



Meet Shanae Becker, an International Studies student devoted to religion and politics in the Middle East

Tell us a bit about your background: I grew up in Santa Barbara, California before moving to Austin, Texas for high school. I then moved to the Philadelphia area for my undergraduate studies at Bryn Mawr College, where I studied religion. Actually, I was almost done with my pre-med requirements when I started studying theology during my semester abroad in Belfast, Northern Ireland. That trip changed everything and when I went back to Bryn Mawr, I gave up the pre-med track because I wanted to focus my attention full-force on religious studies. I also learned a lot while interning at the Texas Freedom Network in Austin in undergrad (and after), which is a non-profit concerned with keeping religion out of politics--a huge issue in Texas.

What brought you to the Josef Korbel School? What brought me to the Josef Korbel School was a recommendation from a peer that also currently goes here, who received the suggestion from some alumni during her internship at the Defense Intelligence Agency a few summers ago. I am working towards the general [International Studies degree](#), with a [regional concentration in the Middle East](#). Originally, I was drawn to the Josef Korbel School for their Human Rights program and the flexibility within my degree to take whatever interests me. I ended up deferring my admission a year, and during that time, the school hired [Professor Nader Hashemi](#), an assistant professor in Islamic Politics and the Middle East. His expertise in church-state relations and the Middle East were of exceptional good fortune to me, because my interests in religion and the Middle East, which are sometimes mutually exclusive, could be furthered.

Religious concerns are important all over the world, so why are you focusing on the Middle East? Prior to Professor Hashemi, there was not much of a focus on the Middle East or on religion at the Josef Korbel School. My interests in both areas began when I took a class on Shi'ism, a branch of Islam, at my undergrad institution. The [academic study of religion](#) (not theology!) is from a humanities perspective, so it is very literature-rich and historically-based. A large part of the reason I wanted to study International Studies is to place religious histories in a current perspective, and I think this is especially important for the region of the Middle East today.

What is one of the biggest issues currently facing the Middle East? Often U.S. policies towards this region do not take into account, or misinterpret, history. For example, the history of the structure of religion-state relations and the push for democracy in the Middle East; or the rich and very complex

history of Islam as a religious, social, and political system at its inception and its evolution over time are not properly considered.

How did you spend your summer? This summer I traveled to Beirut, Lebanon to [study Arabic](#) for six weeks. My first year at the Josef Korbel School I focused my energy on researching Lebanon, specifically its history of religion- state relations and its confessional system. Besides learning Arabic, I learned that there is no way to explain the political system in Lebanon! Its complexities can never be fully known to an outsider. This visit exposed me to the reality of such a diverse and condensed Middle Eastern country in terms of the military and sectarian politics, and it also reaffirmed the reality of Hezbollah and its roles in Lebanese society. It was amazing to be there; Lebanon is different in many ways from other Middle Eastern countries, but similar in others.

I knew that Beirut was praised for being more Western-oriented than most Middle Eastern countries, but I was able to travel to Dubai and Cairo this summer as well, and I guess you can say I was a little disillusioned with the degree of Western imprint these countries had. Being able to go to a friend's wedding in the south of Lebanon, and being able to go up inside the minarets of the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo were definitely memorable experiences!

If you were a crayon in the Crayola box, what color would you be? I would definitely be Shamrock Green!

**-Nirvana Bhatia, MA candidate in Human Rights
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