

Buffett Undergraduate Research Fellowship Opportunity

The Meaning of ‘Syrian’? National Identity during Political Transition

Faculty Mentor: Wendy Pearlman, Professor, Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences

Project Synopsis: After 54 years of dictatorship and 14 years of war, the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 launched Syria into an uncertain political transition. This project examines the Syrian case to explore how such transitions might require not only the transformation of political institutions and practices but also the forging of new national identities. It takes its inspiration from a chilling July 2025 incident in which a Syrian civilian, prodded by an armed extremist to disclose his religion, responded that he was simply Syrian — prompting the incensed gunman to ask, “What is the meaning of ‘Syrian?’” Though asked in the course of what became a cold-blooded killing, the question struck at a core challenge for polities striving to shift from internecine violence to social peace and from stifling dictatorship to long-denied freedom: how can a society cope with domestic fractures, histories of brutalization, and deep distrust to forge a sense of peoplehood that genuinely includes and represents all its citizens?

Project Term: Summer and Academic Year 2026

Project Location: Remote

Job Description: The students’ responsibilities will be to assist in the project described above by:

- (1) searching for, discovering, carefully reading, analyzing, and coding written primary source materials
- (2) mastering relevant software to assist with transcription (and, if possible, translation) of interviews, and also carefully reading, analyzing, and coding transcripts
- (3) carrying out comparative analysis of older and newer interviews to identify larger patterns
- (4) searching for, discovering, carefully reading, analyzing, and summarizing relevant secondary source materials

Special skills or background:

- Fluency in Arabic is very strongly desired.
- Prior coursework on or knowledge of Middle East politics, political transitions, and/or Syria is desired

Time Commitment: 5-10 flexible hours per week

Number of available positions: Two