

# The Jerusalem Initiative

## *Lessons from an Enduring Conflict*

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**I**n August 2021, BYU Law School announced the Jerusalem Initiative, a three-week program for law students interested in international law and conflict resolution to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict up close. Through the program, 12 students would have the opportunity to learn from Israeli and Palestinian experts (including government and academic leaders in the region), visit local sites, and engage in simulated negotiations relating to property ownership and rights in contested territory, the balance of security and human rights, political representation, and equality.

I had already identified alternative dispute resolution and international law as two areas of legal practice I wanted to pursue, and this program offered a remarkable opportunity for in-depth study of one of the world's most complex and deep-rooted conflicts. I eagerly applied, and I was thrilled to be accepted.

To participate in the program, students were required to attend a semester-long seminar, conducted by professors Ben Cook and Eric Talbot Jensen, to ensure that we understood the viewpoints and sensitivities surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We learned about the history of the dispute and the region, the basic tenets of Judaism and Islam, and the relevant domestic and international laws governing the dispute. Reading assignments, presentations by experts representing both sides of the conflict, and individual research culminating in a written paper and oral presentation were all integral to our learning about the complex issues at stake and understanding why efforts to create lasting peace have failed.



### SEEING THE HOLY LAND

We spent our first week in Israel touring historical and religious sites in order to better appreciate how the region's history and its physical and political geography have contributed to the conflict. For example, by viewing Israel's borders with both Lebanon and Syria, we better grasped the reality of the ongoing threat to Israeli security. As we walked the streets of Jerusalem among Jews rushing to pray at the Western Wall, Muslims fasting for Ramadan, and Christians worshipping at the Stations of the Cross, we recognized the central issues of access and control within the city for each religion. Experiencing the arid climate, we saw the necessity of access to water and arable soil in a region where these resources are scarce. This formative week, combined with our seminar preparation, readied us to talk with and learn from both Israelis and Palestinians.

## LEARNING FROM LOCALS

Over the next week, guides from the Telos Group, an organization focused on peacebuilding by fostering relationships, helped expose us to varied narratives. We traveled to an Israeli community on the Gaza border to spend time with Roni, an Israeli who is reaching out to serve her Palestinian neighbors in the midst of Israeli-Hamas aggression. We met with Rachel from an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and Fadi from a Palestinian city in the West Bank to hear their perspectives. From Gerard and Salwa, two attorneys with Military Court Watch, we learned about night raids, the detention of Palestinian youth, and military courts. Hamze, a resident of Dheisha refugee camp, talked with us about life in a refugee camp, and we walked along the barrier wall in Bethlehem and through an Israeli checkpoint.

One of our Telos guides, an Israeli Arab Christian, shared his family's history in the conflict as we walked through Tel Aviv. We sat with Daoud, a Palestinian Christian living in the West Bank, as he shared how the struggle to keep his family's farm led him to create Tent of Nations, an organization that builds bridges in the community by offering educational and work projects at the farm. Retired colonel Itamar Yaar, an Israeli security expert, shared his perspective on some of the complexities of Israeli national security and the politics surrounding the issue. Sahar, a resident of Silwan (a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem), shared the impact of Israeli policy and law on its residents. Lastly, we met with Layla (an Arab Palestinian) and Robi (a Jewish Israeli)—both participants in the Parents Circle Families Forum for bereaved Israelis and Palestinians—who each recounted how the loss of their children to violent conflict brought them together and prompted them to find ways to build bridges between Israelis and Palestinians.

During our last week in the region, we traveled to southern Israel to stay at Kibbutz Ketura and to meet with representatives from the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. Here Palestinian, Jordanian, and Israeli students join with students from other parts of the world to study and conduct research on environmental issues and participate in a peacebuilding and environmental leadership seminar. During our visit we met with members of the institute faculty, who reviewed with us the environmental impact of the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty, environmental ethics, and conflict resolution theories. We also heard from a student panel composed of a Jordanian, a Jewish Israeli, and an American, who shared how attending the institute impacted their view of the conflict and the parties involved. My experience at the institute deepened my conviction that building relationships and trust is the key to the dispute-resolution process.

## CONFLICT-RESOLUTION SIMULATION

Finally, we engaged in a conflict-resolution simulation using “systems practice,” a problem-solving method developed to address complex issues. We worked in teams to identify forces that promote peace and positive engagement between parties. The simulation helped me to see how the complexity of the dispute requires recognition of all stakeholders, issues, and interests and an understanding

of how they are interrelated. The exercise also emphasized that building trust is essential to successful negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Jerusalem Initiative was transformative for me. Predictably, my understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict deepened and my perspective on it changed. Prior to my participation, I questioned the role of international organizations and foreign nations in addressing the conflict. Now I have more confidence in the positive influence of the international community, and I support these organizations' efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution. But creating sustainable peace requires more than just government policy and diplomatic peacemaking. Nongovernmental organizations, businesses, religious communities, scholars, the media, and private citizens should also be part of the process. Identification of all the stakeholders is essential.

Participating in the program also reinforced my interest in conflict resolution and international law as a career path. My experience underscored the importance of my current work with the G20 Interfaith Forum. This organization brings faith leaders, faith groups, academics, nongovernmental organizations, and government representatives together to draft policy proposals addressing global issues, especially as identified by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The forum calls on international organizations like the United Nations to include religious groups and religious leaders in the process of global problem-solving, including peacebuilding initiatives.

Visiting the Arava Institute in particular led me to accept a position with a nonprofit organization whose mission is to create sustainable communities through building relationships between stakeholders and by addressing environmental issues. My experience at the Arava Institute also prompted my independent research on the use of environmental issues as an impetus for dispute resolution through relationship-building.

## GAINING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

As formative as participating in the Jerusalem Initiative was for my career, perhaps its most profound impact was spiritual. My encounters with those who had suffered deep pain, loss, and hardship due to others' choices, and who were nevertheless able to forgive, strengthened my testimony of the reality and power of Christ's Atonement. As I engaged with my classmates, our guides, the students and staff at the BYU Jerusalem Center, and the many people we met during our time in Israel and the West Bank, I felt love for each of them, and this love reaffirmed my knowledge that we are all God's children.

It was a privilege to participate in the Jerusalem Initiative. I will use the knowledge, experience, insight, and strength I gained to be a peacemaker who builds bridges of understanding and trust as I serve God and His children.

