

## **Olive Tree Initiative Middle East Trip:**

### **2013 Report from a Student Participant**

This report analyzes a recent Olive Tree Initiative summer trip to Washington, D.C. and the Middle East. OTI has drawn controversy from Jewish groups claiming the program's organizers are ideologically motivated, and that students have been taken to meet with controversial anti-Israel activists, including a high-ranking member of Hamas. Some Jewish groups have aimed at obstructing OTI by pressuring the UC to drop its support for the program. I aim for this report to give a comprehensive look at the trip, its organizers, and its effects on students in order for readers to understand what threats OTI does and does not pose to Jewish participants, the American Jewish Community and Israel, as well as to inform the Community's strategy towards the UC and OTI in the future.

#### **Experiential learning and trip organization**

OTI relies on learning through immersion, purporting that 'living the conflict' provides the intangible mix of contexts necessary to best understand the situation. However there were major problems in the core components of the trip, primarily in student selection and trip facilitation.

Significant resources are spent towards providing participants the OTI experience, and students must arrive having prepared extensively. However many students who came on the trip had little knowledge of the conflict or of Jewish and Arab histories relative to even the materials put forth in OTI educational literature. Such intellectual laziness seriously handicaps participants' ability to contextualize their experiences and biases their conclusions towards their immediate

emotional reactions and away from conclusions grounded in a mixture of present and past knowledge. Additionally, OTI relies heavily on discussion, requiring a 'mixed bag' of students. While it is undoubtedly difficult to ensure a healthy mixture of students, the balance tipped far to one side on this trip. Additionally, OTI facilitators acknowledge that some trips are sometimes decidedly one-sided but shrug the problem off as simply an inevitable part of arranging trips. On a positive note, OTI attracted a competent group of students whose attitudes towards academic discussion and more in-depth examination of beliefs were conducive to open discussion.

Trip facilitation is an incredibly important part of the OTI experience, as students' intellectual process is informed and guided by organizers. Students must have a reasonable expectation that facilitators put their views aside for the purpose of providing a well-rounded viewpoint. This trip's most major failure was, perhaps, that key facilitators were anti-Israel activists and used OTI as another platform for their ideological battle. George Rishmawi, co-founder of the International Solidarity Movement, was a central figure and provided translation, transportation, and meeting facilitation during our time in the West Bank. His likeability translated into close relationships with students and significant one-on-one time with students in discussion circles. His purpose was to advocate for Palestinian resistance and to delegitimize Israeli perspectives on anything that came up. In addition, several other facilitators played a similar role.

### **Individuals and trip organizers**

OTI is run by Daniel Wehrenfennig of UC Irvine and has a staff on that campus. As OTI has evolved, trips are more and more co-organized with a former OTI student and current OTI-assistant, Corey Feinstein. Their work in Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan are largely arranged by

the Center for New Diplomacy, a somewhat mysterious organization lead by Shannon “Mica” Shibata. CFND’s new executive director, Isaac Yerushalmi, is a former OTI student at UC Irvine who went on to the IDC in Herzliya for a graduate program.

Daniel Wehrenfennig is a difficult man to read. A German Christian, he seems to have a genuine interest in involving students in an academic study of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflict. He believes his job as an activist is compatible with his job as an academic, since his goals are to increase understanding of the conflict by moving students away from “stereotypes and sound bytes” into more substantive discussion. Indeed, his academic work was on citizen diplomacy, whereby private individuals work amongst themselves as one of the multiple ‘prongs’ of a political movement, which includes public and underground political cooperation, radical activism, etc. He founded the UC Irvine Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, which sponsors research into citizen-based peacebuilding and reconciliation. Ultimately, Olive Tree Initiative is sort of an implementation of the citizen diplomacy he researched, and his aspirations are for the group to foster a community of informed ‘citizen diplomats’ and experts in this conflict.

Daniel’s ideas on Zionism are unclear, though he is clear that he thinks a state with a substantial Jewish character that provides safe haven for Jews is compatible with liberal democracy. It is likely that he is a proponent of the two-state solution, though a major theme of the trip was the inevitability of a one-state solution with a Palestinian majority due to the ongoing settling of Jews in the West Bank and Israel’s lack of interest in ending the occupation. The trip’s major problems were somewhat offset by his activities as an organizer. He often countered some criticism of Israel, brought up substantiating evidence of pro-Israel viewpoints, and would steer discussions away from ‘Israel-bashing’ by respectfully calling out excessive or unproductive diatribes by some students. He also would provide disclaimers to students on particular speakers’

views. However his work in this regard amounted to a paltry ballast against the mostly pro-Palestinian bias of the speakers, student and faculty participants, and organizers like George Rishmawi. His efforts seemed mainly to steer the activities away from groupthink and one-mindedness and towards confrontational discussion where students would continually challenge each other. As Daniel suggested to me late in the trip, his interventions were often sympathetic to Israel because the group had a tendency to track into anti-Israel groupthink.

Corey Feinstein is a former UCLA OTI student. Today, he works fulltime with Daniel at OTI's headquarters at UC Irvine. As an undergrad, Corey suggested that he was in the pro-Israel camp, but was not very informed nor part of the activist community. Recently, speaking to a group of students in California, he admitted that his first experience in Aida refugee camp (perhaps the 2007 trip) left him feeling that his sympathies for the Palestinians were misplaced because the camp's conditions were much better than his expectations. Since going through his undergraduate OTI experience, he may have moved more to the center of the spectrum, but I suspect he is somewhat sympathetic to the Israeli point of view, though his conduct as a facilitator on the trip was such that his viewpoint was not obvious. Corey often doesn't give his opinions on debates, saying that he can't decide what his view is – instead saying that his passion for OTI is to spread his own uncertainty and interest in learning to students whose opinions are otherwise set firmly. More recently, Corey may have started training to eventually take Daniel's place on these trips so that Daniel will no longer travel to the region on a regular basis.

When I brought up the flaws I perceived in the trip's itinerary and facilitation in private to Daniel, as students were encouraged to do, he admitted that he understood the problems and was constantly seeking to improve the program. However he didn't suggest the trip was fundamentally flawed or that the itinerary was systemically biased. Instead, he suggested that the mixture of

students of different backgrounds was the determining factor in a trip's outcomes, effectively moving major responsibility from the organizers and itinerary to the participants themselves. Addressing individual students, a different facilitator was very open about his/her disdain for hard-nosed activists who, in the past, derailed OTI's mission while on trips. The facilitator laughed at several past incidents where both pro- and anti-Israel students got "too worked up." The facilitator also expressed frustration with students whose personal politics obstructed discussion. I think the facilitator's statements are indicators of genuine concern for balance and moderation. However the choice to divert responsibility for ideological one-sidedness towards student approaches and behaviors avoids the most important sources of trouble – the itinerary and facilitation.

Shannon "Mica" Shibata had worked for StandWithUs prior to her work with the CFND, and according to an Israeli journalist with whom I spoke, she may perhaps have also worked in anti-demolition activism with the International Solidarity Movement. Shibata told the 2012 OTI delegation that Israel had limited her mobility and entrance to the country (she was with the 2012 delegation in Israel, though), which may explain her move to Switzerland as well as the handover of authority in the CFND. Today, one of the original OTI students from UC Irvine, Isaac Yerushalmi, now lives in the region and functions as the CFND's Executive Director. CFND paired OTI with George Rishmawi, co-founder of the ISM and current president of Siraj Center for Palestine Studies, whose effects on the trip are negative and substantial (see *Experiential learning and trip organization*). Interestingly, CFND lists *Olive Tree Initiative* as its own project, and says that:

Demand for this program, which began in 2007 at the University of California, Irvine, continues to grow rapidly. We plan to launch Olive Tree Initiatives at Ivy League schools as well as major universities in the United Kingdom in the near future.

Isaac Yerushalmi, the current executive director of CFND, is a former UC Irvine OTI student who went to IDC Herzliya for a graduate work. Soon after graduating he became very involved with Shannon's work, though he may have been working with her during his studies at the IDC. In July 2012, he announced his position with CFND, describing the center as a "multi religious and multi ethnic organization that facilitates constant, balanced and accurate resources for stakeholders in the Middle East regional conflict." He added that they "reach out and cultivate relationships with those from polarized lobbies and political viewpoints, uniquely bringing them together to work on areas of mutual cooperation and progress."

While technically equivalent to student participants, faculty participants may have a unique influence on the trip due to their social standing, specialized knowledge, and comfort with voicing their ideas during discussions. Ideally the unique characteristics of faculty participants could bolster the trip's educational value further by either selecting faculty with multiple ideological leanings or those who naturally tend to avoid advocating one side. This trip included faculty who were sharply critical of Israel. Their negative effects on the trip were somewhat tempered by their respect for discussions with a diversity of views. Sadly, these participants showed more deference to OTI's aims for balanced discussion than the group's facilitators like George Rishmawi. Still, faculty selection is an area that can acutely affect students' experiences on a trip and, like student selection, wasn't carried out in accordance with OTI's purported focus on balance.

### **Attitudes towards 2009 Hamas-OTI meeting**

During their 2009 trip, OTI organizers conducted an unapproved, off-itinerary meeting with Dr. Aziz Duweik, the highest -ranking Hamas member in the West Bank at the time. CAIR

California reported that this meeting was unintentional, citing OTI as having claimed that Duweik had stepped in to replace a Fatah member of the Legislature, who had been unavailable to speak to the participants. Whatever the circumstances of the meeting, OTI's organizers displayed an impatient attitude towards the Hamas-OTI meeting being discussed during the trip.

During a meeting with students on the trip, Daniel Wehrenfennig explained the circumstances of the Hamas meeting, which had remained a passing topic of confusion for the students aware of it. Daniel said, "We met with the highest Hamas member in the West Bank," and that it wouldn't have been problematic if OTI were not affiliated with a public school. "If you were at USC, they meet with Hamas all the time," he said, concluding "that's why we don't have Hamas perspectives on this trip." Students throughout the trip argued that Hamas' FTO classification was an unfair impediment to peace-related interests, and Daniel's description of the meeting served to reinforce this perception. Indeed, his point in bringing up the meeting was not to address the group's rumors surrounding the meeting and dismiss them, nor was it to downplay the meeting or offer some excuse. Instead, his focus was to highlight the negative consequences the meeting brought and to explain the illegality of such a meeting given OTI's connections to UC. (That such a meeting would be on questionable legal grounds for even a USC-backed trip was not mentioned). Daniel did not see the Hamas meeting as a problem, and if it were not illegal, it seems that he'd move to conduct such a meeting again. This mirrors the general students' perception of the meeting, as well as the way other organizers addressed the meeting throughout the trip. Its only significance was to illustrate, through the backlash it generated, how "unproductive" classifying Hamas as a FTO is and to belittle the American community's fear of Hamas as silly and unhelpful.

### **Itinerary**

The central component of the OTI trip is its itinerary of speakers and tours, and as the most immediately available public information about the trips, it is also what garners legitimacy or sparks suspicion of bias. OTI creates itineraries in collaboration with Shannon Shibata's Center for New Diplomacy, an organization that functions as a speakers' bureau, matching interested visitors with speakers relevant to their interests in the region. The relationship between OTI and the Center for New Diplomacy is unclear, as is the exact process of choosing speakers and visits for the itineraries. Questions for further analysis would be: Who is creating the pool from which speakers are drawn? Who makes final decisions about meetings?

When broken down, the itinerary for this trip was moderately to heavily more inclusive of pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel voices. Tallying events that left the group with a relatively homogenous impression, I find that there was a three to one ratio of events portraying Israel or Israelis negatively to those that did so positively, with a smaller number having a mixed effect. This count takes into consideration certain meetings that, while featuring a speaker fond of Israel, ultimately delegitimized Israel and Israelis by virtue of the speaker's relatively extreme, bizarre, offensive, or unrealistic views. An overview of the publicly available itineraries for the most recent trip yields similar results. Overall, my trip's itinerary promoted a relatively unified, positive message about Palestinians and the Palestinian cause and overly simplistic and negative messages about Israel and Israelis.

All OTI trips cover the issue of terrorism and violence through meetings with survivors or families of victims. These meetings were possibly the most emotional and challenging for many people, and it follows that the knowledge gleaned from these experiences is therefore likely to be formative in students' understanding of the conflict. Our delegation met with a Palestinian whose

child was killed by the IDF. The parent channeled this loss into productive means. Her presentation elicited strong emotional reactions from students. Later, students would reflect their disappointment that the world holds strong, negative views of Palestinians which will preclude many from meeting and being inspired by individuals like this speaker.

This speaker broadly represented the image of Palestinians which the trip promoted. There were no interactions with personalities that seriously deviated from this positive image; nearly every Palestinian whose families suffered deaths due to IDF actions were involved in peace or coexistence activities. Indeed, the only speaker whose talk brought up family killed by the IDF and was not directly involved in peace- and coexistence-centered organizations was nevertheless a figure whose effect on students' perception of Palestinians was positive. When a Palestinian's views or disposition would leave students disappointed, they were minor compared to the amount of goodwill this speaker generated. The same cannot be said for her Israeli counterparts, though.

In contrast to the Palestinian speaker, the Israeli parent of a terror victim we met was a negative figure that was hard to connect with. The parent had become cold and suspicious of Arabs and Muslims and adopted a scornful attitude to peace that many students found upsetting. Like other Israeli speakers we met, this parent did not think that it was possible to make peace with Israel's neighbors due to the cultural, social, and religious deficiencies of Arabs, and saw ongoing security measures and wars as the only way to keep Arabs 'at bay.' This worldview indicated to the group that Israelis are driven by irrational fear and are the source of ongoing conflict because they do not seek peace. Adding to this perceived Israeli irrationality, this parent may have had some psychological issues. Reflecting on this meeting, students predominantly expressed sadness and regret that terrorism had "corrupted hearts" with "hatred." Unlike the Palestinian parents, whose losses beget a noble cause and an embrace of the idea of a future peace

with Jews, the Israelis with whom OTI students meet reinforce the impression that Israelis are fearful and abusive power wielders, unwilling to give peace a chance. As this theme was established throughout my trip, the concept of Israelis' irrational fear and the 'Israeli fear machine' became an ongoing topic of interest. This takeaway is reflective of many meetings with Israeli perspectives – nearly all of which served to explain to students what has led Israelis to such 'terrible' conclusions.

The OTI delegation of 2012 released an insightful promotional video, in which other students seem to have taken the same messages away from their meetings with parents of victims of terror. One student reflected, "although I sympathize with this father completely, I do disagree with his choice to consider all Muslims to be suspect." Another followed, saying that the experience challenged her to think about why people with such backwards views have arrived at them. Another student from the 2012 OTI delegation wrote online that Israel was "a country... destroyed by death, pain, and loss" in a post about meeting with an Israeli parent of a victim of terror. All this suggests that these negative messages about Israelis were not simply artifacts from my trip's particular itinerary but a theme in every OTI program.

Our meeting with multiple extreme right-wing Israeli organizations, one of which may be described as fascist, exemplifies the tendency for the itinerary to delegitimize Israelis as irrational and out of touch with reality, or otherwise extreme. For example, a representative of the Jewish settlement in Hebron was among the less extreme Israeli right-wing individuals we met. Students went from confusion to disgust with these figures, who, to them, were evidence that Israeli Jews are a privileged elite so isolated from reality that they don't understand the devastating consequences of their actions in the West Bank. As several students concluded, the conflict will not

end until Israelis are woken up and see both the ‘truth’ about Arabs and the consequences of ongoing Israeli aggression. While we met with the far-right, we had little opportunity to get to know the vast majority of Israeli people and civil society in the center, skewing the group’s impressions.

It is notable that more than one Israeli (out of an already small group of Israeli speakers) were strange enough to elicit psychoanalysis from the group after meeting with them; needless to say, this never was the case with other speakers. These ‘everyday’ Israelis’ impact on the group was negative and significant.

On the left, the group met with peace activists and prominent Israelis whose work in progressive politics was largely revered by the student and faculty participants. However, these meetings tended to drive home the message that the Israeli political machine was stuck with an intransigent, ultra-right wing coalition that had no interests in peace. Left-wing Israeli speakers often advocated for groups like B’Tselem (among the groups most OTI delegations meet with), Breaking the Silence, etc. They so strongly blamed the Israelis for the current situation that, by the time students met with centrist speakers, many were convinced that the center was crazy or even racist for holding Palestinians as accountable for their actions as they do the Israeli government. Had students approached their experiences with a broad historical knowledge of the conflict, they would have been able to contextualize the debate within Israeli society. Since they did not, they couldn’t put into perspective the extreme right’s true significance in Israeli discourse, nor could they understand the Israeli left’s far greater propensity for self-criticism than the Palestinians’. They could not even entertain the ideas of the Israeli center because, by the time of these meetings, the group’s views had moved so far to one side. This issue of internal dialogue and self-criticism, which the Israeli left embraces but is absent in discourse with Palestinians of any stripe,

was discussed at length at a latter OTI conference, where Daniel Wehrenfennig explained this imbalance and argued that it exists in many asymmetric conflicts. I don't have a record of this particular caveat from Daniel during the trip, though, to his credit, his "contextualization" of issues did come up frequently, and always to address an anti-Israel tilt.

Meeting center-right groups and individuals, even those taking a pragmatic and non-ideological approach to substantive issues, was pointless, as many students dismissed them from the get-go. Back in California, several OTI participants brushed aside a meeting with the center-right watchdog group NGO Monitor, dismissing it as another cog in the so-called "Israeli denial complex." While I doubt any student participant on my trip was familiar with *any* investigation or reporting from the watchdog group, the only non-negative comments about the organization came from Daniel, who ended up asking the group to respectfully avoid preemptive judgment.

Among Palestinian speakers queried on the subject, support for multiple types of BDS was near universal. In meetings with those who did not directly discuss the legality or legitimacy of BDS tactics, the vast majority of Palestinian speakers described the struggle against Israel as one requiring every nonviolent tactic possible. There were two notable exceptions, both emphasizing the relative productivity of engaging with Israel in the political and economic arenas. During these talks, speakers reported mixed or unsure feelings about boycott of settlement products, but stated firmly that blanket offensives against Israel were doomed to fail and would make Arab-Jewish coexistence and cooperation much harder. Aside from these two exceptional meetings, though, nearly every Palestinian questioned argued that BDS was a legitimate, nonviolent way to help end the Israeli occupation.

In meetings with activists in four cities across the West Bank, BDS was always portrayed as a necessary step towards ending the occupation. Often citing the speakers' comments, students would later describe BDS as a logical response to occupation, as it addresses the students' popular concept of the occupation being "profitable" for Israel. As many speakers repeated, by reducing the "profits" Israel reaps from its occupation, BDS is an important peace-building step; by the end of the trip it seemed that among students, if support for BDS in particular did not catch on, the idea of occupation being politically easy, convenient, and materially "profitable" did. This concept is best demonstrated in one student's statements on my trip: "the only way a peaceful solution can be reached... is when this occupation is no longer so profitable for the Israelis and by proxy for the Americans and I don't see when that's going to happen." Additionally, facilitator George Rishmawi, a strong BDS proponent himself, reinforced this nonsensical concept of Israeli and American profit throughout the trip.

Doubts about Zionism and the legitimacy of the concept of a Jewish democratic state extended much further with some meetings, with multiple speakers laughing off the idea of Jewish peoplehood. Two meetings were especially important in this regard. Early in the trip the group met with Zoughbi Zoughbi, a man who runs the Wi'am Conflict Resolution Center and who has also recently spoken for OTI events on UC campuses. Zoughbi was a very likeable person, whose presentation seemed to impact many students, as evidenced by their tendency to later reference his ideas. Zoughbi denounced the idea of a Jewish state, comparing Israel's Jewish character with the idea of an Islamic republic like Iran. Instead, he explained, he "just" wanted a simple nation for "everyone to coexist," and warned that Israel would never not be a theocracy. In a meeting with a representative of the PLO, this was taken a step further. The speaker, responding to a question

about Jewish peoplehood, dismissed the idea as bizarre, saying Judaism was never more than a religion and Israel was and would be nothing more than a theocracy. The harsh approach and unsubstantiated denial of Jewish peoplehood (and, later, Jewish claims to the land) led students to rebuff the speaker somewhat. After all, as students later reflected, it is ridiculous that a diplomat would be so ignorant. I believe that the ideas nonetheless made an imprint on them. Surveying other delegations' meetings, the prevalence of speakers who have histories of denying Jewish peoplehood is quite overwhelming, and several trips have met with high-up officials whose impressive histories doubtlessly legitimized these views in students' eyes. Indeed, a student participant in the 2012 delegation, whose itinerary included a PLO executive known for such anti-Semitic views, recently posted harshly-worded denials of Jewish peoplehood on public social media forums. Whether these views originated from the participant's OTI experience or were simply reinforced on the trip is impossible to know, though.

Finally, our meetings with both Israelis and Palestinians often included discussions on secondary or tertiary channels for negotiating peace. These alternative negotiation channels involve private citizens working across borders to either encourage peace (i.e. advancing societal rapprochement) or changing facts on the ground (i.e. working in NGOs to advance water sharing cooperation). One student reported that his trip focused on "what we can do aside from the peace process. What are other avenues aside from the peace negotiations that you can pursue and get a two-state solution?" These alternative avenues for negotiations derive their usefulness and legitimacy from the failure of the official peace process – after all, if the official process is going smoothly, secondary and tertiary channels may be less critical in resolving impediments. In our meetings, the blame for the lack of peace negotiations was laid almost universally on the

intransigent, land-hungry Israeli government. There were almost no exceptions to this, whether students were meeting with former Israeli left-wing politicians, who decried the Netanyahu coalition's thirst for more Arab lands, or with human rights NGOs, who discounted Israeli society's capability of acknowledging Palestinian claims to the land. The only alternative view, that peace talks had failed in the past due to issues on part of both Israelis *and* Palestinians and that Israelis have been continuously open to negotiations, was pushed by some of the Israeli government officials, as well as by some students in discussions. People and groups from the extreme-right often indicated this, but their effect was to delegitimize such views in the eyes of students.

### **Major themes in the trip**

Though the trip's itinerary favors one general group of views over another, leaning anti-Israel, each participant will be influenced by different speakers and experiences uniquely, making it difficult to generalize the net effect of the trip. However there are several ideas and themes that occurred repeatedly without the trip without adequately including opposing viewpoints, for which there is often a wealth of scholarship:

- Palestinians have a long history of secular, pluralistic self-rule before Ottoman occupation and, later, Zionist colonization of the Land of Israel. Today, Palestinian resistance has been an overwhelmingly peaceful, secular national movement motivated by human rights on the principle of equality with Israeli Jews.
- Iran is a rational actor, and preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons is an immoral extension of American power. Additionally, American support for a nuclear Israel seriously belies the nonsensical nature of US foreign policy, as Israel is, on balance, an aggressor in the region.

- Support for Israel is probably not in the US' strategic interests, and its continuity and robustness indicates the disproportionate control of the pro-Israel lobby at the expense of American security, Israeli democracy (via the occupation), and Palestinian rights.
- Hamas is a complex organization, whose multifaceted operations and recent moderation mean that it should not be FTO-listed. Additionally, the US complicates Palestinian unity by listing Hamas as an FTO.
- The IDF's actions and bylaws scarcely differentiate it from Hamas, and perhaps it should be designated a terrorist organization given its actions. Additionally, the IDF's irresponsible actions against Palestinians and the nature of the occupation significantly factor into the rise of Palestinian terrorism.
- Israel is a land-hungry country and its society is driven by paranoia.
- Israeli security measures, especially the security barrier, impose costs to Palestinian livelihoods that greatly outweigh the safety benefits. Additionally, there is very strong evidence that the barrier, checkpoints, and permits for mobility serve little security purpose and are designed to serve political goals.
- Israel has no interest in pursuing a just peace with the Palestinians. Israel is the primary or only actor capable of creating peace.
- Israel is primarily responsible for moving the status quo towards a one-state solution. Its left wing, who are understood by the group to be embodied by the likes of the Meretz party, have little chance to move the country off its current course.
- Gaza is effectively occupied and living conditions there constitute a near-humanitarian crisis, putting 'blood on Israel's hands.'

### **Post-trip student activities**

Information students post on social media outlets after the trip suggests that most may have a decidedly pro-Palestinian perspective that was either developed or reinforced during the trip. The sampling of posts below comes predominantly from participants of the most recent delegation to the region, as their social media posts are the most accessible.

One student, the president of OTI at Berkeley who became a central OTI organizer after the 2012 delegation to the region, is an open supporter of J Street U, and shares news related to Israel that leans far to the left. She regularly ‘likes’ statuses on Facebook that are critical of or anti-Israel, but rarely interacts with posts of the opposite nature in the same context, except to disagree.

Recent events in the US and abroad have prompted many older and recent OTI participants to share information online. After a Presidential debate, the president of OTI at Santa Cruz posted the following comment, which was ‘liked’ by multiple OTI participants (not necessarily those who attended a trip to the region):

Both candidates failed to mention that Israel possesses 300 nuclear warheads that are undeclared. Israel is not a signatory to the NPT (Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty). **Who is really the threat to world peace, Iran**, which might -or- is in the process of producing nuclear weapons, **or a nuclear armed militaristic expansionist state, like Israel.** *[emphasis added]*

Operation Pillar of Defense prompted many OTI students to post to Facebook and Twitter. A significant minority of posts evidence a strong bias against Israel, including many accusations of genocide and delegitimization of Israeli security concerns. Many posts from older and recent OTI participants focus on Israel’s “disproportionate” tactics.

Another common comment “template” consists of linking to an example of offensive, anti-Arab/Muslim/Palestinian content which OTI students denounce on Facebook. The prevalence of such posts indicate that OTI students are aware of and very sensitive to speech against Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians. Often criticism is conflated with racism and prejudice. In several forums, students posting articles critical of human rights abuses in the Arab world were rebuked by OTI participants. The OTI students, sometimes referencing the need to keep respectable dialogue and avoid stereotypes, dismiss critiques of Arab culture as baseless attacks on Arabs as “uncivilized people.” This has a particularly negative connotation in an academic environment obsessed with colonization, imperialism, and post-colonial racial ideas, especially when such discussions are not informed by facts that betray serious problems in the Arab world. Students will often identify this speech as part of a larger trend of extremism on the “right” (or pro-Israel side) that is tied in with censorship and the sidelining of pro-Arab/Muslim/Palestinian views. In turn, this theme is essentially part of the connection between Israelis and misused power, and between Palestinians and underdog status in the eyes of OTI students.

After the trip to the region, many photos with speakers from all side of the conflict were shared online. However, there was notably more excitement around photos with Palestinian speakers, especially ones who were strongly anti-Israel. Obviously, this isn’t a quantified, rigorous analysis into postings, and it is impossible to offer these posts as proof of a systemic bias. However, it is notable that photos with speakers that garnered Facebook hype after the trip were often those with leaders who most strongly denounced Israel, including some with officials who outright denied Jewish peoplehood. The hype and excitement after the meeting and in online posts

show a clear schism between the attitudes towards meetings with Israeli officials, who command respectful acknowledgement, and those with Palestinian officials, who excite and inspire; I found no photos with right-wing or even centrist Israeli speakers garnering praise online.

While these examples are anecdotal, I conducted surveys of OTI students' social media outlets available to me with fairness and balance in mind, and I believe the trends in political views in these posts to be largely reflective of the students' overall views. Additionally, I see the current posts as evidence of students feeling empowered to make public observations and engage in political speech; after all, students have *been* to the security barrier, have spoken *in person* with experts, etc. I have limited access to my trip's participants' social media content from before the trip, so I cannot make comparisons about the change in frequency and confidence with which they engage in political dialogue online. Overall, the type of news and commentary shared, the selection of posts 'liked' and – sometimes conspicuously – *not* 'liked,' all point to students developing a view of the Israeli-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian conflict greatly shaped by the core themes listed earlier in this report.

Given OTI's apparent effects on students' thoughts on the conflict, it would seem to follow that its students would support BDS. This is unclear, though more recently it has become the case on one campus. The current student fundraising director at UCLA's OTI, who is credited with gathering over \$100,000 annually and who may have participated on the 2012 delegation's trip, has connections to BDS groups through her work on campus. In September, through her position as UCLA's External Vice Chair, she was part of the UC Student Association's unanimous vote to condemn HR35. Subsequently, UC Irvine's student body unanimously approved divestment from

companies engaged with the occupation. The two chief proponents of the measure aren't directly connected to OTI, but the issue is worth further research. Shortly after news of the unanimous vote at Irvine spread, the President of OTI at Santa Cruz praised the success of UC Irvine's divestment supporters.

The UCLA OTI student mentioned above, who is a Palestinian-American, may not have had her views formed by OTI, but seems to have been empowered by the program to become an activist. In a mass email sent by the Saint Mark Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, she says the following:

Ever since coming back from the trip, I have never before felt so educated on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a Palestinian-American, being completely educated on not just both, but ALL the complex sides to this conflict, is crucial. **Through OTI, I am given the backing and the knowledge I need to be taken seriously.** How many times will I be given the chance to speak directly to leaders in the region who are making the decisions AS WE SPEAK. How many times will I be given a chance to voice my opinion on the conflict to an Israeli or Palestinian living in the region? These are the opportunities that are given to me by OTI. This is why OTI is so important to me and why I urge many to get involved.

***[emphasis added]***

It was possible that OTI's meeting with the church was part of a fundraising campaign.

The 2012 delegation to the region had participants who have since been very vocal online. Due to how recent their experiences abroad were, they may be more passionate than the older participants. Among other comments, several public posts from one participant stand out:

Any Jew who supports what Israel is doing is no Jew in the eyes of God. Israel is killing children.

It's too bad there's so many #zionists in general. #zionism is a racist ideology.

Hey #israel, your killing is not #kosher! Stop freaking out over mixing milk& meat and start worrying about ur state murdering 110+ in #gaza

Zionism invented terrorism in 1946 when they bombed the King David Hotel killing 91 innocent people! ... #genocide

As many posts are not available to me, I cannot draw substantive inferences of the trip's likelihood to foster extreme students. However, that even this one student (in a leadership position, no doubt) took such extreme, offensive, and baseless stances is telling of the lack of vetting in the student selection process. Furthermore, despite the public conduct of this particular leader, OTI never, to my knowledge, addressed the student. The result of this is that instead of fostering a community of learners and peace builders, as OTI purports to do, the loudest representatives are activists without respect for the organization's intended purpose.

Other posts from students on different delegations have rationalized Hamas' militant resistance to Israel and have, if not outright denied Jewish peoplehood, referred to such statements from speakers in their own discussions. Additional posts are available in Appendix 1.

Students across multiple OTI delegations have also displayed a tendency to stay in close contact with facilitators and with some speakers on the trip. Pro-Palestinian speakers tended to be

more personally open, inviting students to return to the region and stay with them or their organizations, and therefore seem to have garnered more long-lasting relationships with student participants. The same was not the case of any Israeli speakers on my delegation, aside from CFND organizers/facilitators and students of Israeli universities. This tendency fits the larger pattern for the Palestinian narrative to be represented by grassroots agents who worked on a person-to-person level to communicate their message, a method that spoke much more strongly to participants than the typical method by which the Israeli narrative was disseminated. The typical “pro-Israel” narrative was communicated by people whose advocacy, by virtue of being a profession or organized in a more professional manner, appeared to student participants too forced or otherwise contrived.

A perfect example of this difference is students’ meetings with families for dinner. While students on my delegation left small dinners with families in the West Bank feeling like they had made a personal connection with them and often expressing interest in returning in the future to meet their new acquaintances, meetings with Israeli groups were much different. Some students scoffed at the fact that the group dinner with a family was arranged by a Jewish organization whose mission was, if only loosely, to give Jews a home away from home during Shabbat. As it was (or at least appeared to be) a more organized homestay program, some students joked about the “attempts” made to please visitors and the “talking points” that the host family had “practiced” regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. No students dissented from these views during the discussions, though Daniel suggested that the criticism was unwarranted and encouraged students to trust the earnestness and authenticity of the Israelis opening their homes to the group. I believe that students on a latter delegation also met with a similar Jewish homestay group.

Again, it is impossible to conduct a fair survey of the students' post-trip relationships with these figures. However, from these types of interactions, I believe that some students leave their trips with contacts that they leverage for future activism. Mazin Qumsiyeh, a major figure in the BDS movement and an extremely anti-Israel and anti-Semitic OTI speaker who has met with many delegations, opens his home to OTI students. In recent years, he has hosted at least two whom he came into contact with through OTI or an OTI participant. Also, in the past year I have recorded at least two instances of students recommending others to stay with him during their travels to Israel.

***Special note on experience of Jewish students***

Many students find their experiences on OTI deeply emotional. Indeed, Daniel and other facilitators make it a point to prepare students for dealing with a range of emotions, from shock to frustration to joy. Given that many participants have a personal connection to the conflict, such reactions are to be expected. Some students, especially Palestinian and Arab students, leave OTI feeling as though they'd found a new home or that they'd connected with their ethnic roots in meeting Arabs in the West Bank. More students leave with a profound sense of frustration and hopelessness, having been shocked by the trip and concluding that the situation is intractable. Several students felt profoundly changed by their experiences speaking with the parents of victims of terror in Israel and those of war in the West Bank. However, only pro-Israel Jewish students leave feeling disturbed and with a sense of betrayal. For these individuals, the trip proves to be an assault on their community's legitimacy, which is all the more insulting and harmful because the trip's organizers claim it is an honest exploration of the conflict.

For example, a particular student on my delegation with such a background was often the one most isolated from the group. The failed model of experiential learning, which created an experience that heaped shame and judgment overwhelmingly on Israel, did so at the expense of the Jewish student's identity and understanding of his/her community. During the trip this student became visibly upset many times but, unlike the others, the student was not frustrated with the humanitarian situation, nor was the grief from hearing of a victim of terror. Instead, I believe that the source of the student's anger was from within. On this trip, one's identity as a Jew and one's connection to Israel was a source of confusion and, at times, of shame. As most Jewish students' understanding of the conflict would be insufficient to respond to the wave of opposing ideologies and views that build throughout the trip, a Jew is forced to admit that one's own community is responsible for the crimes the trip exposes in the West Bank and Gaza. Contrast this with a Palestinian student whose people are lionized for resisting foreign occupation, and it is understandable why the experiences are fundamentally different.

Questioning moral commitments to one's community and challenging one's political views are all part of a vibrant dialogue that everyone should partake in. If some Jewish students develop negative views of Israel and the American Jewish community through an open and honest inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it would be unfortunate for the Jewish community but wouldn't necessarily warrant a condemnation of the program. However, OTI doesn't make Jewish students uncomfortable by these open, honest means. Instead, its ideologically skewed nature doesn't pose sincere questions – it *demand*s Jewish students admit their community's guilt, accept responsibility for fixing the problem, and bear the burden of judgment. This is a fundamental flaw in the program.

Given this, it is understandable that Jewish students may simply turn away from the experience. A particular pro-Israel student on my delegation ended up leaving the trip with a somewhat disconnected affect. While the student bonded with the other participants and enjoyed the times socializing and traveling, the anti-Israel bias was overbearing and the lack of intellectual diversity made it difficult for the student to bounce ideas off people in the group. In the end, this student indicated that he simply passed through the trip and enjoyed it for what s/he could. The student didn't want to talk about the trip further. In later discussions, this student and others noted the problems in the way the trip was organized and acknowledged a bias, but also noted that the Jewish community and its ideology had a lot of problems, as well. A naïve interpretation of these comments may be that OTI opened these students to questioning even their closest-held beliefs and invited them into a dialogue with others that challenge them to no longer dismiss criticism as 'anti-Israel banter.' In reality, I see the students' changes as being somewhat of a personal defeat and a bitterness to the experience. Importantly, I think this bitterness is a response to feeling that the Jewish community, which the particular student from my delegation values for having informed his/her views and nurtured his/her values, is a fundamentally problematic actor in the tragedy of Israel/Palestine.

It is important to note that there are pro-Israel Jewish students who, on other trips, appear to strongly connect with OTI while retaining their views. A survey of OTI leadership in the past as well as the present reveals at least one such student. My view is that, while these students may have had experiences which immersed them in an intellectually challenging environment, their experiences are probably not the norm for most pro-Israel Jewish participants.

**Issues for further investigation**

As described under *Individuals and trip organizers*, George Rishmawi and Shannon Shibata are both identified as people of great concern. While George's role in this trip is the most overtly political, Shannon Shibata actually plays a fairly neutral position. However, research by outside organizations have linked Shibata with the International Solidarity Movement, which, as stated before, George co-founded. She worked briefly for StandWithUs in Israel, and described to the group a bizarre story of leaving the organization to work on citizen peace building. It is unclear if she began working with George during her time with the ISM, though that is a possibility. Additionally, the Center for New Diplomacy, her fixing service organization, has unclear goals but is the primary way OTI connects with high level officials and organizes meetings and transportation.

BDS is a key concern, and OTI members' support of it is a topic worthy of investigation. Recently, OTI at UCLA and Irvine have several members whose backgrounds and political affiliations already place them solidly in the divestment crowd, but it is important to isolate populations who have become BDS activists due to OTI's systemic biases from the population of those whose existing ideological positions dispose them to BDS support irrespective of OTI participation.

### Conclusions

What is to be gleaned from these observations? There is substantial evidence that this program is very problematic for the Jewish community, and its support should be seriously questioned. There are short and long-term effects the program has on the Jewish community, starting with the effects on Jewish students.

Though the academic leader of the program exhibits correctional behavior during problematic moments on the trip, he bears some responsibility for allowing the UC-branded program to be largely directed by political advocates. The overarching themes of the trip, painting Israel as an illicit state and precluding judgment against its Arab neighbors, are woven together and reinforced by a skewed itinerary developed by these activists. Additionally, during critical times of group discussion and reflection, some facilitators intervene in students' affairs, erasing the barriers between a partisan speaker and an impartial facilitator. The ideological shift I observed across participants was overwhelmingly in one direction (anti-Israel). Having participated on the trip, students consider themselves experts in the conflict and feel empowered to become opinion leaders on their campuses, despite the fact that their knowledge of the conflict may be limited and one-sided.

These flaws illustrate why the Jewish community should seriously rethink its support of OTI as well as consider the harm OTI can do to Jewish students and the community. In the short run, OTI is changing discourse on campuses by equipping students with a vehicle to advance anti-Israel views under the guise of academic exploration. Additionally, its purported academic legitimacy offers administrators a convenient way to show they are providing a means to overcome interethnic tensions on campus. In this way, OTI is hampering the type of hard self-reflection that administrators and academics on campus must undertake to address the serious problem of campus anti-Semitism. President Yudof's repeated deflection of Jewish community concerns via letters praising OTI only serve to reinforce the false notion that this organization can substitute for addressing the real problem.

The other threat OTI poses to the Jewish community is that it may discourage and demoralize pro-Israel students, perhaps even making them question their Jewish identity. As I

noted previously, traditionally pro-Israel Jewish students on my delegation and others seemed to experience a personal defeat as a result of their respective experiences in the region with OTI. I believe that, unable to respond to the trip's ideological pressures, these students internalize OTI's highly problematic messages.

## Appendix 1

### Facebook Posts of Former OTI Trip Participants

Note: In this report I pull social media posts almost exclusively from the participants of OTI's 2012 delegation because, though I am not connected with many of the participants, the relative recency of the trip allows for easier compiling of materials that become difficult to search after months pass. Additionally, due to the escalation of rocket attacks and subsequent Operation Pillar of Defense in late 2012, the participants' activity on social media channels was largely focused on the region for a sustained period.

**Theme:** Ruling out relations with anyone supportive of Israel, insulting and shaming them:

If anyone I know is going to a solidarity with Israel rally, consider my relationship with u terminated.

*"Liking" the following statement:* "I honestly find it hard to find in my heart even attempting to look an Israeli in the face without the need to puke, knowing that they are standing for a state that is built on the bones of murdered children, and that is an occupier. My heartfelt sympathies and condolences to you and to your family as I shed the bitter tears of anger, sadness, and helplessness as I watch this CUNTry that I came to seeking solace and safety, contribute to the genocide of innocent people. I love you, and I am here with you, your family, and PALESTINE! FREE PALESTINE!!! FREE GAZA!!!!"

*Directed towards a student online:* No f\*cking shame, humility, or compassion.

*Directed towards a Jewish student: @skoopit only BS in [is] a Zionist propagandists... [sic]*

all the sensible Jews with a beating heart here or in Israel see the truth and are disgusted with what the Zionist army is doing. So go away with your stupid ignorant input and the least u can do is have some shame.

But again we will wait and see if this is too much to ask of a person like you.

**Theme:** Accusing Israel of genocide, apartheid, and intentionally targeting civilians, especially children:

...Crippling siege and blockade causes enormous hardships. Enforcing it has nothing to do with security. It's about committing slow motion GENOCIDE.

dont be a bystander to a terrorist state carrying out terrorist actions, come out and support the struggle against israel.

israel is merciless and remorseless because it knows its crimes have full backing of the world's "civilized" and "human rights" loving governments. Take a stand everyone, don't let your government support this genocide!

Its almost as if Bibi is under a mandate to kill no less than 20 Palestinians (with at least 5 children) a day now. Quick as many as you can before the imminent ceasefire.

questioning why our tax dollars... a whopping \$3 BILLION PER YEAR is sent to aid the settler-colonialist apartheid state of Israel

**Theme:** Hamas' violent "resistance" is appropriate, and belittling Israeli security concerns or the human costs of terrorism to Israelis:

I can't even see the Zionist propagandists comment. But I'll just assume he ignored EVERYTHING we said and complain to me about the 100 injured in Israel, which btw 85 of are being treated for stress

The Hamas charter is not okay, however the resistance is 100% appropriate in my opinion.