Identity's Shifting Sands

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Education abroad in Egypt leads to personal and cultural awakenings for one Palestinian-American student.

DUSTY, BUSY, LOUD AND EXHILARATING is the view from my Cairene sidewalk. I hear loud honking and watch with continuing astonishment at how eight cars can fit next to each other on a three-lane highway.

I look for the small black and white Peugeot taxis, ubiquitous in dotting the streets of Cairo day and night. I point a finger out toward the street and four taxis race magically toward me, paying no attention to the throngs of pedestrians in the road.

Crossing the street in Cairo is much like a game of Frogger or Chicken. Many of the American students take their cue from Egyptians to know when to cross and position themselves behind the locals. Crosswalks, it seems, are merely street decorations.

Identity in the Eye of the Beholder

I get inside the cab and hope that the door actually locks, or at least closes. The taxi driver eyes me cautiously. He quickly asks, "Where are you from?"

I am always unsure about how to respond to that question. Do I say, 'America" and withstand a lecture on U.S. foreign policy? He will ask why I know Arabic fluently, why I am in Cairo and how much money I make in the United States.

Do I say "Palestinian," and then take a longer route home, as he speaks about Egypt's relationship with Israel and his views about the conflict? Then I must withstand the critical questioning of why I don't "act" Arab, why I didn't sit in the. front seat next to him, and why my Arabic is not up to par.

Do I say "Palestinian-American"? Then, I have to hear all of the above, not to mention a lecture about how it is not possible to be simultaneously American and Palestinian. ("The bombs killing Palestinians are made in America! How can you possibly be American?")

Back in the United States, I receive similar questions about my background. I hear the same doubt that I can be both Palestinian and American. "You can't be," they say. "There is no such thing as Palestine."

Studying abroad in Cairo has helped me realize that there is no place where I can be myself. There is nowhere that I can really call home.

In Cairo, I am "the American." I am told I smile too much to be an Arab, and I am asked for the "American" point of view. I dress Western and speak American English. I am disillusioned and don't understand what life as an average Arab is like, because I "left." America made me too secular. I am too critical of the Arab world, but not critical enough of the United States.

In the United States, I am the Arab. I am asked what Arabs think and how "they" can stop hating "us." I am the Palestinian who has not adjusted to life in America and has not accepted the political status quo. I am the Palestinian who was saved by coming to America after being raised in a culture of hatred and violence. The Arab world made me too Muslim. I am too critical of the United States, but not critical enough of the Arab world.

Where do I belong in this puzzle? How do I explain to this taxi driver who speaks as if he understands me? I stay silent. I let him judge me and define me based on how I look, act, speak or dress. He isn't the first to do so and certainly won't be the last; How ever, it is through this process of external identification that I have been able to come in terms with who I am.

I am Palestinian. And, I am American. Studying abroad allowed me to realize that while categories are created and only one box should be "checked," I do not have to fit anyone's definition of who I am. I essentially became an ambassador between the United States and the Arab world. I understand both places, speak English and Arabic, and being abroad helped me realize that I can connect both worlds.

Misperceptions and Insights in Siwa

However, it took an overnight trip into the middle of the Sahara Desert to realize how disconnected Americans are from all the places around the world over which we have an immense influence.

Five American students and I took the 10-hour bus ride from Cairo to an oasis 50 kilometers, from Libya, a place called Siwa. Siwa is an oasis of hot and cold fresh springs in the middle of the desert, which gave rise to thousands of olive and palm

trees. The people who live in Siwa are Berber and speak mainly the Berber tongue, but their business language is Arabic. It is believed that Alexander the Great consulted the oracle Ammon about his divine origins here. For millennia, Siwa has preserved its own culture and heritage, separated from the Nile by 600 kilometers of sand.

A young boy named Mohammed asked us if we wanted to hike the ruins of Shali-rising above the desert for over seven centuries. As we were walking up the ruins, we realized how unexplored Siwa was. I could not help but think about how direct an impact the United States has on the Middle East and on people like Mohammed. After we explored the ruins, Mohammed invited us to his mud-brick home for a break. There was no floor to the home, and we found ourselves surrounded by children and the occasional small goat. The stark simplicity of the Siwan people's way of living reminded me of how often I assume that other people live the same way I do.

When I asked the children if they knew much about America, they looked at me as if I was crazy.

They were quick to tell us that, of course, they know about America. They study three languages in school: Arabic, Berber and English. They also believe that Americans don't care about their culture, and wondered if it was true that Americans only learn English in school?

As I translated their words to my fellow Hoyas, we looked at each other and thought about how true their comments were. We were visibly upset.

While we, as Americans, pride ourselves on celebrating diversity and different cultures, we fall short of seeking to learn more about the world where our influence is felt.

In Siwa, people may live in mud homes, but they still have satellite televisions that broadcast images of America. Despite seeing the United States on TV, Siwa remains relatively untouched by globalization (often the same as Americanization). But they still see what America does to their neighbors and watch Hollywood images of sex, violence, drugs and wealth. These images are not America itself, but they are part of what we export. Combine these images with perceptions of U.S. policy in the Arab world, and you have some sense of how America appears to a person abroad.

That isn't to say that the Siwa's imagination of America is entirely accurate. The people of Siwa had many misperceptions of life in the United States. They probably would not imagine poverty, a Muslim mosque or multiculturalism. Those are some of the missing pieces of our image abroad. It is often difficult to find a common ground between ourselves and other cultures.

I don't expect everyone to know about a tiny gem in the Sahara called Siwa. I certainly had never heard of the place prior to my visit. However, my experience in Siwa caused me to wonder how many Siwas the United States affects with its culture and policies.

My time in Siwa made me acutely aware of the asymmetry of knowledge that exists between the United States and the countries for which we profess concern.

My personal experiences studying abroad as an American in an Arab country has placed me in a unique position in our changing global environment. Rather than being Out of place! I have the ability and responsibility to become a liaison between different worlds. The late Edward Said vividly captured this powerful vantage point: "Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity." Studying abroad has allowed me to cross borders and break barriers.

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