

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

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Although fieldwork—especially ethnography and participant observation—has always been an integral part of the research of the Middle East (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read, 2018:234), in recent years quantitative, surveys, and experimental studies of the region have been on the rise (Benstead, 2018; Clark and Cavatorta, 2018). This change echoes the overall transformation in single country research in comparative politics, with increased focus on micro-level 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 the leading political science journals: out of 2,442 articles in their dataset, only 42 are related to the Middle East, with 22 of them 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 has resulted in diverse new research in the areas of conflict (Zeira, forthcoming), migration (Author, 2018a), electoral politics (Bush and Prather, 2018; Corstange, 2016), and more. The number of foreigners doing empirical work in the Middle East is also 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 may also affect collection of existing observational data. This piece explores some of these challenges, based on my experience of doing research in Turkey as a foreigner. I will begin by briefly outlining the motivations for conducting research in the Middle East. I will then discuss challenges that foreign scholars might face, and conclude by highlighting potential strategies for addressing them.

### *Why do foreign scholars conduct research in the Middle East?*

The Arab uprisings have transformed the region and spurred many social, political, and economic changes. For political scientists, these changes have created opportunities to study topics such as democratization, conflict, and migration, making this region more attractive also to scholars with non-area interests. My work as a foreign scholar in the Middle East started 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 over 1,200 Turkish residents. In addition to the large-N study, we visited southeast Turkey—the area where we ran 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 to Turkey, and our ability to conduct research and survey in Turkey. 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, or comparison of small number of cases. We were interested in examining the micro-foundations of the argument that refugees may spread conflict to their host countries, 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, and 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 towards 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 positions. Our findings appear in the *Journal of Peace Research* (Author 2018a), and are summarized in a policy brief (Author 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 over 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 a large 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 survey company that had the capacity to carry out an academic survey of this scale.

There are two additional factors that make it attractive for foreign scholars to work on the Middle East. First, as mentioned above, studies of the Middle East are underrepresented in general political science journals, but have recently been on the rise. This provides an opportunity for non-area scholars to work in countries that have not been over-studied yet, and offer a chance to test existing theories in a new context, or develop new theories based on observations of these cases. Finally, 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 that benefits Official Development Assistance (ODA) countries, and the Middle East offers an opportunity to engage in research in such countries.

### *The challenges of being a foreign researcher and possible solutions*

Fieldwork, let alone in a foreign country, involves many challenges most of which are not unique to the Middle East, but some have become more prevalent following the Arab Spring. In a PS Symposium dedicated to doing fieldwork in the Middle East, Romano (2006) highlights the danger of being exposed to violence, difficulties of obtaining access to areas or individuals, and obstacles crossing from one belligerent country to another. Clark (2006)—based on a survey of political scientists doing fieldwork in the Middle East—emphasizes the difficulty of obtaining interviews with relevant individuals, and the interviewees' unwillingness to speak openly due to the 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 such dilemmas. She argues that researchers cannot remain neutral and dispassionate while collecting data in the Middle East, and instead have to 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 the understanding of the local cultural and political complexities (Tessler and Jamal 2006). In this piece, I highlight some of my experiences doing research in Turkey.

As I worked 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-sensitive vignettes; and the sensitivity involved in conducting research in a potentially non-friendly environment due to my origin.

Gaining access to interviewees—or in our case, getting people to participate in our survey experiment—was a concern for us 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 conducting academic surveys in political science. We ultimately decided to work with a company named Infakto that has been involved in numerous academic surveys and that is headed by a scholar with research experience in political science. We chose this company because our co-author who is based in Turkey had extensive knowledge of the local survey companies' market. In addition to working with a reputable company, we made sure to train the heads of the enumerator teams by going with them over the questionnaire, and explaining and practicing how to conduct the interviews. This was especially important because even though many academic surveys have been conducted in Turkey, the enumerators as well as the respondents have had limited exposure to the method of survey-experiments. Having a local partner again proved to be highly valuable, as he was able to conduct this training in Turkish, and to convey to them all the nuances of this survey—something that an interpreter without knowledge and stakes in this survey could not have done.

Another challenge we experienced was how to make sure that the local respondents understand our questions, and how to interpret the findings. Training of enumerators—some of which are local residents of the areas we surveyed—was very valuable in gauging how the local respondents may understand and interpret our questions. We also traveled to southeast Turkey (Gaziantep and Sanliurfa) in May 2014 to conduct interviews with numerous NGO representatives who work with Syrian refugees, and who shared with us 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 these interviewees were not easily available. For example, we were able to meet the head of the Gaziantep office of Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM-SGGD)—a big Turkish NGO that works on assisting refugees in Turkey. We met him in their new branch that was scheduled to open one day following our interview. In his office—overlooking the old city of Gaziantep—he shared with us the complex dilemmas that even those assisting refugees have. One thing we took away from that meeting is that security concerns related to influx of refugees are also prevalent among those assisting refugees. We received detailed explanations about the security arrangements in their new office, scheduled to welcome refugees the following day after our visit. The heightened security concerns were not unreasonable given

that the violence from the civil war in Syria was increasingly spilling over the Turkish border in 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 of the Syrian refugees remained close to the border with Syria. Within that area, we sampled in provinces that received many refugees and those that received only a few. This is because prior studies suggest that attitudes of the host society towards refugees may be conditioned on the exposure of locals to refugees. We also sampled in areas with varying degree of support for the incumbent party, and areas that were and were not exposed to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Partisanship is an important factor that explains attitudes of the locals in Turkey towards Syrian refugees since supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) are more positively predisposed towards Syrians. Finally, exposure to political violence has been shown to affect exclusionary attitudes among the exposed population, and could therefore affect how the local population in Turkey responds to our treatments. Guided by these considerations, we randomly sampled 33 districts in the southeast Turkey, and for each district we determined how many respondents we wanted the survey company to interview. We submitted our list to the survey company, but quickly found out that a few of the districts were not accessible to the enumerators due to ongoing counterinsurgency operations against the Kurdish rebels that intensified since 2013. We had to come up with close substitutes of these districts, and this is where the expertise of the local partner was invaluable. This difficulty also echoes fieldwork challenges discussed by other scholars (e.g. Romano (2006)). It is also an example of how post Arab Spring political dynamics can affect scholars' ability to conduct fieldwork in the Middle East. The effect of the Turkey-PKK conflict on our ability to conduct research related to Syrian refugees in Turkey shows that different conflicts in the Middle East interlock with each other making it important for researchers to have knowledge about the region beyond the particular issue they are studying.

An additional challenge we had to deal with was the ethical question of how we can expose local respondents to information that can potentially have a long-term impact on their attitudes towards refugees and towards their domestic peace process. In addition to obtaining IRB approval for this survey-experiment, we conducted a pilot and debriefed the respondents to try and understand how our treatments affect them. We also toned down the language of our treatments—even though this made it less likely for the treatments to have an effect—to avoid the possibility that our treatments might incite anti-refugee sentiments.

One of the more complicated aspects of doing fieldwork for me was how to deal with conspiracy theories that are prevalent in Turkey. One of the more widespread convictions I have encountered was that the US 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 for me, this view was not confined to uneducated people, and was openly expressed by some individuals with whom we met during our fieldwork. The fact that I was perceived as a Western (US-educated and at that time Israel-based) scholar could have made it harder to access interviewees or hear truthful answers from them. While there is no foolproof recipe to defuse such situations, having reliable and trustworthy coauthors along my side—one of whom is a scholar at a reputable Turkish university—helped me to deal with these situations. Additionally, me being a female working with two male co-authors made the

interviewees focus more on them rather than on me, and made it easier for us to conduct some of the interviews. This highlights the ironically beneficial role intersectional identities might play in helping overcome 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 the political developments in the region that made the Middle East very 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 know the challenges they are likely to face—especially if they are foreign to this region. While there are no ready-made solutions to all the possible challenges, my experience suggests three important points that researchers need to be mindful of. First, it is important to acknowledge that the Middle East is a complicated region with many interlocking issues, and scholars should be aware of such issues even if they are not studying them directly. In the case of my research in Turkey, the PKK conflict affected our access to respondents whom we wanted to interview about a 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 side-conversations and also in social contexts. How researchers present themselves—their national and institutional affiliation, the focus of their research, which contacts they know—can shape their ability to access data and information, and in some cases may have implications for their safety and security. Finally, 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 is a coauthor in the project—as opposed to a “fixer”, a research assistant, or an occasional consultant—assures that this partner is as invested as I am in the project. This, in turn, immensely improves access to reliable data and lends credibility to the project.

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