in a conversation with the shopkeepers, many would ask me if I were Muslim. When I said yes, they would often give me a reduced price or a free item for being Muslim. I wasn't annoyed by the fact that I was asked about my religion. I was annoyed because it should not matter if I am Muslim or not. They never asked my Christian or Jewish peers what their religions were.

Another thing I was pleasantly struck by was the culture of tolerance in Oman. Omani people are very open-minded and hospitable. This was proven to me as soon we arrived in Oman. When Talal, our very amiable driver, arrived at the airport to pick us up, Professor Rosenblum was incredibly happy to see him. They greeted each other so warmly (with a chest bump!) and I remember one of the other girls in the group even remarked that she hadn't seen Professor this happy to see anyone besides his niece. Talal was very warm and friendly, but the fact is that most people we met in Oman treated us this way. Even when we arrived in the Omani airport, Customs was incredibly nice to us and the atmosphere was very laid back. We were practically welcomed with open arms. Having just arrived from Israel, where I was stopped and briefly interrogated at Customs, it was a strange feeling to actually be "welcome" into a country. Going from Jerusalem, where tension was ubiquitous, to Oman where it was a foreign concept, was an unusual but pleasant dichotomy. Oman's commitment to tolerance was also proven during our meeting with the Cultural Advisor to the Sultan, Abdul Aziz Al Rowas. He expressed how

Oman is different from other Gulf countries because they are very fond of people who are different from them. Omanis love to meet people who are of a different religion or culture. That was really wonderful and refreshing to hear.

3. What assumptions did you have about the Middle East regarding interfaith relations & religion, social entrepreneurialism and conflict transformation that were proven wrong or somehow altered by the trip?

I didn't realize how big the social entrepreneurship scene in the Middle East is. For example, I was really amazed to see entrepreneurs like Bashar Masri doing innovative projects in the West Bank. Masri is the brains behind Rawabi, the first Palestinian planned city in the West Bank. Considering the lack of resources in the West Bank, you wouldn't have even thought that was possible. Masri admitted there were many problems getting in the way of this project, the biggest ones being access to water and main roads, but he is committed to carrying it out because he knows in the long run it will be worth it and it will drastically improve Palestinian economy and unemployment rate. I was truly stunned. After spending time in Ramallah and Rawabi, I honestly believe there is so much potential in this region—we just have to tap into it. I have hope that this region can flourish and grow given the proper resources, which is not something I could confidently say before.

I was also especially impressed by how many social entrepreneurs in the Middle East are women! Mayadda Abu-Jaber, the CEO at Jordan Career Education Foundation, does amazing work empowering and employing youth and her passion for education is evident. Nisreen Shocair, President of Virgin Megastore Middle East, is another very talented Arab woman who after joining Virgin, revamped it. It was wonderful to see Arab women having such high positions because they serve as great role models for the younger generation. Of course in more conservative regions there is still a lack of women empowerment, but I foresee that slowly changing. One of my favorite entrepreneurs was Suzanne Al Houby, who was the first Arab woman ever to climb Mount Everest, and she is the CEO and Founder of the travel agency, Rahhalah. She was extremely friendly and her courage and bravery to break the status quo as an Arab woman was truly inspiring. When I spoke with her, she was happy to find out that I was Bangladeshi because she had a close friend from Bangladesh who had climbed a mountain with her. She gave me her friend's contact information and insisted that I reach out to her. This small act just goes to show her passion for what she does and her desire to share it with others, which I admire and thank her for.

My biggest assumptions proven wrong on this trip were in regards to conflict transformation in the Middle East. Before this trip, I was never aware of people like Lior Amihai or Dan Rothem and the work they do. Lior is a director of Peace Now Settlement Watch, which is a team that provides information regarding the expansion activities of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Lior took our group into the West Bank where he spoke about the checkpoint conditions, the wall, settlement expansions, and more. We even visited a settlement with him, where we spoke with

Zionist leaders who had very interesting, yet somewhat extreme, narratives. Similarly, Dan Rothen talked extensively about settlements and “land swaps” between Israel and the West Bank. The visuals and maps Dan presented were incredibly thorough and high-tech. I was impressed by both Dan and Lior. They aren’t politicians or anything of that sort, they are just regular citizens of Israel with families of their own who are committed to ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine and bringing peace to this region. They are different than the faces you see on the media.

4. What steps will you take to apply the lessons learned on the trip to your local community, work place or school?

The most important lesson I learned on this trip is that dialogue is crucial. It is crucial for interfaith relations, conflict transformation, and even social entrepreneurship. Dialogue helps us share ideas with one another, and that helps us to connect. Dialogue is essential for interfaith relations because without exposing ourselves to other faiths, we would not be able to understand them. Having this understanding make us appreciate and celebrate interfaith. I’m sure there were some people on this trip, or even on past trips, who had assumptions about Muslims that were proven wrong after the program. Even I, as a Muslim, was astounded to see the diversity of Islam present throughout the Middle East. For instance, Omanis are predominantly Ibadi Muslim while Jordanians are mostly Sunni. Omani culture has elements of Iranian, Yemeni, Indian traditions while Jordanian culture is mixed with Palestinian and Syrian culture.

Dialogue is also crucial for conflict transformation because without it there will never be an end to any conflict. Each side has to understand how the other side views the problem, because as I mentioned before, everyone has a different narrative. When we visited the Shilo settlement, we heard one of the settlers speak about what the settlement means to her and why she felt so connected to the land. Although, I disagreed with a lot of the things she said, I understood her perspective and at times I even empathized with her. I am now more aware of how she views the settlement issue, which is something I’ll always keep in mind when I approach the topic from now on.

And lastly, dialogue is important for social entrepreneurship because entrepreneurialism is all about spreading innovative ideas. Mayyada Abu-Jaber’s organization helps train and employ youth. There are still many undereducated youth who are unaware of the opportunities they have, or are unmotivated by their families to seek out these opportunities. Spreading awareness of these opportunities and the means by which they can be reached is necessary, and that is where dialogue comes in.

With all that being said, I hope to practice more dialogue in my workplace, school, community and I encourage others to do the same. The next time I see a Jewish person or an international Muslim student, I will ask what their religion means to them. When I go to a Penn for Palestine event, I will make the effort to go to a J street and even a PIPAC (Penn Israel Public Affairs Committee) event.

5. How will you share the knowledge you acquired? Note: the power point presentation that you are submitting along with the essay is one way you will be able to share knowledge.

In my opinion, one of the most effective way to pass information is through pictures. I have included a plethora of pictures from my trip on the powerpoint, but I have also posted up an entire album on Facebook. So I would highly encourage people to check out my album. After coming back from the trip, many people who I was merely acquaintances with on Facebook, saw my pictures and was really curious to learn more about my experience. I think that posting pictures on social media sparked many people's interest and they ended up reaching out to me themselves for more information.

Since I also kept a journal of notes containing information about the speakers and their talks, I have offered many people to take a look at it and even borrow it. A close friend of mine borrowed my journal for a few days and was really impressed with the leaders we met and amount of information that was in it. There is no use in keeping the journal to myself, so I would happily let anyone who's interested read it. I also kept a personal blog during the trip. It's not published, and not very organized, but I plan on editing and adding the finishing touches to it so that I can publish it and anyone who wants to experience what the program felt like for me can read the blog.

Lastly, I am also a part of the Penn for Palestine group on my college campus. We have general body meetings every other week. In one of those meetings I plan on presenting my experience in Israel/Palestine and then open up a dialogue afterwards. Anyone would be welcome to join.

6. What specific plans do you have for promoting greater cross-cultural/interfaith understanding, conflict transformation & social entrepreneurialism in your community or school?

After this trip, I have become much more passionate about conflict transformation, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian region. I am interested in promoting it on my campus. To understand the conflict, one would also have to understand the religions that are involve because they play a large role. Thus, interfaith understanding would also be promoted.

I noticed that one of the biggest problems with this conflict is that people are always defensive about their own narrative but fail to listen to other narratives—not to mention, some people don't even have that option. That's why I am so fortunate to have gone on this program because it has allowed me to listen to so many narratives, giving me a more colorful perspective on this conflict rather than a simply black and white one. While it is important to listen, it is equally important to understand and implement. If we are to come up with a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has to be one in which each side understands each other.

Thus, I think it would be interesting to do a type of simulation between people who align themselves as Pro-Israeli and those who identify as Pro-Palestinian where both

sides would switch places, or in other words, swap narratives. This simulation/social experiment would last a semester. In the beginning of the semester, before being swapped, each side would come up with a “solution” to the conflict. Later on during the semester we would meet various times, and over the course of those meetings these two groups would be presented with scenarios representing problems between Israel and Palestine, except the Pro-Israeli students would have to represent the Palestinian side and the Pro-Palestinian students represents the Israeli side. They would have to come up with a solution to the scenarios. Afterwards, we would discuss the solution and thought processes of the students, hopefully to facilitate some dialogue. At the end of the semester, I would ask the students to come up with a “solution” to the conflict again and compare it with the first “solution” from the beginning of the semester. It would be interesting to see how views have changed after the simulation.

7. Was there a moment that you think our group bonded and connected with each other? Or perhaps a series of moments that helped bond the group together?

One of the most meaningful moments of the trip was during our debrief session in Jerusalem. During this session, I was really able to connect with my peers and understand what was going in their minds. I personally was relieved to get a lot off of my chest and help my peers understand better what this trip felt like from my perspective. I learned that some people, especially the more religious people in our group, felt more uncomfortable in some places than the rest of our peers. For instance in Tel Aviv, I felt very uncomfortable because I was constantly getting stared at and I did not feel welcome in most places. However, Christine and Jimmy felt perfectly fine because although they were not Jewish, they did not stand out like me. Also, Daniel opened up about how he felt very self-conscious in the Arab countries we visited because he was visibly Jewish, and that could put him in danger. I, on the other hand, felt the most safest in Arab countries and Christine and Jimmy felt no different than they did in Tel Aviv or any other city. For many people in our group, the fear level was pretty stagnant throughout the trip. But for others, like myself and Daniel, our fear levels shifted depending on which country we were in.

In general, I would also say that the bus rides played a central role in helping us all bond with each other. I don't think any of us ever sat in the same spot or with the same people for too long. We always switched it up. And with long bus rides, you are bound to spark up interesting conversations and connect. Not to mention, after each speaker we would get back on the bus, and this is where we would reflect and comment on our thoughts and feelings with each other. The bus rides were truly the unifying factor, in my opinion. I personally will never forget my conversations with Daniel, Yvette, and Jenny. We would always strike up a conversation about our faiths and I learned so much from them. I hope that I was able to deliver the same about my faith.