A Year in Damascus: The CASA Experience

By Elizabeth Williams

In the summer of 2007, the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA), after 40 years in Cairo, opened a new program in Damascus, Syria. As one of the first-year CASA Damascus fellows, I cannot speak to the exact similarities or differences with the Center’s Cairo program; however, I can attest that the Damascus program is as rigorous as anyone familiar with CASA Cairo’s reputation might expect. The program is a welcome opportunity for advanced Arabic students seeking to study in an immersion setting and is an important addition to the growing number of Arabic language programs offered in Damascus. According to the program’s website, American citizens and permanent residents of the U.S. can apply.

The year I applied, the application process to CASA Cairo and CASA Damascus was the same and applicants could indicate on the application if they wanted to be considered for the CASA Damascus program. The procedure for application is involved and professors should encourage their students to start early. The application form itself is usually due in early January. On a set date in early February, students must take the CASA written exam, which lasts several hours. The year I applied, the exam was followed by an oral phone interview in late February with the results announced in March. This year, however, the oral interviews took place after students were notified of their acceptance.

The CASA program in Damascus has expanded rapidly—in its first year, eight students participated in the program; in its second year the program accepted approximately twice that many. The first-year Damascus fellows were all full-year participants in the CASA program; with the second group, the program began to institute the summer-only option on a limited basis. The program takes a well-rounded approach to teaching the Arabic language, with coursework stressing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and includes classes taught in both Modern Standard Arabic and Syrian colloquial. The summer semester in particular stresses intensive classes in Syrian colloquial so that students can begin to use it immediately in their daily interactions outside the classroom. The summer class in Modern Standard Arabic is designed to teach copious amounts of vocabulary accompanied by a significant amount of reading and the weekly writing of a relatively short essay. The intent is to prepare students for the fall semester which focuses on reading and vocabulary, but also continues to build students’ fluency in Syrian colloquial as well as listening and speaking skills. During the first year, texts for the fall semester included novels by Hoda Barakat and Abdul Rahman Munif, a nonfiction book by Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri, and additional shorter texts in both classical and Modern Standard Arabic.

In the spring semester, students are required to take a writing class that culminates in a lengthy final research paper. The remaining three spring classes are elective and, as the program continues to expand, students’ options for electives will also increase. Thus, students have the ability to decide what skills they want to focus on during this final semester from reading (the year I attended there was a choice between both Modern
Standard and classical texts) and listening to grammar and colloquial Arabic. The program’s teachers in Damascus are excellent. From tailoring classes so that they best suited the individual students’ needs and interests to spending hours outside of class working with students individually, their commitment to ensuring the rigor of the curriculum as well as the advancement of student knowledge was unwavering.

Finally, one of the best things about the CASA Damascus experience is the opportunity it affords students to live in Damascus itself. Not only is Damascus a city rich in history and cultural opportunities, but it is an excellent environment for language learning. Most local Damascenes are eager to talk with students and fully expect to be able to do so in Arabic, even if it means being a bit patient. Thus, students should have ample opportunities to practice their Arabic in a “real world” setting. Overall, the CASA Damascus program is a welcome addition to the language-learning opportunities available to students in the region. Students will be rewarded with an intensive immersion experience in a stimulating and rigorous environment. For more information see the CASA website http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/casa/ .

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