

The best way for me to summarize the two months I spent in Palestine with Siraj Center: life changing.

Firstly, Siraj Center knows a network of wonderful families in Beit Sahour who will make you feel at home, stuff you with food, show you around town, and deliver an occasional lecture on Middle East politics. I had 3 host siblings who were close to my age, and we had a lot of fun together. With the Bannoura family, I practiced my Arabic, learned how to be a cucumber farmer, made wine, and had the time of my life. I strongly urge all Siraj participants to live with a family; you will not regret it.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time learning Arabic at Bethlehem University (BU). Besides having a gorgeous campus with panoramic views of the whole Bethlehem area, BU offers an intensive summer Arabic program that is designed to help foreigners quickly become comfortable having a conversation in Arabic. My time at BU was made even better thanks to my awesome classmates who were from all over the world.

After Arabic lessons, my volunteer placement took up the rest of my day. The staff at Siraj Center have connections with a variety of organizations in the Bethlehem area (and beyond), so you can easily find a placement that suits your interests and personality. I was a writer for the International Middle East Media Center (imemc.org), and it was exciting to research and write articles about the occupation and Middle East politics.

At the end of every week, I always looked forward to the upcoming weekend trip. Almost every Saturday, Siraj Center organized a trip to a different part of Palestine and Israel. The guides chosen by Siraj Center are no doubt among the best in Palestine. They know the history, they know the people, and they know the places. Not only are the guides smart and funny, they are friendly and welcoming. One of our guides even had us over for dinner and beer a few times, because in Palestine your guide isn't just your guide, your Arabic teacher isn't just your teacher, and Siraj Center staff are not just staff: they are your friends, and they want you to feel at home.

Another reason I loved the trips was that you learned about the ancient history as well as the current occupation. During my two month stay, I visited a 9th century palace, and I also visited with Bedouin families in the Jordan valley whose homes have been demolished by Israel, and who are continually at risk of violence and displacement at the hands of settlers and soldiers.

Lastly, what made the Siraj program right for me was the freedom it gave. Besides your Arabic lessons and volunteer placement, you control the schedule, and you have lots of time to make your own connections and explore Palestine and the many events taking place. I made many good friends who I look forward to seeing when I return, and I will never forget the fun times and adventures we had.

I am so happy that I came to experience Palestine and its culture: my eyes were opened to kindness and hospitality, but also to the cruelty of military occupation.