

Application Essay

I developed my topic last year around this time while attending the International Studies Association annual conference. My adviser, Dr. Birnir, was chairing a panel on ethnicity in the state, and I became intrigued as to the role ideologies play in a minority group's political behavior. I spoke to Dr. Birnir immediately after the presentations about my interest in the subject, and she agreed to advise my senior thesis. At the time, I was enrolled in GVPT289H, a 1-credit course designed to prepare Government and Politics Honors students to write a thesis, and Dr. Lee, the honors program chair and our instructor, encouraged me to further explore my topic so that I could develop a research question. My experience with this process speaks most to the evolution of my project. I have worked as a research assistant on the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project run by the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) for over two years, and have had hands-on experience with many aspects of the data collection. Furthermore, my terrorism studies classes sparked my interest in ethno-nationalist violence. After speaking with several trusted advisers familiar with this subject, I chose to combine these interests to quantitatively examine the effect of ethno-separatism on observations of anti-government rebellion and protest.

While significant amounts of data exist within the MAR database and many esteemed scholars have published on them, some have criticized MAR of selection-bias toward cases with a higher incidence of rebellion, thus potentially weakening the findings. As such, CIDCM's newest project has been to create an expanded database (E-MAR) with different thresholds for ethnic group inclusion, thus allowing less extreme yet politically and socially salient minorities to be accounted for. As this database is brand new, no data had yet been collected. Much of the bulk of my work has been to code the 91 groups in the region I am examining (Middle East and North Africa), only 29 of which had some existing data, of which I updated through 2009. From my previous experience working on the MAR database, I recognize the importance of thorough and exhaustive research on each group in order to maximize the accuracy of the findings. While journal articles and books are occasionally helpful, the best source of such data is found in news articles and online reports. I used Lexisnexis to access all relevant archived news articles and a wide variety of sources that ordinary internet searches are incapable of compiling or filtering. I have become quite adept at using the many command statements and search tools available on Lexisnexis Academic, and my positive experience has encouraged me to utilize it for other academic pursuits.

Near the beginning of this process, I met with a librarian who presented an orientation tutorial on the use of Research Port. This was a very helpful experience, as before that meeting I was only aware of the "quick search" function. I was also unaware of resources designed to assist scholars in organizing and compiling endnotes and reference pages. I appreciated this opportunity and found it very helpful when I embarked on an extensive literature review. Ethnic conflict and violence has been written about widely, so while there was a substantial amount of information to sort through, I find I can now navigate the academic search engines with ease. Initially, my strategy was to find some core relevant books and journal articles and comb the bibliographies for related articles. I also referenced other scholar's literature reviews in order to

learn how to conduct my own and for leads on where next to search for information. I generally trusted all information from academic journals and published works, though read critically to discern any theoretical biases they were writing with that may have colored their arguments. I was more discriminating when reading news articles; not only did I pay attention to the source but also who provided the information being reported. While coding, it is very important to differentiate between statements made by the regime or ethnic entities, as both parties have compelling motivations to skew information.

As I aspire to one day become an academic, this experience has been hugely beneficial and I am very appreciative of my advisers who pushed me to pursue a very work intensive, but very rewarding piece of original research. I will be presenting my findings on March 17th at this year's International Studies Association annual conference, and truly feel that this research project has come full circle.