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Experiences of a Lifetime: Studying Arabic in Yemen

The Yemen Language Center in Sana'a attracts students from around the world and serves as one of the places that the United States sends government personnel to train in Arabic. The special summer rate for college students, which includes airfare, housing, meals, Arabic language study, lectures on history and culture, and travel in the country, is an exceptional financial bargain. Students can enter the program at whatever level of the language that they possess, and, through international agreements, the hours are transferable to American colleges and universities. The course is intensive and by attending all three summer terms, students can reach intermediate level fluency.



Sarah Walters and Yemini friend

During the past summer, two Converse College students studied at the YLC. The following essays provide a glimpse of their individual experiences.

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NEWS AND ARTICLES

The Best Decision That I Have Made in my Undergraduate Years

Sarah Walters

When I first landed in Sana'a, Yemen, I felt that I had arrived at the end of the Earth. Ten weeks later, though, when I reluctantly left that small Arab country, I knew that I had been living in the very treasured center of the Earth. Spending the summer studying Arabic at the Yemen Language Center was the best decision I have made since I chose to attend Converse College.

The city of Sana'a itself, classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is amazing. The Old City buildings with their intricate window and wall detail are testimonies to the spirit of the people who have carved beauty from the barren mountains. When one enters any building, the browns and tans of the desert are washed away by the sea of bright color in the hangings and upholstery inside. The people have learned to make the

most of their surroundings. A road wraps around the city built in such a manner to catch the overflow water during rainy season and become a river navigable by boat. The surrounding mountains are topped with elaborate houses poised on the very edge of the cliffs. While the architecture and the landscape are stunning, the best part of my experience was the Yemen Language Center itself. My Yemeni hosts, the language instructors, and the other university students, with their passion to study the language and to explore the unique culture, made this an unforgettable experience.

During the first term at the Yemen Language Center, I spent four hours a day, five days a week, in class. With only six people in my class, the other five all males, our two professors came to know us all quite well. At least once a week, the

whole class went into town with our professors to practice our new vocabulary at the suq, museum, or at lunch. On these trips, we learned a great amount about Yemeni life and culture. Negotiating in the suq was a eye opening experience and we were pleased to have our teachers help in the challenging effort to make our purchases.

Yemeni society was a completely different experience. I had participated in a travel-study program in Egypt so I had some familiarity with Arab society, but Yemen is very different from Cairo. The difference in food between Egypt and Yemen surprised me. I had assumed that the Yemenis would eat in a similar fashion to the Levantine or Maghrebi meals, but Yemeni dining is closer to Ethiopian both in cuisine and style than it is to Egyptian. Yemenis eat on the floor with their hands, only occasionally using a spoon. Chicken, kebab, bread, rice and potatoes are the staples of the diet. After ten weeks I sometimes grew weary of traditional Yemeni food, but I never lost my enthusiasm for Yemeni honey. It is truly the best in the world. In Egypt I could go to McDonalds to change the eating routine or visit a music nightclub to meet with friends. Neither of these exist in Yemen.

Other differences were more pronounced. Women were everywhere on the streets of Cairo and in all forms of attire. This was not the case in Yemen. On my first excursions in Sana'a, I saw very few women, and those I did see were covered in the traditional burqa with their heads lowered as they hustled about their business, children

Sarah practicing firing an AK-47



NEWS AND ARTICLES



Bab al Salam

in tow. After a couple of weeks in the city, a few of us discovered an interesting opportunity at a women's community center opened by a Yemeni NGO. During the short time that we were in Sana'a, we presented lectures, arranged after school games for the children, and I even taught a Pilates class. I particularly enjoyed spending time with Yemeni women in this relaxed environment.

Two weeks before leaving Sana'a, I finally experienced life behind the veil of a Yemeni woman. I was walking home from class when a young woman in a burqa, who had been following me very closely, suddenly- jumped in front of me, and said "Help me!" in English. I was quite taken aback, but I quickly learned that she did

not actually need assistance for an emergency; she was simply trying to make contact with an American with whom to talk. Amal was a twenty-one year old in her third year of studying English at Sana'a University. For weeks, she had watched me walk back and forth to class and to the market from my house across the street, and finally she had determined to talk to me. Amal became an instant friend. She introduced me to her family, took me to her dress maker, invited me to her best friend's wedding parties, and provided me a candid view of her life in Sana'a.

I learned invaluable lessons about the struggles she faced as she invested time and energy into her studies with no clear promise of

a career. At the same time she attempted to please her parents by cooking, caring for her younger siblings, and preparing for married life. As we got ready for the several wedding parties that she took me to, she watched me do my hair and put on make-up. She was not allowed to wear make-up until she was married. At the wedding parties, the women welcomed me, shared their perfumes and taught me to dance the unique Yemeni dances. It was astonishing to watch these women tip-toe in from the street in their full burqas and then rip off the robes and reveal the tight, animal-print cocktail dresses beneath that were accessorized with four-inch heels and feathers. I had to pinch myself to make sure that I was not

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A Summary of Memories

Katie Moore



YLC students and Yemeni woman and child

The conversation with the man next to me in the doctor's waiting room led to why was I there? When I answered, "To get shots to study abroad," the natural response was where was I going? Doubting that he would know where Yemen was, I responded "the Middle East." A bombardment of questions followed. Why I was going? Was I not scared? The unarticulated implication was "Are you crazy? I was a customed to the reaction. My family, friends, co-workers, and almost everyone else with whom I had confided had expressed the same concerns when I told them I planned to study Arabic in Yemen for five weeks during the summer. The general reaction was why would a nineteen-year-old female college student want to travel to an area of the world that was unstable, where women were marginalized, and where America was highly unpopular.

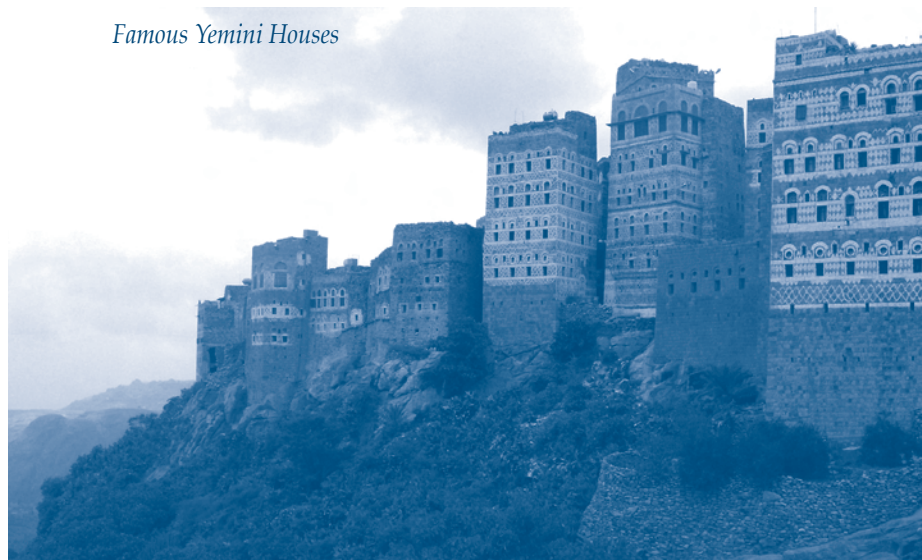
My passions—languages, culture, and travel—were three of the reasons why this venture was exciting. I left

twenty somethings looking frustrated while airport security agents check their bags for explosive materials and gawk at their paper tickets. By the time that we arrived in Yemen, the group had begun to bond. After a lengthy wait at the airport, we loaded into buses and drove through Sana'a to our various housing locations. I was at "Biet Sabri," the guest house at the Yemen Language Center, a beautiful building surrounded by a wall with a high metal gate monitored by three guards. I felt safe and during my entire trip had no reasons to feel otherwise. The experience was to be far more than I ever imagined.

Spartanburg, South Carolina behind as I set off to learn a bit of Arabic and experience a quite different culture. For all my bravado, I was admittedly very apprehensive. I shook the majority of the time in the three airports I traveled through to get to Sana'a, the capital city where the Yemen Language Center was located. But I slowly gained friends as fellow students began to identify each other. Students stand out as stereotyped

The language center was an interesting place. All three of my teachers were Yemeni, but my six-person class consisted of four Americans, all from different parts of the United States and backgrounds, and two Italians. The school included people from all over Europe, with a large number of Spanish and Italians, and also Irish, German, Scottish, and Polish students. It was so interesting to talk with the students

Famous Yemeni Houses



YLC student and child

about their lives and experiences and the similarities and differences between our cultures. I have kept in touch with many of them and I hope to remain friends with them for many years.

We had class for five hours a day, six days a week. The pace of the course was rapid and the time flew by. It seemed that one day we were learning the alphabet, and the next we were speaking and writing Arabic. I learned enough elementary Arabic to get around the city, including how to figure the proper prices and how to avoid paying more. Yemeni cab drivers would always say that they would give you "Special price! No worry, no worry, special price!" which meant you were being charged four times the normal rate. I learned to order food in a restaurant, give directions to a cabby, and conduct a basic conversation involving greetings.

The city of Sana'a is beautiful, and we had opportunities to travel beyond it on several occasions. We visited several other little towns and saw many beautiful landscapes and

monuments, including a magnificent mosque at the top of a mountain and the stunning "palace on the rock," built on a rock that overlooks the rest of the town. We spent three days on Kamaran Island in the Red Sea with the clearest water that I have seen. We visited a mangrove forest where trees grow directly out of the water. At low-tide, it looks like a simple forested area, but by high tide the trees are almost completely submerged.

Around the city it was common for locals to stare at the foreigners, which could be quite entertaining or annoying. Merchants would spike their prices and sharpen their smiles, preparing for those who did not know how much things cost. Despite being fully prepared to take advantage of your wallet, the Yemenis were very hospitable. It was never difficult to get directions or help, cabbies were more than willing to be patient with slow, bilingual directions, and the children always wanted you to join their soccer game or to speak with them in English. The children spoke pieces of the many different languages that they acquired from the different tourists that they encountered. One of my favorite places was a small store on the way from the guest house to the school. Three young girls ran the place for their father during the day. They were the sweetest children and

would always ask me about my day and help me with my Arabic.

The only disconcerting moments that occurred in Yemeni society were the occasional advances of men. A woman with white skin and green eyes is a novelty, and our uncovered faces and pale skin attract considerable attention. Only once did a man try to touch me, and even then he only grabbed my arm. Still, this was considered by the Yemenis to be horribly insulting, and I was quite surprised at how the people defended my honor. One Yemeni man berated the offender for his behavior, and my friend Rebekah, who has studied Arabic for years, informed the man that Allah was ashamed. Besides that incident, I had no problems, and I loved walking around the city with my friends or traveling to the souq to buy gifts or just to look at the different items for sale.

I will never forget my experience in Yemen, one of the best experiences in my life. The people I met, the places I went, the culture I experienced, and the language that I am still learning have permanently impressed upon me the importance of travel and study in everyone's lives, not just that of students. I encourage everyone to take every opportunity that they can to travel abroad, especially to the Middle East, so that they may have such memories as mine.



Arabic Class at YLC

Reforming Syria: A Summer Internship

Nora Nassri



Nora at Omayyad Mosque, Center for Islamic Learning Courtyard

I spend several weeks visiting my extended family in Damascus every summer, and I try to make my time there as profitable as possible. During the last couple years, I have volunteered in the Damascus Community School and worked with the Syrian Family Council in Lebanese refugee camps. This summer I had the most meaningful experience yet as I served as an intern at the Syrian Enterprise and Business Center (SEBC). It was a wonderful opportunity to meet interesting people and to engage in important research.

The SEBC is a private foundation dedicated to the development of an internationally-competitive Syrian private sector. Among its activities are support for qualified industries and businesses, including administration of a 15 million Euro grant from the European Union earmarked for the development of small and medium enterprises. The SEBC also conducts and publishes public reports on various industries in Syria, including the pharmaceutical and olive oil industries, and it attempts to lobby the Syrian government on various economic issues.

I was assigned to a team working on “Vision 2025,” a report that projects a vision for Syria by the year 2025 and provides the strategic objectives and recommendations necessary to accomplish this task within the economic, social, political, and environmental arenas. This was an appealing project for me that combined my interests in Arab political and social issues



Historic Damascus Alley

as well as my budding interest in economic development.

Vision 2025 is directed toward a range of audiences, but the primary intended one is the Syrian government. Economic issues addressed by the report included the need for institutional reform within the economic infrastructure, the most important of which are a more functional Central Bank and the problem of extensive subsidies within the Syrian economy. The Syrian economy has been unduly dependent upon oil revenues, but the decline in Syrian oil production means that unless new discoveries are located, Syria will become a net oil importer within ten years. Since the subsidies and government programs have relied upon oil monies, a crisis is looming. The Vision 2025 report highlighted the necessity of eliminating many subsidies. Emphasizing the interrelatedness of the political, social, and economic spheres to maintain lasting and stable economic growth, the report also called for wide scale reform to encourage a climate conducive to the

development of human capital and the creation of economic, social, and political opportunity.

The staff of the SEBC is a talented group of people who hold diverse views on politics, economics, and social issues. Lunchtime discussions ranged over disagreements about religion, Iraq, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, women’s issues, and many other topics. Specific issues of the summer included the massive influx of Iraqi refugees to Syria, the civil

strife in Palestine and Lebanon, the war in Iraq, Iran, and the Turkish elections to touch on only a few topics. On one subject there was general consensus—that a change in the U.S. administration cannot come soon enough.

The Vision 2025 report, which includes my name as a contributing author, was formally presented to a visiting delegation from the European Union in September 2007. I am very interested in

observing the Syrian government’s reaction to the report. However, they respond, my experience at SEBC this summer was a totally positive one. The people that I encountered, those with whom I worked and debated, made a strong impression on me. The research and writing experience gained will prove invaluable to me as I continue to graduate school. In sum, my internship was a most rewarding opportunity.

A Key Issue of Debate in Kuwait

The contest between traditional practices and modernization is a lively debate in the Arab Gulf world. In this piece taken from “Weekly Diwaniya,” a socio-political television program in Kuwait, Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra, a political analyst and head of Jusoor Arabiya, a consultancy firm dedicated to transformation through leadership in the Arab world, addresses a pressing issue in Kuwait. Dr. Ghabra’s career has included his roles as professor of political science and director of the center for strategic and future studies at Kuwait University, director of the Kuwait Information Office in Washington, DC, and the first president of the American University of Kuwait. The television show, which hosts prominent guests who debate with young men and women in order to provide alternative perspectives, provides an open forum on challenging issues in the Middle East.

The issue during this weekly broadcast in September was “Coeducation and Segregation in Kuwaiti Colleges.” In 1996,

the parliament approved a law forbidding mixed environments in universities and institutions of higher education. Defenders of segregation believe that coeducation is against Islamic cultural traditions. Those against segregation argue that the practice is seriously detrimental to the quality of education in Kuwait. Debating these issues were Dr. Ghabra’s guests Dr. Fatma Ayyad, professor of psychology at Kuwait University and board member of the Womens’ Cultural Society, and Dr. Saad Al-Onaizi, lawyer and specialist in Islamic law.

Dr. Ghabra: “How do you understand the implementation of this law?”

Dr. Ayyad: “This law passed suddenly in the late nineties. We never had any issues related to coeducation. All was going fine until parliament passed the law against the will of educational institutions and faculty. Likewise, if you look at the ratio of men to women at Kuwait University, men only account to about 30%.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Has the law affected the learning process of these students?”

Dr. Ayyad: “Yes, we run into complications. In so many cases we will have 80 female students sign up for one class and five male students that sign up for the same class. Some male students have to wait another semester to take the class and this affects the number of years it takes them to graduate. Segregation demoralizes the students and thus affects them in many ways.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Does the law of segregation imply segregation all over the university?”

Dr. Ayyad: “In the cafeterias, courtyards and hallways it is mixed.”

Dr. Ghabra: “So segregation is only enforced inside the class rooms?”

Dr. Ayyad: “Predominantly yes. This is the irony of this issue in our institutions of higher education.”

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Dr. Ghabra: “Do you think that this law will lead to even more restrictive laws?”

Dr. Ayyad: “No, because the existing law has failed. When our students graduate and go into the workforce they will be working in mixed environments. I resent the fact that the parliament questions the Minister of Education for not implementing the law while problems as important and widespread as drugs are being ignored.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Too many contradictions?”

Dr. Ayyad: “Manners and upbringing is a key factor in our society. Segregation is not the way to teach our youth about each other and about the future.”

Dr. Ghabra: “I would like to hear why segregation is beneficial from the other point of view.”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “We live in a society of Islamic tradition and culture which means that in mixed environments we must implement what Islam asks us to follow. In Islam when a woman goes the market or goes to pilgrimage for example, there are boundaries that our religion sets.”

Dr. Ghabra: “What are these boundaries?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “Many people ask us for the proof that Islam promotes segregation. Well in the Quran we find many excerpts that prove this.”

Dr. Ghabra: “What are the boundaries when it comes to segregation?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “We need to act morally and continue to follow our Islamic traditions.”

Dr. Ghabra: “What does Islam say about being around different sexes?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “Sharia says that activities between men and women should be segregated and woman should cover their hair.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Throughout time women have always fought, stood by men and have been seen as a pillar of strength, so why are these things enforced on women today?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “A woman should cover her hair when she goes out. These days you see young boys and girls holding hands in public and this is not part of the Kuwaiti tradition.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Isn’t it degrading to look at women like this?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “This is how we protect our women and value them.”

Dr. Ghabra: “Here in this room in the TV studio we have an audience today that is comprised of both female and male students. Lets pretend that this is a classroom, what do you think is going to happen? You agreed to be part of this coeducational environment today. Why not the same environment in a real classroom?”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “No contradiction. I do not like this situation yet I am hear to promote a noble idea. I also believe we can be in a mixed environment as long as we are working to segregate it.

This is why in every place and situation that we are in we should try to promote segregation.”

Dr. Ayyad: “I don’t understand how women obtained their political rights and are participating in society at a higher level while in a simple classroom they have no rights.”

Dr. Al-Onaizi: “Men should always come first, then the woman.”

Dr. Ayyad: “Our youth are in need of mixed environments so they can grow in a healthy setting.”

Dr. Ghabra shifted the discussion to the audience where one university female student stressed the importance of having mixed education. In addition, Ali Khajah, (a student organization) said that the law of segregation is a way of achieving further segregation in our society. Likewise, Ahmed Al-Omar said that the students are the victims of this law. A women student emphasized that mixed classrooms help women learn how to deal with men. We are studying at the Faculty of Medicine in order to become doctors and as future doctors there is no difference between us and the patient or between men and women.”

For commentary or information, contact:
Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra, President
Tel: (965) 251-7384/6 Ext: 101
Fax: (965) 251-7387
E-mail:ghabra@jusoorarabiya.com
www. jusoorarabiya.com

LEARNING RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES



Book Review

Dr. Joe P. Dunn

Charles A. Dana Professor of History and Politics, Converse College

Yoav Alon, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism, and the Modern State* (I.B. Taurus, 2007).

This newsletter is primarily for a popular audience, and most of the books that I review in its issues are for that audience. This book does not fit that category. I expect that few readers will actually undertake this very scholarly account. However, the book made such an impression on me and its topic is so important that I wished to call attention to it by at least summarizing the argument and the contribution that it makes to the literature.

Tribes are the most important component of traditional societies. In the Middle East as in other areas around the globe, they are the political and social instrument around which societies are organized. The history of regions is largely the story of the interplay, conflict, and accommodation of various tribes. Each has very different perspectives about their relative roles and importance. Honor and disgrace are at stake. In the preface

the author tells a story about his first research trip to Jordan to conduct the work that would eventually be this volume. He was called into the office of a high ranking official in the Ministry of the Interior who berated him for not giving sufficient attention to his father, a tribal shaykh whom the official insisted had not received adequate attention in the author’s unpublished masters thesis on the life and dealings of another shaykh. Indeed by implication, the other shaykh appeared to be more powerful and important. Obscure as this manuscript was, such perceived slights and the attention to one leader or tribe above another were serious business. The honor of the official, his good name, and that of his entire family apparently rested upon corrective action by the author. Once the author agreed to make some accommodations, he was invited to a dinner party to meet other members of the tribe and to be supplied with documents to rectify the supposed slight.

As Alon states, he then truly understood the complexities and pitfalls of writing about Jordan’s tribes. But his intent in this book is not to write or comment on tribal histories, and he apologizes in advance to any Jordanians who might interpret that their family and shaykhs received insufficient attention. The purpose of this book is to detail the process of how the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan became a state. On this subject, Jordan has received far less attention than its surrounding states, and the author claims much of the commentary rests on clichés rather than on indepth study of the realities of the actual process.

Building a modern state in the

developing world usually has meant a zero-sum process in which the central government gained power at the expense of tribal autonomy, identity, and primary loyalties. However, Alon demonstrates that Jordan followed a quite different model. In contrast to other Arab states, where the power of the tribes was broken by violence and tribal authority was marginalized, the tribes in Jordan actively participated in the process of state formation. As he traces this process of accommodation through the various stages of the British mandate period, the author emphasizes that Britain’s most successful state building in the Middle East was the product of the relative weakness of the colonial power rather than its strength. However, more than any other factor, Emir Abdullah’s adroit dealings with the tribal shaykhs and notables in the establishment of a national chieftaincy accomplished this task.

The study is marvelously researched, the thesis impeccably articulated, and the book beautifully written. It is a significant contribution not only to appreciating the uniqueness of Jordan, but to understanding the state building process throughout the region and indeed tribal-state relationships globally. Even if this is not a book for the general reader, it deserves a wide audience among scholars and informed laymen. It is a very important and quite valuable contribution to our understanding of important matters. Although obvious differences exist between the two states, the role of the tribes and shaykhs must be considered as a central component in the building of the contemporary state in Iraq. This book helps to explain the difficulties and the compromises necessary for any hope that such an achievement can ever be reached.

(continued from page 3)

dreaming as I observed a room with at least one hundred Yemeni women laughing and dancing, adorned in gold jewelry, thick make-up and sequins. While the Yemeni women may maintain an outward appearance of repression in their black head-to-toe dress, they shared their sensual sides in private with their friends as they teased about marriage and talked openly about their intimate desires.

I would not have imagined that living in such different settings, we could be so similar in our goals and dreams; however, I identified with the women as I recognized the universal struggle that women confront as they attempt to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers while reaching for their dreams as knowledgeable and passionate individuals.

During the long weekends, guided excursions around the country were available so that we could visit historic sites and practice our Arabic. Hotieb, the Red Sea, and Hadramawt were my personal favorites. We visited the city of Mar'ib the weekend preceding the car bombing that destroyed the temple mound. Having just visited this location, watching the news about this terrible event was a disconcerting experience. While I realize that Yemen is not totally secure from terrorist threats, I never personally felt endangered. Armed guards escorted us on any trip where security might pose a threat. Occasionally, I rode in a cab that sported a picture of Saddam Hussein and a driver that cursed the United States under his breath. However, the more normal experience was that I was warmly received with

gracious Yemeni hospitality as a visitor to the country.

From the Bedouin tribes in the Empty Quarter to the fisherman on the Red Sea who took me out on their boat to go snorkeling over a coral reef, I found the people immensely hospitable and nearly untouched by the progression of time. The northern part of Yemen where I lived remains unconquered by any Western empire. I think I know why: any Westerners who had the opportunity to get to know the people and enjoy their traditional customs had their hearts conquered by Yemen. I did.



Dr. Joe P. Dunn, Director
Carolinas Committee on U.S.-Arab Relations
Converse College
580 East Main Street
Spartanburg, SC 29302

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