

Midshipman Studies Arabic Abroad

From the Naval Academy International Programs Office



Midn. 1/C Mike Hogan wears traditional Egyptian clothing while on a semester exchange in Cairo. Hogan studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo. Photo courtesy of Midn. 1/C Mike Hogan

During the spring semester, Midn. 1/C Mike Hogan attended the American University of Cairo in Egypt to study Arabic and the Egyptian culture.

“Having been to Egypt on a previous program, I thought I had some foresight into what I would experience. However, the four months spent without a guide during the semester was much different from the month spent with a group of Midshipmen and knowledgeable guides,” said Hogan. “The lack of guide turned out to be the biggest benefit of the trip. This forced me to make decisions about where to go, what to see and when to do it. It also allowed for interaction with the Egyptian population, giving me valuable insights into Middle Eastern politics and conflicts.”

Hogan attended colloquial language lessons at the American University of Cairo which helped further his conversation skills with the average Egyptian. He found that as he began to learn the Egyptian dialect, as opposed to the formal classical Arabic he was familiar with, he was able to learn much more about the culture from the local people.

“My teacher was very responsive to questions and encouraged heavy interaction from all the students,” said Hogan. “By the end of the semester, I was carrying around a pen and pad to record words I did not know. She would translate any unknown words at the end of class.”

For Egyptian students, attending the university is expensive. While on campus, Hogan’s interaction was with the wealthy youth of Egypt, and he found that the atmosphere of the university resembled an American high school rather than a college.

“The most important insights I gained were with respect to Egyptian history and politics and the Israel-Palestine struggle,” said Hogan. “Some of these discussions revealed an underlying dislike of American support or actions. The viewpoints shared in the discussions challenged everything I thought I knew.”

Conversations with Egyptians comprised part of nearly every day. Popular topics of discussion included American politics and its affect on Egyptian politics. Egypt’s current government has had American support since the initial peace talks between Egypt and Israel. According to Hogan’s experience, some Egyptians blame the U.S. for their current status and are very vocal about it, while others are very supportive of the American aid the country receives.

Interaction with the “bawabs,” responsible for security and upkeep of each apartment complex, provided Hogan with the opportunity to practice language and discuss a wide range of topics.

“It was interesting to hear the foreign perspective on American politics,” said Hogan. “By the end of the semester, Hassan, one of our bawabs, was a good friend whom I could count on for any number of services.”

Outside of Cairo, Hogan witnessed the cultural diversity of the country. In Upper Egypt, near the Sudan border in the South, he met the darker-skinned Nubians. In the city of Luxor, he visited the enormous Karnak Temple and the Valley of the Kings, where numerous pharaohs, including Tutankhamen, were buried. In the Sinai region, he experienced the liberalism of former Israeli regions such as Sharm el-Sheikh and visited Mount Sinai, one of the holy sites of the Abrahamic religions.

In addition, he was able to see some of the different economies of the country at work, from farming and sculpting in the south, to fishing and shipbuilding in the north. According to Hogan, tourism is a large factor in Egyptian economy, and sculptures made of onyx, alabaster and other materials in the south are sold throughout the country to tourists. Many people make their money through tips as guides or hieroglyphic interpreters at the numerous ancient sites throughout the region.

Hogan was especially interested in the military history of the country. Ancient Egyptian conquests were depicted in drawings in many of the temples he visited, and the Military Museum was devoted almost entirely to a combination of ancient conquests and the crossing of the Sinai by Egyptian forces. He found that Egyptians view many of their historic conflicts with Israel as victories, though they are regarded internationally as losses.

Hogan was also interested in potential future conflicts and had the opportunity to participate in a Theatre Security Cooperation Workshop Group with members of U.S. Central Command, Africa Command and the American Embassy in Cairo. The group discussed current operations and cooperation between the U.S. and Egyptian militaries.

“While this was my only true military event while abroad, it certainly left an impression as to the responsibilities and the effort put forth in diplomacy,” said Hogan.

“Overall, the experience was once in a lifetime. I experienced Egyptian and Arab culture in a way I could not with only a short journey to the same areas. This tremendous amount of history, from the ancient Egyptians through numerous Islamic empires to the modern dictatorship, can only be witnessed in a few cultures around the world. I am very fortunate that I was able to have this experience.”

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