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Jordan

With the help of the Naples Council on World Affairs, I was able to spend four weeks in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan. Travelling to a region that is so often misunderstood by Americans was both unnerving and exciting. However I have returned from my trip with a newfound respect for both the region and the people living there. The four weeks I spent in Jordan shaped my personality in a way I never imagined possible.

After arriving in Amman our group was immediately brought to a halt at Customs and Immigration when one of our group leaders, Cortez, was stopped because of his recent travel destinations (Morocco, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt) and the fact that he looked very similar to someone on Jordan's most wanted list. This was our first taste of Jordanian Security (though it would not be our last). After sorting out the issues at Customs we were greeted by a few Jordanian students our age that would be working with us and helping to guide us during our trip. We were driven to a hotel and upon entering, the first thing I noticed were three large pictures above a fake fireplace. One was of the late King Hussein, the next of the current ruler King Abdullah, and the third of the Crown Prince Hussein (who recently finished school in the United States). These pictures would be found almost everywhere in Jordan, a constant reminder of the royal family. Though all of us were extremely hungry, it was Ramadan, so we had to wait until sunset arrived to eat. When *iftar* finally arrived and we could eat, we were served a mediocre meal in the hotel. We met Dema, the country coordinator for World Learning, and were taught the main rules we were expected to follow while in Jordan. It was stressed that we were not to eat or drink in public during Ramadan, though it wasn't until later that I found out that this action could be punished with jail time (that would have been good to know!)

The next two days consisted of general introductions, basic Arabic lessons, and cultural lessons. One of the important cultural lessons was about taxis. Women were never to sit in the front seat, and men were always expected to. I was nervous about communicating with other group members because I had not brought my cell phone, but we were later provided with Track-phones with local numbers. On our third day in Jordan, a moment arrived that many of us had been dreading, meeting our host families. My friend and I were especially nervous, as I only had one younger brother (age nine) and a single mother, and my friend didn't even have any siblings. In the afternoon, our host families arrived to pick up all of the students. My host mother (always punctual) was one of the first to arrive at the SIT building. After an awkward picture I hopped into my host mother's GMC and drove to our neighborhood, Jandaweel. I learned that my host brother, Fawwaz, went to Canadian International School, and thus was fluent in both English and

French. My mother was educated and had lived in the US for six months, so she also spoke some English. I was given my own room and bathroom in our nice, albeit small apartment.

The plans for the night were to go to my grandparents' house, then to my Uncle's for dinner. My grandfather was very easy to get along with, and he had amazing stories to tell. He had served as a general in the army, then later became the personal bodyguard for King Hussein! He had met numerous American politicians and had travelled all over the world with the King. After enjoying tea and fresh fruit, we left for my Uncle's. He was the oldest in the family, but was currently not home. He worked for the United Nations and at the time was stationed in Sudan. My host Aunt made dinner and afterwards, my cousin came up to me and asked a question I will never forget, "do you want to play PlayStation 4?" For a few hours I delved into the politics of Middle Eastern Grand Theft Auto Servers. Apparently the Saudi's were the best players so to counter them, the Jordanian and Egyptian players formed a loose alliance. After a bit of fun (which, in hindsight, wasn't very culturally emerging) we returned home so I could sleep off the jetlag.

The rest of the trip was a plethora of Adventures throughout Amman. My host mother was very encouraging of me to spend my nights out in Amman exploring the city with friends. I would go to class until 3pm, explore the city for a few hours, return home for dinner, and then go back out until past midnight. Since it was Ramadan, the streets were always packed and my host family would stay up easily until sunrise, essentially becoming nocturnal. On one night of Adventure, I and three other guys planned on going to an old Roman Amphitheater to take some pictures before returning home early. Upon arriving there was a giant line, which we soon found out was to enter a concert. Not just any concert though, a free concert! We stood in a security line (which had three different checks) before entering the packed theatre. We enjoyed a set list of Jordanian live music before leaving. We bought some street food and prepared for the arduous task of finding a taxi, at night, during Ramadan. One of the guys finally caught one, and as I prepared to get into the back of the cab, we discovered our seats occupied by a sleeping child, maybe 4 years old. The taxi driver casually requested that we "hold his kid" before driving off. Eventually the kid woke up and we blasted music and played with the kid before arriving at our respective houses. The amazing thing about this encounter was that it wasn't planned, it just happened. Amman was always full of surprises.

After spending days on end drinking Pepsi in back alleys the final day of Ramadan, Eid, finally arrived. My host Uncle was returning from Sudan, so the family had rented a house (with a pool!) near the Dead Sea to celebrate the holiday. The day after Eid our group travelled north, three kilometers from the Syrian border. Dema's brother owned a farm up there, and had almost 500 Syrians living and working there. Jordanian law requires Syrians to have a sponsor if they want to leave the camps and work, so he had sponsored them all. We met a family with a father who had been a teacher, his two wives, and his fifteen children. They all lived in a tent about the size of two of my bedrooms. And, amazingly, the first thing they did was bring us all food. We heard their difficult story about how their house had been destroyed and many of their family

members had been killed, but luckily all of his children had made it out safely. I distinctly remember him talking extensively about how he thought that the United States could solve the crisis in Syria if they truly wanted to.

Another story that sticks out in my mind occurred when I and two others decided to go exploring on the edge of Amman. While walking through this poorer area, we noticed a lot of graffiti with anti-American sentiment. We walked for hours before deciding to turn back and find a cab. A few young kids offered us food and soda, which we politely accepted. The people were always not only willing to give out food, but they truly felt it was their duty. On our way back we stopped at a small shop selling falafel. The man owning the shop struck up conversation and asked where we were from. We falsely told him Canada. He began talking about how much he hated Americans and had feared that we were from the evil United States. He then asked us if we had heard about what happened in France (this was shortly after the Nice attack.) We told him yes, and he said that he believed, "they deserved it." We were growing increasingly nervous (especially because the girl with us was not wearing a hijab) but the conversation continued. He then asked the other guy with us where he was from (he is clearly Arab). After telling him he was from Iraq, the man at the falafel stand revealed that he too was from Iraq, and asked my friend his family name. When my friend replied, "Rizvi" (a very Shia name) the man's face turned to pure disgust. "Are you Shia," he asked. Lying once again, my friend told him that he was most assuredly not Shia. The man gave us free drinks, because we were Canadian and not American, and we left quickly. Luckily this man was the exception and not the rule amongst most Jordanians we met, though it was unnerving to meet someone who was a true terrorist sympathizer.

I could write novels about my time in Jordan, but the ultimate takeaway was that the Middle East is not even close to how Americans perceive it. It is a region rich in cultural and full of proud and welcoming people. Jordan is a phenomenal country, with history spanning thousands of years. To walk the same sands that Moses, Jesus, and even Muhammed walked is a feeling unlike any other. I wish every American could have the same experience I had so as to better understand the issues facing our world today. The friends and connections I made will last a lifetime, and I cannot wait to someday go back.