

By traveling to different countries within the Middle East I will gain a better understanding of the differences and similarities of the region. It's necessary to understand the interaction between the three Abrahamic religions and the other faiths that exist within the Middle East as well as the diversity found within Islam itself. The Middle East is not a homogenous area and within the Arab Gulf, traditions and culture can vary. If you compare the Gulf to North Africa or the Levant, then the differences are even greater.

Receiving an in-depth experience of the communities and leaders found within the Middle East, I will return to the United States with a greater capacity to participate in the dialogue surrounding the region. I will have a greater understanding of the important issues revolving religion, war, and inequality that exist in the Middle East. As a Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations concentrator, I have the fortune to focus my studies and passion on this subject and being able to visit multiple countries will help me be a better leader and student within my field of study. For example, visiting Israel will allow me to be more active in the Palestinian-Israeli discussion on campus because I will have gained more understanding and experience related to the issue. When speaking of the cultural differences between the Levant, North Africa, and the Arab Gulf I will have more credibility because I will have visited all of the regions and will base my information on my experiences and education.

As a Mexican, Roman Catholic woman, my insight into Middle Eastern culture is unique. As a woman, I am able to witness first-hand the patriarchy of the region while as a Mexican, I can relate greatly to that same gender based system that exists in Mexico. With my religious views, I am able to compare what different forms of Christianity look like in the Middle East with how they are portrayed in North and South America. In the same way that Mexican Catholicism is different from what is found in the United States, so is Catholicism found within Jordan. While Islam is not the prevalent religion in Texas, where I grew up, I will be able to further analyze the Islamic culture found within the Arab community of Houston with what is found within the Arab Gulf, where the religion was founded.

When I first told my family I wanted to study Arabic in college instead of being a doctor or a lawyer, they were confused and very afraid. They did not understand why I would want to risk my life in a part of the world they consider dangerous and an enemy. Then, they did not want to imagine what the treatment of a Catholic woman would be in a Muslim world. A few years later they are able to better understand the complexities of the Middle East beyond what they see on television but that's only the beginning. By studying Arabic and traveling to Jordan and Morocco, I've been able to further disprove some of the myths my family and friends believe. In the future, I plan to continue this opportunity to offer knowledge to my family by visiting more countries and one day working in the region. In teaching my family that not all of their beliefs and fears are true, they are also gain the ability to teach their friends. Slowly, the community that surrounds me, especially in Texas, is gaining a better understanding of the Middle East and becoming more accepting of the Arab immigrants in Houston. I hope to receive the opportunity to continue creating change and understanding within my community, both in college and at home.

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