

# Research Spotlight

## Research takes fourth-year student from Syria to Stanford

**Many undergraduates opt to study abroad, but Rania Awaad wanted to do more than explore a foreign culture and take a handful of classes. Instead, she decided to earn a law degree in Syria.**

“At first it was just exploration,” Awaad said, a kind of follow-up to her experience studying abroad in Damascus during high school, when she first became intrigued with women’s issues within Muslim culture. “Then I got really serious about doing the degree.”

“There are very few women who actually study Islamic jurisprudence, for a variety of reasons,” she said. “I think I was a little bit of an anomaly over there in a field that was predominantly men, and older men. And since I was a young woman who was American on top of it all, (that) was kind of odd to them.”

Awaad earned the equivalent of a J.D. from a private legal university in Damascus while pursuing a double bachelor’s degree in biological anthropology and Islamic studies at the University of Michigan. Now, as a fourth-year medical student at Wright State, she is combining all of her interests in a research project that earned her a prestigious grant funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

“Muslim women in particular don’t really access mental health care as they should,” Awaad said. “I thought it would be interesting to study the perceptions that

women have, perceived barriers — what it is that really keeps them from getting mental health care.”

When Awaad applied for the grant she ultimately received through the American Psychiatric Association (APA), she didn’t realize it would make her one of a select few medical students to be named a full research fellow of the American Psychiatric Institute for Research and Education (APIRE). In fact, she was the only one in 2008.

For her research, Awaad adapted and combined three psychological survey instruments to create a tool to gauge perceptions about mental health care among Muslim women in the U.S. Using specialized databases and resources of the Stanford School of Medicine, Awaad contacted potential participants and invited them to take an anonymous online survey. She was hoping to collect a few hundred responses in total; with several weeks left before the survey closed, she had received more than 1,200.



Fourth-year student Rania Awaad won a prestigious NIMH grant to study Muslim women’s perceptions of mental health services and the barriers that may keep many from receiving needed care.

Comments volunteered by many survey-takers gave Awaad an indication of why the survey might have struck a chord.

“People are saying that they realize it’s a huge problem” that Muslim women are hesitant to seek mental health care, Awaad said. “And they really feel that they can’t reach out to people who may not understand them.”

If it holds true, the finding will likely reinforce her determination to specialize in psychiatry, build on her background in Islamic law and culture, and offer Muslim women new and better options to get the treatment they need.