

A journey to the Promised Land

During eight days in Israel, American lawmakers get hands-on civics lesson.

BY MARY LOU COOPER

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A small band of American state legislators embarked Dec. 9 on an eight-day visit to Israel for a crash course in the politics and history of “the Promised Land.” The visit came at a troubled and historic time, just nine weeks into the most serious uprising by Palestinians in recent Israeli history. In Israel, Prime Minister Ehud Barak had just resigned his post. In the United States, the winner of the 2000 presidential race was still unknown.

The trigger for the latest Palestinian “intifada” or uprising was a visit by



Shown are, from left, Idaho Sen. Bart Davis, Mary Lou Cooper of CSG-WEST, Kara Stein of AJC, California Assemblyman Rod Pacheco, Arizona Rep. Debora Norris and New York Assemblyman Paul Tokasz.

Ariel Sharon, then leader of the right-wing Likud Party and now Israeli prime minister, to a Jerusalem site of deep religious symbolism to both Ar-



Israeli soldiers patrol area near the Wailing Wall (inset) in Jerusalem.

abs and Jews — known respectively as Al Aqsa and the Temple Mount. However, as we would learn in the course of our visit, nothing in Israel is as simple as it appears from home.

Our group of four state legislators and representatives from the American Jewish Committee and The Council of State Governments was smaller than the 11 members planned. Our numbers dwindled prior to our departure in response to news reports of violence in the Middle East. Despite warnings from friends and family, the six of us gathered at JFK International for our El Al flight to Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion Airport. The journey would become the trip of a lifetime.

Our numbers were evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, men and women. We came from all over the United States — Sen. Bart Davis is from Idaho Falls,



Idaho; Rep. Debora Norris from Sells, Ariz.; Assemblyman Rod Pacheco from Riverside, Calif.; and Assemblyman Paul Tokasz from Depew, N.Y. AJC staff member Kara Stein is a New Yorker, and CSG staff member Mary Lou Cooper lives in Santa Fe, N.M.

Project Interchange, an educational institute of the AJC, hosted the seminar in cooperation with CSG. For AJC, the purpose of the trip was to educate American policy-makers about Israel and the importance of the American-Israeli relationship. For CSG, the trip was a logical extension of our belief that sharing information across borders builds better government institutions on both sides.

As we made our way through Israel — from Tel Aviv to the Arab town of Baqa to Galilee to the Golan Heights to Jerusalem to Masada and the Dead Sea — we learned at every turn that this is a land of never-ending contradictions. Because of the unrest, we avoided the West Bank along the Jordan River and the Gaza Strip.

We learned that Israel is not just a desert. In many areas, it is an oasis

with vast fruit-laden orchards and green fields. But oranges and lemons grown by tanned communal farmers on kibbutzim no longer drive Israel's economic engine. Today Israel is a high-tech society with more scientists and technicians per 10,000 workers than the United States or Japan. The modern high-rises of Tel Aviv and suburbs of Jerusalem contrast vividly with the ancient walls surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem.

Religion not only unifies the Jewish state, it also divides it. Secular Jews fight with ultra-orthodox Jews about taxes, exemption from military service and whether buses will run on the Sabbath. As the homeland for Jews from throughout the world, Israel's citizens come from such diverse places as Ethiopia, the United States, Latin America, and Eastern and Western Europe. In the 1990s, the nation experienced massive immigration from the former Soviet Union. Now Israel reaps both the benefits and the challenges associated with a heterogeneous population.

Members of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, do not represent constituents from distinct geographical districts. Rather they represent political and religious factions exclusively. As many as 17 different parties make up the Knesset, which makes putting together a government coalition a matter for miracle workers. All-consuming national security issues make it difficult for the government to pay enough attention to domestic matters such as infrastructure and social services.

From left to right, almost every Jewish Israeli we met agreed on one point. They believe that the U.S. media, especially CNN, is biased toward the Palestinians in reports on the Middle East. If so, these media reports are spectacularly ineffective in molding opinion. Recent Gallup polls show that the American public favors Israel over Palestinian Arabs by a margin of 51 percent to 16 percent.

Our American vision of two

peoples fighting over land, water, sovereignty and security doesn't begin to capture the fact that each of the two groups contains many peoples with different backgrounds, interests and beliefs. We learned, for example, that 20 percent of Israeli citizens (1 million people) are of Arab descent, and generations of Arabs have lived in East Jerusalem for the past 1,200 years.

Our teachers on this journey offered a Middle-Eastern banquet of

Voices from inside Israel

"Arabs must understand the great hurt done to Jews during the Holocaust. And Jews must understand the hurt of Arabs whose land has been taken away." — Kifah Massarwi, Israeli-Arab

"I have a right to my 20,000 kilometers. ... The Jewish People don't have another home." — Israel Harel, Jewish settlement resident

"America is Israel, and Israel is America. ... To die is better than to live under humiliation." — Palestinian Authority Minister Ziad Abu Zayyad

"A Jew is not a Zionist." — Poster in an ultra-orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem

"This is a place where you get on the #18 bus and you don't know if you'll make it to the end of the line." — Rabbi Levi Lauer

"At first we didn't really think they (Caucasian Israelis) were really Jewish. ... We had to learn everything." — Orley Takura, Ethiopian immigrant

"We can't occupy the Palestinians, and we can't make peace with them." — Yossi Klein Halevi, Israeli journalist

political and religious perspectives. At the U.S. Embassy, Deputy Chief of Mission Paul Simons reported on diplomatic relations between our two countries. (Israel is the No. 1 recipient of U.S. foreign aid, but much of the \$28 billion yearly appropriation is returned to the United States in the form of military purchases.) We heard from Yossi Alpher, former director of Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University and an ex official of the Mossad, Israel's elite foreign-intelligence agency, on the peace process, and from Hebrew University Professor Ehud Sprinzak on Israeli politics.

Gil Keinan, an economist with Israel's Ministry of Industry and Trade, took us through the labyrinth

of Israel's economy, and Sachi Gerlitz, senior vice president of Comverse Technology gave us the private sector's view of Israel as a major player in world communications technology.

Labor Party member Eli Goldschmidt answered dozens of questions about the Knesset. We met with former Likud Chief of Staff Yossi Ben-Aharon, who articulated his opposition to "land for peace" proposals. We also spent time with the Palestinian Authority's Minister of State for Jerusalem, Ziad Abu Zayyad, to understand his views on the peace process.

The representative of Israel's foreign ministry, Dani Mokady, told us that Israel needed to sign a peace

agreement "yesterday." Yossi Klein Halevi, the American-born writer for *Jerusalem Report* and *The New Republic*, explained why the Israeli people have become disillusioned with government peace proposals.

Some of the best lessons on our journey through Israel came from people such as our guide Menachem Hefetz, a retired El Al security officer and storyteller of Old and New Testament history. His friend, Kifah Massarwi, helped us see Israel through the eyes of a highly educated Arab-Israeli woman torn between two worlds. Eran Glik, a farmer at the Kibbutz Merom Golan, informed us that only 3 percent of the Israeli population now lives on kibbutzim and those that remain are privatizing to survive.

Hava Levene, mother of 11 and spokeswoman for the Neve Michael Children's Village, talked with us about Israeli children living at the home. Jewish settlement resident and advocate Israel Harel gave us an impassioned lecture on why he believes Israelis cannot withdraw from communities built on Arab land acquired during the 1967 Six-Day War. Sarabeth Lukin and Ron Krumer gave us a tour of Hadassah Hospital Ein-Kerem in Jerusalem, where both Arabs and Jews are treated without regard to religion or politics. Ethiopian immigrant Orley Takura and Russian Genia Gitkis told us heartwarming stories of their "absorption" into Israeli life.

Rabbi Levi Lauer allowed us a glimpse of his personal feelings as a husband and father living in a dangerous world. Home visits with two Israeli families offered conversations about everyday life and a welcome respite from intensive political talks.

As we climbed aboard our tightly packed El Al jet to leave after our eight-day journey through Israel, the words of *Jerusalem Report* writer Yossi Klein Halevi came to mind. "Allow your confusion to seep in," he said. "It's a good place to begin your understanding of our issues." ★

Lessons learned

U.S. legislators said the trip changed their ideas about the Middle East:

"My ideas of Israel and the Middle East have become more confused and frustrated. I personally support a strong Israel and believe that U.S. support must be consistent. ... The almost utter futility of the situation in Israel is something I hope will diminish in my mind and in reality for the people of Israel." — New York Assemblyman Paul Tokasz

"I learned quickly that cold peace — no one was killed today — was acceptable. I did not genuinely understand (before) that the millennial nature of the conflict was rooted too deeply for my simple solutions." — Idaho Sen. Bart Davis

They also said state legislators should take an interest in the Middle East:

"It allows for comparisons between our education systems and economies. Israel is an example of how a country can thrive and become self-sufficient. I learned how Israel treats its immigrants. The philosophy is 'let's help them get on their feet,' whereas some of our states discourage and even ignore immigrants." — Arizona Rep. Debora Norris

And they commented on the biggest lessons they had learned from the trip:

"The peace process is a heck of a lot more complex than it appears at first glance." — California Assemblyman Rod Pacheco

"I meaningfully understood for the first time that Palestinians believe, with the same resolve as their Israeli counterparts, that Israel/Palestine is theirs." — Idaho State Sen. Bart Davis

"The complexity of the situation is the most important thing I learned. When you read about it the New York Times or see it on CNN, it seems much more black and white." — New York Assemblyman Paul Tokasz