

Midshipmen Study Abroad in Jordan

From the Naval Academy International Programs Office



Midn. 1/C Janell Peske stands with four Jordanian students. Peske and two other Midshipmen spent six months studying in Jordan. Photo courtesy of the Naval Academy International Programs Office.

During the spring semester 2009, the Naval Academy sent three Midshipmen to Jordan to study the Arabic language and experience a foreign culture very different from their own. Midn. 1/C Jason Maenza, Jeremiah Olver and Janell Peske spent six months in Jordan, studying as civilians and interacting with Jordanians as American college students. According to the three Midshipmen, they gained a knowledge and understanding that will serve them well in their careers as Naval officers.

“Interacting and learning from our friends and the people we talked to on the street provided an invaluable education for which there is no substitute,” said Peske. “Our stories and the knowledge that we bring back to the Naval Academy and share with our fellow Midshipmen will help to break down the erroneous images many have of one of our chief Middle East allies.”

Jordan is a small desert country, only about an eight hour drive at its farthest. Located in the heart of the Middle East, it shares borders with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Israel. Despite some neighbors who have a history of hostility toward the United States, Jordan’s government has remained an ally.

However, Jordan is dependent on its neighboring countries for survival. The country’s only direct outlet to the rest of the world is the small Red Sea port of Aqaba, and its

major water source is the River Jordan which is shared with Israel. Due to these and various other factors, Jordan has repeatedly found itself in precarious political situations and has been a key to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Jordan's population is primarily split between Jordanians who descended from the Bedouin nomads that wandered the area now called Jordan, and Jordanians of Palestinian origin who still refer to themselves as Palestinians regardless of their citizenship and place of birth. Although the exact demographic is a closely guarded government secret, it is widely accepted that the majority of the population of Jordan is Palestinian.

The Palestinian population is concentrated in Jordan's cities, mostly in the capital of Amman where the Midshipmen lived and spent most of their time interacting with Jordanians.

According to the Midshipmen, most Palestinian Jordanians oppose the nation of Israel and express disdain for the American government, blaming it for Israel's success, but they differentiate between a nation's government and its citizens. Many of them openly expressed to the Midshipmen their contempt for U.S. government policies while also expressing their fondness for the American people.

“We learned that many of the people of the Middle East regard people as separate from nations and governments,” said Olver. “Thus a Palestinian saw no personal conflict with disliking a government while helping and befriending its citizens.”

The Midshipmen studied at the University of Jordan, the country's largest university. Their daily classes exposed them to a unique environment, surrounded as they were by other students who had come to Jordan to learn Arabic.

Outside the classroom, they were immersed in Jordanian youth culture. Aside from the daily impromptu interactions with Jordanians, they also participated in the university's Language Partner Program, which pairs foreign students studying Arabic with a Jordanian student studying the foreigner's language. Through this program, each student learned much about each other's proper language, including common slang, and a great deal of one another's culture.

“Despite its importance in America's foreign policy, few Americans know anything about Jordan,” said Maenza. “Our time spent in Jordan enabled us to tell people about the real population of Jordan – a society that shares many of the same problems that any society has when modernity struggles with tradition – but also a society of people that are very welcoming and almost always willing to help a stranger in need.”