

# Carolinas Committee on U.S.–Arab Relations

## NEWSLINES

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## A Long Distance Runner on a Long Distance Trip

*by Jaxon Wright*

I am a long-distance runner. It is a major part of my self-definition. This trip was a far distant experience in miles and understandings that required the discipline and will power to gain the most from a unique opportunity.

This December I was honored to be selected by Gateway KSA for an expense-paid trip to the Kingdom

of Saudi Arabia, a program privately funded by HRH Turki bin Salman, a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family and former ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom. The purpose is to showcase to young opinion-makers from around the world the dramatic changes transpiring in Saudi Arabia. This was my



*KSA Group*

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first international travel and as a rather insolated Southerner, the experience was enlightening. There is much that I could discuss but I will focus on my comparisons between my own upbringing and Saudi culture and society.

Several students from my institution have enjoyed this opportunity over the years, but my personal story may be different. I was not the normative type usually selected for this trip. As a child I was diagnosed as autistic and I was told that I probably would not be competent enough to be able to graduate from high school. Most of my life has been trying to catch up from my early years' rejections and to prove myself. I was blessed with the ability to run and that singular focus got me through high school. It earned me a college track scholarship and now I will graduate and plan to go on to graduate school. It has been a long race, and this trip was an important step in my continuing development.

As for the trip, nine of us met for the first time on December 7 in the capital city of Riyadh, and we were a diverse group. Together we visited three cities—Riyadh, Al Ula, and Jeddah, each reflecting very different aspects of Saudi life and society. Early in the trip we met Prince Turki at a dinner at which he shared his experiences as a diplomat. From that conversation on, I saw many of my previous assumptions challenged and I realized that we had more in common than I had believed. In Riyadh we visited several government ministries, including the Ministry of Culture and KAPSARC, where we learned how Saudi policymakers approach issues such as archaeology, environmental sustainability, and economic planning. We also participated in panel discussions at an Islamic studies institute, where we gained insight into how Saudi Arabia balances modernization with cultural preservation.

One of the most striking visits was to Diriyah, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Seeing how Saudi Arabia honors its historical origins while also developing the area economically demonstrated how seriously the Kingdom takes its past while planning for the future. We also visited King Faisal University, where I observed that Saudi students share the same priorities as college students everywhere: education, employment, and upward mobility. After our time in Riyadh, we traveled to Al Ula, where we experienced a completely different side of Saudi Arabia. Al Ula exposed me to rural Saudi life through its historical and geographical landmarks, including Elephant Rock and Hegra. The region's pace was slower, and the environment felt deeply reflective. It was here that I met a worker named Mehri, whose conversations left a lasting impact on me.

My delegation was intelligent and impressive but coming from a tight-knit sports team at a small university like Converse, I value strong communal bonds. Talking with Mehri, I realized how deeply collective Saudi culture is. The emphasis on community over individualism resonated with me immediately. Our conversations ranged from hometown life and football clubs to global politics, including the Abraham Accords and the humanitarian crisis in Israel and Palestine. While we approached some topics from different angles, we shared common ground on the importance of a two-state solution in Palestine and the need to eliminate armed groups in the region. We agreed that dehumanization on both sides fuels conflict. Once we reached that understanding, our perspectives aligned more than I expected. It demonstrated how much dialogue matters.

After leaving Al Ula, we traveled to Jeddah, where the Red Sea was one of the most beautiful sights I have

ever seen. The water was impossibly clear, and it remains one of the most peaceful places I have experienced. In Jeddah, we visited King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), where I was extremely impressed by the scale of Saudi Arabia's scientific development, particularly its advances in supercomputing. Learning about the historical role of Islamic civilization in advancing science during Europe's Dark Ages was especially eye-opening, as this topic is rarely emphasized in American education. My favorite part of Jeddah, however, was visiting Effat University. As a private university for women, it reminded me of my own institution, traditionally a women's college. It felt like home away from home. The students welcomed us warmly, and I still keep in contact with several of them. When I began to feel homesick later in the trip, those interactions grounded me again. At Effat, we heard everyday Saudi perspectives rather than elite or official narratives. We talked about limited politics, Western television, sports, relationships, and music. These conversations made me feel truly connected and reinforced how similar our daily lives really are.

Before this trip, my worldview was extremely narrow. Growing up in a small town, I had never traveled outside the United States. As a politics major and member of the Model Arab League program, I thought I understood the Middle East. In reality, I had no idea. American education presented Saudi Arabia as a place defined by a monarchy, the Hajj, restrictions on women, and extreme conservatism. Social media, on the other hand, portrayed it as a rapidly developing economic powerhouse. I arrived expecting a society with little in common with my own. I was wrong. I was raised in the American South, where identity is shaped less by individual ambition and more by

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who stands beside you. At Converse, I run track not just as an athlete, but as part of a tribe built on loyalty, discipline, and shared struggle. Family, faith, and respect were never optional values in my upbringing. You showed up on time, looked people in the eye, and understood that your actions reflected something greater than yourself. Saudi society operates on those same principles.

The sense of shared responsibility I witnessed in Saudi Arabia felt familiar. Outside of my track team, I had rarely experienced such tight-knit social cohesion. Seeing teamwork embedded throughout society made me feel like I genuinely belonged somewhere. American politicians often portray Muslim migrants as invaders, yet speaking with Saudi locals revealed people much like everyday Americans. They attend universities, love sports, practice their faith, and prioritize family. Returning to Converse University, I expect to hear questions about women's rights, equality, and Islam. I will answer honestly: no nation is perfect. The United States faces serious challenges of its own. What stood out to me was that Saudi Arabia, under Vision 2030, is actively working to improve its society. I saw women earning Ph.Ds, leading institutions, and guiding delegations with confidence and dignity. Empowerment was rooted in excellence and contribution, not hypersexualization. Faith was another powerful takeaway. In the mosque, men of all backgrounds removed their shoes, bowed together, and worshipped as equals. Status disappeared. What mattered was devotion and character. That moment challenged many Western portrayals of Islam and left a deep impression on me.

My Gateway KSA experience was transformative--educationally, culturally, and personally. I would not have been able to experience this

without my friends, family, professors, and community at Converse University. My background as an athlete, student, and MAL participant gave me the confidence to engage meaningfully with local perspectives. I originally questioned if I had what it took to apply for the program, and I almost missed the opportunity because I didn't have a Passport. I was originally accepted, then dropped for lack of the Passport. However, with encouragement from Professor Joe Dunn, I gained my Passport, reapplied, and was re-accepted. Gateway

KSA expanded my understanding of the world and reshaped how I view community, faith, and cultural connection, lessons I will carry with me for life. My whole life has been one of being challenged by lower expectations about me. But one needs to push oneself to succeed just like in a distance race. Life is a long-distance race and the more experience that one acquires and raising one's expectations and goals for himself leads to higher achievements. The Saudi trip was a big step for me that I will never forget.



## From Preparation to the Actual Practice: A Summer Internship in the Office of the President of Kosovo

by Jack Stokes



*Interns meet with the first female president of Kosovo*

world exercise, which I had the opportunity to put into practice in Kosovo.

The medium for my summer in Kosovo was the Isla Internship Abroad Program, a uniquely immersive international service experience that pairs students with host organizations around the world based on their skills, academic interests, and career goals. Unlike more traditional internships, Isla placements are designed to embed students within government institutions, NGOs, and civil society organizations where their contributions have both immediate relevance and sustainable value.

The program not only facilitated my placement in Kosovo but also provided cultural orientation and ongoing support throughout my time abroad. Isla put me in the Office of the President, where I held a full-time role as a Democracy & Governance Intern. It was more than a placement; it was an invitation into the internal operations of a young government grappling with some of the world's most vexing public policy challenges. Isla facilitated not only to observe from the sidelines, but to play a tangible role in Kosovo's international and domestic agenda. From week one, I was given high-level responsibilities, interacting daily with Cabinet staff, policy advisors, and visiting with dignitaries. It was a front-row seat, and sometimes an active one, in public diplomacy and executive leadership. From

I spent the Summer of 2025 in an unusual internship—in the Office of the President of Kosovo, in a country of which I was not previously aware. The path to this experience was both immediate and of long evolution. I stumbled into the opportunity, first nearly passed it up, and then spent several weeks reviewing diplomatic briefing memos, drafting policy letters, working directly with high-level Kosovar officials, and helping coordinate an international forum in the capital of the world's youngest democracy. In more ways than I ever could have expected, the skills and instincts shaped during my time in the Model Arab League and International Model NATO programs prepared me for this unique experience.

I am currently a masters of public service candidate at the

University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, where I am studying practicum-based research, program planning and development, and cross-sector collaboration. As a South Carolina native, I studied politics and international affairs at Converse University and held leadership roles in student government and at the national-level in Model Arab League and Model NATO programs.

In high school I participated in a scaled down Model United Nations and then spent three years at Converse in the institution's high-powered Model Programs. The years of chairing councils, authoring background guides, studying regional security, planning team development, debating policy, and simulating diplomatic tone and practice shaped me for the actual

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sixteen-hour days during the 2025 Women, Peace and Security Forum, to late nights on WhatsApp with colleagues and contacts, I was reminded of those never-ending conference days.

My primary responsibility involved supporting the planning and organization of the 2025 Women, Peace, and Security Forum, an international convening that brought together diplomats, ministers, survivors, and civil society leaders. I supported a range of activities, from the drafting of diplomatic communications to the creation of briefing documents and ambassadorial outreach coordination. I led note-taking and synthesis responsibilities for the Forum itself and supported the drafting of the edited version of the Forum's official Outcome Paper. I was also connected to other institutional work, such as Kosovo's early-stage coordination with Canadian stakeholders to strengthen national gender-based violence data infrastructure.

Though Kosovo lies far outside the geographic boundaries of the Arab League, the knowledge and skills I acquired through the MAL experience were incredibly relevant. For context, the conflict in Kosovo is largely the result of deeply entrenched ethnic tensions between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority, fueled by the disputed political status of the region within the former Yugoslavia. Following years of violence, an increasing humanitarian crisis prompted NATO intervention in 1999. Post-conflict, Kosovo declared independence in 2008, a move recognized by numerous states

but still contested by Serbia and others. The Kosovo case reflects the challenge of ethnic nationalism and international involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The region's violent political past, post-conflict reconstruction, contested sovereignty, and international recognition reflect many of the dynamics I studied and simulated as the chair of the Joint Defense Council in Model Arab League. In Kosovo, actual diplomacy demanded precisely what MAL acquainted me with: when to talk and when to listen. When to push and when to compromise. It needed cultural awareness, clear thinking, and a regard for nuance.

Besides MAL, my time as chair of the Model NATO's North Atlantic Council showed me the behind-the-scenes of

intergovernmental coordination and strategy development. NATO's continued presence in Kosovo makes the alliance not just relevant, but at the heart of Kosovo's global persona. Watching the diplomatic and security dynamics unfold in real-time gave me a deeper appreciation for the skill set of multilateral negotiation and reaffirmed how the Model programs instill those skills early and well.

Living in Prishtina, I found a city defined as much by resilience as by trauma. Kosovo is young, both demographically and politically. It's filled with fellow students, international partners, artists, and activists who are eager to participate in shaping their country's future. From conversations over late-night *macchiatos* to formal dinners with international guests, I gained insight



WPS Forum Team at the Forum's International Dinner

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into how democracy is constantly being reimagined. One night, sitting at a national cultural festival hosted by the President's Office, I glanced around at the guests and was struck by the intersection of memory and hope. Instead of forgetting, they choose to re-live and learn to forge a new path forward.

Although this was not my first foray into international study or travel, it was the most formative. I've long believed that experiential learning is where growth happens. Whether leading projects in an office that has a place on the world stage or managing the front-of-house operations for a restaurant back home in South Carolina, I've learned that public service is about presence and perspective. Kosovo reminded me of this at every turn.

Looking back, Model Arab League was never just an academic

exercise. It was a place where I sharpened my instincts and learned the weight of words. The experience stayed with me, in unlikely places and formative moments, and continues to shape how I approach complexity and compromise. My time in Kosovo recommitted me to international public service and to advancing inclusive diplomacy. It also deepened my respect for the Model programs that laid the groundwork and shaped how I listen, how I lead, and how I engage the world, not just in theory, but in action.

For that, I owe sincere thanks to those who made all of this possible. First to Dr. Joe Dunn and Dr. Rebecca Glazier, who offered not only academic guidance but a deep belief in the MAL program. Tiffany Jacob and Dr. Nichola Driver helped shape the opportunities that

allowed these lessons to reach far beyond the classroom. In Kosovo, I was fortunate to learn from Blina Salihu, Donika Kadaj-Bujupi, Dora Musa, and Learta Hollaj, each of whom brought insight and spontaneity into conversations. To the fearless ladies who lead Isla, I will be forever grateful. Leila Ali and Dijana Latifaj have created an incredible program that I know will continue to help students flourish. And, of course, Delaney Leslie, the superhuman coordinator of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations models, whose trust and frustration with me all those years ago when as a freshman I served as her junior debate partner, helped lead to this. Their perspectives grounded my experience and reminded me that diplomacy is at its best when it is shared.



## My Model Arab League Experience

by Tina Rohner

One of the standard inclusions in this newsletter are commentaries on the impact of Model Arab League by high-profile veterans of the program. Tina Rohner's career in the global financial and business world marks her as one of the most noteworthy achievers in MAL history. This brief interview speaks to that topic.

### 1. Background Prior to Converse?

I grew up in Kaufbeuren, Germany, a small town in Bavaria. I had never been to the United States before starting my freshman year at Converse!

### 2. Role of Model Arab League in your education?

It was completely transformative. Not having been a native English speaker, I thought it was a long shot to even make it onto the team at tryouts. Model Arab League really became a central pillar of my education at Converse, teaching me how to speak confidently, research complex topics, analyze issues from multiple perspectives, and think on my feet in fast-moving debates. It also gave me my first real taste of diplomacy and negotiation - learning how to defend a position, build alliances, and sometimes compromise without losing sight of the bigger goal. Those experiences shaped not just my academic growth, but also the way I approach challenges and opportunities in my professional life today.

### 3. How did it prepare you for your career?

Model Arab League taught me many of the core skills that I have

relied on throughout my career. Thinking on my feet, speaking with confidence and conviction, and framing an argument clearly became invaluable foundations. It also taught me how to perform under pressure and thrive in demanding environments surrounded by peers who were just as intelligent, hardworking, and passionate.

Perhaps most importantly, it was an extraordinary confidence builder. At 18, I certainly did not think of myself as a leader — in fact, I was far from the most confident person in the room. Four years later, after countless debates, negotiations, and team experiences, I left Converse a completely different person. I no longer saw limits to what I could do or achieve. That mindset has carried me ever since, opening doors to opportunities I could never have imagined when I first arrived at Converse.

### 4. Best remembrances of your time on the team?

One of my most vivid memories is from my very first national Model Arab League competition in Washington, D.C. At the time, I thought I might miss it altogether: the team was leaving by bus, but I had a tennis match to play that day as part of my athletic scholarship

at Converse. To my surprise, Dr. Dunn told me he would personally cover the cost of a flight so I could still attend. I remember feeling completely overwhelmed with gratitude — it meant the world to me to be given that chance.

I don't think I slept a minute that night, afraid of missing my 5 a.m. flight. I then had to navigate a city I had never visited before, find my way to the conference venue, and go straight into the competition after being awake for over 24 hours. Against all odds, I ended up winning an award. That experience taught me two lessons that have stayed with me ever since: first, that most problems in life have a solution; and second, that I am often more capable than I initially believe.

### 5. Advice for individuals considering participation on the delegation or the larger program.

Go for it — even if you feel uncertain or think you don't fit the mold. When I first joined, I was convinced that everyone else was more confident, more experienced, or simply better prepared. What I quickly discovered is that growth happens incredibly fast: within just a few months, I found myself feeling as capable as the very people I



*Tina and family in Georgia mountains*

had once found intimidating.

The program offers outstanding mentorship and creates an environment where you're encouraged to stretch beyond your comfort zone. It's not only intellectually enriching but also genuinely fun, and the friendships and lessons you take away can be transformative for both your academic journey and your future career.

### **6. Hopes for Model Programs Future at Converse**

I hope that Model Programs at Converse will become an endowed program with secure, long-term funding to ensure its future for generations of students. For me, it was a central pillar of my Converse experience, and I know it continues to be just as impactful for students today. Dr. Dunn has built and nur-

tured the program with remarkable dedication for decades, creating opportunities that truly change lives. As he looks toward retirement (whenever that may be), my hope is that the foundation he has laid will be strengthened and carried forward, so that students long into the future can benefit from the same transformative experiences that shaped me.

## Converse Dominates Southeast Model Arab League Conference

The Southeast Model Arab League conference was held at Converse University, March 13-16, 2026. The Opening Ceremony speakers were two Converse alums, Kennedy Anderson and Jack Stokes. Kennedy, former press secretary for South Carolina Congressman James Clyburn, the House Minority Whip, and legislative aide for Congresswoman Lauren Underwood of Illinois, Kennedy is presently finishing her master's degree in political communication at Columbia University in New York City. Jack is finishing his master's degree at the Bill and Hillary Clinton School of Public Affairs at the University of

Arkansas. He has completed an internship with the Office of the President of Kosovo, in Prestina, Kosovo and work with AirWars in London.

The participating institutions were the US Air Force Academy, Georgia State, Brenau University, Mercer University, Tennessee Technological University, The Citadel, Jacksonville State University, Spartanburg Community College, and two high schools, The Scholars Academy at the University of South Carolina, and Hilton Head Heritage Academy. The school color of royal purple dominated the awards stage, as Converse had a dominating performance with 17 of its 20 debaters

winning awards, and the Converse Djibouti delegation finishing first; the Palestine delegation finishing second, and a small four-person delegation representing Iraq also winning two awards. Other cited award-winning delegations were Saudi Arabia (Brenau) third, Syria (Georgia State University) fourth, Bahrain (Citadel) fifth, and Oman (Jacksonville State University) sixth.

Chelsea Pallotta served as Secretary-General. Bella Moreno won the best chair award and Kaylee Warner was the distinguished chair. The 2027 Southeast Model will be March 12-14 at Converse.

*Converse Delegation at SERMAL*



# The 43<sup>rd</sup> National Model Arab League Conference



*Award winning Jackie Didok and Sunny Bostwick speak in JDC*



*The Outstanding Award winners Miguel Junco and Bella Moreno speak in JDC*

Amidst the dramatic events of the crisis and war in the region, the 43<sup>rd</sup> National Model Arab League (NUMAL) met in Bethesda, Maryland March 26-29, 2026, at the Hyatt Recency Hotel. The Opening Ceremony was held at the new Qatar Embassy building with Ambassador (Ret.) Greta C. Holtz, president and CEO of Amideast, as the keynote speaker.

The Secretary-General of the Model, Kimberlain Williams (Converse University) convened the three-day events of international diplomacy, discussion, and policy formation of the 22 members of the body and Türkiye as a participating observer. With well over 300 students plus faculty and staff, it was the largest NUMAL on record.

Students from across the United States strived for achieving consensus on matters of mutual concern amidst the daily ruminations and violence of military conflict. Following the Summit event, where resolutions from the eight councils were adopted, the closing speakers were Dr. Naila Al Sowayel, Senior Academic & Research

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Fellow and Director of the Gulf Cooperation Council Area Studies Program at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, a distinguished former Saudi Arabian career diplomat for over four decades, Dr. Al Sowayel in turn introduced Her Excellency Ambassador Shiekha Al Zain Al Sabah, the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States, who spoke on international peace efforts.

At the Awards Ceremony, the recipients of the Outstanding Delegations were Northeastern University (representing Somalia), Converse University (representing Djibouti) and the University of Cincinnati (representing Tunisia). Distinguished delegations were Brenau (Saudi Arabia) and Georgia State University (Syria). Spartanburg Community College (Lebanon), University of Massachusetts—Lowell (Egypt), and Miami University (Libya) were deemed Superior delegations. Four of the top six rated schools were participants in the Southeast Regional Model Arab League conference.

Just before adjournment, the Secretariat for 2027 was announced to be led by Lynn Hanchon (Converse University).



*Award winning Jaxon Wright speaks in Economic Council*



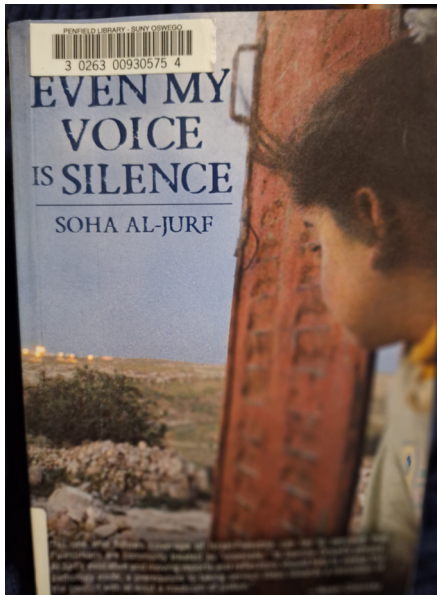
*Distinguished Chair, Allen Manning, in Social Council*

## LEARNING RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### *Soha Al-Jurf, Even My Voice is Silence: A Palestinian-American Woman's Journey "Back Home" (2011).*

By Soha Al-Jurf

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



This self-published book isn't new, but it is a powerful treatise, one of the best that I have read lately. Soha has lived almost her entire life in the United States as a Palestinian-American Muslim citizen; however, as a statement of Palestinian identity, her mother went back to Nablus to give birth to all three of her children. Soha was one-year old when her mother returned to the U.S. Soha's father, a wealthy doctor/college professor in Iowa City, did not interact with others outside the Arab community, and he imposed strictures on his daughter to remain Palestinian, not American. So, like many other second-generation "refugees," she had a conflicted identity. She had visited and lived briefly in Jordan and Palestine as

an adult, but as part of a quest for meaning she set out in 2009 to discover any remains of her father's village, which her parents had fled in the 1948 *Nakba*. The book is the story of the disturbing mission of seeking a past, present, and self.

Written in a poetic lyric style, punctuated throughout with Soha's powerful poetry, the book captures the trauma of living under occupation and colonialism for Palestinians in the years of the first decade of the 21st century. And of her own crisis of identity. She details the absurd reality of Palestinian's geographic limitations according to the identification badges. Although she had an American passport, her *hawiyya* (internal visa) of West Bank birth meant that she could not get a visa to travel to Jerusalem. How she maneuvered around this makes for fascinating reading.

The plight of Palestinians under occupation and the violence and cruelty imposed on them is palpable. The role of the settlements is damning. The daily survivability of ordinary Palestinians is frustrating, sickening, and enlightening. Soha focuses on the West Bank with passing mention of the even greater oppression in Gaza, from which she was barred. The conditions depicted in the

decades long before the more recent Gazan War illuminates what would lead to events of November 2023. The author's ability to capture the feel of oppression, pain, and rage of a people is amazing, and one cannot come away without understanding the fire for national identity from Palestinians.

Intertwined into the narrative are glimpses of Soha's personal life in the United States—in New York City, San Francisco, and elsewhere, her professional career, and her family disfunction, etc. as she sought peace and understanding through Buddhist meditation, Jewish-Palestinian cooperation, and her personal on-and-off but ultimately failed relationship with her male lover.

The theme of this narrative is about identity. The book screams of anguish, pride, hope, and an unsettled past and future. While it provides great insight into Occupied Palestine, it also speaks to the trials, tribulations, and expectations between the first and second generation of "refugees" from other places and cultures around the globe. I taught a course this term on refugees and identity. Most of the books in the course addressed the topic with power and sadness. This was one of the poignant. It is an incredibly valuable read.