

Today is the day.

I keep repeating that phrase in my head like I don't know any other way to communicate my excitement. And really, I don't. I have wanted to travel to the Middle East for so long that it is completely surreal.

Today is the day... (Still cannot believe it!)

Now, for a little about myself...

I'm Lindsay Cooper and I am a student at the University of South Carolina (Go Cocks!). I am currently a junior, and I am majoring International Studies and minoring in Arabic. My hope is that through this blog, each reader will learn not only about Israel and Palestine, but about me.

I have always been fascinated with the Middle East. It's history, culture, and beauty drew me in like a moth to flame. As I have studied the region more I have truly begun to learn how diverse and incredible it truly is. Humanity LITERALLY started there, and enough culture is engrained in it's history that one could spend an entire lifetime studying it and still die with much left to learn. My goal over the coming weeks is to take a small ant-sized bite out of the very large apple which is the Middle East.

I am currently sitting on a plane flying over The Chesapeake Bay on my way to my connection in Newark, NJ—which I learned is pronounced “Noork” not “New-ork”(oops!). Tomorrow morning, I will arrive in Tel Aviv, Israel to take a 1.5-hour bus ride to Nahalal, Israel study at the Galilee International Management Institute (GIMI) in a course on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. During my stay I will attend lectures, study tours, and travel across Israel learning about each new place as I go. I cannot wait to share my experiences and I dearly hope to inspire at least one person to go out of their comfort zone and travel. I also hope to change at least one person's opinion on the Middle East. The negative press about the Middle East is a constant, and I want to show a different side of it.

I cannot wait to go on this journey and have each of you with me every step of the way.

Please share and comment!

- Lindsay

Kibbutz. Kibbutzim. Kibbutznik.

Today I found out a Kibbutz is not a Jewish cult. Which I definitely thought it might be when coming... Sort of... At least a commune type community. But I'll tell you below, that is not the case at all.

Today was a long day. Starting at 8:00a.m. we had three guest speakers. They were Dr. Zalman Gordon from Haifa University, Dr. Maha El-Taji Daghash from Haifa University, and a gentleman from the Kibbutz who told us to call him "Chibbi". While Dr. Gordon and Dr. Daghash's lectures were very interesting and I cannot wait to tell you about them, for today I will just focus on Chibbi.

It was 5:00p.m. and I was absolutely ready for dinner. After sitting in a classroom listening to lectures for 9 hours (on top of major jet lag) I was not sure how I was going to get through the last 45 minutes. Then Chibbi walked in. A very nice looking man who I could guess to be about 60 years old starts by telling us HE is ready for class to begin... Even though we had 10 minutes left in our break. But who argues with an old man? So class begins.

Like the beginning of this post it started with "Kibbutz. Kibbutzim. Kibbutznik."- our Hebrew lesson for the day. "Kibbutz" meaning to come together or to live together, "Kibbutzim" being the plural of Kibbutz, and "Kibbutznik" being a person who lives in a Kibbutz. A Kibbutz is actually a community of people living together all benefiting from the safety, work, and community of the Kibbutz. There are families, singles, young, and old people. All in all, there are 276 Kibbutzim in all of Israel. (an earlier speaker said ~400, but just because he was awesome I am going to take Chibbi's word for it)

The first Kibbutzim started in 1910, before Israel even became a state. It was created by extremely "dedicated" (Chibbi) young men who left everything to move back to where their ancestors lived to create these communities. After the Jewish Diaspora the idea was that the Jews needed a place of refuge. Where better than Palestine, where their ancestors lived two thousand years ago. They were formed in remote areas, and were thought to eventually establish "borders" for the Jewish homeland (as the idea of a Jewish state had not arisen yet). The pride and passion in Chibbi's voice when he spoke of the creation of Kibbutzim was something that can only come from generations of love and dedication.

Kibbutzim were originally established as egalitarian socialist communities where the members worked within and were provided for by the Kibbutz (not politically correct, but i thought of communism as an easy comparison). All income is shared and no one Kibbutznik is at a higher standing than any other Kibbutznik. But in the past 20 years the younger generation has not wanted to come back unless there was change. They did not want to have to share their income with another. They wanted cars, devices, and their own personal income. The Kibbutzim were scared because they were losing a generation, and that could mean the end for them. It took about 10 years of discussion, but on April 1, 2009 the Kibbutz Mizra (where I am staying) changed to a capitalistic society. Therefore instead of a large Kibbutz shared bank, every Kibbutznik has their own private accounts and pays a tax that is similar to a homeowner's tax. This means that there are Kibbutznik with more wealth than other members.

When I asked in the long run if Chibbi was worried about this creating a large and possibly discriminatory class divide, he basically said don't look into the future if you know a problem will occur. For now he and the rest of his community are happy that all the younger generations are coming back to live and their Kibbutz can stay alive.

Kibbutz Facts:

- Kibbutzim Members make up 1.5% of Israel
- Kibbutzim provide 35% of Israel's Agriculture industry
- They make up over 10% of Israel's Industrial Products
- Only ~90 Kibbutz still have a socialist society

So, would you live in a Kibbutz? An old Kibbutz? or new? (Comment your thoughts below!)

Thanks so much for reading, below are some pictures I took while walking around.

- Lindsay

P.S. Isn't that sunset beautiful?

Before I get into the topic of this discussion, I would like to take a second and talk about my experience so far. When I first arrived at the airport I was supposed to meet a driver who would take me on the 1.5 hour drive to Kibbutz Mizra where Galilee Institute is located. But it took me about 20 minutes of walking around to find him. So naturally half of that time I was panicking that I would be alone and for some reason I had no driver and would be stuck at the airport for 2 weeks. Reasonable, right? (lol). Then I found a little man named Khomas (definitely spelled wrong) with a Galilee sign. Whew!!! Finally, we started our drive and he brought me some cookies from his village. Great welcome, and a lovely man. I truly hope I get to see him again before I leave.

There are about 10 students in my program here. I am the youngest, as most are at least getting their masters. There is a recent grad from China, a masters student from Germany, a French journalist, a Nigerian NGO worker, a Liberian pastor, two U.S. professors, and a Romanian professor (my roommate). So with the exception of two students, the age gap is quite large for me. Honestly it was very intimidating at first, but after a couple long days together we are getting along quite nicely. My roommate is in her early 40's and is a very nice woman. She is not completely at the native level in English so it has been fun communicating. Every person offers a new perspective and it is interesting to watch different cultural norms all at play in the classroom.

In fact, tonight we (+ other Galilee students from Africa) all stayed up drinking and chatting and it was very lovely to get to know everyone.

Now unto the purpose of this post...

One of the largest and most difficult issues to understand within this conflict is the issue of identity. In fact, every lecture we have had has started with some topic on identity. What does it *actually* mean to be a Jew? An Arab? An Israeli? A Palestinian? In fact, the answer (if there is really one) is much more intertwined with the conflict than you might expect.

Let's start with the question: "What does it mean to be Jewish?"

Our first lecturer, Mr. Zalman Gordan from Haifa university, was the first to ask us this question. The answers ranged from religion to ethnicity... but in reality it is much more than that. Judaism has evolved from a religion to a 'peoplehood' or a culture. It is an identity; there are religious jews and non-religious jews. Jews are located in almost every part of the world. So how do you define who is a Jew in Israel? Can you?

This question of identity applies to Arab and Palestinian identity as well. An 'arab' by definition is any member of the people who originated from the Arabian Peninsula. Constituting many Muslims, Bedouins, Druze, and non-religious arabs. The Palestinian identity within Israel is any arab who has stayed in Israel when the jewish state was declared and has become an Israeli citizen. The issue within this question of identity in Israel is heightened by the conflict. There is a lot of discrimination towards the small minority of arabs left after the 1948 creation of the state of Israel. They live in much poorer communities, go to schools that are not as good as jewish schools, and are thought of as not as loyal to the state.

Therefore, if you ask an Arab in Israel what their nationality is depending who you are you will get many different answers. If a Jewish man asks, the Arab may call himself an Israeli-Arab in order to avoid politics or an uncomfortable social interaction in normal day life. BUT, if another Arab asks him the same question, he may call himself an Israeli-Arab-Palestinian. This connection to Palestine is a political statement. A person is declaring that they are not in favor of the creation of Israel, they feel like their homeland was taken from

them. In the same sense, declaring that you are Jewish does not necessarily mean you are even religious. It means that you believe in the state. There are religious and non-religious jews, just as there are religious and non-religious arabs.

At first, I thought to myself, "Wow, complicated. But understandable. Makes sense!" Let me tell you... I was very wrong. In fact it is extremely complicated. For example, while studying the Arab minorities in the Galilee we met some members of the Druze community. Because we had a Jewish guide every conversation was brought back to how they were NOT arabs. Even though they are counted in the Arab minority of Israel. They wanted to show him that they are Israeli's and they support the Zionist state, yet who knows if they speak differently to their Arab neighbors. If a civil war broke out, which side are they on? In the midst of conflict do you choose your heritage? Or your state?

The education system also complicates this. Do you send your child to a better school and forgo your heritage? Do you not teach your child the Quran and have them learn the Torah and Jewish history to go to a better school? The answer is no. The glue between citizens in this country is not nationalism, but identity. It is a national mandate that all students learn Hebrew, but not Arabic. Even though Arabic AND Hebrew are *both* Israel's national languages. (If you are a teacher or in the education field, the situation in Israel is a very interesting topic for you to research with lots of complications!)

Once you start thinking about the idea of identity, if you are *reeeallllyy* thinking hard you will just keep confusing yourself and reaching dead ends. Which is exactly where the country is. How do you compromise? How do you satisfy a minority who believes their families were wronged? And, how do you identify yourself as a citizen of Israel? -especially if you are an Arab! And this is just the beginning of many of the questions of the conflict. In my future blog posts I will give more insight to many more issues, opinions, and possible resolutions.

Thanks for reading!!

-Lindsay

P.S. the pictures are all of an Arab hospitality center that was recreated in the image of a traditional Arab home.

We all know I'm here to study the conflict between Palestine and Israel, but I haven't actually talked about *the conflict*. So... Let's just jump straight into it...

I'll start with some history:

For the purposes of this blog we will start with Herzl. In the late 19th century Herzl and other young ideological Jews introduced the idea of a Jewish homeland. They went through many different options for a homeland, but finally settled on Palestine. In the next two decades Jews began immigrating to Palestine - but it was still majorly an Arab state. In 1917 the Allied Forces occupied Palestine, and Britain aided the Zionist movement in Palestine in exchange for Jewish support against the Turks. The Brits won, and Palestine was under British Mandate from 1922-48. According to Palestinians, the Brits allowed their homes to be stolen from them. In 1947 the UN created the Partition Plan in which the Palestinians were allotted 45% of the state they once held, the rest going to the Jews (at this point the Jews owned about 7% of the land and were 30% of the population). Quite naturally, they refused. This refusal meant that Palestinians were granted no lands at all. With the gift of hindsight we (and many Palestinians) may say this is foolish, but to the Palestinians at the time it was not. Why would they give up all of their lands which, for the majority, were inhabited by Arabs, to the Jews? It simply did not make sense!

Unsurprisingly, war broke out between 1947-49. The Israeli's won and conquered almost 80% of Palestine- all in the name of Zionism. The West Bank was annexed by Jordan and the Gaza Strip was annexed by Egypt which meant that the Palestinians did not even have legitimate control over the 22% of land they still inhabited. In 1967, the boundaries changed again. Israel took control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, so now Palestinians were now completely under the control of the Jewish. When this happened some Arabs left willingly, but many did not want to leave the homes that they had for generations. But, the Jews brought their armies and forced the Arabs to leave, often with only a nights notice. The

effect was millions of Palestinian refugees pouring into surrounding countries, losing their homes, and being forced by circumstance to move into refugee camps.

Eventually the Gaza Strip fell under the control of Hamas (a terrorist organization) and the West Bank was divided into three areas. These areas are known as Area A, Area B, and (of course) Area C. Area A is under 'full' Palestinian authority, Area B is under Palestinian civil control and shared Palestinian/Israeli security control, and Area C (61% of the West Bank) is completely under Israeli control. Though in reality, the entire West Bank is littered with checkpoints and the Palestinians cannot leave the West Bank to enter Israel. Israel has also spent billions of shekels creating a wall which separates the Palestinians in the West Bank from the Israeli's. The "West Bank Barrier" (as it is known) has been built in the last 10 years, and is still in progress. According to the Israeli government it is necessary for security purposes. Regardless of intent, the wall means Palestinians are prisoners in the West Bank. And 'full' Palestinian Authority is very limited when Palestinians cannot leave their lands, control their natural resources, imports/exports, and do not have a state to belong to.

This is the EXTREMELY simplified version. I just want to make sure everyone has a basic understanding of the history of the conflict before I move into larger issues. In my opinion, the one of largest dilemmas in this conflict is the lack of understanding between the two sides. The Jewish are made to believe that all Arabs are evil, and want to kill them and take their land. While the Arabs, feel that they are trapped and that all Jewish are evil and want them to suffer.

I will not lie, this was a hard post to write. It is very difficult to describe the conflict without going into too much detail. I mean I need things to write about later!! But I'll try to conclude this explanation with a few questions for you to think about until my next post.

1. Who's land is it? The Jews feel that they have claim to the land of their ancestors, and they *did* win the war. But over a million Palestinians were forced out of the lands that they have had for generations- they lost their land, their state, and sense of nationalism.
2. How do you solve this problem? If you remember there is also an identity crisis here. How do you satisfy both the Palestinians and the Israeli's?

Below are some very basic maps of Land Loss (Palestinian) and Gain (Israeli). They are not perfect, but for all intended purposes they will do.

I am not going to lie to anyone, I kind of had a little bit of a meltdown last night. We are finally back at the Kibbutz after a 3 day stay in Jerusalem and of course... I lost my bag. Anyone who knows me well will not be surprised. We had to be on the bus at 7:30am to drive to the Old City, had 2 very long lectures, and spent all day getting on and off the bus and walking in the heat. Naturally, I fell asleep on the way home and when I got off the bus forgot to get a bag with my clothes. Thankfully I didn't actually leave anything but clothes, but at that moment it was the end of the world. The waterworks came and I then realized I left my notebook as well... annddd shed some more tears. Honestly, I knew it was all a little silly. Clothes can be replaced, and I could get notes from another student, but sometimes in exhaustion we all turn into a tired little kid. This morning I woke up and one of my classmates grabbed my bag because they saw it left behind! I may have given them a big hug... whether they wanted it or not. I did realize a few things from my little meltdown. (1) Maybe take a second and make sure I have everything before running away from the bus because I was so happy to get off. (2) It's okay to have a mini tired/homesick/I'm in a foreign country meltdown - We're all human! (3) In one way or another it'll all work out! Buutt maybe don't scare your classmate with a huge hug at 7 in the morning.

It's so funny that after being surrounded by broken english it's hard not to write that way. I read over my last post's first draft and honestly laughed out loud. It was terrible! For those of you who read that post before I edited it... I sincerely apologize. (Mom & Dad I promise I'm getting a college education. Don't worry!)

Today, I'm going to discuss the Israeli perspective on the conflict. My next post will be about the Palestinian perspective, and I will do my best to be as unbiased as possible when describing these so you may form your own opinions.

Obviously, the Israeli's are in favor of the Israeli Jewish State. They feel that they rightfully have ownership of the state as it was given to them in the UN Partition Plan. When the plan happened, the Jewish had already started immigration into Palestine. In fact, when asked to

show land ownership papers, the Arabs had none and the Jewish did. The Jewish call this a period of "land acquisition" in which they purchased large amounts of land. But we must remember, the Arabs had land that was passed down from generations. They did not understand the concept of land ownership documents. But to the government, when an Arab said, "But this is my land! I have had it for generations!", it was not sufficient when the Jewish held official documentation.

You may remember the Jewish and Palestinians working for peace, and you would be correct. First, the Palestinians did not agree to the Peel Commission, which granted them 60% of the lands and put Jerusalem under international control. Second, the Palestinians did not agree to the UN Partition Plan (45% of lands, West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem under international control). Lastly, they did not agree to the Oslo Accords. In the Israeli point of view, the Palestinians were not only given chances to have the majority of the land in 1937, but after they lost most of the land to the Jewish they still refused to accept the Oslo Accords which granted them the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

One of the major arguments for Palestine is the refugee crisis. Palestine has millions of refugees around the world who all want to "come back" to Israel. From the Israeli standpoint, these refugees have been living off of aid for 50 years. They could have tried to move on. As a lecturer today put it, "My family moved from Lebanon... We still do not try to claim our homes in Lebanon now that we are in Israel." Too little, too late. It's time to move on. The Israeli's also believe that the reason many Arabs left is because their leadership told them to, and this is also the reason that they have not moved from the camps. The basic argument is that Arabs are a "top down" people, and the "top" is a problem because they hinder the growth of their people- aka the people will listen to their leaders no matter what.

Another argument is security. Or should I say the only argument that the Israeli government will provide to the Palestinian people over why they cannot be allowed to fully govern themselves. Israel says the history shows that Muslims/Arabs are linked to terrorism. And that by not building the Western Wall or having heavily armed checkpoints the Jewish people will be in danger.

Why can't the Arabs have back the land that the Jewish illegally settled on in the West Bank? Considering it is the most fertile and Arabs were expelled when the Jewish provided

land documentation... Because security. And because there is the dilemma of where to put people. Where are the hundreds of thousands of settlers going to go?? We can't even trust the Arabs enough to allow them to leave the West Bank without a permit, control their own natural resources or imports/exports, or have a military. The Intifadas and recent terror attacks have made us worry about security. Security. Security. Security.

Why couldn't the Palestinians be allowed a military or free passage in and out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the Oslo Accords? Answer: security.

Many Israeli's do not understand why Palestinians did not accept the Oslo Accord Agreement when these terms were for the Security of the nation of Israel. The Arabs want things like more money to their communities, but they refuse to become citizens and do not vote for their municipalities therefore have less representation. Honestly many Israeli's do not see Arabs as equals, and almost every Israeli lecturer I've had will admit to it . They are scared. Scared of oppression and scared of a repetition of the past.

It may not be hard to see that I am biased. But for the record I really did try my best to be unbiased. I won't say which side I agree with yet just incase I hid my opinion better than I thought (I really don't think I am that good though). I have some really interesting stuff to talk about tomorrow, and I'll tell you more about my personal opinions.