

*King's Student
Perspectives
Asian and Middle
Eastern Studies:
Arabic*

*Ivan, AMES graduate
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Ivan studied Arabic at King's and is now working in Baghdad.

How did you decide to study Arabic?

I was attracted to studying Arabic at King's as much by the opportunity to learn about a fascinating and important region as by the breadth of the course in terms of its balance between language study and other disciplines. To this end, I decided to concentrate on a single language to enable me to take more papers on subjects encompassing the Qur'an, political Islam, modern Arabic literature, Turkish history and an anthropological research project.

How did you choose King's?

Before applying I attended an open day at the AMES Faculty and another at King's, during which I met the Director of Studies at the time. He was really engaging right from the start of our meeting and that, together with the friendliness of everyone else I met at King's that day, was enough to persuade me that this was the right college for me even without knowing much about any of the other Colleges.

What is King's like?

It's probably fair to say that King's is among the most diverse colleges in terms of the backgrounds of the students as well as their range of interests, which is primarily what makes it such an amazing community to be a part of. Besides the refreshing open-mindedness and strong sense of community, for me it was the vibrant music scene with its two choirs and orchestra along with the close friendships I formed through being part of the King's rowing team that made the three years I spent at King's so enjoyable.

From an Arabist's point of view, King's also benefits from having several affiliated AMES Faculty members from the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies who are very approachable.

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And the course itself?

The Cambridge Arabic course places a strong emphasis on teaching of the language in the first year. This can be hard work at times as it means trying to learn both the spoken and written forms of the language simultaneously, however it helps that the language teachers are excellent and supportive. Undoubtedly one of the big strengths of the teaching in the AMES Faculty is the small size of the classes, usually numbering not more than a dozen students and often considerably fewer.

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What about the Year Abroad?

One of the benefits of studying Arabic is the wide range of countries that it unlocks for the year abroad (subject to the political climate in the region at the time, of course!). The freedom that the Faculty gives students when planning their year abroad allowed me to begin in Syria before heading to Yemen to study at a language school in Sana'a and then finish in Palestine where I volunteered at a university and began researching my fourth year dissertation.

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My experiences during the year abroad convinced me that I wanted to live and work abroad after graduating, preferably in a Middle Eastern country where I could use my Arabic. The combination of language skills and understanding of the Arab world that an Arabic degree represents is valued by a wide variety of employers, reflected in the different career paths that each of us in my year have subsequently taken.

What did you do after graduating?

In my case after graduating I decided to join a bank with a substantial presence across the Middle East.

After initially being posted to New York for a year and half, during which time I frightened my neighbours by watching Al Jazeera Arabic in the mornings to try to preserve some of my Arabic, I took the opportunity when it came to relocate to Baghdad.

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After nearly a year based in Baghdad I moved to Amman, which is an altogether much more pleasant place to live even though I do miss the friends and colleagues I got to know in Iraq.

Amman has a reputation as a somewhat boring city, but being able to speak Arabic has enabled me

to make friends and get involved in the local community. In fact the Arabic I learnt during my degree has proved as invaluable to me in my work as it has outside of the office since moving to the Middle East, all of which makes those tough first few weeks of the course in Cambridge seem thoroughly worthwhile.

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A note to current King's AMES students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying AMES at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:
undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk.