

# TUFTS OBSERVER

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CONTEMPLATING A SHARED FUTURE



# NO SIMPLE ANSWERS

## Tufts students explore the complexities of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Report by NIMEP members Matan Chorev and Negar Razavi, photos by Matthew Edmundson

“It began, our trip that is, with the look of an Israeli father whose 14-year old daughter’s life was taken in a bus in Jerusalem, a suicide bomb. Sitting next to him was a Palestinian man who lost three family members in the recent Intifada. Their story, told hundreds, if not thousands of times, to various groups, is slightly tired. The look, the look in their eyes, the burning of the pain, is not tired. The look doesn’t go away, it never will. It is gripping; it is terrible. The same look, the same burning, would return to haunt us throughout the trip.” These were the words of Matthew Edmundson, one of the 11 Tufts undergraduates who traveled to Israel and the West Bank during winter break with a unique group called NIMEP—New Initiative for Middle East Peace (see opposite page).

The trip, organized in collaboration with

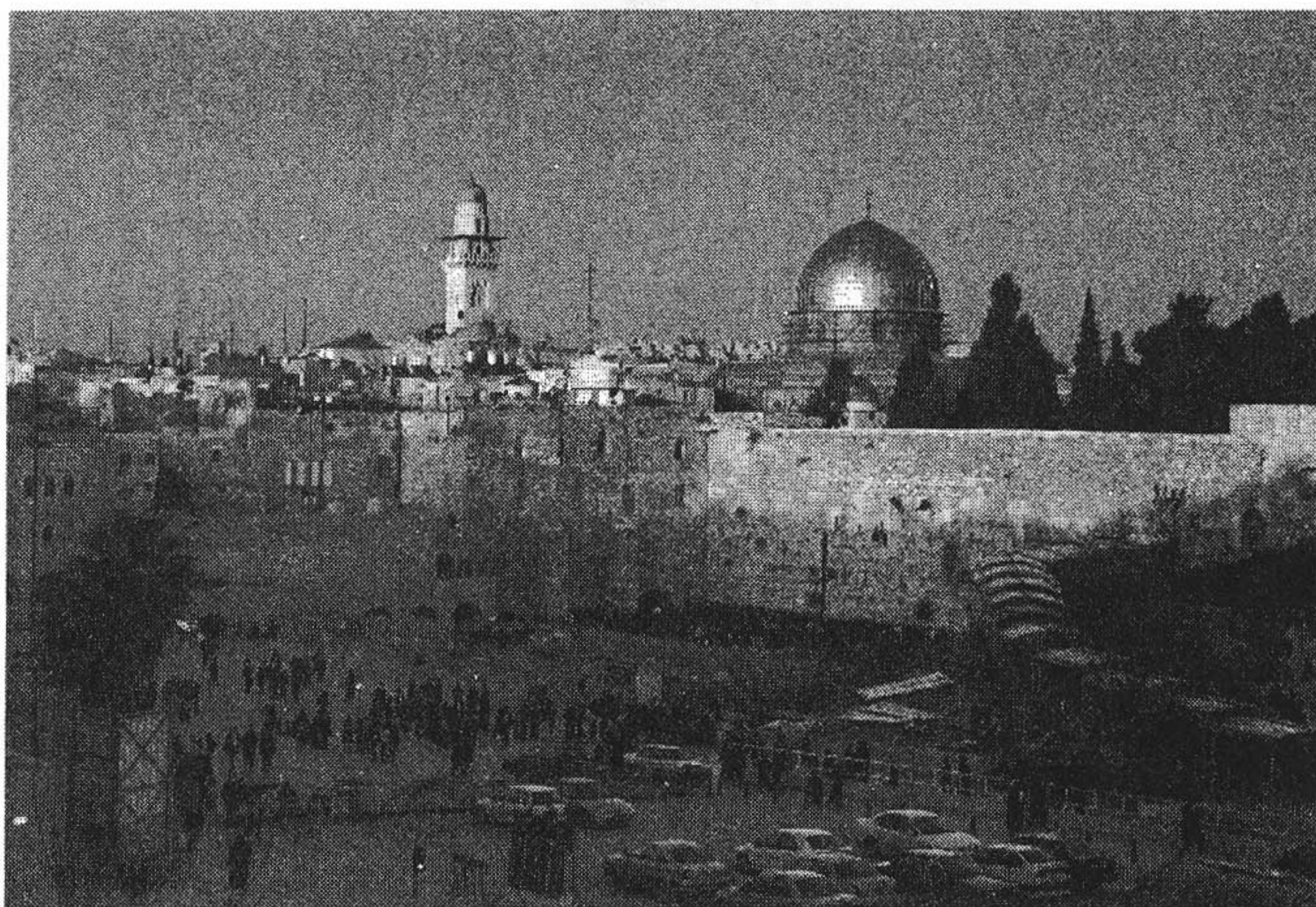
issues from many perspectives. NIMEP’s first day in the occupied territories began with a detailed presentation by

tenure as mayor, the city has suffered four suicide bombings all attempts to jeopardize this co-existence. For Yahav, a longtime Labor party member and supporter of the peace camp, the fence is an unfortunate yet necessary reality. He stressed his opposition to the fence’s deviation from the 1967 border, but citing his commitment to his daughter’s safety, still supported its construction.

A few hours later, the delegation visited the fence, described by one member as “a gargantuan complex,” in the town of Baka Al-Sharkia.

As we filmed and photographed the wall, a group of Palestinians ran up to the group to tell their story. The first man, a father and teacher said, “Look at what the Israelis are doing! They are dividing us. How am I supposed to teach peace in my school if this is what my students see?” Another Pal-

man told us about the demolition of his house on the morning of his wedding because it stood in the path



**“Even the most sacrosanct places in the world were being corrupted by the hand of human irresponsibility”**

Faculty for Israeli—Palestinian Peace (FFIPP) co-founder Yoav Elinevsky and joined by MIT professor Michael Fischer, a renowned anthropologist and expert on Iran, provided students with the opportunity to engage in intense study of the conflict and the human repercussions for both Israelis and Palestinians. Over the course of 10 days, NIMEP members met with practitioners, politicians, students, journalists, activists, and academics while visiting the region’s most charged sites.

“If there is anything I concluded from this tremendous trip, it is that things are more

Jad Isaac, a scholar at the Applied Research Center in Bethlehem. Using GIS technology and satellite images, the delegation learned about a plethora of issues caused by the construction and route of the security fence. Isaac described the fence as an example of Sharon’s “land grab” and outlined what he saw as a reality of cantonization and “ghetto-ization” of the West Bank. Several days later, the students met with the mayor of Haifa, Yona Yahav, who offered a different perspective on the wall. Haifa is 20 percent Arab and has developed a unique environment of coexistence. During Yahav’s

of construction. The Israeli soldiers admitted that while the fence has caused hardship to the Palestinians, it is necessary due to the amount of shooting at civilian Israeli vehicles on the Israeli side of the border. In fact, the group had to leave by sundown because the area was not considered safe after dark.

NIMEP was able to travel to places in the West Bank often inaccessible to Israelis themselves such as the Daheisha refugee camp, Ramallah, and Hebron, in addition to traveling to Israel’s major cities and the Negev region. In the West Bank, the students visited Manger



Square, the site of a 36-day standoff between the Israeli Army and Palestinians who had hidden in the Church of the Nativity. The room in the Bethlehem Peace Center, where we met with its curator, served as the central command of the Israeli Army during the standoff.

On the outskirts of Hebron, students toured HI, a fully autonomous territory of the Palestinian Authority. After meeting with the mayor, students toured the Old City with an Al-Jazeera reporter. The streets were windy and narrow, the shops closed. On the walls were posters of martyrs juxtaposed against anti-Arab graffiti scrawled by settlers. The tour culminated in a visit to the Ibrahimi Mosque, a site holy to both Jews and Muslims. The Mosque sits above the Cave of Machpelah, or Tomb of the Patriarchs, the most ancient Jewish site and second holiest place for the Jewish people, after the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The cave was purchased by Abraham as a burial place for his wife Sarah some 3700 years ago and is the final resting place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, and Leah, according to Jewish tradition. Muslims believe that Joseph too was buried here. The Mosque was the site of the 1994 massacre of dozens of Muslim worshippers by Dr. Baruch Goldstein.

On the final day of the trip, the delegation went to Yasir Arafat's compound in Ramallah—a "surreal experience." The buildings inside the "Muqata" were heavily damaged, and Arafat's rather aggressive security force spilled out from behind destroyed buildings, AK-47 in tote.

In Jerusalem the students traversed the sites of terrorist attacks on and around Ben Yehuda Street, the popular pedestrian mall in the center of town. After visiting the Old City, freshman Rachel Leven said, "The aura inside the walls of the old city was truly unique and holy but was not exempt from the harshness of the political reality. Even the most sacrosanct places in the world were being corrupted by the hand of human irresponsibility". Later, students met with Benjamin Pogrud, head of the Yakar Center for Social Concern, who compared his experiences as a journalist during the apartheid era in South Africa to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He expressed offence at creating a parallel between the predicament of the Palestinians and the Blacks in South Africa, although he offered keen insight on more effective strategies for the Palestinian national movements.

Some of the most powerful moments on the trip were the least formal. The last day of the trip included a meeting with students and faculty at Bir Zeit University, described by one Israeli as a "hornet's nest" of Hamas. For Shulman, it was "a very strange experience. On one hand, you are sitting in a comfortable



and modern conference room. On the other, you are listening to descriptions of army raids and violence. Reconciling this dichotomy is a challenge, and perhaps impossible for an outsider." There was a definite split between the tone of the faculty and the tone of the students, which was very encouraging. Even though they shared similar politics in many cases, the students were optimistic,

or at least determined, to continue their studies and focus on the future. Junior Rachel Brandenburg also described the experience as "very strange," but for different reasons. "The students at Bir Zeit are much like ourselves in many ways, but the atmosphere in which they live is a completely different reality from anything we know. Whereas students at Tufts, for example, involve themselves in student groups

## NEW INITIATIVE FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

A PROJECT OF THE INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP  
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

NIMEP is a non-polemical student think-tank and outreach initiative aimed at finding a progressive solution to the historic conflict in the Middle East. Through a diverse array of events and initiatives it seeks to foster an environment of understanding and co-existence between the peoples of the territory. NIMEP is distinguished from other initiatives because it was conceived by and run by students from diverse backgrounds: Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Colombia, and United States.

These students have come together by their own accord to create an initiative that is not only a scholarly exercise but one that can contribute to new realities on the ground. Through research and immersive education, the think-tank arm of NIMEP aims to contribute a new perspective on the region's well-defined dilemmas. NIMEP believes that the foundation to any future political settlement will not work unless it is based on a solidly founded human contact between the conflicted parties. NIMEP's outreach and cultural advocacy facet aims to create contact between youth of the parties in conflict and with adults in a way that will attain this objective.

The unique group of students who have spearheaded this initiative are committed to partaking in the next generation's leadership and inspiring others to realize the powerful results such a model of thinking and action can produce.





such as Tufts Democrats or Republicans, their equivalent political action groups include Hamas, Fatah, and Islamic Jihad. What we consider cultural groups here are only beginning to appear on their campus. Because life for them is so directly impacted by politics, the political sentiment on the Bir Zeit campus is considered a representative microcosm of

with the students, and we are committed to work together in the future. Similar connections were established at Haifa University where the delegation met with a co-existence project called the "Arab-Jewish Center for Dialogue." The students described their attempts at bridging the cultural divide.

NIMEP members also attended a two-day

of the students. Leven said that "too great a percentage of the time was spent decrying the situation as opposed to finding new solutions." Another student referred to the peace camp as "dangerously impotent and guilty of perpetuating the occupation."

The trip was a very personal journey. Alia Hamid, a senior majoring in international rela-

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political sentiment in the city of Ramallah. This is completely different from politics on college campuses in the U.S."

There was a diversity of political opinion regarding different options for a peaceful future. Some advocated the Geneva Accords and a two-state solution, while others said they would prefer a bi-national state. The faculty tended to focus on the past and current political climate, while the students generally talked about their studies and, in some cases, chances for reconciliation and peace. As Yoav Elinevsky put it, "If these are the hornets, then I am encouraged."

NIMEP established strong connections

international conference focused on international exchange among academics committed to an end of the occupation and a "just peace." The conference provided an opportunity to think about the occupation with distinguished individuals from around the world. Students met Hanan Ashrawi, former member of Palestinian National Council and a leading figure in internal Palestinian reform; Peter Hansen, Commissioner General of UNRWA; Luisa Morgantini, a member of the European Parliament; and activists Mustafa Barghouti, Shulamit Aloni, and Israeli Professor Naomi Chazan. Although the conference was insightful, its tone reflected some of the frustration

tions, is a daughter of a Palestinian refugee. She commented, "It was disconcerting to walk through the country where my father and grandparents were born, knowing it is impossible for them to return to or even visit the land they left behind. My U.S. passport enabled me to do what many Diaspora Palestinians today can only dream of." For some, this was the first trip to the region, and for others it was a new way to experience their homeland. As an Iranian, sophomore Negar Razavi had a slightly different experience than the others on the trip. "It was difficult for me to be in Israel given the historical tensions between Iran and Israel. Very few Muslim Iranians have ever



traveled to Israel or to the West Bank, yet they all have very set opinions on the conflict. The most important thing that I took from this trip, and which I have been sharing with my community, has been my realization that moral relativism is dangerous in this conflict. What is happening to the Palestinian people is a tragedy. They are being denied their basic rights as humans: freedom, security, and dignity. I

cannot accept both as such, than there is no hope for peace.”

Funding and support for the trip came from a wide array of sources including the Institute for Global Leadership (IGL), the University College of Citizenship and Public Service (UCCPS), the president’s office, private donors, and contributions from the students. At Tufts, NIMEP has become one of the many

and 2000 photos. NIMEP will also publish a journal at the end of the year that will include members’ research papers, interviews, opinion pieces, and art. Other planned activities include special events throughout the semester that will examine the “stumbling blocks” of the conflict in a progressive way and speaking with high school students from all over the country during the EPIIC program’s Inquiry weekend. NIMEP

**“If there is anything I concluded from this tremendous trip, it is that things are more complicated than I had realized”**

myself experienced some of the humiliation that they are subjected to, simply because of my nationality. However, at the same time, Israelis are living in constant fear of suicide attacks and have had to watch their innocent civilians being killed. This is a tragedy as well. If we

initiatives that contribute to an exceptional campus environment by constructing intellectual exchange and cross-cultural understanding. With this goal in mind, NIMEP plans to produce a documentary on its group and the trip, drawing on over 30 hours of video

will also participate in the launch of a web-cam based initiative that will allow Tufts students to participate in a dialogue with students from Al-Quds University. ©

A documentary on NIMEP’s trip will debut at this year’s EPIIC Symposium, Feb. 26-29th.

