

JINSA Military Academies Program in Israel 2011 Cadet/Midshipmen Report Excerpts



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The JINSA Military Academies Program in Israel provides a positive, in-depth experience for American military cadets and midshipmen. This three-week, work and study program imparts the reality of Israel, its past and recent history, its security requirements and the capabilities it brings to meeting its defense needs and supporting Western interests in a crucial part of the world.

Emphasis is placed on having the participants meet and engage in discussion with young Israeli military officers, highlighting the role of the military in democratic countries, similarities and differences in officer schooling, and building bridges for future contact between their respective military establishments.

The success of the program is assessed through essays submitted by trip participants in response to three questions posed by JINSA:

- *What lessons will you take away that will have an impact on your future as an American military officer?*
- *What was the most serious misconception you had about Israel?*
- *What made the strongest impression on you? Alternatively, what was the high light of the program?*

What becomes clear from the reports is their relative lack of knowledge about the region prior to the visit and the participants' desire to know more. Their understanding of the complexity of the Middle East is dramatically enhanced, as nearly all participants comment on the differences between the Israel they have seen on television and the Israel they visited with JINSA. Some participants noted a changed sensitivity to how the news covers the IDF, or can now recognize that the media has manufactured Jerusalem to seem like an active war zone.

Many of the more affecting parts of their essays concern the lessons that the cadets and midshipmen believe will make them more successful military officers. Two lessons appear to be the most universal among the participants. The first is that they have a greater appreciation of the sense of patriotism and service they share with their Israeli counterparts—from seeing the service of peers who have to fight for their very existence. The second lesson is a better understanding of the alliance between the U.S. and Israel. One midshipman recounted, *“I expected Israel, as with any other nation, to be different, with a different sense of morality. However, from conversations with IDF officers, I learned just how similar our values are. This realization truly spoke to me. It is this truth, that alliance and joint operations are based upon.”*

Bill, an Air Force Cadet, wrote, *“I slowly began to realize that what Israel fights for is, at its very core, a fight for survival. Israel’s enemies have launched numerous campaigns to delegitimize and undermine its existence as a sovereign state. When its way of life, the culture, the freedoms, and the dreams of the Israeli people were threatened, Israel prevailed. Before 9/11, most Americans would find it difficult to empathize with Israel’s struggle for survival. However, the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were attacks on the survival of the American ideals of freedom and democracy.”*

The JINSA Military Academies Program in Israel makes a direct contribution to the security of Israel and the ongoing U.S.-Israel cooperative relationship. It also makes a direct contribution to the future of United States security by helping to educate a new generation of American military leadership.

This is often the first opportunity many cadets and midshipmen have to visit a foreign country and immerse themselves in a culture not their own. It is also an opportunity to see beyond the headlines of the daily papers and understand some of the complex strands of history and politics in the Middle East. And it is an opportunity to make personal contacts in a country whose security is intimately tied to that of the United States.

Note on Abbreviations: U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA); U.S. Military Academy at West Point (USMA); U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis (USNA).

Lessons for Future Military Career

Dave, USAFA

The Middle East proves to be an area of continued interest and tension in American politics. My experience in Israel has helped me understand a piece of the puzzle, and a critical one at that. The United States needs all of the friends it can get in the Middle East right now, and Israel remains one of America's most steadfast allies in the region. I hope that I may be able at some point in my career to help commanders understand the consequences of various policies on the Israeli-American relationship from the Israeli point of view. I am also hopeful that I may one day benefit from my connections to the young IDF officers who helped introduce us to Jerusalem. Perhaps one day our countries could be working together in some operational or strategic capacity where I could facilitate communications between the two militaries.

Jana, USMA

I believe that this experience will greatly benefit me as an American Military Officer in the future because I have had the opportunity to experience another state and culture, but also interact with her military. Through this interaction with the military personal and experiencing the culture and learning the history, I have great confidence in working with and fighting next to not only Israeli soldiers but with other nations as well. I believe that as a future Army Officer it is important to understand how to be a diplomat for my nation.

My trip to Israel through the JINSA program truly was a once in a lifetime experience that I will never forget. Because of this experience, I have trust in the people of Israel and her military forces and look forward to continuing to build strong relationships with them. I am confident that the knowledge and experience gained from this trip can only benefit me in the future as a United States Army Officer.

Kyle, USNA

This trip has been valuable for me in how it has better prepared me to become a naval officer. My awareness of the tension in the Middle East has definitely increased, which is important since I will be serving there in the next few years. I have gained a lot of knowledge about international politics and how different countries' issues effect their and defense organization and their military operations. I have also gained insight on how terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah operate and think. The U.S. military is currently facing a fundamentalist Muslim terrorist organization in Afghanistan, so the insight I have gained is informative for future operations, of which I will be a part.

Zac, USAFA

I am confident that the trip and especially our interactions with fellow Israeli officers will affect me for years to come. We were peers and are now friends. Israel's military setup is very different from ours and while it is unlikely that our chain of command will be altered; I appreciate Israel's enlisted-first approach and their two-way feedback as opposed to the U.S. military's top-down style.

Benjamin, USAFA

The whole trip will benefit me as an officer in the United States Air Force because of the relationships built and real life experience gained in the country. The Mifgash (meeting) with the Israel Defense Force officers was a unique experience to exchange military culture between the two forces. It was nice to see that most of the officers were just like us, young kids that just want to do their part to serve the country. By contrast, it was amazing to see the experience and maturity they already had in the military even

though they were our age. It was interesting being asked questions about why we fight wars half way round the world. It was hard to answer because although we fight for freedom, it is not our own freedom directly. The Israeli IDF officers found this strange because the IDF is so oriented towards defending their immediate borders. This is why when Israel is pushed to go back to their 1967 borders, it is simply absurd. After being in that country, it is amazing to see how small it is, only ten miles wide at some points in 1967. That border cannot be defended. It is no wonder they refuse to go back to the 1967 borders. Frankly, as long as Israel has such a professional military full of capable officers as I met, they should not go back to their 1967 borders and I feel this trip has convinced me of that and has enabled me to defend their actions as an ally better.

Shelby, USNA

The trip will help me become a more rounded military officer because I have a better grasp of how the world operates. I now understand that not every country has things as good as we do in the United States. Not all people are able to live with the comfort of not being blown-up at any time of the day. I was able to meet other military officers in Israel both from the Israeli Defense Force and from our own American Military, and through meeting these different people, I now know that we are all linked by the same strand of wanting to protect our country. We are not too different from each other.

Nate, USAFA

From this trip, I have gained several important things as far as becoming an officer in the United States Air Force. First, I was able to make friends with current and future officers in the Israel Defense Force, the United States Army, and the United States Navy. I foresee that these relationships will be invaluable in the increasingly joint environment of American military operations – more and more, the separate branches of the U.S. military are working together and working with the militaries of allied nations to accomplish their missions. I was also fortunate to understand the Israeli military culture and the way in which the IDF approaches operations.

I believe this understanding will benefit me as I move forward with my career because in the future, I will be better able to understand the customs, courtesies, and strategic mindsets of other countries as I work together with foreign military officers to achieve common goals. In all, this trip bettered me as a person, a citizen, and an officer candidate.

Darrell, USMA

This trip will be extremely beneficial for several reasons but three reasons stand out to me. First, I now know several officers and civilians across Israel, which whether acknowledge or not has been one of our closest allies in the War on Terror. They have been fighting the War on Terror for decades longer than the United States has. The second thing that will benefit me is an understanding of another culture. With how interconnected the world is today it is incredibly important to understand other cultures and have an ability to adapt to other cultures rapidly. Finally, I gained a better knowledge of how another military functions and why they function that way. As a future officer in the United States Army I will benefit from the trip to Israel in several ways that I probably will never even realize but the above three things will certainly stand out in my mind in the future.

Rachel, USNA

This experience has not only shaped me into becoming a better person, but I feel that it will also greatly benefit me as an American military officer. First, I feel that it is easy for Americans to become desensitized to the events in the world around them. For us, everything is far away, overseas, something you see in the news. However, for the most part, many Americans are very isolated from the rest of the world. Meeting members from the Israel Defense Force really helped to remind me that these are real people living in a very serious time. It helped to humanize these events for me.

Meeting these young officers placed things in an entirely different perspective. They shared with us the hopes, fears, aspirations, and dreams. They shared with us their occasional frustrations with being in the IDF, and yet all the while there was a strong sense of pride for their country. As a future military officer, I feel that it is important to remember that the people who you are responsible for, the allies you fight with or the enemies you fight against are all human. I feel that with this in mind I will reflect more deeply on decisions that I know may lead men into harm's way. It will make me more conscience of ways in which conflict could be avoided. Yet if there is no way in avoiding conflict, it helps me to understand the pride men feel when they are fighting for something that they believe in. Whether it is as a global force for good, or merely the right to exist, I feel it is important as a leader of men to know what you are fighting for and what your men are fighting for.

Derek, USNA

Returning from Israel, I feel I have gained a better understanding of the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wars that have and continue to shape the region to this day. Our trip brought us to every part of the country and introduced us to many of its diverse people groups and cultures. The overarching theme is the continuity of the Jewish culture despite two thousand years living in a Diaspora. As a result of this trip, I will be better prepared to lead against today's conflicts of ideology and in a future of diplomatic service.

Because of the trip, I am now better prepared for my future as a naval officer. I understand the challenges of a war of de-legitimization and the how that can weaken the ability of a nation to use its military's soft power capabilities. The U.S. Navy continues to fight this same type of battle today. We have humanitarian missions in order to combat our negative stereotype particularly in South America and the Middle East. The Libyan no-fly zone is a Navy war that is aimed at winning the hearts of Middle Eastern critics and protecting freedom around the world. Despite these efforts, making a good image is an uphill battle. The Israeli efforts with Palestinian aid have gone largely unnoticed in the world media. In contrast, mistakes are remembered for years.

Daniel, USMA

This trip did aid my development in becoming an American military officer. I always find it valuable to spend time with members of foreign militaries, especially ones allied to my own nation. It allows having insight into their perspective and learning how their military operates. It also allows me to build professional relationships that can continue into my military career and into the operational environment. This knowledge and experience will assist me in future operations when working with the Israeli military. However, I think spending time in such a politically charged reason is also a beneficial experience. I saw how a diverse set of cultures could live side by side in peace and in strife. I learned about the importance of understanding a culture not in the present, but how that culture developed. Gaining experience operating in other cultures and learning about their customs is invaluable training for a future military officer. I truly felt like this experience gave me that opportunity and I really value it.

Barrett, USMA

As a future United States Army officer, the most important lesson I learned from this trip was that the will to fight for the good of this world, and the promise to defend and protect the free people of this world at whatever the cost. This experience will help benefit my career as an Army Officer by constantly reminding me why I serve every day. Additionally, it will serve as a modern day example that I can teach my subordinates and remind them as to why they serve their country and protect those who are most important to them.

Brandon, USAFA

In two years, I will become an officer in the United States Military. My time spent in Israel has helped prepare me for that day and the subsequent years of service to my country. Learning about Israel is especially important when considering their location. They are a beacon of freedom in the Middle East and one of America's largest allies. It is very possible that I will work with or alongside Israelis at some point during my military career. I am fully confident that my experience in Israel has given me an advantage when dealing with joint operations.

William, USNA

What set this experience apart from any given trip was interacting with the IDF. I expected Israel, as with any other nation to be different, with a different sense of morality. However, from conversations with IDF officers, I learned just how similar our values are. This realization truly spoke to me. It is this truth, that alliance and joint operations are based upon. As a naval officer, I will spend time in foreign ports and interact with foreign officers. To know how to separate true allies from opportunists and those who wish ill upon the United States will be an important skill. My time in Israel, specifically with officers who I know share my values, demonstrated to me the qualities that I can expect to find in a true ally.

Erik, USMA

Why does West Point do this trip every year? The answer is that because as well broadening and adding depth to our education it has a very real impact on us as future officers in the military. It would not be far reaching to say that a conflict in or around Israel is possible, and that I could be deployed to the region in response to a future conflict. This happening, having the experience there, before hand, will be invaluable. On a less dramatic scenario, the nature of our current conflicts requires junior officers to interact and work with foreign people as part of the mission. Being experienced to one, learning about its history, its customs, its differences, its similarities and more importantly how to interact with that culture makes it easier to apply that model to other cultures that we may be asked to work with in the future. Finally seeing and working with another military is very good opportunity. It allows you to look at your own and compare them. What works, what does not, and why? All these will help affect what I do within the next year.

Alexander, USMA

After this trip, I think a lifelong relation has been established with the IDF officers. Even though there are different religious beliefs, there is a deep found respect for one another. We both share a common goal; preservation of the country that we fight for. If the Army had a base in Israel, I would highly consider serving there. My visit to Israel showed me a different level of what defending one's country means. While the U.S. fights wars on foreign land, the Israeli people fight to protect where they live now. I hope that as I go up in ranks, I will be able to maintain good relations with Israel and conduct joint operations if possible. This trip has given me insight on what duty really means and I hope to carry that into my professional military career. I wish it were possible to send all my classmates to Israel, as this trip was a real eye-opener for the profession of arms. I feel truly honored that I was selected and able to attend.

Matt, USNA

This trip will undoubtedly prove to be a useful resource in my naval career as an officer. The conflict in that region has lasted for many years and continues through this day. I believe the region will be of interest to the United States for a long time. This trip has given my deeper insight and awareness into the culture and dynamic of the State of Israel as well as the surrounding nations. It was very interesting to hear the thoughts and views of Jews and Palestinians both young and old, something that can really only be gained by being in the region and talking to people. This will help, as I will probably serve in the Middle East in the next few years. The opportunity to spend time with members of the IDF and see what they think also helps, as Israel is a strategic ally of the United States. Knowing those views can help me foster a positive view of Israel among those around me.

Tirzah, USAFA

I was amazed at how much I learned not only about Israel, but also about myself. I saw an unwavering pride in the state of Israel. I saw how much people are willing to fight for a chance to survive. It was inspiring all the national pride this small, size of New Jersey, nation has and all the citizens willing to give up their lives in its defense. I had the opportunity to learn the history of the people and why they are so passionate about the land of Israel. I asked myself how I feel about my own nation in comparison to the Israelis and I realized how much I love the United States of America. I realized how similar I was to the Israeli soldiers who are my same age fighting for their country in mandatory service and how they cared just as much about Israel as I do about the United States. I have heard a lot of criticism of the U.S. government about supporting Israel and was never passionate about the subject. Now, I am reading books about Israel and desperate for more information. I am so glad our government supports them because they too are fighting for freedom from terrorism. They just want the right to be their own state and to exist. I cannot think of a more noble cause than to help a nation do what we did ourselves when this country was founded.

Hayden, USAFA

After my experience with the IDF, I have realized that there are many different ways to do all things military, whether leading as an officer, making decisions, or interacting with superiors and subordinates. This has made me understand that as an officer, one must always consider the consequences of any action, the importance of every resource, and the power of command decision. As well as offering these lessons in leadership, my time spent with the IDF has made me think about why I serve. More specifically, it affirmed my choice to serve, the importance of service, and the strength service gives to the individual and to the nation. I know that these experiences and lessons learned have and will be beneficial as I develop into an officer of character, motivated to serve my country.

Caitlyn, USNA

This experience will benefit me as an American military officer in so many ways. I have had an invaluable experience that I will take forward with me as a future officer. The relationships and networking that I developed with the IDF will help me change and influence opinions and foreign relations with the people I interacted. I have also developed an understanding of what Israel is going through with fighting to keep their territory and the relationship that exists between the United States and Israel. I was able to get a perspective on how members of the IDF feel about this relationship and how it is vital to continue developing this relationship. The lessons that I learned will stay with me and I will be able to share my experiences with others to develop their understanding of Israel on a personal level, not just, what one would read in the media.

Amanda, USNA

I was so impressed by the passion each Israeli held to defend their country and the dedication to keep their freedom and keep their promised land for the generations and generations who will come after them. This will benefit me as an American military officer because I will also hold the passion each Israeli holds that I was envious. If I can also spread this passion and dedication to defend our country, I believe our military will be even more effective than it is now. In addition, in the future I look forward to being a resource for my colleagues because of the knowledge I gained on the trip.

Chris, USAFA

This unique opportunity to experience Israel has been incredibly beneficial for my development towards becoming a successful American military officer. I have gained an immense appreciation for one of our most critical allies in an area of constant conflict and turbulent political circumstances. As a future leader in the U.S. military, I may be called upon to make important decisions concerning our involvement in

areas in and around the State of Israel and the world beyond. This trip has made me a more informed individual. I have gained a more complete perspective on the world around me and the complex international consequences of my decisions. I understand now that situations may seem simple from a distance, but upon further inspection, they are usually very complex and dynamic, especially when dealing with political systems and military actions.

Tom, USMA

This interaction with the IDF and the rest of my experience in Israel may not serve me in the near future. But the knowledge it provided me with of Israel's history and the current fight they are in now, coupled with the networking that we all have done will prove invaluable in the future. As the fight against terrorism continues, the United States is going to need all of the support we can possibly muster. Luckily for us, Israel is already there on the front lines fighting terrorism where it is often most brutal and violent. Should I ever find myself in any strategic level command position or in any capacity interfacing with Israel, I feel confident enough in my knowledge of Israeli history and culture to be able to interact successfully with any Israeli on any level. Whether that be political or tactical in nature I truly believe that this trip has given me the groundwork to be able to build even better relations with Israelis and Israel as a whole.

Bill, USAFA

After completing the trip to Israel and returning to the United States Air Force Academy, I believe I came back as not only a more cultured individual but also an informed officer-candidate. My experiences in Israel taught me that as a future Air Force officer, I must be able to see and understand the "why" in issues. I believe that I have gained the ability to detach myself from the wholly American perspective and empathize with notions that may seem foreign at first, but after diligent investigation, will ultimately help me realize the importance of my duty as an American military officer. I slowly began to realize that what Israel fights for is, at its very core, a fight for survival. Israel's enemies have launched numerous campaigns to delegitimize and undermine its existence as a sovereign state. When its way of life, the culture, the freedoms, and the dreams of the Israeli people were threatened, Israel prevailed. Before 9/11, most Americans would find it difficult to empathize with Israel's struggle for survival. However, the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were attacks on the survival of American ideals of freedom and democracy. Meeting this threat head on, just as the Israelis have done, has defined the "why" in my duty as an American military officer.

Benjamin, USNA

Learning these things is invaluable for a future officer of any service. I realized that I know very little about the day-to-day life of citizens of Israel, as well as the rest of the world. In turn, I realized that many people who are offering solutions for the various conflicts around the world seldom have experience with the culture on which they are trying to impose a solution. This cannot work. In order to resolve any conflict, be it war, a simple civil matter, or of a different nature, it is essential to know how the people involved think. It is important to keep in mind what motivates people, what their daily concerns are, and what is aspired towards within the society. These are just a few things that must be taken into consideration, and the list continues and does not make solutions simpler. As a future officer, having learned this will hopefully allow me to make more wise decisions and settle conflicts of any nature in a way that does not ignore crucial aspects.

Misconceptions

Zac, USAFA

I thought Jews were Jews and Israelis were Israelis. The diversity astounded me and was certainly the biggest misconception I took with me to Israel. One briefing in particular underscored this fact. While we were at Bahad-1, we partook in a panel of seven or eight students and two or three officer instructors. The nations represented by these nine figures included Morocco, Iraq, Tunisia, Poland, Australia, England, America, and Russia. Looking back and understanding the history of Israel, it seems impossible to have missed the fact that it is a nation of immigrants pulled from almost every corner of the world. As many nations in Europe and even North America are grappling with immigration issues, Israel stands alone as a nation with open doors to rightful citizens.

Kyle, USNA

The biggest misconception I had coming into this trip was my questioning, “Does Israel really need its own state? And if so, does it need to be in such a highly contested area of the world?” As we travelled around the country and visited many sites important to the people, my questions were soon answered. The answer to the first half of the question, “Does Israel really need its own state?” was determined as we visited Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust museum. What I realized as we walked through the museum was that the Jewish people need to be able to defend themselves. From 1938 to 1944 during the peak of Anti-Semitism and the execution of the “Final Solution,” no one came to the rescue of the Jewish people, and 6 million Jews were killed. Jews need to have their own state so that they can have a standing army capable of preventing genocide. The answer to the second half of the question, “does Israel need to be in such a highly contested area of the world?” was found as we visited many Biblical sites located around the country. This land contains Israel’s long history of 3500 years as given in the Bible. If there is any place for the Jewish people to call home, it is here in the promise land, because they have no substantial history or dwelling place in any other region of the world.

Erik, USMA

From the northern border in Haifa, west to the Golan Heights, then south to Eilat along the Red Sea, we covered Israel geographically, historically and politically to an extent I had not have conceived was possible in three weeks. What was most surprising to me out of the entire experience was not any one experience, but the dramatic shift in my own opinion.

The first place we stayed was in Tel Aviv. There I was confronted with my first and biggest misconception of Israel, the spatial aspect of the political issues. Walking along the Mediterranean ocean on the first night, we came upon an abandoned and derelict dance club on the waterfront. It was only later did I realize this old club was the Dolphinarium, the club that attacked by a suicide bomber exactly ten years ago, to the day, that I walked by it by chance. However, only twelve at the time, I remember reading about it one Sunday morning. Then it seemed so far away, so distant, but here it was right in the heart of city. The conflict that I had heard about for so long was not in some distant area like Afghanistan, but for the Israeli people was happening all around them. As I traveled this fact was compounded more and more. The hotly contested Golan Heights was not some foreign field, but less than an hour from our hotel room in the city of Tiberius. The West Bank was not a distant border but something that was ever changing and even harder to define. The fact that so much does and so much is happening is something that is impossible to fathom until I actually experienced it.

Edward, USMA

When I first found out that, I would be going to Israel I was slightly overcome with a discomfoting feeling. My initial impression of Israel was that it is a state in consistent conflict and that I would find myself between the crosshairs of the conflict while on my visit. I developed this impression from the media, my friends, and family who are strongly influenced by the media. I agreed to go to on this trip, however, to find out for myself what Israel is really like. I soon discovered that the hostile environment I had expected when I arrived to the country only exists in a fictional world created by people who must have never been to Israel. From the moment we landed at the airport in Tel Aviv to our departure three weeks later, I was completely taken aback by how safe I felt for the entire trip. Other than the borders shared by Arab nations and the Palestinians, I felt safer in Israel than I do in many places in the United States.

It was interesting to learn how people live and think in Israel. Through my research and the history lectures we received while touring through the country, I learned that Israel has been fighting for peace since the day it declared itself the state of Israel. This has a significant impact on the lives of the Israeli people. I found that the Israelis, as a whole, have an understanding of their current situation regarding the threats at their borders and have a strong sense of unity when it comes to keeping their country alive. It also struck me as odd just how open and interactive people were on the streets but what stuck out the most to me was how opinionated they were of all the worldwide issues. In my experience, the average U.S. citizen either does not care, or simply just does not know what goes on outside of his/her hometown. Another significant difference is how the military recruits its soldiers. Every Israeli citizen is required to serve in their military once they have completed high school. This grants every citizen a job immediately after high school. I learned that some people do not mind it while others would prefer to do something completely different but every person I encountered was proud to serve their country.

I was surprised to learn about the hardships Israel faces today. Israel must constantly reconfigure and reinforce its borders as it attempts to find peace with restless and aggressive neighbors. As I learned more about the history of the Jewish people, I realized how prolonged their fight has been to attain a Jewish state and proclaim independence but it is amazing how they must continue to fight to this day to maintain that status. This is something the United States only had to deal with when it first attained its independence so it was astonishing to see how people have to live with those kinds of circumstances in the present time. The way these situations are handled by the Israeli government is also impressive because it does so in a more democratic approach without resorting to extreme measures in hope that it would save time and resources. It was also interesting to find out just how influential religion can be on a country. From the prohibited cheeseburger to the Sabbath, never have I before seen people incorporate their religious practices into their daily life as the people of Israel do.

Nate, USAFA

Unlike the United States, Israel is under the constant threat of attack and possible elimination by many of its neighboring countries, and has been since the nation declared its independence in 1948. I discovered that this constant and imminent state of war has shaped a national philosophy that has placed homeland defense at a premium, as well as high patriotism and awareness of current events unmatched by the average American. I was very impressed by the fact that all of the Israelis I met, regardless of their faith, country of birth, or ethnicity, were completely willing to do all that it takes to defend their nation. As a member of the United States military, I found myself wishing that Americans would appreciate the mission of national defense as much as Israelis do (perhaps this is due to the mandatory service commitment of all Israeli citizens, something I realize is not quite feasible in the United States).

Rachel, USNA

The biggest misconception that I took to Israel was in thinking it was a simple homogeneous state. I had never realized how many different cultural facets there were.

Initially, I thought that the state of Israel was simply a Middle Eastern country, different only in the fact that it is Jewish. It had never really dawned on me how many Jews had immigrated to Israel, let alone all the different places from which they had come. I also had not realized that there were so many different interpretations on the concept of being Jewish to include that of heritage, religion, or both. It made me understand the struggles the state initially had trying to assimilate waves of immigrants into the country when the single unifying factor, being Jewish, was so intricate in it. They say that America is the giant melting pot, but I believe that Israel is also a melting pot, but perhaps with an even stronger purpose. That purpose being a right for the Jewish people to exist in a place of their own, free from the fear of persecution. Ultimately, it was a joy to realize that we had more in common than we had differences.

Derek, USNA

Going into the trip, I was convinced that the occupation of the West Bank was the greatest impediment to stability in the Middle East. For the Jewish people it is not an occupation but disputed territories, lands that they captured in a defensive war against neighboring aggressors. In addition, the Jewish heartland historically has been the regions that are engulfed by the West Bank. A return to their homeland is the highest ideal of the Zionist movement.

Nevertheless, the Israelis recognize that they cannot keep the territories due to demographic issues that would develop in maintaining the Jewish State. They saw the failed efforts that Ariel Sharon made towards peace when he withdrew settlements and IDF troops from the Gaza Strip. This failure to bring peace leads Israelis to believe that terrorism would only be worse if they were to withdraw from the West Bank. For this, Israel does not believe that stability would result from any withdrawal of the Palestinian territories for them or for the greater Middle East.

The approach that Israel has taken to calm the violence in the Palestinian lands in recent years will do more to achieve peace than any security barrier could even accomplish. Recently, Israel has taken it upon herself to build schools, hospitals, and roads in order to create the infrastructure necessary for a future Palestinian state. Whereas before the Palestinian people found they were helpless to better their lives and idle enough to resort to extremism, by building infrastructure, the Israeli government is simultaneously improving their quality of life and giving them work to do. Efforts such as these will lead to long-term stability and help improve the damaged image that Israelis have with their Palestinian neighbors.

Daniel, USMA

Before going to Israel, I had taken the whole region for granted. I thought I knew the situation and understood the conflict going on. I had conducted prior research, taken a Middle East history course, and believed I grasped the nuance of each argument that the Palestinians and Israelis had to the land. Upon arrival, it was very clear I was completely wrong. The more I learned about the conflict the more intrigued and confused I became. I felt that with each incident and political move that took place the situation became even more convoluted and I became lost in a variety of arguments from both sides. Ironically, I feel like I understand the situation, to an extent, but I feel it is more complicated than ever before. My renewed interest has left me with a strong desire to return to Israel to learn and explore even further.

Barrett, USMA

One of the biggest misconceptions I discovered after the trip was the strength of the Israel Defense Force. Prior to the trip, my impression of the Israel Defense Force was its capability of withstanding an attack

from a nearby state until foreign aid came to its assistance. During the trip, however, I was baffled to learn more about the history of the IDF since the creation of the state. The technology, organization, and preparation of the military altered my opinion of the IDF entirely. Israel's survival and victory during the Six Day War against several neighboring states became an inspiration to millions and led me to believe that the country was more than capable of defending itself from foreign aggressors.

What most American citizens fail to realize is that Israel is constantly under threat from aggressors in neighboring states. This occurs so often that during our stay, we witnessed on the news several Syrian protestors attempt to cross into Israeli territory under the belief that their country should cease to exist. Additionally, we were under the impression that the Israeli military uses outdated equipment and transportation compared to that of the U.S. military, however, my assumptions were found to be false. The IDF holds technology equal to that of the U.S. including its naval and air forces, and in some areas has a more highly developed aircraft than some of the aircraft we use in the United States.

In addition to a newfound respect for the strength of the IDF, I was also baffled by the idea that every Israeli citizen between the ages of 18 and 21 must serve in the armed forces. Quite possibly the most honorable part of my Israeli experience was the chance to personally exchange military experiences with IDF officers. During our week stay in Jerusalem, I was able to converse with several Lieutenants from all branches and gain their perspective on the requirement to serve their country in a time of crisis. This unique experience, known as the Mifgash, taught me one of the most important lessons in life that one should cherish and be thankful for everyday; that the foundation of the state remain intact because its younger generation is willing to serve, fight, and defend for the existence of Israel.

Thomas, USMA

The most important thing I learned on the trip was how the IDF trains and fights and how it is organized. It was beneficial to see the various military academies and bases because we got an in-depth look at how the different branches prepare their officers and noncommissioned officers. It was also interesting to see what is being taught to the soldiers of the IDF as well as what resources and technology is available to them. Visiting these bases and academies showed us what the focuses and goals are for the different branches of the IDF. These visits gave us some insight into what the character of Israel is. This was important to me because there is always a chance that American and Israeli forces will work together at some point, and having an understanding of their background will make the relationship easier.

William, USNA

I gained an appreciation for the diversity of Israeli political opinion. From my experience, I believe that this diversity stems from the foundation of the state. There are three main ideals that the state of Israel was founded on and for which Israelis continue to strive for today. Israel should be a democracy, Israel should encompass the Land of David, and Israel should be Jewish.

I could have gathered that from a textbook or op-ed piece but being in Israel, conversing with Israelis, gave me a true understanding of the political climate. To that end, my time in Israel was spent correcting misconceptions as it was filling in voids because, frankly, I did not know much about Israel and there were not many misconceptions to correct.

Alexander, USMA

The biggest misconception I had about Israel before going was how the IDF operated towards the countries surrounding it. I thought Israel simply fired missiles and conducted bombing missions just to prove they had military might and that everyone else should just stay out. I have always heard about Palestine on the news and it seems Israel was always just beating up on Palestine for no good reason.

Overall, the media does not seem to shine a very good light on Israel. I did not know Palestine was actually an area in Israel until I did a little research before the trip, I always just thought it was a country next to it. While I was there, I was surprised to hear the how different the Israeli side of the story was from what I hear on the news. I learned that Israel did in fact try to compromise with the Palestinians and make a two state solution, but the Palestinians declined. The news makes it sound like Israel wants the Palestinians to leave and that there should be no compromise. IDF operations are also defensive and trying to prevent attacks rather than just being completely offensive. I also learned that a few Palestinians are represented in the government of Israel. Overall, what I found very interesting was that the government has a wide representation of the different culture and peoples in Israel.

Benjamin, USAFA

The biggest misconception I took with me to Israel was that everyone in Israel was Jewish. Obviously, I knew of the Palestinian contingent in the disputed territories, but I did not really consider that Israel proper or the Palestinians really to be citizens of the State of Israel. However, this was quickly corrected. We saw many Arabs living happily in the state of Israel and I was surprised to see the large number of mosques in the country. It really surprised me to hear that there were radical Islamic political parties that held seats in the parliament of Israel. This notion that there was little diversity in Israel was further shattered when we visited the Druze house as well as the Bahá'í faith seated in Haifa. It was weird to see any other religion in the country of Israel, much less have Israel be the center of the religion.

Matt, USNA

My biggest misconception was that the State of Israel and its surrounding region is violence prone and unsafe. My misconception, that the nation of Israel is not a “safe” place, was quickly changed during the trip as I had a chance to experience the region first hand. I felt incredibly safe for the duration of the trip. I saw just how much Israel cares for her people. I also thought the fact that uniformed soldiers always carry their rifles around sent a good message of preparedness. Even when there was violence and protests on the Syrian border during the trip, I still felt safe.

Caitlyn, USNA

The biggest misconception that I had was about the IDF. I assumed that the officers were older and had already studied at a university or college for four years to become a commissioned officer, which is what happens with midshipmen and cadets. I soon came to realize that these officers were the same age as all of the midshipmen and cadets. They started serving Israel when they were out of high school.

This aspect truly amazed me because their responsibilities at a younger age were as big as or even bigger than that of an officer with a college degree. It was extremely evident that the members of the IDF knew their responsibilities and fully carried them out. It was also apparent how much serving Israel had an impact on their everyday life. It is necessary to protect and defend themselves because the fighting happens within their country, as where in the United States; we are fighting a war on foreign soil. I enjoyed listening and asking questions with the IDF and truly received a perspective of Israel that I would not have been able to see without this trip.

Amanda, USNA

I think my biggest misconception before going to Israel was the political situation between the Arabs and Jews and just how many different aspects go into the conflict. Before going, I knew the basics of the conflict but had no stance because I did not have enough information regarding the situation. Throughout the trip, we gained knowledge about the strife Jews encounter and how Arab countries and Palestinian representation have reacted to any decisions made. I also had no idea that every country surrounding Israel holds hatred towards the Jewish people as well. I learned how difficult it will be ever to solve the conflict in Israel and may never happen because generations upon generations still hold the same perceptions.

Chris, USAFA

Before traveling to Israel, I had always believed that there was widespread, unorganized foreign resentment against the nation, but it was simply an ideology. I quickly realized firsthand that threats on the State of Israel are very real, immediate, and serious. I stared in shock as our tour guide explained the alarm warning system set up throughout the nation in an effort to protect Israeli citizens from airborne attacks. While the United States carries out military missions in faraway lands, the Israeli military is primarily concerned with domestic security. Because of this constant threat, the level of commitment and sense of duty for members of the Israeli Defense Force must be immense. As today's politics in the U.S. is primarily concerned with our economy, the Israeli political system focuses its attention on security. The different outlooks, which set the base of each nation's politics, provide for interestingly distinct outcomes.

Tom, USMA

The picture I had painted, prior to my trip to Israel, was one of constant threat and a consequent level of militarism. My initial perception of Israel was totally dashed. In reality, if you change a few choice cultural differences and tweak the climate a bit you could easily be fooled into thinking you were somewhere in the States when walking through many parts of Israel. This realization was a big point in the trip for me. I knew that we, as Americans, shared many similarities with Israel, but it was a completely different feeling to have that become so apparent while standing in Israel.

Benjamin, USNA

Probably the greatest misconception that my perspective was changed on was related to the Golan Heights. I had thought the region was held purely for strategic purposes and that the border was bristling with military defenses. What I saw instead was a fertile area that has prospered due to the labor of the kibbutz that settled the border.

This was some of the first and most tangible exposure to the kibbutzim and that socialist aspect of Zionism. Furthermore, something I learned about the region dealt with the issue of the Golan Heights Watershed, which supplies Israel with a large percentage of its water supply. This aspect was something new and helped me gain an appreciation for the how crucial control of the region is to Israel and her security.

This change in perspective, though minor, gave me a much greater insight into the unique position of Israel, that many of the struggles are not just about militarily strategic issues. Rather many of them are about issues that directly affect the day-to-day livelihood of Israelis. I learned of other examples of this throughout the trip. One that stands out and demonstrates this is the bus bombings that plagued Jerusalem that were described when our guide pointed out the new light rail system. It was foreign to think about the danger individuals face simply traveling to work. These changes in perspective have really allowed me to analyze news relating to Israel and the Middle East from and have a better understanding what situations individuals may be facing.

Strongest Impressions, Highlights and Lessons

Edward, USMA

I believe the highlight of the program was being exposed to a small nation of people that are united by one common factor, survival. This type of survival refers to a group of people, the people of Israel, being bombarded by all sides with violence and pressure simply because they claim to be Jewish, Israeli, or both.

This realization is the highlight of the program to me because I am able to understand better the people of Israel. I believe that the American view of Israel and its people as been strongly skewed by the media, which leaves the Israeli people, misunderstood. My exposure to the country and having the time to engage with the people allowed me to grasp my own understanding of Israel. This opportunity removed the biased opinions of the media as well as the people who have never seen for themselves the country and its people.

Bill, USAFA

To me, being able to spend a significant amount of time with the IDF officers was the highlight of the trip. I was able to connect on a personal level with a couple of the officers and get a perspective on life as an Israeli that I could have never read about in a book.

Dave, USAFA

My increased understanding of Israeli geopolitics has cemented my belief in the right of the Israelis to have a sovereign state of their own and lends historical support to this belief.

Darrell, USMA

Though it appears to be small on the map it was not until our bus was driving along a section of the wall between Israel and the West Bank that I was finally able to grasp how small is Israel. With only 14 miles separating the border from the Mediterranean Sea, having been raised in Texas makes that a difficult concept to grasp. Also, when standing on the borders with Syria and Lebanon and later Egypt I gained a better understanding of why the wars since 1948 have been so desperate. Of everything, that I learned while in Israel, the size and proximity to its enemies is likely the most important thing I am taking away from the trip.

The highlight of the trip for me was getting to interact with the IDF officers for five days. I became extremely close to one infantry Lieutenant in the Airborne Brigade. All of the cadets and the IDF officers became extremely close on the trip and provided a greater understanding of Israeli culture than we previously experienced.

Daniel, USMA

I think the most important thing I learned was simply how connected all of the history of the region is. The Arab-Israeli conflict has deep roots that really seem to begin over millennia ago when some of the various sides' claims to specific pieces of land are examined. I think knowing how the ancient, medieval, early modern and contemporary histories are connected is invaluable to understanding the conflict. Being able to live these histories through visiting sites involving all of the aforementioned periods really brought the whole story together in my mind.

Thomas, USMA

This up-close-and-personal experience was unique and really allowed us to develop relationships with the IDF officers that will hopefully continue into the future. These relationships would be extremely beneficial if our two militaries were to fight together one day.

Secondary to learning about the IDF was learning about Israeli politics. While Israel's political system sounded confusing, understanding an ally's political spectrum is necessary in order to comprehend why that ally acts the way it does. In addition to that, politics and the military are closely intertwined and getting to see both made it easier to understand Israel as a country.

Erik, USMA

I believe the most important thing I took away was the sheer power of will. I always knew that creation of and maintenance of the current state of Israel has been less than easy, but I could not have known, and for that matter, still do not have a full appreciation for the depth of difficulties that the state Israel has faced and is still facing. Going through learning about the first Zionist movements in the 19th century, to the difficulties under the British Mandate, to its war for independence and the subsequent wars after, it shocked me that Israel, let alone is prosperous, but is even in existence. What I saw in Israelis of the past of the past and many I encountered was very deep and powerful will simply to survive, to exist and that will has overcome this seemingly simple, yet impossibly difficult task.

What I enjoyed the most out of everything, was the people I met and friends I made. First and closest to me, are my comrades from West Point. I knew a few of them previously but over the course of three weeks they formed the backbone of my trip and without I would have never have received the amazing experience that I now have. Working with other cadets from other academies offered a rare and enjoyable time that allowed me experience a little of the other branches of service. The Israeli officers I met especially the ones that stayed with us in Jerusalem was an amazing experience. Sitting down and talking, sharing questions and experiences, joking, laughing, and drinking with our counterparts was not only the most fun I had but also where I learned the most. Finally, was our tour guide, who was the single most important person in making our trip an excellent experience. His, encyclopedic knowledge of just about everything as well as his sense of humor, personal experiences and friendliness cemented and created the framework for my once in-a-lifetime experience in Israel.

Alexander, USMA

The most important thing I learned was just how tough Israel is. Israel is just like any other sovereign nation, defending its borders and trying to live a life of peace and happiness. The difference between Israel and other countries though is that Israel is surrounded by enemies who hate them. I have never seen anything like it. I have gained a lot of respect for the Israeli people because of their perseverance and dedication to live in such a beautiful, but hostile and dangerous, environment. They stay even with the risk of rockets fired by Hamas and Hezbollah. I already knew Israel required mandatory service, but I really did not know how the culture was going to be. Since everyone has served, it puts people on a level playing field. It brings the country together in a way I wish the U.S. could.

My favorite part about the trip was definitely the Mifgash. Getting to know the IDF officers and spending time with them integrated us into the culture. The Israeli officers could talk to us about being in the IDF and what it is really like. Having the Air Force, Navy, and Army represented allowed each service academy to really personalize with each of the IDF officers and relate to their own professions. Having officers close to our age meant we could blend right in — for the most part. Going out and exploring with the officers at night allowed me to socialize with the Israeli people, and ask questions about the culture and opinions on issues.

Matt, USNA

There were two highlights of the trip for me. The first was visiting the historical and especially Biblical sites. I like to visualize scenes as I hear or learn about them. Traveling all around Israel was the ultimate visualization. It was amazing to see and touch places that I had read about in the Bible as a child, whether

it was the plain where Gideon fought or the Western Wall. The second was the opportunity to spend time with the IDF officers. Having them along enriched the entire experience. I enjoyed talking to them and hearing each of their personal stories and experiences. This was also one of the most valuable aspects of the trip because it provided me with a great deal of insight into the people of Israel. I found many similarities between our IDF companions and myself.

Tirzah, USAFA

The most important thing I learned in the program is there are always two sides to a story. I learned about the media in the sense that they can/do have a bias towards Palestine and how easily news can be twisted. I learned how the Israeli-Arab conflict is such a dynamic and complex problem. I saw for the first time Israel's side of the story and why they behave the way they do in the world scene and how that affects not only their Arab neighbors, but the entire world.

The highlight for me was going to the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. This was very different from the memorial in Berlin for the Holocaust. It gave a unique perspective of the Holocaust through the eyes of the Jewish people. Most other museums like the Berlin one are through the eyes of the Germans or the eyes of the Allied Forces. Going through the museum was a reminder of another case of prosecution from the outside world. I felt so angry that such an atrocity could happen to so many men, women, and children. I was so repulsed by the endless crimes that I became sick to my stomach. Yet, there are some incredible stories of resistance such as the Warsaw Ghetto fighters who found their inspiration from Masada. The more I learn about Israel and the history of the Jewish people the more that the connections start clicking throughout my mind. It is mind-blowing seeing the displays of how even after such a bad thing happened to the Jews, they bounce back this time with a firm drive that never again will they go defenseless. They are willing to pay any price to keep from anything close to that happening again.

Hayden, USAFA

Since I am not a religious person, nor a scholar of history, I entered Israel with ignorant of the country's many religious and historical sites. The most important thing I learned during the program was the value of the historical and cultural sites of the area. I had never traveled to a location with such a storied and important past stretching back many thousands of years, and especially not to a place where thousands of years of history have shaped the region and the world into the environment that it is today religiously, politically, culturally, and economically. It impresses me to this day that I actually went to Masada, Jerusalem, Caesarea, etc. - the places where history was made.

Lauren, USAFA

The most important thing that I took away from this trip is more of an understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most Americans do not know about many of the protests and disturbances that occur in Israel as a result of the tension, but the Israelis are living in the reality of it. Before, I had only known Israel was created after World War II as the Jewish homeland and there is still opposition to its creation. During this trip, I realized how much hostility and conflict actually exists.

The 1967 Six Day War was something that I read about in history class, but the full impact of this war was not clear to me at all. All I knew was Israel had gained territory from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. However, I did not realize that the war that occurred over 40 years ago was still so important today. On June 5, our tour guide told us that there were protests breaking out on the border with Syria because of this war. Our group had been in that area only three days before.

These protests opened my eyes to what Israelis live with every day. Unlike most of America where parents do not really have to worry about their children playing outside, Israeli parents had to live with the fear

of never seeing their children again after sending them to school. Despite all of the violence and conflicts that have occurred, Israel still exists.

The highlight of this trip was meeting the Israeli officers. The main reason we were able to connect with them is the military. All of the cadets and midshipmen on this trip joined the military to protect our country, and the Israeli officers have the same mindset. We were from a different country, different culture, and different language, but we had the desire to serve in common. I have realized how much the media does not report on the conflicts in Israel and learned that the media tends to report the Arab side. Now, whenever I hear about a conflict involving Israel, I am much more inclined to pay attention due to the connection of having visited this country.

Caitlyn, USNA

The most important thing that I learned through the program is how much patriotism occurs throughout Israel. I was amazing to see the number of Israeli flags hanging up on homes and buildings when we were travelling through the country. The Israelis truly love their country and are fighting other countries to be even considered a legitimate country in the Middle East. The fighting happens on every Israeli border and we were able to see every border of Israel, realizing how close many of these cities and people's homes were built near these borders. This trip provided an aspect of Israel's culture and ways of life that I could never truly experience reading a textbook.

Amanda, USNA

I walked away from Israel learning that there is more to life than the bubble most of us Americans live in. It was incredible delving into another culture and becoming knowledgeable about the strife, this country struggles through on a daily basis. I left Israel feeling more appreciative of the freedom I live in and the lack of fear I have to carry with me in everything I do. At any moment, Israel could be attacked from any country sharing a border with them. I feel lucky to have been able to immerse myself into Israeli life so I can make a difference once I become an officer.

Chris, USAFA

Another piece of information essential to a better understanding of the Israeli nation that I learned on the trip was the aspect of mandatory service. I had many discussions with my fellow cadets concerning this particular topic, wondering what effect it could have on our own country. I cannot even imagine some of my friends from high school living a military lifestyle! While such a policy is nearly impossible to implement in a country as large as the United States, the State of Israel takes advantage of it. The unity, patriotism, and sense of duty of the past and current members of the Israeli Defense Force are great to be able to witness.

Tom, USMA

My personal highlight of the JINSA program was when we were sitting outside a restaurant in downtown Jerusalem late at night after having toured all over the Old City during the day. It was nearly all of the cadets and midshipmen from the academies and all of the IDF personnel that were with us gathered around one large table made out of many smaller ones all pushed together. Everyone was talking, laughing, and just having an overall good time with each other. And just as I realized that the United States of America has some really tough allies that share many of our core values as a nation and also back us up on nearly all of our foreign policy in the Middle East. I also realized that the highlight of the program for me was our weeklong Mifgash with the IDF. Being able to sit down with individuals from all aspects of Israel's military that are very close to our own age and talk about current topics candidly at almost any time of the day or night was a tremendous opportunity. It is not often that anyone gets a chance like that. I am very proud to say that all the service academies and the IDF got a lot out of our interaction with each other.

Stephen, USMA

The most important things I learned during the trip were related to Israel's security issues. I always knew that Israel has been burdened with attacks from its neighbors but I now have a much deeper and clearer understanding of how vulnerable the Israeli state is to these attacks. An IDF captain on the trip spoke to us about the second Intifada, and how only ten years ago there were close to 30 rocket attacks a day. The alarm would go off and citizens had about 15 seconds to reach shelter until the rocket would explode somewhere in the streets. I met many young Israelis during the trip. I remember talking to a girl in Jerusalem and, in the middle of our conversation, I just realized how different our childhoods must have been. When she was 10 she was dealing with rocket attacks and the second Intifada; a stark contrast to my simple and care free childhood most likely worrying about what cartoon was on TV next. I feel like I have a much better understanding about how the borders and geography of Israel make it vulnerable as well. If Israel were to give up the West Bank and return to the 1967 borders, it would be seven miles wide at its narrowest point, which would be hardly defensible. A few days after we were in the Golan Heights I heard news that a group of angry Syrians were trying to cross the border in the north not far from where we were. It made me realize how dealing with these security issues is a constant struggle. In the end Israel is simply struggling for its survival and its right to exist; a right that many are hell-bent on denying them.

The highlight of the program was the Mifgash with the Israeli officers. The West Pointers adopted one of the IDF first lieutenants as one of our own. He was a paratrooper and an officer already, and we are still in school. But it made sense; he was one of ours, because our branches of the military are essentially the same. During most of the trip, we sat next to each other on the bus rides and had so much to talk about. In the beginning our conversations were mostly about the military because that was what we initially had in common, but eventually it grew to include just about everything from politics to music. I really liked having someone close to my own age with so much in common to ask questions and talk to about all the things we were doing in Israel.

Bill, USAFA

I realized how little I understood Israeli culture on June 5, 2011. That day was the 44th anniversary of the Six Day War and on it 18 protesters were killed and numerous others were injured when they stormed across the Syrian border. What struck me as profound was that our group was up upon the Golan Heights overlooking the peaceful and quiet land, which comprised the Israeli-Syrian border just three days earlier.

Even more amazing was that life was normal in Jerusalem when news of the violence was announced. It was then that I realized that although U.S. politicians talk of Arab-Israeli peace as a campaign promise, the Israeli's have become so familiar with violence and war that both have become normal and an expected part of life. When I asked the Israeli Defense Force officers who accompanied us on the trip about my realization, they would sometimes joke about Israel's situation. I am not sure if it was learned optimism or hopeless naivety. I listened attentively and watched carefully as they told their stories and jokes.

We all shared laughs with the Israeli Defense Force officers, but after the smiles there was a subtle yet familiar look of despair on their faces from not knowing peace since the creation of the State of Israel. To me, being able to spend a significant amount of time with the IDF officers was the highlight of the trip. I was able to connect on a personal level with a couple of the officers and get a perspective on life as an Israeli that I could have never read about in a book.