



An Arabic student gets help with calligraphy with guidance from a teacher.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATED BY CHERYL D. COLLINS. COMPONENTS SHUTTERSTOCK AND AAPM



LEARNING Arabic Abroad

BY VICKI VALOSIK

STUDYING ARABIC HAS BEEN INCREASINGLY POPULAR IN RECENT YEARS AND HAS FUELED THE GROWTH OF INTENSIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS ABROAD.

S TUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA) have seen tremendous growth over the past decade. According to the most recent *Open Doors* report by the Institute for International Education (IIE), 6,415 students studied in the MENA region for academic credit from U.S. colleges and universities during the 2012–2013 academic year compared with only 890 students who studied in the region in 2000–2001, the school year prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. While this growth is reflective of a trend in higher education toward global and experiential learning—according to *Open Doors* the overall number of U.S. students studying abroad has more than doubled in the past 15 years—it is also telling of an intensifying interest in the Arab and Muslim worlds among students and educators in the years since 9/11.



Language acquisition is a main reason that many students choose to study abroad in the MENA region, says Cara Lane-Toomey, director of education abroad at AMIDEAST, a nonprofit organization promoting cooperation between America and the Middle East. National statistics show that Arabic language enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities have grown at similarly explosive rates to the growth in study abroad programs in Arabic-speaking countries. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), Arabic language enrollments grew at a rate of 126.5 percent between 2002 and 2006 and another 46.3 percent by 2009. Although total enrollments took a dip between 2009 and 2013, Arabic has remained the eighth most commonly studied language in the United States and, according to the MLA, more schools than ever are offering Arabic classes. In a research study conducted by Lane-Toomey and published in the *Journal of Studies in International Education*, she finds that 80 percent of students surveyed who have studied abroad in the MENA region cite the opportunity to improve their foreign language skills as a main motivation to study abroad. She also finds that, compared with students who choose more common study abroad destinations like Europe and Australia, students who studied in the MENA region were much more likely to have taken language classes prior to their study abroad experience.

Immersion Advances Language Learning

“An overarching goal [of mine] was to learn about the language we studied, and more importantly, to live in an environment where the language was spoken on a daily basis,” says Daniel Pena, a senior at Middlebury College who spent his junior year abroad at the Middlebury School in Jordan, based at the University of Jordan. “It is often hard to really have the language button click ‘on’ when you take an hour course daily or even twice a week,” Pena adds.

This is especially true for students of Arabic, says Bill Mayers, study abroad adviser at Middlebury College’s Sunderland Language Center, which offers semester and academic year programs in Amman in partnership with the University of Jordan. “It is particularly difficult to attain proficiency in Arabic, let alone any sort of ‘fluency’ without spending some significant period of time studying or otherwise living in the MENA region,” says Mayers. The difficulty in gaining Arabic proficiency stems largely from its nature as a diglossic language, says Mayers, which requires students who want to be able to converse in Arabic

to learn Modern Standard Arabic, which is used on news broadcasts and in many publications such as newspapers, as well as one or more local dialects. “Native Arabic-speakers speak a dialect that is distinctive to their region,” says Mayers, “and it is only by living/studying in the region that students can gain proficiency in a local dialect, so as to be understood by the proverbial ‘man on the street.’”

As a result, students who study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) on campus often seek to supplement their coursework with dialect classes in the region, which are more readily available in most study abroad programs than on campuses in the United States. Lebanese American University’s Summer Institute for Intensive Arabic and Culture (SINARC) offers Lebanese dialect classes, as well as MSA classes that incorporate media interpretation and analysis, says SINARC Institute Director Mimi Milki Jeha. Likewise, the Arab American Language Institute in Morocco (AALIM) offers advanced courses in Darija, the dialect of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb, says Anne Marie Skye, executive director of AALIM. For students at the University of Arizona, who are able to take courses in the Levantine dialect—as well as MSA—on their home campus prior to going abroad to the university’s program in Jordan, the transition is very



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smooth, says Christian Sinclair, assistant director of the University of Arizona's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. "We align the Arabic language programs in Jordan to our curriculum back home so that a student can step away from the campus, go study abroad, and come back to know they are going to be in sync with the next level of Arabic when they get back."

Interest in the Region Is Growing

Most practitioners in the fields of Arabic and MENA studies agree that the media attention on the Middle East after 9/11 and the Arab Spring have catalyzed student interest in the region, with some even dubbing current college students the "9/11 generation." Students who have grown up with constant media coverage on the region want to understand it better or see for themselves, says Lane-Toomy. "Students whom I interviewed in focus groups in 2010 indicated that they were dissatisfied with U.S. media coverage of Arabs, Muslims, Afghanistan, Iraq, Al-Qaeda, and the region as a whole," she says. "I believe those students have much in common with today's study abroad students who also seem to be seeking a more

nuanced understanding of the political, cultural, and religious aspects of the MENA region."

Briana Sanchez, who graduated from the University of Arizona in 2015 and went on its summer Arabic program in 2014, says, "My interest in the Middle East also stemmed from how prevalent the Middle East has been in the news for most of my life." She recalls being in third grade when the terrorist attacks of September 11 happened. "Ever since then I feel like I wanted to know more about this sector of people who everyone kept talking about."

A similar interest among students at Marquette University was so pronounced that they petitioned to bring Arabic to campus. "Students really wanted Arabic language in the curriculum so they galvanized around the fact that we were not offering Arabic and organized a massive campaign through the *Marquette Tribune*," says Terence Miller, director of international education at Marquette University. He credits this push from students, combined with funding from the U.S. Department of Education and support from an interdisciplinary group of scholars on campus that made bringing Arabic to Marquette a reality in 2009. Soon after the university began offering Arabic



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on campus, it signed agreements with American University in Cairo, EGE Rabat, and later with the University of Jordan to send Marquette students on customized study abroad programs.

An Edge Up in the Job Market

Many students are also hopeful that Arabic language skills and a study abroad experience on their résumé will help them land a job. Skye says that another reason she has observed for the increase in students coming on AALIM's programs in Morocco is the job opportunities available for those "who understand the region and can function professionally in the MENA. This refers not only to language capabilities but also to a cultural sensitivity that leads to successful cross-cultural interaction."

Sanchez, who began working as a photographer and videographer for the *St. Cloud Times* in Minnesota after graduation, agrees. "I think having Jordan on my résumé helped during the job search because often times employers are looking for something that makes you stand out on top of the work experience you have," she says.

Arabic Identified as a Critical Language, Attracts Government Funding

Beyond students' academic and career interests, the U.S. government's increasing national security priorities in the region since 9/11 have also contributed greatly to the growth in both Arabic language offerings across the United States and study abroad programs in the region. Federal funding of Arabic dates back to the 1958 National Defense Education Act, which mandated funding for "uncommonly taught languages" through Title VI, and gained a 10 percent funding increase after 9/11 that largely went toward the support of Arabic language programs and Middle East studies. Other programs, such as the Department of Defense's National Security Education Program (1991) and the Department of State's National Security Language Initiative (2006) provided funding to U.S. colleges to develop Arabic programs, while scholarships, such as the Gilman Scholarship, the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship Program (FLAS), and the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) scholarship provided opportunities for students to pursue language study abroad.

Miller says that funding from the Department of Education through the International and Foreign Language Education Program was the "jumpstart" to the Middle East and North Africa program at Marquette University and laid the foundation for several study abroad programs,

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such as Project Go. Sinclair at the University of Arizona, which also receives funding to administer Project Go—a program that provides language training to ROTC students—says such programs are increasing the diversity of students going abroad. "We are getting a lot of engineering majors, aerospace engineering majors, civil engineering, and other students who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to study abroad," says Sinclair.

Even though government funding has increased, demand for that funding has increased more, making scholarships very competitive. "The growth that CASA experienced in the past 10 years is reflected in the quality of applicants," says Nevenka Sullivan, director of the Center for Arabic Studies Abroad, adding that the proficiency level of applicants, who are required to have had three years of prior Arabic training, is much higher than it was a decade ago. She says that each year they receive roughly 100 applications for 20 or fewer slots for recent graduates and graduate students.

Students participating in the Lebanese American University's intensive Arabic program visit the Roman ruins in Baalbek, Lebanon.





Many Countries, Many Options

While the events surrounding the Arab Spring have continued to spark student interest and government funding, they have also brought challenges for study abroad programs, particularly in terms of safety. Universities and study abroad programs have played a sort of musical chairs, closing programs in one country as events deem it unsafe or travel warnings are issued, and then opening them in another. Syria and Egypt were once top study abroad destinations, but now programs in Syria are nonexistent and many in Egypt have been moved or suspended indefinitely, such as Marquette University's study abroad program at the University of Cairo. At the same time, programs in Oman, Morocco, and Jordan have grown, as they have remained relatively stable during times of unrest in neighboring countries.

"We have seen increased interest over the years since the Arab Spring, particularly for organized groups of students," says Skye of AALIM, which has seen a five-fold participation increase in its programs in recent years. "Many American administrators now see Morocco as one of a very small number of 'safe' options for their students."

Sinclair refers to Jordan as "study abroad central" and says "Jordan has experienced waves of immigrants: the Palestinians in the '40s and '50s, then the Iraqis, and then Syrians. And now they joke that the fourth wave of immigrants is American students coming to Jordan to study Arabic. New places and programs have opened up to accommodate the influx."

In order to ensure that the relatively large presence of U.S. students in Jordan doesn't hinder their abilities to learn the language and engage with local culture, students

on the University of Arizona's programs are required to live with Jordanian host families, which used to be optional. "It helps with the language acquisition," says Sinclair, "as students are reinforcing their language at home, watching TV and speaking with the family in Arabic at meals, going on weekend trips with them."

Students on the Middlebury program in Jordan also stay with host families, but they take the immersion one step farther by requiring students to take the same language pledge that the Middlebury language programs in the United States are known for. "It's a pledge to each other to speak in Arabic and only in Arabic," says Mayers. "The homestay families are educated about the pledge and so they don't talk to the students in English."

In addition to being better for language acquisition, Sinclair cites the security benefits of having students stay with host families. "The homestay families are very protective of the incoming American students and if anything happens or they don't come home on time, we'll get a phone call so it's a better way of keeping tabs on the students as well."

For those concerned about safety or unable to travel to the region, the Lebanese American University now offers a version of its SINARC program in New York, which Jeha says is designed to be a "language acquisition program," more than a cultural immersion, though it does include a lecture series and Middle Eastern cooking demonstrations. She adds that it often serves as a feeder to the summer session in Beirut. "In other words, they get a taste of what Lebanon is like in New York and come for more."

Most people who have been to the region would agree that nothing can compare to actually being there. "We believe that only by going to the region and seeing 'the Other' with their own eyes can students surmount the preconceived ideas they may have had from their home environments, particularly from the media," says Skye. "The students are able to interact person to person and see similarities which far outweigh the differences between their home and host cultures."

And for students studying in the MENA region, language is a key part of that "person to person" experience. "Language plays a pivotal role in removing barriers between people and bridging cultures," says Joseph Jabbra, president of Lebanese American University. "Language also makes us better at resolving cross-cultural conflicts. In learning another language, people inadvertently learn a new way of looking at the world."

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VICKI VALOSIK is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C. area. Her last article for *IE* was "Supporting LGBT International Students," which was published in the March/April 2015 issue.

An informal student discussion at the Arab American Language Institute in Morocco.



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