Empowering Students Via Travel: Probing the Arab-Israeli Conflict from the Field

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Abstract

Teaching the intricacies of the Arab-Israeli conflict to undergraduates in a comprehensive and dispassionate manner presents numerous difficulties, even under controlled classroom conditions. As logistically difficult as it is, traveling to the region and exploring the issues through direct interactions with its various peoples, places, groups, and polities allows for a unique and meaningful opportunity to unravel otherwise unfathomable elements of this complex case. This paper documents the particular successes, challenges, and missteps of a recent international travel-learning course which brought a group of American undergraduates to Israel and the West Bank for an intensive learning experience. Unlike traditional classroom settings, this course was frontloaded with all of the readings so that the students came in with at least a minimum shared base level of knowledge. The focus on the ground was exploring how on a day-to-day level the inhabitants of the region coexist more than they clash. In this course students gained a unique insight into the various aspects of the current and past Arab-Israeli conflict through exposure to a wide range of sites, narratives, politics, and initiatives in this land shared and claimed by both sides. We were able to meet with individuals from across the various political, ethnic, and religious divides and visited locations in Israel and the West Bank that are holy to Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, Baha'is, and others. Students had access to places and peoples out of reach to regular tourists, allowing for thoughtful analysis and understanding of the conflict, its complexity, and its possible resolutions or evolutions. Here, I review how the trip aligned with best pedagogical practices, what before and after trip reflections and measurements tell us about student learning and empowerment gained via the program, what improvements could be made in the future to enhance similar trips, and what lessons from this intense endeavor could be brought back into the domestic classroom to improve learning outcomes in the more standard environment.

Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian dimension of it in particular, is often presented as perhaps the most difficult of situations to overcome, involving complex questions of politics, law, religion, and ethics. On most American college campuses, the conflict has become such a hot button issue that activists pressure those across the spectrum to take harder line stances which can decrease serious academic engagement in favor of simple talking points and ad hominem attacks.[1] Getting students to the level of knowledge necessary to unpack the complexities of the conflict without forming new, or relying on pre-existing, biases is a heavy lift, with instructors often opting to either oversimplify the details or highlight one perspective or narrative at the loss of truly dispassionate analysis. Studies have shown that students can best disentangle complex new information through experiential learning, but even intricate classroom simulations cannot capture the full picture of what is going on in the field.[2] Could an intensive travel course to the region therefore be a means of both quickly introducing students to a multifaceted topic before biases set in and providing a forum for deep introspection and analysis that cannot be accomplished via more traditional classroom models?

This paper reviews an attempt to put this concept into action. It is based on an Intensive Learning travel course offered as part of Roanoke College's May Term curriculum that took place in May and June of 2019. This course included both time spent throughout the state of Israel and in Palestinian-controlled sections of the West Bank. Student participants ranged from those with virtually no background on the region and its politics, to those who had completed some initial academic course work that was either directly or tangentially related to aspects of the trip. None of the students had previously visited Israel/Palestine, none had more than the most basic background in Hebrew or Arabic, the selected students came from a variety of academic fields, and their personal politics covered the full spectrum of the American electorate.

Initial post-trip measurements suggest that the participants completed the course with a nuanced view of the conflict, the major actors, and their intersecting histories and narratives. Their own analyses in their final reflection essays varied considerably, demonstrating a success in terms of presentation of the full spectrum of the daily lives, challenges, and perspectives of the inhabitants of the region. In the sections that follow, I lay out in more detail the programmatic goals, issues faced, relevant academic literature, daily schedule, and successes and missteps of the program. The conclusion discusses potential improvements and outstanding questions for further consideration.

Goals

This course was offered as part of the May Term programming for Roanoke College, a private Lutheran college located in southwest Virginia, USA. Unusual for a course like this, none of the

[1] The pro-Palestinian position is most closely associated with the "BDS" (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) movement, while the pro-Israel position is supported by various organizations, including the "Canary Mission" which compiles dossiers on pro-Palestinian student activists, professors, and organizations and publishes them via its website.
[2] Smith, Elizabeth T., and Mark A. Boyer. "Designing In-Class Simulations 1." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 29, no. 4 (1996): 690-694; Asal, Victor, and Elizabeth L. Blake. "Creating simulations for political science education." *Journal of Political Science Education* 2, no. 1 (2006): 1-18; Bernstein, Jeffrey L. "Cultivating civic competence: Simulations and skill-building in an introductory government class." *Journal of Political Science Education* 4, no. 1 (2008): 1-20.

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students were Jewish, Muslim, or Arab, let alone Israeli or Palestinian. All were U.S.-born and raised, and none had previously visited the direct area of focus (e.g. Israel/Palestine). Traditional courses on the topic often have a singular focus, presenting primarily the narrative of one of the sides while more tangentially (if at all) touching on the competing narratives. More recent trends in academia have included an active attempt to show and explore the major narratives across the divide (Israel/Zionist and Palestinian/Arab), with the groundbreaking book by Abdul Monem Said Aly (an Egyptian), Shai Feldman (an Israeli), and Khalil Shikaki (a Palestinian), as perhaps the best guide for exploring this pedagogy.[3][4]

With this travel course I have attempted to build off this positive pedagogical trend and to take it further by challenging the dichotomy between two major narratives often presented and instead exploring the complexity by adding to the dual-narrative approach rarely heard voices who might represent smaller communities of opinion. To do so, we read about the major narratives of the different actors in our pre-trip preparations but made sure that while in the field we also sought out speakers who voiced perspectives that did not always align with their group or national identities. These included an Israeli West Bank settler speaking about positive interactions with her Palestinian neighbors, a Bedouin artist who had taken full advantage of opportunities for gaining higher education available through support by the Israeli state, and a member of a Jewish community on the border of Gaza who explained why she felt high levels of empathy with her supposed "enemy" just across the line, as well as others noted in the daily schedule section below. The historic background readings were required to be completed before the trip so that on the ground we could focus on the day-to-day lives of inhabitants and a variety of voices.

The major educational goals for the course could be summarized as:

1) Meet students at all levels of initial knowledge about the region/conflict.
   This trip did not require students to have completed specific preparatory course work before enrolling in the course. This was a decision made for both practical and pedagogical reasons. Practically speaking, as a small liberal arts college with very small Jewish, Muslim, and Arab populations it would have likely been impossible to attract enough students to both meet minimal College requirements for the course to "make" and to divide costs in a more efficient manner if we limited the pool of applicants to only those with a previously explored interest in the region. From a learning perspective though, the benefits to having a diverse range of majors and backgrounds also allowed for interesting discussions and perspectives that were not pre-shaped by any particular course of study.

2) Ensure that the primary voices while on the ground were individuals from the region with the instructor and aids acting as guides.
   Here the idea was that the students spent months hearing from the professor in the lead up to the trip, but since the course was focused on the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants of the region it made more sense to put their own voices front and center on a daily basis as opposed to that of the professor. We ended up working with an Australian-born Israeli guide as our primary leader, along with a Bedouin bus driver, and a couple of Palestinian tour

[3] Aly, Abdel Monem Said, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki. *Arabs and Israelis: conflict and peacemaking in the Middle East*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013.
[4] Author's disclosure: As a graduate student I worked on data gathering and reviewed drafts of the manuscript that became this book.

guides. The additional speakers beyond that core group covered a wide variety of ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds.

3) Work to hear from as many different perspectives as possible while recognizing that fully achieving "balance" is impossible.
   It was important to the course design and goals that we present a wide variety of opinions and perspectives, both mainstream and idiosyncratic. But the entire concept of attempting to find "balance" is problematic. While many issues that we explored have various competing narratives attached to them, not all do, and not all issues require an equal presentation from every possible voice. The goal was to not ignore important perspectives, but also not to elevate claims that could clearly be proven false, even if such false claims were widely held by one or more group.

4) Focus on the intersection of big-picture political questions and the day-to-day lives and realities of inhabitants of the region.
   As a political science class, we organized many of the site choices and discussions around large political issues that are generally the focus of political science research and writing on the region. At the same time, one of the most important benefits of being on the ground was the ability to also focus on the micro-level of how national and international politics affects the lived experiences of locals. This allowed us to uncover daily challenges that are generally ignored when looking higher up the political ladder, and to show how much coexistence is present at any time even in periods where little political progress can be measured on the grand scale.

5) Emphasize the importance of history and different narratives of the same events.
   The current events in the region cannot be understood without thoroughly engaging with the complicated history of the various groups and national movements. At the same time, it is not just the history that matters but how the major actors have framed these events and built critical and enduring narratives around shared events.

6) Ensure that the participants end with high levels of understanding of critical moments from throughout the conflict, while also emphasizing successes in coexistence.
   In short, we were interested in both the good and the bad elements and sought to fight the sense that many students experience that the situation is so hopeless that there is nothing positive to consider. While we did not sugarcoat the realities of daily life on the ground, we also did not lose sight of the fact that there is also lots of beauty to consider and experience along with the obvious pain and challenges.

Best Practices

The *Journal of Political Science Education* has published only a small number of articles that are relevant for the methodology under investigation in this study. A 2015 article by Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado "Internationalizing 'Engaged' Learning: Enhancing Travel Study in Cuba" appears to be in the only article published in any of the major political science journals to directly address the use of travel study in the discipline. As the title suggests, the article provides an overview of a pilot project which attempted to use travel study to Cuba, and specifically

service learning there, as a means of reinforcing classroom learning about Cuban politics.[5] As a service-learning course, the students were consistently exposed to locals and given the opportunity to interact with them in the hopes that this would lead to reflections regarding the relevant classroom lessons. Our course similarly sought to use interactions with locals as a means of enhancing classroom learning, but otherwise the experience was quite different since the students in our travel course were directly exploring the topic at hand as opposed to doing so tangentially through informal conversations.

Samer Abboud's "Teaching the Arab World and the West…As an Arab in the West" addresses how subjective experiences can support the pedagogical goal of developing critical thinking skills and does so with specific focus on the Middle East. Abboud rejects the concept that "teaching and learning occur in 'neutral' contexts" and explains that he "attempt(s) to use (his) own biography to tell a story about international politics."[6] He contrasts that with the perspective of Michael Marks who has argued that "the use of the first person plural detracts from the scholarly neutrality that all students should aspire to."[7] In this course, I did attempt to maintain a level of dispassionate presentation of the various positions, which was perhaps easier for me than Abboud has found it to be for him in his course as I am neither Palestinian nor Israeli. But, like Abboud, I believe that in courses such as this it is often best that "professors act more as facilitators rather than as transmitters of knowledge. The role of the professor…is to initiate both intellectual and personal reflection on the course material, not simply regurgitate ideas, facts, and arguments."[8] In that way, this course clearly followed the pedagogy outlined by Kember and Kwan regarding facilitating student learning by encouraging them to construct their knowledge and understanding of the world through their own existing conceptual framework coupled with the experiences that they had in the field.[9]

There have only been four other articles in the *Journal of Political Science Education* dealing with experiential learning in political science classrooms. The first, "League of Our Own: Creating a Model United Nations Scrimmage Conference" is not directly relevant to the topic at hand. With the exception of the fact that the article focuses on the experience of liberal arts colleges in the mid-Atlantic region, the pedagogy they describe is quite different from that of our travel course.[10] The second, "Seeing Other Sides: Nongame Simulations and Alternative Perspectives of Middle East Conflict," has a similar goal of introducing American students with limited knowledge of the region to the complexity of the history, politics, and narratives.[11] However, unlike our class only the Arab side of the equation is presented, and the use of simulations was due to the inability to have the students fully engage with the region directly. It thus provides what could be a useful model for courses on the topic that do not have the

[5] Benjamin-Alvarado, Jonathan. "Internationalizing "engaged" learning: Enhancing travel study in Cuba." *Journal of Political Science Education* 11, no. 4 (2015): 483-493.
[6] Abboud, Samer. "Teaching the Arab World and the West… As an Arab in the West." *Journal of Political Science Education* 11, no. 2 (2015): 233-244.
[7] Ibis p238; Marks, Michael P. "The "We" Problem in Teaching International Studies." *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (2002): 25-41.
[8] Aboud (2015), p241.
[9] Kember, David, and Kam-Por Kwan. "Lecturers' approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching." *Instructional science* 28, no. 5 (2000): 469-490.
[10] Ripley, Brian, Neal Carter, and Andrea K. Grove. "League of our own: Creating a model United Nations scrimmage conference." *Journal of Political Science Education* 5, no. 1 (2009): 55-70.
[11] Baylouny, Anne Marie. "Seeing other sides: Nongame simulations and alternative perspectives of Middle East conflict." *Journal of Political Science Education* 5, no. 3 (2009): 214-232.

opportunity of studying in the field, but it appears that there are few benefits to this model over the one that we have designed here when travel is an option.

William James Stover has also written two articles dealing with experiential learning and the Middle East. In one, "Moral Reasoning and Student Perceptions of the Middle East: Observations on Student Learning from an Internet Dialog," he explores using the Internet to provide students at a small Christian liberal arts college the opportunity to interact with faith leaders from around the world to examine how their varied moral understandings of the Middle East would affect students' views towards the region and its actors.[12] Like this study, he was interested in how interactions with different actors could alter perceptions, but in his course those interactions were purely done via online communications and purposefully came at the issues through faith as a lens, which by design we never did. His other article, "Teaching and Learning Empathy: An Interactive, Online Diplomatic Simulation of Middle East Conflict," similarly explores using online tools to alter students' perceptions of the region.[13] In this case, he is interested in how role-playing which included online interactions with citizens of the region could affect the participants' empathy towards the Middle East and its actors. He notes that he is using this medium because not all students are able to participate in travel experiences and suggests his methods could be useful when travel is not an option for financial or practical reasons. His main pedagogical goal is quite different from ours. For our course, we did attempt to measure changes related to empathy, as will be discussed in the findings, but this was not the focus of the course and the measurements were mostly taken because all students participating in international experiences via Roanoke College are required to complete "intercultural development" measurement surveys before and after their courses of study.

Outside of the political science journals, a recent book on *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict* provides a number of chapters that are directly relevant here. Oren Kroll-Zeldin, an anthropologist, writes on "Duel Narrative Learning: Experiential Education in Palestine/Israel."[14] His course, like ours, was a three-week immersion program bringing together students from a variety of backgrounds to study the conflict from the ground level. Akin to our trip, his was designed to engage "with multiple narratives in order to make sense of the everyday life in Palestine and Israel."[15] In addition, both programs seek to present multiple narratives and to avoid advocacy, instead giving students the ability to critically analyze their perceptions of the conflict. From there though, the two programs diverge. While his program included Jewish Americans, Arab Americans, and students of Palestinian descent, our group included no students identifying as any of those. His trip traveled the country and across the Green Line but was based entirely in Jerusalem, while we began our trip in Jerusalem but moved throughout Israel proper and the West Bank, staying at a variety of hotels and doing home stays. Most critically, his course was rooted in anthropological pedagogy utilizing the theoretical frameworks known as comparative conflict analysis and social identify theory, while ours used theories from political

[12] Stover, William J. "Moral reasoning and student perceptions of the Middle East: Observations on student learning from an internet dialog." *Journal of Political Science Education* 2, no. 1 (2006): 73-88.
[13] Stover, William James. "Teaching and learning empathy: An interactive, online diplomatic simulation of middle east conflict." *Journal of Political Science Education* 1, no. 2 (2005): 207-219.
[14] Kroll-Zeldin, Oren. "Dual Narrative Learning: Experiential Education in Palestine/Israel." In Harris, Rachel S. et al, *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019.
[15] Ibid, p.182.

science and international relations, considering both the high-level politics and the effect of the conflict and related issues on the day-to-day lives of individuals at all levels of society.

Other chapters in the edited volume focus on a wide variety of subjects related to teaching the Arab-Israel Conflict. Donna Robinson Divine urges an emphasis that helps students understand that the conflict "is not only about a piece of real estate: it is also about different and competing conceptions of national identity. And on that topic, Zionists and Palestinians disagree as much within their own communities as across the national divide."[16] This is an important point that aligns with my attempt to introduce students to a wide variety of voices and perspectives from throughout the region. Canadian political scientist Mira Sucharov meanwhile aligns herself with Aboud's previously discussed position that professors should not shy away from presenting their own opinions and backgrounds to students as they grapple with the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict, although her arguments prove unconvincing overall.[17] She explains that she has felt uncomfortable with the disciplinary norm that policy advocacy rarely has a place in a political science classroom. While she makes a compelling case that disregarding the norm has made her more comfortable as an instructor dealing with sensitive issues, a clearly positive achievement, she provides no real evidence that this shift away from the norm in turn benefits her students. Promoting policy advocacy as a standard in the classroom will likely result in certain students (perhaps marginalized) feeling recognized while others either would need to be comfortable being taught from a biased position or end up avoiding coursework that could be critical to their academic studies. The quantifiable benefits of providing a more comfortable atmosphere for the instructor at the detriment to the general student population appears dubious, however.

Two other chapters from the book present interesting perspectives on tackling issues of culture and the Arab-Israeli conflict. First, Ari Ariel discusses a pedagogical approach that uses food to teach the conflict asking students to consider questions like "What happens when national cultures overlap, for example, if a food is shared by several nations? And how does political conflict impact shared cultures?"[18] We endeavored to explore similar questions as we traversed Israel and the West Bank and sampled the assortment of foods available, each of which tells a story of the making of the modern Israeli and Palestinian societies. This element of the trip came up in a number of the students' journal entries as being particularly memorable and thus proved a good gateway for deeper conversations. Lastly, Joel Migdal writes in the conclusion to the book about famed Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling, noting that he "stressed that it is impossible to understand Israel, and particularly the Jewish population of Israel, without taking into account the profound effect Arabs have had on Jewish culture and society (and Jews on Arab society)…Israel's politics, society, and culture are in good measure the outcome of the engagement between two distinct, but deeply intertwined groups, Jews and Arabs."[19] But Migdal also stresses that when looking within Israeli society, intercommunal relations are critical to understand as well, because "Palestinian-Jewish and Arab-Israeli relations have inexorably

[16] Divine, Donna Robinson, "Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict." In Harris, Rachel S. et al, *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. P. 58, 60.
[17] Sucharov, Mira, "Letting Politics into the Israeli-Palestinian Relations Classroom." In Harris, Rachel S. et al, *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. Pp282-287.
[18] Ariel, Ari. "Feeding Minds: Using Food to Teach the Arab-Israeli Conflict." In Harris, Rachel S. et al, *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. P.277.
[19] Migdal, Joel S. "Teaching Beyond the Conflict." In Harris, Rachel S. et al, *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. P. 349

interacted with intracommunal relations among Jews….the relations between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews have been key to understanding Jewish-Palestinian relations and conflict."[20] This salient point is particularly difficult for students without a preexisting background in the Middle East to comprehend when studying the region from the confines of their home institutions in the United States. By traveling to the region however, the many layers that exist in each national community come into much clearer focus, allowing the students to grasp many subtleties that I have yet to see captured in a classroom, no matter the strength of the institution or level of instruction.

Schedule

The pre-trip process began with an application due in the fall, including an essay on why the individual was interested in taking part in the trip. After review of the applications and one-on-one interviews, fifteen students were accepted and enrolled in the course. Starting at the beginning of the spring semester in January, these students had meetings with the study abroad office that are required of all students taking part in international learning experiences and three additional group meetings specific to this trip. Each of these three meetings concentrated on different elements to help prepare the students for their experience.

The first group meeting was designed to provide the general overview of the course and outline the expectations. Students received the full syllabus, which listed all of the required and suggested readings, and it was explained that the "midterm" exam would be given electronically and was required to be completed a few days prior to departure. Since many of the students did not know each other previously, this initial meeting also served as an icebreaker to begin to build the group atmosphere.

The second meeting concentrated on providing more background into various aspects of Israeli and Palestinian cultures and peoples. Students were introduced to the maps and given statistics regarding demographics. They were also provided a list of useful phrases in Arabic and Hebrew to practice before the trip. To offer native expertise, a visiting fellow from Israel was present to answer students' questions and help demystify some of the most "foreign" elements they were likely to encounter while abroad.

The last group meeting covered the remaining nuts and bolts. It was primarily a discussion of the detailed final schedule and how to prepare for the trip. Students were given packing lists, travel instructions, tips, and other guidance, and reminded to complete the readings and midterm by the required deadline.

Students had to read three major books before the trip. David Lesch's *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History* served as a general overview from a relatively neutral stance.[21] To understand the two main competing narratives, Migdal and Kimmering's *The Palestinian People* was used to present the Palestinian history while Benny Morris' *Righteous Victims A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* provided the Israeli side of the equation.[22] Other supplemental readings were also suggested, but these three served as the core curriculum.

[20] Ibid, p.352.
[21] Lesch, David W. *The Arab-Israeli conflict: a history*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
[22] Baruch, Kimmerling, and Joel Migdal. *The Palestinian People: A History.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003; Benny, Morris. *Righteous Victims. A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. NY: Vintage, 2001.

Students were expected to read the books over the course of the spring semester, with the understanding that most would cram the majority if their reading in during the few weeks between the end of the finals period and the beginning of the trip. As a strong incentive to finish the readings before the trip, students were required to complete the online midterm by midnight on the Sunday before the flight to Israel (we left the U.S. on Tuesday evening). This combination of assigned readings and the exam ensured that they had a shared base level of knowledge of critical terms, dates, people, and history before arrival.

To begin the trip the group met in Washington DC and flew together from Dulles International Airport. We used the downtime after going through airport security to discuss some more details of the initial schedule and to ease travel concerns. Pedagogically, we were able to use the interaction with Israeli security professionals during our layover in London and later upon arrival in Tel Aviv as the first taste of experiential learning, discussing how these procedures differed from others students had experienced and questioning why that was the case.

After arrival, the trip consisted of long days with early breakfasts and activities continuing through dinner, with few exceptions. The itinerary involved starting in Jerusalem, then shifting west to Tel Aviv, heading south to the desert and Gaza border, then east to the Dead Sea, followed by a few days in the Palestinian West Bank, before ending in the north. We went to religious sites (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i), Zionist sites, Palestinians sites, and overlapping sites important to multiple groups.

Each day of the course had a different theme. I lay out the major topics, talks, and sites below:

1. Tue May 21, 2019
   Flight from *Washington Dulles* USA to Israel

2. Wednesday, May 22, 2019
   Welcome to the Holy Land
   - Arrival in Israel
   - Drive to Jerusalem
   - Panoramic view of the city from Mount Scopus.
   - Opening lecture and discussion

3. Thursday, May 23
   Abrahamic religions in the Holy City – Yerushalayim, Jerusalem, al-Quds
   - Tour the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary
   - Visit the Western Wall
   - Explore the Jerusalem Archeological Park, including a model of the Second Temple
   - Walk the Via Delarosa
   - Visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher
   - End with rooftop discussion overlooking the Old City.

4. Friday, May 24
   Jerusalem Remembers: How Israeli society grapples with the legacy of the Holocaust and its fallen soldiers
   - Tour Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial
   - Visit Har Herzl National Cemetery

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- Hosted by families for Shabbat dinner

5. Saturday, May 25
   Shabbat – A day of rest
   Since most things are closed on the Sabbath, and the students still were adjusting to the time change, all Saturday day activities were technically optional, but almost every student chose to participate.
   - Synagogue tour (optional)
   - Israel Museum tour (optional)
   - Group reflection in the evening

6. Sunday, May 26
   Jerusalem United/Divided: Past, Present and Future – the city as a microcosm of the conflict
   - View the city from Haas Promenade
   - Visit the Bell Outpost (by Kibbutz Ramat Rachel)
   - Visit the Mount Zion Cable Car Museum
   - Tour Ammunition Hill
   - Visit the Arab neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah – Palestinian speaker
   - Overlook of wall section of Israeli barrier near Pisgat Ze'ev, next to Shuafat Refugee Camp and Anata
   - Free evening at Machane Yehuda Market

7. Monday, May 27
   Return – case studies of the 1948 War
   - Visit the Tomb of Rachel
   - Travel to Gush Etzion (West Bank settlement) via the Tunnels Road
   - Visit the Lone Oak and walk down the Patriarchs' Way
   - Kfar Etzion audio-visual presentation
   - Settler speaker
   - Nature walk at Sataf (Arab village depopulated in 1948)

8. Tuesday, May 28
   The 1948 War and Modern Israel (Tel Aviv)
   - Visit Castel National Park
   - Explore Nachalat Binyamin crafts fair and Carmel Market
   - Free time on the beach
   - Tour the new Innovation Center at the Peres Center for Peace
   - Discussion on Israeli socio-economic issues on Rothschild Avenue, the epicenter of the 2011 social justice protests

9. Wednesday, May 29
   The Negev Desert – conquest and settlement in the Land
   - Hike in Ein Avdat Nature Reserve
   - Tour the ancient Nabatean city of Avdat

- Tel Be'er Sheva National Park
- Bedouin artist speaker
- Negev Brigade memorial

10. Thursday, May 30

The Negev Desert and David Ben-Gurion – Vision and Reality/Neighboring Gaza

- See David Ben Gurion's Gravesite overlooking Nahal Zin
- Visit Ben-Gurion's Home on Kibbutz Sde Boker
- Approach and observe the Gaza border crossing
- Black Arrow memorial
- Speak via phone with Roanoke College student from Gaza
- Sderot/ Visit the JNF playground (bomb shelter)
- Speaker at Netiv Ha'asarah (the closest Israeli community to Gaza)
- lookout towards Gaza Strip

11. Friday, May 31

Judaisms during the time of the Second Temple and beyond

- Tour Masada
- Swim in the Dead Sea
- Drive to Bethlehem and meet Palestinian host families
- Tour the Church of the Nativity

12. Saturday, June 1

Palestine and Occupation

- Morning breakfast and discussions with host families
- Visit the Aida refugee camp/Lunch in the camp
- Tour of the wall (segment of the Israeli separation barrier)
- Visit Banksy Museum

13. Sunday, June 2

The Successes and Failures of Palestinian Nationalism and State Building

- Arafat's grave and museum at the Muqata'a in Ramallah
- Guided tour of the new city of Rawabi – discussion of Palestinian development & challenges
- Pass through Israeli checkpoints and meet up with Israeli guide
- Drive north
- Speakers (Palestinian citizen of Israel and Jewish Israeli working on coexistence)
- Reflection Session

14. Monday, June 3

The Golan Heights – Past, Present and Future

- Visit Mitzpeh Gadot
- Hike at Jilaboon Stream
- Explore the Katzrin Talmudic Village
- Visit Golan Winery

- View the Golan Heights and Syria from atop Mount Bental

15. Tuesday, June 4
Akko and Haifa as a case study of a mixed population city
- Akko – Underground Prisoners Museum, port and market
- See sites in Haifa (Baha'i Gardens, Stella Maris, Elijah's Cave)
- Visit the ancient port of Caesarea
- Concluding session

16. Wed June 5
Fly home to USA

Issues

Although the trip was clearly a success based on most measurements, it was not without its faults. Before going through the highlights, I think enumerating the problems that we faced can help frame the successes in an even clearer light.

The first issue is likely an unavoidable outgrowth of the trip design, namely that even with careful efforts to avoid it some elements of the program are bound to feel "unbalanced" to at least a portion of the students. Students bring their own biases and opinions along with them, and in some instances, individuals missed pieces of presentations due to fatigue, and thus would on occasion complain in their journals or aloud that a certain element lacked balance between rival accounts. While it is important to be as evenhanded as possible, "balance" between the competing narratives is impossible, since not all stories or facts have two sides. In addition, "balance" is not always desirable, since it can feed into the false notion that every element has multiple correct perspectives, when in some cases critical elements of a narrative are demonstrably false. Lastly, balance can be measured on both the micro and macro levels, and measurements could be based on time, quality, quantity, or various other aspects. While the trip therefore might be judged to be unbalanced by certain dimensions, it was not if one focuses on others, and how "unbalanced" it was depends crucially on the chosen measurements and the biases of the measurer.

Relatedly, the desire to hear from a wide variety of voices opened up the chance for some of the guest speakers to present falsehoods. This raises the important pedagogical question of how an instructor should correct fictions while respecting differing narratives, especially those deeply tied to national identity. In the case of our trip, it was especially hard to vet the speakers in the West Bank because they were arranged through a third party, which may have led to more corrections of those presentations. I was careful to only correct factual errors and not challenge non-fact-based elements of any of the narratives, but the question remains whether this can be done without appearing biased. The reviews suggest I successfully towed the line, but each instance presented a separate challenge and distilling what a consistently successful response should look like appears an elusive goal.

Another element that is difficult to avoid with the student selection process is that the varied backgrounds of the participants meant that we could not assume basic background familiarity about particular elements of the history or narratives, so those with some initial knowledge might

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have felt certain presentations were elementary, especially early in the trip. To deal with this, the students with more pre-existing knowledge were given opportunities to help lead discussions and to reinforce their existing understandings. This helped bridge the knowledge gap and provided all individuals the chance to perform according to their abilities and backgrounds. By the end of the trip, once all students had a strong foundation, this was no longer as big of an issue.

Housing the students in tourist-focused sites (hotels/hostels) in Israel but with families in the West Bank exaggerated the very real discrepancies regarding water availability and usage. Palestinians are clearly in a worse situation overall and at the mercy of the Israelis for much of their water supply, but water issues in Israel are more serious than they appeared. Tourist-reliant countries tend to go out of their way to make those tourists feel comfortable, and so there was always an abundance of water at the Israeli sites. Yet studies have recently documented that by at least one account Israel is tied as the second-worst country in the world when it comes to water availability.[23] Unfortunately, student journals and papers suggests they left the trip with the impression that Israel no longer faces major water issues, a clear misunderstanding of the situation.

The downtime in the schedule while in the West Bank provided a nice break in a hectic few weeks, which also allowed for students to have more unstructured interactions with their Palestinians hosts. This ended up providing a discrepancy between the different parts of the course. This was positive in terms of giving the students a really memorable and rewarding home stay experience and strong sense of Palestinian hospitality (which is a point of cultural pride), but without a similar experience with Israeli families, it was hard to humanize both in the same way for some students.

The desire to make the most out of being on-site and experiencing the country led us to plan a number of beautiful and interesting but at times difficult hikes. We may have overestimated the stamina of the students. Many post-trip comments reflected how physically difficult they found this element, and that they were unprepared for it. No students indicated that this was a major detraction, but for future trips it will be worthwhile to rethink the educational value of some of these days and whether we can accomplish some of the same learning objectives in other less physically taxing ways.

Finally, a last-minute addition of a phone conversation with a Roanoke student from Gaza while we were on the border overlooking the isolated territory was well meaning and meant to provide access to voice from a location we could not directly access, a clearly worthwhile goal. But its spontaneous nature meant that the student was uncomfortable in speaking openly due to lack of knowledge about the tour guide and any other potential Israeli listeners, so it ended up being stifled and awkward. Planning for a similar talk more carefully in advance could alleviate some of the problems we experienced with this element while still ensuring that voices from Gaza are heard from directly, aligning more successfully with the goals of the course.

Highlights

While the issues and challenges outlined above are important, the trip overall was extremely successful based on all available measurements. The biggest achievement was simply getting a

[23] Aqueduct™ Water Risk Atlas (Aqueduct 3.0) https://www.wri.org/applications/aqueduct/country-rankings/

group of American college students, few of whom had ever left the United States, to appreciate the complexity and beauty of the region and its people along with the details of the political events and history. Having taught numerous courses on the region I have found that while facts and a general cultural understanding can be built in the classroom, there is no substitute for being on the ground to fully convey and inculcate this sense of the dynamics of the region and its intermingled people.

One of the most meaningful elements of the trip was the relationships formed by the students with our Israeli tour guide, Bedouin bus driver, and Palestinian host families. Each of these was unique but all were extremely positive. As discussed previously, it would have been better if we also had done a homestay with Israeli families, since our warm and welcoming Shabbat dinner hosts were not allotted enough time for the exhausted students to really get to know them in a meaningful way. But the entirety of the Shabbat experience in Jerusalem, including the hosted dinner, optional services, and experiencing the distinctiveness of a city almost entirely shut down in observance of the sabbath still provided an exceedingly memorable day.

While in Arab East Jerusalem, we were hosted for tea by a Palestinian whose family home has been condemned by the Israeli authorities and whose challenge to the Israeli Supreme Court had recently been denied. His was a long history of displacement and legal battles. The area of Jerusalem known as Sheikh Jarrah was the site of a historic Jewish neighborhood that was abandoned as a result of the 1948 war, after which the Jordanian authorities settled Palestinian families there. But after Israel captured East Jerusalem during the 1967 war, laws were passed that allowed Jewish property holders to reclaim land for which legal documents could be found and authenticated. The intricate details of the overlapping claims and contested legal issues are elements that I have had students study in classes before. But being able to sit and chat with a family who is directly affected by the conflicting claims was very powerful for the students, most of whom left with a sense that no matter which side has the stronger legal claim, the human toll on ordinary families is troubling.

Our visit to the newly opened Peres Center for Peace and Innovation helped the students to break out of the concept that everything in the region centers around the conflict. The Center was founded by Shimon Peres, the longtime Israeli politician and one of the architects of many of the Israeli-Palestinian peace attempts. The Center focuses its presentations and exhibits on some of the positive developments, both diplomatic and interpersonal, that the members of the various societies have experienced over the decades. In addition, it showcases technological innovations developed from numerous sectors that are having positive impacts on the region or the world, or which have the potential to do so in the future. In addition to presentations focused on coexistence efforts, the students seemed particularly impressed by a company working on creating home cooking gas from waste products including food scraps and human excrement and another startup focused on alternative protein production via bug farming.

In line with the Ari Ariel chapter previously discussed, one of the most oft mentioned elements of the trip in the student comments was the way that we were able to use food to see and experience the diversity of Israeli society. Not only did students appreciate how delicious many of these (to them) exotic dishes were, but being aware of the availability of Kurdish, Yemenite, Ethiopian, eastern European, Moroccan, and other cuisines alongside the expected "Middle Eastern" foods like hummus and falafel provided concrete substantiation of how diverse Israeli society is today. In addition, comparing the traditional foods that we consumed with our Palestinian hosts to what we saw in both Jewish and Arab areas of Israel also allowed for

fascinating ethnocultural analysis regarding the heterogeneity of the various areas as well as the similarities across divides.

Lastly, our primary guide was the most knowledgeable and evenhanded leader one could hope for in a trip such as this and his intricate expertise and planning made for an extremely smooth experience throughout our time in the region. If there were any issues with him, they were limited to the possibility that his own neutrality on many issues meant that the traditional Israeli narrative was rarely presented unchallenged, which was only really an issue when contrasted with other speakers, since his Palestinian counterparts were less willing to stray from their traditional national narratives. Although in contrast to his performance throughout the trip, on first appearance the name of his company "Teaching Israel" might have itself seemed biased to students, priming them to be suspicious of his assumed prejudices.

Lessons Learned/Analysis

One of the difficulties of evaluating travel courses is that the educational goals are often quite different to that of standard classroom courses. While the basic facts covered in any course on the Israeli-Arab and/or Israeli-Palestinian conflict should generally be the same no matter the structure, an experiential learning course in the field is attempting to provide a three-dimensional learning sphere that moves beyond these collections of facts. In my standard course on the subject the students are graded on classroom participation, a midterm exam approximately seven weeks into the semester, a research and analysis paper, and a final essay-style exam. None of these was required in an identical way for the travel course, so direct comparisons are impossible. Students were still graded on participation but answering a question in a class is not the same as being engaged during tours, guest lectures, or other activities. As noted already, the "midterm" for this course took place before the trip began, so although it covered some elements that we had discussed together, much of the pre-trip learning was self-driven and based on the assigned readings, a far cry from a month and a half or more of class lectures and discussions. This trip did require a final paper, but as opposed to a research-based assignment the prompt asked them to analyze and synthesize the lessons learned through their engagement in the region and to reassess previous beliefs and understandings, again a different style of assignment than the traditional counterpart.

Given all of that, how is it possible to judge the learning achievements of the students? First, a baseline was established in the pre-trip meetings and applications, so I knew before arrival what their general background knowledge and positions were. The midterm also provided concrete evidence of how much they had learned from their review of the books. Here it was evident that their understanding and expertise at the beginning of the trip itself was well-behind what their peers had gained by the midterm in the standard class, as would be expected when comparing self-directed study of complicated material to performance in a guided course.

Another potential data point came from the fact that the international education office required every participating student to take a pre-trip "intercultural competence" survey. This is a standard measurement that they capture from all May Term trips as well as all other international student experiences, such as semester study abroad. The measurement is designed to evaluate each individual student on how they experience cultural differences, but it appears to be about how much students can put themselves "in the shoes" of locals, in supposed opposition to them "judging" based on their own perspectives. This is a worthwhile goal, but was never a planned

learning outcome of the course, partly because political analysis is sometimes best accomplished as an outsider who does not have the considerable biases of inhabitants themselves. While I did want the students to hear and understand the perspectives of the various people that they interacted with, the conception that they should return from this short trip in a position to completely remove their own experiences and cultural outlooks from their analysis does not appear an especially worthwhile learning goal, especially for a course focused on political analysis as opposed to an academic field like anthropology or sociology.

During the trip frequent formal and informal group discussions and the required daily journal entries were another element that helped document the student growth and learning. While few students began the trip with a solid understanding of the major issues and events, by the end of the first week the average student was at least at the level usually achieved at the midpoint of a standard semester in terms of facts, and much higher in terms of the less tangible and difficult to convey elements of the situation. Students spent less time "studying" during the trip, but the fact that the learning was coupled with experiences meant that the students generally had better recall of the facts that we had gone over, being able to visualize for example the exact divide between neighborhoods in Jerusalem in a way that books fail to capture. The journal entries ranged from simple notes about what they had experienced to more complex analysis and reflection. They document how students struggled with difficult situations and conflicting presentations and help to highlight which activities were appreciated in the short term versus those that proved most memorable in later reflections.

Since the goal of education is to provide not just interesting experiences but knowledge that will last beyond the final exam, the post-trip measurements are instrumental in judging the success of the course. Here there are five different potential pieces that can help form the full picture. First, there are the formal student evaluations, which are collected at or near the completion of the semester for all courses at Roanoke, like at most other colleges and universities. Second, there are the final reflection papers, the deepest formal writing that they were required to complete for the course. Third there was a post-trip survey again administered by the international studies office to measure changes in individual students' intercultural development. Fourth, a small number of students from the course have enrolled in other courses with me since the trip through which I have been able to gauge how much information they retained from the trip via their class subsequent participation. In addition, most participants attended a reunion dinner in late November, which provided an opportunity to check in with a larger group of participants, albeit in an informal setting. Lastly, in January, all participants were asked to complete a 6 month post-trip follow up survey which invited them to reflect on their experiences, what they had retained, and their feelings about the structure and content of the trip after having had more time to process.

The formal student evaluations are useful in that they are standardized across all College courses, providing a nice benchmark to use in considering the strengths and weaknesses of course design and implementation. That said, there are two major issues with using these to judge the success of this course. First, there are the general concerns about the accuracy of using such student surveys to evaluating educational achievement. These concerns are well-documented and wide-ranging, but the largest criticisms include the fact that students are generally not in a position to judge the educational success of the course, and the appearance of

student biases in the measurements.[24] I will not engage with these critiques here since they are outside of the scope of this paper, but they do suggest that any use of student evaluations as an indicator only be done in concert with other potentially less-subjective measurements.

The second issue with using these student evaluations is specific to this course. Because our trip was outside of the timeline of most May Term courses, starting later than others and spilling nearly a week into June, the Institutional Research department had to shift the deadline for student responses. This meant institutionally that they could not close the response reports for any of the other May Term courses until ours had also been completed. Since the summer sessions had already begun, there was a concern about pushing the reports too much later, and thus they required students to complete their evaluations within just two days of return from the Middle East. Because of this the students were jetlagged, many were still traveling, none had time to process their experiences, and the participation rate was lower than in my other courses. Nonetheless, the course received an overall mean score of 4.56/5, showing that student reactions to the course upon immediate return were very positive, at least for the two-thirds who completed their responses.

The final reflection paper was due eight days after we returned to the United States. As mentioned, this assignment was quite different from the equivalent paper in my standard Arab-Israeli Conflict class, so there can be no direct comparison. But the student performance on this paper was excellent, especially considering the wide-ranging academic backgrounds of participants. Across the board, students engaged in complex analysis and demonstrated detailed understanding of the facts and narratives of the various actors. They also had a more intricate understanding of some of the thorniest issues that students in the standard class have frequently failed to comprehend. That said, in a substantial number of cases they were more influenced by one or two strong emotional interactions which helped sway their analysis in particular ways. This is not inherently good or bad but does indicate that being in the field makes it harder for many students to maintain detachment from the actors. While students were more understanding of each of the major narratives therefore, they also emerged both more engaged and often more subjective than they had been at the outset. Again, since the student population for this trip was more diverse in terms of backgrounds than the standard course, it is unclear whether this shift is inherent in the structure or due to the variance seen between students across the courses.

The third potential measurement, the intercultural development measurement produced by the study abroad office, was one that I thought would be one of the most interesting since it provides concrete before and after measurements on the same clear scale, which none of the other pieces do. The study abroad office fell behind in getting this data together, so I only received it a couple of days before the draft of this paper was due for submission, and thus my analysis here is only preliminary. The data suggests a slight overall movement downward on the scale of intercultural competency, a move that is apparently in line with other May Term courses. Since this measurement was in regard to a learning achievement that was not a goal of the course, the data does not tell us much, but does suggest that interacting in the polarized environment of the Middle East may have caused some students to "retreat" towards a position

[24] See for example: Mitchell, Kristina M. W., and Jonathan Martin. "Gender Bias in Student Evaluations." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 648–52; Stark, Philip B. and Richard Freishtat. "An Evaluation of Course Evaluations." *ScienceOpen Research*, (2014); Vasey, Craig and Linda Carroll, "How Do We Evaluate Teaching?" *Academe*, 102, no. 3 (2016).

where difference is minimized and where one is seeking universal harmony instead of diving deeper into the meaning of difference. If that movement is in fact meaningful, I cannot say I blame the students for wanting to focus more on the positive relationships that they had witnessed rather than the differences that have undermined peace in the region for decades, but I am dubious that the measurement is actually too telling for a short course like this.

The fourth measurement, interactions and discussions in the semesters following the trip, are naturally largely subjective. Of the 15 participants, one graduated and one has been abroad for the year, and thus there is no follow up data on this measurement for either of them. Of the thirteen remaining students, all but two have either taken another class with me since we returned or participated in the November dinner, with many doing both. Every single one of them has provided thoughtful responses to queries about analyzing elements from the trip and has demonstrated a high-level of recall regarding at least a large percentage of the course material. But without a standardized measurement, this is largely anecdotal.

The final measurement, a survey of participants conducted the January following our return, assessed how the students reflect on their experience after having had six months to process their experiences. A few telling statistics: 91% of respondents reported that they strongly agree that after participating in the course they have a more nuanced view of the situation(s) of the various groups, that the overall amount of learning that they did in the course was higher than other courses, and that they are now more understanding of others as a result of the trip. 100% reported that being on the ground in the region fundamentally positively changed their learning in the course, that they were exposed to a wide variety of attitudes and positions over the course of this trip, that their cultural understanding of Israelis and Palestinians improved, and that they would "jump at the chance" to return to the region if given the opportunity to do so. Their comments on the survey express in even stronger terms how much they gained from the trip and are still coming to appreciate their learning experiences.

Conclusions

This paper has presented an overview and analysis of the successes and failures of a travel study course to the Middle East. After review, it is clear that the trip achieved its main learning goals and objectives and provided an experience for students that allowed them to comprehend and embrace the complexities of the region. While it is not practical for all students to visit the region, doing so in the context of an intricately planned and cross-communal program such as this appears to provide real benefits that are difficult or impossible to mirror in the standard classroom. Some elements of the trip however could potentially be emulated by using technology to videochat with a variety of individuals from the region and by exploring food culture through cooking or dining experiences, for example. But even as innovations make the world seem like a smaller place, there is still no substitute for the feel of being on the ground and the tactical experiences that provides. Experiential learning in the field cannot replace all standard classes but as this course shows it does prove to be a strong method for exploring difficult content in a comprehensive manner.