Model Arab League Student Leaders Visit Saudi Arabia

The National Council, in partnership with the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), escorted a delegation of nine Model Arab League students on a cultural immersion study visit to Saudi Arabia, June 6-16, 2010. The visit provided the young American leaders a hands-on experience in the Arab world that few others their age have had.

In the 2009-2010 academic year, nearly 28,000 Saudi Arabian students were enrolled in American universities across the United States, but only a handful of American students were able to experience Saudi Arabia first-hand. To help bridge this "understanding gap," the National Council partnered with SACM and MOHE to provide a firsthand educational experience in Saudi Arabia for a select group of American students who exhibited exceptionally strong leadership skills in the Council's Model Arab League student leadership development program. The visit included meetings with Saudi Arabian educators, businessmen, and civil society leaders in addition to American diplomats and visits to sites of historical and cultural interest.

The study visit's participants were selected from applicants with outstanding records of professionalism, research, debate, and leadership at a Model Arab League conference in 2010. Nine students were chosen from as many universities involved in the Council's Model Arab Leagues, producing a delegation of talented young emerging American leaders from institutions coast to coast. The delegation members were comprised of students with a minimum of two semesters remaining before completion of their degree, which ensures they will be able to share what they learned in and about Saudi Arabia with their classmates, professors, and members of their local civic, business, and professional associations.

The program began with a pre-departure orientation session in the National Council's Washington, DC office. The student delegates were briefed by Council President and CEO Dr. John Duke Anthony; U.S. Department of State Office of Arabian Peninsula Affairs Deputy Director Linda Stuart Specht, Saudi Arabian Embassy Information Office Director Nail Al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabian Defense Attache Brigadier General Amin Shaker, and Saudi Arabian Embassy Cultural and Social Affairs Mission Director Dr. Mody Al-Khalaf. The delegation also attended a reception and art exhibition in honor of 2010 Saudi Arabian university student graduates.
The Model Arab League student delegation visits the Embassy of Saudi Arabia during their pre-departure orientation program in Washington, DC.

In Riyadh, delegation members visit Masmak Fort, one of modern Saudi Arabia’s most important national landmarks.

The delegation meets for discussions with H.E. Hussein Al-Athel and other leaders of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Delegation members meet to discuss issues of shared interests with Saudi Arabian students in Riyadh.

The delegation touring research facilities at the King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals.

The Model Arab League delegation meets with H.E. Dr. Abdulrahman H. Al-Saeed, Advisor to The Royal Court of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Director of the Office of Special Projects for HRH Abdallah Bin ‘Abdalaziz Al Sa’ud, Custodian of the Two Holy Places and King of Saudi Arabia.
The delegation began their study visit to Saudi Arabia in Riyadh, the capital. The students visited King Saud University, the offices of the Al-Zamil Group, the King Abdul Aziz Historical Center, Saudi-Fransi Bank, the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research, the U.S. Embassy, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation. Among the many individuals the delegation met with in Riyadh were HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal; Dr. Abdulrahman Alsaeed; Dr. Abdul Rahman Al-Zamil, Dr. Salwa Al-Hazza, HE Hussein Al-Athel, Ms. Muna Abusulayman, Economist Dr. John Sfandiakis, and American embassy officials as well as American corporate representatives.

After several days in Riyadh, the delegation visited the Eastern Province, center of the world's largest producer and exporter of oil. There they met with diplomats at the U.S. Consulate, visited the King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals, toured facilities and received a briefing at Saudi Aramco, and visited the Prince Sultan Center for Science and Technology along with Jubail Industrial City. The delegation concluded their study visit in Jeddah, on Saudi Arabia's western coast adjacent to the Red Sea. In Jeddah the delegation visited Queen Effat University for Women, King Abdul Aziz University, and King Abdullah University for Science and Technology.

Since returning from their visit, the students have been sharing the experience in their communities through articles in local and school publications, and presentations to various school and community groups. Such educational outreach and follow-up has a multiplier effect on the knowledge and understanding gained by the Model Arab League alumni during their time in Saudi Arabia.

Through the wide range of individuals and institutions visited, the students were provided a unique view of Saudi Arabian society. Northeastern University student Matthew Cournoyer remarked, "I found all of the Saudi Arabians we met to be warm, hospitable, and willing to engage in discussions about complex issues even where we may disagree. The country is so frequently stereotyped in a negative fashion by Western media that important nuances of its society are unfortunately neglected. The experience helped show me why these stereotypes are unfair and narrow-minded." Myles Murphy, from the University of San Francisco, noted that although he had "studied the Middle East for years, there is simply no substitute for engaging with people face-to-face."