This summer I attended the Middlebury Arabic Language Summer School at Mills College where I was placed at the high intermediate level and was fully immersed in the language for two months. Through formal classes, extracurricular activities, lectures and cultural events I not only improved my language skills, but also developed my understanding of the Middle East culture, traditions, history and politics.

The importance of this experience for my future as a social change agent has three aspects. First and foremost, being immersed in Arabic for the summer helped me gain significant progress in regards to my linguistic skills. Once I finished language school, I travelled to Jordan to spend three weeks with family members prior to beginning my Middlebury Study Abroad Semester in Amman. Seeing the increased confidence in expressing myself in Arabic I had gained, together with the ability to converse with locals and understand conversations and media texts (even if not in their entirety!), showed me that my time at language school indeed was not wasted and that I had made visible gains in proficiency that I am now building on by living in the Middle East. The impact of improving my linguistic skills is critical to my ability to live and work in the region.

Not only is Arabic one of the official UN languages which plays a role in being hired in international organizations, but it is also the language spoken by a vast number of people in the world. Gaining fluency in Arabic allows me to connect with people from Arab countries across socioeconomic backgrounds and to reach levels of empathy with others that are accessible only when one speaks the mother tongue of those she speaks with as language is not merely a tool for verbal transactions but a carrier of heartfelt emotions, memories and convictions about the reality one occupies. In that sense, the application of my Arabic language study to social entrepreneurship is huge, as it gives me not only a point of entry in foreign communities, but also the sensitivity and understanding of cultures to not impose solutions or assume what people's needs are, but instead be able to ask probing questions, observe actively and make informed decisions as to what role I should play in the development of these countries.
The second aspect of my language school experience relevant to my fellowship had to do with learning Arabic through exposure to authentic media in my Standard Arabic (Fusha) class. Every day my Fusha class started with student presentations on current news from the Middle East and further exercises in listening to, reading and discussing news. Prior to becoming a Sociology major and working in Palestine (last year) I thought of myself as "apolitical". I didn’t have a routine of following up the news and current events.

While sitting in one of my classes during language school, my classmates and I were discussing the Arab Spring. I suddenly tried to remember where I was during its beginning and the events that followed it. After all it only happened a couple of years ago. I asked myself why I couldn’t remember anything. The Arab Spring, as it was taking place, didn’t register in my mind as a revolutionary, historical moment that would impact the Middle East and the world profoundly.

Reflecting on this made me realize how people can live in the world without being part of the world, attending to their personal worries, struggles and joys without an awareness of what bigger changes are happening around them, in their region or around the world. In a world that is so interrelated, living without an understanding of how events elsewhere affect you and how your own actions may have either positive or negative impact somewhere else hurts our ability to affect change. In order to participate in revolutionary movements and be active citizens and agents of change people need to be educated about the importance of being up-to-date with current events and developments, as well as being encouraged to develop critical thinking skills and desire for life-long learning.

As I considered gaining critical consciousness in a new light, I was inspired to include it in the Fellowship Project I am envisioning to carry out next summer with the Support of MCSE and the Middlebury Community in my home country Bulgaria. After observing a critical need for innovation in foreign language teaching in Bulgaria, my initial idea was to organize a Summer Language School for English and create an immersive environment for language study modelled after the Middlebury Language Schools that would feature formal classes taught by native-English speakers (Middlebury Under-
graduate Interns), as well as a variety of other activities.

My current vision for the project includes the development of language skills, as well as critical consciousness and political awareness as its main objectives. To that end building on my previous studies in International Education, Sociology and Psychology, in addition to my new insights, I am hoping to create a curriculum based on the Freirian approaches to empowering education as outlined in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", whereby classes are designed around and directed by students’ interests and self-identified needs. Within this conceptual frame, the educational process leads to liberation, increased ability for self-expression and participation in the political and socio-economic life of the community one occupies.

An example of an educational activity that can help achieve this goal is requesting from students to bring a news or opinions article in English on a relevant topic of interest to them to present in front of their peers and guide discussion. Through similar activities program participants will not only be supported in improving their language skills, but also challenged to develop a routine of keeping up with news, forming and expressing opinions and creating conversations with others on the topics that excite them. Participants will also be invited to research, think about and design solutions to the problems they identify as important to solve. The final event to conclude the project could be a “Hackaton” or “Idea Challenge” event to bring project participants and other interested youth from the
greater community to work on designing innovative projects, present them, receive feedback and potentially-funding.

The last critical aspect of language school that contributed to my development was the incredible opportunity for networking with people with common interests (Arabic, Middle East, Development). I met and connected with incredible people who are now part of my network and who have already inspired and supported me to keep growing. For instance, someone I had met during the program shared his experience with working for the UN and offered to connect me to some UN offices for potential internships. While this didn’t happen yet, the realization that the UN is not an impossible goal as a potential site for exploration of my passion for development and social change gave me courage to pursue the opportunity to intern with UN agencies in Jordan. In the initial weeks of my stay here I tirelessly applied to internship positions, whereby after successfully interviewing with UNDP Jordan, I was offered an internship position in the “Governance and Disaster Risk reduction” Portfolio at UNDP.

Thank you so much for everything!