Resources about Harassment and Sexual Assault

Harassment while Abroad:

Overview:

Harassment, defined as any sort of unwanted attention, is unfortunately quite common across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). During your time abroad, it is likely that you will experience some form of sexual, gender-based, racial, political, and/or religious harassment. Keep in mind that the severity and frequency of harassment varies from country to country around the MENA region due to different social structures and expectations that arise from each country's unique history and set of norms. Harassment generally cannot be avoided, so we encourage all of our students (male and female alike) to begin thinking about how they will approach unwanted attention either towards themselves or their peers while abroad. While this resource seeks to explain some of the factors behind various forms of harassment in the MENA region, AMIDEAST does not intend to excuse harassment that students experience. If you experience any form of harassment, we encourage you to speak to on-site staff as soon as possible for support.

Political Harassment[1]

As you may already know, U.S. foreign policy and history of military intervention are generally not well-received in the MENA region. While some people in the MENA region may not view the U.S. government favorably, many explain that they make a clear distinction between sentiments towards the U.S. government and those toward the American people. As a result, they do not necessarily dislike *people* from the U.S. While locals likely distinguish between you and your government, they may still express dissatisfaction with actions of the U.S. government. In these cases, it is often best to simply listen. If you disagree, we strongly advise you not to argue. In general, we encourage all students to exercise caution with potentially controversial topics.

Racial Harassment

Racism exists in the MENA region, as it unfortunately does in many places around the world. It is important to note that categorizations of racial groups vary widely from society to society, and therefore racism abroad may manifest itself in unfamiliar and surprising ways. Further, many host country nationals may have limited experience with certain racial and ethnic groups. It is possible that these limited interactions, as well as a low level of representation of certain racial groups in society and in the media, may sometimes result in stereotypes and perceptions that

[1] Please note that this learning content uses the U.S. as an example/comparison. While most of our students are from the U.S.; we do accept students from other countries as well. We use the U.S. as a reference point here because AMIDEAST is an American organization and the majority of our participants come from the U.S. Some of the relevance of this information may differ based on individual backgrounds.

are more exaggerated and/or differ from forms of racial discrimination that are present in parts of U.S. society.

We have had students report racist behavior during their time abroad. Should you encounter problems with race-based discrimination and harassment, please speak with in-country staff for suggestions on how to manage the situation. Additionally, students sometimes report hearing racist terms in conversations with host country nationals while they are abroad. Note that what may be considered racist in the U.S. can sometimes hold a slightly different meaning in the MENA region. While it may be challenging if someone offends you with his or her choice of language, consider whether or not the individual intended the comment in an offensive way. If you choose to engage in conversations about the issue of racism with people in your host country, please do so with caution and recognize that the context abroad may be different than the one you are used to. That being said, we encourage students who are negatively impacted by such comments and conversations to reach out to in-country staff for support.

Ideas of what an American looks like can sometimes be fairly monolithic, which can create challenges for students who do not necessarily fit the preconceptions local people may have about people from the United States. Students of color, particularly African-American students, should be aware that due to the presence of sub-Saharan African migrants in the region, it is possible that when describing your identity as American, locals may not believe you at first. We have seen this to be true especially if the student's Arabic language proficiency is more advanced. As a person of color, locals might question you about your American nationality. This usually comes in the form of aggressive questioning of your roots. Many times these questions are not meant to be offensive or accusatory, but simply reflect the individual's image of the U.S. and the conception of nationality that the person holds. We advise students to prepare by considering how you would respond to this type of line of questioning.

Additionally, in some parts of the Middle East, there are many Asian immigrants and many of them work as maids or live-in nannies. As a result, students of Asian-American descent may face similar difficulties and misconceptions to those described above.

Religious Harassment

Please note that proselytization is illegal in some countries in the MENA region and religion, in general, can be a sensitive topic. Some people may ask prying questions about religion or bring up the topic of converting religions. In these situations, it is best to simply listen to the speaker and change to a new topic when possible to avoid conflict.

The MENA region is predominantly Sunni Muslim, with minority populations of Shi'ites, Christians, and various other religions and sects. As the birthplace of several religions, many believers in the Levant are descendants of some of the first converts and take great pride in this heritage. There are opportunities for Christian and Muslim students to attend religious events and celebrate their own holidays. However, because of the lasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict, students may hear comments that are hostile to Jewish and/or Israeli people. While most

people in the MENA region differentiate between Jewish people, Israeli citizens and the state of Israel; people sometimes conflate these groups when discussing Palestinian issues. Because of these hostilities, Jewish students may not be able to practice their religion as freely as they are used to in other countries. That being said, in some locations such as Morocco, there have historically been small, vibrant Jewish communities in many major cities in which students can become involved – the largest of which is in Casablanca. It is recommended for all students to be discreet with their religious beliefs until they assess the sensitivity of the topic in each conversation and setting.

Non-religious students should also carefully consider how they plan to talk about religion with locals. Peoples of the MENA region are very accepting of monotheists of any sort ("People of the Book"). A stranger will generally assume that, as an American, you are Christian. If asked, you may find it is easier to tell someone you are a Christian, as locals will usually drop the topic afterwards. It can be complicated for students to explain atheism or agnosticism because peoples of the MENA region are either unfamiliar with these or feel uncomfortable with the concepts.

Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Assault:

Sexual and gender-based harassment is the most common form of harassment that AMIDEAST students encounter. Sexual and gender-based harassment exists all around the world and is the result of the confluence of many societal factors. These factors include gender roles, political and social norms, conceptions of masculinity and femininity, gender and other social inequalities, and stereotypes. Additionally, due to the pervasiveness of sexual content in U.S. movies and media, negative stereotypes can be applied to U.S. women, which further contribute to their sexualization and objectification in the U.S. and abroad. While these factors can explain why some men in your host country are persistent in harassment, it does not excuse this behavior.

While harassment is never the fault of the victim, we encourage both men and women to take extra precautions by dressing conservatively and being mindful of actions in public. Many students have found that it can help reduce the frequency of harassment to adhere to standard cultural norms by dressing conservatively and to travel in groups whenever possible. Keep in mind that you may experience harassment no matter what you wear or who you are with. Again, this is due to the fact that harassment is not a function of the victim's actions, but rather social dynamics and norms. Sometimes local men are less likely to harass a woman if she is with a male student, but being in a group of 2-4 women can also feel more comfortable. Often, if cat-calls are ignored, men will not pursue you any further. If a man touches or assaults you, it is recommended for you to call for help. It is also important to look out for your peers. Male students should not feel pressure to accompany female students in the city, but it can be much more comfortable for female students if they do. Lastly, while AMIDEAST staff recognize that gender-based harassment and violence are not the fault of the victim, this is likely not the predominant belief in your host country. While many people in the MENA region are working to

change beliefs about gender and harassment, concepts of consent, harassment and assault may not be widely understood or accepted. There are a number of other tips and resources regarding sexual harassment in the documents attached below.

In addition to taking precautions in public, it is also important for people of all genders to keep in mind that host-country friends or acquaintances will likely interpret your actions according to the local cultural framework. In the context of gender relations, this means that actions that may be simply considered friendly in a U.S. context may be considered as romantic or sexual advances in another context. In the MENA region, spending time in a mixed group of people is typically more appropriate than spending time alone with someone of a different gender. If you decide to spend one-on-one time with someone of a different gender than you, it is very important to be aware of how your actions may be interpreted. This is particularly true if you decide to take a trip together or you go to a hotel or private home alone with that individual. While you may only intend to build a friendship with someone of a different gender, he or she may interpret your actions as consent to sexual advances, even when consent has not been given. Be aware that date rape as a concept may be unknown to people in your host country. If you do want to date someone, we suggest spending as much time as possible in groups and in public places in order to get to know your potential partner before spending time alone together.

It is important to note that as with many regions of the world, sexual assault is a real risk in the MENA region. AMIDEAST wants to prepare students as best as possible to mitigate this risk by taking extra precautions, which is why it is important to take these factors into consideration before going abroad. Lastly, AMIDEAST strongly encourages students who experience any non-consensual sexual contact to report the incident to on-site staff as soon as possible.

Final Thoughts:

All students should keep the above information about different forms of harassment in mind when you go abroad. If you ever feel that you are being harassed because of your political beliefs, citizenship, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender; remove yourself from the situation as quickly and safely as possible and speak to programming staff to receive additional support.

We also encourage you to be sensitive to the differing experiences of your peers and to look out for each other. For example, a black female student will experience harassment differently than her white female or black male peers. Each student's experience will be different depending on his or her unique and intersecting identities. By recognizing that everyone's experiences are valid, all students will feel more welcome and included on the AMIDEAST program. You can also look out for each other by checking in if you see something suspicious. It is always good to err on the side of caution and touch base with your friends if it seems to you that they are in an uncomfortable situation. Lastly, AMIDEAST encourages students to support one another by sharing what they have learned about the local culture and helping each other to adjust. This process can include brainstorming ways that you might want to handle an uncomfortable or unwelcome situation.

With the information regarding various forms of harassment being said, we want to note that many students experience daily encounters in which host country nationals are accepting and hospitable to all kinds of people. The information provided here regarding harassment is intended to prepare you for what *might* happen, but we hope you keep in mind that **many** locals do not approve of any form of harassment. If any uncomfortable situation regarding harassment persists, the AMIDEAST Education Abroad on-site staff can assist students in working through these concerns.

More information about harassment is covered in the AMIDEAST Pre-Departure Orientation recordings found in the Learning Content Section of your Student Portal.

Readings on Harassment in the MENA region:

Included below are links to several resources focused on sexual and gender-based harassment while studying abroad and specific articles related to harassment in the Middle East and North Africa. Although these resources address sexual and gender-based harassment in multiple countries, we encourage you to read all of them in order to start reflecting on the issue of harassment. These are somewhat long articles, so you may want to print them and bring them along to read on the plane.

Know that, once you arrive in your host country, you will receive more information regarding harassment during orientation. You will discuss some of the reasons harassment happens and different ways of dealing with it. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns about any form of harassment during your time abroad, please feel free to contact AMIDEAST Headquarters.

Sexual Harassment and Prevention in Study Abroad by Nancy Newport, RN, LPC
Gendered Contestations by Nadia Ilahi
Morocco: Four Perspectives on Sexual Harassment by Global Voices
The Nation: As Jordanian Women Leave the Home, Sexual Harassment Reaches Unprecedented Levels by Elizabeth Whitman
Young Women and Social Media Against Sexual Harassment in North Africa by Loubna Hanna Skallia
Qahera the Superhero: http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/60081962515
Discrimination Abroad by the Diversity Abroad Task Force on Race & Ethnicity
KAHAL is an organization that provides resources and connections for Jewish students abroad.