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My First Travel Experience was to Saudi Arabia

by Madison Skoog

This past December, I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity--a fully-funded trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under the Gateway KSA Program sponsored by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal. I had never traveled outside the country, indeed never been on an airplane.

Beyond a bit overwhelming, the experience was life changing.

As a major in history and politics, my professors and peers, including a large number of international students, provided many different world views. After transferring from another local institution,



Elephant Rock

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Group

in my first semester at Converse University I developed a keen interest in human rights. Through classes and participation in Model Arab League, my interest centered on the Middle East. I studied the history and politics of multiple countries within the MENA region and my desire to travel to the region grew as I learned about the intricate web of political, cultural, and regional relationships and issues in the region. From my Model Arab League experience; valuable internship with the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) during the summer of 2024; Model League sponsor Dr. Joe Dunn's nomination; and his and my other adviser Dr. Allison Vick's strong recommendations, I was selected as one of ten students from around the world (including from programs such as that of Stanford and University of California-Berkley to members of the Carnegie Endowment Center for International Peace) to the

Gateway KSA Program.

Throughout the program, I was introduced to beautiful historical areas that make one understand just how ancient and long-standing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is as well as controversial global topics presented through Saudi's perspective, and a revolutionary economic development plan. The views below are that of the government program which may or may not represent the breadth of people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. But clearly the monarchy intends to bring Saudi Arabia into the mainstream of international travel and business. I was able to discuss the Kingdom's foreign relations and foreign policy towards specific events, such as Ukraine and Gaza. While we were asked by the program not to mention specific individuals during this 'off-the-record' panel session, I am free to discuss the things I learned about Saudi Arabia's view of its role in the world, which the

spokesmen described as a country of 'forceful good' in the complex and interactive role that KSA plays in the world today.

The Saudis described their foreign policy as attempting to prevent regional conflict and ensure a shift away from interdependence. An example is Saudi's perceived role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict-attempting to maintain a neutral image while advocating and pushing for peace. We were informed that KSA had a better relationship with Ukraine prior to the outbreak of war as the country traded more with Ukraine in terms of goods than it did with Russia, but this has changed as Russia has sought for more oil from the Kingdom. KSA has played a role of negotiator between these two countries, including hosting meetings to discuss how the conflict could end. The Saudi's proclaimed that there is no military solution, and the war must be ended peacefully. They stated that Russian victory cannot be accepted, but a complete Russian defeat is just as dangerous as it ensures an ongoing threat to international stability. It seems that KSA hopes to continue working with the United States in this sphere, speaking about how it is already in contact with the incoming Trump administration and that both parties share the similar goal of peace.

Central to all our discussions was the Kingdom's Vision 2030. I had done previous research on this topic, but it was extremely interesting to hear from an individual working on the development of the Vision. I was particularly interested in business trends and

the Financial Sector Development Program that I had learned about beforehand but wanted to understand in greater detail. We received considerable information regarding these two topics, discussing the role of financial literacy for youth, the 'buy now, pay later' trend that has become increasingly prevalent, and the declining unemployment rate. The 'buy now, pay later' trend was interesting to me because it was related to financial literacy for youth, an increasing issue in Saudi's economy as many of its youth do not understand finance or the banking system. I was also interested in the so-called 'economic cities', which receive government funding and craft their own policies and ideas in somewhat separate economies owned and run by businesses and companies. One city I was particularly impressed with was King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), which lies on the coast of the Red Sea with the goal to one day become a hub for international trade. Although with a record of many incredible achievements, many outside the city consider KAEC a failed project as it has not fulfilled its goals/projects many times. However, it has been able to remain afloat through government funding.

The most interesting of all of the information and sights I was able to see were those in ALula. ALula is a beautiful desert area in the center of Saudi Arabia, which contains a vast amount of history and culture. I was able to see temples that were thousands of years old, the ruins of settlements long before the creation of Christianity or Islam, and the untouched

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beauty of ancient Saudi culture. The different blends of cultures and how these cultures have remained throughout hundreds of years of change was stunning.

But the greatest value of the experience was the relationships I made with my fellow travelers in Saudi Arabia. The opportunity to experience a totally new environment with people from such a diverse array of backgrounds allowed me to forge invaluable relationships that I won't forget. We all learned and grew together in no small part due to our contact with the people of the Kingdom. Students, professors, academics, and ordinary people on the streets shared personal insights that be-

came part of the mosaic of the Saudi experience.

I end with the admonition for others to join Model League of Arab States and seek these unique experiences. Of all the great memories of my Converse undergraduate education, Model Arab League remains one of my favorites due to the people I have been able to meet and opportunities I have been able to participate in. I hope that it is the launching platform for a career into the field of policy creation for international human rights. I thank Gateway KSA and the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations for the opportunity, as well as my mentors at Converse University.



Sunset in Desert

Studying AI in the UAE

by Jerome Harris



As a four-year member of Model Arab League and this year as the head delegate, I had the honor to be selected in a competitive process as one of eight people for a program sponsored by Amideast and the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations to study Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the United Arab Emirates. I spent a week in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in January.

UAE's has a rich history with AI with 13% of its booming economy attributed to this new technology, and the program addressed the world-wide future of this innovation. During our week, I participated in roundtable discussions focusing on the ethical uses of AI. Two of the companies that we visited were M42, a health care delivery and management organization, and Microsoft, which is integrating AI into new products development.

We met with M42 in Abu Dha-

bi where the company focused on four key principles: interpretability, model transparency, ethical risk management, and bias mitigation. The company is very interested in time management and alleviating some of the recording burden currently on doctors and healthcare practitioners. Our discussion turned to questions of legal liability, particularly where AI plays a significant role in clinical decision making. Could or should companies assume liability when things do not turn out as desired. The representatives were reluctant to delve very deeply into these ramifications of errors or misinformation. Nevertheless, M42 demonstrated a commitment to forward-thinking approach to preventing illness while maintaining ethical standards in the rapidly evolving landscape of AI in healthcare.

During our visit to Microsoft, I had the opportunity to engage

in a thought-provoking discussion with some of the company's most ambitious AI professionals. The conversation began with my inquiry into common misconceptions surrounding AI usage, which led to a deeper dialogue about the role of youth in advancing research within this field. It was fascinating to hear their perspectives, particularly on the importance of integrating young minds into the development process. Again the questions of ethical use of AI were central.

Later, we explored the concept of Microsoft's "co-pilot" feature, discussing its practical applications in social settings such as Google Meet and Zoom while maintaining Microsoft's unique interface. This part of the discussion offered a glimpse into how AI could seamlessly integrate into everyday interactions, reinforcing its potential to enhance productivity and communication. Overall, the experience provided valuable insights into Microsoft's vision for the future of AI and its broader implications.

Throughout the week, my conversations with these companies spanned a wide range of topics from how AI can be applied in industries like transportation, healthcare, and hiring processes to discussions about ethical considerations and challenges. Through all the conversations, it became clear that AI is still a very new and young technology with endless capabilities and questions.



Cultural and Historical Experiences

While in the UAE, we enjoyed the opportunity to experience the country's rich culture and history. I visited many iconic landmarks in Dubai, including the Burj Khalifa, the Museum of the Future, and the Dubai Frame. In Abu Dhabi, I was awestruck by the magnificent Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. Wherever I went in the UAE, it felt like everything was the best, the biggest, or the tallest. I was constantly starstruck, seeing these landmarks in person that I had read about.

As example, the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, the largest in the UAE, is a testament to the nation's rich culture and ideals. The journey to the mosque begins in a mall, highlighting the UAE's unique blend of tradition and modernity. As visitors approach, the atmosphere becomes noticeably more formal, with strict rules in place

before entering the mosque itself. The irony is that the strict regulations are counterposed against the mosque's primary role as a tourist attraction rather than an active place of worship. Interestingly, unlike most traditional mosques, men and women enter and move through the building together, rather than being separated into distinct areas. The mosque's interior is unbelievably beautiful, captivating visitors at every turn. The presence of Sheikh Zayed's burial site on the grounds adds a profound sense of reverence and historical significance to the experience.

Reflections

Although the trip was short, every moment was filled with activities or learning experiences that opened the door for future conversations about the U.S.-Arab relations and the integration of technology.

Going to the UAE was truly one of the best experiences and most educational opportunities that I have had. I'm extremely grateful for the people that I met on the trip as it gave sort of a camaraderie to my learning experience that I don't think I would have gotten with any other group of people. Overall, it was truly an exciting thrilling opportunity that has shaped the way that I view technology today.



Model Arab League Shaped My Career

by Katie Hutchison



Starting a career in social work by working with sexually trafficked young women was not exactly what I had envisioned for myself during my years at Converse College. I distinctly remember a Spring day in 2007, wearing a purple suit and looking at a bulletin board in Carmichael Hall at Converse College, admiring the various newsletters, pictures, and accolades of students from the Politics and History Department. I wondered if 17-year-old homeschooled me could possibly fit in here. I was waiting to meet Dr. Joe Dunn for an interview at an accepted student scholarship competition day. Little did I know that day would propel me into my life's trajectory. I quickly learned Dr. Dunn had opinions—very strong opinions—and he made it very clear that he wanted me to attend Converse, and that he had plans for me on the debate team.

It fascinated me to hear the lore of the fierce women of the Model Arab League team (MAL) who had defeated Harvard. I aspired to join the ranks of this legacy. In August that year, I moved into Converse as a freshman from Pickens, SC. I was a quiet girl, but I knew that I had more within me; I just did not quite know my full potential at that point. Bright-eyed and eager to learn, I could not wait to take advantage of all that Converse had to offer.

I was certain that I was going to be a lawyer, so I was very enthusiastic about double majoring in Politics and History and of course, I tried out for and joined the MAL team. I still remember the shrieks of excitement in my dorm hall when several of us girls who had tried out for the team received our acceptance emails. I was very much in awe of the three head delegates of the team

who took us under their wings, mentored us, and taught us how to fill a 3-inch binder with our research on the respective countries we were representing. They impressed us underclassmen that this was a team with credibly high standards and we had big shoes to fill as we rose up in the ranks.

My eyes were opened to learn about cultures so different from my own. I started out as a delegate on various committees and in my sophomore year, I discovered that I had an interest in chairing committees. I also thrived in the Arab Court of Justice. Participating in MAL required full dedication for four years, so we took this commitment seriously. Model Arab League was our world and we loved it. We spent countless hours researching, preparing for the next conference, and religiously engaging in debate practice every Sunday evening. By senior year, I served as a head delegate and I think Dr. Dunn knew that I needed this to challenge me in my own personal development.

One of my favorite memories from my four years on the team was traveling to the Middle East with my co-head delegates our senior year to work with high schoolers in Jordan, facilitating a Model Arab League conference. I never dreamed I would be traveling to the Middle East where we toured Roman ruins, witnessed a protest during the Arab Spring, floated in the Dead Sea, explored the ancient stone city of Petra,

and stayed in a seaside resort at Aqaba by the Red Sea. We taught the students how to deepen their research, sharpen their debate skills, and refine their understanding of parliamentary procedure in chairing. This was my first international trip, and certainly not one that I will ever forget. It was an incredible experience to have the privilege to visit a country in the Middle East that you had studied and represented in MAL.

My initial dreams of attending law school fell to the wayside my senior year when I struggled with accepting the high price tag of law school and so I briefly wrestled with an unclear vision for my future beyond my beloved Converse campus. I was taking one of Dr. Dunn's most popular classes my senior year, Women in Africa and Asia, a course that involved prolific reading, writing, and class discussions. I remember beginning to gain a glimmer of light for a new dream and vision for my future. Human trafficking and social justice were hot topics in the course, and I realized that I was very interested in pursuing some type of career along these lines. I had no idea how to actualize this at the time, so after graduating from Converse in May 2011, I moved to Las Vegas to attend a mission's program with a focus on human trafficking.

Through living in Las Vegas and then traveling to Mumbai, India and Katmandu and Chitwan, Nepal, I gained a plethora of experience and education in human trafficking on both domestic and international platforms. I quickly realized I wanted to work in the

aftercare facet of human trafficking, so after completing the program, I moved to Asheville, NC, to become involved with an after-care safe home for adolescent girls who had been trafficked. I witnessed the intersections of trauma, addiction, and poverty, and I began learning how policy shapes systems in this field. I rapidly advanced from volunteer to intern to staff within 4 months, so I knew that I was meant to be involved in this agency. This was my first "real" job post-college and this is when I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was meant to pursue a career in social work.

In the past fourteen years since graduating from Converse, I have had quite an interesting journey in social work and behavioral health. After working in the aftercare safe home, I attended Western Carolina University for my Master of Social Work degree (MSW) with a

focus in addictions, then conducted crisis assessments at a behavioral health urgent care, worked with birth mothers in an adoption and foster care agency, and provided mental health services in community healthcare clinics. I am currently working in a counseling practice in Asheville, NC, providing outpatient therapy as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Licensed Clinical Addictions Specialist (LCAS.) Although I am not directly working in the public policy field, I cannot overemphasize the impact my professors, particularly Dr. Dunn and Dr. Woodfin, and the impact the MAL experience had in shaping my life's path.

So many lessons from my time on the Model Arab League team transferred into my career in social work. I credit MAL for teaching me about how policy shapes systems and cultures, be-





Nepal Orphanage

cause public policy affects every part of my jobs past and present, including issues such as incarceration, substance use, racism, sex work, poverty, and mental health. I learned how to exude confidence and poise (even if I had to fake it at times!) in MAL and I have had to channel this same demeanor in many crisis situations. It takes a savvy ability to read people during assessments, size up a room quickly, to know how to connect with others, and collaborate with other professionals, all of which I developed expertise in through Model Programs. I found my voice through chairing committees in MAL conferences; I had frequently struggled with confidence in speaking up quickly as a debater and so chairing offered me the opportunity to learn how to

facilitate constructive MAL committees with assertive boldness. These experiences ultimately contributed to drawing the blueprint for my life.

I chose to specialize in working with young women because I witnessed how the late teen/early twenty ages are so formative for identity development and I cannot help but wonder how much the mentorship from Dr. Dunn imprinted this same desire in me to invest in working with young women. There is such power in spoken words, in calling forth someone's potential, and walking with them, even if just a few steps, along their journey of discovering their identity and living a life full of purpose. Dr. Dunn cultivated a powerhouse of strong female leaders in MAL and I can

only hope to continue to be a part of the process of affecting positive change in the lives of young women.

I credit the lasting impact of Model Programs in cultivating my confidence, finding my voice, and giving me the leadership skills I needed for the professional world after college. It's been 18 years since I first stepped foot onto Converse and I find it mind-boggling to realize the impact from the chain reaction of my involvement in MAL. I have now worked with hundreds of clients, attempting to facilitate positive change in their lives, and this first started with one girl in Spartanburg, SC at Converse. I am forever grateful for Dr. Dunn's guiding presence and for my years on the Converse Model Arab League team.

Converse Wins Southeast Model Arab League

At the Southeast Model Arab League (SERMAL) conference, held March 14-16, 2025, at Converse University, schools from North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, and Arkansas competed. In the final tallies, Converse won both the Outstanding Delegation awards for its teams representing the UAE and Oman. In order, Georgia State University (Algeria) and Brenau University (Iraq) were designated Distinguished delegations, and Spartanburg Community College (Lebanon), Citadel (Palestine), and Mercer University (Comoros)

were Honorable Mention.

The Secretary-General was Jerome Harris and the council chairs were Jack Stokes and Bex Little (University of Arkansas-Little Rock), Noor Al-Baghdadi (Georgia State), and Steven Greer, Kimberlain Williams, Lynn Hanchon, Gretchen Berry, and Chelsea Palotta, all from Converse. Jack Stokes and Steven Greer were named the best chairs, and Chelsea Palotta was named distinguished chair as the runner up.

Madison Skoog and Jerome Harris each spoke briefly on their recent trips (see previous articles),

Madison on a Gateway KSA sponsored trip to Saudi Arabia and Jerome Harris, to Dubai to study A.I. in the region, sponsored by Amid-east. Dr. Holly Jordan from American Near East Relief Agency (ANERA), the keynote speaker, in a powerful presentation, addressed the present conditions in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon.

Converse, Georgia State, Mercer, University of Arkansas Little Rock, and Spartanburg Community College will move on to the National University Model, April 3-6, in Washington, DC.

SERMAL both winning delegations



National Model Arab League

Delegation Showing Purple at the U.S. Capitol Building



NUMAL Opening Ceremony in Capitol Visitors Center

The National Model Arab League conference was held, April 3-5, 2025, at George Mason University Madison Square campus in Arlington, VA. The Opening ceremony was held at the beautiful U.S. Congress Visitors Center. The keynote Speakers were H.E. Ambassador Sabri Boukadoum, Ambassador of Algeria to the United States and former permanent representative to the UN and Mr. Tom Staal, retired USAID Counselor and former USAID Mission Director in Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Iraq.

The two days of conference debates were filled with debate --- to give only a small sample of topics on such matters as the plight of Palestinians, women's issues, human rights concerns, and environmental impacts as students attempted to gain consensus to formulate resolutions for the conference final communique.

At the Summit, held at the conference hotel, the Westin at Arlington, the keynote speaker was Ambassador Greta Holtz, president and CEO of AMID-EAST, and former ambassador to Oman.

At the awards ceremony the outstanding delegations went to Converse University (Oman) and Northeastern University (Qatar) and the distinguished delegations to the University of Cincinnati (Bahrain) and the University of Wyoming (Palestine).

Kimberlain Williams of Converse University was selected to be the Secretary-General for the 2026 model. Also from Converse, Lynn Hanchon was named as an assistant secretary general, Kaylee Warner was selected to chair the Political Council and Allie Manning, only a freshman, was chosen as the Social Council chair.

The 2026 National Model will be March 26-29 again in Arlington.



NUMAL Oman Outstanding Delegation



Arab Court of Justice at NUMAL



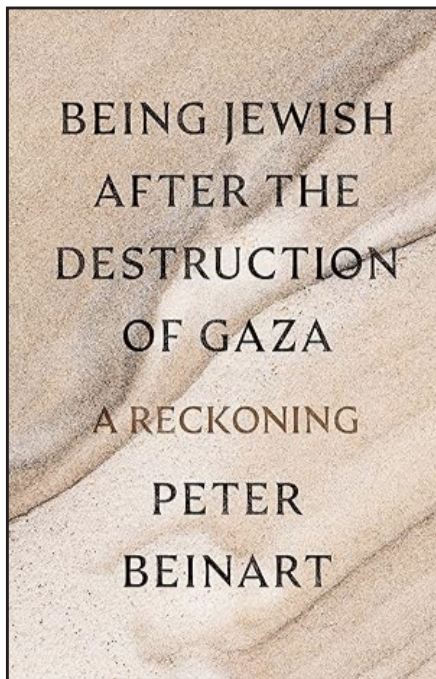
Heads of State Council at NUMAL

LEARNING RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning

By Peter Beinart

Reviewed by Dr. Joe P. Dunn, Charles A. Dana Professor of History & Politics, Converse University



Peter Beinart is a professor of journalism and political science at the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City of University of New York, an opinion writer at the *New York Times*, MSNBC political commentator, and non-resident fellow at the Foundation for Middle East Peace. He is also an observant conservative Orthodox Jew which gives particular interest to this book that addresses the anguish of Israel's war on Gaza. This is not Beinart's first warning about and to the state of Israel, but in the present circumstance it is particularly poignant.

In sum, Beinart argues that

what Israel is doing is very wrong, an affront to Judaism's historical and moral role in the world. Growing up in South Africa, he experienced apartheid and its ultimate end. When he applies the term to Israel's dominion over the Palestinian people, it is a condemnation rendered from both his faith and his practical experience.

The core argument is that for many Jews, the submission to God and pursuit of righteousness has been replaced by the worship of the state of Israel. In the early 1960s, German-Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt warned of the danger of Zionist nationalism: "The greatness of this people was once that it believed in God. And now this people believes only in itself?" As Beinart explains, against all the world's criticism of its actions, Netanyahu proudly claims that the Jewish state of Israel is exempt from all worldly standards. Beinart invokes the Prophet Ezekiel who in the sixth century BCE proclaimed to the Israelites that they can committed idolatry and abominations that would invite God's wrath. Beinart remarks that Ezekiel could have been speaking about the War in Gaza.

Beinart expounds that peace can never be achieved until the Palestinians have their own sov-

ereignty which will militate against those who gain support for violence against Israel. He invokes numerous previous historical circumstances that with sovereignty and self-rule, peace has been achieved. But Netanyahu, a product of the Vladimir Jabotinsky school of uncompromising Jewish supremacy, will never acquiesce to full Palestinian sovereignty. He is as much an exponent of the call "from the river to the sea" for Jews as Hamas is for Palestinians. According to Beinart, the nonacceptance of a Palestinian state means that Israeli will remain an apartheid state in which a minority of Jews rules over a colonized majority of Palestinian people with second class rights—both Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel and those in the West Bank and Gaza.

Beinart spares no words in condemning Netanyahu, Trump, and other world demagogues such as Putin, Xi Jinping, Iran's theocrats, and he is equally dismissive of the corrupt, failed anachronistic leadership of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority.

Obviously, this is a controversial book, which will be attacked from many sides. But is a very insightful and though provoking treatise that is highly recommended.