

Carolinas Committee on U.S.–Arab Relations

NEWSLINES

Volume 33, No. 1

The Newsletter of the Carolinas Committee on U.S.-Arab Relations
An Affiliate of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

June 2019

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Jacqueline in the Desert

Life Lessons from the Trip of a Lifetime

by Jacqueline Torres

When I was younger, I never imagined I would spend so much time learning about Middle East culture. As a freshman in college, I joined my school's Model Programs team. This opened the door to several wonderful opportunities and experiences. The Model Programs delegation at Converse College has a very rich legacy, and it is known for sending stu-

dents on trips to the Middle East. I had missed an opportunity to visit Qatar earlier because my passport was not up-to-date. Luckily, The National Council on US-Arab Relations offered me an opportunity to participate in Gateway KSA's program, a fully-funded tour of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that exposes students and other “society influencers” to the rich history, cul-

Jacqueline



ture, and scientific progress within the country. I traveled to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia this fall for nine days. It was an incredible experience and I am very grateful to those who made it possible for me to explore such a thriving and culturally rich nation. As I write this in December 2018, the Saudi government is facing criticism on the international stage. The situation is continuously developing, so I will focus on the culture and the people I interacted with during my trip.

Growing up in a conservative Mexican-American household, I found that I could relate to a number of cultural aspects of Saudi life. Both cultures have a deep reverence for tradition, faith, and family. I had the opportunity to listen and speak with a number of Saudi men and women. I was able to participate in a discussion with a couple of female members in the Shura Council (the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia). Dr. Ahlam Mohammed al-Hakmi and Dr. Mody al-Khalaf are trailblazers, and I noted the great pride about how they spoke of their country and culture. They were not afraid to be honest and did not feel the need to soften their statements or aspects of their culture to accommodate the sensibilities of a group of Western students. The two women spoke about their family lives and careers and how those two dimensions coexisted. They addressed a dilemma many Western women face: career goals or family life. These women have managed to balance both aspects of their

lives successfully.

The discussion with two of the female members of the Shura Council led to deeper discussion on feminism. Dr. Mody al-Khalaf made a statement that resonated for me: "There is not a single kind of feminism. Feminism should be discussed in the context of culture". This is not a conversation that I expected to have during my visit in Saudi Arabia, and this mentality I would later notice, is part of the problem. I am a student at Converse College, a women's college that praises female achievement and empowerment; surely I would know what feminism is all about, right? Not exactly. As Dr. Mody pointed out, I was only attempting to comprehend what feminism is through the dominant culture lens in my life. I was failing to understand how the concept of feminism can change through a different cultural lens.

My encounters with other local women of my own age clarified this more. I found that these women held the same goals and aspirations; they just had to develop these goals in a different cultural setting. They did not consider this different cultural setting to be an additional challenge, but rather just an additional component of their identity. We had a chance to chat over coffee with a group of students from Effat University, a female institution. Many of the students had already studied abroad in Western nations and had been exposed to Western culture. I wondered how they were able to make such a major cultural transition, and whether

they were happy to return. I was surprised to learn that all the women I spoke to were not only happy to return, but felt as if it was their duty. This highlighted, yet again, the importance of family and nation.

I also got the opportunity to visit and tour ARAMCO and SABIC, two large Saudi companies that are pushing the boundaries of innovation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has made several attempts to diversify their economy through the decades, yet they have not been quite able to complete the goal. However, technological developments have made business leaders much more optimistic about successful diversification in the near future. Both the ARAMCO and SABIC representatives spoke about their engineering developments and how they hoped to expand even more. Both companies were eager to discuss their incorporation of women into traditionally male dominated fields in science. The young professionals in Saudi Arabia are very optimistic about their futures.

Without my participation in Model Arab League, I would never have gotten an opportunity to visit such a unique country. My education at Converse College has been key in the development of my appreciation of Middle Eastern culture. And the Gateway KSA allowed expansion of that base through a unique and life-changing experience. I look forward to what the future has in store for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

A Glimpse into the Future of Saudi Women

by Olivia Fattah



Olivia

In March, I was offered the extraordinary opportunity to travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the Gateway KSA program. I had a little over a month to prepare for this huge adventure. I needed a passport and a visa as well. I was nervous to be traveling across the globe for my first time

outside the United States, but I was very excited. As a student at a women's college, I was curious about the role of women in Saudi Arabia. My main focus on this trip was to gain a better perspective of women's changing roles in Saudi society, and this is what my article here will address.

On day one our group traveled to the King Faisal Center for a panel with two incredible Saudi women, Huda Al Helaissi and Khlood Al Dukheil. Huda was a member of the Shura Council and very vocal about the direction of women in Saudi. She expressed both support and hesitations about the new freedoms women were gaining. The older generation has concerns about the loss of traditions and important cultural foundations. Despite her cautions, Huda was an amazing example of what Saudi women in politics could accomplish.

Our next speaker Khlood Al Dukheil, a Saudi woman who found her success in the financial sector, was an unabashed progressive. She came to the industry at a time when there were only a miniscule number of women in professional jobs. However, she was able to show her competency through handling hundreds of millions of dollars in major business transactions. She even served as the King's personal advisor. And she accomplished this while being a wife and mother. She demonstrated the balance between being a progressive Saudi woman and a commitment to traditional values. Today Khlood does many conferences and panels and she encourages Saudi corporations to hire

more women onto their teams. She proclaimed that it has been working as she sees more women around the conference tables and on conference calls. It was a pleasure to speak with Khlood and hear more about the direction that women are taking in the Kingdom and what she hopes to see in the future.

The conversations with these two women will always stick out to me from the trip, but there were other women we met along the way as well. Our tour guides at the historical sites we visited such as Al Diriyah, Mada'in Saleh, and Old Town were women. They had so much knowledge about the history of the region. It was fascinating to listen to them speak. The businesses that we toured had female representatives that spoke to us about current practices and the future for women in the companies. Throughout the Kingdom our group was exposed to women that were defying the strict traditional standards and forging their own paths. They were proving to the Kingdom and to the world that Saudi women were smart, capable, and determined to have the ability to make choices about their futures. It was inspiring to meet and speak with these women about their experiences in a still male dominant culture.

My time spent with these incredible women put into perspective how fortunate I am to



Mada'in Saleh, one of Saudi Arabia's most stunning landmarks

be afforded opportunities that I have here in my country. I can pursue my degree freely without stigma and make decisions for my future independently. In the coming years, I hope to see more

Saudi women taking big strides for themselves and future generations. They have so much to offer the world as their potential is recognized and employed.

Tea in the Desert



“When I Remember Qatar, I Think of Milk”

by Errin Baylis

In July 2018 my professor and advisor Dr. Joe Dunn summoned me to his office to discuss a possible travel opportunity. During my two years on the Model Arab League team, I harassed him repeatedly that I wanted to go on one of the travel opportunities offered by the National Council on US-Arab Relations. He told that he was nominating two students for a trip to Qatar and that he was leaving the decision of which one would be selected to the National Council. I was quite excited and even more so when I learned a few weeks later that I was the one chosen. I could hardly wait for the trip in November.

Arriving at the Greenville/Spartanburg Airport at 5:00 am on November 16 for my flight to Washington, DC, I was nervous about what to expect. Though I would be with other students, I felt that I would be going to a foreign country on my own. All of the questions and concerns of my friends and family came to mind. Would I be safe? Would I be able to communicate with the people I would meet? My fears dissolved when I reached the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations headquarters in Washington, D.C. We began the preparation for the trip with a briefing about Qatari customs and history by Dr. John Duke Anthony and Ambassador Anne Patterson.

One of the most important things that we learned about was the blockade of Qatari that Saudi

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in conjunction some other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council declared in May 2017. The announced reason was to punish Qatar for supporting terrorism, but obviously larger issues were at stake, including control of Qatari gas fields. With all trade, diplomatic, and political ties cut off, it was expected that Qatar would capitulate quickly; however, over a year later, the country is not only surviving, but thriving.

Following a thirteen-hour plane ride, we arrived in Doha and went to our hotel. On the ride, I was absolutely mesmerized by the atmosphere. As dusk set in, there were bright lights, palm trees and amazing architecture. I was finally in the Middle East. I couldn't wait for my adventure to begin. The next morning, we began bright and early with a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where we met with the Head of the Office of Counterterrorism and the International Cooperation Director who told us how the Qatari government plans to counteract radical extremism. The three step plan is as follows: tackle the root causes, work on economic empowerment, and provide education. We also heard about the Qatari role in countless political mediations. I found myself so struck by the fact that as an undergraduate from a college in South Carolina, I was sitting in a foreign country speaking with high ranking officials.

Next we met with the CEO of

the Qatar Financial Centre and learned about the financial state of Qatar, especially in light of the current blockade. After lunch, we toured the Museum of Islamic Art, which was one of the best experiences of the trip. The architecture of the building was beautiful and the history within was amazing. As we walked out onto a large outdoor space, we saw the beautiful waterway and Doha's many skyscrapers. Leaving the museum, we went for dinner and shopping at the Souq Waqif. This definitely was my favorite part of the trip. Shopkeepers lined the many alleyways with beautiful trinkets, teas, and scarves. So many beautiful cashmere scarves! With the friendly exchange rate of 3.65, I bought Christmas gifts for just about everyone on my list. This was the end of a fulfilling first day.

The second day we began at the Ministry of Foreign Defense, where we learned about the strong military and diplomatic ties between the United States and Qatar as well as the large number of women in all branches of the Qatari military. Though the women primarily hold administrative positions, there are a few female Air Force pilots and other combat slots. Next we visited the Religious City complex. Though it is relatively “Western,” Qatar is still a conservative Muslim country. However, the vast majority of people living in Qatar are not native to the country. Out of a total population of 3 million, only about

Errin at Education City



300,000 are Qatari citizens. This means that many residents may not be Muslim. Religious City contains several non-Muslim religious institutions, including a Greek Orthodox Church and a Roman Catholic Church.

After lunch we visited Al Jazeera, the global news organization based in Qatar. The first thing we noticed was an armed guard outside the front door. We learned that at the start of the blockade there had been threats on the Al Jazeera headquarters. This was due to Al Jazeera's policy of unflinchingly telling the truth about the things happening in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia did not react favorably to accusations about the Kingdom's behavior, so shutting down Al Jazeera became one of the demands for

ending the blockade. The day ended with dinner and a briefing from members of the US embassy staff in Qatar.

Day three began at the Qatar National Library, which was a trip highlight. One of the most amazing things was the library's book return device that took a book from the front desk through long hidden conveyor belts exactly to the place on the shelves where the book belonged. Next we visited the Qatar Foundation, also called Education City. Within Education City are nine branches of American universities, including Georgetown, Cornell, and Texas A&M. Qatari students are able to study at these universities in Qatar and even have the option of possibly traveling to the United States to continue their education. Fol-

lowing this, we visited Al Shaqab, a stable and training area for Arabian horses. Getting to pet the horses and see where they trained was a fun time! The biggest adventure though was sand duning in ATVs in the desert with dinner on the beach. I even got to ride a camel!

Day four began with a visit to the Al Shura Council where we met with the council's Vice President. This is similar to the American Congress, except there are 27 members total. Thirteen of these members are elected and fourteen of them are appointed by the Emir. This was the only time during the trip that we had to use a translator. Despite this, it was an interesting and informative experience. We learned that women lead in all sectors of the

government and are considered the main pillar of society and the family. Once again I found myself in awe of the opportunity I had been given to ask questions to high ranking Qatari officials.

After leaving the Al Shura Council, we visited the 2022 FIFA World Cup headquarters. The day that we arrived was exactly four years to the day that Qatar is set to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The most interesting part of this visit was hearing about the plans for stadium building and development. During past World Cups, stadiums were built and never used again after the games, which was detrimental to the environment. However, Qatar has developed plans for stadiums that can be dismantled so that sections of seating can be donated to developing countries for the creation of new stadiums. The Qatar stadiums have been developed within close range of each other and connected by new public transportation. This will allow fans to attend two or three matches a day, something impossible during past World Cups.

Next, we visited the Al Udeid Air Force Base. This was a unique experience because we knew that if not for this trip, we would never be able to visit a top secret base like this. When we walked through the door, they took our cellphones. We learned about the military operations between Qatar and the United States. We finished the night with a boat tour dinner. The water was beautiful and though the night was windy and chilly, I will definitely remember this part of the trip forever.

We started our last day at Ras Laffan or Industrial City. This is the plant where natural gas is produced. The entrance is guarded and you cannot enter unless you work or live within the Industrial City limits. The process of the production of natural gas was explained to us as we drove through the city. One thing that sticks out to me about this visit is being told about a building that had been built in Industrial City that gathered and reused the excess natural gas that had been released into the air. We were told that this building would never pay for itself because there is not enough leftover natural gas released into the air to justify building such a building. However, the Qataris are so committed to protecting the environment that they were willing to forego profitability. That impressed me.

The last stop of our trip was one of the most interesting. We visited Baladna, the Qatari dairy farm. When the blockade began in 2017, Qatar lost all trade with Saudi Arabia, including their milk supply, which was a staple of normal life. Rather than fold under the pressure, the Qataris decided to build a dairy farm. They flew in cows from all over the world and in less than a year, they had built a thriving dairy farm, which was no small feat. I can say without exaggeration that the milk that I had at Baladna was the best milk I ever tasted in my life. The courage and perseverance it took to decide to generate their own milk in the face of such a struggle was awe-inspiring for me. We finished the day with one last dinner full of

music and laughter.

When I think about my trip to Qatar, I concentrate on many things. I witnessed genuine faith in the government there. Everywhere we went there were pictures of the Emir's face on skyscrapers, car bumpers, clothing, even people's phone backgrounds. To Americans, this looks like a telltale sign of a dictatorship. However, the Qatari people seem to have a lot of trust in their government which does appear to be interested in the wellbeing and happiness of their citizens. I often think about how well laughter and kindness translates across cultural barriers. Even when we didn't always understand each other, we all appreciated humor. A well-timed joke could light up the room and connect us as if we were old friends. Constant hospitality was demonstrated: tea and coffee served during meetings, long dinners where we were constantly given new food to try. The hospitality was endless.

I believe that this trip taught me many things, but the one thing that I always come back to is the blockade. I have been blessed to have Converse, to have amazing friends, family and advisors. I have had so many wonderful opportunities that I cannot possibly be thankful enough for. But the endurance of the Qatari people in the face of a blockade inspired me like few other things. I learned that we are always stronger than we think we are, we can always last longer than we think and when all of our friends turn their backs on us, we can always produce our own milk.

Qatar: "If you build it, they will come."

by Danny Morgan

Actor Kevin Costner's iconic 1989 film *Field of Dreams* about an Iowa corn farmer and baseball fan who heard ethereal voices encouraging him to build a baseball stadium among his cornfields, provided the now famous but often misquoted phrase, "If you build it, he [they] will come." The small, Middle-eastern country of Qatar, largely unfamiliar to most of the world, is presently in the process of building its own "Field of Dreams." Unlike the fictional field of dreams that brought long-dead athletes and a stream of imaginary fans to its stadium, Qatar is in the process of building seven new stadiums and renovating an eighth as it prepares to host the world's best soccer athletes and more than a million fans. All of these stadiums are projected to be completed nearly two years before the first match is played. A project of this magnitude, along with the corresponding infrastructure construction and the housing and hotel space needed to accommodate the swarms of athletes and fans, would be a formidable task for any country and usually is assigned to much larger and well-known countries. This tiny Middle-Eastern country, undaunted by the magnitude of the quest, began its mission nearly a decade ago by winning the bid in 2010 to host the games some twelve years later.

This past November I was afforded an opportunity to participate in a study-visit to Qatar as a faculty advisor for Converse Col-



Danny with the head of Al Shura

lege's Model Arab League team. Along with Errin Baylis, a student team member from Converse College, we joined a delegation of faculty and students from several colleges and universities across the United States. Our delegation arrived in Qatar for a one week study-visit as guests of the country of Qatar. During our visit, we were afforded high-level briefings from economic, cultural, political, educational, and industrial leaders. In addition to briefings from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Qatar Financial Center, we visited Qatar's Education City, Religious City, and the Industrial City. We

were afforded a visit to Al Udeid Air Base and a briefing from the brigadier general in charge of the base. A highlight of this visit was a strictly guarded visit to see the B1B Bombers that are called upon for airstrikes on hotspots throughout the Middle-East. We also visited the headquarters of Al Jazeera where, along with a tour and briefing on the mission of this simultaneously reviled and revered news agency, we were able to watch a live news broadcast. As a thorn in the side to the more conservative nations in the Arab world, it became a major point of contention and the demand for it to be shut down was a primary

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goal of the current political and diplomatic embargo against Qatar orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and joined by the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. All of these briefings and tours provided us with up-close views facilitated by Qatari policy-makers, specialists, and academics that gave us enhanced understanding of Qatari society, culture, economy and government. Of particular note, my personal impression of many of the key figures in the Qatari gov-

ernment, military, and economic community, in regards to their feelings about their Arab brothers from the countries involved in the economic and diplomatic embargo, was not so much anger and resentment, rather more so it was dismay and a sense of mourning that their neighbors and brothers would move against them in this way. Along with this, I could sense a firm resolve, on a level equal to the patriotism of the United States post 9/11, that this

country would stand against any threat and overcome any effort to marginalize Qatar.

Amidst multiple meetings and briefings, our delegation was also divided into several teams and tasked with preparing a briefing paper on various aspects of Qatari culture, political positions, and diplomatic relations. Although our time in Qatar was heavily tasked with these briefings and academic assignments, we definitely had opportunities for fun and adventure. Along with several visits to the Souq Waqif, where I purchased enough silk scarves to seemingly supply all of my Christmas gift requirements for several years to come, we were extremely well-fed every evening. Every evening meal (and many lunches) provided samplings of numerous local and regional dishes that were completely foreign to me, but unquestionably delicious. Just thinking back on all of those meals is making me salivate. One of these meals included entertainment from a dancer in a costume made of lights. The music and lights of his costume accompanied his dance and created a visual/auditory sensory spectacle as he spun continuously about the room for more than five full minutes. Watching him perform was dazzling; and dizzying! We also went on an adventure that was a first for me. I saw our schedule included something called "sand dunning." Possibly being overly influenced in the pronunciation by the name of my mentor and benefactor, Dr. Joe Dunn, I mistakenly pronounced it as it appeared to be spelled. The



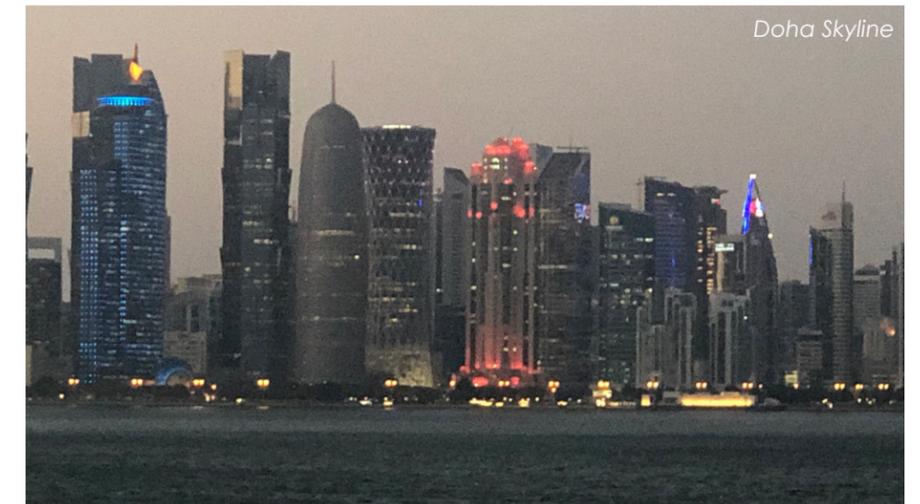
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proper pronunciation was sand "dune-ing". Regardless of pronunciation, it was an adrenaline pumping experience and topped off with a visit to a "Beduin-like" desert camp where we enjoyed time by the campfire under the stars, a brief splash in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, and camel rides for the more adventurous. While we were "all-business" during the day, these evening and night adventures allowed us to develop a more rounded vision of what Qatar is like from a face-value perspective as well as from a more subcutaneous level.

I frequently hear the words – "once-in-a-lifetime" – preceding descriptions of various travels and adventures in which people engage. I commonly try to avoid using such a prefix before discussing the many adventures that I have embarked upon throughout my life; primarily, because I would like to think that I may have the opportunity to redo many of my past escapades at some point in the future. That being said, short of being involved in another study visit arranged through the National Council on U.S. Arab Relations, I think my visit to Qatar this past November was truly a "once-in-a-lifetime" trip!

Buford "Danny" Morgan is an adjunct professor at Spartanburg Methodist College and Converse College among other places. He founded high school Model Arab League delegations at the Scholars Academy at the University of South Carolina Upstate and Broome High School.

photo on right: Typical meal



Doha Skyline



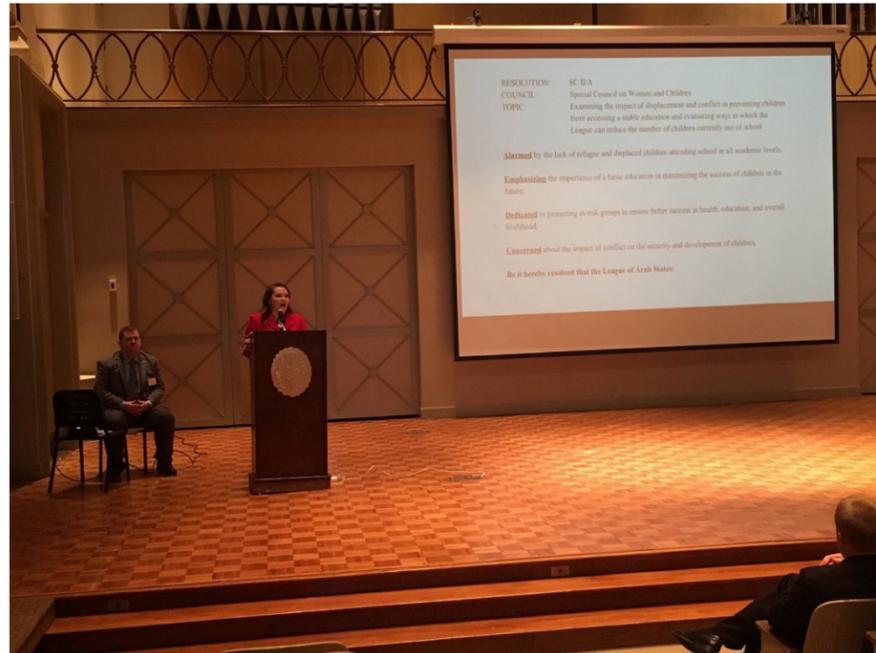
Converse Continues Tradition at Southeast Model Arab League



At the Southeast Regional Model Arab League, held March 15-17, 2019 at Converse College, the Converse delegation, representing the United Arab Emirates, took the Outstanding Delegation Award. Roanoke College was named Distinguished Delegation and Georgia State University took third place honors as Superior Delegation. The Converse Yemen delegation finished fourth.

Alexis Turner (Converse) served as Secretary-General assisted by Assistant Secretary General Daniel Crum (Kennesaw State University). The quality of the chairs of the council was so uniformly strong that the faculty had great difficulty in selecting a best chair. They selected three individuals for recognition: Erin Bradley (Converse), Errin Baylis (Converse), and Sawsan Selim (Georgia State University).

Converse Model Arab League alum, Dr. Holly A. Jordan ('06),



newly appointed New Business Development Manager for the American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) gave a powerful keynote presentation that focused on how her Model Arab League

experience have led to her career. Several individuals who had participated on recent National Council study-travel trips to the region spoke briefly about their experiences.

A Note on the National Model



For the first time in my 32 years in Model Arab League, I was not able to accompany my delegation to the National Model Arab League in Washington, DC. Spinal surgery made this impossible. However, my good friend and colleague Dr. Mirko Hall stepped in for me, and Dr. Holly Jordan ('06), who has long experience in MAL, first as a Converse undergraduate, later with her own delegations at other institutions, and now working in Washington, assisted.

In my absence the delegation continued their annual winning ways. With a top award in every one of the eight councils plus two awards in the Arab Court of Justice, Converse was named Overall Outstanding Delegation at the event on the Georgetown University campus.

Emily Holbert served as Secretary General, and Converse chaired five of the nine venues. Errin Baylis was selected as Outstanding Chair and Erin Bradley was named Distinguished Chair. Sophomores Kathryn Frizzell and Courtney Dziewior were selected to be chairs for next year's Model, and sophomore Kennedy Anderson will serve as Assistant Secretary General.

As it turned out, I was not entirely absent. Years ago, as a joke my students made a life size cardboard cutout of me. In other absences at other events, including student's weddings, this alter ego has appeared, much to my embarrassment. Holly Jordan, the creator and keeper of this artifact, brought it with her to the conference. To my chagrin, it appeared in the conference office and in several pictures. One can only hope that it was inspirational.

I missed the annual pilgrimage to DC greatly and cannot wait to be back with the delegation next year. The cutout cannot substitute forever, especially since the figure never gets older. That cannot be said for the individual that it represents.

Joe P. Dunn

LEARNING RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Mohammed Al Samawi, *The Fox Hunt: A Refugee's Memoir of Coming to America*

Reviewed by Dr. Joe P. Dunn

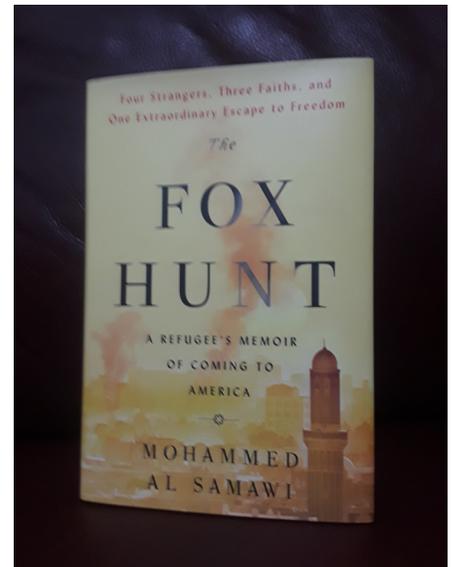
Interfaith dialogue is an important aspect of the contemporary academic scene. Particularly where I teach where one particular conservative Christian denomination is most present, large numbers of my students have had limited, if any, exposure to other manifestations of the Christian faith, much less other religious expressions. The new memoir *The Fox Hunt* has served well in interfaith dialogue.

Mohammed Al Samawi was born and raised in Sana, Yemen to middle-class, devoted Zaida Shia Muslim parents. He suffered from a physical handicap from birth which restricted his mobility and hindered capacity to perform certain traditional practices of the faith and culture. Although his parents were moderate in the inter-Muslim differences between Shia's and Sunni's, they were adamant about the evils of Jews and Christians. Like most Yemenis, Mohammed grew up with no question about the truths that he had been taught.

A budding intellectual with a desire to understand the larger world beyond his confines, Mohammad sought to perfect his English. This led him

to involvement with a Canadian Christian teacher whom Mohammad tried to bring to the true faith. However, in this process he was introduced to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and it rendered great consternation. The memoir is an absorbing account of the trauma of confronting other perspectives that flew in the face of all that he knew and the inner conflict that it brought to his family. Although Mohammad never abandoned his faith, he sought to understand Judaism and Christianity. This led him to seek social media and ultimately live interactions with Jews and Christians that set him on the road to interfaith understanding and tolerance, including involvement in international organizations.

This journey is intermixed with the story of the Yemeni civil war in which Mohammed was caught. My students were able to relate to the complexity of this turmoil from reading his personal account. Eventually, Mohammad fled Sana to escape the Houthi. But in Sunni Aden, he found himself in even graver danger. Al Qaeda had no tolerance for Shias and none for individuals associated with Jews and Christians. As



a northerner whose appearance, accent, and name clearly established his identity, Mohammad was a doomed individual if he could not escape the growing civil war. The last third of the book is the adventure story of Mohammad's efforts to get out of Aden and the country orchestrated by the superhuman efforts of his international Jewish and Christian friends. Finally, making his way to the United States, he continues to work today with NGO's in peace and religious tolerance activity.

My students have found the book insightful and inspirational. It resonates for them in their own lives. I understand that plans exist to make the book into a movie. That practice often results in a disappointing product, so we will wait to see. But I highly recommend this book for students and the general public.