

PSE 2010 Already at Halfway Point!

Wednesday, 07 July 2010

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” as they say, and this second session of Palestine Summer Encounter 2010 is certainly representative of that old aphorism. Somehow, we have already completed the first half of the second session, which also means PSE 2010 is more than half complete!

Another week has just breezed by, full of constant programming, exposing PSE participants to the Palestinian culture and to the diversity of perspectives of the region’s inhabitants.

To begin the week, the group took in a lecture from former Bethlehem University professor Adnan Musallam on the history of Palestine. Dr. Musallam briefed the participants on the history of the Middle East and the Zionist-Arab conflict to enhance their understanding of their present environment. Dr. Musallam will give additional informative lectures in the remainder of the session on the topics of Palestinian identity and Palestinian politics, equipping the participants to understand this land and its people in a much deeper way.

For a mid-week guest speaker, the group travelled just a few kilometers south of Bethlehem to Efrat settlement. There, participants spent two hours listening to the perspective of an Israeli settler and asking extensive questions to attempt to understand his perspective and reconcile it with all that they have experienced during their time living under Occupation in the West Bank. Participants left the meeting noticeably frustrated at the answers they had received but also grateful for the opportunity to learn more about a settler’s opposing perspectives on peace and security.

For the continued exposure of participants to Palestinian culture, the group continued their debkah training, preparing for a performance they will give at the end of the session for their host families and friends. On Thursday, the group got a necessary taste of the culture as they took part in a cooking lesson on how to prepare the Palestinian staples falafel and hummus, held at Afteem Restaurant. What could be more like a native Telhami (Bethlehemite) than frying your own falafel in Manger Square!

On Friday, a majority of participants decided to attend the weekly demonstration in Bil’in village, some of them for the second time and others as the first protest they had attended in the West Bank. It was educational for those who are just hearing for the first time of the nonviolent resistance movement in Palestine. For those who have been here a while, it was an opportunity to engage in the struggle alongside Palestinians and stand as a witness to the injustice of Occupation. Afterward, the group cooled off by visiting the Taybeh beer brewery again and enjoying “the finest in the Middle East.”

To wrap up the week with an exposure trip, the group left the West Bank and headed into Israel proper and Occupied Syria (the Golan Heights) for a mix of sightseeing and politics. First the group visited the Sea of Galilee, taking a boat ride across the Sea and taking in a few of the historical and religious sites in towns along the coast. After lunch and a dip in the Sea, the group headed north to the Golan. After spending the night engaging in the universally shared and loved activity—football (World Cup) watching—the group heard a new perspective regarding what life is like for Syrians under Occupation in the Golan. Though Occupation looks very different in the Golan, the group heard a number of familiar characteristics regarding the inequalities institutionalized between the Arab residents and Israeli citizens of the State. Quite shocking was the clarity of the ethnic cleansing that took place in 1967, reducing the Arab population from 130,000 to 6,000, and the statistics of their water situation; though their water supply was plentiful, they now pay 3.8 times the amount that Israeli settlers in the Golan pay. The Israeli government has even started charging them for the rainwater they collect to water their crops!

On the final political stop of the weekend, the group met with Duroob, an organization in Yarka village, which trains leaders to shape Arab society within Israel to be able to effectively respond to the problems of the State of Israel, which refuses to give them rights. Hearing the Israeli-Arab perspective added a new facet to the participants' understanding of the conflict—the Arabs (Palestinians) living within Israel are facing a whole entire set of their own problems regarding the institutionalized racism and attempted cultural vitiation against Arabs in Israel.

Finally, heading home to Bethlehem, the group stopped in Haifa to see the Baha'i Gardens and then in Caesarea to view Roman aqueducts and take a quick walk on the Mediterranean beach—a bittersweet activity when coupled with the realization that participants' host families cannot experience the same joys of the ocean breeze and waves because they cannot obtain permission from the Israeli government to visit.

This summer has been exceptional and as a result has seemed to fly by. The coming week, and a half finishing out Session 2, will bring more perspectives into view and likely, if events hold true, continue to be challenging and rewarding for everyone involved.

For more information on Palestine Summer Encounter, visit the website to follow participants in their own words as they encounter Palestine: <http://www.palestinesummer.org/blog>.