

# B | A | X

British-Arab Exchanges



**BUILDING BRIDGES:**  
Impressions from a visit  
to Palestine's West Bank  
7th-18th April 2013  
[www.bax.org.uk](http://www.bax.org.uk)

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**"Tell them what you saw, nothing more, and nothing less"**

# Introduction

## Building Bridges

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Building bridges is the central mission of British-Arab Exchanges (BAX). It is also the name given to a recent BAX programme, which offered nine young professionals and postgraduates from Britain and Ireland an exceptional insight into the life and the people of the 'West Bank Palestinian Occupied Territory.'

Following the visit, the nine participants wrote accounts of their experiences and the lessons they learnt. These individual records, presented here, give a vivid impression of some of their encounters. They went into a challenging situation, experiencing the realities of life under occupation, yet a message of hope for a better future shines through their writing.

The main objectives of the Building Bridges programme were for the participants

- to meet with their counterparts and community leaders in Palestine
- to experience daily life in Palestine
- to learn about the historical links between Palestine and the UK
- to plan potential collaborative projects
- to make a personal report of their experiences.

The visit was organised by four young Palestinians who themselves had participated in a previous BAX training programme for emerging civil society leaders. This had taken place in England and Northern Ireland in November 2011.

### Palestinian Hosts

The Palestinian hosts, who took substantial time off work to arrange the schedule and accompany the British delegation during their visit, were:

**Amra Amra**, Palestine Medical Relief Society, Ramallah

**Mohammed Owaineh**, Hassan Mustafa Cultural Centre, Bethlehem

**Hassan K Saad**, Head of Fire Service, Bethlehem

**Daoud Abu Libdeh**, Common Ground NGO and Fateh Youth League, Jerusalem

### UK and Irish Participants

The nine participants selected by BAX through an open advertisement and interview process, were:

**Nadja Abia**, project manager at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, volunteer community mediator and restorative justice practitioner, London

**Tina Boonstra**, writer and song-writer, Liverpool

**Paul Briggs**, documentary film-maker, Liverpool

**Nargees Choudhury**, teacher and trainee barrister, London

**Robin Dru**, biology graduate, about to start medical training

**Nikky Houlihan**, postgraduate in Middle East Studies, and volunteer with Save the Children and BAX, Dublin and London

**Eleanor McAll**, physiotherapist, Bristol and Sheffield

**Leanne Messham**, assistant clinical forensic psychologist for the NHS, Liverpool

**Roland Singer-Kingsmith**, Arabic and Islamic Studies postgraduate, Brighton.

**Peter Riddell**, Secretary of BAX

# Programme

The programme included:

## Ramallah

- o Briefing by Abed Al-Meniem Wahdan, General Manager of International Affairs, Palestine National Authority, Office of the President
- o Briefing by Jamal Juma, Director, Stop the Wall campaign
- o Briefing by Dr Mohammed Iskafi, Emergency Programme Director, Palestinian Medical Relief Society
- o Visit to the Ramallah Music Academy
- o Dinner with Dr Mustafa Barghouti MP, leader of the Palestine National Initiative and President of Palestinian Medical Relief Society
- o Meeting with young people engaged in non-violent demonstrations

## Qalqilya

- o Briefing by Dr Aboushi, Director of Palestinian Medical Relief Society clinic
- o Visit to a school at Arab Ramadeen bedouin enclave

## Nablus

- o Visit to the souk and ancient mosque

## Jenin

- o Viewing of the documentary film Arna's Children at the Freedom Theatre and visit to the Jenin refugee camp

## Bethlehem

- o Visits to the Church of the Nativity, the partition Wall, Aida refugee camp Suleyman's Pools
- o Visits to Walajah village and Al-Zakariya village, both surrounded by Israeli settlements
- o Hike along a valley to Battir village for supper and music
- o Visit to the Palestinian Wildlife Society, a walk with its director Imad Atrash along a river valley to Jericho, and a swim in the Dead Sea
- o Evening with the Al-Rashaydeh Bedouin community
- o Dinner with Dr Mazen Qumsiyeh, a prominent scientist and political commentator
- o Dinner with Anwar Al-Zboun, Hamas Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council

## Jerusalem

- o Visit to the Old City including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Garden Tomb, the Western Wall, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock
- o Visit to the Silwan Information Centre and Pools of Silwan (Siloam)
- o Observe a Fateh meeting in support of prisoners on hunger-strike
- o Meeting with Ron Shatzberg of the Economic Cooperation Foundation and Dr Aliza Belman Inbal, Director of International Development and Senior Pears Fellow of the Hartog School of Government and Policy, Tel Aviv University

## Hebron

- o Visit to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of the Patriarchs
- o Tour of Old City, and briefing by Jamal Talab Al-Amleh, director of the Land Research Centre.

# Impressions from the Host

Mohammed Owanieh

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Planning a schedule, arranging accommodations, contacting people is what a host does. But in my case, I was more of a member of the BAX 2013 delegation than a host, since I always felt a part of the group and I learnt new things along with them. It is amusing how sometimes you think you know all about your country, because you have lived enough in that place to know everything; but actually you find out that there is a lot even for you to learn - especially if that place is Palestine.

On 7th April Amra, Hassan and I were biting our nails in the Aladdin hotel in Ramallah anxiously waiting for the group to arrive, calling their escort every once in a while just to make sure that everything was going according to plan, and hoping they had not been harassed by the Israelis. The moment I spoke to them after they got through the security checks, I felt relieved knowing that they had overcome the hardest part of our trip!

Later that evening, over dinner we got acquainted with the group and had nice chats with everybody; and from that moment, I felt that everyone of this group had something special to do and some contribution to make. Then we started to get ready for the next step in our journey which was: discovering Palestine (or 23% of the West Bank to be more precise)!

Every place we went to, starting from the Pretentious city of Ramallah, through the Trapped city of Qalqilyia, the Heart-warming traditional city of Nablus, the Melancholic refugee camp in Jenin, the Holy Town of Bethlehem, the Herby Valley of Al-Makhrou, the Villages of Battir and Al-Walajeh, the Bedouin community in Al-Rashyadia, Jericho and the Bizarre occupied old city of Hebron, all held within them masses of stories for us as a group, and helped in shaping the 'sublime' theme of this trip over the short course of twelve days.

In the course of these twelve days, I learnt a lot from each and every member of the group, and I found my way to bond with every one of them in special way. That, of course, taught me a lot about how they perceive Palestine and Palestinians, and how important this is to me.

The most exquisite thought I had, was when we were walking in the narrow streets of the old city of Nablus: here I was, accompanying ten British people, in a city where everyone would stop them, talk to them, and blame Great Britain for what happened to Palestine! This thought made me realize how Palestinians were probably not too forgetful, but too forgive-full... Because, despite all the hostility and the suffering they have faced from Great Britain in the past, they refused to reply to it but with hospitality and generosity. It also made me realize the significance of the Quranic verse "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes, that you may know one another." (49:13). How important it is to admit our differences as a natural factor, and to live accepting the fact that we are different, and that we need our differences in order to function well in a universal society, and therefore to build bridges among humans.

For me, BAX 2013 was an eye-opening experience, because sometimes you live in an odd situation for too long, and you choose to close your eyes and decide to go with the flow. As AlMutanabi\* said, "He who has no pride left takes humiliation easily, as no man feels the beatings he receives when he is dead". Sometimes you need something to strike you on your head, wake you up, help you regain your consciousness and balance, make you stand up and re-recognize yourself and where you are. For some Palestinians this wake-up call is the death or the imprisonment of a loved one. But for me all I needed was: lots of sweets and caffeine, a blue-striped bus, and the fellowship of nine Brits and an Irish woman!

## Hassan Saad

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It was a great honour for me to participate and assist with the organisation of the BAX visit to Palestine. I was both excited and nervous as I felt responsible for showing the reality and the suffering of Palestinian life. I was also pleased to be involved as I knew I'd meet new friends and perhaps learn new things. But my fears were much greater: I was afraid that ten days were not enough to show the reality and suffering of Palestinian life. What to do? How to do it? Where should we take them? And what is the best way to do it? All these questions and more!



I know there is so much to see in Palestine: the holy places, refugee camps, the desert with the Bedouin, the checkpoints with Israeli occupation forces; and to meet intellectuals and university professors, or unemployed workers to name a few. So we decided all we can do is our best to make the programme a success, and I think we achieved success through the variety of activities that we organised and with the enthusiasm of everyone involved on both sides. I'd like to personally thank everyone involved.

During the ten days I learned a lot about myself and about the places I thought I knew. I learnt that I am a stranger in the place of my birth. I felt the separation wall growing ever larger and I saw the changing countryside from greenery to the concrete of the settlement blocks which are so alien to my memories of home. Then reality hit me again, and I realised the future is even harder and more dangerous than ever before, not just for me but for all of us.

I was hoping to join the team that would visit Jerusalem - a city that I've always loved. It is more than fourteen years now since I last visited Jerusalem. It is only five miles from my home, a ten minute drive! So I felt great sadness when I was refused 'permission' and it hit me again: I am Palestinian and I have no rights. But hope has always kept Palestinians going, helping us to overcome the occupation, the military checkpoint, the challenges of daily life. Hope is what kept the prisoners alive and hope is something we have a great deal of in Palestine.

Over the ten days I felt Palestinian hospitality: the smiles in Nablus, the tears in Jenin refugee camps. I saw the resistance of Palestinian villages cut in half and isolated by the wall. Israel calls it the separation wall, and claims it separates Palestinians from Jews, but that's a lie: it separates Palestinians from Palestinians, Palestinians from their land, Palestinians from their communities. I heard wise and inspiring words from a man riding in his donkey in Bethlehem, and I learnt to be patient and to look for a future that will and must be better.

Next time I will not be worried about setting the programme or what to show our guests. Palestine and its people will organise it themselves, with love and warmth, with smiles and lots of amazing food! This is Palestine, the place where you cry and laugh, the place where you are happy and angry at the same time. Welcome to Palestine.

At the end of the programme I returned home with such a great feeling of the wonderful experiences I had and I recognised that I learned a lot from meeting our guests. While they came to Palestine to learn more about the reality here, I too learned more about the reality that is actually mine. My love for Palestine and my respect for the inspirational resistance of my people to the occupation has grown even stronger.

## Amra Amra

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As we planned excessively for the BAX delegation, finalizing minor details while sitting in the lobby waiting for their arrival, the Palestinian hosts reminisced about the impact that our trip to the UK had on our lives. We had only hoped that the unique program we created would be able to tell our story; the untold Palestinian story.

As one of the organizers of the trip, I wanted everything to go perfect – not just according to plan but also in a way that would be able to convey the struggle of the Palestinian people which was in a way too ambitious. However, what I did learn was that not everything goes exactly according to plan.

More often than not, life does not go according to our plans. We are faced with obstacles, struggles and difficulties which serve as tests. Unfortunately being Palestinian and living under occupation, having total control is something that is impossible as the Israeli occupation finds a way to meddle not only into our daily lives, but also adulterates our minds and dreams.

While traveling throughout the West Bank with the group, it allowed me to experience the trip with a pair of fresh eyes. Sometimes whilst being so involved in the deteriorating situation, one gets too preoccupied with feelings of desensitization and hopelessness. However, by having the opportunity to tour the West Bank with the UK delegation, it replanted that same seed of hope that was first planted during my participation in the BAX Palestinian delegation in London.

The input, ideas, and optimism that each individual contributed with reaffirmed their solidarity and firm stand in support of human rights, dignity and justice. Being involved in such a memorable and unique experience was not only rewarding, but also inspirational and helped create strong knit bonds that I believe would allow us to contribute in the change we want to see!



## Nadja Abia

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I sank into the seat in the minibus, suddenly exhausted by the interrogation I and another participant had just experienced in Ben Gurion airport. Topics ranged from my family, why I was visiting Palestine, my 'single' status which prompted them to ask invasive questions relating to my preference in men (Palestinian or Israeli?). They checked my email inbox and Google-searched all my Jewish friends (and I have lots). All this with a friendly smile, a jovial manner - so I guess that makes it ok.



I soaked up the scent of jasmine in the air, watching the orange, green and evening pink of the landscape as it jostled alongside our minibus. To contemplate the next nine days was an impossibility then. Yet now, I am reminded of being moved by the narratives we heard, lump in throat, trying not to cry (for the 4th, 5th, 10th time), humbled by the patience of each Palestinian I met, and grateful to the land that is Palestine for showing me her beauty, despite the cruelty she experiences.

I no longer associate A, B and C as letters of the alphabet, but as Area A (Palestinian controlled), Area B (mixed Israeli and Palestinian control) and Area C (Israeli controlled comprising 68% of the West Bank). Though these areas experience demolitions, water shortages, forced displacement, damage to olive trees, the drying up of fertile agricultural land, clashes with settlers and soldiers on a daily basis, I wish to remember it for its outstanding beauty, the folk sound of the flute playing into the night as we sang, danced the dabke and smelt the wood fire. As I gazed out on the valley below earlier that evening, the wall snaking, making loops around villages and green alike, I was winded by the true value/importance of this way of life, its land and roots. I suddenly understood.

I learned that a chicken in Arab Ramadeen (a bedouin enclave near Qalqilya) is different to its counterpart in London - the former is viewed as a security threat, and has to go through checkpoints just like their owners. Up until 2009 the chicken was denied entry, as poultry and meat were not allowed into the area. Since 2009, however now one chicken can cross the checkpoint, but not two. This means 40% of Qalqilya families encircled by the apartheid wall suffer "food insecurity" in which their standard two meals a day do not contain sufficient quantities of protein. This fact for me equates to forced malnutrition of the local population. In Hebron I learned that a window is a door, by which Palestinian children climb out to avoid the curfews (to attend school) and settler violence. It is a messed up city of contradictions, mazes, metal barriers, soldiers and their outposts (everywhere), unmarked but segregated pavements/roads, cages, settler-thrown bricks on markets below. I became messed up myself, bad-tempered, claustrophobic, unsettled by the violence in the air. All of this juxtaposed with soldiers dancing amongst themselves as buskers played songs for them. A soldier hit me twice with large rocks, which hit the back of my leg and achilles tendon. I'm still not sure why I had been selected.

In happier moments, I learned that a nickname in Palestine is not superfluous but bridge-building. Nicknames can be the corruption of first names i.e. Hassan to Hassuna, Ibrahim to Barhume, or metaphoric such as Abu Al-Khaur (father of goodness) or not so noble sounding Al-Jahiz (the goggle-eyed!). It is something that I came to cherish though I did not fully understand it at first. In the market of Nablus, the market sellers offered

me the gift of recognition on which they commented, connected and smiled at: my ancestry invisible in multicultural London. Later, the bedouin in Al-Rashaydeh challenged my Muslim heritage and beliefs, but were quick (and gracious) to accept my reasoning. In return I offered my respect and covered my head. Again, not like anything I had experienced back home, within my Muslim community of Great Britain.

I learned that returning from Palestine was more fraught than arriving. At the checkpoint proceeding terminal 3, I was one of two who were told to get out of the van, questioned, taken through a semi-circular security barrier into a waiting-room and finally out through the exit where my passport was stickered with a number 5 (I had been given 3 on my way in). Upon arriving at the entrance to the airport, I was again singled out and taken through another security barrier, the number on my passport was noted and my bag bar-coded (I had four bar-codes on my bag before I left). My books caused suspicion, as did the multiple languages I speak; there was hostility towards my intended profession, and a demand to know if I was "pro-Palestine". Before I could answer, I was gestured towards a small room where a female soldier was waiting. I was in this room only 15 minutes but it was an intimidating experience. I was asked, "What about Israel?" and when I expressed confusion over the question, I was insulted (sworn at twice), and told "Why don't you do the talking, rather than the asking, Miss Clever"

I have realised that it is impossible to write on one A4 sheet of paper all I experienced and felt during those 10 days. The selecting of each vignette, the weighing of one truth against another and the impossibility of such a task silenced me, overwhelmed me – but I realised that to remain silent was to avoid. I was reminded of what Edward Said described as "reprehensible" - "that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political: you are afraid of seeming too controversial... you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate... to remain within the responsible mainstream". So I wrote.

Thus, to answer the question posed by the security guard, if being "pro-Palestine" means wanting to correct a historic wrong, if it means wanting to stand in support of the inherent right of self-rule, if it means supporting the third intifada of a cultural kind, if it means opposing the apartheid wall (and racism/anti-Semitism along with it), if it means fighting for equal access to water, education and freedom of movement, if it means being vocal about the illegal detention of children in Palestine, if it means supporting practical policies as opposed to politics, if it means wanting to see that chicken not simply cross, but hop, skip and jump through that non-existent check-point then I guess...yes... that does makes me Pro-Palestine.



Sharing traditional music



family home from which people have been evicted

## Leanne Messham

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In preparation for our full immersion into Palestinian culture on our British-Arab Exchange adventure I began stretching the openness of my heart and mind. A psychologist, by nature and by trade, I wanted to understand, and to understand Palestinians understanding, of the occupation. A week after returning to the UK I was rendered more perplexed than before. We experienced a snapshot of the occupation, and although I was seeing with my own eyes, I was not quite able to believe it.



The moment came quicker than I expected, we were sat around Jamal Jamal's table at the Stop the Wall Campaign when it came upon me. My soul had reached saturation and I needed to flee. This wasn't your average history lesson; this was history with a heart, and my heart was flooded. My head ached, which was a constant sign to me throughout the trip about where the effects of the occupation resided. Past and present, facts and figures, thoughts and feelings, questions, 'But why? But how?'. That's when Jamal said it, 'This is not an occupation, this is not slavery, and it is not human rights violation. It is more.' It is more. Not just because it is a trauma that is embedded in history, and remains today, but because the depth of the trauma is relentless.

The ever-present, daily disposability of life in all its fullness is like the occupation of the mind. It is more. However, what rendered me most overwhelmed and confused was hope. The relentless hope of the Palestinians in the face of this. Hope is not a form of resistance for Palestinians. It is more.

Haneen Amra, a young Palestinian university student, a leader amongst her peers for popular resistance, shared how she had been arrested twice and was now due in court. During her arrests, she was verbally and sexually harassed, left blindfolded in the baking sun to cripple her mentally, whilst being photographed. She was then interrogated, manipulated against her own family and threatened about the success of her future. When I asked what her hope was, there was a deep silence, she laughed, apologised, she could not imagine a perfect Palestine, yet she had hope. Hope for Haneen isn't about being able to imagine, hope is not always seeing. Hope believes. It is the confident expectancy of a better future. This is the story of many Palestinians today.

When seeking to understand Palestinians hope, I was encouraged to see my psychology textbooks, and my faith, come alive in such a positive way. I saw how our thoughts influence our behaviours, and how these behaviours not only reinforce beliefs, but in turn reinforce and increase the behaviour. These cycles tend to be resilient and robust in their ability not to be broken. I began to see these cycles of hope in the Palestinians that we met; hope that goes from being a belief that is unseen, to giving Palestinians a way to have life. This shared hope binding them in their shared humanity, and in their shared wounds, healing and protecting, individually and collectively. The Palestinians ability to abide in hope was beautiful and contagious; it grew the conditions of a life against oppression. It allowed them to keep their dignity, to be abundantly generous in the richness they are made with; with their time, their heart, their wounds, their family, their homes, and their coffee. It allowed them to forgive our British history, to maintain their spirited joy and live with integrity.

The complexity of disparate Israeli restrictions has created some difficulty for Palestinians to identify with each other. But despite this, from within the isolated, Bedouin community in Qalqilya, to over the West Bank as a whole, I saw this shared hope. This tangible network of hope that creates roads between Palestinians that can not be restricted, that contributes to the resilience and perseverance of survival. This network of hope, that is unseen yet shared, cultivates the ability to keep going back; when they are arrested for providing emergency health care, when they are taken to court for setting up educational facilities for children, when their water systems are cut off in the desert. By hoping, they are persevering, by persevering, they are resisting, and by resisting, they have a powerful weapon against their repression.

As Palestinians say, to exist is to resist.

The beauty of their hope is that it can be held for someone when they can't quite hold it themselves. By holding hope, it was as if holding the responsibility of hoping, seeing the hope when others can't. This provided security for those we met. This is not just something Palestinians can do other, but also what we, as internationals, can do. To hold their hope; to fulfil what was their one request from us, to "tell of what we saw, nothing more, and nothing less". This is what I saw. Hope is not a way to resist for Palestinians. It is more.

'Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?' Saint Paul



Hopeful graffiti



Palestine is a land rich in history, culture, faith and conflict. During the course of our travels throughout the West Bank we were able to witness first-hand the subjugation of the Palestinian people by a relentless regime seeking to wipe Palestine's existence from the face of the map as we know it today. In turn, the Palestinians have become more resilient; fervently refusing to give up their land. They have become more politically active; even in the face of increasing state brutality.

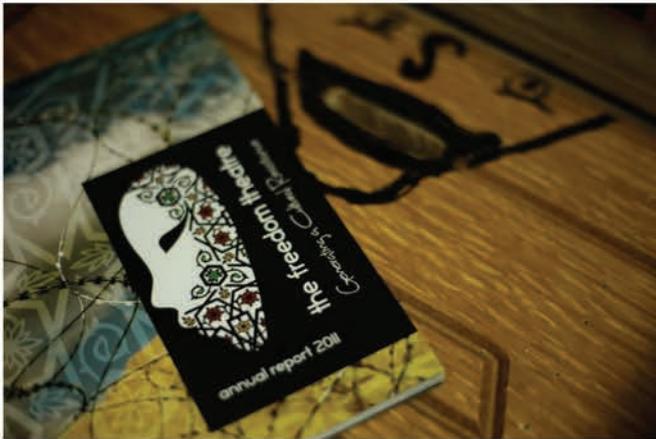
They have become more conscious of human rights; unsurprising, as their own human rights are being violated on a daily basis. They have become more communal; perhaps, a necessary mechanism for survival. Witnessing this, I came to realise that Palestine is a land from which one derive all the most important lessons in life.

Lesson 1: Integrity and courage tempered by wisdom. During the course of our travels situations arose where our Palestinian friends were either denied entry to certain locations or they themselves took a more principled approach by refusing to pay admission charges to enter localities (so as not to fund the Israeli state). In one such instance, during a visit to the Dead Sea, one of our hosts refused to pay the admission charge. But we discovered that the head of our group who already paid the admission charge for the entire group. I felt as if I were in a terrible predicament. Was I to stand in solidarity with my Palestinian friend? Or, was I to proceed with the schedule and enter a part of Palestine which was now operating as an Israeli beach resort – to rub salt into the wounds, the revellers were celebrating 'Independence day'. I felt incredibly torn. In an instant I decided to leave, feeling sick to my stomach, wanting to keep my integrity intact and wanting to have the courage of conviction. But something stopped me from exiting. It was, I hope, wisdom. The fee had already been paid, this was on our schedule and a day we had all been looking forward to, I would not be bullied out by the Israelis (however implicitly), this was Palestine and I had every right to be there and to enjoy it. In many ways there was no right or wrong course of action in these circumstances. What was most important was my ability to live with the decision that I had made. If anything, feeling sick to my stomach and proceeding to have 'fun' was actually the best way of empathising with the Palestinian people. Day in and day out they have to keep on living (which includes, at times, having fun) and to keep their heads held high even in situations worse than the one that I had just encountered. Momentarily, I felt I finally understood what it meant to be a Palestinian living under occupation.

Lesson 2: Empathy tempered by morality. As we met both Israelis (albeit to a lesser degree) and Palestinians and heard their stories I found myself being able to empathise with their suffering. However, despite such empathy, I did not feel that I had to justify or uphold the course of action that these people chose to adopt as a consequence of such suffering. Children raised in refugee camps whose dreams and aspirations and, ultimately, lives had been destroyed by the state of Israel were the ones I felt I empathised with most.

As a teacher, my job is to nurture dreams and aspirations; it was simply heartbreaking to watch a documentary on the children of the camp turning into adults and committing suicide bombings. Interestingly, the UN resolution (Res 45/34 p.4) dealing with this issue is very broad and permits resistance by "all necessary means at their disposal" this would, of course, encompass suicide bombings. For me, however, my faith determines the parameters of morality and such acts will never be justified from an Islamic faith perspective. Armed resistance against an occupying force is of course a different story entirely.

The lesson I ultimately learned in this regard is not to be swayed by empathy/emotions to such an extent that you lose focus on the fundamentals upon which you ground your morality.



Freedom Theatre, Jenin



Dead Sea mud!

## Roland Singer-Kingsmith

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Going to Palestine was a transformative experience for me. As someone who had studied Arabic at university, lived in Cairo during the Jan 25 Revolution and now works in Morocco, I thought that I knew what to expect from a trip to the West Bank. But nothing could have prepared me for the things that I saw and the stories that I heard.

I learned a lot about the occupation and the cruel subjugation of the Palestinian people. I listened as villagers told us about generations of dispossession; I stood aghast at the eight metre high 'separation' wall; I choked on my words as I walked down the segregated and besieged streets of Hebron. There's no way around it, the occupation defines daily life - it restricts where you can go, dictates where you can live and decides whom you can see. In some cases it can even prevent you from marrying the person that you love - if your lover lives in East Jerusalem and you in the West Bank.



Arguably worse than the physical limitations of the occupation are its destructive psychological effects. Stencilled onto the wall in the Aida Refugee Camp I saw the death rattle of an entire community 'we cannot live, so we are just waiting to die'. In Jenin, another refugee camp, we visited the Freedom Theatre where we watched the documentary Arna's Children about a group of friends who attend the theatre workshops as young boys but grow up to become leaders of the Al-Aqsa Brigade, a group of armed resistance fighters, after their houses are bombed by the Israeli airforce. As you watch them perform with barely broken voices it is difficult to comprehend the level of pain that is required to turn talented young boys into hardened and violent fighters. For those who choose not to take up their right to bear arms, they must live with the daily trauma that the occupation brings - child arrests, indefinite detention, death - leaving most Palestinians scarred. We didn't meet anyone who had not themselves been arrested or knew someone who had.

It is to their great credit then that Palestinians are optimistic about the future of their country. On the 'separation' wall in Bethlehem there are six foot graffiti letters that cry out LOVE WINS and Light Is The Only End To Darkness and No Wall Can Make U Disappear. There is an inspiring culture of civil rights activism that transcends the harsh reality of day-to-day existence. A growing faith in non-violent resistance is building momentum as activists on the ground experiment with innovative methods of challenging the occupation. And all of this comes complete with an unassailable sense of humour that can cut through even the tensest situations - borders, checkpoints, protests, the lot.

The Palestine National Initiative is one of the biggest players in the non-violent resistance movement and we had the privilege of meeting Dr Mustafa Barghouthi, its leader. The Initiative is well-known for attempting to build Bab al Shams, a tent village, in an area of Palestinian land that is threatened with the expansion of Israel's largest settlement, Ma'ale Adumim, home to 39,000 settlers. Of course Bab al Shams was torn down and the protestors arrested by the Israeli army, but it served to highlight some undeniable truths: Palestinians are forbidden from building in Area C (68% of the West Bank) while illegal settlements expand into the same land; Palestinians are punished for exerting their right to protest while settlers live in guarded impunity; Palestinian resistance is non-violent and legal while the occupation is violent and illegal.

Most of all I learned that the Palestinian resistance is the civil rights movement of our age. The issue of Israel/Palestine is not a football match - the question is not whether we are pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian, but whether we are for or against human rights. If we begin our discussions from this point then, and only then, can we proceed. Equal rights for all and not political reconciliation is what matters. Most of the Palestinians that we met are less interested in the conversation of one-state or two-state solution than talking about how best to protect and preserve the livelihoods of those people and places that are, quite literally, threatened with extinction.

## Nikky Houlihan

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The Building Bridges Programme was a truly eye-opening and transformational experience for me. Participating in the exchange was one of the best decisions I have made and I was delighted to have the privilege to discover life in Palestine and get to know our hosts. Our hosts worked exceptionally hard to provide us with the most authentic, educational and enjoyable experience. We were even introduced to their families and invited to their homes.



My university studies and personal research on the situation in the Palestinian Territories had not prepared me to face the injustices on the ground. I had originally thought I was fully aware of the realities of the occupation but I was dismayed to find that the situation is in fact a lot worse than we are told in the Western media.

Despite the nature of the BAX programme being apolitical and the trip therefore being intended to focus on British-Palestinian relations and the discovery of Palestinian culture and life, it was impossible to ignore the encroaching occupation pervading every aspect of daily life. It cannot be denied that the occupation is all-encompassing and is aimed to make every aspect of routine life extremely difficult for Palestinians in all areas ranging from freedom of movement, work, permit distribution, access to water, access to healthcare and much more.

Yet our hosts worked hard to provide us with a balanced programme where we would gain an understanding of the injustices but also experience cultural and non-political sides of Palestine. We were brought on beautiful hikes to the village of Battir and to Jericho, travelled into the desert to have a barbecue with a Bedouin community, enjoyed plenty of good food and music, visited the bazaar of Nablus and learned about the eco-system and diversity in the region from the Palestine Wildlife Society. It was also an educational trip where we could see art and culture merge with political resistance when we visited the Apartheid Wall and the Freedom Theatre in Jenin camp.

I was expecting to encounter an attitude of general negativity or resignation and despair. In fact, quite the opposite was true. All of the locals we met, without fail, were warm and friendly and always told me "Welcome to Palestine" – regardless of whether we had met formally through our hosts or casually on the street. There was genuine friendliness from the people we met and they had tremendous joy and a great sense of humour. I must say that the hospitality and generosity we received in Palestine will be hard to match in the future, as far as I'm concerned. Overall, the programme and the people we met all made for a tremendous, heart-warming experience. It is my personal belief that in order to benefit the Palestinian cause, a holistic approach is required. There needs to be Non-Violent Resistance on various levels within Palestine and condemnation of Apartheid and the Occupation in the international community – and this was very clearly conveyed to us by the people we met. However, what I took back from this trip is that one must not only denounce and condemn, but also positively promote and support Palestinian culture in itself in order for it to transcend the occupation while simultaneously avoiding the normalisation of the occupation. It is without a doubt vitally important to not only condemn the occupation and Human Rights abuses of Israel, but to also give attention to what will ultimately be lost, should this process of ethnic cleansing and ghettoization of the Palestinians be allowed to continue. All of the wonderful things we experienced during the programme; the landscape and the olive trees, the eco-system and its wildlife, the Bedouin way of life and everything else that Palestine has to offer, all will be lost to the occupation if it continues. These are the things that Palestinians are fighting to protect and so should we.

Unfortunately, as many of those in the international community who remain on the fence regarding the question of Israel and Palestine tend to be sceptical of 'taking sides', they can easily feel alienated by aggressive condemnation of Israel. It is possible however that they may be more amenable to change with an active and positive promotion of Palestinian culture and way of life and an understanding that these are in peril. The dignity and strength of the Palestinians must be highlighted alongside the injustice they are living.

## Robin Dru

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Looking back to when I first arrived in Palestine, it is difficult for me to remember exactly what I expected to find. The little I did know about Palestine from the British press, was always framed in terms of violence and conflict: rockets from Gaza, bombs from Israel. What I found however, were some of the most generous and kind people I have ever met. One of the most interesting and inspiring aspects for me was the different ways Palestinians maintain hope in the face of the occupation.



We had the privilege of meeting a range of people from across Palestinian society: politicians, artists, young people, social activists and farmers. And we encountered a range of ways each person maintained their hope. Here are some examples:

'To exist is to resist' – a motto that was coined during the second intifada, or uprising, that captured the idea that just being Palestinian and living in Palestine was resisting the occupation. I found this sentiment across the West Bank.

The two-state solution – The official line. During our meeting with the General Manager of International Affairs in the President's Office of the Palestinian Authority, he stated how the first priority was upgrading the status of Palestine, and the second was pursuing legal channels. Not everyone we met shared the idea that a free Palestine would arise from traditional politics.

The one-state solution – Consider this: one in five Israelis are Arab. Many people in educated circles are calling for one state, where Arabs and Jews live side-by-side. Forget what the state would be called (Israstine? Palisrael?), social equality and justice is the number one goal. Perhaps only a faint dream at the moment, it was extremely humbling to see victims of injustice ready to lay aside their grievances for the sake of peace.

Allah – The importance of Islam in Palestine is huge. While I did not openly discuss religion and its role in people's lives as much as I would have liked to, I got the impression from many people that faith in God was their main source of hope; 'Allah kareem' or 'God is generous'.  
Violent vs Non-violent resistance - One idea that I came across and that I had never before been forced to consider was that of violent versus non-violent resistance. I do not wish to overstate the role of armed resistance in Palestine, as it is carried out by a tiny fraction of the population and pales in comparison with the violence committed by the Israeli Defence Force. But considering that security threats are one of the main tools by which the Israeli government justifies their authoritarian regime, I felt it a particularly relevant issue.

Does the end always justify the means? Or do bad means poison the end? International law states that Palestine is entitled to resist their occupation militarily, so in theory armed resistance is legally justified. But is it morally justified?

Asked under what circumstances suicide bombing could ever be justified, a leader we met from the Islamic political party Hamas responded with: "That person must have considered that what was happening at the time was worse than the act they committed." It is difficult to condemn individuals who choose to take up arms against an opponent who does so on a daily basis. Killing innocent Israelis is one thing, but what about defending your family and neighbours from a military invasion? These are difficult questions that I would not wish upon anyone. I myself have been forced to look inside to try and find where I stand on this issue.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I learnt from my visit to Palestine is that the fight for justice is not an easy one. From my experience in Palestine I have been filled with hope. I had never before been confronted with a situation like that in the occupied Palestinian territories occupation and I do not know how justice will prevail. But the character, dignity and strength in spirit that I witnessed in the people of Palestine leaves me with hope that we shall one day see peace in the Holy Land.



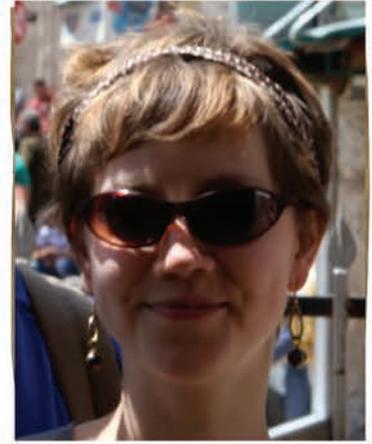
'To resist is to exist' wall painting



Abed Al -Meniem Whahad, Head of International Affairs at the President's Office with Mohammed Owanieh

'...Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.'  
Saint Paul

Hope, courage, perseverance, creativity, generosity and dignity. These are some of the first attributes that come into my mind when I reflect on the people we met during our time in the West Bank. I'd like to share some examples and stories that personally inspired me, and discuss why it gives me hope for the future of the country.



Generosity... Everywhere we went we received warm welcomes, and people seemed genuinely happy to meet with us. We were often greeted with delicious thick black arabic coffee or sweet tea. I especially loved the market in Nablus, vibrant and colourful, where we were welcomed to sample many a tasty treat, and people freely gave their time to chat with us, with no hidden selling agenda or pushiness, challenging what I normally expect in a marketplace. A story that stuck with me, which I feel reflects the generous spirit of many Palestinians, is a story we were told about a man who was passing through a checkpoint, transporting 21 barrels of olive oil to sell. He was told to denounce Palestine by Israeli soldiers, or else have a barrel of his oil upturned. Refusing to do this, the soldiers progressively upturned one barrel of olive oil after another, until there was nothing left to sell. When the man returned to his village there were 21 barrels of olive oil on his doorstep. The villagers had seen at a distance what had happened, and had each brought one from their own homes.

Courage... I strongly related to the Palestinian youths we met, being a similar age and stage of life myself. They told us a tale of two occasions they had been arrested, once for walking to a spring in a 'closed military zone', and the other for taking part in a demonstration. What they were subjected to during their arrest included blindfolding, wrist-binding, food deprivation and verbal abuse including sexual harassment. I can't even begin to imagine what that must have felt like, feeling helpless, scared and deprived of human rights. And yet hundreds of youths have the courage to continue taking part in nonviolent protests, each one knowing what the consequences could be.

Dignity... We visited a village called Al-Walajah, of which there is only 5% left since the development of a nearby Israeli settlement. We met a man whose house had been divided from the rest of the village by a settler road. The village lost 9000 dunams (1 dunam = 1000 m<sup>2</sup>) of land after 1967, and after full establishment of the wall there will only be 2 dunams left. The electric fence (another form the wall takes) is going to be put up 6m from his house. The Israeli military have been trying to get him to leave his home, harassing his kids and taking his Jerusalem work permit away for 1 year. If he leaves his house for more than 72 hours they will seize it as an Israeli military camp. In 2010 they gave him a blank cheque, offering any amount to purchase the land from him, but he refused. Despite all this he did not seem full of hatred and anger as I might expect. But spoke to us softly with dignity.

I myself was seething with the injustice of it all... and was amazed and humbled to see such patient perseverance displayed.

Creativity... A contentious spot, known as E1, is an area the Israeli government has been hoping to develop, as it lies between East Jerusalem and the biggest Israeli settlement in the West Bank, Ma'ale Adumim. Developing here would enable them to completely divide East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

It was in this area of private Palestinian land, that a creative group of activists decided to erect a pop-up community called 'Bab al-Shams' in January of this year. The first night it was destroyed by the IDF and many were arrested and beaten. Two days later they went back and organised a fake wedding in the area. The 'wedding party' then jumped into action and started re-building the camp. This time it was met with helicopters, bullets and teargas firing. The next time they surprised the Israelis by setting up in a slightly different area and building a playground. Cleverly this was planned at the time of Obama's visit, so it was, for a short period, left alone.

These stories fill me with hope for the Palestinian people. Although there is a complex, overwhelming and seemingly hopeless situation, there is an abundance of spirit. That is untouchable, and something I believe the Israeli government and military will struggle to destroy. As long as this spirit of peaceful steadfastness remains, I will not despair for the country. The attitudes I met also challenge me personally. Challenge me to be slow to anger and swift in love. Challenge me not to lose faith in dark hours. Challenge me to be the change I wish to see in the world. And that is what I'd like to thank the Palestinian people for.



Dr Mohammed Iskafi, Palestine  
Medical Relief Society, with Peter Riddell



Man from Al Walajah



It's the smells that struck me time and time again in the West Bank, the smell of jasmine thick and sweet in the air, pulling my attention away from street-sellers and beeping car horns. The spices in the market stalls and the herbs that grow naturally along the well-worn paths that curl through the hills of the countryside. I never expected at all. It hadn't even crossed my mind that we might be struck with such a sweetness hung above centuries of pain.

But things rarely are as you expect them. Hiking through the beautiful Al-Makhrour valley on our way to a village called Battir, we came across an old man with a donkey. He seemed like he'd been travelling this old road as long as it had existed. As he ascended the hill slowly, his donkey ambling beside him laden with produce, I noticed that the buttons on his shirt were missing, his trousers hung loose around his legs, a white cord acted as a waist belt, and the zip was broken. The first thought that came into my head was something like this: 'Poor man, he's been a farmer all his life, no opportunities, no education...'

As he drew closer a friend of mine recognised him, it was his old Physics teacher. 'This man' my friend Hassan said, 'was the best teacher I ever had, he taught half the people who work for the Palestinian Authority today.' The old man gave a smile.

Hassan walked over to embrace him, and we began to talk with him. He told us about his time at university and of his five children who were 'all graduates now... and working' he added, with sad eyes and a crooked smile.

A few days earlier I was in a café taking shelter from the sun in an ancient city called Nablus. To be honest, I was feeling a little uncomfortable. The room was covered with pictures of men holding guns. The owner was showing one of my friends how to make Turkish coffee, and someone else came round to offer us free drinks. Everyone was having a great time, apart from me. I wanted to leave. I had been on my guard all day. I watched as everyone I was with was having the most amazing time tasting local delicacies, hearing people's stories, sharing their own and I stood by, waiting for them to be ripped off. I didn't want to be friendly I didn't want to talk to this man with all these pictures of people holding guns staring at me, what did he have to say to me?

As we left that café, I overheard his story. His brother was killed during the uprising in 2002 leaving his wife and children unsupported. This man's business supported not only his own family but his brother's family too. And that huge picture on the wall that I didn't want to look at; was his brother.

It wasn't as black and white as I thought.

Statistics, news-bites, headlines make us feel like we understand. It's black and white, clear-cut and laid out in a way in which we can make an 'informed opinion'. But the uncomfortable truth is that nothing is clear-cut, nothing is that simple. That 'terrorist' you heard about on the news, he's a son, a brother, a friend.

All our well-intended research can so easily just end up becoming a barrier to connecting with the people that stand right in front of us. As a Christian, it's the example of Jesus that I want to follow, and Jesus got his hands dirty. Jesus overcame that wall of fear that is so quickly built up, and made friends with the people on the other side of it; the freedom fighter, the prostitute, the foreigner. It's risky, it may mean laying down my black and white opinions, it may mean being left open to assault and betrayal - it didn't always go well for Jesus. But in this process I might discover the most beautiful people on the other side of the wall that fear helps to build. I might discover that they in fact, might change me.



Spices in Nablus



Man with the donkey

## Paul Briggs

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A statement that encompasses all I have learnt from the BAX educational visit to Palestine is this: Ignorance is not bliss - how can we do if we do not know? To fully explain how profound this trip has been it is important to understand my personal history. I have been brought up in an active Christian family and have attended church all of my life. For as long as I can remember the church I grew up in has prayed for Israel, held collections for different charities within Israel and has had an Israeli flag propped up at the end of the hall. I took this interest in Israel held by the church as something which had stemmed from Israel's key role in the Old Testament and the importance of the country in our collective history as God's people. My knowledge of the Palestinian occupation and ongoing conflict was poor, and apart from what I read in the papers and saw in the news, I am ashamed to say, that is what formed my understanding of the conflict: Israel was under a prolonged terrorist attack from Palestine. After meeting the group who visited the UK as part of the first leg of the BAX exchange programme, I learnt that this conflict was much more complicated and one-sided than I had first imagined. I realized my knowledge of the conflict was lacking and proceeded to read around the subject from a number of viewpoints and opinions, and applied to be part of the team visiting Palestine.



Though there are countless things that impressed me, causing me to not only rethink my views on the conflict, but also reflect on some of the motivations and reasoning in my own life. There are two common traits that each Palestinian we encountered shared that have challenged me most. The moving and often heart breaking stories shared by the people we met, painted a vivid picture of the reality facing people living in Palestine. The father fighting to save his land and home from being demolished after he had been completely partitioned from the rest of his village by the Israelis, taught me of the courage and dignity people in Palestine possess. Even after being offered four prosperous options including a blank cheque from the Israeli Ministry of Defence for his land, he refused saying, "This is my land, this is my country, this is where I want to die and this is where I want to be buried." This overwhelming dignity was apparent wherever we visited. The people living in small camps and villages, who invited us into their homes, who clearly did not have many worldly possessions but would gladly share all that they had, often in the form of delicious mint tea which would be enjoyed while we discussed the effects of the occupation on individuals as well as the villages as a whole. The preservation of Palestinian tradition was echoed when we joined the Bedouins in the desert near Bethlehem. Their way of life that has been practiced for generations is now under threat from Israeli 'military artillery practices' that involve destroying cisterns in the desert, the only source of water for the Bedouin tribe. Yet they face this adversity with dignified defiance.

Hope for the future is the second trait that has deeply impacted me personally. Time and time again when asked, what keeps them motivated to reach their goal? Companies, Resistance Theatre Groups, NGO's would answer: the hope that future generations can live in a free Palestine. When visiting a school in Arab Ramadeen, the headmistress said, "I am still here, in Palestine, because it is my land and I have to teach my children to live here." The school consists of four tents and teaches the 20 or so children from the village. They are slowly widening the age groups taught to grade 9 to ensure the children are educated, so they have bright, equal and hopeful future.

These are the motivations that have encouraged me to do my part and continue using my skill base to contribute to seeing this hope one day fulfilled. The aim of building bridges of trust and love between the British and Arab communities is of utmost importance. I hope it will be the first step in our ultimate goal of peace in the Middle East, a safe environment for all generations to live, work and exist in together. Two countries that operate in a lawful political system and who are willingly held accountable by international law. A safe Israel and a free Palestine.



Children from Arab Ramadeen

## Finances

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## About British-Arab Exchanges

BAX organises educational exchanges between people from the Arab world and Europe. By allowing participants to meet and gain an understanding of each other's countries, BAX aims to bridge divisions, train current and future opinion leaders, and provide space for dialogue.

Established in 1973, BAX programmes build on the common ethical values and aspirations shared by our distinctive heritages, and promote collaboration and mutual learning. Over the past 40 years, hundreds of students, postgraduates and young professionals, have participated from Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, UK, France, Netherlands and Switzerland. BAX is a non-governmental, non-political, UK educational charity.

BAX is run by volunteers, who either hold posts on the Board of Trustees or Management Team, or who help with specific visits, events or fundraising projects. We welcome you to support us in one of the following ways:

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