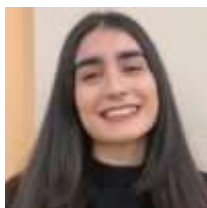


AESI STUDENTS MODERATION



Dr. Silvia Siciliano – AESI Direction

STAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MISSION TO THE ITALIAN EMBASSY IN TEL AVIV

Abstract: The following text deals with the internship experience of Silvia Siciliano - a previous AESI student and now member of the staff - at the Embassy of Italy in Tel Aviv. From a personal perspective, she analyses diverse aspects of her experience, from the application process to the outbreak of the pandemic in Israel. In addition to this, she points out her role at the Italian Embassy and reflects on the meaning of being European in such a country. Lastly, she makes her considerations about the future of COVID-19 pandemic.

3 hours and a half away from here my experience begins. Ben Gurion Airport welcomed me to Israel, in what would have been later my home for the next three months. It was a cold rainy Sunday evening, and that weather was not so typical in such a country. However, that day was what I had been waiting for a long time. I was there as one of the winners of the internship programme sponsored by MAECI - MIUR - Fondazione CRUI. The programme offers curricular internship opportunities to university students nearing graduations at the Italian diplomatic missions worldwide, respectively at Embassies, Consulates, and Institutes of Culture. It also establishes a partnership among selected Italian universities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, University and Research and since 2015 also the Conference of Italian University Rectors with the intent to give to the future leading generations the chance to gain a real insight into the world of diplomatic and international careers. 350 students are usually selected per slot and I was honoured to be one of them.

From the very beginning my application placed me before a dilemma, “What do I want from my internship experience?”. This has been the key question I tried to answer during the whole application process. It is not easy to choose just two destinations around the world. So

many times I fantasised about close and far places where I would like to live in. But then the choice, the one that could change your life, does never come easily. Then one day I had my answer or at least my final decision: Italian Embassy in Washington and Italian Embassy in Tel Aviv. I was sure of one thing, I wanted to leave my comfort zone that had been Europe until that moment. I had already had many experiences in Europe, and I felt as if it was the time to challenge myself and that internship was the chance. Moreover, this challenging need rose during my past experience at Rome International Seminar which definitively marked a turning point in my academic and personal path. Rome International Seminar has been a unique experience which took place in Rome last year. It is something that I personally could not imagine that it would ever happen. But it happened. Young delegations of students from Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria spent more than a week together. They had never met before, they first saw each other as perfect aliens and they at last said goodbye as old friends. Throughout those days, I saw with my own eyes the value of respect, solidarity and inclusion. Therefore, I am grateful to these students and to AESI - the architect and mind of this project - and in particular to President Massimo Caneva who turned his idea into a reality.

Once in Tel Aviv, my area of employment was the Press and Political Office at the Italian Embassy. My typical day began with a press review in the morning and later in the afternoon with the management of the social media of the Embassy, such as Twitter or Instagram. I often took part at meetings promoted by the Delegation of the European Union to Israel dealing with sensitive national issues regarding Arab minorities living in Israel or the settlements conditions, with the purpose to raise awareness among the Embassies. As I got through the door, I was a hurricane of feelings. In the first place, I felt ignorant, small and ungrateful. Until that moment, I took everything for granted: as European citizen I could buy a low cost airplane ticket and fly around Europe just with my ID, I could say “hello” to my friends of the neighbouring countries, and I could study one semester abroad thanks to the Erasmus programme. And still, the European Union motto “in varietate concordia” guarantees six pure values: Human dignity, Freedom, Democracy, Equality, Rule of Law and Human Rights. Over the past months I learnt that being European is a fortune and being Italian is a warm hug anywhere in the world. Thanks to the Italian Embassy I was lucky enough to take part at meetings about the Israeli elections or the Trump peace plan. I was there during the organisation of the arrival of President Mattarella in occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Obviously I was there at the pandemic outbreak. I read everyday what was happening in my country and I was not there. The press review dedicated an entire section to “Coronavirus in Italy” and I had no real perception of my

suffering country. This was probably due to the bubble I was living in. Tel Aviv is definitely a bubble, Jerusalem is 70 kms away as well as Gaza Strip. And the sense of danger does not belong to that city. Perhaps it is the motto “carpe diem” that surrounds it that gets you the impression that “everything is just fine”.

COVID-19 turned our lives upside down, and “normality” became suddenly an exception. Happiness was once the antithesis of normality, and now it has become its synonym. No country has been immune, nobody has been fearless and the future is still unknown. Few things are clear to us, and probably we should fight our global enemy on the same terms - the pandemic knows no borders, we should not either. On this occasion, I would like to thank Ms. Tatiana Valovaya on behalf of all AESI students for your time, and encouraging words. We also hope, one day, to be able to make our trip to UN Geneva.