How to Get a Job in the Middle East (in Washington, D.C.)

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

Apr 16, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

A seasoned Middle East researcher and hiring director offers four tips for aspiring policy wonks.

Nearly 13 years after 9/11 and despite the talk of a "pivot" to Asia, the Middle East continues to attract the attention of American college students. In the 2011-2012 academic year, for example, roughly 7,000 American students studied in the Middle East, and many thousands more took courses on the region's history, cultures, religions, politics, and languages. But those hoping to translate this interest into a career face an unfortunate reality upon graduation: There is simply too much talent for too few paying jobs.

I speak from personal experience. I attended my first college class on Sept. 12, 2001, and spent the next four years studying Arabic and Hebrew; taking coursework on Islam and Middle Eastern politics; spending summers in Israel and Lebanon; and writing a senior thesis on Israeli elections law, for which I conducted research in the Knesset. Yet when the time came to apply for jobs, I was rejected left and right -- including, at first, by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's research assistant program. I eventually got lucky: The Washington Institute ultimately needed an additional research assistant, and pulled my application from the trash heap -- literally, I'm told.

Nine years later, I am now responsible for hiring research assistants and interns at the Washington Institute, and I must confess: I completely understand why they initially passed on me. Every year, we receive hundreds of resumes from a pool of highly qualified applicants, and we can offer only seven paying positions. Our acceptance rate is under 3 percent.

So what does it take to make the cut? I should emphasize from the outset that there are no hard-and-fast rules: As policy priorities change, what we look for in prospective candidates shifts as well. But with two seasons of hiring now behind me, here are four pointers for college students seeking entry-level positions at Middle East-focused think tanks.

1. Spend at least a semester in the region -- and, if you can, write about it.

For many decades, the relative stability of Middle Eastern regimes meant that U.S. policy towards the region emphasized high politics. Policymakers had to be intimately familiar with Middle Eastern leaders' views on negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, or the Israeli-Palestinian peace process -- but less so about what Middle Eastern citizens themselves thought about the politics of their region. That's all changing: Non-state actors' emergence as pivotal players, as well as the increasing relevance of public opinion in shaping the politics of the region, means that the next generation of Middle East policy professionals will have to intimately understand the region, its peoples, and its cultures.

The process of learning the region firsthand should start while you are in college, and you should anticipate continuing your engagement with the region throughout your career. For this reason, the strongest applicants for entry-level think tank positions will have already completed one or two study or work experiences in the Middle East. The most impressive applicants will have made an effort to understand a given country beyond the specific program in which they were enrolled, and those applicants who stray from well-traveled paths within the region -- studying in Haifa, rather than Jerusalem, for example -- always stand out.

To be sure, spending substantial time in the region does not on its own guarantee that potential employers will beat a path to your door. But it does signal two things to application readers. First, you are intellectually curious -- you are not satisfied by only reading about the Middle East in books and newspapers, but want to see it and live it, despite the occasional security and health risks. Second, the fact that you've committed time to living in the Middle East signals that you are looking to continue working in this field beyond the entry-level position. Nobody wants to hire the recent college grad who is just looking to "try out" Middle East policy -- we want people who are committed to it, and spending meaningful time in the region demonstrates that commitment profoundly.

Finally, the best way to show what you've learned from your time in the Middle East is to write about it. Whether your work appears in your school newspaper or more mainstream outlets is immaterial. What matters is how your observations from the ground inform your deeper analysis -- about the country's politics, its society, or the effects of U.S. policy. This is also a vital opportunity to showcase your writing skills, demonstrating that you can write in a way that is accessible to a general (rather than academic) audience.

2. Strive for fluency in at least one Middle Eastern language -- and if you haven't, don't fudge the truth.

Because U.S. policy is set from Washington, many policymakers and analysts only get to visit the Middle East for a few weeks -- if that -- every year. For this reason, those who aspire to a career in Middle East policy should have the ability to follow the region as intimately as possible from 6,000 miles away. This means having the language skills to watch Middle Eastern television, read local newspapers, track social media pages, and speak with a broad range of local actors over the phone or Skype.

The strongest applicants for entry-level Middle East policy positions will therefore be fluent -- or close to fluent -- in at least one Middle Eastern language. Those who have not yet learned a Middle Eastern language by the time they graduate college are unlikely ever to do so, and this make them less worthy of an entry-level think tank position -- especially when many other applicants have achieved a high level of fluency.

When I read applications, I therefore look for two things. First, has the applicant studied Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Hebrew for at least three years in college, or at the advanced level -- if only for two years? This applies to native and non-native speakers alike: I have often interviewed native Arabic speakers, for example, who despite speaking Arabic to their parents in a colloquial dialect, have not mastered formal Arabic to the degree that would allow them to read a newspaper. As a result, they cannot conduct research in the language.

Second, has the applicant used at least one of these languages on a daily basis while studying or working in the region? That's why where you study or work in the Middle East matters: The people making the decision on your

application know which types of programs or settings involve at least some language immersion, and which do not.

One more point: Never embellish your language skills. During the interview phase, I always test the applicants on their language skills by asking them to translate newspaper articles and YouTube videos on the spot. If you claim to be "fluent" or "proficient" in Arabic on your resume and then can't perform -- well, that doesn't look very good.

3. Write a college senior thesis.

Regional experiences and language skills are vital to understanding the Middle East, but they are useless in the hands of someone who cannot research or write. A thesis trains students to develop these skills -- to use a wide range of source materials, offer deeper analysis, and develop expertise on at least one narrow issue, typically under the guidance of an established professor.

The process of writing a senior thesis is often more important than the ultimate product. Even if your senior thesis topic has little or no relevance to Middle East policy, the fact that you can synthesize large amounts of primary and secondary-source information will make you a more effective policy researcher, analyst, and advisor. Bonus points for thesis topics that involve research in a Middle Eastern language. And additional bonus points for those who conduct senior thesis research in the Middle East, since this demonstrates the ultimate application of your country-specific skills.

4. Do an internship in Washington -- preferably at a policy organization or in government.

While understanding the Middle East on its own terms and learning region-specific skills are important, they are ultimately only half the battle. To repeat an earlier point, for better or worse, U.S. policy toward the Middle East is crafted in Washington -- and the best applicants for entry-level positions will have spent at least one summer working in D.C. getting to know its ways.

There is no one right or wrong place to intern, but the ideal internship involves two components. First, it should involve exposure to a narrow policy or political issue, so that you gain an appreciation for the policy process and the way Washington "works." In this light, an internship in the State Department is as good as an internship in the Washington office of the New York State governor (full disclosure: I interned many years ago at the latter). Both opportunities expose interns to the unique interplay of federal, congressional, and bureaucratic politics, as well as policy considerations, which ultimately influence policy outcomes.

Second, the ideal internship allows its interns to explore Washington beyond the day-to-day office job. This means that you should be able to carve out some time for attending events around town, such as Hill hearings, policy forums, book launches, and the like. Beyond these events' substance, these outings will introduce you to Washington's inherently social aspect. Learning how to network effectively within the city is often the best way to ensure that your application for a research assistantship gets read.

In addition to these benefits, Washington internships give those looking to get their foot in the door of the Middle East policy world the opportunity to showcase their professionalism. They have an opportunity to impress upon potential employers that they can show up on time, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively with colleagues. Indeed, I frequently call applicants' former internship supervisors to inquire about their prior work, and strong recommendations go a long way toward getting an interview, and possibly a job.

As I examine the stack of resumes on my desk, here is what I'm looking for: Someone who knows the Middle East, understands its languages, knows how to get his or her resume directly on my desk, and has a track record of professionalism. Even then, there's no guarantee you will be selected -- there is simply too much talent for too few positions. But it's a good way to get my attention.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)