

A major misunderstanding of the Israel/Palestine conflict that I had and still struggle to overcome is approaching Israel as a homogeneous monolith. There is little coverage in U.S. news outlets of the mosaic that makes up Israeli politics and the myriad of beliefs held by the electorate. This information deficit creates the impression of a single, united Israel-Jewish force that opposes peace initiatives and supports settlement building in the West Bank. Additionally, most of the reported stances from the Arab world include slogans such as “Death to Israel” and the rejection of Israel’s right to exist. This creates an image of a unified Arab-Islamic force that strives to destroy Israel. Both of these misconceptions further entrench both sides and aggravate religious and national tensions, leading to deep misunderstandings and animosity infiltrating any attempt at constructive dialogue.

One of the great strengths of the Ibrahim Fellowship is its ability to display a more nuanced picture of the conflict, revealing the various beliefs and many actors on both sides who genuinely want peaceful co-existence. Therefore, my impact plan will attempt to address these misconceptions and bring students together so that they may begin to have a constructive dialogue with one another. There are three means by which I will do this:

- 1) I will be working at the Independent Institute, an Oakland based think tank, this summer. I will use my time there to publish op-eds detailing my experience on the Ibrahim Fellowship and hopefully reach out to the many academics and students who read the Independent Institute’s quarterly journals. This step only deals with education, as I will not be actively attempting to bring people together in dialogue. Instead I will be focusing on dispelling common myths surrounding the conflict.
- 2) Throughout the next school year I will be a Resident Advisor in one of the freshmen dorms. There are vibrant Muslim/Palestinian and Jewish communities at Cal and I hope to be able to use my experience to bring these groups together in the dorms in a constructive manner.
- 3) Finally, as a member of the Olive Tree Imitative club here on campus, I will work with OTI to conduct seminars for UC Berkeley’s numerous Jewish and Muslim clubs. These seminars will focus on shedding light onto the “opposing” side and helping the club’s members understand other perspectives towards the conflict. From here I hope to conduct cross-club discussion where two clubs representing “opposing” groups can come together and have a healthy discussion about the issue and why it is important to them and what they see as the biggest barriers to peace. My ultimate goal is to help each side see the other as a companion in the struggle for peace rather than as an obstacle that must be overcome. We will focus on shared interests (for example, economic prosperity, security, and a shared cultural history) in order to show both groups that they have more in common than in opposition.

I hold no illusions that everyone I talk to will be receptive to what I say, but I believe that participating in the Ibrahim Fellowship will give me a one of a kind legitimacy and allow me to connect with students who have personal ties to the region in a way that I otherwise could not. As long as one student is able to see the conflict from a new perspective and realizes the value in dialogue and understanding opposing views, I will have had a positive impact on UC Berkeley’s campus.

Gregory Waters