



# Disillusionment

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## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

*Every academic year ICSR is offering six young leaders from Israel and Palestine the opportunity to come to London for a period of two months in order to develop their ideas on how to further mutual understanding in their region through addressing both themselves and “the other”, as well as engaging in research, debate and constructive dialogue in a neutral academic environment. The end result is a short paper that will provide a deeper understanding and a new perspective on a specific topic or event that is personal to each Fellow.*

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**A**s strange as it may sound, I had to travel more than 5,000 kilometres to learn some basic facts about the peculiar, small, and unique place I grew up in – my home, Israel.

I am a graduate of sociology and anthropology, so I should have known that I needed some distance from my country to see it objectively. After all, detachment is one of the most important tools of anthropological observation. And yet, I did not anticipate the impact this distance would have on me.

I was lucky to take part in *Through the Looking Glass*, a two-month fellowship for Israeli–Palestinian dialogue at King’s College London. Here I experienced an educational journey about my country and our national narrative. In this essay, I reflect on my experience as a secular Israeli who started the fellowship with limited knowledge of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Most people would expect a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to have a strong opinion about the conflict, as well as a thorough understanding of the complex issues related to Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the settlements. And since the university is located on Mount Scopus, completely surrounded by Arab villages, most people would expect students to be familiar with the area and its people.

But the truth is that many of us are not, myself included. After spending some time away from my country, I realise how strange that sounds to anyone who isn’t Israeli. I learned that the whole world looks at this small land in the corner of the Mediterranean Sea, and that outsiders sometimes have more detailed knowledge of the political and economic dimensions of the conflict than many of us in Israel.

Despite having liberal, left-of-centre views, I found myself trying to rationalise and justify Israel’s policies towards Palestinians. But these types of discussions led me to confront the narratives I grew up believing and to explore the fluidity of ‘truth’.

When I am asked about my life in Israel, I talk about my wonderful memories, particularly as a student in Jerusalem, on Mount Scopus. I also talk the sense of fulfilment experienced by my Zionist parents.

The notion that all Israelis are completely engaged with the conflict is false. Likewise, the notion that all Israelis are aware of what happens in the occupied territories, or know where exactly the 1967 borders are, or what Area C exactly stands for is also false. You might ask, *how can it be easy to remain ignorant when there are successive wars and military operations?* That is a perfectly good question. I think I chose not to engage with the conflict for my own sanity.

To introduce myself to the other fellows on the first day of the program I said, “Hi, my name is Meytal and I live in a small community settlement in the north of Israel.” Because I did not know a lot about

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the 1967 borders, I did not understand the meaning of my words. Although I was referring to a village in the Galilee, I soon realised that my peers thought I was a settler.

Throughout that day, I thought about that moment several times. *How could they think I was a settler? In my left-wing home, settlers are considered traitors. But was I too harsh when I denied being one, as though it was a great insult? Shouldn't I defend my fellow Israelis?*

It was then that I decided to learn more about the following two issues: the 1967 borders from a critical historical perspective, and the settlers. *Who are these people and what is their role in the conflict?*

While the fellowship was underway, we all digested a vast amount of information, and I accomplished my goal of achieving proficiency in the subject of the 1967 borders. The realisation of how much I had never learned – or worse, how much I had not wanted to learn – was stunning to me.

My most vivid experience occurred as I was looking at a beautiful, large map of Israel and the Palestinian territories. To be perfectly clear, I had looked at my country's map many times, and I had travelled and walked on that land probably more than many Israelis. But for the first time, I really saw it; I had the time, space, and expertise around me to learn what I had been afraid to know. I felt embarrassed by my cluelessness.

Deep into the programme, I got sick and realised I would be spending a couple of days in bed. Because I felt so guilty to be missing valuable lectures and discussions, I decided to tackle my second, private goal – exploring the phenomenon of settlers.

I accessed YouTube, as I often do when I'm interested in a topic. And without intending to, I embarked on a marathon session of watching video after video – and I was amazed.

I found videos in which settlers were expressing the same doubts and ethical dilemmas that I was experiencing. I learned that people can question the core of what they were brought up to believe.

If you are expecting me to share a solution for the contentious issue of settlements, you will be disappointed to learn that that I don't have one. But when I watched these videos, I again became aware of my large knowledge gap, which many Israelis like me share. Our ignorance related to the settlements and how Palestinians in the West Bank are treated is shameful.

I decided to take part in this fellowship because I wanted to confront something I had previously avoided. I wanted to challenge myself; to gain a clearer understanding of my own society and the conflict we are part of.

I approached all the information I received during our lectures with scepticism and critical reasoning. But in this project of rediscovering my country and our national narrative, I experienced some disillusionment.

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I love my country and I will always be Israeli, despite the complex feelings I described in this essay. But I feel as though many of my Israeli peers are passive with regard to the conflict, myself included. I hope my essay encourages people like me to seek more knowledge. I am not advocating a certain political perspective; just the importance of learning about the world around us and engaging with it.

This has been the story of my journey, my detachment, and my disillusionment.

***Meytal Vainstub***

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