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Midshipmen Work With Israel Defense Force

By Midn. 1/C Amanda Schoenthaler Special to Trident



Tour guide Jonathan Cutler explains the significance of the Yitzhak Rabin memorial in Tel Aviv to a group of Midshipmen and cadets. Eleven Academy Midshipmen joined cadets from other service academies on a three-week summer internship in Israel. Photo courtesy of Midn. 1/C Phil Stiefel.

During the summer, 11 Naval Academy Midshipmen, led by Lt. Cmdr. Rory Berke and Lt. Glenn Schatz of the Political Science Department and joined by a contingent of cadets from Army and Air Force, arrived at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel, to embark on a three-week internship.

Sponsored by the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) and made possible with the support of the Friends of the Jewish Chapel (FOJC), the purpose of the internship was to educate future U.S. military officers on the complex national security issues of historic and modern Israel.

To best understand the complexity of issues linked to Israel's heritage, current status and military posture, the trip consisted of two separate phases. The first phase introduced Israeli society and history through academic lectures by renowned professors of Jewish culture followed by tours of related historical sites. Traveling throughout the country illustrated the concepts introduced in the seminars, allowing Mids the opportunity to apply the information firsthand and draw their own conclusions.

The second half of the trip focused on learning about the Israel Defense Force (IDF) and included time spent interacting with young IDF officers and learning about their military's structure and capabilities.

From the moment the Midshipmen arrived in Jerusalem, the busy schedule began with a briefing from IDF spokesperson Capt. Benjamin Ruthland, the Head of the European Pacific Desk,

welcoming the group to Israel. His introduction included a discussion of the top threats to Israeli national security and their influence on the current military posture.

Following the brief, the Mids visited some of the numerous Jewish and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, including the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Many chose to partake in the daily ritual of prayer at the Western Wall, adding their own to the collection of papers stuffed into any open crevice of the wall.

Each destination of the internship illustrated a separate yet integral part of Israel's history or modern nationalist symbols. At the Red Sea, the Mids experienced the beauty of the tropical waters. Snorkeling and diving right off the shore revealed a natural aquarium of exotic fish and coral reefs, yet the amazing view of Jordan from windsurfing reinforced the daily paradox of Israeli life: beauty interrupted by continuous Israeli awareness of security threats within the region.

Daily itineraries included activities like an archeological dig at a working site of a Beit Guvrin dwelling, climbing Mount Masada, swimming in the Dead Sea, camel riding, a lecture by Holocaust scholar Dr. Rachel Korazim, a visit to Israel's new Holocaust Museum Yad Vashem, and a Krav Maga martial arts class where the group learned from a world-renowned counter-terror expert to defend against knife and gun attacks.

The Mids also spoke with Professor Reuven Hazan of Hebrew University about understanding the Israeli political structure, took a jeep tour through the Golan Heights and discussed Israel's current security situation. The last days of phase one closed with visits to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Mount of Beatitudes, the synagogue at Capernaum and the beautiful Bahai Gardens in Haifa.

Phase two of the internship commenced with a "mifgash," or gathering, between the students from the service academies and the young IDF officers before touring the naval base in Haifa. The JINSA internship also included visits to the IDF Air Force Academy, their military sites and tours of their naval facilities and platforms.

At each site, the Mids were able to interact with young officers, discussing everything from differences in command structures and military service to basic questions about daily life, beliefs, pop culture and the best place in down to grab a good meal. Five IDF soldiers joined the group on the internship for the final week and provided an invaluable opportunity to interact with the host officers and truly get to know them as people and friends.

Thanks to the generous support of the FOJC and JINSA, the Mids were able to take part in a trip that directly supports the Chief of Naval Operations' priority of creating an officer corps that better understands our allies and religions around the world. Observing Israel's rich culture and professional military presented the group with the rare opportunity to hear firsthand the nation's views on its heritage and current position socially, politically, and militarily in the global arena.