

Claire Anderson  
FLAS Fellowship Application  
Personal Statement

I flew out of the US on January 29, 2009. My 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. But this wasn't a birthday trip – it was a life change. I was flying to Amman, Jordan, where I intended to set up life. Officially, it was a study abroad experience, or “an opportunity to enlarge my views” in the college-approved jargon. Personally, moving to Amman was a test.

I had been preoccupied with the Middle East as long as I could remember. At Occidental College, it was my study of choice - everything from the language to the politics. I read voraciously on these subjects, yet I couldn't imagine not experiencing it for myself. I had lofty goals of learning Arabic and cultural intricacies that are often misunderstood in the West. So I packed up my life, sat through the seemingly endless barrage from loved ones about staying away from terrorists and bombs, and went to Jordan.

With my curly blonde hair and light eyes, I personified the image of “American” to locals. Falling somewhere in-between of the incredibly free Arab men and the overtly protected Arab women, I experienced life more in terms of my ethnicity than my femininity. I had more freedom than local women did, but in exchange for that freedom, I was expected to be the stereotypical American girl – namely, promiscuous. My looks were likened to Carrie Bradshaw more than I would care to admit, and every single time that reference was loaded with expectations of how my behavior should be similar to hers as well.

Because of this, I was relentlessly aware of my surroundings. Translating Arabic, deciphering street signs, and being jeered at whenever I walked half a block left me continuously exhausted and stimulated. I worked to gain acceptance. Speaking Arabic showed I wasn't afraid and gave me access to community events. Six months of Arabic courses caused my language skills to soar, but cultural immersion was far more valuable. Participating in belly dancing classes, henna parties, and weddings helped me examine the complexities of gender and women's

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issues. I used my ability to learn across cultures to observe the interaction of males and females in public and private space to better understand cultural and traditional customs. Before I knew it, it was time to leave, and I was crushed.

To be fair, my love of the Middle East doesn't make a lot of sense in a lot of ways. It's hot. It's dirty. I get harassed walking down the street. I can't dress normally. I am achingly conspicuous wherever I go. Yet in spite of everything, it just works. I never know what to expect, but I always learn. And I'm always happy.

I spent the next year finishing my undergraduate degree – first with a semester-long internship at the UN, with the Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. I utilized the availability of UN resources to research the importance of gender mainstreaming in water governance in the Middle East as well as prevention mechanisms for sexual violence against Palestinian women in armed conflict.

My final semester at Occidental was devoted to writing a 50-page comprehensive thesis, in which I analyzed the effects of colonial rule, imperialistic thought and Orientalist tendencies on local Arab populations and the self-sustaining systems of patriarchy that emerged. I was also counting down the days until I could return to Jordan.

Soon enough, I gave in to the yearning that was pulling me back towards Amman. Not even a month after graduation, I hopped on a plane yet again, eager to go where I had found to be home. I received full-ride scholarship from the prestigious Qasid Institute for an intensive 8-week summer Arabic program. I have since moved on to freelance writing documentaries for different media companies around Amman while also assuming the position of Editor-in-Chief at a luxury lifestyles magazine called *Aviator*.

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As challenging as living in Amman was and is, leaving was the single hardest thing I had ever had to do. I've fallen in love with a place, a culture, a people, and a language that I find wholly beautiful. As imposing as life in Amman can be, the challenges don't compromise the benefits of my life abroad, instead merely reinforcing my desire to continue to study the region academically and eventually pursue a career concerning gender and women's empowerment in the Middle East. One thing's for sure – I'm never really going to be done with this place.