



## **Jordanian Stereotypes of Americans: A Study at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates Jordanian student perceptions of Americans through a survey of Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan. Specifically, this study identifies pervading stereotypes held about Americans, and where these stereotypes were learned. Data was collected June through August of 2014 from Yarmouk University students through a distribution of surveys. Students reported learning the most about Americans through films (22%). For a majority of students, the response for a trait related to Americans had a significant association with the response for the same trait related to Jordanians. Traits commonly and significantly associated with Americans were lack of family values, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, and disliking Muslims. The trait commonly and significantly associated with Jordanians was being generous.*

Keywords: American stereotypes, Jordan, Middle East perceptions, Arab youth, Arab stereotypes

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### **Introduction**

How do peoples of the Middle East perceive Americans? Despite a preponderance of sweeping generalizations and recent claims by politicians, media outlets, and even academics, these perceptions remain difficult to measure. Groups such as Zogby, Pew, and the U.S. State Department have conducted multiple studies and analyses in an attempt to address this question and determine this opinion in various countries throughout the region (Arab American Institute, 2004; Arab American Institute, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013a; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013b; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013c; Telhami, 2010). Often, these collected opinions are reported by numbers and percentages, usually x percent positive, y percent negative, and then tracked over the years. This data allegedly shows if or how much Americans, the U.S., or related

topics are “liked” in the Middle East. Resulting information is discussed primarily in the political sphere, but also extensively in a variety of academic fields.

Though such approaches of collecting public opinion are both useful and interesting, black and white categories of positive and negative, which answer the question of “what” miss the nuances that answer the questions of “why” and “how.” Though many studies have theorized or searched for the reasoning behind public opinion, few attempt to quantify their research. And of those that do take a quantitative approach, almost all miss a defining factor that plays into perception: stereotypes.

Stereotypes play a massive role in determining one’s opinion on a group, and Middle Easterners’ opinions of Americans are no exception. Though stereotypes of the Middle East in American culture are well known, few, if any, studies deal with stereotypes applied to Americans in the Middle East. If, as a significant body of research supports, stereotypes are so prevalent, pervasive, and impactful in American culture, it seems odd that the potential for a similar effect would not be studied in Middle Eastern cultures. Knowledge of stereotypes would be particularly useful in Middle Eastern countries where a large number of American students study abroad, such as Jordan. Due to recent regional instability and the U.S.’s friendly relations with Jordan, Jordan has become the main hub of American students studying abroad in the Arab Middle East. Understanding Jordanian stereotypes of Americans could help U.S. students to be prepared to engage with and manage those assumptions in a conducive manner.

This study begins to address this gap through a survey of Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan. Specifically, this study begins to identify what pervading stereotypes held about Americans are, and where these stereotypes are learned. To address this question, this paper progresses in three sections: first, the study of stereotypes and where they may arise in Jordan is briefly presented; second, our survey data is presented, explained, and discussed; third, a conclusion summarizes the results before making suggestions for subsequent studies.

### **Where Stereotypes May Arise in Jordan**

Though it is widely acknowledged that stereotypes do not spontaneously emerge within societies, pinpointing where they arise is both difficult and contested. Often the manifestation of stereotypes evolves within a context. For example, in Jordan, some stereotypes of Americans may arise from primary schools. A 2012 analysis of Jordanian public school English books for grades 1-9 found a distinctive difference in gender roles between males and females (Hamdan, 2012). Females were associated with traits focusing on their appearance, while males were associated with traits focusing on their personality. More broadly, “The results emphasized the female low status in society in all categories from wealth to education” (Hamdan, 2012, p.66). Because these stereotypes were found in English books, and as learning a foreign language is tied to learning that foreign culture, this stereotyping through the means of learning within the educational system suggests that gender stereotypes of Americans may be planted at an early age in Jordan. And these seeds can grow quickly; at the age of six, children know and begin to apply stereotypes (Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010, p. 1799). Earlier, children can categorize by race, and majority groups exhibit the beginnings of in-group preference.

Another often-claimed contributor to stereotypes in the broader Middle East is religiosity. It has been observed that aspects of religiosity and prejudice are often correlated (Johnson, Rowatt, Barnard-Brak, Patock-Peckham, LaBouff, & Carlisle, 2011). If this is the case, the high religiosity of Jordan may indicate a high likelihood and prevalence of stereotyping. However, religiosity may not necessarily be related to such prejudice; one study found that it was right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, rather than religiosity itself, which were strong mediators of prejudice (Johnson, Rowatt, Barnard-Brak, Patock-Peckham, LaBouff, & Carlisle, 2011). In other words, religiosity does not cause prejudice; only certain, small, specific aspects of religiosity may be related. In the Middle East, factors such as personal politics, regional politics, and economy are stronger predictors of bias than religion (Johnson, Rowatt, Barnard-Brak, Patock-Peckham, LaBouff, & Carlisle, 2011; Tessler, 2003, p. 177). This specificity implies that the likelihood of stereotypes being prevalent is far less generalizable, and depends heavily upon the individual.

The extent to which Jordanian stereotypes of Americans are applied is key to understanding their true significance. This application largely depends upon context and cross-cultural understanding. One study, which included both Americans and Arabs, asked participants to define merchant goals in an argument (Tinsley, Turan, Aslani, & Weingart, 2011). It was found that no members of the study based merchant goals on stereotypes; in other words, neither Americans nor Arabs applied stereotypes of the other. However, this lack of applying stereotypes can also be negative. Both study groups perceived merchant goals to be their own cultural goals, rather than considering the potential that a person of a different culture might have different goals. This secondary finding points to a potential issue: evaluation of a foreign culture by one's own culture may accidentally misinterpret the foreign. For example, in 19 different cultures, it was found that the idea of protecting native women also related to being hostile towards foreign women (Cuddy, Fiske, Kwan, Glick, Demoulin, Leyens, Bond, & et. al, 2009, p. 9). This may be due to the foreign women being measured by native woman standards.

As so little information exists regarding Middle Eastern perceptions of Americans, it may be useful to examine American perceptions of Middle Easterners and hypothesize how this may relate to the former. Though perhaps most obvious in Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations theory and post-September 11<sup>th</sup> American attitudes, the idea of "Arabs" as natural enemies of Americans has spread within the U.S. throughout American history (Tessler & Corstange, 2002; Suleiman 2007; Suleiman 1974; Suleiman 1982, p. 114-117). Even back in 1974, Suleiman noted that bias against Arabs in America comes from public opinion, press coverage, school history textbooks, and professors, and that in 1982 many Americans were biased against "Arabs" but unaware of their bias, and had internalized negative stereotypes through communications media, including textbooks. In 2007, he expressed how these issues continue. With the rise of the terrorist group ISIS, this negative association seems to only be heightening within the U.S. This is partially due to the political battle for public opinion, as conflicting nations naturally place negative stereotypes upon the enemy (ie increased U.S. racism against Arabs immediately prior to and during involvement in Iraq) (Suleiman, 1974, p. 109).

However, in critical analysis of what data has been collected concerning perceptions of Americans in the Middle East, time and time again this century has shown that throughout the Middle East, opinions of American foreign policy are poor but are often simultaneously positive, or at least more positive, concerning American society, culture, and people (Arab American Institute, 2004; Arab American Institute, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013a; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013b; Pew Research Center, 2002-2013c; Telhami, 2010). Exposure through television, a relatively direct means of learning American culture, has been seen to create more positive feelings towards the West (Tessler, 2003, p. 180). In this way, one should recognize that “antipathy towards the U.S. and the West does not flow from cultural dissonance; it is based not on who we are perceived to be but on what we are perceived to do,” (Tessler, 2003, p. 180). A significant body of literature supports that disagreement and distaste from the Middle East majority is not cultural, it is political.

### Method

This study is based on a mixed-methods survey distributed at Yarmouk University. Specifically, it was distributed to a purposeful sample of undergraduate and graduate classes based on personal contact with the teaching professors. The survey was given in Arabic to six different classes, four of them in the Education Department and two in the Language Center. In total, 164 surveys were distributed, and 153 responses were collected. Of these, 38 students had been or were involved in cross-cultural exchange programs<sup>1</sup> with Americans from either the University of Virginia Arabic Program or the CET Intensive Arabic Language Program at Yarmouk. Other undergraduate students were surveyed from a “Principles of Education” class and a “Civic of Education” class, both university requirements. Other master’s students were surveyed from an Education Masters requirement and English Instructions class. Classes were selected from within the Education Department because graduate students in this department come from a wide variety of majors and therefore contribute different backgrounds to the study.

Students were given approximately fifteen minutes in class to fill out the survey, which included both multiple choice and free response questions. Questions addressed basic demographic information, most significant source of learning about Americans, exposure to Americans, and opinions on Americans and topics related to Americans. The final section of the survey, and the focus of this paper, provided the students with a list of traits (see Table II) and asked students to mark those which they believed applied to a majority of Americans and to a majority of Jordanians. A McNemar’s test was used to assess whether respondents were more likely to associate each trait with Americans or Jordanians. To assess whether certain sources of information were associated with certain traits being more frequently attributed to Americans in comparison to Jordanians, a logistic regression was used for each source of information to regress all the traits against that source. All analyses used a Type 1 error threshold of 0.05.

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<sup>1</sup> Exchange programs only involve Americans in Jordan but do not involve Jordanians that have been in the U.S.; Jordanian students involved with such programs act as roommates or language partners for American students.

## Results

Table I describes characteristics of the participants overall. Numbers reported as percentages are actual percentages within the category. As not all respondents answered all questions, therefore not all percentages totals add up to 100. Males and females had about equal representation in this study. The study population was largely composed of Jordanian graduate students and undergraduate students. When students were asked to choose the most significant source of information through which they learned the most about Americans, the most common single source reported was films (22%). School, the Internet, and news followed respectively, each making up 13 to 14 percent. Learning from Americans in Jordan was the least reported method (9%). There was more unanimity in opinions about Jordanians than about Americans; for six of the 20 traits, over 90 percent of respondents agreed about how they applied to Jordanians, whereas agreement about how they applied to Americans was no greater than 75 percent.

The respondents viewed Americans and Jordanians differently when comparing traits. Traits that students were significantly more likely to be associated with Americans rather than Jordanians were lack of family values, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, disliking Muslims, being immoral, optimistic, rich, hardworking, racist, arrogant, and materialistic. Traits that students were the significantly more likely to associate with Jordanians were being generous, religious, brave, and rude. Vast differences between American and Jordanian associated traits (exceeding 50 percentage points) were found in the traits of being generous, having no family values, religious, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, and disliking Muslims.

**Table I: Survey Population Demographics and Source of Information (%)**

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Gender	
Male	47.7
Female	51
Level of Study	
Undergraduate	68.6
Graduate	30.7
Nationality	
Jordanian	85.6
Jordanian of Palestinian Origin	14.4
Most Significant Source of Information about Americans	
School <sup>2</sup>	14.4
Americans in Jordan	9.2
Internet	13.7
Films	22.2
News	13.1
Other/Multiple	25.5

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Table III shows which traits were significantly associated with specific sources of information about Americans. The result should be interpreted cautiously; all twenty traits were included in the analysis for each of the six sources of information, so significant association can be expected for six random traits simply due to the analyses' Type 1 error threshold of 0.05. Within this potential error, this test found significant associations for five traits, with none having extreme significance values.

Acknowledging that, students who reported learning the most about Americans through films were much less likely than other students to believe that Americans were rude, and much more likely to believe that Americans were immoral and racist. Students who reported learning the most through school were much less likely than other students to view Americans as arrogant. Students whose most significant source of information about Americans was the internet were less likely than other students to view Americans as being immoral. No differences in views of traits were associated with the most significant sources of learning about Americans being Americans in Jordan, the news, or other or multiple sources.

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<sup>2</sup> Including both pre-university and university education

**Table II: Percent of Respondents Attributing Each Trait to Americans and Jordanians**

Trait	Trait Attributed to <u>Americans</u>	Trait Attributed to <u>Jordanians</u>	Percentage Point <u>Difference</u>
Have No Family Values***	70	<b>3</b>	67
Women are Promiscuous***	66	<b>7</b>	59
Want to Invade Other Countries***	65	<b>8</b>	57
Dislike Muslims***	60	<b>6</b>	54
Immoral***	44	<b>8</b>	36
Optimistic***	72	37	35
Rich***	48	16	32
Hardworking***	75	50	25
Racist***	56	32	24
Arrogant**	36	22	14
Materialistic*	60	46	14
Attractive	58	49	9
Love Guns	49	44	5
Ignorant	17	13	4
Fat	32	29	3
Smart	55	62	-7
Rude***	27	49	-22
Brave***	29	70	-41
Religious***	11	72	-61
Generous***	24	<b>93</b>	-69

**Bolded percentages** highlight that more than 90% of respondents gave the same response.

\*  $p < 0.05$  for McNemar test comparing American trait to Jordanian trait

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  for McNemar test comparing American trait to Jordanian trait

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  for McNemar test comparing American trait to Jordanian trait

**Table III: Statistically Significant Odds Ratios Associating Beliefs about American Traits with Information Sources about Americans**

Traits	Films	Americans School <sup>3</sup> in Jordan	News	Internet	Multiple /Other
Rude	0.2				
Immoral	3.1			0.3	
Racist	4.2				
Arrogant		0.2			

Note: Each regression included every trait. This table only displays odds ratios of those traits that were statistically significant in their association with the source of information about Americans. All significant p values were between 0.05 and 0.01. An odds ratio of 1.0 indicates equal odds (i.e., no difference).

### Discussion

Though this study is relatively small, our results begin to give insight into how Americans are viewed by the educated youth of Jordan, and where Jordanians learn these perceptions. The largest single source of student reported learning from was films (22%), almost ten percentage points above the next most common source (school, 14%). Almost all traits were significantly associated with either Americans or Jordanians, showing that for a majority of students, the response for a trait related to Americans had a significant association with the response for the same trait related to Jordanians. In addition, multiple traits had over 50 percentage points of difference between Americans and Jordanians, exhibiting sharp contrast between Americans and Jordanians for these traits. American associated traits above 50 percentage points, in descending difference, were lack of family values, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, and disliking Muslims. Jordanian associated traits above 50 percentage points, in descending difference, were being generous and religious. These traits were identified as specifically either American or Jordanian. When comparing these traits to information sources about Americans, about five percent of factors were found to be statistically significant, as might be expected, and therefore no conclusions about how information sources may have affected stereotypes can be confidently drawn.

Our study generally conforms to the expected stereotype patterns previously observed in other literature. The out-group, Americans, was associated with far more negative stereotypes than the in-group, Jordanians, though both are associated with both positive and negative traits. Some of the most significant stereotypes applied to Americans immediately related to their potential to harm Jordanians (wanting to invade other countries, disliking Muslims), emphasizing both the origin of stereotypes and their continued significance in the defensive sense. There was also a strong societal agreement on various stereotypes as both applied to Americans and Jordanians (though we only considered explicit, self-reported stereotyping). Furthering this point, due to the time period in which this study was conducted, the angry political atmosphere of the summer may have impacted stereotyping, as surveys were conducted July 2014, during the Gaza War. The atmosphere surrounding the war may have affected Jordanian student

<sup>3</sup> Includes pre-university and university education



sentiments, especially as a majority of Jordan's population (though not the survey population) is of Palestinian origin, and the U.S. is often identified by Jordanians as Israel's ally. In order to anticipate the potential effect of these uncharacteristically high tensions, Yarmouk professors were asked about what they thought the effect the ongoing politics would have on the survey. Each professor replied similarly: through a few students would allow the current politics to affect their opinions on Americans, the large majority of student opinions on Americans would not be affected (Gibson and Banihani, n.d).

However, Jordanians defied the idea of in-groups having more difficulty applying stereotypes to them than to out-groups; over 90 percent of Jordanians agreed upon six traits regarding Jordanians, but no such consensus was reached for any traits relating to Americans. It seems Jordanians are easier for Jordanians to stereotype than Americans.

In addition, there was general consensus of similarity regarding the traits of being attractive, loving guns, being ignorant, fat, and smart. All of these traits had less than 10 percentage points of difference between Americans and Jordanians, showing that the majority of Jordanian participants believed both nationalities shared these traits. It is noteworthy to observe that being ignorant and smart, or being attractive and fat, seem to be opposites, yet both apply to both nationalities equally. This congruence highlights the potential that in the categories of intellect and appearance, Jordanians see themselves and Americans as equals. In other words, from a Jordanian perspective there is general similarity between the intellect and appearance between American and Jordanian cultures.

However, in other categories Jordanians viewed themselves as vastly different from Americans. Jordanians reported themselves as being strongly generous and religious. Being generous is a specifically family-oriented value, as hospitality is a strong tradition within Jordanian society. And religiosity in Jordanian society is almost synonymous with Islam, the dominant religion in Jordan. Jordanians reported Americans as being strongly lacking family values, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, and disliking Muslims. These traits are almost in direct contrast to the traits Jordanians labeled themselves as having; in Jordanian society, lacking family values contradicts generosity, and disliking Muslims and promiscuity contradicts religiosity. (Invading other countries is a specifically political relationship, and is consistent with the idea of Jordanians disliking American policy.) Comparing these traits, it appears that the major difference Jordanians believe sets them apart from Americans is incongruent family and religious values.

It is important to understand that differing religious and family values are perceived by Jordanians, but may not necessarily exist. As related studies have suggested, religiosity is not the cause of Jordanian stereotypes; the perceived lack of religiousness of Americans compared to that of Jordanians is the significant difference. In addition, it is likely that Americans are being measured by native standards, which may misinterpret or exacerbate differences. In this way, cultural differences are not the cause of conflict, but result in misinterpretations of the other. This potential is particularly heightened in Jordan's case, as most students reported learning from films, a medium which generally magnifies stereotypical aspects of American culture.

## Results

Though this study is relatively small, our conclusions begin to give insight into how Americans are viewed by the educated youth of Jordan, and where they learn these perceptions. The largest single source of student reported learning from was films (22%), almost ten percentage points above the next most common source (school, 14%). For a majority of students, the response for a trait related to Americans had a significant association with the response for the same trait related to Jordanians. Traits commonly and significantly associated with Americans were lack of family values, women being promiscuous, wanting to invade other countries, and disliking Muslims. The trait commonly and significantly associated with Jordanians was being generous. When comparing these traits to information sources about Americans, about five percent of factors were found to be statistically significant, as might be expected, and therefore no conclusions about how information sources may have affected stereotypes can be confidently drawn.

Our study generally conforms to the expected stereotype patterns previously observed in other literature. However, Jordanians defied the idea of in-groups having more difficulty applying stereotypes to themselves than to out-groups; over 90 percent of Jordanians agreed upon six traits regarding Jordanians, but no such consensus was reached for any traits relating to Americans. In comparing traits, general similarity was perceived in intellect and appearance of Americans and Jordanians, but vast differences were perceived in religiousness and family values. Our study shows that within the Jordanian population there is nuance to the perception of Americans. In some aspects, such as appearance and intellect, Americans are considered similar to Jordanians, while in others, such as religiousness and family values, they are considered different. Addressing the significance of how Jordan's educated youth think of Americans gives reason for why opinions of Americans stand as they are today. In addition, understanding these perceived differences between Jordanians and Americans enables future cross-cultural efforts to focus on addressing and effecting overall opinion of Americans. Perhaps a starting point would be to affect Jordanian perception through films, the most commonly reported source of learning. Though a short-term solution, perhaps the larger issue at hand is that films are likely inaccurate, hyperbolic representations of Americans, and perhaps a longer-term solution would be to make more reliable information sources available.

## Suggestions for Further Studies

Expansion to enable a larger sample size and implementing a stratified random sampling method is suggested. Including a larger, more varied population and going beyond university students would make findings more generalizable. This study was limited by its scale and limited student accessibility; potentially meaningful associations may have been discounted or gone undetected; for example, the number of results in Table III was within what would be expected due to random error. As films are the most commonly reported information source about Americans, a deeper analysis of their effect on this learning is suggested. Subdividing this category further, such as into categories of films on television, films from the theatre, films online etc. could help identify exactly which and what type of films Jordanians are exposed to, therefore enabling potential targets for future cultural education efforts.

Scaling information source impact may also contribute further to specifying results of further studies. About a quarter of students reported learning from multiple or other sources; enabling students to rank the impact of sources, or assign a number to scale how strongly that source impacted their perception, could benefit future specificity.

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