



British-Arab Exchanges

latest news and events from **BAX**



NEWS EXCHANGE

Spring 2012

Issue No 1

Exciting times ahead

Our friends in the Arab world have been very much in our mind during the momentous political upheavals of 2011. The images of youth protesters holding peaceful rallies in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia and Syria in the face of violence have been broadcast into British homes, showing us the resilience and courage of young Arab people and their communities as they work to bring about change.

BAX had two major initiatives last year: 1) up-skilling youth trainers of Sonaa Al-Hayat in Gaza using the British Council's video-conferencing facilities in London and Gaza (photo below); and 2) hosting a group of Palestinian emerging civil society leaders from the West Bank and Gaza (photo



In addition, we have a new website www.bax.org.uk, a new management team and structure, this new newsletter, and a new chairman, John Battle.

John, a former MP, takes over from Roger Spooner. We thank Roger for all his years of service, and welcome John on board.

We hope the newsletter and website will help us keep in closer contact with all those who have been involved with BAX, whether participants in programmes or hosts, or in any other way. If that is you, then please get in touch and let us know your news.

The BAX team looks forward to hearing from you!



In this issue: -

- Palestinian visit
- Letter from Tahrir Square
- Catching up with our Iraq alumni
- Introducing our new chairman...
- ...and a parting thought from our outgoing one.
- Your chance to get involved.

BAX needs you!

BAX remains a 100% volunteer-run organisation. Without your support we could not carry on our activities. So if you can help we'd love to hear from you! Email us at info@bax.org.uk





Building a Palestinian future – leadership visit

BAX welcomed a delegation of Palestinian civil society leaders to the UK in November. Nine exceptional young people from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem spent two weeks participating in our *Building the Future* Leadership Training Programme.

The group – which included NGO activists, communication specialists and youth trainers -- were selected for their leadership potential, and their track-record of taking initiatives to contribute to their country. They took part in daily training sessions, focussing



on leadership, team-work, inter-personal and communication skills. They also gained a privileged insight into UK society and shared their visions for their homeland during meetings with a wide range of community and national leaders.

During their week in Northern Ireland, they were hosted by the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast and Derry-Londonderry.

They were welcomed by the Speaker of the Assembly,

William Hay MLA (photo right), and were briefed by Assembly members some of whom would not have sat in the same room some years ago.

In London, they met a number of politicians, including Alan Duncan MP, Minister for International Development (photo left) and the Duke of Montrose.

In north London they heard from local councillors about the issues behind last summer's riots, while at the BBC they discussed how to communicate their message effectively in the media.

Commenting on the experience, one of the group said that they had learnt “that change is possible, but not easy - it can take time and starts within oneself”.



BAX would like to thank all those who so generously gave their time and money to make this visit possible. We are dependent on donations from BAX supporters, as well as the time and expertise volunteered by the host team. There is still a shortfall of £1000, so if you would like to donate to the programme, you can either:

- 1) send a cheque payable to ‘British-Arab Exchanges’ to BAX at 12a Norham Road, Oxford, OX2 6SF.
- 2) or donate online via the Big Give on our website or go to: - www.thebiggive.org.uk and search for ‘British-Arab Exchanges’





Return to Ramallah

Amra Amra shares her experience of BAX's leadership training programme last November.

As soon as I reached the Israeli border, I was lucky enough to receive 'special Palestinian treatment'. The border control took my passport and ordered me to sit down. As I sat down waiting for them to call my name, I remembered our trip and what the BAX programme had provided for us; the hope and skills needed for us to initiate change within our society. I remembered the meetings with prominent British officials I had just taken part in.

The Israeli soldier emptied my bag, throwing its contents roughly onto the table. I remembered the immense generosity and hospitality that I had been shown during the programme.

As I gathered back up my things, I held my tongue and controlled my frustration. I recalled how in the UK I hadn't had to worry about road closures or checkpoints, or to bother myself with the endless 'what-if' questions you learn to become familiar with as a

Palestine I had to reprogramme myself into 'Palestinian-mode'.

Since my return so much has changed. I still meet with my activist friends, and try to convey all the messages that I learnt during the BAX programme. I keep thinking how lucky I was to be given this opportunity. Whenever I talk with others, I realize how much potential we have, yet how much work we still have ahead of us.

“I have learnt that we are all leaders and change is inevitable!”

Shortly after my return, a fellow activist was killed by Israeli forces as he took part in a peaceful protest against land confiscation at a village near Ramallah called Nabi Saleh. Sometimes it is hard to be proactive when you are consumed by feelings and endless questions. It is hard to be proactive when your



daily life is obstructed with constant violations, and when occupation attempts to strip you of justice, freedom and dignity.

The BAX programme has made me look at myself differently. The experiences we were given, the people we met with, and the time we spent together as a group from different areas of Palestine -- I cannot explain their value. No human words can express this, no tongue can speak it, and no mind can comprehend it.

“I realize how much potential we have”

You have taught us so much. One lesson is that we are all leaders and must assume the role that has not yet been given to us. I will continue to act as an advocate for change within my society; and when I am opposed with pessimists who say change is impossible... I will tell them change is inevitable!

SEND US YOUR FEEDBACK!

We hope you enjoy reading our first newsletter. Please send any comments, suggestions or article ideas for our next issue to the Editor - alison.baily@bax.org.uk



Introducing our new chair, The Right Hon. John Battle

British-Arab Exchanges is delighted to welcome a new chairman on board this year. The Right Honourable John Battle, a former Labour minister and prime ministerial envoy to the faith communities, will lead BAX at a time when momentous political changes in the Arab world are highlighting how important it is to build bridges between young British and Arab emerging leaders.

John retired at the 2010 general election after 23 years as Labour Member of Parliament for Leeds West. During his time in Westminster, he was Minister of State at the Department for Trade and Industry and at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. After the 9/11 attacks, he became the Prime Minister's envoy to the faith communities.

As well as his parliamentary record, John is well-known for his work in his local community in Leeds and also for his services to the Catholic Church. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI awarded him the Star of the Order of St Gregory the Great in recognition of his work.

“We need to be part of building a positive future”

In his first comments as chairman, John emphasised the importance of maintaining BAX's work amid difficult political conditions in the Arab world. He said: "We need to work harder than ever to bring about British-Arab understanding as we shift far too quickly from images of 'Arab spring' to a bleak sense of 'Arab winter'".



John also underlined the importance of our work in supporting civil society leaders who are poised to play a crucial role in the political transition taking place in the Arab world, "BAX has supported young civil society leaders in the Arab world for many years. At this crucial time, we will persist with our programme of regular visits, exchanges and leadership training to ensure that long-term dialogue becomes part of the future".

Speaking about the charity's agenda for 2012, as freely-elected governments take office in numerous Arab countries, John said "Now more than ever, we need to be part of the process of building a positive future. 2012 will prove a crucial year for BAX and all our supporters as we seek to support the extraordinary efforts of young people in the Arab world".

We welcome John on board and wish him well in what are set to be a very important few years ahead for BAX.

Voluntary Opportunity

We are looking for volunteers to join our fundraising team. You don't need any experience, but should be able to commit the equivalent of 1-2 days a week based at home with occasional meetings in London.

Guided by an experienced fundraiser, you'll help plan and carry out the fundraising activities that our vital to making our exchanges happen.

Contact info@bax.org.uk for more information





From London to Tahrir

BAX's Rachel Aspden talks about her visit to Egypt during its first post-Mubarak elections

During a month's stay in Egypt last November, I saw many swings between peace and violence, chaos and order as the country struggled to navigate a way forward. Young people were at the forefront of demonstrations and liberal political activism, campaigning for equal rights for all Egyptian citizens, accountability for the interior ministry and army and an end to arbitrary detention and military trials for civilians.

I saw many acts of kindness and generosity in Tahrir – from men handing out free gas masks to women circulating with bottles of anti-tear-gas spray. “This is what it was like during the uprising,” people said when I commented on the spirit of the square.

BAX has many friends in Egypt, most associated with a group called MRA (Moral Re-Armament, a precursor to Initiatives of Change).

Some of the older ones participated in the first BAX exchange in 1973 and have been inspired by the experience ever since.

“Young people are committed to developing their society”

Many of the young people linked to MRA support revolutionary groups. They share videos of police and army brutality on Facebook and collect donations of money, food and medicines to support protesters in Tahrir.

They are all politically informed, committed to developing Egypt and Egyptian society – an inspiring group of people.



However, not everyone shares their visions for Egypt's future. For less-educated and less-wealthy Egyptians, the priority is re-establishing security and protecting jobs and income.

“I saw many acts of kindness and generosity”

After years of corruption, many believe conservative Islamic parties such as the Salafi Nour party offer the best hope of establishing a just society.

One of the main challenges for young leaders is to find ways of building bridges between these different constituencies, and reviving the sense of shared purpose that fuelled the January revolution. It would be wonderful if BAX is able to support them in this goal in 2012.

Story Exchange!

Do you have an experience of your own British-Arab exchange that you would like to share with other BAX supporters?

Send in your stories for our next newsletter, by email to alison.baily@bax.org.uk or by post to 50 Cranbury Road, Reading. RG30 2XD.





Letter from an Iraqi

Lena, an architect from Kirkuk, took part in our programme for emerging Iraqi civil society leaders in 2010

I was one of six Iraqis on a BAX delegation in 2010. Muslim, Christian, atheist, Arab, Chaldean and Kurd, our little group exemplified the complexities of Iraqi culture.

For three weeks we exchanged ideas and cultivated relationships with parliament, media professionals and religious leaders. As an Iraqi Christian woman my experience in the UK was hugely rewarding.

Following the fall of Saddam, Iraq has been overwhelmed with media information.

“I experienced real freedom for the first time”

We have had glimpses of the West, but nothing could prepare me for the experience of real freedom that I had on the streets of London:



the freedom to dress and express myself as I liked.

The British and Irish people welcomed and embraced us, and listened to our views about our country.

As a twenty-something Iraqi woman, this was the first time that I felt myself treated as an equal.

I held onto this feeling when I returned home. I still smile when I remember how that made me feel. All Iraqis, especially women, should be able to experience this.

My time with BAX gave me hope. I learnt how to work as a team and I gained different insights from meeting other Iraqis and the British. My self-esteem grew and this helped me lead my team of architects back home, where I was the only woman.

“My self-esteem has grown”

It's also inspired me to blog about women's rights, and to voice my opinion, even at my own peril. I realised that nothing comes easily, especially freedom.

Whether we women in Iraq will achieve equality remains to be seen. But we will never get there if we do not at least give a voice to the issue and keep trying.

Join us online!

BAX now has an exciting new website and its very own Facebook page.



Take a look at our website at www.bax.org.uk to find out about our latest activities.

To find our Facebook page, log onto Facebook and search for “British-Arab Exchanges”. Sign up and connect with fellow BAX supporters around the world.





CHANGING

Outgoing BAX chairman Roger Spooner reflects on almost 40 years of British-Arab Exchanges

British Arab Exchanges has now been building links between Britain and the Arab World for nearly 40 years.

We have received groups of future decision-makers, entertaining them in homes, meeting distinguished personalities, learning something of each other's cultures. We have also sent groups of students to countries in the region.

“Improving understanding between cultures has been a great pleasure”

We have learnt much about countries we knew little of, and they were able to see something of how we lived. It was a stimulus to want to devote time and effort to improving understanding between our different cultures.



As the centenary of the First World War approaches we need to learn about how Britain's decisions as a colonial power shaped much of today's Middle East.

Through the secret Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain and France divided up the Middle East in 1916. A year later the Balfour Declaration offered to set up a national home for the Jews in Palestine.

Even the amounts of water the countries surrounding the Nile can take from the river were decided by British agreements made years ago.

BAX is embarking on a number of new projects that have been in development since before last year's major changes in the Arab world. These developments have given BAX's mission added urgency.

“The uprisings have given BAX's mission added urgency”

How do we move forward? You can help us do that by getting involved with ideas, donations and your time hosting groups and helping organise exchanges.

I extend a warm welcome to John Battle as new chair and wish him and the Management Team every success in the exciting times ahead.

YOUR BAX

Did you take part in one of BAX's earlier exchanges? We'd love to share your memories in our next newsletter. Email Alison Baily at alison.baily@bax.org.uk

