

Wi'am and Scottish Cultural Youth Exchange – August 9-12, 2006

On Wednesday, August 9, 2006 the Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center welcomed a group of youth from Scotland for a three day cultural exchange. We had a great time getting to know each other, sharing our cultures with one another, and learning even more about ourselves in the process. We met for the first time on Wednesday night, getting to know each other, sharing information and ideas about each group, as well as sharing traditional songs and dance here at the Wi'am Center in Bethlehem. The first night concluded with the Scottish youth visiting Palestinian homes for overnight stays. One participant from the Scottish group reflected, 'visiting Bethlehem and seeing the extent, height and effect of the wall made an enormous impact on all of us.'



Sharing Stories



Learning Dabkeh (traditional Palestinian Dance)

Thursday, August 10

Session 1: Introduction

We arrived in Jericho around lunch time, enjoyed a meal together and held our first session in the afternoon. Facilitated by our fabulous leaders, Mr. Zoughbi Zoughbi and Ms. Jen Zielinski, we gathered together (about 45 people) and sat in one large room at round tables with 7-8 people at each table. Discussing things first in our small groups and then in the large group, we laid down some Ground Rules for how our sessions would run and we discussed together our dreams, hopes, and expectations for the conference. Many were excited to learn about another culture and many were also excited to share about their own culture.

As the session progressed we also took some time to look briefly at one another's history. While the Scots had many questions for the Palestinians surrounding the history of issues such as identity cards and restrictions on travel and movement, the Palestinians also wanted to know more about the organization of the Scottish government. Though the Scottish convene a Parliament in Scotland, a large majority of the governance (for example, national security and environmental affairs) is determined in London where a smaller body of Scottish representatives meet with Parliament there.

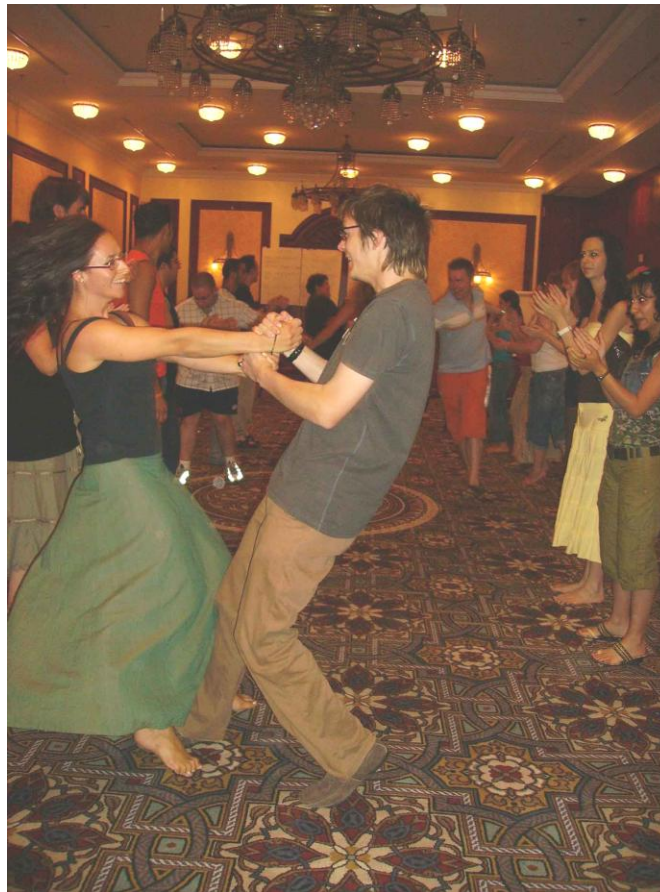
As people shared personal stories, we began to see an unfolding picture of differences and similarities we had never before known. When the Scots shared stories of their frustration with not having full control of their country, the Palestinians were curious to know more, (as this is a story with which they are all too familiar in the West Bank and in Gaza).

Several Palestinians shared stories of not being able to see brothers and sisters for years because one lives in Jerusalem and the other lives in Bethlehem. In the past years, the rapid development of the Wall surrounding Bethlehem has cut off Palestinian families who once were able to make the short journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem (a mere distance of five miles). The Israeli authorities however have denied the Palestinians their freedom of movement. The Israeli authorities determine whether or not a Palestinian can go from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, whether it be for work, pilgrimage or visiting family. Equally distressing, many times the Israeli authorities will prevent Palestinians in Jerusalem from travelling to the West Bank and Gaza. In the end, one of the young Scottish women commented, 'History seems to be repeating itself with this wall and it is time to put a stop to history repeating itself... yet there is hope – even in history – because the Berlin Wall came down.'

Such difficult stories are often hard to hear. However, even as these topics weighed heavily upon us, we were also able to spend time lighting candles and sharing with each other the good things we were seeing in our new friends. We ended the night with a great time of teaching and learning traditional songs and dances from both Scotland and Palestine.



Round Table Introductions



Scottish Folk Dance

Friday, August 11

Session 2: Identity

Returning to our small round tables (but with different friends), we began our second day together with a discussion of identity. Through time to either draw a picture or write a few words that describe our identities we were able to spend a few moments individually and as a group considering ourselves. In my own small group we focused very much on personal issues of identity – relationships with family and friends, faith, hope, and the heart. Other groups shared many discussions of comparison between Scottish and Palestinian identity. Comparisons were drawn between the presence of freedom or lack thereof. In describing her small group discussion to the large group, one of the Scots noted, ‘Palestinian identity and reality are very important. For example in the pictures drawn, there were many Palestinian flags, representations of the wall and representations of the occupation. The Scottish people at our table though tended to draw more about family and hobbies and things of that nature.’ Comments such as these helped push us into a deeper probing of our understandings of ourselves and others.

After this exercise we split up into tables according to nationality and gender, ie, all the Palestinian women sat together, all the Scottish men sat together, etc. We then discussed our identities as a group and how such identity shaped our perceptions of others. Most of these discussions centered on issues of gender. Every group had something very positive to say about the need for women to play an increasingly important role in society. All affirmed women’s rights and many discussed the challenges for women that exist in a world that has been and continues to be dominated by males.

Following this discussion, we were told to find our own group... to choose a group with whom we would like to have our next session. The events that followed were quite unique. Perhaps people were getting a bit restless after being in one room for so long, but over the course of a few minutes, the majority of the group wound up dancing around the room and singing, forming a long chain. Not all joined – there were a handful of others who chose to sit down at tables, about two or three people to a table. After the party train died down, we discussed the reasons we chose each group. I'd like to share those reasons with you because I found them insightful and remarkable.

Those who joined the large dancing group explained their choice of that group in the following way:

- There is strength in unity
- We are all human beings
- I didn't want to reject anyone by choosing others
- We are all one hand
- We are happier when we are together
- Support
- Power
- We celebrate differences
- Cooperation
- Integrating
- I didn't want to feel lonely
- Belonging
- Identity
- Emotions
- I joined because everyone else was doing it
- Together we attract others
- We want to call ourselves 'Palesscot' ☺

Those who remained at the tables in small groups explained their choice of that group in the following way:

- I didn't want to be bothered
- To be democratic you need not always be in agreement – we are all still in community with everyone, and especially with others who are sitting (even if they are at a different table)
- I needed to rest... even resting shapes our identities

As you can see, just this mere practice of choosing to do one thing or another, of choosing to be with one group or another... all of it reflected our identity in some small way. Some were identifying with song and dance, others were identifying with stillness and silence. But at the end of the session people recognized that their identities were all still connected in some way. I found this to be an exciting moment of discovery for both groups.



Identity



Our fearless leaders, Jen and Zoughbi

Session 3: Stereotypes

After lunch and some down time, we discussed perceptions and stereotypes. In trying to explain how we see others and how we think others see us, the focus of many comments revolved around our national identities. As individuals and as a large group, we had a tendency to draw many comparisons with the West (and predominantly America). There were positives and negatives expressed with regards to how we see others and how we think others see us.

As the only American in the group, this was a very informative time for me. American foreign policy hurts Palestinians, and this is definitely something with which I struggle. Yet these Palestinian young people do not begrudge me this fact. They might encourage me to try to change it, but they will not judge me because of it. These young people have no desire to sweep all Americans into one overgeneralized category. But imagine the confusion it brings about when American foreign policy does one thing and American people say another. I have written before about learning the art of ‘practicing democracy’ – discussing stereotypes not only with Palestinians, but with Scots as well was an eyeopening experience for me.

Perhaps some of the most remarkable comments were as follows:

“If the West, as civilians, understood us, as civilians, then they would support us.” - This came from a young Palestinian.

“We seem to have a superficial impression of other cultures... and we are starting to ask ourselves why we should see others this way.” – From a young Scot.

“The real effect and details of what is happening in the West Bank and Gaza are not being told abroad.” – Jen Zielinski, co-cordinator of exchange and Programme Director at St. Andrew’s Galilee

“We often look at the ‘other’ from the point of view of enmity and not friendship... this is not the best way.” – Zoughbi Zoughbi, co-cordinator of exchange and Founder/Director at Wi’am.

Session 4: Conflict Resolution

We closed our second day with two very engaging exercises. To begin with, we returned to our small group tables and together with the others in our table we wrote down (on small rectangular sheets of paper) the different ways that we could help build bridges between cultures. We often speak at Wi’am about the necessity of building bridges instead of walls. This exercise allowed us to do so in a visual way. After each group shared their five or six suggestions, we pasted the sheets of paper together and made a bridge (on the wall) between a map of Palestine and a map of Scotland. The visual representation was really moving.



Explaining the different building blocks for our bridge

For our final exercise of the day, we broke up into groups to discuss five different ideas/situations revolving around the topic of Conflict Resolution. These topics included:

- **Northern Ireland**
- **Jerusalem**
- **The Israeli Invasion into Lebanon and Hezbollah Rockets**
- **Extremism and Fundamentalism**
- **Terrorism**

Following one hour of small group discussions, the Jerusalem and Extremism/Fundamentalism groups presented their findings to the larger group, and we had a time for discussion.

Most of the discussion about **Jerusalem** was informative in nature. Many people are not aware of the harsh reality of land confiscation and home demolition that is occurring in Jerusalem by the Israeli authorities. The group explained how the municipal borders have been expanded in order to appropriate more land for Israel, and also explained how the wall is being built in such a way that Palestinian families are separated from one another and workers are separated from their places of business. There is so much going on with Jerusalem these days, but the group presenting did an excellent job covering as much information as possible in a short period of time.

When it came time to discuss **Extremism/Fundamentalism**, there was a good bit of lively discussion. We found it difficult to agree upon how to define and distinguish between these two. This allowed us to realize that they are two issues that will be very complex to resolve in the future and in the world. When conflicts occur because of Extremism and Fundamentalism we need creativity and energy to insure that they do not become the status quo.

Our evening concluded with some reflection and quiet time, a viewing of the film ‘Rachel Corrie’ (followed by questions and discussion), and ultimately with more singing and dancing. ☺ Palestinian youth and Scottish youth LOVE to sing and dance. It was fabulous to end both our nights with casual time and time for celebration of our unique cultures.



Presentations



Team work!

Saturday, August 12

Session 4 (continued): Conflict Resolution

For our final morning, the remaining three groups presented their assessment of their topics. Beginning with **Terrorism** there was a great deal of discussion surrounding the different forms that terrorism can take. Zoughbi helped us identify State-Sponsored Terrorism, which takes different forms in different cultures. These are groups that are not sponsored directly by the state, but are indirectly supported by it, (ie, the state does nothing to prevent the violence perpetrated on civilians by such groups). In Palestine, Israeli settlers often perpetrate acts of violence on Palestinian school children and other Palestinian civilians, but receive no punishment or censure from Israeli Authorities. Zoughbi also addressed the danger of Environmental Terrorism. Whether it be through development of nuclear capabilities (as in the Dimona Nuclear Plant in the Negev), disruption of ecological habitats (because of the Wall), or confiscation of water resources (Israel controls even the water aquifers in the West Bank), terrorism wrought upon the environment harms all of creation.

Finally, the Palestinian youth were able to explain that State Terrorism is one of the harshest and most evil forms of violence that they must face each day. One of the youth explained that during the forty-day seige of Bethlehem in 2002, he and his mother went out on the balcony of their home. He comes from a family dedicated to non-violence. Yet gun shots were fired at his mother by an Israeli Army sniper from a neighboring roof. This brief introduction to the idea of state terrorism was very important to many of the Scots as they reflected that they often only saw terrorism as acted out by individuals. They were excited to return home to share these new terms with others... to use it as an opportunity for education and awareness.

With the discussion about **Northern Ireland**, we quickly established that there is much to be learned from the history and events there of the past and present. Many of the Scots shared stories from their Irish friends about what it is like to live in a community somewhat on the other side of all-out conflict. Many in Northern Ireland are trying to establish equality, but it is still a struggle. One

young woman shared a story of a friend who was killed for wearing the wrong football jersey while he walked through a particular area. Painful stories such as these are familiar for many of the Palestinian youth and any cultural exchange is extremely meaningful when we are able to see ourselves in the lives of people from other places. Even in the pain of people from other places. Perhaps the most important thing we decided that we could learn from the situation in Northern Ireland though is that often times when the oppressed are given power, there is the temptation to abuse that power and to become the oppressor. Though we could not resolve in our discussion whether or not this is always the case, we also could not ignore that history has shown it to be the case more often than not.

Our final group made a review of the **Israeli invasion into Lebanon and the Hezbollah rockets launched into Israel**. As we discussed the progression of events that had taken place in Southern Lebanon and Northern Israel up to that point, one of the most helpful comments came from one of the Palestinian young men, “This action does not come in a void... we need to go back to the roots of the conflict.” Thus, we do not begin with the kidnapping of soldiers. Rather we look at the bigger picture of the historical conflict of this region. The area in Southern Lebanon has experienced occupation by Israeli armed forces in a similar, though not as consistent a way as experienced in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian youth appropriately informed the group that according to UN Resolution 3236 (1974 General Assembly), the Palestinian people have the right to defend themselves and hold the rights of all peoples with states – the right to self-determination. Though the Wi’am group ultimately feels that non-violent means are the best way to address the injustice of the occupation, there is also no denying the devastation and destruction felt in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion.

Many of the youth also took the opportunity to draw parallels between the Israeli attack on Lebanon and the consistent Israeli attacks on Gaza. In both places, entire neighborhoods have been levelled and in both places power plants have been destroyed. There is limited access to humanitarian aid because of Israeli blockades and people are desperately trying to rebuild their lives. We spent a long time discussing our pain and shock at the events taking place in Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank – all places where occupation defines the livelihoods of the people. We wished that more people would understand that there is a difference between resistance to occupation and terrorism.

At the end of the session, it was affirmed that we are all created in the image of G-d and that any death is a loss. Jen shared her story of being in Tiberias when four large blasts occurred, and she invited us to consider how such events would feel. She recognized that her hearing and experiencing such events was only a small glimpse of what happens all too often in Palestinian villages and towns every time the Israeli army decides to come in. It was hard. It was painful. She was scared... and yet this only happened to her once. What about all the children, youth and adults who had to experience day after day of such explosions and uncertainty as is faced in so many communities in the West Bank and Gaza? Again we affirmed that the best way to resist is through non-violent means, and Zoughbi summarized our sentiments best in stating that the ‘dialogue of arms needs to be replaced by the arms of dialogue.’

Final Session: Reflection

In our concluding session together we took some time to sit in a circle and consider all that we had learned and shared over the past few days. In the middle of the circle we placed a tray of flowers in a circle made of rocks. On either side of the tray were two bowls of water. Each person was given time to consider both the hopes and fears he or she had upon ending this cultural exchange. We used the rocks to represent our fears, and as each person came forward, that fear was named and placed in the bowl of water. This allowed us the visual representation of watching our fears drop to the bottom of the bowl. Our hopes however were represented by the flowers. As each person came forward, hopes were named and then placed in the bowl of water. As you can imagine, this gave us the visual representation of the indomitable spirit of hope – for just as the flowers rise and float, so too does hope by its very nature rise and float. It was a beautiful way to conclude our time together, and I think for

many of us, the time in that circle allowed us to acknowledge both our hopes and fears – to name them and face them and ultimately to let go of the fears and cling to the hope.



Instead of cursing the darkness, we light a candle!



Pools of Hopes and Fears

Some Final Comments from the Palestinian Youth

Following the exchange, we spoke with several of the youth from Wi'am that participated, and the following are some of their comments:

Through this exchange I learned to communicate with other people from different countries; to share ideas and experiences; to know about the traditions of others. I learned what they thought about Palestine and I learned how to change the wrong ideas about it – how to let them see the truth.

This was the first time I ever met with Scottish people, and so every part of the exchange was relevant. What I learned about myself was that I should listen more and read more even about our own history so that I can be better able to define things for other people and be accurate when I talk... not just to say what I want to say. The message I want to send to the rest of the world is that the media is not the only message to receive. I want to encourage more opportunities for exchange between cultures so they can get the real message from the real people and take this message back to their country.

And I want to say thank you so much for everything! - Maisa Dabdoub

I learned many things about the Scottish culture and heritage... it was also a good experience to hear a positive view about Palestine and the Palestinian people. I really enjoyed our times of evaluation and reflection. I learned that I have to respect other cultures in order for them to respect me. I also learned that we have to struggle to prove to others that we are responsible. The message I want to send to the rest of the world: Please pay attention to the Palestinian people and to our community. My hope is that all the Palestinian hopes will come true. My fear is that one day Palestine will be crossed off the map.
– Raed Awad

This was a great experience full of nice things. I really enjoyed the cultural nights and the meetings were also great I tried my best to speak and to give my opinion and to be active. The message I want to send to the rest of the world is that they should know the truth... nothing except the truth about our situation. I also want to say thank you to Wi'am Center for everything! - Rana Abu Abara

This was a great experience and I learned how to accept others as they are. I was also introduced to their culture, traditions, and way of living. The most significant thing for me was when we started talking about our situation because I think and I hope that we gave them a clear image about our situation. – Marwa Hihi

The Scottish group also shared with us a brief review of their conclusions about the exchange as well as their desire for continuing this new relationship with the Palestinian youth:

By personal encounters and meeting individuals, the Scots have returned to our country with a much better informed viewpoint. All the sessions at the conference in Jericho were helpful for this purpose.

This initial encounter will hopefully continue with a group from Wi'am travelling to Scotland in 2007 and the possible attendance of up to 10 young Christian Palestinians (aged 16-25) attending the National Youth Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Dundee in September 2007.



The PaleScot Group!