

Mandy Jones AM Report on Delegation to Israel and the West Bank

This is my report on the cross-party delegation of Assembly Members who went to Israel and the West Bank between 24th February and 28th February 2019.

This was my first opportunity to travel abroad with the Assembly and the furthest I have ever travelled. I could not miss this opportunity to participate in a ceremony to mark Welsh Christian and military heritage in the Holy Land, however, I admit to having very little knowledge about the situation in this region. So I grabbed the chance to find out about Israel and the West Bank, including the peace process, the culture and the long and difficult history.

I was honoured to be part of the ceremony to commemorate Welsh Christian and military heritage in the Holy Land.

It was a moving service as I thought about my own son, a serving soldier, as we remembered the Welsh troops who marched through the Jaffa Gate with General Allenby following the surrender of the city by the Ottomans during the Egypt and Palestine campaign of the First World War.

I am told that 160th Infantry Brigade, the Royal Welsh, and the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association for Wales all contributed to the costs of the plaque that was gifted. I am also a member of the Cross Party Group on the Armed Forces and Cadets, also headed up by Darren Millar AM and I was pleased to meet members of the Welsh Brigade recently.

This ceremony was very symbolic of the friendship and connection between our two countries and these relationships formed through common history and faith are exactly the sort of relationships we will be able to make much more of after we have left the European Union.

I am not particularly religious but I do respect the right of others to observe their faith as they see fit and I am always open to finding out more through questions and clarification. As I was starting from a relatively low point, I asked plenty! What struck me was that even though we were miles away from home, in a different climate and with some cultural differences, that actually, most people, wherever they are from and whatever religion they follow, are hospitable, generous with their time and attention and incredibly proud of their homeland.

Possibly the most difficult part of the trip for me was the visit to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, to undertake a tour of the Holocaust History Museum and to take part in an Act of Remembrance for victims of the Holocaust. It is the first time I have really, truly considered the horrors of anti-Semitism during the Nazi period. I have never wanted to face it previously. It is a matter of grave concern to me that the scourge of this anti-Semitism is rearing its very ugly head in this century.

I was particularly interested in the work of the Academy of the Hebrew Language on the revival of Hebrew as an everyday language. My 4 children are all fluent Welsh speakers and it was good to hear how policies being used there have clearly protected and encouraged take up of the language.

I was surprised that a trip to the Gaza border and Golan Heights was included as I have heard such horror stories about this area and seen some the heart-breaking news footage. What struck me though was the stoicism of the residents who continue to pursue their best lives despite this.

I did gain some useful understanding of the history of the area but I felt myself, and recognised in the citizens we met, a real sense of frustration that solutions seem unable to be found and agreements reached.

We met with a Labor politician who was, at that time, in campaign mode. Again, the similarities struck me – the major areas of concern were health, housing and the sort of domestic matters that concern us.

Despite the conflict it was heart-warming to hear that boundaries are pushed in terms of urban regeneration and health care innovation. I saw a sense of pride in the country, citizens and all of their achievements.

This was a fascinating trip of only 4 days. I have learned so much about the area, its history and its people. The hospitality extended by all concerned was second to none. I thank everyone involved in the trip and especially Darren Millar AM as Chair of the Cross Party Group on Faith.

Mandy Jones AM

North Wales