

# “Englishman in New York”: Conducting Research in the Middle East as a Foreign Scholar

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**F**ieldwork—especially ethnography and participant observation—has always been an integral part of research on the Middle East (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 234). However, in recent years, quantitative studies, surveys, and experimental studies of the region have been increasing (Benstead 2018; Clark and Cavatorta 2018). This change echoes the overall transformation of single-country research in comparative politics, with an increased focus on micro- and individual-level analysis (Pepinsky 2018). The change so far has been slow: data compiled by Obermeier and Pepinsky (2018) suggest that this region still comprises a small fraction of all the published works in leading political science journals: of 2,442 articles in their dataset, only 42 are related to the Middle East, with 22 articles published in 2010 or later.

This growing scholarly interest in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the increased focus on micro-level studies have resulted in diverse new research in the areas of conflict (Zeira, forthcoming), migration (Getmansky 2018a), electoral politics (Bush and Prather 2018; Corstange 2016), and more. The number of foreigners conducting empirical work in the Middle East also is increasing as the region is becoming more attractive to scholars with non-area expertise. These scholars are likely to face several challenges that stem from their status as foreigners, as well as from the region's characteristics—especially if they attempt to collect original data, although some of the issues also may affect collection of existing observational data. This article explores some of these challenges based on my experience of conducting research in Turkey as a foreigner. I briefly outline the motivations for conducting research in the Middle East and then discuss challenges that foreign scholars might face. I conclude by highlighting potential strategies for addressing these challenges.

## WHY DO FOREIGN SCHOLARS CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

The Arab Spring uprisings transformed the region and spurred many social, political, and economic changes. For political scientists, these changes created opportunities to study topics including democratization, conflict, and migration, which make this region more attractive to scholars with non-area interests as well. My work as a foreign scholar in the Middle East began in 2014, when I teamed up with Tolga Sinmazdemir and Thomas Zeitzoff to study the impact of Syrian refugees

in Turkey on public opinion in their host society. We conducted a survey experiment among more than 1,200 Turkish residents. In addition to the large-N study, we visited southeast Turkey—the area where we conducted our survey—to conduct qualitative interviews and to train the enumerators who executed the survey.

Several factors led us to focus on Turkey: its relevance to existing literature on refugees and conflict, the large number of Syrian refugees that have fled there, and our ability to conduct research and surveys. There is a rich political science literature that documents a link between refugees' arrival and conflict onset in the receiving countries (e.g., Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). Most of this literature is based on cross-national analysis, single-case studies, and comparison of small numbers of cases. We were interested in examining the micro-foundations of the argument that refugees may spread conflict to their host countries. We did this by randomly exposing our respondents to different messages about the possible effects of hosting refugees: increased economic burden, disruption of ethnic balance, and ties with rebels, as well as a positive message of saving innocent women and children. We tailored these messages to resemble elite cues as they appeared in Turkish media and to theories about the way refugees may spread conflict. We were interested in how these messages affect the locals' perceptions of Syrian refugees and attitudes toward the Turkish–Kurdish peace process. We also examined how partisanship, ethnicity, religiosity, and actual exposure to refugees in the course of the respondents' daily lives affected their position. Our findings were published in the *Journal of Peace Research* (Getmansky 2018a) and summarized in a policy brief (Getmansky 2018b). Another reason for our focus on the Turkish case was the enormous scale of the refugee crisis. Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees: 1 million at the time of our survey and currently more than 3 million. Despite being a large and populous country, the presence of Syrian refugees affects many aspects of life in Turkey. We therefore wanted to analyze the effect of Syrian refugees on a host society that has received an enormous number of refugees and that constitutes an important case for addressing the Syrian refugee crisis. Finally, one member of our team was based in Turkey at the time of our survey and had good contacts with a reputable company that had the capacity to conduct an academic survey of this scale.

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Two additional factors make it attractive for foreign scholars to conduct work in the Middle East. First, as mentioned previously, although recently increasing, studies of the Middle East are underrepresented in general political science journals. This provides an opportunity for non-area scholars to work in countries that have not yet been over-studied as well as to test existing theories in a new context or develop new theories based on observations of these cases. Second, the status of Middle East countries as low- or middle-income countries makes it easier to obtain external research funding. In some cases, funding agencies condition grants on research

sensitive vignettes; and the sensitivity required when conducting research in a potentially nonfriendly environment due to my origin.

Gaining access to interviewees—or, in our case, convincing people to participate in our survey experiment—was a concern because we asked questions about political views that people might not want to disclose. To address this concern, we identified a reputable survey company that had extensive experience in conducting academic surveys in political science. We ultimately decided to work with Infakto, a company that has been involved in numerous academic surveys

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that benefits Official Development Assistance countries, and the Middle East offers an opportunity to engage in research in these countries.

#### **THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A FOREIGN RESEARCHER AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Fieldwork, especially in a foreign country, involves many challenges, most of which are not unique to the Middle East but have become more prevalent following the Arab Spring. In a *PS: Political Science & Politics* symposium dedicated to fieldwork in the Middle East, Romano (2006) highlighted the danger of being exposed to violence, difficulties of obtaining access to areas or individuals, and obstacles crossing from one belligerent country into another. Based on a survey of political scientists doing fieldwork in the Middle East, Clark (2006) emphasizes the difficulty in obtaining interviews with relevant individuals and the interviewees' unwillingness to speak openly due to fear of political repression. Carapico (2006) discusses the ethical dilemmas that researchers face while doing fieldwork in the Middle East and reviews four models for addressing them. She argues that researchers cannot remain neutral and dispassionate while collecting data in the Middle East. Instead, they must confront questions about their obligations to their subjects as well as their relationship with the US government and the policy implications of their work. These scholars offer invaluable advice on how to address these challenges, highlighting the importance of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, local contacts, and patience in developing an understanding of the local cultural and political complexities (Tessler and Jamal 2006). This article highlights some of my experiences conducting research in Turkey.

Working on the project with Sinmazdemir and Zeitzoff, I became aware of some of these difficulties, especially the challenge of gaining access to interviewees and obtaining truthful answers; the ethical considerations involved in priming respondents in a foreign country with politically

and that is headed by a scholar with research experience in political science. We chose this company because our coauthor, who is based in Turkey, had extensive knowledge of the local survey-company market. In addition to working with a reputable company, we trained the enumerator team leaders by reviewing the questionnaire with them and explaining and practicing how to conduct the interviews. This was especially important because although many academic surveys have been conducted in Turkey, the enumerators as well as the respondents had limited exposure to survey-experiment method. Having a local partner proved to be highly valuable because he could conduct this training in Turkish and convey all the nuances of our survey—something that an interpreter with neither knowledge nor a stake in this survey could have done.

Another challenge we experienced was how to ensure that local respondents understood our questions and then how to interpret the findings. Training the enumerators—some of whom were local residents of our survey areas—was valuable in gauging how local respondents might understand and interpret our questions.

In May 2014, we traveled to southeast Turkey (i.e., Gaziantep and Sanliurfa) to conduct interviews with several NGO representatives who work with Syrian refugees and who shared their impressions of the locals' perception of the refugees. We also interviewed healthcare professionals in a large hospital in Gaziantep, where many refugees receive medical care. Some of the interviewees were not easily available. For example, we met with the head of the Gaziantep office of Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants—a major Turkish NGO that assists refugees in Turkey. Our meeting with him was in their new branch, which was scheduled to open for welcoming refugees the day after our interview. In his office overlooking the old city of Gaziantep, he explained the complex dilemmas experienced by even those who assist refugees. Our takeaway from the meeting was that security

concerns related to the influx of refugees are prevalent among those assisting refugees. He explained in detail the security arrangements in the new office. These heightened security concerns were not unreasonable given that violence from the civil war in Syria was increasingly spilling over the Turkish border during the summer of 2014.

Conducting a large-N survey meant that we had to design a sampling strategy. We decided to limit our survey to southeast Turkey because at that time, most Syrian refugees remained close to the Syrian border. Within that area, we sampled in provinces that received both many and only a few refugees. Previous studies had suggested that attitudes of the host society toward refugees may be conditioned on the exposure of locals to them. We also sampled in areas with varying degrees of support for the incumbent party as well as areas that were and were not exposed to the Turkish–Kurdish conflict. Partisanship is an important factor in explaining attitudes of Turkish locals toward Syrian refugees because supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party are more positively predisposed toward Syrians. Finally, exposure to political violence has been shown to affect exclusionary attitudes among the exposed population and therefore could affect how the local population in Turkey would respond to our treatments. Guided by these considerations, we randomly sampled 33 districts in southeast Turkey; for each district, we determined how many respondents we wanted Infakto to interview. We submitted our list to them but quickly learned that some districts were not accessible to the enumerators due to ongoing counterinsurgency operations against Kurdish rebels, which had intensified since 2013. We had to find close substitutes for these districts, which is where the expertise of our local partner was invaluable. This difficulty echoes fieldwork challenges discussed by other scholars (e.g., Romano 2006). It also is an example of how post–Arab Spring political dynamics can affect scholars’ ability to conduct fieldwork in the Middle East. The impact of the Turkey–Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) conflict on our ability to conduct research related to Syrian refugees in Turkey demonstrates how different Middle Eastern conflicts are interlocked with one another. Therefore, it is important for researchers to have knowledge about the region beyond the particular issue they are studying.

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Another challenge was the ethical question of how we could expose local respondents to information that potentially had a long-term impact on their attitude toward refugees and their domestic peace process. In addition to obtaining IRB approval for our survey experiment, we conducted a pilot study and debriefed the respondents to understand how our treatments affected them. Although it made it less likely for our treatments to have an effect, we toned down our language to avoid the possibility of inciting anti-refugee sentiments.

One of the more complicated aspects of doing fieldwork was how to deal with the conspiracy theories that are prevalent in Turkey. A more widespread conviction I encountered was that the United States and Israel are behind the events in Syria and that the refugee problem could be resolved “overnight” if these two countries decided it no longer served their interests. Unexpectedly, this view was not confined to uneducated people—it was openly expressed by individuals we met during our fieldwork. The fact that I was perceived as a Western scholar (i.e., US-educated and, at that time, Israel-based) could have made it more difficult to access interviewees and obtain truthful answers. Although there is no foolproof formula to defuse such situations, having reliable and trustworthy coauthors—one of whom is a scholar at a reputable Turkish university—helped me address these situations. Additionally, being a female working with two male coauthors made the interviewees focus more on them, making it easier to conduct some of the interviews. This highlights the ironically beneficial role that intersectional identities might play in overcoming fieldwork hurdles (Clark and Cavatorta 2018, 149; Davenport 2013).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

An increasing number of foreign scholars are conducting empirical research in the Middle East using quantitative and qualitative methods, including fieldwork. This increasing attention is fueled by political developments in the region that made the Middle East relevant not only to area specialists but also to scholars of conflict, democratization, elections, development, corruption, migration, and more. The growing interest in this region makes it important for scholars working in Middle Eastern countries to be aware of the challenges they are likely to face—especially if they are foreign to this region. Although there are no ready-made solutions to all of the potential challenges, my experience suggests three important points of which researchers must be mindful. First, it is important to acknowledge that the Middle East is a complicated region with many interlocking issues; scholars should be aware of these issues whether or not they are studying them. In the case of my research in Turkey, the PKK conflict affected our access to respondents that we wanted to inter-

view about the seemingly unrelated issue of Syrian refugees. Being aware of this conflict was crucial even if it was not the focal point of our research.

Second, cultural and political complexities play an important role and affect researchers’ ability to access reliable information. Awareness of such complexities is important not only during formal interviews but also during casual conversations and in social contexts. How researchers present themselves—their national and institutional affiliation,

the focus of their research, their contacts—can shape their ability to access data and information and, in some cases, may have implications for their safety and security.

Third, the most important lesson that I learned is the importance of working with trustworthy coauthors and having a reliable local academic partner. Having a local academic partner who was a coauthor of the project—as opposed to a “fixer,” a research assistant, or an occasional consultant—ensured that he was as invested as I was in the study. This, in turn, immensely improved access to reliable data and provided credibility to the project. ■

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