

Essay Sample 2: Research Proposal

STATEMENT OF PROPOSED STUDY OR RESEARCH

Jordan—Political Science

Jordan's Political Outlook: Secondary School Students' Opinions on Democracy

In the American news media, pundits, politicians and critics often ask this question: Can democracy flourish in the Middle East? In many Middle Eastern nations, this question has been internally debated for decades, including one particular nation, the country of Jordan. The nation of Jordan is mainly Sunni Muslim (close to 92%), a sect of Islam that is the dominant religious ideology of the region. Jordan is one of the most progressive and stable Middle Eastern nations, with a fledgling democracy (parliament in place since 1993) and bright prospects, hence my interest and hope to travel to the region with a Fulbright grant to study the opinions of secondary school students with regard to the democratization process, with the hope of defining an operating concept of democracy for Jordan and in general terms, for the entire region of the Middle East.

According to a 2005 poll conducted by the JCSS (Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, only one of two think tanks currently devoted to taking polls of the adult Jordanian population on issues of government), Jordanians believe their society is becoming a freer, more open nation. However, the poll indicates that only 6% of Jordanians believe existing political parties represent their social, economic, and political needs. In all of these polls is another trend worth noting; all of the studies are conducted with adults. By only taking polls of those eighteen and over, the Center for Strategic Studies misses a necessary viewpoint: that of secondary school students. Considering that these students will one day form a powerful electoral group (60% of Jordanians are under 30 years old) and the notable cultural similarities between Jordan and some of its neighbors, my study will provide insight into the often cited divide between American ideas of democracy for the region, and the viewpoints of those living there.

Attitudes of secondary-school students towards democracy in Jordan have sparked my curiosity due to my own formative high-school years, which shaped my political activism and party preference. While Western governments take for granted polls of high-school students, in the Middle East this is not the case. Studying Jordanian student ideas about democracy and civic knowledge will help provide me with a better understanding of the challenges facing a fledgling democracy in the Middle East. Without understanding the viewpoint of younger generations, Jordan's quest for a progressive society may diminish with a lack of educational awareness, involvement, and understanding. In all classrooms in Jordan, students are taught civic lessons about their nation. These lessons form the basis for future interpretation of what democracy entails, and my project provides a groundbreaking opportunity to understand the framework of Middle East democracy.

I hypothesize that although students are still in their formative stages of understanding their political leanings, it is vital to understand their conception of what constitutes a Jordanian democracy. This study, in turn, will provide greater implications for most of the region. Understanding influences on students' political views (such as television, parents, student groups, mentors), and the role civic education plays in their political development will help me decipher the complex entity that is democracy. The socially constructed political fabric surrounding students can be biased by income level, educational performance, religion, national origin, gender and individuals.

If I am awarded a Fulbright, I propose to spend a year in Jordan studying the political opinions of secondary-school students (age thirteen to eighteen) keeping in mind the criteria mentioned above. My survey seeks to determine the extent to which Jordan has progressed in the democratization process, the measures that should be adopted to upgrade the democratic climate, and the inclination of secondary-school respondents to vote in future parliamentary elections once they reach the voting age. In addition, each study will be somewhat different for each grade and age group, in order to ensure that the growth of civic information (or lack thereof) is clearly illustrated. Certain questions and polls on each study will be similar to demonstrate trends and provide a baseline for the study. For example, a few objectives of the survey will be to determine respondent evaluation of the performance of their Assembly of Deputies (Majlis al-Nawab) and Senate (Majlis al-Umma), their understanding of what democracy entails, and what they believe the level of representation of the various sectors of Jordanian society and its different levels should be.

This study will be conducted with the help of the Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST) in Irbid, and the Civil Society Development Center (CSDC), under the guidance of Dr. Abdallah Malkawi, Vice President of the Jordan University of Science and Technology. The CSDC is a non-profit interdisciplinary educational entity based at JUST, and it is part of the university's mission of conducting research to establish baseline data on issues of political representation, voting patterns, gender analysis, and youth employment, management of change, religious diversity and family protection. Dr. Malkawi will be directing the selection of appropriate political science professors to advise me, and his experience in the educational sphere will be invaluable for logistical issues such as contacting schools and other university research centers.

Dr. Malkawi will help me identify various school districts to help diversify the polling. Specifically, JUST will support my research by providing the necessary academic support such as the design of the study, and with contacts with local authorities, high schools and if warranted other research centers such as the Center for Strategic Studies at the Jordan University (JCSS). Mr. Saleem Haddad, a research assistant of the Jordan Center for Strategic Studies, will also be working in coordination with me to provide the statistical analysis support needed for this study. However, most of the necessary support will come from the CSDC. I will also be partaking in a few political science courses at JUST during my year abroad, such as Theories of International Relations or the Politicization of the Islamic Religion, as a complement to my research and to further my understanding of the political situation in the region.

My studies in history and political science at Rochester provide a good foundation for my project. Courses such as International Relations, Public Opinion Voting and Political Inquiry (political statistics) provide a good background of knowledge on the subject of polling. As a fluent Arabic speaker, I will be able to communicate both in and out of the classroom, and provide the Fulbright program with an articulate ambassador. In addition, my experiences in Model UN serve as a reminder of the joy of both understanding and contributing to political systems. As a debater and current President of Model UN, I often choose committees that reflect my growing interest in Middle East politics, such as the special committee of the Arab League. My ability to work well with peers, both as an individual and in groups, will also be invaluable since I will be working mainly with teenagers.

Although this type of study may seem too expansive in scope for the tenure of the Fulbright, I will be hitting the ground running since I will have designed the survey and discussed it with Dr. Malkawi and the CDSC before my grant period begins. In order to ensure the integrity and validity of my study, I will be soliciting advice from Dr. Richard Niemi throughout the spring and summer of 2007 before I travel to Jordan. I plan on traveling to Jordan in September 2007 and returning in May 2008. I will spend approximately one month for every student grade/age group interviewing and polling secondary school students, beginning with senior students and ending with freshmen (to allow for any civic education courses to remain fresh). After four to five months of interviews and polling at various schools (with a statistically significant number of responses estimated at this point at about 1500 students corresponding to a breakdown of about 100 students per school in about 15 high schools in diverse geographic regions) I will compile the data and publish an analysis of the results, hopefully in a political science journal.

This research will provide a stepping stone from which I can continue my political science studies in graduate school, culminating with a doctoral degree in Middle East policy. Through this project, I aim to gain greater insight into the belief systems of the younger set that will one day steer and govern Jordan. Secondary students are at a crossroads: this is the time when they learn about their nation, from not only their school, but from government sponsored national days, their parents and friends. By understanding how they view democracy at such a vital time, future opinions and polls will have far more weight theoretically and empirically. My hope is for the future, and understanding the political preferences of young Jordanians is necessary for understanding how to spread democratic values in the Middle East, since many nations of this region share a similar set of values as Jordan.

FULBRIGHT CURRICULUM VITAE

Jordan—Political Science

At the age of twelve, I visited my parents' home country of Lebanon. Confined to my grandfather's apartment due to a heavy Syrian military presence outside (and the drivers are particularly wild), I decided to use the elevator and get a view of the world outside. As the slow Otis elevator ground to a halt, the elevator door opened to reveal an entire story that was no longer in existence. Rubble was everywhere, and my mind, already processing the bullet holes that marked almost every building that did not get the fashionable facelift of downtown, was reeling as I stared from the edge of the 9th floor to the ground below. The devastation and destruction wrought by years of ethnic and religious conflict had a deep impression on my psyche. I could not imagine how such appalling acts could occur or how people could live in such an atmosphere of apprehension. Returning to her old mountain home overlooking Beirut a few days later, my mother could only cry as she saw old rusted bullets in her bedroom, and she could only scream at us in Arabic to stay away from the rockets in the bathroom. To help ease my apparent distress, my father gave me a hug, telling me, "You are safe in America. It is our new home. Just remember this: Anger does not solve anything, an eye for an eye and the world goes blind."

As I grew older in America I recognized that the lines of communication and understanding in Lebanon had been undermined and replaced by bigotry, religious intolerance, and hatred. During my high-school years, I was a bilingual speaker of English and Arabic, with a cadre of friends who spoke French, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, Hindi and Swahili. My world broadened with the many heated talks on international politics, and growing up near Washington, DC, I was drawn to the history and politics of the region, visiting the various museums and the Kennedy Center, and keeping abreast of political

news. In my spare time (summer break), I spent my money on books and travel, visiting Japan, Spain, Australia, England, and New Zealand. I readily admit my life is sheltered, yet I have encountered many obstacles in my young life.

My multicultural experiences as a child and teen gave me inner strength to overcome the hurdles. From blatant racism in high school from teachers and students because of my name, to people discounting my ability to speak English, I have learned that respect is earned and patience and understanding are a necessity. Before visiting my parents' home country, I was an angry child. Students who would make fun of my name or call me 'camel-rider' were often hit. My anger led to numerous black eyes. Until I visited real suffering, I could not imagine a worse existence. Yet my world was radically altered when I could no longer look at myself in the mirror and see someone to pity. That day anger was replaced with a promise to do better for myself and others.

For these reasons, upon arriving at the University of Rochester, I was naturally drawn to History, Neuroscience and Political Science. My majors are a reflection of the self I have become and the future-self I still strive for. I want to be able to understand both theoretically and scientifically what drives world society towards horrific acts. I want to understand why anger can lead to violence. Most importantly, I want to gain the skills that will help implement solutions towards fixing such problems. Agonizing over game theory, learning about centers of the brain, and understanding the historical roots of regional conflict all help further my aim of applying my education in real-world situations.

Living in Jordan as a Fulbright Scholar will give me the opportunity to interact with a new generation of young adults, providing me with the opportunity to learn and impart knowledge by acting as a bridge between cultures. As part of my community outreach, I will establish a rapport with local schools around my university, in order to engage in community service activities with secondary students. I will also volunteer in the community at hospitals, schools and shelters (in conjunction with the Public Services Club of JUST), much as I did in high-school at Suburban Hospital or Bannock burn Elementary, both located in Bethesda, Maryland. By directly establishing a relationship with secondary students, I will learn how teenagers view democracy and what they see for the future politically. Understanding how younger generations of Jordan will adapt and implement democratic processes is essential in a region that is volatile, since the alternative is death, destruction, and needless suffering.