

# **Enabling Faith Schools to tackle conflict in the Middle East**

Joshua Hillis

WINSTON  
CHURCHILL  
MEMORIAL  
TRUST

## Table of Contents

Page 3	Executive Summary
Page 5	Introduction
Page 7	Background to my Churchill Fellowship
Page 9	Findings
Page 21	Recommendations
Page 23	Evaluation of my Churchill Fellowship
Page 25	Next Steps
Page 26	Acknowledgements

Copyright © 2019 by Joshua Hillis. The moral right of the author has been asserted.

The views and opinions expressed in this report and its content are those of the author and not of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust or its partners, which have no responsibility or liability for any part of the report.

## Executive Summary

This report is based on my travels during my Churchill Fellowship. I travelled for six weeks to Israel and Palestine, officially referred to as the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The objectives of my fellowship were:

1. Give teachers in British schools, particularly faith schools, the confidence to teach conflict in the Middle East, by creating resources emphasising religious ethics and perspectives.
2. Bring together students from faith and non-faith schools to debate the issues which divide communities.

The major findings were that:

1. Conflict in the Middle East is generally not included in faith-based and cross-community projects and discussions in Israel and Palestine. Social and governmental pressures reduce the scope for tackling conflict in the Middle East, to the detriment of the success of the projects.
2. There are few resources available in Israel and Palestine for teaching different views of the conflict, because few schools are willing, or able, to teach different views of the conflict.
3. History is at the centre of the conflict. Each community has its own understanding of the conflict in the present, and its own vision of the future of the conflict, and so each community has a history or a story of how 'we got to the present'. Consequently history is key to how identities are defined and to how communities treat those of other identities. divides identities.

My recommendations for teachers in British schools, and for organisations working on interfaith and cross-community initiatives are:

1. The effectiveness of interfaith and cross-community work and discussions is increased by engaging with the present-day conflicts relevant to members of religions and communities.
2. History is the best way for engaging with present-day conflicts in schools because it opens students up to the possibility of change in the present and the future.
3. Studying contested history is a brilliant way for bringing students out of opinion bubbles, teaching them to evaluate arguments, and interesting them in present issues.

## Introduction

The most unusual conversation of my travels occurred in a cafe in Tel Aviv. I found myself in this cafe explaining to the man on the next table that Theresa May is not Jewish. He would not accept that the prime minister at the time is the daughter of a Christian priest and regularly attends church. Fearing for my ability to persuade someone of an easily verifiable fact, I sought the source of his information. He showed me an article on a Hebrew news website with a photo of Theresa May holding a sign, declaring 'Je suis juif'. The article did not explain that Theresa May was standing in solidarity with Jewish communities after the January 2015 terrorist attack on a Jewish supermarket in Paris. Indeed the article argued that Theresa May was Jewish and therefore the most pro-Israel prime minister in British history. A misunderstanding or a deliberate misrepresentation? Either way, it was an instance which reminded that the skills required for interpreting media on the internet are essential.

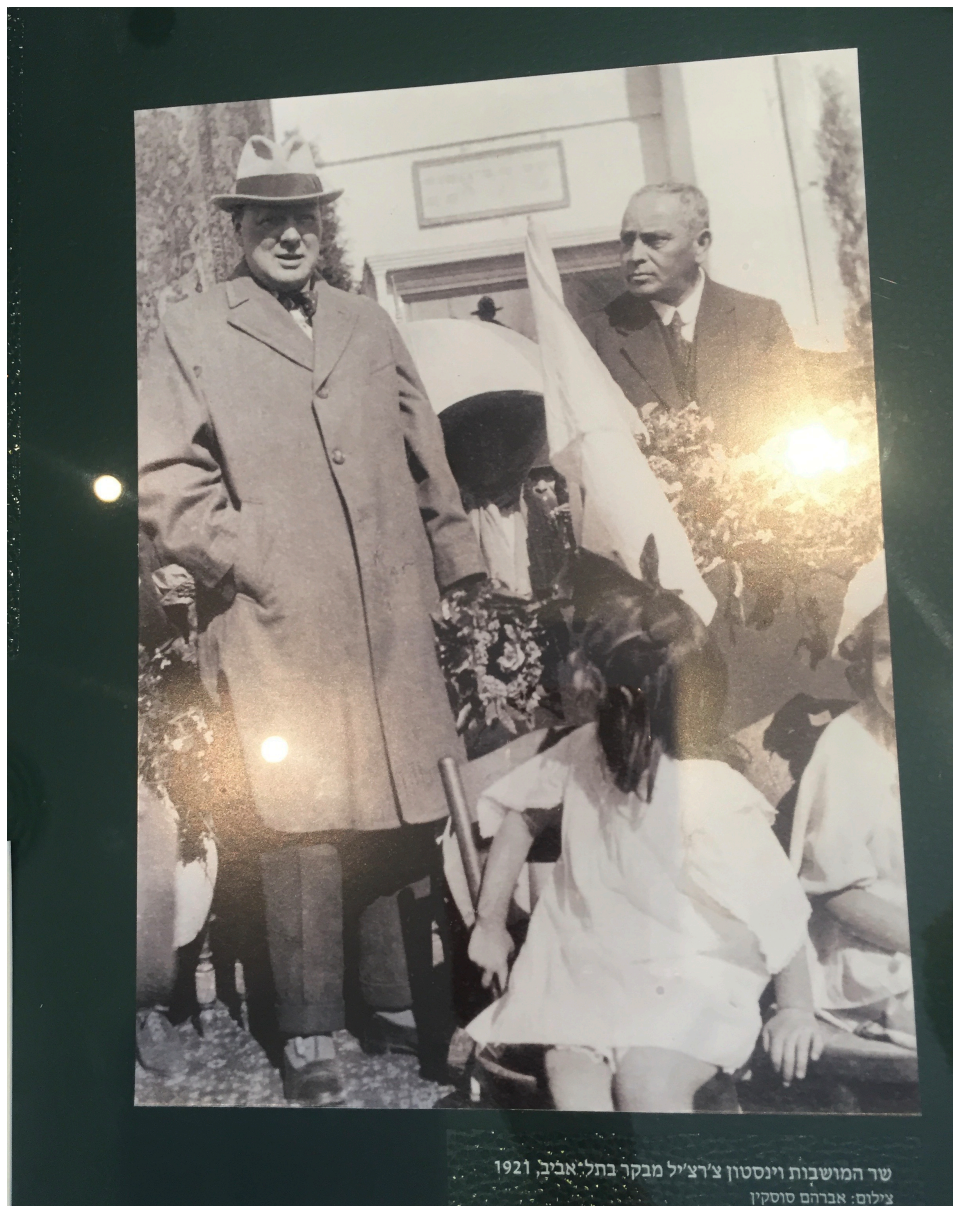
Encouraging high school students to cultivate those skills was one of reasons for my application for a Churchill Fellowship. Another reason was a desire to remedy the current lack of resources for students learning about conflict in the Middle East. Conflict in the Middle East is a highly contentious subject and none the less for the ongoing controversy about anti-semitism in the Labour Party. It connects to our present debates about Britain's past, present and future place in the world. It is a source of division between communities in the UK. It contains exciting and attractive elements for students: a colourful cast of characters, the great '-isms' of nationalism, socialism, colonialism. Yet less than one percent of students taking GCSE history last year were taught the 'Conflict in the Middle East' option. This subject provokes fears of being too complex, too controversial. Information about the subject is usually adorned with an agenda. Historical narratives without an eye on influencing the present are rare. News reports are zealously picked over. It is a fascinating subject important to current affairs but off-putting due to the appearance of too much controversy. This paradox connects the two reasons of my application for a Churchill Fellowship. For few subjects are the skills of evaluating evidence, understanding bias, analysing arguments more important than conflict in the Middle East.

These two reasons did not appear out of a vacuum. They are the result of my experience of a pilot initiative bringing together students from Muslim, Jewish and non-faith schools to debate conflict in the Middle East. This experience demonstrated that schools need not shy away from conflict in the Middle East. Indeed the students thrived. The frisson from actually discussing this topic broke down any initial distance between the students; while the development in critical use of evidence and analysis was conspicuous. This pilot initiative was the background to my application for a Churchill Fellowship. The aim was to learn about how conflict is studied and discussed in the Middle East, particularly within faith and interfaith environments.



The Middle East is sadly beset with conflicts at the moment. The conflict being referred to here is otherwise known as 'the Israel-Palestine conflict'. My Churchill Fellowship enabled me to travel for six weeks to Israel and Palestine in order to pursue my aim. I met with academics, journalists, teachers, representatives from civil service organisations, government officials in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beer Sheva, Jerusalem (East and West), Ramallah and Nablus. This report seeks to present my findings in order to improve practices in the UK. It does not seek to argue for a particular perspective on the conflict and so the use of the terms 'Israel' and 'Palestine' is not an ideological claim. They are merely the shortest terms available for describing what are officially recognised by the UN and the international community as the State of Israel and the State of Palestine.

The purpose of this report is to help students develop the skills necessary to make their own minds up in our current world of digital media, through studying the important topic of conflict in the Middle East.



## Background to the Fellowship

### **The Pilot Initiative**

The immediate background for my fellowship was the unusual sight of Jewish students arguing for a Palestinian interpretation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, of Muslim students arguing for the Israeli interpretation. A perusal of online articles about the conflict gives the impression that Jewish and Muslim identity includes an instinctive defence of Israel for Jews, and Palestine for Muslims. The occasion was a workshop in Autumn 2018. The Jewish students were from the Jewish Community Secondary School, a Jewish state school in London, the Muslim students from Abrar Academy, an Islamic private school in Lancashire.

Parallel Histories were the reason for the Jewish and Muslim students confounding a common impression about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Parallel Histories is a British educational charity that has developed innovative resources for the study of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Michael Davies founded the charity to disseminate the findings of his Churchill Fellowship in 2015. He sought to encourage the teaching of the Israel-Palestine conflict through a dual narrative approach. Studying the history of that conflict in this way removes the teacher from the position of referee between two competing claims. Prior to the pilot initiative in 2018, Parallel Histories had produced a series of interactive videos telling the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict from an Israeli and a Palestinian perspective. These videos had been trialled in several schools, before Parallel Histories embarked on this pilot initiative.

The underlying ideas of the pilot initiative were that: British schools are reluctant to teach the Israel-Palestine conflict for fear of controversy, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a valuable area of study for students, and that studying the history of the conflict through contested narratives allows students to form their own opinions, while reducing the scope for controversy. Abrar Academy and the Jewish Community Secondary School had used Parallel Histories's resources in preparation for the day-long workshop.



## **My application**

My involvement in this pilot initiative stemmed from my work for Parallel Histories. I had worked for Parallel Histories as a researcher since 2016, the second year of my undergraduate degree in history. I was promoted to the role of assistant editor at Parallel Histories after graduation in June 2018. I wanted to use the skills I had developed during my degree for the betterment of society. Expanding and improving the pilot initiative seemed a good way to help British students develop their own informed opinions about a conflict that causes divisions in British society. The Churchill Fellowship offered the ideal opportunity to learn from similar projects in the countries most affected by the conflict.

## **My objectives**

The objectives I chose for my Fellowship were to:

1. Give teachers in British schools, particularly in faith schools, the confidence to teach conflict in the Middle East, by creating resources emphasising religious ethics and perspectives.
2. Bring together students from faith and non-faith schools to debate the issues which divide communities.

The pilot initiative was unique in British schools because it combined interfaith interaction, study of the history of the Israel-Palestine, and debate about the merits of Israeli and Palestinian narratives of that history. The objectives for my fellowship grew out of those three elements.

The first objective focused on the first two elements. Faith schools were unlikely to have the confidence to study the Israel-Palestine conflict in an interfaith setting without the sense that their own understanding of the conflict was respected. A sympathy towards religious ethics would help give schools this confidence. The pilot initiative had identified a lack of resources for the teaching of the conflict that were sympathetic towards religious ethics and perspectives. Therefore the creation of such resources became my first objective.

The second objective combined all three elements but with an emphasis on the third. Inviting students to debate the Israel-Palestine conflict is potentially dangerous idea: the debate could quickly turn confrontational, alienating students from each other. Yet the benefits of a debating model was evident in the pilot initiative. It forced students to examine the evidence base of arguments, to enter more deeply into Israeli and Palestinian understandings, to work together to develop a winning

strategy, to build confidence through public speaking. I wanted to learn how others handle such debates.

## Findings

I have grouped my findings into three themes that relate to my objectives: religion, education and history. These three themes are inherently intertwined and a combination of the different themes inflected many of my conversations. The themes do provide though a framework for my findings, differentiating between different aspects of my research while mapping onto my objectives.

### 1. Religion

#### **Summary of findings**

Conflict in the Middle East is generally not included in faith-based and cross-community projects and discussions in Israel and Palestine. Social and governmental pressures reduce the scope for tackling conflict in the Middle East, to the detriment of the success of the projects.

#### **My focus**

Learning about interfaith work was a focus of my travels. The reasons for this focus were:

1. Help me create the resources outlined in the first objective of my fellowship. Any resources I helped create would only be improved by a deeper understanding of the connections between the Israel-Palestine conflict and religion. Religion in this case is not an abstract concept: Christianity, Judaism and Islam are the three specific religions involved. Interfaith work between these three religions, in Israel and Palestine, seemed an area where the connections between religion and the conflict would be easily accessed: an area where practitioners are developing strategies for introducing, or not introducing, the conflict into religious discussions and activities.
2. Examining the anecdotal evidence from the pilot initiative. Some of the students in this initiative had taken part in other interfaith activities. They highlighted the benefits of studying and debating the Israel-Palestine conflict with students of other faiths. The conflict seemed to be a 'forbidden fruit': a topic that they described as more relevant to their lives than the focus of other interfaith work on worship, belief or holy texts; and yet they felt discouraged from talking about the conflict for fear of disrupting other interfaith work.

Defining interfaith work in Israel and Palestine can be tricky. Organisations use a variety of terms to describe their activities. Three of the leading Israeli organisations in this area of work demonstrate this variety. The Peres Center for Peace and Innovation prefers leadership cultivation, the Interfaith Encounter Association is clear about what it thinks of its activities, while the Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace talks about multicultural dialogue. The difficulty is describing activities involving people of different identities, in a conflict that cuts across these identities. An activity involving Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims could be described as cross-cultural if the emphasis was



on the nationality. If the Palestinian Muslims lived in the West Bank then it could be described as cross-border, but if they lived in Israel then it could not. If the activity focused on similarities in holy texts, then it would probably be described as interfaith.

I have chosen to group all activities that brought together people of different identities as interfaith, so long as the activities touched on at least one of the three pillars of religion: belief, worship and community. The distinctions between interfaith, cross-cultural and cross-border are less significant in the UK. The pilot initiative showed that the important distinction for the Jewish and Muslim students was their religion; the distinctions between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, between Muslims of Arab heritage and Pakistani heritage, were less significant.

## My findings in Israel



Interfaith work in Israel and Palestine happens in Israel and East Jerusalem, but not the West Bank, and Israeli NGOs predominantly organise it. Dr Ron Kronish worked with over fifty Christian, Jewish and Muslim organisations during his twenty-five years as director of the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel. He explained how this work was conducted in Israel and Jerusalem. I met with three of the leading organisations in this area of work: the Peres Center, the Interfaith

Encounter Association and the Adam Institute. All were founded by Israelis, are located in Israel and operate in Israel. The Israeli-centric nature of interfaith work is emphasised by the study by Israeli academics of the methodology and practices of interfaith work. Dr Ben Mollov, director of Bar-Ilan University's Project for the Study of Religion, Culture and Peace, combines leading inter-religious courses for Jewish and Muslim university students, with studying the work of various NGOs. The predominance of NGOs in this work was noticeable. Tabeetha School is a fascinating institution that educates students of all faiths on a daily basis, but it is run by the Church of Scotland, not the state. It is still located in Israel.

## **My findings in Palestine**

The location of this work in Israel does not mean that Palestinians do not participate in interfaith work: the calendar for the Interfaith Encounter Association is busy with events involving Israelis and Palestinians. It may have been a failing on my behalf not to have found work based in Palestinian territory or organised by Palestinians. Nevertheless I did not find any.

## **Generalisation of my findings**

There is still a similarity between Israel and Palestine: the amount of work conducted now is perceived to be less than it was. I could not find any statistical evidence to corroborate this similarity but it was a common reflection. I learnt in my meeting with the Peres Center that its work has not reduced in scale. Its work has moved away from interfaith, in the sense of touching on any religious matters, and instead focuses on cooperation around science and medicine. Dr Kronish talked about the difficulties in sustaining his work in recent years. Martin Daltry, director of the British Council in the Palestinian Territories, related how there was considerably more interfaith activity during his first period in Palestine, a decade ago. Marzia Dalla Vedova, EU Procurement Manager in Jerusalem, lamented the reduction in interfaith work. Yehuda Stolov, director of the Interfaith Encounter Association, pointed out how this organisation was unique in sustaining its level of work over twenty years.

Regardless of the present level of activity, all of these organisations intentionally bracketed out the conflict from their activities. There was a variety of methodologies used for interfaith work but a commonality was directly related to what I was interested in: how these organisations handled the conflict when it came up in discussions, and whether they intentionally introduced it, or not. The Adam Institute did look at the conflict in their activities. Nevertheless the conflict was to be turned into a personal dilemma for the participants through scenarios, in order to spark an interest in promoting peace. The conflict was not discussed, debated or studied directly. Therefore bracketing out the conflict from interfaith work is a commonality between the UK, and Israel and Palestine.

## Explanations

The context for this work helps explain why the conflict is bracketed out, and the relevance of these findings to the UK. This commonality between the UK, and Israel and Palestine may indicate that there are no connections between religion and the conflict to be found in interfaith work. An exhibition that I visited at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art was useful in showing that connections between religion and the conflict are destined to arise when religions interact. The exhibition was titled 'In Statu Quo: Structures of Negotiation'. It focused on how different governing powers of Jerusalem have regulated the use of the major holy sites in Jerusalem (the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Jewish Western Wall and the Muslim Haram al-Sharif). To quote the introduction to the exhibition:

The term "Status Quo" refers to the codes that govern holy places shared by different religious groups. Initiated by the Ottomans in the mid-nineteenth century, later advanced under British and Jordanian rule, and still in use today by Israel and the Palestinian Authority, it requires whoever is in power to maintain a delicate web of negotiations and agreements that allow contested sites to operate in their daily routines.

The curators pointed out that:

The Status Quo can be only a temporary solution because it prevents violence by spurring the contending parties in their struggle for rights and possession. It is valid until the next violation of the hegemony leads to the definition of a new one.

The idea is that politics and governments cannot reconcile contradicting claims to a holy site; governments can only try and prevent these claims becoming violent.

I interpreted the curators as saying that religion and the conflict are connected by how the competing claims of religions to holy sites can be inflame the conflict, and by how changes in the balance of power between governments in the conflict can produce religious violence. The religious claims cannot be settled without reference to the conflict because the conflict is the reason for the particular political situation at any moment in time. The conflict and religion feed off each other as religions interact. The connections between religion and the conflict do exist.

Therefore 'bracketing out' is the right term. An element of the interactions between Christians, Jews and Muslims is being removed from interfaith work in Israel and Palestine. All the organisations explained that this was a conscious choice. The reason that they gave was the need to avoid government pressure and social pressure.

The government pressure manifested itself in two ways. Organisations talked about the frustrations of bringing together Israelis and Palestinians across the border between Israel and the West Bank. The length of time required to fill out the permit applications is usually rewarded by either considerable delays at the border or a closed door. Organisations had most success bringing people together when



they presented their work as not related to the conflict, for example science or medicine cooperation. The second manifestation of government pressure on interfaith work is government discouragement of engagement with those of different identities. This discouragement was said to be largely emanating from the right wing Israeli government under Prime Minister Netanyahu, over the last ten years. Government discouragement of learning about Palestinian perspectives in state schools was an example given of how Netanyahu's government has created a more hostile atmosphere to interfaith work in Israel. Avoiding discussing the conflict was one way that organisations could still maintain their work in this atmosphere.

Social pressure was cited as prevalent in both Israel and Palestine. In Palestine, the pressure is summed up by the word 'normalisation'. Salim Tamari, director of the Institute for Palestine Studies, explains that normalisation has been associated with moves to perpetuate what is perceived to be Israel's colonial rule of Palestine: making the occupation normal. 'Normalisation' is a word that regularly cropped up in my discussions. Palestinians explained that the word carries a considerable emotional charge. I was told that anyone associated with an activity accused of normalisation will quickly be ostracised by others. In Israel, there is a general social pressure not to engage with Palestinians due to the association of Palestinians with terrorism. David Assaf, director of the Forum for Regional Thinking, spoke passionately about the work of his organisation to change this association in many Israelis' minds. He acknowledged though the extent of the social pressure against his work.

Organisations that wish to facilitate engagement with those of different identities have found that it is easier not to mention the conflict, due to these government and social pressures. People related how there is not the emotional space in Israel and Palestine for learning about the perspective of the other on the conflict. The result is that it is more prudent to focus on topics other than the conflict.

## **Relevance to the UK**

These findings demonstrate the importance of situating interfaith work within the pressures on individuals, and their world-views. Ofer Zalzburg, senior analyst in the International Crisis Group's Arab-Israel Project, argued that the liberal basis of peacemaking efforts in the Israel-Palestine conflict has alienated several powerful constituencies, including the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities and Islamists. These groups perceive the correlation between liberal democracy and the promotion of peace as a threat to their values and religious laws. Asking groups to abandon their sacred values in favour of liberal values is insensitive and sets interfaith work on a course to failure. I experienced the realities of Zalzburg's arguments, when individuals I met with assumed that I was another liberal westerner coming over to tell Israelis and Palestinians how to solve a conflict that Western nations had helped create. I sought to challenge this assumption by explaining that I wanted to learn how I could encourage British teachers to teach the conflict, and to do so in a way that allows students to

Page 13

form their own views. This process of explaining reinforced to me how interfaith work needs to be situated within the pressures on individuals and their world-views.

It is not a criticism, therefore, of the organisations that I met with that they bracket out the conflict from their work: they are operating within their context. Nevertheless it does not follow that the same applies to the UK. Indeed several individuals stated that bracketing out the conflict was to the detriment of their work. I was told that Palestinians are regularly unable to attend interfaith meetings in Jerusalem because they had been stopped at Israeli checkpoints for no particular reason. My interlocutor explained that not mentioning how the conflict impacted their interfaith meetings reduced the effectiveness of the meetings.

The philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, argues that there is a fallacy in our current discussions and ideas about religion and identity, in his book, *The Lies that Bind*. He calls this fallacy the source-code fallacy and defines it as: ‘the idea that the true nature of a religion lies with its deepest, most foundational texts, abstracted away from the real-world range of its actual adherents.’ His idea is that this fallacy hinders attempts by the Muslims of Europe and their non-Muslim neighbours to find successful forms of cohabitation. The individuals that I met in Israel and Palestine were essentially applying this fallacy to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Interfaith work is less effective when it seeks to establish the grounds of commonality between the true nature of two religions by focusing on the foundational texts, without consideration of the real-world issues separating the adherents of the faiths. Social and government pressures prevent the consideration of the real-world issues in their context.

Therefore the relevance of my findings about interfaith work in Israel and Palestine is that bracketing out present-day conflicts will reduce the effectiveness of interfaith work. Considering such conflicts has to be done within the world-views of the individuals involved so as not to alienate.

## 2. Education

### **Summary of findings**

There are few resources available in Israel and Palestine for teaching different views of the conflict, because few schools are willing, or able, to teach different views of the conflict.

### **My focus**

The second focus of my travels was to learn how the conflict is taught in schools in Israel and Palestine. The first objective of my fellowship was the reason behind this focus. It seemed sensible to

learn from schools in Israel and Palestine in order to help British teachers teach the conflict. An ideal situation would have been finding resources that could be adapted for British schools: such resources would have already passed through the pitfalls that are more numerous in the area of the conflict.

The second objective of my fellowship narrowed this focus to learning about how schools handle debate about the conflict. Debating the conflict necessitates engaging with different perspectives on the conflict, whether that be through listening to people with differing views, or through learning about different views in order to debate them amongst a group of students. There already exists studies of the portrayal of Palestinians and Israelis in each other's curricula. I did not wish to enter this highly charged debate, and the portrayal of Palestinians in Israeli schools and Israelis in Palestinians schools is not particularly relevant to a British context. Therefore my focus was on the methodologies and practices employed by schools, or educational charities, in facilitating such debates.

### **My findings in Israel**

It was clear that few schools in Israel are willing, or able, to teach different perspectives on the conflict. An Israeli who has studied the Israeli educational sector for twenty years explained that there has been a narrowing of the opportunities for schools to engage with perspectives on the conflict, that differ from official government views. They particularly identified Naftali Bennet's tenure as Minister of Education from 2015 to 2019 as the critical period. This explanation was corroborated by other Israeli teachers and academics, albeit there does not seem to have been much scope for such teaching. The government pressure has taken the decision out of the hands of state schools in Israel. There are some notable exceptions, such as the Hand in Hand schools. The social pressure placed on such schools- in November 2014 there was an arson attack on Hand in Hand's school in Jerusalem- is a further discouragement from teaching Palestinian perspectives in Israeli schools.

### **My findings in Palestine**

I found comparable pressures in the West Bank. I learnt about two schools which received considerable pressure from the Palestinian Authority, when they tried to introduce Israeli perspectives into the curriculum. Just as in Israel, the social and governmental pressures are found across subjects, whether in history, geography, politics or religious studies.

### **Generalisation of my findings**

I did find more interest in debating different perspectives on the history of the conflict in private schools. These schools introduced debating into schools through the Model United Nations and

similar activities. These schools wanted resources to learn about different historical narratives of the conflict. Resources for engaging in such an approach do not largely exist.

One resource that does exist is a book, *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel and Palestine*. I was fortunate to meet one of the authors, Professor Eyal Naveh. *Side by Side* is a brilliant resource for studying different narratives of the history of the conflict, because it places the Palestinian narrative of a particular historical event next to the Israeli narrative on the page. Professor Naveh explained though that the book received little usage in Israel and Palestine. The book was viewed as too controversial and so is only used abroad.

Again, pointing out the lack of engagement with other perspectives on the conflict is not a criticism. There is debate in both Israel and Palestine about the history and the present of the conflict. One of the most interesting experiences I had was visiting the Negev Museum of Art in Beer Sheva, Israel. The exhibition on the history of Beer Sheva contained an appraisal of the exhibition, noting that:

The Archive materials reflect first and foremost the endeavours and outlooks of the settlement organizations: the Jewish National Fund, Keren Hayesod, government agencies, and philanthropic entities associated with them. They decided what to document and particularly how to do so: the photographs are often staged and highlight the establishment agenda making the desert bloom, absorbing immigrants, education, inauguration ceremonies, visits by dignitaries and donors.

I was struck by the sensitivity of the handling of the question of what is missing in the exhibition and why. This appraisal guided the visitor towards questioning the pictures in the exhibition, towards looking for the motive behind them. The appraisal invited the visitor to think about the limits of national stories and official perspectives, without telling the visitor what to think and without introducing terms such as ‘colonial activity’, ‘land expropriation’, which would raise emotions. The museum was operated by the Israeli state. Yet it was not a school and so did not carry the heightened emotions of the debate about how children should be taught. The scope does not appear to be there for schools to open up national perspectives to ask what is missing.

An example of handling debates around sensitive issues was two days of debates that I had the privilege of participating in at a Palestinian university. I was invited to provide some guidance for the students about debating in general: the coordination of arguments across a team, the reinforcement of arguments through the deployment of evidence. The students did not need much guidance. The debate question was about solutions to the conflict that would be fair to Israelis and Palestinians. No student had to argue explicitly for an Israeli position, merely take into account an Israeli perspective. The debating skills on show were impressive with evidence that the students understood what would appeal to Israelis, without having to lay aside their own perspectives as a Palestinian. The debate

intrigued: was the framing of the debate the key to mitigating against social and government pressures?



Palestinian students at the debate

## Relevance to the UK

I did not find any resources that could be used to teach different perspectives of the conflict, aside from *Side by Side*. The relevance of my findings lies more in how government and social pressures can shut down engagement with alternative perspectives on issues. The curators' introduction in the the Negev Museum of Art shows that it is possible for state institutions to draw attention to the communities excluded by state endorsed narratives. Two questions spring from this possibility. What government and social pressures in Britain are working against students learning about perspectives different to those of their own community? Who and what are British state (or maybe states?) endorsed narratives missing?

It is easy to point to 'remain' and 'leave' as two communities that shout at each other without often engaging. The question of how students should be educated about Brexit is a live one. If a government with a 'leave' agenda and aggressively heightened public emotions render answering that question too difficult to handle in a classroom, then learning about another issue with conflicted perspectives might be the way forward for the time being.

### 3. History

#### **Summary of findings:**

History is at the centre of the conflict. Each community has its own understanding of the conflict in the present, and its own vision of the future of the conflict, and so each community has a history or a story of how 'we got to the present'. Consequently history is key to how identities are defined and to how communities treat those of other identities. divides identities.

#### **My focus**

The pilot initiative had taken historical events as its subject matter. Students had debated the merits of Israeli and Palestinian interpretations of several key historical events, by analysing the evidence on which those interpretations are based. As a result, I had a particular interest in examining the role of history in the conflict. The history of the conflict, the different narratives of that history, and how history is used in the present-day conflict are also topics that I had chosen to study in my undergraduate degree, and are issues I had researched in my employment for the charity Parallel Histories.

I narrowed my focus to how buildings and monuments can carry conflicting historical narratives. The history of the conflict is a vast topic and I wanted to find a lens that students could easily engage with. I chose buildings and monuments partly because buildings and monuments are sources that students can easily engage with: their physical shape, and changes to it, are easier to understand than abstract ideas such as nationalism. The other reason was that it provided a replicable question that I can ask anyone that I met. That question was: what are the ten monuments and buildings in Jerusalem that are significant to you as an Israeli or Palestinian? A series of buildings or monuments could be strung together to understand an Israeli historical narrative of Jerusalem, or a Palestinian narrative.

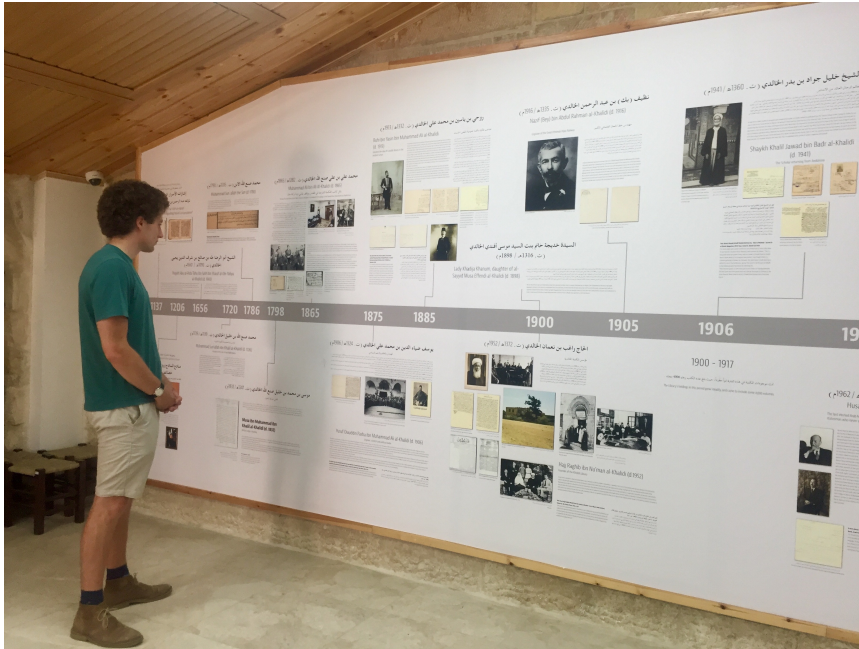
#### **My findings in Israel**

The more interesting findings were not the particular buildings Israelis and Palestinians think and feel are important to their identity. Instead the common thread that emerged from my discussions with academics, museum curators, teachers, researchers and others was how historical narrative is used to police the boundaries of an identity. The means of establishing who is in, and who is not, an identity is usually through historical narratives. Hillel Cohen, a professor in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University, argued that the Zionist (Israeli Nationalism) narrative inherently excludes Palestinians. He explained that the central idea of this narrative was returning to the holy of holies, the temple in Jerusalem, after centuries of persecution around the world. This narrative polices the boundaries of the Zionist identity because it does not allow

Palestinians to join the Zionist identity: Palestinians are not Jewish and so the temple in Jerusalem is not the holy of holies for them. Professor Cohen went on to say that the dynamic of change in this Zionist narrative is Palestinian resistance to the Jewish return to the holy of holies. Therefore Palestinians are further excluded from the Zionist identity by the Zionist narrative: they are the ones who have tried to stop the Jews returning to the holy of holies.

## My findings in Palestine

For Jack Persekian, director of the al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, in Jerusalem, the dynamic of change in the Palestinian narrative of Jerusalem is Israel. He explained that, in the Palestinian narrative, Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city that flourished in the nineteenth century under the Ottomans. It was a modern, confident city in which many different faiths worshipped, and many different communities lived without violence. Zionism disrupted this city because it asserted the rights of the Jews over and above everyone else's rights to the city; it compelled the other communities to embrace nationalism in order to protect their rights, to the exclusion of others. In the ensuing conflict of nationalism- a conflict that Jack emphasised the British, and Winston Churchill in particular, helped create- Zionism won and so imposed its vision of the city on the rest of its inhabitants. Raed Saadeh agreed with Jack, describing how he seeks to showcase this cosmopolitan heritage of the city through his role as chairman of the Jerusalem Tourism cluster.



Visiting the Khalidi Museum in Jerusalem which seeks to celebrate the Palestinian history of Jerusalem through the lives of the Khalidi family

## Generalisation of my findings

Therefore both nationalist narratives prevent the inclusion of the other in that nationalist identity. Palestinians have been the force opposing the Jewish return to the holy of holies, in the Zionist narrative. Israelis have disrupted the peaceful coexistence of communities in Jerusalem for Palestinians.

The dynamic of change in both narratives is the other making your own identity group the victim. Many other factors separate Palestinian and Israeli identities and thus perpetuate the conflict between them: competition for resources, the denial of the right to self-determination for the other, acts of violence, among others. I found that the power of history to police who is in a particular identity kept cropping up: it did not just separate Israelis and Palestinians but also separated Israelis from Israelis and Palestinians from Palestinians.

The split between secular and religious Jews in Israel is directly experienced when staying in West Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. A loud alarm sounds through West Jerusalem at sundown on a Friday and from then on, it is difficult to find food in West Jerusalem. The shops, cafes and restaurants are shut for Shabbat and the very few who do open receive protests from Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Jews. Meanwhile the vast majority of shops, cafes and restaurants remain open in Tel Aviv on Shabbat. Professor Naveh explained that this divide is longstanding in Israeli Jewish identity that has become discernible recently. The first generation of Israelis after the founding of the state in 1948 had built the institutions of the state- the Supreme Court, the Knesset, monuments of national remembrance- in Jerusalem in order to claim the city for the Zionist identity. Professor Naveh argued that this Zionist identity was a rebellion against the religious Jews in Jerusalem. In this narrative, Zionist identity is secular, active and centred on Tel Aviv- the new Jewish city- and the kibbutzim- the collective farming communities that had worked to claim the land. The religious Jewish identity is passive, waiting for the Messiah to come, and centred on Jerusalem.

Yossi Klar, a former member of the Haredi community, confirmed this make up of the religious identity. Yossi went on to point out that the Haredi community view themselves as being outside of history; they see themselves as playing no role in how we reached the present. Their narrative is of returning to Jerusalem in the nineteenth century, fully obeying the religious law and waiting for the Messiah. It is here that history comes into view, policing the limits of identity. The Haredi exclude themselves from the secular identity and are treated as excluded from the secular identity, with this historical narrative. The reason is that the secular identity emerges from a narrative of founding and building the state of Israel.

My meeting with Yossi Klar and other employees  
at the 0202 Media Center





The Haredi identity is not the only community that make up the religious identity. Other religious communities are more willing to participate in state affairs: they see themselves as reclaiming the state from its secular foundation. The effect is the same: these other communities exclude and are excluded from the secular identity by rejecting the secular narrative. These other communities are consistent with what I found: historical narratives define who is, and who is not, in a particular identity. Yossi, Professor Naveh, and others explained that historical narratives do not just police the limits of Israeli and Palestinian identities, but also within the Israeli identity as well.

I found the same is true within Palestinian identity. I was fortunate to learn about history and Palestinian identity in meetings with Tareq Baconi, analyst for Israel and Palestine at the International Crisis Group and author of *Hamas Constrained*, and with Amin Abu Bakr, an academic in the history department at An Najah University in the West Bank. Both Tareq and Amin agreed on the centrality of the Oslo Accords in 1993 to the historical narratives that divide supporters of Fatah and Hamas, the rival Palestinian political groupings. The question is: did the Oslo Accords betray the First Intifada or fulfil it? Did Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, render redundant the ordinary Palestinians' protest against the occupation, abandon the struggle of the liberation of Palestine, and take power for himself? Or did he use the First Intifada to force Israel to the negotiating table and so secured a Palestinian government for the first time? Hamas, and its supporters, base their narrative on the first interpretation: Fatah and its supporters on the second. Conflicting interpretations weigh down several other moments in the Palestinian memory. Your interpretation of the Oslo Accords sorts out those moments into a narrative that tells you your identity. Alternatively your identification with Hamas or Fatah gives you your historical narrative. Either way, historical narratives help set the limits of thought permitted by particular identity.

## **Relevance to the UK**

History is therefore highly relevant to teaching the Israel-Palestine conflict in Britain. Teaching the conflict necessitates some discussion of who Israelis and Palestinians are. Historical narratives have a critical role in understanding why someone is either an Israeli or a Palestinian. Studying the contested history of the conflict helps students comprehend why there is a conflict in the present-day and how Israelis and Palestinians differ. Other subjects- religious studies, geography, politics- also enable students to grasp these elements of the conflict. History offers the possibility of a deeper understanding for students. Israelis feature in Palestinian historical narratives as the villains, and so do Palestinians in Israeli narratives. History enables students to engage at a deeper level with the reality of the conflict because it introduces them to how difficult it is for Israelis to accept a Palestinian into their identity and vice versa. The other is the constant force that has prevented the identity in question reaching what they perceive to be the ideal situation in the present.

There is an argument that studying history in this way reinforces separation between communities. Labelling a narrative as Israeli, or Palestinian, could teach students that there never can be crossover. It also could lead students to become accusatory towards one side or the other because they sympathise with the cause of one side. Nevertheless teaching the conflict through contested history mitigates against these problems. Understanding the stories that Israelis and Palestinians tell about themselves, and how they reached the present, allows students to work out the axioms, the building blocks, of a particular position of the conflict. Therefore they will have a much greater appreciation of what it means to be an Israeli or Palestinian, and what it means to support either side, or to support neither side.

## Recommendations

1. The effectiveness of interfaith and cross-community work and discussions is increased by engaging with the present-day conflicts relevant to members of religions and communities.

### **Explanation:**

Real-world conflicts are just as divisive as scriptural, doctrinal, worship or social issues. The assumption that scriptural, doctrinal, worship or social issues are what matter to the participants is more than an arrogant presumption. Interfaith work often seeks to present a vision for relations between different religions. Failure to engage with these conflicts leaves participants in interfaith work without a framework for understanding how these conflicts relate to the vision presented. This failure leaves participants to acquire information about conflicts from the internet or other means. This information can often perpetuate stereotypes about individuals from other communities. Therefore a failure to engage with present-day conflicts will generally be detrimental to the aims of interfaith work.

2. History is the best way for engaging with present-day conflicts in schools because it opens students up to the possibility of change in the present and the future.

### **Explanation:**

For any conflict to end, it must have a beginning and so a narrative that connects the two. I visited many organisations performing valuable work, trying to end the conflict. The focus on the present in this work, and in similar work in the UK, implies the conflict is a timeless constant. This focus leaves untouched the narrative that connects the present to the beginning of the conflict and to any possible future. Those who want to perpetuate the conflict can argue that the status quo cannot be changed. History is essential because it undermines that stability. It demonstrates to students that the past did not necessarily have to lead to our current present. Other steps could have been taken. In this way, history gives students a sense of the openness of the present.

3. Studying contested history is a brilliant way for bringing students out of opinion bubbles, teaching them to evaluate arguments, and interesting them in contemporary issues.

### **Explanation:**

Contested history necessarily leads students to engage with a variety of views. It draws them from any opinion bubbles they may occupy on social media. The aim is not to change opinions but to widen students' range of sympathy for those of different identities. Contested history helps develop an understanding that those of different identities have their own perspectives, that they hold as strongly as you do. Such an understanding is a basis for giving dignity to others. Even for those who do not identify with Israelis and Palestinians in this particular conflict, studying history in this manner develops students' cultural capacity: the ability to respond to ideas and items of cultural significance,

to situate such ideas and items in their contexts, and to draw comparisons with more familiar ideas and items of cultural significance.

Contested history has the benefits of introducing students to how historical narratives are constructed, to how evidence is used in historical narratives. From here, attention can be drawn to what the discipline of history offers, and to the limits of the discipline. In this sense, contested history is an ideal methodology for teaching disciplinary knowledge: understanding how each discipline searches after knowledge.

## Evaluation of my fellowship

My travels were highly beneficial in helping me meet my first objective but were less useful in meeting my second objective.

My first objective was to:

1. Give teachers in British schools, particularly faith schools, the confidence to teach conflict in the Middle East, by creating resources emphasising religious ethics and perspectives.
- I have a much deeper knowledge of Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspectives on the conflict, including the differences within those perspectives. This knowledge has given me a better understanding of the topics that the resources would be best served to focus on. The conversations that I had with religious leaders, teachers, academics and civil society organisations have provided a clear strategy (that is explained in the Next Steps) for giving teachers the confidence to teach conflict in the Middle East. In this respect, my fellowship was successful.
- I did not find methodologies for the teaching of conflict in the Middle East, particularly in religious settings. This is not necessarily a failing of the fellowship. These methodologies are not developed in Israel and Palestine because of government and social pressures on engaging with the conflict. Furthermore any methodology I might have found would have needed to be assessed in British schools anyway. My travels have given me a strategy moving forward. The strategy points in the general direction; finding the exact path will require testing avenues and adjusting for any false steps.

My second objective was to:

2. Bring together students from faith and non-faith schools to debate the issues which divide communities.
- I was left without ideas for facilitating debates between students about the conflict. Individuals from different identities debating the conflict is rarely possible in Israel and Palestine.

The only debate I witnessed between individuals from different identities left me jaded about the prospects for any form of interfaith, conflict reconciliation work. During this debate, a former speaker of the Israeli parliament, who had also been acting president of Israel, stated that the Israeli occupation of Palestine was 'sick, depraved and wicked.' The rest of the panel- consisting of the leader of an Israeli political party, an Israeli Arab politician and a former prominent figure in the Palestinian Authority- agreed with him. All of the panel spoke eloquently about the issues at stake in the conflict and proposed solutions. Nothing changed. The conflict continues. No one in the audience spoke in defence of groups with an interest in perpetuating the conflict. If such a senior Israeli figure can

describe the occupation as sick and yet the occupation continues, then what is the point of trying to foster harmony between communities?

It was easy to feel jaded throughout my travels. I had to expend considerable effort to convince Israelis and Palestinians that I was not another irritating foreigner with a solution for their conflict. Despite my best efforts to frame my introductions around the purpose of my travels, the frequency of needing to expend these efforts indicated that Israelis and Palestinians have to endure quite a few foreigners with bright ideas about the conflict. Their jadedness was infectious.

A conversation with Raed Saadeh, director of the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster, offered a counterpoint. He explained how he tries to place discovery at the centre of his work. He wants tourists to leave Jerusalem with a fuller picture of the Palestinian perspective on the city, but he does not try to enforce that picture on them. He merely wants to give tourists the tools to explore the Palestinian heritage and perspective on Jerusalem. How far they will take it, is down to them.

Raed avoided the failings of the debate that I attended: alienating those of other opinions by having only liberals talking to liberals, presuming that everyone is interested in the conflict and wants the same thing as the organisers. Instead he takes people as they are. Some are more interested than others, some already have strongly held opinions. He merely seeks to help all in their discovery of the city, and discovering the city means engaging with the Palestinian Jerusalem as much as the Israeli Jerusalem.

I was unable to find resources that would help me meet my second objective. I did though learn the pitfalls that even the most well meaning projects can fall into, and that may be an invaluable lesson.

## Next Steps

The next steps of my fellowship will be to create two different sets of resources:

- The first set will cover the history of Jerusalem, according to Christian, Jewish and Muslim narratives of the city. The history of Jerusalem offers ideal subject matter to take advantage of the findings of my fellowship:
  1. It is a lens that brings together the conflict and religion. All three religions have historical narratives of the city, all three religions contest the memory of the city, all three are involved in the present-day conflict in the city. Therefore the history of the city enabling the presentation of Christian, Jewish and Muslim ideas familiar to students before opening up to the narratives of the religions.
  2. The source material for this subject matter is easy to understand. One way to access the history of a city is its buildings. Buildings, how they change with different users, how different religions can have different claims about a building, all of these ideas are often easier to understand and analyse, than documents or graphs.
  3. The history of Jerusalem is a topic that can be changed for sensitivities and pressures on individuals. It is possible to study the history of the city without mentioning the present-day conflict. The focus can be on periods before the modern conflict. Therefore students can understand that history is contested, and learn about the history of the city, without engaging with the heightened emotions around the present conflict.
  4. Understanding the historical narratives of Christianity, Judaism and Islam about the city offers the opportunity to appreciate the limits of these religious identities, in a similar manner as discussed in the history theme of my findings.
- The second set of resources will concentrate on the history of other conflicts that are sources of division in the UK. Examples of these conflicts include the divide between Scottish nationalists and Scottish unionists, between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, between Irish nationalists and Irish unionists. If faith schools feel reluctant about engaging with the Israel-Palestine conflict, studying other conflicts through a similar methodology allows them to introduce the ideas of contested history, and to follow my recommendations. Once schools have studied other conflicts, then the opportunity may be there for them to move onto the Israel-Palestine conflict.



A screenshot from the first of the resources created based on the findings of my Churchill Fellowship

These next steps will take place in order to expand the pilot initiative. The aim of creating these new resources is to develop the existing connections between schools, facilitated by Parallel Histories. In 2019 twenty schools have used Parallel Histories's resources. In order to raise further awareness of this methodology and resources, I have helped organise a conference in the House of Lords in November 2019. Through these steps, I will seek to use my fellowship to increase the number of schools, and the geographical range of the schools within the UK, tackling conflict in the Middle East.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following organisations and individuals for kindly meeting with me and offering their wisdom and insight about my research topics:

- David Assaf, Director of the Forum for Regional Thinking
- Amin Abu Bakr, Professor of history at An Najah University, Nablus
- Tareq Baconi, analyst for Israel-Palestine at the International Crisis Group
- Tom Bateman, BBC Jerusalem Correspondent
- Hillel Cohen, Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem
- Marzia Dalla Vedova, Procurements Manager at the EU office in Jerusalem
- Martin Daltry, Director of the British Council in the Occupied Palestinian Territories
- Christian Duncumb and Jonathan Shor, The British Council in Israel
- Aaron Eime, deacon of Christchurch, Jerusalem
- Yedidya Etzion, Head of Keshet High School
- Shir Grady, Michal Shilor, Reem Salem, Yossi Klar, Yiftach Shavit at 0202 Media Centre
- Oliver Holmes, Jerusalem correspondent for *The Guardian*
- Maria Ivanova, Head of Marketing and Development, Tabeetha School
- Or Kashti, journalist at Ha'aretz Newspaper
- Ron Kronish, Founding Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel
- Uki Maroshek, Academic Director of the Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace
- Ben Mollov, Director of Bar-Ilan University's Project for the Study of Religion, Culture and Peace
- Eyal Naveh, Professor of history at Tel Aviv University
- Peres Center for Innovation and Peace
- Jack Persekian, Director of the al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art
- Raed Saadeh, director of the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster
- Hillel Schenker, editor of the Palestine-Israel Journal
- Richard Sewell, Dean of St George's College, Jerusalem
- Yehuda Stolov, director of the Interfaith Encounter Association
- Rabbi Loren Sykes, Principal URJ Heller High: The Isaac and Helaine Heller EIE High School in Israel
- Eran Tzidkiyahu, researcher studying the history and politics of Jerusalem
- The Israel Museum
- The Museum on the Seam
- The Tel Aviv Museum of Art
- Abdalkarim Zawawi, Professor of Linguistics and English Literature at An Najah University, Nablus

In particular, I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and its staff for their support.