

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER YOUTH CAMP



The Magnifying Rights, Building Foundations project was a 10-day youth volunteer program in which youth from EU member states and the Palestinian Community in Israel worked together to clean, renovate and beautify disadvantaged Arab localities in Israel. The stories published here tell the firsthand experiences of participants from the Magnifying Rights, Building Foundations youth program.

During the program, they explored many different aspects of Palestinian communities in Israel as they worked and learned at sites across the country, from the Negev, in the South, to the Golan Heights, in the North. The project aimed to strengthen youth activism, fight racism and stereotypes, increase cultural awareness, promote human rights and build solidarity among young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

DAY 1

HAIFA



Written by volunteers from Italy - The first morning, the staff from the Mossawa Center welcomed us with an incredible traditional breakfast, which was the perfect way to start getting to know each other. With our bellies full, Dalal, a staff member from Mossawa, explained to us the schedule for the upcoming 10 days and the goal of this program.

At the beginning, we made a tour around the town of Haifa. Emad, our tour guide, took us to an ancient marketplace which, before the war in 1948, used to be an important square for Haifa. Indeed before being turned into a simple place named Paris Square, the square was one of the most important connection points between Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. It was kind of a big bus station. We could really imagine how important it was before the war.

Afterwards, we continued to walk in the old city neighborhoods before taking the train to the top part of the Bahai Gardens on Mount Carmel. As soon as we arrived, the view took our breath away. After walking for a while, we entered the Bahai Gardens in order to learn the history of this religion. In fact, this beautiful park is a holy place dedicated to Bahai Allah.

Also, the neighborhood was completely different from the center of Haifa. Indeed the buildings up there were more modern. As Emad pointed out, for example, we saw the first kindergarten that we had seen that day.

Conversely, when we got out of the park, we passed through an Arab neighborhood and it was amazing to see the contrast between the upper part of Haifa and these neighborhoods. From there, we

arrived in Wadi Al Salib, in the old city of Haifa. The story of this place is interesting because in 1948, the old city, which used to be under the Ottoman occupation before the Nakba (catastrophe), was bombed from above by the Israeli Army. Most of the citizens had to flee their houses by the sea. Indeed the army forces attacked from two places at the same time which forced the people to flee by boat. Nowadays the government doesn't let the owners of these houses come back to rebuild their homes. As a matter of fact, we had the impression that we were in a ghost town.

It was also quite a shock to all of us to see, right outside of Wadi Al Salib, the machinery demolishing the lower part of the city to turn it into gardens. We all had the impression that the old city is going to be swept away by the new urbanization project from the municipality of Haifa.

At the end of the day, we had the opportunity to go to the beach with all of the staff and interns from Mossawa. It was a pleasant moment of sharing; it helped us to forget, for a moment, the sadness we felt when we were in Wadi Al Salib and the other poor neighborhoods of Haifa, where we had seen the ongoing disappearance of the cultural and historical legacy of the Palestinian Arab citizens who live there.



DAY 2

NAZARETH



Written by volunteers from Denmark – On the second day we went to Nazareth, which is the biggest Arab city in Israel. It is an old city and it has a long history. To make us understand the identity of the city, we started out with a guided tour, led by a man named Fehmi. He showed us the city by leading us through both the religious and the cultural sites. Nazareth is an Arab city and it was very interesting to see the Muslims and Christians living side by side. During our day, we visited two churches and a mosque. All of them had their own history and were very beautiful.

During the tour, we also went to the market in the old city centre. It was an amazing place with a lot of stores filled with colorful clothes, accessories, coffee, spices, etc. The streets were narrow and we really felt that we could have gotten lost if we had not been together with a local who led us through the winding paths. While we were walking, Fehmi explained that the market used to be crowded and there were a lot of tourists coming every day. However, the biggest Israeli tourist agencies have changed their practices. They now only make short tours into the market and tell their clients not to buy anything because the Arabs will overcharge them, which was not our impression at all. Instead the sellers were very friendly and we were even invited into the back of a store to see how they prepared the grains and spices they were selling.

At the market, we also met the Imam from the White Mosque of Nazareth. He was a little old man with a friendly face. He was very talkative and asked where we were all from. Surprisingly he had comments about almost all our home countries and

cities—especially with regard to the status of their football teams. The Imam explained his view of the situation in Israel. He was very positive in the manner that he really believes in the hope for a better future. Nevertheless, he also mentioned the situation in the Palestinian territories and, with one phrase, he made the importance of their situation quite clear: “What happens if you lock two cats into a room and let them out after one day? That is the same for our people in the West Bank and Gaza.”

At the end of the tour, we went to the house where Fehmi was born and raised. Here, he showed us the guest rooms where there were many pictures of his grandfather, who was an important man in Nazareth. He explained to us that the house used to be full of people who came over to visit. For us, it was interesting to see a real Arab home and especially to hear how openly he shared about his home.

This day was also the first day for us to do community service. In the afternoon, we went to a center that is led by the Orthodox Christian Community Council. Here we helped to clean an area that will be used for after school educational programming, serving students who otherwise lack the resources to access such opportunities. Even though we worked a lot and it was warm, we all felt very energized. It was so nice to be able to give something back to the people who were welcoming us. Our work was rewarded with real Arab falafel that was so good and tasty. When we went home, we all agreed that it had been a really good day.



DAY 3

EIN MAHEL



Written by volunteers from Denmark and Spain - On the third day, we visited Ein-Mahel, the hometown of Dalal, a Mossawa staff member and leader of our group. This town is located nearby Nazareth, but our experience there was quite different than the one we had the day before. First we went to the high school to talk with some students and to exchange views about the situation they face in their country, but also to discuss our point of view as Europeans. We all agreed that the students were very mature for their age. It seems they have very clear ideas about what is good for them, for their future and for their community. It was also interesting to see how we have different ideas about Europe; we felt like we gave them a pessimistic, but honest, view of our region.

After the talk, we split up into two different groups and participated in community service at four different kindergartens, in two locations. We filled the playgrounds' walls with colorful paintings. It was simple work but very enjoyable and we really hope it will make children happy every time they see it. The community work was followed by a delicious lunch at Dalal's home. We felt very welcomed and we really appreciated that, even though it was Ramadan, people offered us so many delicious drinks and foods.

Afterwards, we went to visit the new Jewish settlements that are being built around Ein-Mahel and Nazareth. We had a great talk from Firas Abu Leil, an activist in Ein-Mahel. He was very clear and direct and he helped us to better understand the situation that Palestinians face in their daily lives. He showed us where his house was located and how,

some meters away, the Israeli government put up a fence which determines the limits within which the town can build. The problem is that Jewish settlements are now being built on what had been the land of Firas and his neighbors. The people were forced to sell their land even if they didn't want to.

We visited also the new area around Hariona, built in front of Ein-Mahel. Though only one street away, the differences between them were too obvious not to see them. The problem was not only with the restrictions to build within the limited territory, but with essential services that the government provides (or doesn't provide) to the town — access to enough education, sanitation and transportation services are daily struggles for Ein-Mahel inhabitants. In front of them is a neat town with enough parks, public buses, schools and many other things. Neighbors were living in the same country, but in completely different realities. We felt only frustration and sadness as we observed this injustice.

Later on, we visited a group of youth activists and had an amazing dinner cooked by the young people and their families. We were overwhelmed by their kindness and really appreciate all the effort these people made for us. It was a great experience as it allowed us to better connect with the Arab community and to better understand the real discrimination that Palestinians face in their own home.



DAY 4

DAHMAH / JAFFFA

Written by volunteers from Italy - We started our trip through the sunny south on Wednesday. Our first step was to visit Dahmash, a Palestinian village situated 15 kilometers from Tel Aviv-Jaffa. It consists of almost 70 homes where 600 people, all Arab citizens of Israel, live, but it is still unrecognized by the Israeli authorities; the government insists that the area is supposed to be an agricultural zone. The inhabitants of Dahmash have no access to basic services such as schools, buses, and mail because they have no official addresses. Further, in 2015, three houses were demolished by the authorities. The children have no playground. Their way to school, in Ramle or Lod, is dangerous and long.



Arafat Ismail, the village leader, called “Nelson Mandela” for his non-violent resistance, received us in his house and offered us watermelon, coffee and biscuits. We felt completely at home! He was so gentle while explaining the situation of Dahmash to us. He showed us a clear map of the region. Dahmash is still unrecognized, while the surrounding villages and settlements, including those meant for Jewish immigrants, continue to be built.

I really don't understand how we can treat humans as illegal while industrial parks, shopping malls and villas spring up all around them. This meeting told me about more than the historical issues of Palestinian refugees in Israel; it told me that my daily problems are too small if compared with the huge struggle many people face in the world. There are invisible people who go to bed every night without knowing if, in the morning, they will wake

up to discover that their house is about to be turned into a heap of rubble. Dahmash people, we know your stories and promise that we won't forget you!

In the afternoon, our trip continued to Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Oh such a gorgeous spot! We perceived the beauty of its ancient history, looking at the vastness of the Mediterranean Sea that sits next to its streets and its buildings. In Yaffa we met Rula, an activist of the organization Sadaka-Reut, who is currently living in Jaffa and studying at the university. Sadaka-Reut is a bi-national Palestinian and Jewish organization that promotes dialogue among youth, trying to secure real change and build a more just and egalitarian society. It's impossible to see the future without knowing the past and seeing the reality.

It's really sad that Israeli authorities tried to destroy the history of this magnificent city, where many cultures used to meet each other and pass on their ways to the North or South, from Beirut to Egypt. Thanks to the photos that Rula showed us, I could imagine the orange trees that used to cover this land in the past; the perfumes and colors invaded my mind and I still feel nostalgic. Palestinian history is hidden in Tel Aviv and the old town of Jaffa has become a touristic, empty place. The occupier arrives and leaves the signs of his passage, destroying all the rest. Do you want to walk in a green park while admiring the sea? You can, but you have no shadows to cover your head and under your feet lie rubbish and demolished houses.

You're just lucky if you don't give up and if you continue to feel the magnificent history passing through your thoughts.



DAY 5

AL-ARAQIB



Written by volunteers from Italy - We woke up in the Negev, where we had slept in a Bedouin family's house in a recognized village. After that we visited the Dar El Kalam School in Rahat. First, the principal and the teachers gave us a brief explanation of the challenges that the school has to face. For example, there was a total lack of any garden or a fence for the safety of the children. Overcrowding is also problem.

We had a conversation with the students in a class, where the benches and the ventilation system were in a state of disrepair. Many of them said they were eager to continue their studies, perhaps in Europe. We also donated 250 books offered by members of the Mossawa Center, in attempt to compensate for the lack of a library within the school.

Then we moved to Al-Araqib, an unrecognized village that is famous for the number of times it has been razed to the ground — now 99, as of the day we arrived. The bulldozers had come in the morning, a few hours before our arrival. Shikh Siah Altory and his son Aziz gave us a brief explanation of the situation. Then we began the work with children and adolescents of the village. In fact, the adults cannot work, because the Israeli authorities could arrest them. During the work together some smiles began to appear, especially when the children returned back from school. They immediately started to help us. We had the impression that they wanted to show us their resistance in the face of the difficult situation they live in.

Suddenly, we saw a very touching episode: a child who was picking up the pieces of his sister's scooter destroyed by Israeli bulldozers. This episode was significant for us because we saw the impact that these demolitions have on children. We can reflect on how these actions can affect their future growth.

Meanwhile, the girls in our group were speaking with women from the village (a mother with her three daughters) and visited the rest of the village. We learned that, before 2010, there were stone houses in the village and it was much bigger. The youngest of the girls, Alia, impressed us: she is a 20-year old like us and is studying to become a teacher, living her life simply and smiling. She was very sweet and we helped her to clean the hut in order to prepare for the Ramadan Iftar dinner, the daily breaking of the fast. We placed the carpets, brought cots and pillows and all the utensils that she had put outside the shelter at dawn, fearing the demolition of her hut. We also helped her to decorate the outside of the hut, putting some lights all around because the children love them so much (and I do too). We hope that after our departure, it was a nice evening for them.



Once our work was finished, some of us even had the opportunity to ride an Arabian horse, and we saw that the kids, even the youngest, were an integral part of the community and they were proud to show their traditions to us.

DAY 5

AL-ARAQIB

Rebuilding Al-Araqib for the One-Hundredth Time









DAY 6

AKBARA/SAFAD



Written by volunteers from Spain and Palestine - On Friday we travelled from the dry and sandy Negev (Naqab) to the village of Akbara, north of the green and flourishing Galilee.

Akbara is a poor village that doesn't have many resources. We decided to go there to see the everyday conditions of an average small Arab village. Our destination was the "Bustan al Farashi" kindergarten (Garden of the Butterflies), which we had chosen to help renovate. Our team was divided into two groups, with one working in the garden and the other painting and decorating the walls of the building.

It was touching to work hand in hand with the local children. We felt that the community appreciated our work and we were happy to be able to support them.

In the garden, we got help from a Jewish American volunteer gardener named Schmuël. He told us that he was living in the Qaddita village. When a local from Akbara explained to us the story of his village, describing how the Arab people from Qaddita village were displaced and fled to Akbara during the Nakba of 1948, we realized that Schmuël, the volunteer gardener, currently lives in the settlement that was built upon the remains of the destroyed village of Qaddita.

After helping in Akbara, we ate a tasty traditional Arab lunch with the children and the kindergarten team before continuing on to the city of Safad for a small tour. Safad is a beautiful old city on a hill across from the Jarmak Mountain (Mount Meron) and has a wonderful view of the Sea of

Galilee. But we didn't feel comfortable visiting Safad. We saw many old houses, whose original owners were expelled in 1948. We saw the people that moved into these houses still living in them. We saw a mosque that had been transformed into an art gallery without any sense of reverence for religion. The most impactful experience was the contrast we saw between the small Arab village and the rich Jewish-Israeli dominated artist town.



This day made all of us feel good but at the same time angry. While we were able to create something new, immediately afterwards, we saw one of the strongest examples of the consequences of mass expulsion in the Nakba in 1948.



DAY 7

KFAR BIR'IM/IQRITH



Written by volunteers from Germany and Switzerland - In the morning we arrived in Kfar Bir'im, a Christian Arab village in Galilee, which was destroyed in 1953. Indeed in 1948 the people of the village were forced to leave their homes. The order was to leave the village and remain at least 5 km away, which means they would have already been in Lebanon. This was a trick from the army/government. Due to the distance, they wouldn't have been permitted to come back. But the people of the village didn't travel so far. They just stayed around their village during the winter time and hoped to come back to their homes. They still have not been allowed to come back, even though the Supreme Court of Israel gave them permission in 1953 to return. But, as it was declared a military area, they are still not allowed to move back.

When we arrived in the morning, a group of villagers were holding Mass in the church. We had the opportunity to see a gathering of people from around, seeing their way of praying and sharing with part of the community for a bit.

After that we met Nahida and Abu Kamal. Nahida's father lived in the village before it was bombed by the air force. In the attack, however, some of the bombs got stuck in the trees. As a result, we could still see some of the houses and how the village looked in the past. Abu Kamal was actually born in the village and lived there until his 22nd birthday. Both of them spoke English very well, so we felt closer to the story. Without the barrier of language translation, we were able to feel with them.

It was easier to really follow and understand their story. The connection was strong because the facial and body expressions were also transferred and not lost in translation. Abu Kamal told us about how life used to be in the village. He showed us around and we saw the demolished houses and what remains of this great village. It used to be totally independent. They had doctors, schools, markets and everything they needed at that time. So they didn't need anything from the government but it was still destroyed.

We think they destroyed the culture of this people and also their history. Nahida had an impressive way of speaking and telling us about her father's life. She didn't seem to be angry the way she was speaking about Israelis was not negative. She separated the Zionists who want to erase the culture of the Palestinians from the others. She made clear that not every Jewish Israeli is bad and that they also want peace. In our view, this is a good way of dealing with this kind of situation; a lot of people in the world can learn from her way of thinking.



After the tour, we did some community work, cleaning the area around the church. We felt a bit disappointed at the beginning because, after hearing Nahida and Abu Kamal, we didn't get the idea of just cleaning. The village was totally covered by trees and grass. We felt lost, as no one from the community was helping us. But then, when we started planting the flowers and the lemon tree that we had brought, we understood that working to help the community is about more than just the physical labor. It's about keeping the culture alive, it's about keeping the place alive. It's a symbol of hope.

DAY 7

KFAR BIR'IM/IQRITH



After Bir'im, we went to Iqrith, which is basically just a church on a mountain. The whole village was also destroyed in 1948 by the army. The story of Iqrith is a similar one to that of Kafr Bir'im. The people from Iqrith also have the permission of the Supreme Court to return to their lands, but it was also declared a military zone and they are not allowed to return.

In 2012, the youth of the village decided to go back to their roots. They didn't want to wait anymore for a new decision. Why? Because they believe deeply in their rights and they are not afraid of the authorities. So, from that time, every day, someone else is living and sleeping there. Every one of them still has their other life, outside of the village. They are working, studying and also living in different cities, but all of them come back for at least one day to Iqrith.

The problem is that the old inhabitants of Iqrith are not allowed to build or plant anything new because it would be against the military policies. For example, they used to have a donkey and chickens, and started to plant flowers, but all the time, when the military comes to check the place, the army destroys and takes everything that is new. To make it clear: they demolish the symbol of a new start. For the youth of Iqrith, it is therefore really hard to create anything new.

The youth of Iqrith have now rebuilt the church and built two rooms next to it on the ruins, even though this is against the law. They tried this before, building the same two rooms, but Israeli authorities demolished them. That demolition

became a big scandal in the news and the government now leaves the new construction as it stands.

Furthermore less than an hour after we arrived, the border police came to check the place. We don't know whether they came because they saw us, or if they would come anyway. For the youth of Iqrith, it was totally normal that the border police came but for us it was like they spotted us. Samer, one of the youth, had a long discussion with the men from the border police and later told us that these policemen were Arabs; he had been talking with them about why they are doing their job.

In Iqrith, the youth told us about their story and their struggles. As a symbol of solidarity, we also worked in their garden in order to keep this place alive. The youth from Iqrith also hold a lot of summer camps and festivals for the same reasons.

In conclusion, the day was really informative but emotional and sad at the same time. We really learned a lot from speaking to different people and seeing the similarities between the stories of the demolished villages across the country.



DAY 8

GOLAN HEIGHTS



Written by volunteers from Spain and Germany - We started our trip in the Syrian Golan Heights in the Jalbina valley. Jalbina was one of 250 villages in the area before 1967. Now there are just five villages remaining. In the Golan Heights, we saw a unique case of destroyed houses. In other demolished cities, there is almost nothing left, or what is left has been reclaimed by nature. In this case, we actually saw a lot of ruins and destroyed houses. The picture of the former villages became clearer to us.

Next to the destroyed villages, we started our hiking trip. Here, we saw a lot of eucalyptus trees. If we had been there on our own, we wouldn't have learned about the importance of the trees. For us, they were just trees, but Emad told us their story.

The eucalyptus trees were planted by the Syrian authorities before 1967, when the Golan Heights still belonged to Syria. Kamel Amen Thabet – an Israeli spy in Syria – suggested planting the trees for practical reasons, to provide shade. In fact, he wanted to mark the villages for the Israeli army so that they would know where to drop the bombs from their planes when the war started.

While hiking, we could see the beauty of the Golan Heights. We could only imagine how the place would have been if it hadn't been occupied. At the end of our hiking trip, we had the chance to swim in a natural pool at the bottom of a waterfall. It was a really nice cool-down.

The next stop for us was a place next to the Syrian border. Here, Emad showed us his passport

and we could see that his nationality is undefined, because he refused to become an Israeli citizen. He is from one of the four remaining Syrian villages that refused citizenship. Just one of the five villages accepted Israeli citizenship. Emad said that the four villages which, refused Israeli citizenship, now boycott the fifth village.

Through this conversation, Emad also explained to us the story of the Syrian brides. The youth from the Golan Heights are allowed to go study in Syria and often people did, before the war broke out in Syria. There, the youth from the Golan Heights often met their girlfriends or boyfriends. However, when a couple wants to get married, they face the problem that Syrians are not allowed to enter Israel and the inhabitants of the Golan Heights are only allowed to go to Syria for exceptional reasons—to study, for instance. Therefore, the couple has no choice but to stay in Syria.

Nowadays, there is an international zone between Syria and Israel where the bride and groom, and sometimes also their families, can meet and have the chance to speak a bit. A bride or groom from the Golan Heights has to leave their home and their family without knowing when they will be allowed to return. On the one hand, the wedding is a happy party but on the other hand, it marks a sad day for the family who is left beyond the border.

At the end of the day, we arrived at Majdal Shams for dinner. This village is just next to the border of Syria. Before cell phones and the Internet were invented, people used to shout to one another from one side of the border to the other. It was the only way for some to keep in touch with their loved ones. Once more we were reminded of the dividing power of borders.

For us as Europeans, seeing a physical border like this was shocking because we are used to living without them, as we travel freely inside the European Union. Seeing the border and hearing the stories of those families who were divided, unable to meet again, reminded us of the importance of living without these physical barriers. It also made us aware of the potential consequences of letting some EU countries build fences with the excuse of controlling migration or security. This experience

DAY 8

GOLAN HEIGHTS

reaffirmed our aim to live in a world where borders and nationalities are not barriers that keep people from meeting, traveling and living together.

Finally, we went to the local market and then on to Ram Lake, near to Majdal Shams. The inhabitants of the village are not allowed to use the water from the lake for themselves, as the Israeli authorities are in charge of the distribution of water—they are not even allowed to collect rainwater for their own use. Again we saw the Israeli government engaged in internal discrimination right in front of us.

Written by a Palestinian volunteer - The occupied Syrian Golan Heights is among the most beautiful spots in the Middle East and even in the world. We can read in books and newspapers about the beauty of the Golan, but when you visit it, you suddenly realize that no words can describe its beauty.

The Golan holds many paths that tell stories of the suffering of the Syrian people living in the area before 1967. These stories begin at the houses that were demolished by the Israeli Air Force. The walls of the homes still preserve memories of Syrian families and children, with their simple wish to farm and herd sheep.

We decided to hike in “Wadi Jalbina”, a valley named for a Syrian village that was destroyed during

the war in 1967. Jalbina was a small village located on a hill above the valley. Some members of our group were surprised to learn of the numbers of Syrian victims and destroyed villages.

This wasn't the first time I had visited the Golan Heights; I'd visited the Golan several times in school, especially Wadi Jalbina. On this visit to Jalbina, I thought deeply about the future of those lands, with the conflict in the background. I wondered if the tourists that come here realize the economic and national importance of this place for the Syrian people, a topic not discussed by the Israeli and international media.

One of the most disturbing things we faced came during our visit to groves of apple and cherry trees, beside Ram Lake, between the two villages of Majdal Shams and Mas'ade. The lake was created after the eruption of a nearby volcano, tens of thousands of years ago. Local Arab populations used the lake freely for farming and drinking water until Israel began its occupation of the Golan. Since then, the people of the villages have been forced to buy their water from the Israeli governmental water company Mekorot.

At Ram Lake, we saw how the Israeli authorities exert control over the Syrian people of the Golan. Despite all these difficulties, the people around Ram Lake still plant in their groves and grow their own produce.





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