
**YOUNG JORDANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
THE U.S. GEOPOLITICAL PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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JEDEDIAH M. MCKEE

Dr. Matthew Foulkes, Thesis Advisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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GEOPOLITICAL PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

presented by Jedediah M. McKee,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts in geography,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Dr. Matthew Foulkes

Dr. Joseph Hobbs

Dr. Loreen Olson

For Lacey

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Introduction

On June 4th, 2009 President Barack Obama spoke in Cairo, Egypt on the tension that exists between the United States and the Muslim World. His speech was entitled the “New Beginning,”¹ and was meant to repair what he presented as a damaged relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The speech was interesting as it seemed to discredit the notion of the “East” and “West” as locked in perpetual conflict. It acknowledged the Muslim world – notably the Middle East – has been misrepresented in the past, and that in the future the U.S. should ensure its geopolitical goals are more in line with those of Muslim-majority states, or at least their people. He labeled the Iraq War an irresponsible and unprovoked “war of choice.” Additionally, nowhere in the President’s speech did he reference the ‘Global War on Terror’ or terrorism in general, preferring to focus on ‘extremism.’ In doing so, he appeared to be signaling to his audience that U.S. geopolitics would be altered from the direction taken in the past. The new direction would attempt to reduce tension through cooperation.

President Obama’s speech attempted to construct a relationship between the United States and the “Muslim world” that emphasized mutual cooperation between the two. This shift of rhetoric in the discourse between the U.S. and Muslim-majority states was significant in terms of international relations and the statements of political

¹ Barack H. Obama. 2009. “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_pres_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University,6-04-09.

elites. However, popular perceptions within Muslim-majority states are also significant to a geopolitical 'new beginning' for the United States. President Obama's speech appeared to be well received by the audience in Cairo, but a long-term reaction was unclear. Negative perceptions of the U.S. have been a particularly dominant issue in discourse about the Muslim-majority states of the Middle East. Without addressing this persistent negative popular opinion in Middle East geographies, there will be no new beginning, only a continuation of the past. Understanding how Obama's words and, more importantly, the wider U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse are perceived by the peoples of Middle East geographies is an important part of explaining U.S. geopolitics, not to mention developing an improved relationship with the many Muslim-majority states of the entire globe. In an effort to address popular perception, a primary goal of this study was to analyze perceptions of U.S. geopolitics at an individual level, or scale, with a focus on how these perceived geopolitical processes affect the spaces in which they live. **Specifically, the research objectives were to explore how young Jordanians perceive the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East and how that presence affects their society.** This includes the inaccuracies found in U.S. geopolitical discourse as well as how they perceive the tension between the "East" and "West."

Understanding how the inhabitants of Middle East geographies perceive U.S. geopolitical objectives, actions and general presence within the region is important in establishing the mutual respect and cooperation required for a 'new beginning.' The power relationship between the United States and Middle East states is one easily conceived of as asymmetrical, and the inhabitants of the Middle East are on the

receiving end of the effects of U.S. hegemony within the current geopolitical order. U.S. domination throughout the region takes many forms, and its geopolitical decisions are felt the greatest by regional inhabitants. Building a mutually beneficial relationship between Middle East societies and the U.S. involves understanding how those societies view the U.S. and its role within the international geopolitical order. Yet research has been overly focused on the speech and actions of the news media; institutional elites, such as heads of state and militants; or victims of extreme violence whose perspectives are limited in their own ways. The other 99.9 percent of “ordinary” society become irrelevant and removed from discourse. Studies of geopolitics can benefit from a non-essentialist, ground-up perspective. If geopolitics is indeed a “discursive practice,”² then understanding and explaining the less-empowered perspectives contributes to accurate representations of the world. Focus group research held in a Middle East geography provides an opportunity to explore how these groups of people perceive the U.S. geopolitical presence within the region.

Focus groups can reveal how U.S. geopolitics are perceived by individuals in the Middle East. By doing so, the new beginning for U.S. geopolitics in the region will be based on more accurate understandings of how individuals interpret the U.S. presence in their lives. Americans and official U.S. decision-makers cannot build a mutually cooperative relationship with Middle East states and at the same time remain ignorant of how people perceive of U.S. geopolitics. In order for decision-makers to formulate wise policy, they must be informed about the world, those who live in it and their

² Gearóid Ó Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 59.

grievances. A practical benefit of this type of research is the generation of policy “feedback” for U.S. decision-making as well as increased information for the American public. This arguably *critical* feedback may address what happens when the United States projects its power in order to achieve its geopolitical objectives throughout space. Most importantly, focus group research offers insight into the contemporary reputation of the United States. It is important to note though, that this study was neither intended to analyze U.S. policy, nor to offer any critique of policy, per se. The goal is to generate more accurate information for use in the various and inevitable decision-making processes that could benefit from considering the perceptions of residents of the Middle East.

An excellent place to conduct focus group research on this topic is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. With borders touching Iraq, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordanians have exposure to the social, political and economic interests (and impacts) of the United States. Indeed, Jordan has been part of a complex interaction of politics, nationalism, conflict and peace within the region, which are of no small concern to the United States. Maintaining a positive relationship with Jordan is a vital part of mediating the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, as Jordan is inseparable from this complex and persisting conflict. The modern state of Jordan is described by Adnan Abu Odeh as the function of the history of the “triangular interaction” among “three peoples” – Transjordanians, Palestinians and Jews – for “two countries” – Palestine and Transjordan – that resulted from the British mandate after the First World

War.³ After the British gained control of the region in World War I, Emir Abdullah – son of the leader of the Arab Revolt, Sharif Hussein – was given control of the Emirate of Transjordan by British authorities.

The British mandate created two separate territorial entities divided by the Jordan River: Palestine in the West and Transjordan in the East. Abdullah, a Hashemite born in modern-day Saudi Arabia, ruled Transjordan for the duration of this mandate, 1922 to 1946. Shortly after the mandate ended and Transjordan gained autonomy, the 1948 War between the Jewish population of Palestine and the surrounding Arab nations immensely changed the region and especially Jordan. This conflict resulted in the establishment of the state of Israel in a portion of mandatory Palestine and, in 1950, the unification of the Transjordanian east bank with the Palestinian west bank under the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The demographic character of the former territorial state of Transjordan was greatly affected by the arrival of Palestinian refugees fleeing the conflict across the Jordan River, with Palestinians outnumbering Jordanians by an estimated two to one.⁴ The newly unified Hashemite Kingdom granted Palestinians the right to citizenship as well. During the 1950s, Jordan began to develop its economy and the Hashemite monarchy strengthened its position with respect to society. The two banks of the Jordan River would remain united until war broke out again in 1967.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict is well known as a rapid and sweeping Israeli victory over its Arab neighbors. The conflict resulted in Israeli occupation of the West

³ Adnan Abu Odeh. *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999). 27.

⁴ Abu Odeh. *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom*, 54.

Bank and increased numbers of Palestinian refugees in Jordan and thus increased the size of refugee camps for those who chose not to integrate into Jordanian society. The Israeli victory severely weakened the Arab states' militaries, making the opposing sides of the conflict militarily asymmetric. After the war, the Palestinian cause was furthered by the fedayeen, or guerillas. The guerrillas' cross-border operations in Israel and occupied Palestine ultimately led to their confrontation with the Hashemite government of King Hussein in Jordan in 1970. As the fedayeen presence increased in Jordan, particularly in the capitol of Amman, they became more openly critical of the Hashemite government. Eventually, fighting broke out between the Jordanian Army and the fedayeen. The Palestinian resistance was pushed out of Jordan and eventually relocated in Lebanon. The conflict inside Jordan between the pro-Palestinian fedayeen and the Jordanian Army – comprised primarily of ethnic Transjordanians – was instrumental in fostering a tension that lasts to this day between Jordanian citizens of Palestinian heritage and citizens of Transjordanian heritage. At this point, it is critical to clearly define what is meant by the term 'Jordanian.' As used here, the term refers to the all citizens of the modern-day Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Of those citizens, some are what may be called Palestinian-Jordanians, who are refugees or the descendants of refugees who fled conflict in Palestine. Transjordanians are those citizens who are the descendants of those peoples who resided in the territorial entity of Transjordan upon its creation after the First World War. For many Jordanian citizens of Palestinian descent, it is critical to acknowledge both aspects of their identity due to the dilemma of their very situation. On one hand, they identify – and have been taught to

identify – with Palestine. Doing so emphasizes their right to return upon the creation of a state. On the other hand, they are compelled to identify with their Jordanian identity not only because they are socially attached to Jordan – indeed many have never seen Palestine – but also for pragmatic reasons. If they renounce the Jordanian aspect of their identity, they endanger their claim to citizenship in the face of Transjordanian nationalism, and thus invite the possibility of being state-less if Palestine never materializes as a viable option. Understanding these distinctions is important to understanding society in the Hashemite Kingdom.

Within Jordanian society, the youth are a particularly interesting group.

According to Betty Anderson it was the youth of Jordan who challenged the Hashemite government in the 1950s before the state effectively created the institutions and national narrative necessary to garner the support of the greater society.⁵ Young people in Jordan are often caught between the traditional and modern forces within their society, which can easily be perceived as conflicting. For instance, the phenomenon of ‘wasta,’ a type of nepotism in Jordan, forces the youth to negotiate contradiction between modern notions of achievement-based performance and the traditional significance of familial relationships.⁶ Essentially, young people in Jordan are caught in a dilemma in which they are taught to honor both family and performance.

Circumstances such as these give them an interesting perspective of the United States, which is not surprisingly perceived as a modernizing force. Conceivably, a great deal of

⁵ Betty S. Anderson. *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2005), 7.

⁶ Robert B. Cunningham and Yasin K. Sarayrah. *Wasta: The Hidden Force in Middle Eastern Society* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 16.

insight into U.S.-Middle East relations and discourse can be gleaned from individuals who must negotiate such dynamics. Tracey Skelton argues “political policies, practices and discourses have direct impacts on young people and that young people do not accept these impacts passively but are actively engaged as political subjects and agents.”⁷ Given this point of view, young Jordanians are viewed as experts on their individual socio-cultural perspectives and are not considered as marginal to geopolitics. Furthermore, Jordanian university students are an elite group and likely to be future leaders within their society. The ‘new beginning’ – or any beginning for that matter – will include people from this group. Highlighting young Jordanian university students’ views and experiences within the U.S.-Middle East discourse offers valuable information.

Close political ties between this Arab, Muslim-majority nation and the United States make Jordanian society a relatively open environment for research into the topic of the U.S. presence in the region. However, the Jordanian political system is authoritarian when compared to that of the United States. The semi-closed character of Middle East societies, such as Jordan, makes it largely unknown to Americans, as Joris Luyendijk points out.⁸ Interestingly, these contradictory attributes combine to make Jordan an attractive place for focus group research. On the one hand, the receptiveness of Jordanian society to America in general as a result of the positive political relationship between the United States and Jordan encourages Jordanians to participate in field-based research. On the other, the inaccessibility of Jordanian society, in some respects,

⁷ Tracey Skelton. “Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography” *Area* 42, 2 (2010), 146.

⁸ Joris Luyendijk. “Beyond Orientalism” *International Communications Gazette* 72,1 (2010): 9-20.

makes data collections methods like surveys less useful. Focus groups are more appropriate because they allow participants to sit down in a comfortable environment where their views can be expressed more extensively.

In the summer of 2010, the author travelled to Amman, Jordan with the intent of setting up focus groups in Amman, Jordan. Prior experience gained from studying abroad as an undergraduate in 2007 and 2008 was critical in making this possible. The author was therefore previously acquainted with Jordanian society and some of its history. In addition, a beginner-level understanding of the native language was also helpful. All of this experience was helpful in setting up and conducting the focus groups. Ultimately though, the study was motivated by the author's desire to understand and explain the tension between Middle East geographies such as Jordan and the United States, as well as how that tension connects to the U.S. geopolitical presence throughout the region.

Chapter One: Review of Geopolitical Theory

The purpose of this chapter is to explain why this study was couched within the framework of geopolitics and briefly describe influential forces that shaped U.S. geopolitics in Middle East geographies. To accomplish this, the first step is to establish what exactly is meant by 'geopolitics.' While the term is not uncommon, it was by no means clear. Within the academy, it has meant many things over the years; and, no attempt will be made to reiterate a historiographical account of its uses as that has been accomplished numerous times elsewhere. Geopolitics is understood here to be the activities of decision-makers in the international political economy that involve the projection of some form of power – including violent force – throughout global space in the pursuit of an envisioned spatial outcome. However, for clarity and simplicity's sake this study utilizes the metaphor 'mastering space,' used by John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge, as a working definition of geopolitics.⁹ The theoretical explanation of geopolitics that follows was intended to be sensitive to usages of the term as material spatial practice. It also explores geopolitics as practice performed via discourse. The latter was of particular importance to this study.

In 1995, John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge proposed a new approach to the academic field of geopolitics in an effort to assert some measure of control over the use

⁹ John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge. *Mastering Space: Hegemony, territory and international political economy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

of the term 'geopolitics' and emphasize discursive aspects of geopolitics as central to its practice.¹⁰ In doing so, their work debunked a geopolitical paradigm which seemingly existed within much of the field of international relations as well as geopolitical thought in general. Instead of, for instance, territorial conquest, Agnew and Corbridge treated international political economy as the central focus of geopolitics. They stated their new geopolitical theory was based on four general premises, which are explained below.

The first premise treated the concept of the 'state' as neither necessarily critical nor fundamental to the control of international political economy. They viewed the belief in the territorial sovereignty of the nation-state as the function of a specific period of time. The value of this point lies in emphasizing the understanding that no contemporary nation-state enjoys absolute sovereignty over its territory. Nor does any state enjoy absolute hegemony within the international geopolitical order. By extension, other institutions throughout the world are capable of exerting power in attempts to control the apparently "sovereign" space of the nation-state. However, it is not immediately clear whether or not Agnew and Corbridge believed in the existence of such an absolute sovereignty in at least some historical period. In short, the 'state' neither enjoys absolute sovereignty over territory nor is it the most significant or singularly fundamental source for the decision-making which shapes the world economy.¹¹

¹⁰ Agnew and Corbridge. *Mastering Space*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

Their second premise was based on the belief that a theory of geopolitics must account for the fact that international political economy is constituted differently throughout time. In other words, the study of geopolitics should benefit from an attention to what motivates international political economy in a certain time period. Theories of war by individuals such as Carl von Clausewitz were offered as an example of a lack attention to the particular historical circumstances driving the geopolitics of the day. Agnew and Corbridge emphasized that Clausewitz's "venerable distinctions between politics and war, and civil [...] and international war lose much of their intellectual meaning in a new context of DIY [do it yourself] warfare and New World Order sport-war."¹² The violent, low intensity conflicts of Africa and the Gulf War of 1990-1991 served as their respective examples, as upon close analysis neither appeared to be subordinated to an established government 'policy,' per se. Much of the war and violent conflict in the contemporary world order was not the result of the policies of nation-states, but rather other influential institutions operating within the global geopolitical order. Critically, Agnew and Corbridge perceived the aforementioned forms of violent armed conflict not as contestations of articulated political will, but as the result of economic competition and manifestations of savagery as the result of inequality and ignorance. Contemporary conflicts were different from Clausewitz's wars because the contemporary international political economy is constituted in a different manner than during the previous period of European, imperial competition. Ultimately,

¹² Ibid., 6.

Agnew and Corbridge's point was that international political economy and, as a result, how geopolitics are practiced changes over time.

The third premise which guided Agnew and Corbridge's new geopolitical theory is that geopolitics is not a function of the distribution of 'natural' resources or of a 'natural' evolution of circumstances within the world. Instead, a given geopolitical order is the result of "thinking political actors" and "the historical accumulation of assets and liabilities and their ability to adopt to changing circumstances."¹³ Therefore, geopolitical influence – "power" or lack thereof – derives from the disposition, in both space and time, of a state (and the influential decision-makers affecting that state) within the international political economy. A state exists within a context of interaction with other states, which are also connected to the international economy in some manner. Its position within that economic geography and within a given period in time influences the path of development chosen by decision-makers. The result is the state's degree of power and influence within the geopolitical order.

The fourth and final premise is an acknowledgement of geopolitics as partly a discursive practice, based in geographical perception and representation. Acknowledging geopolitics as based in discourse derives from analytical distinctions of "real" and "rhetorical" geopolitical space. Agnew and Corbridge described three conceptualizations of space – spatial practice, representations of space and representational space – evoked in explanations of geopolitics. 'Spatial practice' referred to the material processes constituting a geopolitical order. 'Representations of

¹³ Ibid., 6-7.

space' were viewed as the ways in which people describe spatial practices, including processes of geographical coding. And finally, "representational spaces are the scenarios for future spatial practices or 'imagined geographies' that inspire changes in the representation of space with an eye to the transformation of spatial practices."¹⁴ These types of space were perceived as interdependent, if analytically distinguishable, and thus attempts at determining causality between the three were avoided. Essentially, analyzing geopolitics demands a differentiation between material space and the abstract space based in social representation.

Agnew and Corbridge perceived these observations to be critical to the study of geopolitics, and thus used them to inform their theoretical approach to a 'new geopolitics.' Additionally, the concepts of geopolitical order, spatial ontology and geopolitical discourse were also critical to their new "paradigm" of geopolitics. Of these three concepts, the former was mostly intended to explain material spatial practices, while the latter two were integral to the processes of spatial representation.

The concept of a 'geopolitical order' was particularly useful for explaining the material spatial processes involved in geopolitics. For Agnew and Corbridge, a geopolitical order was not simply an economic or military pecking order among states. Instead it was a concept intended to explain the history of major geographical transformations of the social interactions that constitute the international political economy. There are two critical "dimensions" to their organization of a geopolitical

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

order. One is the “dominant scale of economic accumulation,”¹⁵ among states. Put another way, it is the scale at which geopolitically dominant states are economically active. The intensive territorial scale and the extensive interactional scale make up the two types. The other is the “dominant space of political regulation,”¹⁶ which refers to the spatial extent of a state’s organization. There are three main types, including national, imperial and international states. The domination of a given geopolitical order in history was termed ‘hegemony.’ This state of dominance could be comprised of multiple states or by one. The concept of a geopolitical order and how it is constituted was relevant to this study, but was not central to it. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the concepts and theory from which this study draws from when employing terms such as ‘geopolitical order’ and ‘hegemony.’ Ultimately though, analysis of spatial practice and the material processes constituting the international political economy are beyond the scope of this study. The concepts of spatial ontology and geopolitical discourse, however, are vital.

Spatial ontology refers to an expressed belief in existence of particular types of space, or expressed spatializations of ‘things’ existing in the real world. Global spatial ontologies such as Halford Mackinder’s ‘Eurasian heartland,’ surrounded by ‘outer and insular crescents’ is an example, as well as Zbigniew Brzezinski’s ‘arc of crisis’ in the Persian Gulf.¹⁷ For Agnew and Corbridge, widespread belief in a world “naturally” divided into territorial states was an important spatial ontology affecting how they described their theory of geopolitics. Indeed, the treatment of world geography as

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Patrick O’Sullivan. *Geopolitics* (New York, NK: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 37.

divided among 'regions' amounts to a spatial ontology. However, the division of the globe into a distinctly separate 'East' and 'West' spaces is the commonly evoked spatial ontology of concern to this study.

An important aspect of Agnew and Corbridge's new geopolitics was in differentiating the material and representational processes involved in the practice of geopolitics. This led to an emphasis of geopolitics as not simply a practice defined by the projection of military and other forms of power, but also as a rhetorical practice of representing the world. Their approach has been construed as supporting the notion "that if policy makers thought differently the world would automatically be different."¹⁸ This view was not supported here, as geopolitical discourse is viewed as *performed* rather than *constructed*.¹⁹ Put more simply, discourse is not analogous to a scripted act, but more like an impromptu performance where meaning is dynamic and not always completely clear. This concern with the *performance* of geopolitical discourse and imagined geography is important because it can be connected to concrete practices that reinforce the potency of discourse, such as the influence of policy debates, non-state intellectual think tanks, and video games which reenact a simulated 'Global War on Terror,' among others.²⁰ A theoretical approach that emphasizes geopolitics as partly based in discourse was a crucial aspect of Agnew and Corbridge's work and was the main rationale for understanding the discourse (and tension) between the U.S. and Middle East geographies as geopolitical in nature. Their theory and concepts – as

¹⁸ Luiza Bialasiewicz et. al. "Performing security: The imaginative geographies of current US strategy" *Political Geography* 26 (2007), 406.

¹⁹ Bialasiewicz et. al. "Performing security," 406.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 419.

interpreted above – are treated as integral to the understanding of geopolitics as discourse used in this study. The tension President Obama referenced in his Cairo speech is at the heart of the geopolitical discourse between the U.S. and Middle East geographies.

U.S.-Middle East Geopolitical Discourse

In order to analyze and understand the concept of a U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term ‘discourse.’ Discourse is understood here as grand narrative, or conversation abstracted. It is the embodiment of the perceptions and representations which give meaning to a particular topic, exchanged predominantly through the most influential channels of communication in society, such as the news, entertainment, politics and, of course, basic interpersonal communication. Though it can be a process of unbounded argumentation and description, it is more often a function of power and therefore a limited process of conceptualization. Thus, not every “voice” contributes equally to discourse. Geopolitical discourse is performed through the statements of government officials and offices, as well as the various forms of media. Media systems such as the news and entertainment (distinguished here as ‘news media’ and ‘entertainment media’) are structures within society that are particularly vital to the performance of a discourse. They are particularly influential in reifying geopolitical discourse and imagined geography on a popular level.

Analysis of U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse begins at somewhat predictable theoretical foundations – Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. Since 1978, Said’s theory has been not only influential but also controversial. Theories of Orientalism continue to be employed throughout numerous scholarly publications, clearly articulated in some cases and unidentified in others. I use the term theory to describe Orientalism not only as recognition of its complicated and abstract nature, but more importantly as an idea meant to have broad explanatory power. Unlike some studies which only briefly touch on Said’s theory, this study attempts a careful assessment of what was meant by Orientalism as well as a re-characterization of how this relates to U.S. geopolitical discourse. Orientalism is a theory describing processes critical to the establishment and maintenance of U.S. geopolitical hegemony in the global geopolitical order. In order to understand how this influential theory explains U.S. geopolitics, a summary and refocusing of Said’s central ideas will follow.

Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism addresses the ontological and epistemological distinction between the “East” and the “West,” or the Orient and the Occident, respectively. Orientalism is described as a discourse that perpetuates an imagined geography of the Middle East. To understand these concepts, it is necessary to briefly describe the Oriental/Occidental dualism. The distinction between the Orient and the Occident as two fundamentally different and opposing geographically defined ‘forces’ greatly influences how, for instance, Americans think about the Muslim world, and especially the Middle East. The Orient is not a real place, but rather a fiction of Western creation. Europeans and more recently, Americans, create the image of the

Orient in what amounted to more of a counter-image of the West rather than an accurate reflection of a real region of the world. With respect to the Western world, it is the 'Other.' Thus, the dualism of Oriental/Occidental is a product of othering – the perception of a “Western” self, and an “Eastern” other (the deviation from that self). Despite the fact that it does not exist in reality, the Orient is made real through cultural discourse. This biased discourse, according to Said, is made possible through the very real cultural and political hegemony of the West.²¹

Said separates the Orientalist discourse into three interdependent components.²² These are defined as an entire academic discipline for studying the Orient, a way of thinking that assumes an ontological and epistemological difference between the East and the West, and a corporate institution for dealing with a changing cultural and political relationship between “East” and “West.” These three components represented what he later termed “domains,”²³ and together facilitate the cultural and political hegemonic force necessary to dominate the Muslim world. Essentially, the relationship between the “East” and the “West” is one that can be characterized by asymmetric power, because the “West” has the power to define what the “East” is. Through the discourse of Orientalism, the West dominates how the Muslim world is represented.

Said’s three components of Orientalism – academic discipline (or approach), ontological and epistemological distinction, and corporate institution for representation and domination – can be re-characterized to reveal their applications to the study of

²¹ Edward Said. *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978), 1-8.

²² Said. 1979, 2-3.

²³ Edward Said. “Orientalism Reconsidered” *Cultural Critique* 1, (Autumn 1985), 90.

geopolitics. Firstly, Orientalism should be construed foremost as a particular view of spatial ontology. Therefore, it is a particular epistemology premised on a spatialization of the world where “the East” and “the West” are inherently different. This distinction represents not only the ideological backdrop to U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse, but also an important understanding within the belief system and resultant perceptions of those who adhere to the epistemology of Orientalism. From this point begin “the limitations on thought”²⁴ which concerned Said, rather than the production of geopolitical discourse through hegemony, can be better understood. The second conceptualization of Orientalism, as an academic field, is descriptive and useful insofar as it is viewed as a scholarly approach built around the aforementioned spatialization. It can be thought of, alternatively, as an academic paradigm. The third component of Said’s Orientalism can be re-characterized as a geopolitical discourse that emerges from a combination of the pervasiveness of this epistemology and a growing U.S. mastery of the international political economy (hegemony) that constitutes the post-World War II geopolitical order.

The value of Said’s theory is that it explains how a geopolitical discourse can enable geopolitical hegemony. The academic paradigm and its capacity to generate knowledge about Middle East geographies was critical in buttressing geopolitics via the Orientalist discourse. In a sense, the terms ‘Orientalism’ and ‘U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse’ are meant to describe the same thing. They both describe connections between perception and representation on the one hand, and geopolitical

²⁴ Said. *Orientalism*, 3.

vision and domination on the other. The theoretical assessment herein endeavors to highlight an important aspect of Said's theory; Orientalism is inherently geographical. Additionally, it is a theory which explains discursive aspects of U.S. geopolitics. In what amounts to an attempt to explain U.S. geopolitical discourse, Said's theory is infused with perceptions of an American tendency to "lord over" the sovereign space of Middle East geographies. As a theory it does not, however, definitively pinpoint whether power constructs geopolitical discourse or whether such discourse enables geopolitical power. The exact nature of the relationship between U.S. geopolitical hegemony and its accompanying geopolitical discourse is quite possibly indecipherable and is treated as such here.

Americans inherited the epistemology of Orientalism from Europe, but shaped their own view of a Middle East landscape based on the American experience. For sure, American Orientalism continued to be based on an ontological distinction between "East" and "West" as it had been for the British and French. However, the dominant religious beliefs in early America and the U.S. were important in shaping the worldview that resulted from this spatial ontology. The concept of the U.S. as a "divinely-commissioned missionary nation,"²⁵ offered by Faud Sha'ban, is a useful explanation of the epistemology of Orientalism that was particularly American. The contribution of his concept is that it explains how American Orientalism became geopolitical discourse. Sha'ban emphasizes the Puritans' belief in the American colonists as a covenant people, chosen by God to build His Kingdom on Earth, as a critical component of early American

²⁵ Faud Sha'ban. *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of American Orientalism* (Durham, NC: The Acorn Press, 1991), 85.

Orientalism. Nineteenth century American notions of Manifest Destiny evolved this belief into a geopolitical vision of the U.S. role in the Holy Land. As God's chosen people, reinvigorated by the religious revivals of the 1800s, Americans' role in the East was a missionary presence in the Holy Land to spread their message, both in a spiritual and political sense. American Orientalism, as a result, took on a definitively geopolitical character as the U.S. became involved in missionary work in the Levant. An accompanying geopolitical discourse emerged which drew upon stereotypes of Arab and Muslim culture and geography.

The U.S. conflict with the Barbary states of North Africa provided stereotypes from which a geopolitical discourse was based, including representations of Arabs and Muslims as backward, savage, cruel, and tyrannical. These stereotypes were critical in shaping misrepresentations of space. Sha'ban describes the imagined geographies of the East as taking two major formats, the "vision of Zion," in the Biblical Holy Land, and the "Dream of Baghdad," which was largely a function of the influence of literature such as *The Arabian Nights*.²⁶ These two stereotyped conceptions of space, along with negative perceptions of Muslims and Arabs, defined the nineteenth century geopolitical discourse with respect to the region. This worldview developed in America prior to a significant presence of Middle East peoples in American society. Immigration in the late 19th Century and the 20th Century would change this.

As immigrants from what are now the various geographies of the Middle East began to arrive in the U.S. and assimilate into society, they affected the American

²⁶ Sha'ban. *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought*, x.

epistemology of Orientalism and its already triggered evolution into geopolitical discourse. In the U.S., racism had always been an integral facet of American society. Arab and other Muslim immigrants were not exempted from the racial norms of American society, and faced prejudice and discrimination. The existence of such racism is significant because, as Steven Salaita reminds, such racism could be “expedited geopolitically.”²⁷ In other words, a thoroughly racially prejudiced American society enabled geopolitical discourse that de-humanized inhabitants of “Eastern” geographies in which a geopolitical presence was deemed necessary. However, Salaita provides a critical caveat with respect to what he terms ‘anti-Arab racism’ in the U.S., by rejecting, “the notion that anti-Arab racism was formed and has evolved solely on social features (primarily geopolitics) detectable in the interaction of Arabism and Americana. We are better served by looking at that racism as being on a continuum with America’s roots in settler colonialism.”²⁸ Thus, racism in American society toward Arabs and Muslims existed independent of an epistemology of Orientalism in any academic tradition or geopolitical discourse. Surely racial prejudice enabled geopolitical discourse, but stereotyped conceptions of the “Oriental” and their pervasiveness were not the *created* by U.S. geopolitics. American society bears the most significant part of that burden.

According to Fawaz Gerges, several events in the last half of the Twentieth Century were influential in shaping Americans’ perceptions of Muslims and the Middle East. He argues that “contemporary security and strategic considerations, not merely

²⁷ Steven Salaita. *Anti-American Racism in the USA: Where It Comes from and What It Means for Politics Today* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), 12.

²⁸ Salaita, *Anti-American Racism in the USA*, 87.

culture and ideology, account for America's preoccupation with Islamism." ²⁹ Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s preceded political Islam as the first post-World War II threat to U.S. pursuit of hegemony in the Middle East region. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present, several events such as the 1973 Arab Israeli war, the Arab oil embargo, the regional geopolitics of Muammar Qaddafi and most importantly the Iranian revolution caused the dominant U.S. decision-makers to see political Islam as the new threat to U.S. hegemony. Anwar Sadat's assassination and the bombings of U.S. facilities in Lebanon during the 1980s, as well as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing solidified this geopolitical threat as being associated with terrorism.³⁰ Since al Qa'ida's 2001 attacks, this has only been strengthened. Gerges maintains Congress, the Israeli lobby and U.S. news media have fomented the view of political Islam as terrorist threat in the minds of Americans. He also makes an interesting claim, that, "more than anywhere else in the world, Congress plays a determining influence on U.S. policy toward the Middle East." This observation demonstrates how the Orientalist epistemology dominant in American society influences a geopolitical paradigm. More than anything though, the role of the news media is critical in shaping the perception of the policy decision-maker and the average American.

The news media in the U.S. have an important role in shaping a U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse. The manner in which news coverage represents Middle East peoples and geographies is critical. It influences the perceptions of both the people living inside the U.S. and those that reside all around the globe. Both the impact on

²⁹ Gerges, Fawaz. "Islam and Muslims in the Mind of America" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 2033), 73.

³⁰ Fawaz. "Islam and Muslims in the Mind of America," 73-89.

space inside and outside the boundaries of the U.S. is important to understand in analyzing geopolitical discourse. In 1981, Edward Said used the pun “covering Islam”³¹ to describe U.S. and “Western” news coverage of Islam and the “Muslim world.” In doing so, he meant to emphasize the West’s ability to represent Islam through its news coverage, as well as to characterize such representation as resembling a process of ‘covering up’ the diversity among the various geographies which make up the “Muslim world.” Western news coverage, he asserted, was based on representations of the religion of Islam and Muslim-majority geographies that are largely characterized by inaccurate generalization. Additionally, this coverage reifies the role of “Islam” (the West’s version) in Muslim-majority geographies as the dominating influence in the lives of those living in “Muslim” space. Due to this inaccuracy, Said maintains, these misrepresentations are not only irresponsible, but do the U.S. a disservice by preventing more objective, or reflective, analysis of the U.S. geopolitical presence throughout the region. Analysis of this geopolitical presence is most often substituted for analysis of Islam as hostile toward the U.S. and the West, and as a result the degree to which it poses a cultural and geopolitical threat. Such a framing of geopolitical discourse is in no small way informed by an Orientalist epistemology and serves to reinforce and perpetuate it.

Another impact of geopolitical discourse informed by an epistemology of Orientalism involves the perceptions of people outside the U.S. For the inhabitants of Muslim-majority geographies, misrepresentations of Islam in U.S. news coverage are

³¹ Edward Said. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York, NY: Random House, 1996).

often perceived as not only offensive, but also as a deliberate attack. Moreover, the covering of Islam with generalized, stereotyped representations obfuscates attempts to address what many inhabitants of Middle East geographies view as legitimate grievances against the U.S. Critiques of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region and the various military, social and economic impacts which result are generalized as resulting from anti-American hostility inherent in “Islam.” By operating in a framework where tension and confrontation are assumed, U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse is automatically prepared to misrepresent Middle East geographies and justify marginalizing the grievances connected to the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region. The capacity of the U.S. news media to misrepresent people and geography through news coverage, irrespective of any intentionality, affects both citizens of the U.S. as well as people throughout the world, particularly the “Muslim” one.

As a news professional with experience in the Middle East, Joris Luyendijk adds to Said’s analysis of Western media coverage of the region by explaining structural forces that contribute to misrepresentations. She maintains, news professionals’ collection of information is limited by the controlled political systems pervasive throughout the region. Political systems that limit freedom of speech and freedom of the press are removed from a U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse which is largely dictated Western news media. By restricting news coverage, Middle East states also restrict their ability to contribute to U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse because

Western journalists, a vital facet of this discourse, will be dissuaded from drawing on peoples within Middle East geographies in representing the Middle East.³²

The inaccurate perceptions of Islam and Middle East geographies within American society are not defined entirely by the news media and the coverage it provides. A critically important source of stereotype that contributes to the U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse is found in U.S. entertainment media. The pervasiveness of negative stereotypes in Hollywood films was exhaustively addressed by Jack Shaheen in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*. Shaheen maintained Hollywood films conflate all Arabs as Muslims, and vice versa, and portray what results as “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics.”³³ The consistency with which these stereotypes are employed in the over 900 films Shaheen analyzed, is connected to a larger social discourse in the sense that it amounts to a “systematic, pervasive, and unapologetic degradation and dehumanization of a people.”³⁴ Shaheen also made two important observations with respect to these misrepresentations. The first was that the U.S. dominates global filmmaking and projects those films throughout the world in a way that no other state, culture or institution can. This makes Hollywood representations extremely influential. The second point of interest which Shaheen made was that the stereotyped news coverage exacerbates stereotyped entertainment, by reifying the stereotyped representations. In a somewhat different approach than Edward Said in *Covering Islam*, Shaheen points out that the news media cover extraordinary and extreme events and

³² Luyendjik. “Beyond Orientalism.”

³³ Jack Shaheen. “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Jul., 2003), 171.

³⁴ Shaheen. “Reel Bad Arabs,” 172.

individuals, and should not be expected to do otherwise. However, entertainment professionals, such as Hollywood film-makers, have an obligation to break from the stereotyped representations found in the news media. This is an interesting approach to correcting misrepresentation within discourse as it implies that entertainment media are more critical than the news, because these communities of interpretation have a greater capacity to overcome patterns of stereotyped representation, compared to the news media, for instance. Since September 11th, Shaheen claims “hate rhetoric, the war on terror, the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East have generated damaging new media stereotypes and new government law enforcement policies.”³⁵ On the other hand, there have also been “at times, more complex, evenhanded Arab portraits”³⁶ than before al Qa’ida’s attacks. Both entertainment and news media are influential in shaping any U.S discourse of the Middle East. The entertainment industry is pivotal though as it is more capable, for arguably structural reasons, of defying stereotypes when representing Middle East geographies.

The U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse is complex. It has been shaped by a number of factors and is connected to the development of U.S. hegemony in the region. The American Orientalist epistemology, built on the East/West dualism influences not only inaccurate perceptions, but powerful stereotyped misrepresentations and imagined geographies of the Middle East. The development of the American perception of the U.S. as a divinely-commissioned missionary nation coupled with the Orientalist epistemology influenced the beginnings of what Steven Salaita termed a “geopolitical

³⁵ Jack Shaheen. *Guilty: Hollywood’s verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

³⁶ Shaheen. *Guilty*, 35.

paradigm.”³⁷ From this paradigm an accompanying discourse arose that was not only influenced by American Orientalism, but also currents of xenophobia and settler colonialism within American society and culture. The epistemology of Orientalism became intertwined, as Said noted, with geopolitical discourse as the U.S. became more influential in the international political economy. Post World War II, the U.S. realized its hegemony within the geopolitical order of the era and as a result new emphasis was placed on identifying potential threats. With respect to Middle East geographies, the U.S. has come to identify political Islam as a terrorist threat to U.S. hegemony and, by extension regional stability. The geopolitical paradigm that has predominated in the U.S. has not only been premised on the Orientalist epistemology but the traditional understandings of geopolitics, which emphasizes the primacy of states in competition for control of territorial spaces, rather than international political economy. The intersection of treating geopolitics as discourse and viewing Orientalism primarily as a spatial ontology of “East” versus “West” accounts for a great deal of the tension President Obama addressed in his speech in Cairo. These theoretical premises inform the research methodology used in this study.

Reviewing published literature related to the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East was important and established the theoretical grounds for understanding the phenomenon under consideration. However, much of the scholarship on U.S. geopolitics constituted scholars’ perceptions of U.S.-Middle East discourse, based on their analyses of official geopolitical rhetoric, imagined geography, and the various

³⁷ Salaita. *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA*, 12.

forms of media representation. Despite the ideals of academia, this is conceivably not as meaningful as it could be – particularly in the context of generating information for decision-makers who (apparently) operate within an opposing geopolitical paradigm. Essentially, scholars’ perceptions of geopolitical discourse are inconsequential due to their very position within society and geopolitical discourse; geopolitical practitioners’ are not interested in diving into an academic paradigm that amounts to a concerted critique of their chosen path in life. Scholars’ critiques that contribute to the paradigm of ‘new geopolitics’ often amount to nothing more than an exclusively abstract, intellectual-dominated conversation. What is more valuable, given an extreme lack of self representation, are the perceptions and “voices” of the subjects of U.S. geopolitical practices in the Middle East. Developing an understanding of these points of view through research methodologies that actually involve engagement with these communities is critical because it “entrusts” potential critiques to these groups of people. This is not to say that the research methodology used herein does not speak *for* the participants, because it does, in fact, do just that. Nevertheless, studying the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East at an individual scale and through an analysis of participant-driven data, adopts a methodological approach that is premised on the idea that the communities being studied not only know what is best for them, but should also be the ones to vocalize any grievances. Arguably, when this is acknowledged, the need to proffer policy critiques dissipates, and arguing a particular policy stance becomes secondary to pursuing an understanding of how individuals think of U.S. geopolitical decision-making, actions and discourse. The ideal of the research

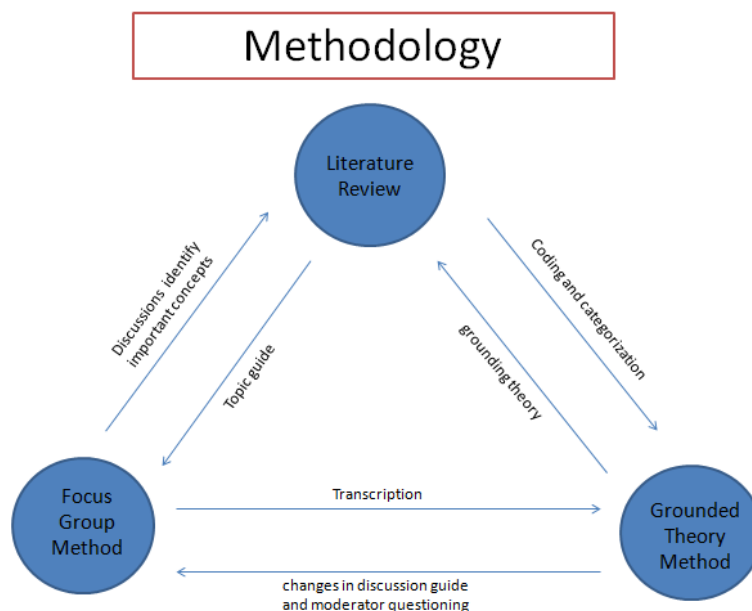
methodology was, therefore, to pursue an accurate understanding of how individuals in the Middle East perceive the U.S., as opposed to assessing what this means for U.S. policy. As a result, the methodology utilized was focused on the collection of primary source data at the individual scale, providing an openness that allowed the research to be non-essentialist in nature. The focus group method was indispensable to this endeavor. This would effectively address U.S. geopolitics aimed at the region, particularly the geopolitical discourse which represents it. The goal was not, however, to illuminate the intricacies of discourses indigenous to Middle East geographies. The novelty of this study was to access “ordinary” Jordanians’ perceptions – which, in fact, are an element of Middle East discourses – to explore U.S. geopolitics. The research methods used lent themselves to the use of these perspectives in order to ground the theories of U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse and U.S. geopolitical hegemony in the focus group data.

Chapter Two – Research Methodology

This chapter describes each method used in this research project and how they fit together. Each was chosen for its appropriateness in addressing the research objectives, its ability to conform to the nature of the data as well as its general ability to effectively fit into an overall cohesive research methodology. The focus group method was used for data collection, satisfying the desired individual-scale analysis of geopolitics. Employing the focus group method dictated the course of much of the methodology thereafter. Processing of the data involved full transcription of each audio-recorded discussion into text format. Finally, the text of the transcripts was analyzed using the grounded theory method. The intent of this method of analysis was to take the theoretical concepts developed through review of existing literature and ground them in the discursive processes observed in the focus groups. Published literature was sought out and reviewed throughout the research process; and thus, the literature review should not be thought of as stage of research completed entirely prior to the collection of data, though. The rationale for the use of these methods in a study of geopolitics, a description of key terms and concepts and how these particular methods were employed are explained in greater detail below.

The methodology was divided into three 'stages.' These stages were (1) the theoretical review of published literature, (2) the focus group method and (3) the

grounded theory method. These three stages were interdependent and each method merged into the other in some way to create a continuous, non-linear analysis process. The purpose of these divisions was meant to emphasize an understanding of the analysis process as continuous throughout the research project. In this view, reviewing published literature was just as integral to the analysis as processes of collecting the focus group data and categorizing and coding that data via the grounded theory method. In fact, the only aspect of the project that was confined to a single period of time, for obvious reasons, was the collection of the data. Even data processing (transcription) was to a degree an iterative activity where editorial corrections in the transcripts were made after periods of grounded theory analysis. Instead of being linear, the methodology was characterized by a cyclical process, moving from one stage to another and back in an attempt to develop the concepts and theory based in empirical data for achieving the research objectives. The diagram below illustrates the interdependence of the three stages comprising the methodology.



A study of geopolitics at the level of the individual is an approach that, from the outset, presented many challenges. The geopolitical processes of interest were themselves complex. Concepts such as hegemony and geopolitical discourse appeared to operate at abstracted scales in which individuals had only tangential relevance. The connection between individuals and the large-scale processes involved in geopolitics was therefore not immediately evident. In an attempt to narrow and refine the topic, the research was focused on individuals' perceptions of geopolitics, particularly U.S. geopolitical discourse and exercise of geopolitical power in Middle East geographies. Rather than attempt to reveal specifically *what* was affected by geopolitical processes, this approach revealed *how* individuals perceived these phenomenon in their daily, lived experience. Therefore, the results of this study were focused on an important aspect of geopolitical discourse, perception. This stood in contrast to results which would conceivably make definitive statements about the spatial practices of geopolitics. The value of such perceptions lay in the fact that they were generated from the perspective of individuals who were regularly exposed to the "practice" or exercise of U.S. geopolitics. Thus, they can be treated as perceptions which resulted from geopolitical practice.

Focus groups were deemed an appropriate means of collecting information on perceptions of U.S. geopolitics. Analyzing this topic from the individual scale benefitted from a method that used primary sources and generated data with a capacity for analytical depth. Such depth was promising when exploring phenomenon occurring in spaces far removed from the territorial boundaries of the U.S. The depth of analysis in

focus group data was beneficial because the ways in which people perceive the world, particularly geopolitics, are complex. These perceptions are not created in one-on-one interactions with the U.S., but rather through social interaction. The focus group method accommodated this interactivity. By contrast, in depth interviews do not embrace such interactivity so completely. Collecting primary source data on individuals' perceptions of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East provided an approach to understanding how geopolitical processes are interpreted by people living in the region. Focus groups were a tool that ostensibly satisfied these demands, by exploring how individuals engaged the topic in group discussion. The use of the focus group method was most appropriate because it connected an analysis at the individual-scale to research about perception of geopolitics.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was considered an excellent place to conduct focus group research on perceptions of U.S. geopolitics. With borders touching Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Jordanians are regularly exposed to the social, political, and economic impacts of U.S. geopolitics. The close political relationship between the Jordanian and U.S. governments provided interesting circumstances for exploring their perceptions of geopolitics. The positive political relationship provided a measure of openness that was critical to research involving potentially sensitive topics. Another appealing reason for conducting a study of perceptions of U.S. geopolitics in Jordan was Jordanian society itself. More specifically, young Jordanians find themselves caught between the traditional and modern forces within their society, which could easily be perceived as conflicting. Furthermore, those young Jordanians who pursue a

university education represent a potentially influential group (as recent uprisings in surrounding countries have shown). Without a doubt, Jordanian university students – an elite group – are likely to be future leaders within their society. The “new beginning” President Obama spoke of in his 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt will include people from this group. How they perceive the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East will affect future relations between the U.S. and Jordan. Indeed, these individuals will likely play an important role in the future, whether it represents a new beginning of U.S.- Middle East relations or not. Highlighting young Jordanian university students’ perceptions within a geopolitical discourse dominated by the U.S. is a valuable study of U.S. geopolitics, offering a window into how a specific group of people think in a place heavily influenced by the U.S.

The Focus Group Method

The focus groups were informal yet structured discussions moderated by the researcher, where group members interacted with each other to reveal perceptions about the topic. A Jordanian assistant observer (native Arabic speaker) was also available in case the language barrier became an issue. Each focus group discussion was audio recorded. Collecting data in the focus groups was a function of the discussion guide, minimal note-taking and moderator questioning/probing of participants to elaborate on their statements. The unit of analysis was understood to be a discussion session as a product of the interaction among a group of individuals. This interaction among participants was a critical aspect of the focus groups, as opposed to the

interaction between an interviewer and interviewee, for instance. The intent was for the moderator to not be heavily involved, and instead contribute only when requested or in the interest of stimulating further discussion.

The importance of the concept of the interaction between participants cannot be overstated in the focus group method. Rather than highlighting separate individual's attitudes and experiences – via interview or survey methods of data collection – the focus group method explored the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East by illuminating how individuals perceived the topic in a group setting. The interaction within that group setting is what made the focus group method distinct from others and offered insights into complex processes, resulting in insights into their perceptions of the topic. In the focus groups, participants responded to moderator questioning as well as sought to frame the discussion themselves. They reacted to comments and asked questions of each other. On occasion, they turned their questioning toward the moderator in ways that forced the researcher to step down from a “podium” of objectivity and provide his own subjective beliefs. The interactive process meant participants' (and the moderator's) perceptions affected one another, and as a result contributed to a process of contextual *group* perception. In short, participants were viewed as active subjects, rather than passive.

Participants' individual statements and perceptions were considered to be inseparable from the group context in which the data was generated. However, the concept of group perception can be problematic. The perceptions which resulted from the discussions were not construed as being a product of group consensus, as this would

be inaccurate. If anything, a *group* perception would likely result from interaction that was at least partly coercive. Indeed, one obstacle in focus group moderation is the tendency of certain individuals to dominate the discussion.³⁸ While this is important to acknowledge, determining the precise nature of such complex interaction is beyond the scope of this project. Suffice to say, that an approach to focus groups as producing group perceptions does not have to construe those perceptions as monolithic or representative of each individual. Indeed, participants' experiences and perceptions *did* vary. For the purposes of this study, the discussions were treated as generating a group perception as a result of a specific context. Furthermore, neither the groups nor individual participants' perceptions were considered as representative of any wider population within Jordanian society. The moderator's presence alone was believed to be enough of an influence to forgo such generalizations.

The focus groups were understood to be similar to everyday conversation. This was significant because individuals' perceptions of complex geopolitical processes are regularly constructed in social settings. Indeed, everyday groups of individuals engage in similar processes of negotiating the U.S. geopolitical presence in the spaces in which they live through a variety of forms of conversation and social interaction. The focus group's purpose was to record the interaction between participants, in a setting similar to everyday conversation. It was as if they were discussing the topic in a "natural" setting. In this respect, the focus groups were like observing a group of individuals, for example, talking during lunch break. However, the controls placed on participant

³⁸ Lia Litoselliti. *Using Focus Groups in Research* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 74.

interaction by the discussion guide, as well as the entire context of the discussions – which included an *American* moderator – prevented the focus groups from being anything more than *similar* to an everyday, conversational setting.

The control imposed by the moderator on the participants' discussion was reason to view focus group discussions as contextualized 'talk' rather than a means of accessing participant and community attitudes as if they were "objects that are out there in the subjects."³⁹ Instead of passive research subjects, the participants were viewed as active, and "involved in constructing social reality through interaction, both in their daily lives and in the focus group."⁴⁰ Conceivably though, the focus group method represented an attempt to create model discussion spaces where individuals' perceptions of the topic were expressed in order to generate data. These "discussion spaces" offered a window into how geopolitical processes were perceived by the participants. Therefore, understanding the focus groups as *models* for everyday conversations amounted to an acknowledgment of the focus groups as highly contextual. Furthermore, the moderator's ability to manipulate focus groups is always a concern given the potential to setup discussions and extract comments from participants that reinforce preconception and status quo.⁴¹ This possibility is mitigated by presenting incidents in the transcripts in a manner that allows readers to draw their own conclusions from the context of the data. Additionally, the clear presentation of the researcher's interpretations of key passages from the focus group transcriptions

³⁹ Greg Myers and Phil Macnaghten. "Can focus groups be analysed as talk?" *Developing Focus Group Research* eds. Rosaline S. Barbour & Jenny Kitzinger (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 185.

⁴⁰ Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Ann Kerr and Stephen Pavis. "Theorizing subject matter in focus group research" *Developing Focus Group Research* eds. Rosaline S. Barbour & Jenny Kitzinger (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 191.

⁴¹ Litoselliti. *Using Focus Groups*, 21; also Cunningham-Burley, Kerr and Pavis. "Theorizing subject matter."

adds to transparency. Ultimately, while the influence of the moderator on the participants' discussions undoubtedly affected the data that was produced, it was not viewed as preventing the focus groups from providing insight into participants' perceptions, as long as the data was presented by the researcher in a manner that allows the reader to consider the context of the incidents and compare incidents that supposedly represent patterns across groups.

Focus group structure and procedures

A great deal of care was needed to ensure the interaction between focus group participants resulted in a fruitful exploration of their perceptions of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region. Litoselliti maintains preparation is of the highest importance in ensuring focus group data relates to the research questions.⁴² An important first step in preparation was deciding on an appropriate structure for the focus groups, including criteria for participation, group size and number, site selection, topic guide construction, moderator assistance and the means of recording the discussions. Additionally, moderation and recruitment were critical procedures to consider when setting up the groups. While the procedures involved in the focus group method were relatively straightforward, they were not easily implemented. Each of these considerations is explained in greater detail below.

Selecting an appropriate site for the focus groups was an important initial concern. Site selection meant finding a space that offered privacy but also created an open and relaxed environment. Permission, of course, was also a requirement. The

⁴² Litoselliti. *Using Focus Groups*, 28.

resident office of the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) in Jordan's capital city, Amman, provided a classroom and facilities for conducting the focus groups. CIEE is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that administers study and teach abroad programs throughout the world for American and international students. Their stated mission is, "to help people gain understanding, acquire knowledge, and develop skills for living in a globally interdependent and culturally diverse world."⁴³ Their facilities and helpful personnel provided an excellent site for discussions of the potentially sensitive topic of geopolitics. The classroom supplied by CIEE had plenty of space and had a center table in which participants sat around, forming an equal and hospitable environment for discussion. A restaurant nearby was easily accessible for purchasing pizza (ironically enough) for the participants to eat during the discussions. The food was provided both as an ice breaker for discussion as well as an incentive for participation.

Determining who would participate in the study was a critical step, but it was not finished upon making the decision to target young Jordanian university students for the study. It was necessary to further refine the criteria. As a general rule, it was important to attempt to have groups where members had a similar background and common perspective with respect to the research topic.⁴⁴ The goal for selecting participants for the focus groups was to find Jordanians who were in college or who had recently finished their education. The desired age range was set at between 18 and 22-years-old. This age range served as a guide only though, as several participants were 23 and

⁴³ "About CIEE." www.ciee.org <http://www.ciee.org/home/about/about-ciee.aspx> (accessed: November 29, 2011).

⁴⁴ Litoselliti. *Using Focus Groups*, 32.

24-years-old. Due to the moderator's lack of fluency in the native language, Arabic, the discussions were conducted in English. Notably though, the researcher had a beginner's competency in the Arabic language that benefited the process of moderating the discussions.

The number of participants per focus group was small – between four and six. Focus groups can vary in considerably in size, with an average at around six to ten individuals; however, small groups were used since it was the researcher's first ever opportunity moderating focus groups. Smaller focus groups were also considered preferable as they allowed for greater involvement from each participant in the discussion.⁴⁵ The groups were held approximately a week apart during the summer of 2010. A four participant pilot group was held first. The pilot helped the researcher/moderator to get a feel for the discussions. The pilot group was also important because it tested two critical focus group instruments: the audio recorders and the topic guide. After the pilot, six full-size focus groups were planned. However, only five were held. The failure to hold the sixth full-size focus group was largely due to the holy month of Ramadan. During this time many Jordanians were fasting and (not surprisingly) recruiting participants became particularly challenging.

The pilot plus the five full-sized focus groups made a total of six discussions to be transcribed and analyzed. The pilot group was intended to be smallest, containing four females. Subsequent groups had five or six participants of mixed gender, save the fifth, which had all females also. A demographic profile with greater detail for each focus

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

group is provided in appendices I-VI. Each focus group was intended to be two hours long, but they tended to last considerably longer as participants became engaged in the discussion and the moderator lost track of time. The full-length groups ranged from two hours and eleven minutes to three hours and sixteen minutes, with an average of two hours and forty-three minutes. The pilot group was shortest, lasting just over an hour; however, the audio recording cut out after forty-seven minutes. This was due to an improper configuration of the recording devices – two ‘Samsung Zoom H2 Handy’ portable stereo recorders – and was corrected without further complication. These devices were placed in the center of the table at which the moderator and participants were seated, being in full view of all. The software used for transcription of the mp3 format audio files was the free ‘Digital Voice Editor 3,’ available on the Sony website. The participants were given pseudonyms in the interest of confidentiality. Full transcription of the focus groups was used instead of abridged transcripts. This was done to avoid missing parts of the discussions that appeared, at the time of transcription, to be unimportant and thus left out.

Constructing the topic guide was an important task prior to setting up the groups. This document acted as a conceptual outline of the relevant aspects of the topic. Following the topic guide ensured the research objectives were addressed during the discussions. It acted as a sort of questioning route for particular issues the moderator might bring up in order to stimulate discussion.⁴⁶ The guide sequenced questions in order of importance, and progressed from the more general to the specific.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 55.

This was important because it was crucial that the topic guide have the capacity to generate multiple points of view. The topic guide was also altered from group to group in order to replace ineffective questioning and thus improve future discussion. Finding the right questions and topics was a challenge. Litoselliti stresses, “The guide should be clear, non-academic, and understandable to the participants.”⁴⁷ In other words, the topic guide was tailored to the participants of the focus groups in order to effectively communicate the ideas of concern to the researcher. This meant avoiding – at least initially – highly nuanced and overly descriptive terms like discourse, hegemony as well as the term ‘geopolitics’ itself (a word that was difficult to translate for the researcher). Nevertheless, this did not pose a problem as getting participants to analyze these concepts was not the goal of the research. The role of the topic guide was to outline the most important geopolitical concepts in a way that would stimulate discussion about them, and reveal participants’ perceptions.

The topic guide questions were organized under four basic headings: physical U.S. presence, general U.S. influence, the East-West divide and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The first two groupings of questions were *quite* general, but represented the most central aspect of the topic. These questions were essential in getting the participants talking and the generality was helpful in not limiting participants’ responses too much. The last two headings were more specific and sought to address the concepts of geopolitical discourse and hegemony, respectively. Notably, outlining the important concepts pertaining to the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region was

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

essentially an early process of categorization. This rough conceptual organizing was drawn from theories found in the literature, and served to inform categorization for the grounded theory method. Having a topic guide that organized the geopolitical concepts of interest was far from determining the flow of the discussions though.

After the topic guide was prepared, Jordanians had to be recruited for the focus groups. Individuals who met the aforementioned criteria for selection were recruited through the local CIEE office. The CIEE Amman office required study abroad students to periodically meet with Jordanian language partners as a part of their program of study. The language partners had to have the fluency in English necessary to communicate with American students with varied degrees of proficiency in Arabic. Additionally, like their American counterparts, they were college students of some type. Among the language partners, some knew each other and some did not. The fact that these young Jordanians had contact with American students created a potentially interesting perspective on U.S. geopolitics. Their cross-cultural experience and tolerance was viewed as a positive, as the best participants for focus group research, according to Litoselliti, are those that are “likely to be participative as well as reflective.”⁴⁸

The actual recruitment of participants was not done by the researcher. Instead, recruitment was carried out by a Jordanian employee of CIEE who knew the researcher from a previous study abroad experience. This employee was of the same age group as the Jordanian language partners. This benefitted the overall recruitment because potential participants were able to discuss the research with a fellow Jordanian of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

similar background, with whom they could more accurately communicate, as a result of language, culture, etc. The CIEE employee contacted individuals from the list of language partners and informed them of the study and the criteria for participation. If they agreed to participate, they were informed of the time and location for a focus group discussion. The “recruiter” did not acquire consent from the potential participants though. This was solely the responsibility of the researcher and the forms were provided when the participants arrived at the focus groups. Under this arrangement the researcher could be more certain they were freely consenting to participate, and, moreover, that they fully understood the consent form.

Data collection in the focus group method was heavily dependent on not only the structure of the topic guide or recording method, but also the moderation of the discussions. It was the responsibility of the moderator to observe and keep the participants’ discussion on topic with respect to the research objectives. Note-taking of important statements and concepts was another moderator responsibility, but was limited in value. It was more important for the moderator to pay attention to the participants, and extensive note-taking was viewed as a distraction to participants. Similarly, effective focus group moderating meant asking participants how their statements related to the various aspects of geopolitics under discussion, rather than simply refocusing participants on the topic guide. Additionally, an assistant observer was available as an interpreter, to alleviate problems arising from potential language and culture barriers. This never became an issue during the groups because other participants were quick to aid in translating. In general though, there were few

occasions that demanded such a role. By guiding the flow of the discussions, the moderator influenced the resultant data.

While the moderator's task was relatively straightforward – observe and keep the participants on topic – it was quite a challenge in practice. The moderator needed to be experienced and well prepared in order to guide the flow of the discussion in a way that accomplished the needs of the research. It was critical that the moderator had prior knowledge of the topic being discussed, as well as of the culture of the focus group participants. The previous experience of living in Jordan and talking with young Jordanian university students aided the moderator immensely. Understanding the culture and traditions of the members of the focus group was important. Moderators must be good listeners, non-judgmental, in control, and adaptable at the same time.⁴⁹ The moderator does not dictate the discussion itself though. Instead, the moderator encourages the participants to actually participate and interact.

In general, the focus group method produces a voluminous amount of data. In total, fourteen hours and twenty-two minutes of discussion audio were recorded. Once the recordings for each discussion were transcribed, there were three-hundred and sixty-two pages of focus group transcript at 1.15" spacing. Such a large amount of focus group data had the capacity to produce multiple interpretations and meanings. As a result, the analysis had to be highly focused on the most important topics for answering the research objectives. Finally, an important note should be made about analyzing the data that resulted from the focus group discussions. As each focus group was in

⁴⁹ Ibid., 40-42.

process, the moderator was engaged in analyzing the participants' statements if not directly, then subconsciously. Therefore, the collection and analysis of focus group data were simultaneous processes. As stated before, these activities were not relegated to specific steps in the research process. Litoselliti makes an important observation in this regard when addressing researchers who also moderate their own groups:

“[An] advantage of analysing your own focus groups is that you will be able to think of the analysis of the data as you gather it. [...] When analysis is understood as continuous – as is the case for most qualitative research – and not something that you do at the end of the collection of information, then several activities can be included in the analytic process.”⁵⁰

In short, analysis was part of a continuous and cyclical process that started even before the grounded theory coding of the focus group transcripts. The grounded theory method merely represented a stage in which analysis became a more salient activity.

The Grounded Theory Method

The grounded theory method, like the focus group method, was not a “step” in the research process that could be singled out from the rest of the project. In many ways, by the time transcription of the audio recorded discussions began, the grounded theory method was already being employed. The process of analysis began with the initial review of the published literature and the development of concepts and theory based on this material. The literature review, as well as the topic guide, provided guidance for developing conceptual categories for important incidents in the data. The results of this process informed the creation of the discussion guide, which became another component of “the analysis.” However, the focus group sessions did not follow

⁵⁰ Ibid., 87.

the rigid outline of the discussion guide. The transcribed audio recording provided not only data to be analyzed but the definitive record of topics discussed and, thus became paramount in further analysis. Ultimately, the transcription process involved the first major stage in the grounded theory method.

Categories, incident codes and themes

Ian Dey's understandings of the various existing grounded theory methods provided the basis for the analytical perspective used herein.⁵¹ A critical premise of this approach to the grounded theory method was a treatment of the process of categorization as a function of both theoretical sensitivity, derived from a thorough and broad review of existing literature, as well as the identification of data similarities, derived from constant comparison. Notably, this amounts to a critique of the notion of the 'emergence' of categories via the grounded theory method; or as Dey persuades, "The argument that categories simply emerge from the data was doubtful even when it was first formulated."⁵² The grounding of theory, therefore, begins with the birth of categories through a review of existing theory, and is then evolved through constant comparison and interaction with the data. This was achieved through the use of three analytical tools for theoretical grounding: incident codes, themes and aforementioned conceptual categories. The incidents in the discussions that appeared to be relevant to a particular aspect of U.S. geopolitics were labeled with what was termed 'incident codes.' They coded *what* the participants were talking about and effectively grounded

⁵¹ Ian Dey. "Grounding Categories" *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* eds. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 168-190.

⁵² Dey. "Grounding Categories," 176.

theoretical concepts in the data. The selection of incidents in the data was always intended to reflect the needs of the research objectives. These incident codes made up the first level of coding.

The second level of coding was made up of the discursive codes, or 'themes.' The themes were basically discursive patterns observed in the participants' discussions. Looking for and identifying these patterns through constant comparison of the discussion transcripts amounted to the inductive interaction with the data essential to the grounded theory method. Focusing on coding discursive patterns in the groups addressed the central goal of the analysis of focus groups – process. The coding scheme employed for the themes used gerunds – such as discrediting, uncovering and sympathizing – for descriptors of these discursive processes, or actions.⁵³ The rationale was that a code taking the gerund form captures the action of the object for which it is intended to describe, in this case the participant. These discursive codes, or themes, represented *how* the participants talked about the coded incidents. Notably, some statements were coded on both levels.

As stated before, categories were also an important tool for organizing and explaining the data. They shaped analysis of the focus groups by formatting the data in a way that addressed the research objectives. They were heavily influenced by the concepts derived from the literature review. Nevertheless, this was not viewed as unavoidably translating into preconceived interpretations of the data. When combined

⁵³ Andy Lowe. "An Explanation of Grounded Theory" *Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration Working Papers* (1996), 8.

with a conscious effort to rigorously compare themes through multiple iterations with the transcripts, conceptual categorizations were considered to be grounded in the data. It is vital to understand that the early conceptual categories as reflected in the topic guide and, more importantly, moderator questioning – such as discourse, spatial ontology and foreign policy – were not the final categories for which the final themes were articulated through. Indeed, the creation (or “emergence”) of the category ‘Americanization’ was intended to address incidents in the data that were not satisfactorily explained by the existing theoretical categorizations. Thus, the influence of the literature was balanced by interaction with the incidents in the data. Essentially, the incident codes reflected the various aspects of the three finalized conceptual categories – geopolitical discourse, U.S. hegemony and Americanization – and involved overlap of incident codes.

Category and code development was a dynamic process. The development of the more basic ‘incident codes’ did not occur entirely prior to the formulation of codes for discursive processes nor for the categories they were later attributed to. Essentially, the coding, categorization and theoretical grounding was in no way linear. Instead it was a cyclical process of reading, thinking, re-visiting the transcripts – and thinking some more. All analytical descriptors were in a constant process of reformulation intended to reach the most articulated and coherent conceptualization of the data possible. The final organization of categories for the most important geopolitical concepts – made up of the coded incidents in the data – provided the framework for illustrating the dominant themes in participants’ discussions. The cyclical interaction with the data was

best described as a series of “passes” through the data, in which all analytical tools were employed.

Transcription: The First Pass

Aside from actually being present during the focus group discussions, transcription of the audio recordings represented the “first pass” through the data. Additionally, immediately prior to transcribing each focus group discussion, the audio was listened to in its entirety to enhance the ease of transcription. In terms of data emersion, this added further familiarization. During transcription, notes were made for incidents in the audio that appeared interesting and/or relevant to the research objectives. Often this note-taking would be accompanied by conceptual, or theoretical memos. This analysis represented the development of the first round of codes and categories for grounding theory in the data. These were brief and basic, prompted by the starkest of observations. The notes and memos were synthesized into a summary for each focus group discussion in order to better compare and contrast incidents among the discussion sessions. This list of ‘incident codes,’ derived from the first pass through the transcripts, was meant to identify and describe the important recurring topics in each focus group discussion. Codes were also developed to describe the discursive processes that participants often engaged in during the discussions. These were the beginnings of the themes summarized in the results chapter. However, the discursive codes only began to be developed after several focus group audio recordings were transcribed. Essentially, as each audio recording was transcribed for the corresponding focus group, recurrent topics and trends became more obvious.

Categorization and coding, as a result, became clearer. Thus, the initial transcripts had fewer notes and less articulated memos. The first reading of each transcript gathered the general impressions from the focus groups while identifying some specific statements for future analysis.

Marking-up Transcripts: The Second Pass

After the first pass through the data, each focus group discussion had an accompanying transcript. The audio then became mostly secondary to further analysis, though it was revisited for corrections and verification of text. A “second pass” through the transcripts was the next task in analyzing the focus group data. Printed copies of the transcripts were read and marked-up with new memos and coded annotations. The summaries of developing incident codes from the first pass through each focus group assisted in this process. This round of analysis was more rigorous than the last, however, as transcription was no longer a distraction. Incidents in the data which appeared important – including those previously noted – were marked with a highlighter. The highlighted text was labeled, when possible, with the appropriate codes. These provided clear coding of the participants’ most important statements with respect to the research objectives. They comprised various aspects of the geopolitical topics being discussed. For instance, incident codes such as ‘imagined geography’ and ‘misrepresentation’ were used to label highlighted text involving descriptions of these aspects of geopolitical discourse. Additional examples of incident codes such as ‘hegemony,’ ‘de-territorialization’ and ‘Americanization’ – among others – labeled statements in the data where participants were talking about the material spatial

practices of geopolitics. Categories were used to label the larger context of the discussion. They reflected moderator questioning, as well as participant prompted topics. The categories divided the transcript into sections which related to the major topical shifts in the discussion session. Finally, mistakes made during transcription were corrected, including re-listening to un-deciphered audio, spelling/grammar mistakes, etc. All the while, conceptual memos about *how* participants talked about the given topic were made in the margins of the transcripts. These memos were often the result of mentally comparing and contrasting previously coded events that were similar. Again, as each transcript was read the coding became more consistent and better articulated, resulting in the latter transcripts having the most developed coding. This lopsided analytical depth with respect to the succession of focus group transcripts generated the need for a final pass through the data.

Finalizing Categories and Codes: The Third Pass

A “third pass” through the marked-up transcripts was intended to reformulate coding across all the focus groups. This process generated consistency in the categorization of coded incidents, and more importantly, more cohesive coding of the discursive processes exhibited by the participants in the discussions. Through contrast and comparison of how participants discussed the topics, dominant patterns in the focus groups were able to be organized into more cohesive themes. After this final pass, summaries were written for each transcript. These documents summarized the topical flow of the discussions based on conceptual categories as indicated by incident codes, in addition to the discursive themes. The latter part was critical as the

summaries outlined the themes as they pertained to the topics of discussion, providing connections between conceptual categories and discursive processes. The themes were derived from the conceptual memos but also involved further elaboration of each theme. Additionally, a master list of themes was developed from all the summaries which provided definitions of what was meant by the coding of each discursive process or theme. A list was also generated of the incident codes that made up each category. Transcript citations were included in the summarized notes as needed.

To summarize, immersion in the focus group data began with taking part in the actual discussions and was subsequently reinforced by listening to each audio recording immediately prior to its transcription. The actual process of transcribing the recordings represented the “first pass” through the data. This involved note-taking and conceptual memo-writing. By the time all the focus groups had been transcribed, a scheme for coding and categorization had begun to develop. This early coding of the important incidents in the data was summarized for each discussion in a list for comparison. This list was used to further develop codes and corresponding categories in the second pass through the printed transcripts. The extensively marked-up transcripts generated more articulate coding, including the early ‘discursive codes.’ The final pass through the data reformulated the existing codes and categories to produce consistent and well articulated themes. These themes represented discursive processes in the discussion, and were the final results of the study. The development of categories and codes was a cyclical process and the various “passes” through the data did not completely occur in order. The themes found in the discussions summaries were the final results of the

methodology, and represent the perceptions of the Jordanian participants of the various aspects of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East.

Chapter Three: Results

The objectives of the research were to explore Jordanian university students' perceptions of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East, its affect on their society, inaccuracies in U.S. geopolitical discourse and, finally, how they perceive the tension between the "East" and "West." The specific topics discussed with respect to the U.S. presence were reflected in these objectives and were outlined in the topic guide. The results of the analysis of the focus group transcripts were themes for the dominant discursive processes observed in the focus groups. They represent how participants perceived U.S. geopolitics, or "how they talked about it." The term 'theme' was used, rather than referring to them simply as codes, to avoid presenting them as mutually exclusive, as the themes do have conceptual overlap. Most importantly, they were not intended to primarily address *what* aspects of U.S. geopolitics were discussed in the focus groups. To accomplish these ends, coding of themes was based on the gerund form of a verb. As stated before, this was intended to emphasize the themes as discursive processes, or descriptors of the participants' discursive actions in the groups. The coding of each theme was as a description of *how* participants talked about U.S. geopolitics in the Middle East. Five themes describe the most dominant processes observed in the focus group sessions: discrediting, uncovering, cultural disciplining, conspiracizing and populist sympathizing. The themes are rooted in the contextual

group interaction and describe how participants perceived the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East.

Discrediting

Participants repeatedly engaged in a process of discrediting U.S. geopolitics. This theme represented participants' perception of the U.S. as unable to elicit belief, or lacking the ability to convince others of U.S. geopolitical positions and actions. The theme was also related to discursive processes more precisely described as distrusting and delegitimizing. These were processes whereby participants challenged U.S. trustworthiness as well as the legitimacy of U.S. hegemony within the contemporary global geopolitical order. These discursive processes were subsumed under the 'discrediting' theme as all were deeply interrelated in discussions to the point of inseparability.

There were roughly three approaches to the discrediting process, all which involved several ways of describing why U.S. geopolitics were lacking credibility, legitimacy, and trustworthiness. These approaches should not be treated as distinct though, as participants' drew from each to discredit the U.S. First, participants emphasized the ineffectiveness of the U.S. to enforce policies and affect change in the region. Second, they also described U.S. policy, whether intentional or not, as contradictory in terms of its goals and outcomes. This involved the reference of negative repercussions to discredit U.S. geopolitical endeavors. Finally, participants also perceived U.S. hegemony as both coercive and controlling. Coercive U.S. geopolitics

were described as leveraging superior U.S. force, such as weapons of mass destruction, to achieve control over global space. The U.S. was viewed as controlling development in spaces in which it has neither sovereignty nor legitimacy. The intention for doing so was often perceived as reinforcing U.S. hegemony. In short, the ‘discrediting’ theme was intended to describe perceptions of U.S. hegemony as lacking credibility, legitimacy, trustworthiness as well as benevolence in its role as global hegemon, or world leader. Rather than intending to preserve global stability, U.S. geopolitical hegemony was perceived as self-interested.

U.S. Ineffectiveness

The ineffectiveness of the U.S. to affect positive change in the region through its foreign policies and other geopolitical maneuvering were repeatedly used to discredit U.S. hegemony. President Obama was discredited as being, thus far, unable to affect change in the region. One participant described Obama’s Cairo speech, stating,

Fayruz: His speech was very passionate and very strong and very... As he started his speech with some verses from Quran, and I went like, [laughter] “Oh, he mentioned some Quran speech!” He is making some change, and at the beginning I was very hopeful. And I was looking for Obama’s era, [laughs] but then I was disappointed because I haven’t seen yet, or...[like], I haven’t seen a change, even slightly. I haven’t seen a change in the way that the American – the States – respected into the Arab world, you know.⁵⁴

The perception of President Obama’s inability to produce tangible positive results in U.S.-Middle East policy was a common aspect of the discrediting process. In another example, Obama was discredited in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,

Rana: But I mean... I think many actions prove that the States, let’s say, because we’re talking about the States – the topic is mostly the States in the Middle East – does it want our best [stuttering] interest? Like, anything, any cause they are usually against us. The first thing that ever America, like, right now in my life – 21 years – [laughs] the only thing that I remember the States doing is, like, a few months ago, when Bush – when Obama said, “don’t build settlements.” And that’s the only thing that we remember that the States stood with us about it.

⁵⁴ FG05: 51: 1525-1530.

Basma: [interrupting] And wait, he said, “don’t build them,” and they built them.

Rana: Yes, and it didn’t work. I mean this is the only thing that he has said, and still it didn’t work. And many others, like, the fact that they give money to Israel, and the fact that they, they believe that they are the best allies in the world – Israel is the best allies of the States, I’m saying.

Moderator: Oh, yeah.

Rana: And the fact that they believe Israel has the right to build nuclear weapon to defend itself, but still Iran cannot, Syria cannot...

Basma: Korea cannot.⁵⁵

The incident above began by questioning the benevolence of U.S. hegemony, and then involved discrediting of U.S. policy as ineffective and, ultimately, biased. The ineffectiveness of U.S. hegemony to enforce international decisions on Israel further damaged the credibility of the U.S.,

Raed: I think there is another factor, or reason, for this conflict between Western countries and the Arab world. The preference policies, that American administration follows make a real big problem, for example, if you know that Russia and America signed a nuclear non-proliferation treaty for all over the world...

Moderator: Hmm.

Raed: ...to make a world without any nuclear weapons – just a peaceful world. And the G20 submission to it. They all agree about it except Israel. And Obama said nothing to Netanyahu and he couldn’t stop him to make nuclear weapons. So, why always Israel, for example... Arabic people think, “Why always Israel is, uh...?”

Ali: ‘Has.’

Raed: ...has exceptional case – they are an exception. They are...

In the context of the Iraq War of 2003, participants’ descriptions of the outcome of the war as ineffective resulted in a delegitimizing process,

Ghadeer: Well they said it’s because they wanted to help Iraq, right? To build...

Suroor: But they didn’t.

Ahmed: To me they have no right whatsoever.⁵⁶

One participant cited the spread of al Qa’ida as a negative repercussion of the Iraq War, stating, “Now we have al-Qa’ida in Yemen. It’s affected al-Qa’ida in Iraq. And we have in [Somalia] or something. We have horrible things now because U.S. just try to go, ‘Oh, we are support... we are, uh, try to kill the Saddam Hussein and do something and any

⁵⁵ FG00: 15-16: 442-455.

⁵⁶ FG01: 53: 1458-1460.

bad thing.”⁵⁷ Another participant went on to describe the war as illegitimate stating, “I guess it’s not the U.S. right to go to another country and concur for just fixing the political, uh, ways inside that country. It’s not right actually, no. It can’t be, no.”⁵⁸ A final example illustrated the relationship between perceptions of ineffectiveness and contradiction, when a participant discredited U.S. extraterritorial intervention and its capacity to bring stability to Iraq:

Rana: Never mind what the people – whether they were with Saddam or not – they would see that this is not the way you ask for peace. You made war. You made Sunni, Shia’, Kurdi even have more fights than before. So, this is why we find contradiction that, you want peace, and yet...⁵⁹

U.S. Contradictions

The tendency of participants to reveal contradictions in the official foreign policy goals of the U.S. was common to the discrediting process, even when not prompted or probed by the moderator. Participants provided examples of contradictions between U.S. definitions of terrorism – an influential geopolitical code – and its own geopolitical actions:

Basma: And they say they wanna stop terrorism, and they’re the ones that are making the terrorism, and not even bothering to give us a definition of what terrorism is, so we’d help them.

Shireen: I wish I could know...

Basma: They did not.

Shireen: I wish I could know...

Basma: Yeah, if I could just get...could know what is considered terrorism so we will not do it. But they did not really define it for us; they just say, “whatever we do not like, we’re gonna call that terrorism or we’re gonna go after it.”⁶⁰

When specifically asked about contradictions in U.S. policy, one participant referenced Iraq,

⁵⁷ FG01: 54: 1490-1493.

⁵⁸ FG01: 56: 1518-1519.

⁵⁹ FG00: 25: 735-737.

⁶⁰ FG00: 24: 708-715.

Ghadeer: Yeah, they said, “We’re going to help them, we’re going to make a better country. We’re going to get Saddam out of their way. We’re going to do this and that. They’re going to be living good ways.” There are barely any Iraqis in Iraq right now.

Moderator: Hmm.

Ghadeer: Is that what it is? I mean, whatever way they used, was it weapons, was it... Their goal wasn’t reached. What they said that they were doing – plus, how many Americans died? Is that what they want? Is that... Is that all because they wanted to help Iraq?⁶¹

Notably, the participant’s comment also discredited the U.S. as ineffective in its prosecution of the war. Participants also discredited the U.S. as contradictory by emphasizing the U.S. military presence which remains in Iraq, despite claims that troops will be withdrawn.⁶²

Another common example of contraction was the U.S. involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Referring to the U.S., one participant declared, “...they wanna stop the war between Israel and Gaza, and they send rockets to Israel.”⁶³

Contradiction was also used a means of illuminating bias in U.S. geopolitics. By highlighting favored treatment of Israel, participants’ attempted to delegitimize any authority for U.S. hegemony. This process clearly displayed perceptions of the U.S. as an illegitimate global leader.

Ahmed: They are giving the Israeli country the green light to do anything to, uh...as she pleases. And at the same time, not allow us to have the same thing that they have.

Moderator: M’hmm.

Ghadeer: Even though I don’t understand why they have the right to give the green light.

Ahmed: Exactly.⁶⁴

Participants’ perceptions of the U.S. as contradictory and self-interested counter themes of benevolence in U.S. geopolitical discourses, and ultimately, undermine U.S. claims to authority as leader of the global geopolitical order. This is most explicitly clear when

⁶¹ FG01: 53-53: 1438-1444.

⁶² FG03: 51: 1560.

⁶³ FG00: 24: 705-706.

⁶⁴ FG01: 49-50: 1353-1357.

participants make statements like, “Because in Iraq, it’s very clear that United States are running after the oil and the petrol.”⁶⁵

U.S. Coercion

Descriptions of a coercive U.S. hegemony were prominent in discrediting processes. A notable approach to discrediting U.S. geopolitics was to draw attention to the control the U.S. exerts throughout the region and the coercive power behind that control. Some participants were direct, maintaining “America want to control all the world.”⁶⁶ Others were more descriptive. When one participant stated during a discussion, “[...] everyone who fears America is a friend with America,”⁶⁷ she not only clearly emphasized a perception of the U.S. as coercive, but moreover, discredited U.S. hegemony as based in intimidation, rather than the legitimate authority derived from normative international law. In doing so, she discredited the coercive power of the U.S. and its ability to control global space for purposes other than reinforcing U.S. hegemony. Another participant drew a similar conclusion in a later discussion, stating,

Zuhur: I guess that we are secure here in Jordan and we don’t have an armies here in Jordan – American army – because only we are good with the Americans, we are good with the US.

Moderator: M’hmm.

Zuhur: We have something common between our government and the American government and we simply protect their interests here in Jordan.⁶⁸

The overseas network of U.S. military installations – a major form of geopolitical power – were perceived as integral to coercive capability of the U.S. and its control over Jordan. Weapons of mass destruction were emphasized as reinforcing a coercive U.S.

⁶⁵ FG02: 30: 857.

⁶⁶ FG05: 23: 689.

⁶⁷ FG03: 49: 1482.

⁶⁸ FG04: 11: 321-325.

hegemony. One participant described these coercive capabilities as well as their ability to control other states.

Khadija: [continuing] ...anywhere. They want to do something, they won't even dare to do it unless America signs an agreement.

Basma: The 'okay.'

Khadija: That they're okay with it...even if it's a national thing. Like, even if it's, like, an opinion, that they wouldn't say. If America doesn't agree, they won't say it. Even if, saying yes, or no, to anything, they have to, to go to their consultant, or to their chief, let's say. And, I, like... I really wish to know who made United States of America the leader of the world. Like, there are many countries who are strong, and can be rebuilt as a strong countries. But United States made itself as the leader of the world since Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Moderator: Hmm.

Khadija: And, since those two bombs, United States went up and now she's, like, she looks down at all the worlds. And she is the richest country, she is the most democratic country, she is the most...

Basma: Powerful.⁶⁹

One participant described the coercive nature of the U.S.-Jordan relationship, stating Jordanians feel as though they “don't have a choice.”⁷⁰ The exercise of coercive power by the U.S. was perceived as not only controlling but also destructive of trust between the U.S. and individuals in the Middle East.

Economic aid was also described as a means of coercive power by which the U.S. controlled Jordan.

Basma: Debts, you know? Like, they owe [sic] us money all the time and we cannot really pay that back; so why is that? Are they giving it to us because they care about us? No.⁷¹

While discussing the control the U.S. exerts over development in Jordan, one participant maintained, “[...] it is like we are in a laboratory.”⁷² In another discussion, a participant discredited U.S. hegemony by emphasizing it not only as controlling, but also as dominating:

⁶⁹ FG00: 14-15: 405-417.

⁷⁰ FG01: 65: 1782.

⁷¹ FG00: 23: 662-663.

⁷² FG01: 35: 960.

Raed: I think that American policy is just to take [unintelligible, everyone speaking] certain restrictions, to limit Arab world.

Moderator: Okay, say that one more time because I couldn't... I'm sorry.

Raed: Uh, no okay. I think that America is following certain policy, or strategy, that making restrictions and limitations about us... How... What to build, and what to do, what not to do, so they can able to dominate us for a long time, uh...⁷³

When participants engaged in a process of discrediting, they were essentially saying “the U.S. has no ability to convince me, or make me believe them; the U.S. is ineffective; the U.S. is contradictory; and the U.S. is coercive.” The concept of U.S. geopolitical credibility represents an extremely influential form of power. When geopolitical power is divorced from all credibility, or an ability to elicit belief, it cannot foster any lasting consensus. If U.S. officials are not believable, this lack of credibility leads to a lack of trust. It also deteriorates the legitimacy of any authority the U.S. might have. A final statement from one of the focus group discussions succinctly describes the process the ‘discrediting’ theme was meant to describe,

[...] it's like, when you lie a lot... When you put into too much lies in the reality, it's hard to believe it, even if it was true – even if it was beneficial. It's like, we can't help it, [*I mean*], accept it in a good way, because I myself – I'm talking about myself – I can never understand that America is going to do something good for us for nothing.⁷⁴

The discrediting theme represented a perceived lack of trustworthiness, legitimacy, and credibility in U.S. geopolitics in the region. Participants viewed U.S. geopolitics as ineffective, contradictory and coercive. The potential loss of credibility for the U.S. in the eyes of the inhabitants of Middle East geographies is a severe blow, not only to U.S. geopolitical hegemony, but also for the ability of the U.S. to form any type of lasting and mutually beneficial relationship in the region.

⁷³ FG02: 24: 680-685.

⁷⁴ FG03: 13: 412-415.

Uncovering

Throughout the focus groups participants discussed U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse. They talked about past experiences with Americans and what those individuals thought of the Middle East and its inhabitants. They also addressed representations of the region in U.S. entertainment and news media. The interaction between participants discussing these various facets of discourse demonstrated a pattern of description that emphasized inaccuracy in American ways of thinking about the region as well as in the representations used to portray it. The young Jordanians' descriptions of this geopolitical discourse resembled a process of uncovering stereotyped generalizations of Islam and the Middle East. The theme 'uncovering' was meant to represent this discursive process, whereby participants uncovered the inaccuracies of a U.S.-dominated geopolitical discourse about the Middle East.

The coding of the theme was inspired by Edward Said's work, *Covering Islam*.⁷⁵ As discussed previously, Said maintained U.S. media coverage of all things "Islam," have been pervasively inaccurate generalizations. Essentially, the media covers a complex, nuanced reality with negative stereotype. Misrepresentations of the Middle East, such as stereotyped images of terrorists and imagined geographies of threat and inferiority, obscure not only the complexity of Middle East geographies and attempts at appreciating them, but also the U.S. geopolitics motivating the grievances of many "Middle Easterners." The latter point is critical to understanding discourse as geopolitical. Much like Said attempted to describe U.S. news coverage by using the

⁷⁵ Said. *Covering Islam*.

phrase 'covering Islam,' the focus group participants sought to 'uncover' the same type of generalizations within a biased geopolitical discourse.

The uncovering process revealed the geopolitical perceptions U.S. discourse was built on, the stereotypes which characterized it, the geopolitical visions it enabled, and the imagined geographies which underlie it. Common to this process were descriptions of U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse as regularly based on an imagined geography of threat. Middle East geographies were perceived by the focus group participants as being misrepresented as what amounted to 'threatscapes' of hostility, terror and conflict. Participants also sought to uncover stereotypes which presented a landscape stuck in an undeveloped past full of camels, Bedouin and the tents they live in. More contemporary stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs as terrorists were persistently uncovered as well.

Participants regularly focused discussions on the misrepresentations of Middle East geographies and cultures in American entertainment and news media. The 'uncovering' theme represents a defensive process where participants perceived U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse as negative and hostile, damaging the region's reputation and encouraging discrimination of the inhabitants of Middle East geographies as well as Arabs and Muslims living in the United States. Notably, while participants differed in their explanations of why the media was covered, they did not doubt that it is in fact dominated by stereotyped misrepresentations of the Middle East. There were, however, several basic approaches used by the focus group participants which were helpful in organizing their statements.

Uncovering Stereotype and Prejudice within American Society

One of the focus group participants' approaches to the process of uncovering was describing American perceptions of the Middle East. Participants referenced American – and more generally, Western – stereotyped perceptions of the inferiority of “Eastern” geographies as underdeveloped and backward landscapes, pervaded by ignorance and savagery. This was often prompted by moderator questions about an ontological differentiation between East and West. Discussions of an East/West spatial ontology often emphasized the inequality perceived in such a dualism. Participants addressed the cultural superiority embedded in how the East is perceived with respect to the West, particularly in the context of modernity and development:

Ahmed: They think that we are... That they are modern, um, civilized. They have, like, uh...

Muna: Superior.

Ahmed: Yes, the superior view on us. Like, we are the third...

Muna: They look down on us sometimes.⁷⁶

In the above incident, participants described Americans as perceiving of themselves as modern and civilized. These American perceptions were viewed as connected to counter-images of Jordanians as backward (not modern) and savage (not civilized). One participant provided an anecdote that demonstrated nicely how an American he encountered held a view of Jordan as an underdeveloped, backward landscape:

Raed: I was talking with an American guy, he said, “Oh, you have internet!” [mumbling].

[laughter]

Raed: You know what I mean? They don't know. They think that we are uneducated, stupid, or...

Ali: Just Bedouins.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ FG01: 21-22: 589-592.

⁷⁷ FG02: 61: 1726-1729.

In one particularly interesting incident, participants negotiated what they saw as Americans' pervasively inaccurate perceptions of Middle East geographies as landscapes of exoticism and backward, "a-modernity" by placing the blame for such ignorance on Americans' insularity and unwillingness to learn about other cultures.

Maha: I think that Americans are, maybe, ninety percent or maybe I'm exaggerating, but they don't really have any idea of... If you ask them about a country they just know Egypt because it's from the pyramids and...

Balsam: Belly dancers...

Maha: So, they really don't have any idea of what is going on outside borders.

Hala: [interrupting] No, this is our bad.

Maha: And they are not seeking, or they are not thirsty to knowledge, or to know about other people. They are not... For example, you [moderator] do some effort to understand others, but I see that Americans don't. They are...

Balsam: Uh-huh. Why do we...?

Maha: They just keep this... They have stereotype idea about Arabs, that we are, you know... Our Spanish teacher, her grandmother asked her, are you living in a tent...or camels...or deserts?

Balsam: Exactly.⁷⁸

Incidents like the one above illustrated how the focus group participants perceived Americans as contributing to a U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse through a type of arrogant apathy. In this case, the unwillingness of Americans to consider other places throughout the world – such as Jordan – as worthy of their attention was viewed by the focus group participants as contributing to the pervasiveness of imagined geographies of the Middle East.

Prejudice within American society was also perceived as contributing to the inaccuracy of Americans' perceptions. One participant described American perceptions of self which permeate U.S. geopolitical discourse, saying, "[...] she looks down at all the worlds. And she is the richest country, she is the most democratic country, she is the

⁷⁸ FG04: 40: 1207-1219.

most [...] un-racist country – no.”⁷⁹ By uncovering racial prejudice in American society, the participant challenged the moral superiority of the U.S. which underlies geopolitical discourse. Discrimination in American society was described as being based in stereotypes:

Fatima: It’s like...exactly. It’s like, [*like*] unfortunately, if we’re talking in a political way, Arabs in America are not really, [*like*], living in a peaceful way.

Murad: M’hmm.

Fatima: Because they’re Arabs. Because Osama bin Laden thing – the whole Osama bin Laden thing. Because they’re Muslims. If you’re an Arab Muslim, [*like*] this is a problem twice, you know.⁸⁰

By drawing attention to discrimination of Arabs and Muslims in American society as terrorists and militants – or, as it was described above, ‘the whole Osama bin Laden thing’ – the participants were in effect uncovering prejudice hidden by representations of the U.S. as tolerant and hospitable. Such incidents addressed a common characterization in geopolitical discourse – the U.S. as a non-hostile victim of Middle Eastern aggression.

The focus group discussions often became centered on how Americans view the Middle East as a landscape of threat. The importance of the perception of threat was critical to understanding the relationship between perception and geopolitical discourse. Participants offered anecdotes from their lives that displayed Americans’ stereotyped conceptions of the region as threatening and dangerous. In one such anecdote, participants discussed American perceptions of Jordan as a threatscape of hostility and danger, where Jordanian men were abusive and savage:

Basma: Like, we had a lot of friends who came – Americans – who came to Jordan to learn Arabic, and they just told us when they first told their families they are going to Jordan, and

⁷⁹ FG00: 15: 415-418.

⁸⁰ FG03: 9: 266-270.

their families really freaked out. Like, “You’re going to the Middle East; I don’t want you to get killed?” And...

Rana: “Call me when you get off the plane.” [laughing, sarcastically]

Basma: Yeah, call me when you – they think so [unintelligible]. Like, everybody really had some ideas that here things are gonna be really hard. Its gonna be not safe at night, and whatever, whatever. And when they came...

Rana: [interrupting] The men will, like, eat you.

Basma: They are like, “Oh my God, that’s Middle East?”

Rana: [laughing] And men will eat you.

Basma: Yeah, men will eat you.⁸¹

Participants also uncovered American perceptions of the region as a threatscape of terrorism, which, of course, is particularly dangerous for Westerners. One participant stated the Middle East is “a term that all foreigners, when they hear it – almost all foreigners – they just see a big bomb [...] on top of it. It’s like an area with a big bomb on top of it, and any country is gonna...this bomb is a terrorism, and people dying and shooting...”⁸² In another incident, a participant provided an experience she had with an American friend saying, “When I ask my friend – the American, she was American girl – she said that when her family, now that she want to be here to get her...to study Arabic, they say, “No, you can’t. You can’t go. They have terrorists. You will be hurt. You will not be at comfort with them.””⁸³ The anecdote demonstrated the participants’ perception of how Jordan was viewed by Americans as an inhospitable environment (a claim for which many Jordanians would take relatively seriously) pervaded by the dangers of terrorism. The element of threat gives these misrepresentations of the region a clear geopolitical context, as it necessitates defensive action by the West.

⁸¹ FG00: 9: 254-264.

⁸² FG00: 5: 150-153.

⁸³ FG05: 21: 629-631.

Uncovering misrepresentations in U.S. news media

Throughout the discussions the young Jordanians were asked to talk about the news media in the U.S. and in the West in general. Often, participants brought up news coverage of the Middle East on their own. Their discussions of this particular topic were centered on misrepresentation and their comments described the aforementioned imagined geographies of threat and inferiority as being embedded in those misrepresentations. The participants' belief in a strong use of stereotyped generalization in Western news media became obvious throughout the groups. In the first focus group discussion, a participant brought up the media as the source for stereotypes of the Middle East. The participants went on to discuss Western media, saying,

Ahmed: [interrupting] Our picture... Our picture in the West is so...

Ghadeer: Exactly.

Ahmed: Our picture in the West is so...

Ghadeer: ...is so blurred.

Ahmed: Exactly.⁸⁴

This discussion went on, when one participant attempted to uncover negative generalization of the Middle East by drawing attention to the existence of violence in all societies which, he maintained, do not receive the same treatment in U.S. and Western news coverage,

Ahmed: ...let me tell you something. Um, every country – every country – has gangs, people killing each other, robberies, stuff like that. Uh, When a robbery, or a homicide happens in an Arab country the media concentrates each and every thing on that piece of news.

Moderator: Yes, yes. I agree.

Ahmed: Yeah, it turns from a random act of violence to a terrorism act, you know?⁸⁵

⁸⁴ FG01: 5: 802-806.

⁸⁵ FG01: 31: 847-851.

Much later in the same focus group, the media was brought up again and one participant declared, “They are kind of... The media is kind of covered.”⁸⁶ The idea of American and Western news media coverage as being a distortion of the “real” Middle East was commonly referenced. The significance of this coverage was summed up by one participant who viewed misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims as having negative impacts on Middle East peoples,

Layla: [interrupting] Okay, I think we, as Arabs, are showing in a bad way. You know, by media or anything else.

Moderator: Hmm.

Layla: ...that we are inferior among the world. That we are, you know, bad and the idea here is... And they, [*like*], this is affect us.

Moderator: M’hmm.

Layla: [*I mean*], by media they shown us as, you know, a bad people or inferior regarding, or combating with Americans.

Balsam: Monsters.⁸⁷

News coverage that presented Muslims and Arabs as hostile militants and terrorists were central to the participants’ discussions of news media. Participants’ descriptions regularly addressed Western generalization of every “Middle Easterner” as a terrorist. As one participant put it, “What they [the media] usually show is, like, Arabs are terrorists.”⁸⁸ In another incident, a participant attempted to uncover the way news coverage generalizes all Muslims and Arabs, by providing an unspecific description of the process,

Fayruz: I think the American media has presented the terrorism concept, associated with Islam and jihad. And that’s a completely wrong idea. I mean, every terrorist... Each time I hear on CNN or Aljazeera that there is a terrorism act or something. The first thing, “Oh, he is Muslim – oh, he is sheik”

Sarah: Yeah.

⁸⁶ FG01: 56: 1539.

⁸⁷ FG03: 42: 1258-1266.

⁸⁸ FG01: 46: 1267-1269.

Fayruz: “Oh, he is from Pakistan, he is from...” He has some Arab origins or something. I mean, a terrorist couldn’t be European, couldn’t be Russian, couldn’t be Indian – only Muslim and Arab?⁸⁹

The discussion went on with other participants in agreement. The lack of a specific examples provided by the participant seemed to be indicative of the others’ approval of her perspective. In another example, a participant connected the U.S. in particular to internationalization of misrepresentations and inaccurate perceptions via the influence of U.S. media systems. Essentially, U.S. dominated media influence how people throughout the world think of the Middle East via misrepresentations built on terrorist stereotypes and an imagined geography of threat and inferiority;

Mostafa: But, uh, there is something that, uh, United States effect on Arab country – not in the Arab world, but outside. That... I met a Polish, uh, one. That... He told me that from the newspaper that he think we are terrorist and we have a machineguns and we have to shoot guns in the street. We shoot each other always every time. Every single hour I go to university with my shotgun, my [unintelligible]. We have...

Ammar: We are like terrorists with pump-actions.

Mostafa: Yeah. And...

Ammar: Automatic machines.

Mostafa: Yeah, and boom, boom, boom, boom. And as a point of view, that we go to, like, anywhere by camels. So, I think that...

Farah: [laughter]

Mostafa: Yes, really. I think that this idea came from the television, which...

Farah: M’hmm –media.

Mostafa: ...which is dominated by the...

Ali: Media, media.

Mostafa: Yeah, by media. Dominated by the United States.⁹⁰

In the same group, another participant offered an explanation of how terrorist stereotypes were the result of biased news coverage in Western media as well as how they contribute to the relationships between societies, stating,

“ And I read a lot of newspaper, Arabic newspapers, and English newspapers, Arabic channels, CNN, and Arabic Aljazeera articles. The media blackout the information – the right informations. For example, if you ask an American guys or any Western guy there, “What do

⁸⁹ FG05: 29: 872-877.

⁹⁰ FG02: 29: 819-834.

you think about Muslims, or what do you think about Arab?" "Terrorist...ignorant," you know, stereotype. By that informations they are making, they are building a stereotype. So, these stereotypes will affect the relation between those people."⁹¹

In one incident, participants described the U.S. news media as leveraging the terrorist stereotype in order to misrepresent Arabs and Muslims as hostile and militant.

Fayruz: You know, there are some extremists in Islam, and I agree with you those who call themselves Taliban, al Qa'ida...

Sarah: I hate them. I hate them.

Fayruz: ...and so, and so on. They are extremists, but at the same time the American media take advantage of this presence of these groups and then present to them that, "Oh, all Arabs are like this, and Islam is the religion of fighting, and jihad, and killing others." We know we are not like this.

Sarah: It's not Islam.

Ula: It's like when Osama bin Laden attack New York they said a Muslim attacked New York, but when George Bush attacked Iraq, they said Bush attacked...

Sarah: In the name of democracy.⁹²

In the example above, the participants drew attention to the unequal way in which American aggression was represented compared to the aggression of "Muslims" and "Arabs." In doing so, the participants uncovered the way the news obscures the grievances of those they are representing (the inhabitants of Middle East geographies) by generalizations that portray the "Middle East" as monolithically militant and aggressive, without any particular impetus for aggression. Throughout the discussions participants described various causes for misrepresentations in Western news media, such as when one participant explained, "It's like they have hate."⁹³ Not surprisingly, when participants were asked about ways in which greater cooperation between the U.S. and Middle East states could ease existing tensions, they mentioned a need for greater accuracy in media representations of Middle East geography.⁹⁴

⁹¹ FG02: 50: 1431-1436.

⁹² FG05: 29: 885-894.

⁹³ FG01: 47: 1282.

⁹⁴ FG03: 53: 1599-1601.

Uncovering misrepresentations in U.S. entertainment media

The final approach participants used to uncover negative stereotypes of Middle East geographies focused on American popular entertainment. Participants referenced various forms of entertainment, such as movies, television programs, and music, as sources of inaccurate representations of the Middle East and Islam. The role of imagined geographies of inferiority and threat was emphasized here as well. The participants drew attention to portrayals of Arab geographies as savage in the notorious opening theme song of the Disney film *Aladdin*⁹⁵ as well as referenced terrorist stereotypes in movies such as the less-well-known *Civic Duty*. In the case of the latter, participants perceived such misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims in American movies as pervasive:

Ula: Uh, wait. I don't know if...get your... I don't know if I got your question right, but last year, I guess, I watched a movie called *Civic Duty*. Don't watch it because it was talking about a Muslim guy. The whole two hours were talking about how good he is, how brilliant he is, how polite and [unintelligible] he is. And he was coexistent with people, with Americans, with non-Muslims, with Jewish, and the last minute destroyed all of that and proved he was a terrorist, and something...

Adel: That's the thing about the American movie, all the movies, all the TV series, the bad guys are usually Arabs or Muslims.

Ula: M'hmm.

Moderator: Hmm.

Adel: The terrorists.

Ula: And the ignorants...

Sarah: That's true.

Ula: The ignorant are Muslims.⁹⁶

Ula's statement, "Don't watch it because it was talking about a Muslim guy," was illustrative of the perception of the consistency of Arab and Muslim stereotyping in American movies.

⁹⁵ FG02: 61: 1735-1747.

⁹⁶ FG05: 38: 1156-1168.

In another instance, a participant briefly referenced the controversial song 'Arab Money' by American hip-hop artist Busta Rhymes, but was unwilling to elaborate on a description of the music video, saying rather, "It's, it's... It's awful. It's stupid. [...] I'm speechless. I can't say anything."⁹⁷ The song was released as a hit single and featured Rhymes arriving in an Arab landscape depicted by themes of extravagant wealth, sexy women servants and magical transformations – all traditional stereotyping of the Middle East. No doubt, Busta meant the song to be endearing toward Arab culture though; tragically, this fact seemed to be lost on the poor, backward young Jordanian.

American television was also perceived as a source of misrepresentation and evidence of inaccurate perceptions. In one discussion, participants provided an example of the stereotyping of women in the Middle East as oppressed and ignorant by describing an episode of the Oprah Show. In an episode about the status of women in the "Middle East" Oprah's perceptions were described as prejudiced, emphasizing only negative views of Saudi men and thereby perpetuating hostile generalization:

Fatima: Unfortunately, she took a very bad image for Islam – and she interviewed an Arabic person, Arabic people – and the problem was, you know, she really, really, really, [*like*]...

Murad: Against...

Fatima: Yeah, it was against us. It was going...

Murad: She was not discussing, she was proving something in her mind.⁹⁸

The discussion continued with participants describing the manner in which Oprah's program covered the complex and nuanced reality of religion and culture in Middle East societies with negative stereotype:

Fatima: Anybody can manipulate everything he wants. He can show whatever he wants and hide whatever he wants. And Oprah showed the only, [*like*]...

⁹⁷ FG01: 23-24: 635-650.

⁹⁸ FG03: 53: 1613-1617.

Bana: The bad side.

Fatima: I'm not saying that it doesn't exist. It does. [*Only*], there is an...there is many...

Bana: In any society.

Moderator: M'hmm.

Fatima: Yeah. There is many... There is MANY good sides of the Arabic, Muslim families. The [*Saudis*] or the Middle East.

Moderator: M'hmm.

Fatima: And she didn't mention anything of the good things we have.

Ibtisam: Yes.

Fatima: And she thinks that we are first to be stupid – the girls are stupid. And the girls are not allowed to learn. The girls are not allowed to walk, talk, and everything. She thinks that we are slaves or something. And we are not.⁹⁹

Oprah's failure to portray a more nuanced and evenhanded picture of Muslim husbands and wives demonstrated the stereotyped generalizations behind her conceptions of the region.

Throughout the discussions, the focus group participants used American news coverage, popular entertainment and American society itself to describe inaccuracy inherent in the perceptions and representations of Middle East geographies and peoples. These elements of geopolitical discourse perpetuated stereotypes which obscured the complexity of Middle East geographies as well as obscured the claims and grievances of their inhabitants. By uncovering stereotypes of the Middle East as a landscape of threat, participants challenged a discourse about the spaces in which they live. Such a discursive process represented a defensive response to stereotyped conceptions of the region. It also reflected a perception of a U.S.-dominated discourse as offensive and unfriendly.

⁹⁹ FG03: 54-55: 1646-1659.

Cultural Disciplining

When asked to discuss how they saw the U.S. presence and influence in Jordan, the participants often spoke in terms of cultural diffusion. This diffusion was described as both good and bad, but moreover, as an uncontrolled process. The capacity of American culture to more easily diffuse throughout Jordanian space – de-territorialization – was an integral concept to the theme of ‘cultural disciplining.’ This theme was used to describe discursive processes in which participants attempted to identify, order and describe the need for restricting the diffusion of American culture into Jordanian society. Essentially, their descriptions of this cultural diffusion were described in the context of gaining *control* of cultural change and social dynamics within Jordan. Participants’ interests in ordering space and controlling processes of Americanization were repeatedly based in a desire to preserve Jordanian culture. This involved not simply the effect of alerting others to cultural loss and deterioration but, more subtly, it involved a discursive dynamic which compelled others to modify behavior in order to prevent the loss of culture. This subtle aspect of such processes of interaction among focus group participants gave this activity its *disciplining* character. In simpler terms, the theme represented a call to action in defense of Jordanian culture. Thus, ‘cultural disciplining’ represented a perception among participants of not only cultural loss within society, but also of the invasive diffusion of American culture through Jordanian space – Americanization.

Processes of Americanization within Jordanian society and the wider Middle East were perceived as culturally coercive and destructive. Americanization was often

described as a process that disciplines individuals to privilege American culture, including economic, social and political aspects. Indeed, the 'cultural disciplining' theme was derived from observations of this pattern in the discussions. This was apparent in an earlier coding of the theme as 'counter-disciplining.' Participants were thought of as engaging in a discursive process of countering a perceived disciplining aspect of the Americanization process that trained individuals to respect and favor all things American. Americanized Jordanians were perceived as those who not only favored American culture, political ideology, products, etc., but imitated it. They were perceived as, in effect, emotionally and culturally disciplined to privilege and imitate "America." Instead of using 'counter-disciplining' as a code, an emphasis on culture was preferred for the coding of the theme because the processes under consideration were ones where participants' *primary* intent appeared to be reifying Jordanian culture rather than necessarily resisting Americanization. This nuanced difference was believed to be critical as it placed the object of the discursive process on the self (ordering Jordanian society) as opposed to the other (resisting Americanization). Ultimately, cultural disciplining was all about cultural control.

Uncontrolled diffusion of American culture

The diffusion of American culture throughout Jordanian society was continually referred to by the focus group participants as being both good and bad. The influence of bad, or negative, cultural diffusion was perceived as a function of a lack of limitations on such diffusion. Essentially, participants described the de-territorialization of Jordan – a reduction in or absence of control over various forms of diffusion – as resulting in

negative impacts on Jordanian society. These included cultural deterioration and loss.

One particular incident illustrated the process well,

Muna: Yeah, we can never deny the importance of America here. We can never [stutters], like, we have a lot of things that it's important, like, restaurant... Everything is American here. But, sometimes people use it in a wrong way. Like, all the things...right?

Moderator: Use it in a 'what' way?

Muna: In a wrong way. All the globalization that we have, we can use it...but you can use it in a good way...but people sometimes misunderstand it.

Ahmed: Yeah, I agree on that. Like, um, it's a positive influence for who use it in a good way. And it can be a bad influence. You know what I mean?

Moderator: Yeah.

Ahmed: Um, so, like, we forget about our Arab culture...

Muna: [background] Yeah.

Ahmed: [continuing] ...by turning to a different culture like the U.S. one.¹⁰⁰

In this instance, the participants perceived Americanization as an unchallenged diffusion of American culture that led to the potential deterioration of Jordanian culture. In another example, the deterioration of Jordanian culture was couched in more extreme terms when a participant described it as an "epidemic,"

Balsam: But when it becomes an epidemic where everyone starts following a certain [approach].

Hala: Approach.

Zuhur: Right, uh-huh.

Balsam: I figure, that's what the problem is all about. Not only are we dealing with the US, for example, on a financial level, or an economic level, or whatever [unintelligible]. [But], Maha, a sociological level. You know, we are being affected by what is being brought to us in the Middle East, in general.

Severai: M'hmm.

Maha: Yeah, that's right.

Balsam: I don't know, I would consider that to be a disadvantage.¹⁰¹

While other participants did not describe Americanization as an "epidemic," they regularly acknowledged it as having disadvantages for Jordanian society. When participants were discussing Americanization and the social pressures on Jordanian

¹⁰⁰ FG01: 5: 137-148.

¹⁰¹ FG04: 13: 399-407.

youth during one focus group, the moderator questioned one participant who had remained mostly silent until that point. The participant responded with emotion saying,

Ibtisam: Okay, I think that we don't have a specific identity for ourselves. Like, we are going to lose our language...

Fatima: Yeah.

Ibtisam: ...our...

[pause]

Fatima: Traditions.

Ibtisam: Yeah, traditions.

Fatima: Traditions.

Ibtisam: Many things – I don't know. I'm sad.¹⁰²

The need for controlling the process of Americanization was emphasized with respect to seemingly harmless aspects of American culture. In one such example, participants rather humorously questioned the value contributed by American cultural diffusion to their society and emphasized the need for gaining control over the process in an attempt to order Jordanian society and foster the preservation of Jordanian culture,

Ghadeer: We have prom, we have Halloween...

[several speaking]

Ghadeer: [continuing] ...even at schools, like for kindergarten. My, um... They have... They have every kind of holiday that America has – even, like, St. Patty's Day. They have that!

Moderator: [*seriously?*]

Suroor: What does it have to do with us?

Ahmed: That's a first.

[laughter]

Ghadeer: They even... They wear green to school, and I'm just, like, okay you look cute, but what does it have to do with anything?

Ahmed: Exactly, any [begins to stutter] Every person – every human being – has a culture to preserve. And we are Muslims, we have to preserve our culture.

Suroor: Exactly.

Ahmed: Uh, learn some of the [stutters] of the good sides of the foreign cultures. You know, not take the good and the bad side, whatever...okay? You know what I mean?¹⁰³

¹⁰² FG03: 15-16: 490-498.

¹⁰³ FG01: 14-15: 393-407.

A critical aspect of the above incident was that while the participants were discussing the surfacing of American holidays within Jordanian society, they were still focused on *culture* rather than economic, political or technological diffusion. Their concern was rooted in cultural loss, regardless of however inconsequential that deterioration might be.

Nowhere in the focus groups was there a more interesting example of how the participants perceived Americanization as having negative impacts on Jordanian society as when the issue of gender equality was discussed in the second focus group. When discussing the impact of American cultural diffusion in terms of the decreased use of Arabic among Jordanians, participants began to debate gender dynamics between Jordanian youth. The shift in the topic of discussion illuminated how participants viewed Americanization as destabilizing Jordanian society by creating tension among the youth who were required to balance the new “American” ideals with tradition,

Amena: Well, I wanna say that – and they [points toward the male participants] have the right to get mad and everything – but I think that this is happening because we are not satisfied about our tradition. Because people think that liberty is to show off and to do like American. Hear American music in English. We, like, hear English songs more than Arabic now. We go, like, as they said, we just don’t have our confidence in our traditions. That’s why I think we are doing that. ...wanna show off because we don’t like how we are living here. That’s why we are doing that, especially for a girl. It’s like, uh, people think that...a girl think that liberty is like to wear...okay not wear – she don’t have to wear. That’s why she have to... In this thing, she has the liberty to live her life. But I think that liberty is not like that. That’s why we misunderstand what’s liberty here. So, we, like, do what they have...

Mostafa: Yeah...[stutters] yeah. About this issue, that all these girls here call for equality, even in our tradition, girls are...

Ammar: Feminism.

Mostafa: [continuing] ...better.

Raed: Better than.

Mostafa: ...than boys, and my father, always, tells me that you have to cut from your shoulder and feed your sister.

Amena: ...and feed your sister.

Raed: Yeah.

Mostafa: Always. Okay, I told him, “I should die?” “Yes, you should die to help your sister, to feed her” So...and, uh, yesterday my colleague – she’s a girl – she said that, “Girls are more advanced than boys, because we can see in the university that there are more girls than boys.” So, I said that “because boys are working to get money to pay for her sister to study at the university.”

Ammar: Yeah.

Mostafa: So, that’s why. Not because they are more clever, or something like that.¹⁰⁴

Tensions which arose out of gender issues in Jordanian society were linked to perceived cultural imitation and diffusion. This example demonstrated how individuals imitating American culture had a perceived negative impact on society. By altering conceptions of gender and its roles in Jordanian society the ‘Americanized’ individual was perceived to have destabilized social norms and others’ understanding of their role in that society.

Privileging and imitating America

The theme ‘cultural disciplining,’ often took the form of challenging favored perceptions of American culture within Jordanian society. In one instance, participants discussed their perceptions of American child-rearing as compared to their experiences in Jordanian society. The topic was prompted when participants discussed how many Jordanians hold a favored perception of American products. The incident began with a description of how Jordanians have come to privilege American products,

Basma: [interrupting] They’ve gained their trust.

Khadija: [continuing] Anything. Clothes. Soap. So, culturally, economically, and emotionally. Like, now they say in the news...and when they, like...for raising children, or... Like, for example, I’m pregnant, they always tell me to read American books on how to treat yourself while you are pregnant. I mean, my mom didn’t read any American book while she was pregnant.

Rana: And look at Khadija.

[laughter]

Khadija: And look at me!

[laughter]

Shireen: She turned out just fine.

¹⁰⁴ FG02: 13-14: 379-402.

Khadija: Yeah.

Moderator: M'hmm.

Khadija: My grandma didn't read any single book about, like, how to treat yourself when you are pregnant. It just, like, the nature. You're gonna be pregnant, that's why God, like, created you. You know what I mean?

Moderator: Right.

Khadija: And, so, I don't have to read, like, "in your first month, eat this and this. In your second month..." Because American ladies do that. I don't have to do that.

Moderator: M'hmm.

Khadija: Like, I can treat myself the way I want.¹⁰⁵

In the above incident, Khadija engaged in a cultural disciplining process by reasserting Jordanian parenting methods over American notions of child rearing. While the cultural disciplining process was certainly based on participants' *perceptions* of American culture, it was no less an attempt to alter behavior. Given the social context of the statement, Khadija influenced the behavior and views of the other participants – and meant to. The participants' discussion continued on, as Khadija described an experience from her life which explained her perspective,

Khadija: Yeah. Even *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*...

Moderator: I've heard of this book, but I don't know anything about it.

Khadija: Like, when I – my sister read it and her husband read it – when I, like, give it to my husband when we were engaged as a gift. And he said, "I don't need Americans to tell me how to treat my wife." That's why he didn't read it.

Moderator: Oh, uh, yeah...

Khadija: When he read the title, he liked it. So, when I was like, "I'm in page one-fifty, where are you?" He's, like, "I'm on page three. I don't need Americans to tell me how to treat you. I know how to treat you." Because everyone is different, so why do they tell us how should we live? [laughing]¹⁰⁶

In another focus group, one participant engaged in cultural disciplining by challenging the privileged conception of American culture and business during a discussion,

Balsam: ...is American – you drink an American drink, you go to American restaurants, you wear American clothes, you eat American food, your furniture is from American, yadda, yadda, yadda... you tend to glorify the thing which provides you with all this – although its originally probably all made in China – [but]...

¹⁰⁵ FG00: 20-21: 582-601.

¹⁰⁶ FG00: 21: 608-616.

[laughter]

Balsam: You know, you tend to glorify what...

Zuhur: Yes.

Hala: America.

Zuhur: Because it is better, right?

Balsam: It is bitterness [sic], because we...

Zuhur: It is right that the American products are better than the Chinese products. [laughs]

Balsam: No, it's made in China. It's made in China – you look at this can, it's probably made in China.

Zuhur: Uh-huh.

Hala: Outsourced.¹⁰⁷

This incident provided an illustrative example of cultural disciplining because the participant challenged another participants' privileged conception of American products and thus reinforced the status of Jordanian and Arab culture. In another example a participant attempted to break the favored perceptions of American professionals and American education in Jordanian society by reasserting the value of Jordanian education and students,

Ula: The last two months, I trained in a factory. It manufactures refrigerators and something. So, our new engineer came to the factory. The manager gave him a high salary. We said, "Uh, why?" He said, "He studied in America and worked there for six months." So, it's like, why? He's normal. He's Arab, by the way, not American. So, you can feel that just because he studied there, he gets a higher salary?

Adel: No, I think that they have better universities, that's all.

Alia: Yeah, and he got a lot of experience also.

Ula: But here we have good universities and smart students.¹⁰⁸

In this instance, as well as those before it, participants sought to weaken the privileged position of American culture in Jordanian society. This favored status was connected to an uncontrolled process of Americanization. The cause for this privileging was not necessarily viewed as caused by the U.S. or American culture itself.

¹⁰⁷ FG04: 30-31: 922-935.

¹⁰⁸ FG05: 6: 199-205.

Cultural disciplining was sometimes a process whereby participants placed the blame for the negative impacts of Americanization on the self, or Jordanian society, rather than a foreign, American influence. This observation was influential in formulating the theme as a process of ‘disciplining,’ because the object of such discursive processes was on changing Jordan. With respect to cultural preservation one participant stated, “I think it’s the responsibility of the individuals. For example, it’s your responsibility to keep you values and your traditions.”¹⁰⁹ In one case, a participant described how Jordanians abandoned their culture literally by moving to the U.S.

Murad: There is positives and negatives. As you say with everything else, “There is a good side and a bad side.” Every good side is a good use of technology, and knowing the other world, or, let’s say, others. And the bad thing: people start forgetting – as I said before – forgetting who they are.

Fatima: Yeah.

Murad: For example, my dream is to go to States. Half my family is already there – are already there – but I don’t know, I’ll always be a Jordanian, and I’m proud of it. But, you know some people like Fatima said, you know. They... When they go there they will never come back. They want... They will be influenced by things they must not. They taking the good and the bad sides, not, you know, just keep on with the positive things.¹¹⁰

Murad’s decision to remain in Jordan and consciously identify with his culture demonstrated his perception of the deterioration of Jordanian culture and a need for preserving it. Murad’s anecdote about cultural abandonment served as an example of what not to do, and thereby acted as an act of cultural disciplining.

Throughout the focus groups participants were concerned with Jordanians who were perceived as imitating American culture at the expense of their own culture. In the previously mentioned focus group where participants discussed gender issues, participants emphasized the responsibility of Jordanians in recognizing and reversing cultural imitation,

¹⁰⁹ FG04: 13: 389-390.

¹¹⁰ FG03: 8: 248-256.

Ammar: We imitate. We imitate randomly.

Raed: ...just imitate, without any thinking.

Ammar: Randomly. Yes, blind imitation.

Raed: So, I think that we have to increase awareness of people here to follow traditions more, and think more wise.

Ammar: Because of misconcepted feminist ideas, I can't find a job for myself. When I look at advertisements in newspapers and websites – job websites – all they want is...

Mostafa: Girl.

Ammar: ...secretary-girl.

Ali: Yes.

Ammar: Receptionist-girl.

Amena: With the good-looking...¹¹¹

Imitation of American society by Jordanians was viewed as the cause of cultural loss, not necessarily Americanization itself. When describing this cultural imitation, one participant maintained, Jordanians “[...] just take the bad things – I think the bad things – and we leave the good things.”¹¹² In another discussion pertaining to the process of Jordanians imitating negative aspects of American culture, a participant remarked, “Yeah, it’s not like America forced us to follow her.”¹¹³ The participants’ discussion went on as they debated the cause for such imitation,

Ula: Jordanians want to be...want everything to be here like America.

Adel: No, I think if you see something better, you want to become like this thing. Because America is leading the world, we are trying to imitate them some. We ended up taking...

Ula: But we did not take all the good things.

Adel: Yeah.

Ula: We took all bad things.

Adel: That’s our problem.¹¹⁴

Notably, negative repercussions of American cultural diffusion were not necessarily perceived as the fault of the U.S. in these last examples. Rather it was the lack of control within Jordanian society, over how diffusion occurs, and what cultural artifacts

¹¹¹ FG02: 20: 567-578.

¹¹² FG02: 41: 1162.

¹¹³ FG05: 17: 529.

¹¹⁴ FG05: 17-18: 531-537.

permeate Jordanian society. There existed no means of filtering Americanization in order to prevent disruptive and harmful changes within Jordanian society. This emphasized an ultimate perception of the U.S. presence in the region as beyond the control of Jordanians, regardless of whether that presence was geopolitical or cultural. Imitation was connected to uncontrolled diffusion.

The abandonment of Jordanian culture was perceived of as negative result of Americanization because Jordanians were viewed as seeking to imitate without purpose everything Americans do. Again, it was a matter of control over the diffusion of Americanization in order to preserve culture and the traditions of society. In an interesting example, participants discussed meaningless imitation and cultural loss as a result of the Americanization of Jordanian society.

Mostafa: I think they deny their real identity, especially our professors who have been in the United States for, let's say, five years. He came here. He forgot the Arabic language, and he just speak English, even outside the class. If you want to speak with him in Arabic, he say, "No, in English." Okay, my mother is not American, to speak English, or my father. So, uh, we face this problem that, you know, any country likes to have their language number one, or standard in the world.

Ammar: Exactly. It's true.

Mostafa: I see people in the square – in the university – just speaking English without any reason. We use the language when we use it. I can speak Italian all the day, and no one can understand me. So, uh, but...

Ali: There's a native in Arabic language.

Mostafa: Yeah. There is no reason. I use it when I need it.¹¹⁵

Americanization was perceived as redefining identity and culture. In this particular instance individuals in Jordanian society introduced the American culture without regard for how it would be diffused. It was a matter of negligence on the part of the professors to ensure cultural traditions remained strong within Jordanian society. Mostafa went on to describe his attempts to discipline Jordanian society to favor the

¹¹⁵ FG02: 9: 265-275.

Arabic language over English saying, “I’m working on it with my friend Ammar, uh, to change this thing. That we should turn back to Arabic language and we should hold our traditions, because without tradition there is no identity.”¹¹⁶ This statement illustrated nicely how cultural disciplining was intended to prevent cultural deterioration through processes of preservation.

It is interesting to note that cultural disciplining was a reactive process occurring after widespread adoption of American culture within Jordanian society. Participants, for instance, often referred to the positive, or “good,” things that resulted from Americanization. Most often, the point of contention revolved around matters explicitly cultural. This represented a critical aspect of what the theme ‘cultural disciplining’ was meant to emphasize. The theme was intended to describe the discursive processes observed in the focus groups were participants sought to resist an invasive and uncontrolled Americanization of Jordanian society. Therefore, a vital concept involved in the theme was control, rather than outright resistance to anything American. By emphasizing the diffusion of American culture as resulting in a loss of Jordanian culture, others were alerted to the uncontrolled invasiveness of Americanization and therefore sensitized to the need for Jordanian cultural preservation and abandonment of the imitation of American culture. This resembled a process of disciplining in the sense that it was intended to produce a specific pattern of behavior meant to improve cultural identity. For the young Jordanians who participated in the focus groups, the ‘U.S. presence’ was perceived in terms of a cultural presence, rather than more “classic”

¹¹⁶ FG02: 10: 288-290.

geopolitics such as a military or political presence. This led the researcher to view participants' perceptions of U.S. geopolitics as inextricably linked to Americanization.

Conspiracizing

Throughout the focus groups, participants described the U.S. as involved in various conspiracies in order to better influence and control the Middle East. The 'conspiracizing' theme represented the participants' perceptions of U.S. geopolitics as an untrustworthy, nefarious and illegitimate pursuit of domination over the Middle East. Like the discrediting theme, it was a defensive process, or reaction, to the perceived latent hostility of U.S. geopolitics. Conspiracizing was considered to be a specific type, or prominent sub-theme, of the discursive processes of 'discrediting.'

The participants engaged in conspiracizing at times when the discussion topic was centered on concepts pertaining to both geopolitical discourse as well as U.S. hegemony. In a particularly interesting incident in the pilot group, the discussion was centered on imagined geography and U.S. geopolitical visions of the region. The moderator prompted the participants to discuss the term, 'the greater middle east' and participants began discussing a conspiracy theory concerning "the New Map."¹¹⁷ The participants' discussion of this U.S. government perpetrated conspiracy was apparently prompted by an article for *Armed Forces Journal* by Ralph Peters, which re-envisioned the political borders of the Middle East.¹¹⁸ Participants described Peter's map as reaching discussion circles throughout Jordan. Peter's June 2006 article described (and

¹¹⁷ FG00: 11: 319.

¹¹⁸ Ralph Peters. "Blood Borders: How a better Middle East would look" *Armed Forces Journal* (June 2006); <http://live.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/06/1833899>. (accessed: November 27, 2011).

illustrated) a new Middle East with borders that (apparently) better conformed to the ethnic and religious groupings within the region. According to Peters, this would reduce conflict in the region. Participants described Peter's geopolitical vision for the region through conspiracism, maintaining it was an example of the U.S. government attempting to divide peoples of the region in order to better control them,

Khadija: It's a project that...it went between people, like, a year ago. And it had a lot of echo. Like, when it first came to the...

Moderator: [interrupting] It had a lot of...?

Khadija: [to moderator] ...to the surface. A lot of echo. Like, a lot of people started to talk about it. A lot of effects. A lot of reflections. And they said – I don't know, because now they're silent, no one is talking about it – but they say that America is planning to do a new map for the Middle East, and this map is basically separating – splitting – Lebanon into three parts, splitting Iraq into three parts...

Rana: Especially Iraq.

Khadija: Yeah. Southern Amman will be considered Saudi Arabia. Northern Amman will be considered Syria. Eastern Syria will be considered Lebanon. Lebanon will be split into Christian Lebanon, Shia' Lebanon, Sunni Lebanon.

Basma: [interrupting] Most importantly is keep apart Mecca and Medina.

Khadija: And Iraq is...will be Kurdistan – like Kurdi Iraq, Sunni Iraq, and Shia' Iraq. And this is for the...to make the, the Kurdistan, the...the Shia' stuff. Like, it's gonna be, like, like number...like a zero. Half of it is Shia' and half of it is Sunni. And that is like splitting the Arab World into two. And Afghanistan will be in the Middle East. Pakistan will be in the Middle East. So, when they say Middle East in the future, they will gather all these countries together. So, any country – which is terrorist – for the United States will be in the Middle East. Like Iran, now, Turkey is on the way to be a terrorist country.

Rana: It will make it easier in the news when they say the Middle East.

Khadija: Yeah, when they say in the Middle East, they don't have to say Iran at the end. Or the Middle East and Iran, or the Middle East and Turkey. So, they will just say the Middle East and that's it. [several speaking, unintelligible] And then all the sudden, like this map disappeared.

Basma: Disappeared. Yeah.

The participants' anecdote about Peter's map demonstrated how participants conspiracized the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region as part of a secret plan to disunite the region through geopolitical discourse emphasizing the region as a landscape of terror. Later in the same group, participants continued to conspiracize the behavior

of influential leaders in the Middle East, such as President Ahmadinejad of Iran, as part of a U.S. plot to further its geopolitical control,

Basma: And this leads us to another point of the conspiracy theory that I myself believe in it. Like, Iran is strong country. It has resources. It has money. It has nuclear weapons and all this stuff, but it's not as strong, as powerful, as the United States. So, what makes it so arrogant, and so...[*stubborn*]?

Khadija: Stubborn.

[several repeat]

Basma: Stubborn. [continuing]...than the United States? You know, you're not as strong as the United States, so why are you just picking on United States, just asking them to come and invade you? What's your problem? So, sometimes I think, like, Ahmadinejad is, it was made by America. He is not, like, the hero that Iranian people think he is.¹¹⁹

One participant's conspiracizing was brought on by a discussion of media misrepresentations. The individual described the news media's coverage of the Iraq War as intentionally biased as a result of the interference and coercion of the U.S. government. The U.S. was described as bombing al Jazeera news stations in Iraq in an effort to prevent the organization from reporting on the U.S. military's illegal operations.¹²⁰ The participant's anecdote about the U.S. conspiring to control the news reflected the participants' view of the U.S. as engaged in covert and illegitimate geopolitics. Notably, this particular instance was dominated by one participant, and other participants challenged the conspiracizing process.

Another participant exhibited conspiracized perceptions of U.S. geopolitics when arguing that the cause of media misrepresentations was connected to "Jewish" interference. The participant responded to the moderator's question about why misrepresentations exist within Western media stating,

Ammar: Ah, okay. Okay...Okay I'll go ahead. Thanks. The reasons behind this, I guess... I'll tell you what I guess, and after that I'll tell you what I'm sure of. The first thing: I guess the media in the West fed from realism. Fed up from reality. Everything is usually a reality.

¹¹⁹ FG00: 17: 483-491.

¹²⁰ FG01: 40-42: 1097-1165.

Moderator: [interrupting] Everything is... I don't think I understood.

Ammar: Okay. I'll explain again – fed up from ordinary things, everyday life.

Moderator: Yeah.

Ammar: Everyday life we see in television – everyday life, we interact. They fed up with it. So, they used Arabs to introduce new techniques to their TV – to introduce new shows.

Moderator: Hmm.

Ammar: I mean genes, harims, belly dancers in a new outfit – an Arab outfit – and people connecting with money and magic. Those things are new to America.

Moderator: [laughs]

Ammar: They are new. They can get very [unintelligible] presence. They can get so many tickets into the US box office. This is the thing – well, I guess it is – for me as a... Let's say from a materialist point of view. But, what I am sure of, Jews are behind this. They don't like Arabs. You know, Jews do not like Arabs. And I was told by a major who was working in the US military – he has been working twenty-two years in the US military. He is in the American embassy now, right now. There was a ceremony held last, uh...two weeks ago in the language center. He told me that the American media is controlled by Jews. He told me – he announced it in front of the whole class. So, I guess, Jews are behind this, or I'm sure of that because they don't like Arab people. They don't like...¹²¹

The pervasiveness of media stereotypes was perceived by the participant as the result of a Jewish interference.

Another example of conspiracizing resulted in a different group when the moderator asked participants what they thought about the foreign policy of the U.S. toward the Middle East. Participants responded by describing the U.S. as intentionally weakening traditional family structures in order to facilitate geopolitical domination,

Ibtisam: I think they want to break our united...our union.

Bana: Union.

Moderator: Hmm. What do you mean our? Like, uh...

Murad: Arab.

Moderator: Arabs.

Noor: Yes, yes.

Murad: Yeah.

Moderator: How so? A little bit more...

Ibtisam: How? They started from the family. They want every individual without his family. Then travel to another country, they start to forget the religion, the tradition, the culture, everything.¹²²

¹²¹ FG02: 50: 1408-1427.

¹²² FG03: 40: 1202-1211.

Essentially, official U.S. geopolitics were perceived as intentionally responsible for initiating cultural and social change in Jordanian society. Conspiracizing represented a reaction to processes of Americanization as well as U.S. geopolitical hegemony in the region. Participants often perceived these phenomenon to be intentionally connected as part of a U.S. conspiracy.

Another example of conspiracizing involved a participant describing the relationship between the U.S. and Jordanian intelligence services. The participant referenced the movie *Body of Lies* while discussing U.S. geopolitical domination and presence in the region saying,

Hala: So, [*like*], and this is a reality. The collaboration is, [*like*]...exists. And we can't deny it, but we can't see it because it's not something to put on the media because of the feelings and the emotions of the nation. They don't approve such thing. Do you understand?

Moderator: Yes, yes.

Hala: So, that's it. And I believe in conspiracy theory, so... There is something bigger than us going on, and we might not just know everything, but there is something, like military bases or something like that.¹²³

The incident above is exemplary of the conspiracizing process. A discussion of U.S. geopolitical hegemony revealed a perception of a hostile U.S. geopolitical presence, conspiring to further establish U.S. domination of Middle East geographies by collaborating with the host government. Another incident from the same discussion demonstrated how perceptions of the U.S. presence were expressed through the conspiracizing process,

Balsam: Excuse me, I want to raise my voice. I'm sorry I didn't mean to do that. [meaning, interrupt] Anyways, they do come. A lot of people do come to the Middle East. A lot of people, Americans for example, they come to the Middle East. They seek to learn Arabic. Alright, they do learn Arabic. They spend some time around the people. They go back home. The stereotype about Arabs has not changed. The entire concept of the American presence, or the Western presence in the Middle East is to learn more about us, so they know what they are facing in the case that they do decide to come and invade...

¹²³ FG04: 9: 256-262.

[someone laughs]

Balsam: ...the Middle East as they have – I’m starting to talk like you, Hala, now.

[laughter]

Balsam: [laughing] I’m starting to talk like you. I don’t want to talk like that.

Hala: [laughing, speaking in Arabic]

Balsam: [*But*], you know, I do think that the reason why they do stress their presence here is to know what they are facing.

Moderator: Hmm.

Maha: Yeah, it’s like a huge survey.

Balsam: Exactly.

Hala: Like, “Get to know your enemy.”

Balsam: Exactly.

Maha: Yeah, long term ethnic survey.

[several laugh]¹²⁴

Cross-cultural exchange through study abroad programs and geopolitical domination are perceived as one and the same in the above example. The participants’ conspiracizing represented a perception of the U.S. geopolitical presence as nefarious in the sense that it conspires to manipulate the region for its benefit.

Throughout the discussions participants occasionally responded to questions about U.S. hegemony and geopolitical discourse by conspiracizing U.S. geopolitics. It is important to note that the conspiracizing theme in itself was not meant to evaluate the accuracy of participants’ views. Instead it was meant to reflect a process present in the discussions. Indeed, the participants perceived conspiracies may be validated by their experiences. Identifying the presence of such a discursive process, as with the other processes, does not involve analysis of accuracy of their views and is irrelevant in acknowledging the existence of the discursive process of conspiracizing itself. Regardless, the participants perceived U.S. geopolitics as conspiratorial. This

¹²⁴ FG04: 15-16: 462-481.

represented a particularly interesting type of discrediting that was considered as prominent enough to warrant separate treatment.

Populist Sympathizing

While the themes discussed thus far have described discursive processes that reflected largely critical views of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East, the next theme represented a departure from this trend. The theme ‘populist sympathizing’ was used to describe a variety of ways that the participants sympathized with the American people. This theme was notably a reflection of positive perceptions of U.S. society and culture. During discussions, participants often made an explicit distinction between the U.S. government and the American people, and thus sympathized with Americans as not being responsible for the actions of their government. The term ‘populist’ was used not only because participants sought to distinguish their sympathies for Americans from their critiques of the U.S. government. It was also appropriate because participants’ statements often subtly emphasized the legitimacy of the authority of the people over the authority of government. The ‘populist sympathizing’ theme represented a discursive process that balanced the participants’ criticisms of the U.S. It was considered to be partly a result of the presence of an American moderator. This does not preclude the participants’ statements from having been made in earnest, however.

Throughout the focus groups, when participants discussed various criticisms of the U.S., they often sympathized with the American people. The participants’

sympathizing was marked, on several occasions, by a clear differentiation of the American people from the U.S. government. For instance, when discussing the U.S. interest in Persian Gulf oil as a cause for the 2003 Iraq War, instead of the officially stated goals of the U.S., participants sought to distinguish their critiques of the U.S. government and its geopolitics from any hostility toward Americans,

Ali: Of course, we're talking about the governments.

Mostafa: Yes.

Ali: Not people.

Mostafa: No, no. It's a political issue, yeah.

Raed: ...a political issue.

Farah: Yeah.

Mostafa: About the government or the...

Farah: People. Ah...

Mostafa: Politic issue. Not American people.

Raed: Yes.

Mostafa: Let's be clear.¹²⁵

Later on during the same focus group, the participants' discussion focused on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and U.S. support for Israel. Participants again began to stress the difference between their dislike of the U.S. government and the American people,

Ammar: There is no – officially speaking – there is no conflict between any Arab country and America.

Raed: Yeah, we don't hate the people.

Ammar: You know that, but...

Raed: We don't hate the people, we hate the government.

Ali: The government, yes.

Raed: We hate the policies that they follow.¹²⁶

When the topic of extraterritorial intervention in Iraq and the U.S. geopolitical vision for the Middle East came up in another focus group, one participant again distinguished the American people from the geopolitics of the U.S. government saying,

¹²⁵ FG02: 30-31: 863-873.

¹²⁶ FG02: 44: 1253-1258.

The thing is, I don't know about the American solution... The thing, it's all about finding freedom and...for people and good for people. But the thing is, they are not applying this exact point that they are claiming. I'm not talking about persons in specific, but you know... They are just...for example, oil. They say that, "We want to go to Iraq just to help people there." But look what happened in Iraq after what they came. I don't know but... This is not the people, I think the government itself. It's a thing with politics.¹²⁷

As the participant challenged the benevolence of the U.S. actions in Iraq, he made clear he did not believe the American people to be so self interested as the government.

Discussions of the Iraq War and U.S. geopolitical hegemony in the Middle East, led one participant to emphasize her adoration for America, saying, "And, I'm saying, like, we're not saying that the United States doesn't have anything good in it. I lived in it. I love it."¹²⁸ This statement was made, basically, as a caveat to her perceptions of American foreign policy as hostile toward the region. In another group, a participant emphasized that criticism of the government should not include the American people when she stated, "But, even though sometimes American government can be so bad to us sometimes, we can never blame American people. We can never say, "We hate them.""¹²⁹ In a sense, participants' sympathizing with the American people served as a counterbalance to the process of discrediting U.S. geopolitics.

One incident demonstrated the participants' desire to balance criticism of the U.S. by declaring their sympathies for Americans. When a participant explained his perception of the reputation of the U.S., the discussion became centered on distinguishing the American people from the U.S. government,

Ahmed: I think – Okay, when you think about the US, politically – political-wise – you suddenly go to the bad side. In a political way, okay? Other than that, I [stutters] personally think that the American people... they are good – mostly, with the good causes.

Muna: Yeah.

¹²⁷ FG03: 6: 166-171.

¹²⁸ FG00: 26: 774-776.

¹²⁹ FG01: 87: 2394-2396.

Ahmed: Not all of them are bad, of course. You can't judge the majority of the American people to go... to be with the bad side.

Ghadeer: There's a difference between the government and the people.

Ahmed: [interrupting] ...and the people. Yes. Exactly.¹³⁰

In another discussion, a participant challenged the other young Jordanians in the focus group who were engaged in the cultural disciplining process. As the discussion became centered on criticizing the diffusion of American culture into Jordanian society by emphasizing its negative impacts, one participant expressed his sympathies for American culture. The other focus group members responded by sympathizing with "America" and the American people,

Adel: So, what is the problem with loving America? [laughs]

Ula: Do what?

Adel: I don't see a problem with loving America, I mean...

Ula: I love America.

Fayruz: Sure, there is no problems.

Alia: Not American people...¹³¹

In the above example, the other participants quickly counterbalanced their critical views of the U.S. by sympathizing with the American people.

The participants' background was undoubtedly influential in terms of their sympathizing with the American people. When discussing the influence of American culture on Jordan, one participant mentioned her exposure to Americans as a host for study abroad students. The participants had been discussing U.S. policy and Obama's inability to affect change in the region since his speech in Cairo,

Ghadeer: For example, like, for me the American presence in my house – we host American students –so...

Moderator: Hmm.

¹³⁰ FG01: 7: 180-187.

¹³¹ FG05: 26: 794-799.

Ghadeer: They're there all the time. So, we have an American presence. They are Americans... Each one of them has a different set of mind, I guess. I don't know, you can't judge... You can't just... America can't just be judged by, like, a small part. It's big.

Muna: Yeah. Whatever we hear from the news, we can never judge – according to what we hear on people in America.¹³²

The participants' reference to the Americans her family hosts, addressed her sympathies for the American people. Doing so demonstrated a clear differentiation of the American people from the government, and arguably emphasized the people as the more legitimate authority.

Participants did occasionally sympathize with the official U.S. government, though it was usually did not go unchallenged. In one group, participants sympathized with the U.S. government only in the sense that it was viewed as no different than any other state. When participants discussed the geopolitical control the U.S. exerts over the region, one participant challenged the negative view of the U.S. that had come to permeate the discussion,

Shireen: I think it's smart. And I think it's justified.

Rana: It is smart.

Shireen: If I were America, I would do the same.

Rana: Any country, if they had the power the same as the States has right now, they would likely do the same.

Basma: You know...

Rana: [interrupting] Any country. It's natural to control others.¹³³

However, this particular approach was more of a rationalizing process with respect to perceived universality of the desire to control others. In other words, participants appeared to rationalize U.S. geopolitical domination. This was markedly different, however, from the participants' sympathizing processes with respect to the American people.

¹³² FG01: 8: 223-230.

¹³³ FG00: 23: 682-688.

During the focus groups, the moderator asked the participants about opportunities for mutual cooperation in an effort alleviate the purported tension between the U.S. and Middle East states. Often, participants responded by emphasizing the value of communication between people, rather than between governments. No doubt, this was partly a reflection of their experiences as language partners for young American study abroad students. In one group, the moderator proposed the question and a participant's response was straight and to the point on the matter, "Cooperation between nations, not governments."¹³⁴ In another example, a participant responded to such questioning saying,

Zuhur: I think that it should – this all should happen between the people, not between the governments.

Hala: Yeah.

Zuhur: Because if it happened between the governments, it will be built on interests.¹³⁵

Participants sympathize with the American people as the legitimate source of communication and cultural exchange, as opposed to governments. They emphasized a lack of popular control over political processes and valued of cooperation between people.

Throughout the discussions, the participants clearly distinguished the American people as separate from the U.S. government and the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East. The theme 'populist sympathizing' was meant to describe this process. Compared to the other dominant discursive processes presented here, it was the most positive. Because of this, it served as a sort of counter-balancing to a 'discourse of critique' observed throughout the focus groups. It was also the most one dimensional.

¹³⁴ FG01: 88: 2406.

¹³⁵ FG04: 56: 1679-1682.

In each focus group, the participants' discussion involved, at some point, the differentiation of the American people from the U.S. government. The theme represented a clearly favorable and sympathetic perception of Americans.

Conclusion

The objective of this study, and the research methods used, were intended to explore how Jordanian university students perceived the U.S. geopolitical presence in their lives and how they perceived its affects on their society. They were also intended to illuminate how participants perceived of inaccuracies in U.S. geopolitical discourse and the tension between the “East” and “West.” The conceptual categories – U.S. geopolitical hegemony, geopolitical discourse and Americanization of Jordanian society – were formulated to facilitate these explanations. Categories were not mutually exclusive and each addressed various aspects of the research objectives. The first two addressed participants’ perceptions of geopolitical hegemony and geopolitical discourse, respectively. The third category, Americanization, was developed upon engagement with the focus group transcripts. The ultimate understanding of how participants perceived the U.S. presence was found in the dominant patterns of interaction among the young Jordanian students. The value of these results was not in illustrating specific examples of what Jordanian students thought of Americans, the U.S. government or even particular aspects of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the region. Instead, the value was in understanding the more general trends in their descriptions of these things. Each discursive theme discussed in the results chapter corresponded to the conceptual categorizations, though they were not specifically connected to one or

the other. The themes were more fluid and overlapped, particularly due to the dynamic flow of the focus group discussions.

The participants engaged in several discursive processes that reflected their perceptions of the U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East. The bulk of these processes contributed to an overall 'discourse of critique' within the focus group discussions. Throughout the groups, participants perceived a lack of trustworthiness, legitimacy and credibility in U.S. geopolitics in the region. Additionally, the participants often tended to perceive the U.S. presence as conspiratorial in nature. The U.S.-Middle East geopolitical discourse was perceived by the young Jordanian students as characterized by stereotyped generalizations of Middle East geographies as landscapes of threat and inferiority. This reflected how participants viewed U.S. discourse as inaccurate and biased. The cultural disciplining theme was a reflection of how participants perceived the influence of the U.S. on their society. Repeated descriptions of the diffusion of American culture throughout Jordan reflected a view of Jordanian culture as threatened. This perception was accompanied by a perceived need for cultural preservation via controlling the degree of Americanization in Jordan. The participants' descriptions of Americanization were, for the most part, a result of their ability to describe the U.S. presence in their own terms. Their experiences as young people in Jordan influenced, no doubt, their descriptions of the American presence as a process of cultural diffusion. Finally, participants viewed the American people in a favorable light despite their criticisms of U.S. geopolitics and its influence on Middle East geographies. Their populist sympathies acted as a sort of counter-balancing process to

the other markedly critical discursive processes. This theme was an interesting indication of how participants perceived the tension between the “East” and the “West,” not as the result of culturally-rooted incompatibility, but rather because of what they perceived to be concrete U.S. geopolitical practices. Overall, the participants appeared to be defensive toward what they perceived as a largely aggressive, if not hostile, U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East.

In order to better understand the themes, it is important to take into consideration as much of the context of the focus group discussions as possible. The discursive processes in which the participants’ engaged during the focus groups can be thought of as performance. This performance is a result of the context of the discussions, particularly with respect to the presence of others in the groups and how those individuals were perceived. Indeed, an unending number of factors contributed to the performance of the participants in the focus groups. Several, however, are considered here to be of particular significance. The first was the presence of an American moderator. This affected group interaction because participants, as acknowledged via the cultural disciplining theme, adjusted their responses to reflect this fact. It is also likely that the presence of an American moderator, combined with the research topic, equated to an opportunity for participants to air their grievances, so to speak. In other words, participants viewed the focus groups as a sort of way to communicate to the larger United States how they felt about the U.S. government and its influence on their lives. This gives insight into not only the discrediting and uncovering themes, but also the populist sympathizing theme, as participants sought to

distinguish the U.S. government as the source of the negative influences in the region from the American people. Another important contextualization for the research was that as an American, the moderator was viewed in a privileged light, so to speak, and thus participants sought to ensure their responses were not offensive to American culture. Also, a factor to consider was that at least half of the participants identified themselves as 'Palestinians,' and potentially more were of Palestinian heritage as many of the responses to demographic questioning were ambiguous. Regardless of an exact number of Palestinians present, the fact remains that it is an important issue in Jordanian society. Palestinians have a vested interest in the United States role as mediator of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and were likely compelled to participate in different ways than their Transjordanian counterparts. Faced with the dilemma of embracing a Palestinian identity in hopes of the establishment of a future Palestinian state, while at the same time identifying with their Jordanian identity in order to maintain the safety and homeland provided by citizenship, Palestinian-Jordanians' perceptions of the United States certainly differ from how Transjordanians view the U.S. presence. There was never any nationalist tension apparent in the focus groups, however. A final influence on the context of the discussions was the participants' awareness of the sensitivity of discussing political issues in Jordan. In one instance, the discussion became centered on the authoritarian government in Jordan. When participants seemed to criticize the government, a participant appeared to subtly compel others to change the topic. Indeed, the Jordanian intelligence service is perceived as always listening to conversations in Jordan. Though there is no reason to

believe this surveillance actually took place during the focus group discussions, it was still an important contextualization as participants' *perceptions* were paramount. Ultimately, they knew and adhere to the norms in Jordanian society with respect to discussing such matters. In short, placing the themes in the wider context of Jordanian society gives them greater explanatory power.

While the perceptions of the participants were not considered to be generalizable to a wider population in Jordanian society that is not to say those perceptions cannot contribute to a meaningful understanding of the region. One important value embedded in qualitative research designs, such as the one used in this study, is a sense of caution in generalizing any research finding to a large, arguably infinitely diverse and dynamic population of human beings. Little can be definitively labeled as representative of an entire society without becoming a gross generalization. The fact remains that the Middle East *is* a foreign landscape to most Americans – even to some of those who have been there. By acknowledging our ignorance of the diverse and complex geographies of the Middle East, researchers, policy decision-makers and average Americans may be able to engage Middle East communities effectively enough to arrive at accurate information. From such information a more objective representation of the “Middle East” may be achieved. For someone like Edward Said, who certainly was a political activist and articulated his own ideas of the directions policy should take, it is important to note that he concerned his analyses and writing with issues of accuracy and subjectivity. Indeed, these critiques can have important implications and value to individuals and groups who disagree with Said's particular

views on policy. The pursuit of identifying and explaining inaccuracy in perceptions and policies which make up geopolitics was the most valuable aspect of his work, not any specific policy recommendation which, tomorrow, may become irrelevant.

The past year has been a dynamic one in the Middle East. Mass social movements, revolution and conflict erupted throughout the region for a variety of reasons that still remain unclear to observers in the United States. It remains to be seen if the dynamic changes taking place will be ultimately positive. Given the contextual nature of the focus group results and the fact that the study was conducted six months prior to the beginning of the social dynamics which took place earlier this year in various Middle East geographies, this study is limited in its relevance to these processes. Drawing any conclusions from the focus group themes with respect to the “Arab Spring” is certainly speculative. Nevertheless, the results of the focus group discussions may provide some insight. Notably, the cultural disciplining theme implies that a considerable measure of Americanization has already taken place among the youth in Jordan particularly. If this is indeed the case elsewhere, then the tension between “East” and “West” does not look to be one that will cause the inhabitants of the region to reject outright all American influence upon the establishment of more representative systems of government. Instead, the cultural disciplining theme (especially so in conjunction with populist sympathizing) indicates a desire for control over American and Western influence in their lives. One thing is undoubtedly true though. The region will not be the same as it once was. As global hegemon, the U.S. inevitably finds itself involved in the processes of change which are occurring in the various and diverse

Middle East geographies. Avoiding this engagement is impossible, just as wishing away geopolitical hegemony is impossible.

The U.S. geopolitical presence in the Middle East will continue, but how it continues is based on how decision-makers address complex issues such as the perceived tension between the United States and Muslim-majority states. By engaging the inhabitants of these geographies American decision-makers may accumulate enough accurate knowledge to inform wise geopolitical decision-making processes. One important step is engaging communities in the region in an attempt to gain those accurate understandings of not only how “they” perceive “us,” but also how our perceptions impact their lives. This study attempted to accomplish this by using that which is so often the “object” of U.S. discourse – the Middle Easterner – as a voice of critique. A vital aspect of their discursive themes in the focus groups was not what they said about Jordanian society itself, but how Jordanians responded to American understandings and representations of the world and self. The young Jordanians who participated in the focus groups effectively exposed these American perceptions of self as well as the ‘other’ that serves as its counter-image.

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Appendix

FG00: Pilot focus group

Date: July 6, 2010

Participants (4): Rana, Basma, Khadija, and Shireen

Rana is 21-year-old female of West Bank Palestinian heritage. She identifies herself as a “Muslim Arab,” and follows political issues between the US and the Middle East “a lot.” With respect to political issues she states “I know some things, not enough though.” She gets her news from CNN, Aljazeera, and Yahoo News.

Basma is a 20-year-old female from Irbid, Jordan. She identifies herself as Arab. With respect to political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, “I used to follow it daily, but now I got bored, almost frustrated. After Obama was elected I stopped watching anything.” With regard to politics she feels, “I know some things, but I have my depression periods when I stop watching news.” Her sources for news are, “internet, newspaper, T.V. and people who are in contact with the events.” She is Muslim.

Khadija is a 24-year-old female of Syrian heritage, but born and living in Amman, Jordan. She identifies herself with “Arabs, Muslim Arabs.” She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East “all the time and every day.” When asked if she feels she knew a lot about politics between the US and Middle East, she states, “Yes, enough, I guess.” She gets her news from, “T.V. Aljazeera channel mostly.”

Shireen is a 21-year-old female living outside Amman. She identifies herself as an “Arab.” She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “not very often, but I’m usually aware of what’s going on generally.” She does not feel she knows a lot about politics. With regard to her sources of news, she states, “I occasionally watch them on TV, but usually I hear about it from friends or family or generally people in the street.” She is Muslim.

FG01: First focus group

Date: July 13, 2010

Participants (5): Muna, Mahmood, Ghadeer, Ahmed, Suroor

Muna is a 21-year-old female living in Western Amman, who identifies herself as Palestinian. She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “not too often.” When asked if she feels she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, she states, “I know...but not enough.” For news she reads internet and TV sources. She is Muslim.

Mahmood is a 23-year-old male from Western Amman. He identifies himself as a Jordanian and follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “too much.” He feels he knows a lot about politics, getting his news from TV, internet, newspaper, and books. He is Muslim.

Ghadeer is a 19-year-old female from Western Amman. She identifies herself as a “Muslim Arab” and follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “not very often.” She does not feel like she knows a lot about politics. Her news sources are TV, radio, and newspaper.

Ahmed is a 24-year-old male from West Amman. He identifies himself as Palestinian. When asked how often he follows political issues, he states, “not too often, but ya sometimes.” He feels he knows, “not enough” about political issues between the US and the Middle East. He gets his news from “mostly TV, if not I usually go for the internet.” He is Muslim.

Suroor is a 21-year-old female from “the East of Amman.” She identifies herself as Palestinian. When asked how often she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, “It depends on how important it is to us.” She feels like she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, getting her news from the internet and TV. She is Muslim.

FG02: Second focus group

Date: July 20, 2010

Participants (6): Mostafa, Amena, Ammar, Raed, Ali, Farah

Mostafa is a 22-year-old male of Palestinian heritage, living in Shmeisani, a neighborhood in Amman. He follows political issues between the US and the Middle East “almost everyday.” When asked if he felt he knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, he replies, “Yes, I do.” He gets his news “from television and newspapers.” He is Muslim.

Amena is a 20-year-old female Christian living in Tla’a al-Ali, a neighborhood in Amman near the University of Jordan. With respect to her background she states, “I was born in America but came to Jordan since 1996. I did not have the chance to discover how life is in there. My parents are Jordanian. I am the eldest in my family. I consider myself Jordanian but I would love to go back to America one day.” With respect to political issues, she explains, “I no longer follow political issues because it makes me feel sad and it does not give a clear right vision about the relations between them.” When asked if she feels she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, she states, “I do not think so.” She gets her news from TV and the internet, and “some foreign friends.”

Ammar is a 21-year-old male Muslim living on Istiklal Street in Amman. With respect to his background he states, “I’m originally from Palestine, but I was born and raised in Amman, Jordan.” When asked if he follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, he states, “As a matter of fact recently I became very concerned with these issues, because I’m going to the US next year.” When asked if he feels he knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, he states, “...no, almost nobody knows the facts or all the relations between Arab countries and the US.” He gets his news from, “B.B.C. London mainly.”

Raed is a 22-year-old male living in East Amman. He describes his background as “Islam...” adding, “I’m from Palestine.” When asked how often he follows political issues between the US and the Middle East he replies, “Almost every day I watch BBC, CNN, JSC.” He feels like he knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, “but, you know it is very difficult to know everything about everything. I believe that the media plays a key role in spreading informations (black out)...” His news sources are the Jordan Times, BBC, CNN, Sky News, as well as JSC Arabic and International.

Ali is a 23-year-old male living in Sahab, east of Amman. When asked about his background, he states, “Asia [...] Middle East [...] Jordan [...] Islam [...] I have a background from all the classes...” When asked how often he follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, he replies, “I follow the political issues if there is important event...in general, yes, I follow it.” When asked if he feels he knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, he states, “I feel like in the Middle East on the average.” He gets his news from TV and the internet, such as BBC, Jordan Times, and Aljazeera.

Farah is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in Amman, who identifies herself as Palestinian. With states she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “very often.” She feels she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East. She gets her news from Al-Arabia, BBC, and CNN.

FG03: Third focus group

Date: July 27, 2010

Participants (6): Ibtisam, Fatima, Noor, Murad, Bashar, Bana

Ibtisam is a 24-year-old female Muslim living in Zarqa, Jordan. When asked if she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, she replies, "Actually, I'm not following any political issues, but of course what I see is support my country, peacefully." When asked if she feels like she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, she states, "Unfortunately, no, I have no idea about politics." Her sources of news are, "Abu Dhabi channel," to which she adds, "I hate watching news."

Fatima is a 19-year-old female Muslim living in Zarqa, Jordan. She describes her background as, "Jordanian – originally from Palestine." She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, "always." When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she replies, "I think so." Aljazeera is her source for news.

Noor is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in Sweileh, a neighborhood in Amman. She describes her background as, "Jordanian/originally from Palestine." She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, "all the time." When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she replies, "Maybe, I am not sure. Sometimes I feel like I know, and sometimes I feel that I don't know anything." Her sources for news are Aljazeera and Alaqsa.

Murad is a 22-year-old male Muslim living in Salt, Jordan. He describes his background as, "It's like Bedouin origin." When asked if he follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, he states, "often, but it depends on the issue itself." When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, he replies "Yes, I do...just to know people all over the world." He gets his news from CNN, BBC, and Al-Arabia.

Bashar is a 23-year-old male Muslim living in Tabarbour, Jordan. When asked about his background, he replies, "I'm from Palestine, but I live in Jordan from a long time." He follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, "sometimes, not always." He feels like he knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East. His sources of news are Aljazeera on TV as well as Aljazeera and BBC on the internet.

Bana is a 23-year-old female Muslim living in Khalda, a neighborhood of Amman. When asked about her background, she states, "originally from Jordan." When asked if she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, "I'm really interested in following the relations between the US and ME, so I can say most of the time." When asked if she feels she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, she replies, "not that much." Her news sources are CNN and Al-Rai.

FG04: Fourth focus group

Date: August 3, 2010

Participants (5): Maha, Zuhur, Layla, Balsam, Hala

Maha is a 22-year-old female Muslim living in West Amman. Her background is from the South of Jordan. She has been graduated from the University of Jordan for two months. She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East on a “weekly basis.” When asked if she feels like she knows a lot about politics between the US and the Middle East, she replies, “Just recent and Headlines especially after 9/11.” Her sources of news are Jordanian and Spanish online newspapers, CNN, Al-Arabia, and Aljazeera.

Zuhur is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in the North of Amman. Her background is Palestinian. She has been graduated from the University of Jordan for one month. When asked how often she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East she replies, “I try to watch news and read newspapers on this topic. I watch news every day.” When asked if she feels like she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East she states, “Not very much.” For news, she watches Aljazeera and BBC on TV, Ajazeera on the internet, and the Petra, Ammon, and Al-Ghad newspapers.

Layla is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in the East of Amman. Her background is Palestinian. She has one semester left at the University of Jordan. She “rarely” follows political issues between the US and the Middle East. When asked if she feels like she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East she states, “I don’t think so.” Her sources for news are BBC and CNN.

Balsam is a 20-year-old female Muslim living in West Amman. She is currently attending the University of Jordan. She “constantly” follows political issues between the US and the Middle East. When asked if she feels like she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East she replies, “No one knows anything about politics.” Her sources for news are Aljazeera, CNN, and Time.com.

Hala is a 22-year-old female Muslim living in Amman. Her background is “Palestinian/ Bethlehem originally, now I’m Jordanian.” She has been graduated from the University of Jordan for two months. She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East “all the time.” if she feels like she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East she replies, “Most likely.” She gets her news from Aljazeera, Reuters, and Arabic newspapers.

FG05: Fifth focus group

Date: August 17, 2010

Participants (6): Fayruz, Ula, Adel, Afnan, Alia, Sarah

Fayruz is a 19-year-old female living “in the capital city Amman, residential area.” She identifies herself as a “Jordanian from Palestinian origins. A modest Muslim.” She is an undergraduate at the University of Jordan. She “occasionally” follows political issues between the US and the Middle East. When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she replies, “kind of, I still believe there is a lot to know about.” Her sources of news are Aljazeera and local internet news websites like, *ammonnews.net*, *alquds.com*, as well as newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Al-Arabi*.

Ula is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in Eastern Amman. She identifies as being from this area. She is currently an undergraduate at the University of Jordan. She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “once a week.” When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, “Yes, I guess so!” She gets her news from Aljazeera, Facebook, and the newspaper *Al-Rai*.

Adel is a 20-year-old male living in Khalda, Amman. He is an atheist and identifies his background as “Arab.” He is currently attending the University of Jordan. He follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, “almost daily.” When asked if he feels he knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, he states, “I guess so.” His news sources are *foreignpolicy.com*, CNN, and Aljazeera, describing Aljazeera as “very biased.”

Afnan is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in Amman. When asked about her background, she replies, “I am from Syria, but I was born in Jordan. My nationality is Syrian.” She is currently an undergraduate at the University of Jordan. When asked if he feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, “Not a lot.”

Alia is a 21-year-old female Muslim living in Sweileh, Amman. She describes her background as “from Palestine. I was born in UAE and I came to Jordan to complete my study.” She is currently attending the University of Jordan. She follows political issues between the US and the Middle East “Once a month and sometimes if there is something important.” When asked if she feels she knows a lot about political issues between the US and the Middle East, she replies, “Actually, no, not a lot.” Her news sources are Aljazeera and Al-Arabia.

Sarah is a 20-year-old female Muslim living in Argan, Amman. When asked about her background, she replies, “I was born in KSA [...] my nationality is Jordanian.” She is currently attending the University of Jordan. When asked how often she follows political issues between the US and the Middle East, she states, “not so much, maybe just once in the week.” When asked if she feels she knows a lot about these issues she replies, “Not a lot, just a little.” Her sources for news are the MBC4, Fox, and the Jordan TV channels.