

Olive Tree Initiative Middle East Trip: Report from a Student Participant

Executive Summary

The Olive Tree Initiative (OTI) is a University of California academic program, existing on multiple campuses with a central office at UC Irvine. The basic premise of OTI is that experiential learning through “living the conflict” provides students with a unique mix of tangibles and intangibles to best understand the Arab/Israeli conflict. Whereas each campus brings speakers and events, the central event for all campuses is an extensive trip focused on Israel and the West Bank, which purports to be without ideological bias and to give students a fact-based “360 degree learning experience.” As such, the academic community has embraced the program, and the Jewish community, beginning with the Orange County Jewish Federation’s generous funding of the OTI’s genesis at UC Irvine in 2007, has and continues to support it with money and approval.

This report, written by a student participant, examines the organization, itinerary, facilitators, content themes, and student reactions of a recent OTI delegation and finds the experience to be permeated with a systemic and severe anti-Israel bias.

Organization, Itinerary, and Facilitators

- Students’ drew conclusions about what the speakers said that were biased toward immediate emotional experiences without the context of accurate historical knowledge.
- The legitimacy of a Jewish state and of Jewish peoplehood remained an open question throughout the trip, with major speakers denouncing the concept.
- The itinerary was weighted towards anti-Israel voices: more than 30 of the events portrayed Israel or Israelis negatively whereas only 10 events portrayed them positively.

- The central organizer, tour guide and event facilitator throughout the time in the West Bank was George Rishmawi, co-founder of the International Solidarity Movement, who advocated openly for Palestinian resistance and delegitimized nearly every Israeli perspective.
- Junior facilitators and faculty participants displayed a bias against Israel during discussions and in meetings.
- Support for the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel (BDS) were near universal among all Palestinian speakers, effectively persuading students that BDS is a justified and legitimate “peace-building” step.
- The issue of terrorism and violence, experienced through visits with families of victims, reinforced a strong, positive image of Palestinians and a view among the students that Israeli society is driven by irrational fear and deep hatred towards Arabs.
- The UC head of OTI, Dr. Daniel Wehrenfennig, communicated to students that from his perspective, there was nothing wrong with the fact that on the 2009 OTI trip, organizers conducted an unapproved, off-itinerary meeting with Aziz Duweik, the highest - ranking Hamas member in the West Bank. This contributed to the widespread view among student participants that it is unproductive for the U.S. to classify Hamas as a terrorist organization, and that American and Israeli fears of Hamas are silly.

Major Content Themes

There are several ideas and themes that occurred repeatedly without the trip adequately including opposing viewpoints:

- 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.

- 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 listed as a Terrorist Organization. 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.

Student Reactions

- Online posts from multiple delegations' participants show examples of extreme anti-Israel positions, including condemnation of cooperation with Zionists, justifications for terrorism against Israelis, and support for anti-Israel divestment on UC campuses. More commonly, students' posts reflect the biases evident in the themes listed above.

- At least some pro-Israel Jewish students left feeling disturbed, at times guilty and ashamed, and betrayed. For these individuals, the trip proved to be an assault on their community's legitimacy, which is all the more insulting and harmful because their peers see them as simply unwilling to engage in the "honest dialogue" OTI promotes.

Conclusions

There is substantial evidence that this program is very problematic for the Jewish community, and its support should be seriously questioned.

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 as well as activist facilitators who show no deference to OTI's rules for academic dialogue. The ideological shift observed across participants has been overwhelmingly in a direction against Israel. What's more, having participated on the trip, students consider themselves experts in the conflict and feel empowered to become opinion leaders and activists on their campuses.

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. 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.

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.