

## Intensive Arabic Semester

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Students become Middle East insiders through intensive Arabic language and general studies. The “Intensive Arabic Semester” offers students from around the world the opportunity to learn Arabic in five months and become an ingrained member of both Israeli and Palestinian society.

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*By Sybil Ottenstein*

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Preparations are already underway and registration is almost complete for this year's “Intensive Arabic Semester” (IAS), a 5-month MASA sponsored program for teaching Arabic under the auspices of Givat Haviva, the leading education center in Israel for teaching Arabic. With its first cycle launched in January 2009, IAS's participants hail from all over the world, and spend their 5-months making positive in-roads to the languages and diverse cultures of Arabs and Jews in Israel.

Graduates of IAS will obtain spoken Arabic at a highly professional level. Along with 500 hours of Arabic study, students live on a kibbutz and study in a Hebrew “Ulpan.” They receive a wide selection of courses in various topics relating to Middle Eastern and Arabic culture, including history, politics, culture and religion.

Students, who range in age from 18-30, undertake community work in neighboring Arab villages and gain first-hand experience in the do's and don'ts of the very diverse societies they are moving between during the semester. Participants become members of “adopted” Arab families, forming deep and intertwined relationships with members of the surrounding Arab villages.

Kerrie Sharon, a participant on last cycle's IAS, had studied basic

Hebrew in Israel in the past but had not attempted Arabic.

As student Kerrie Sharon says: “This program has allowed me to learn beyond the rhetoric, through classes and through meeting people from both communities – to learn to understand more deeply the motivations for Israel's actions, to find new ways of understanding the issues and dilemmas underlying the painful and enduring conflict.”



The Givat Haviva Campus [photo: <http://www.givathaviva.org.il/>]

“I have a firm belief in the power of education to build bridges in conflict situations from my work at home as a citizenship teacher. I eventually realized that I would have to speak the languages in order to undertake effective educational work so the program was ideal for me in terms of allowing me to be associated with Givat Haviva and learn about their work, whilst also developing language abilities,” said Kerrie.



Students learn the language actively through a combination of theoretical studies and hands-on experience in the field. Givat Haviva teachers are all trained, qualified, academic professionals; they are leaders in the field of teaching Arabic as a second language.

Eriana Rivera-Rozo, who holds a Masters in Conflict Management, is a Colombian living in the United States since her teens.

Eriana explains, "Offering a holistic experience, not only focusing on Arabic but also being involved with Arab and Jewish communities, really piqued my interest."

Inon Tagner, a third year student at the IDC in Law and Government, runs the programs' marketing. Tagner's enthusiasm and long-standing connection to the Arabic language fueled his desire to spearhead this initiative.



The Givat Haviva Campus [photo: <http://www.givathaviva.org.il/>]

After completing high school, Tagner participating in a gap-year program, volunteering for a Bedouin tribe in the south of Israel. In order to prepare himself for this experience, Tagner learned spoken Arabic at Givat-Haviva. Givat Haviva's 50 years of experience in teaching Arabic helped Tagner gain the language skills

he needed to be a valuable member of the Bedouin community.

For the past two years, Tagner has guided countless groups around Givat Haviva, explaining to them about the role the Israeli-Arabs play in Israeli society and the numerous dilemmas they face.

The I.A.S. program is open for all applicants regardless of previous Arabic knowledge, nationality or gender. The program is an especially ideal choice for Jewish youth; either as an appealing gap-year option, or for recent college graduates looking for a unique advantage in the increasingly competitive job market and academic circles. A thorough understanding of Arab culture and fluency in the Arabic language is a very attractive feature for a variety of employers and graduate programs.

Unique to most programs in Israel, participants become fully immersed in the local Arab neighborhood, forging strong personal ties with the community and becoming familiar with their environment. Equally important to the acquisition of familiarity with the Arabic environment, participants gain an intimate knowledge of Israeli life and culture.

In the future, IAS strives to form stronger and deeper connections with surrounding Arab villages and offer more and more people the opportunity to learn Arabic in this uniquely immersed environment.

All in all, IAS gives students an opportunity to learn a new language while becoming immersed in two different cultures and understanding the conflict and the region on a deep and personal level. Therefore, if one truly wish to know the "other" and to



put himself in his world, language is the only tool to achieve it. It is the ultimate barrier breaker between people, cultures and conflicts.