Having been raised in the Middle East almost my entire life, it struck me that I had never really ventured out of the Gulf region. Amman, Jordan was a fresh experience in this light. It is an Arab country like none other I have visited—a fond amalgam of the urban city life with aspects of pleasant greenery and nature. Unlike the Big Apple that never sleeps, Amman claims a much more peaceful urban life and does maintain a reasonable bedtime. Just a few hours out of the city, Jordan offers an outstanding relationship with nature. From the wadis with their towering mountains and racing rivers, to the Red and Dead Seas with their respective under and over water experiences I was continually amazed with the beautiful strangeness of Jordan's terrain. The country has so much to offer, and I was privileged to be able to get a taste of it this summer.

Spending two months here and working for a prominent human rights and social justice oriented organization I also came in touch with the nation's socio-political-economic issues, some of which were more pronounced than others. The country has a largely Muslim and Christian population: the sharp division between the two surfaces during Ramadan, where I would notice colleagues having to be particularly considerate of eating, drinking, or smoking publically while others had to abstain all together. Through my organization I became quite familiar with major national issues like a persisting refugee crisis, high rates of poverty and unemployment anomalous with high education rates, and a complete dearth of water (although five star hotels did not restrain when circulating grand fountains, despite Jordan being the third most water poor country globally). However, Jordan remains one of the most progressive and development oriented countries worldwide. There is a longstanding monarchical commitment to humanitarian and socioeconomic development, reflected in organizations like the King Hussein Foundation that have been recognized by prominent international bodies multiple times for their work.

The crisis in Palestine has been unfolding for decades, and I have perhaps inadvertently taken a personal interest in it. As the violence escalated this summer I found myself more disturbed, yet more active, than ever. Being so close to the Israeli-Palestinian border—literally being able to see it—was an uncomfortable and eye-opening shock. I lay on my back, floating in the Dead Sea: my luxury resort to my left and the mountains of Israel-Palestine on my right, concealing decades of strife and atrocities. I took the opportunity to further inform myself on the conflict, and also raise awareness about Gaza and its plight. Over the years I have passively understood the politics of the region, but being in contact with so many people who identified with the stateless-homeless disorientation urged me to apply a deeper human rights perspective. I attended protests, learned Arabic slogans, and visited blood banks to do what I could, but the most useful and rewarding experience continues to be the conversations I have with those around me mutually encouraging one another to be critical of existing narratives. This was an interesting connection to my communications internship seeing as Facebook was the major tool for this massive global conversation; it demonstrated the power of constructive discussion and rationality in fostering humane change.
As the communications and fundraising intern for the King Hussein Foundation, I was able to hone existing skills I had from prior internships, but use them under a human rights and development framework. My major project was to renovate the organization’s website, creating an online platform that would enhance their outreach and transparency in terms of donors, beneficiaries, and partners. I used this opportunity to also develop a fundraising scheme that would incorporate local and individual involvement to sustain the organization’s education institute. This project allowed me to engage thoroughly with the Foundation and its seven institutions, learning about their services and individual goals. Along with working on other communications projects, I was also required to develop communication strategies for large events like Her Majesty Queen Noor’s visit to the Emirates Jordanian Camp for Syrian Refugees and the hosting of Science Expo Asia.

The King Hussein Foundation is an organization I have been following for years; the Foundation is committed to development on all fronts of human empowerment and justice, and embraces a sustainable approach that does not rely on simply charity. The team of 800+ staff is truly committed to their cause, and this shines through as the Foundation is continually recognized for its outstanding work within and beyond Jordan. I genuinely felt that I was able to enhance my skills and contribute positively to the organization. The team at my office was extremely supportive, and always helped me through my projects or any challenges I faced. The King Hussein Foundation provided a very positive and encouraging summer internship experience, and has very much shaped the kind of career I seek.

Ramadan—the Holy Month—characterized my work experience in Amman. July brought slower days and lively evenings, as the city turned nocturnal with cheers and flags supporting the World Cup. Working through Ramadan was a challenge; shorter working hours meant more work packed into one day and quite an uneventful afternoon waiting for Iftar. There was no longer anyone smoking on the streets, all food outlets were closed, and even the tiniest sip of water in public was a huge infraction. It was a test of patience to go about Ramadan while working instead of being in school or living at home as I had done through my childhood. I had to learn to cope with the changed pace of work and had to be creative with how to use my entire day once work ended—most of this was taken up with the struggle of finding food. Ramadan, regardless of whether one fasts, is a growing experience. It is important to make sure that one is courteous and understanding of the obligations of the Holy Month, adjusting expectations accordingly.

My visit to the Emirates Jordanian Camp left me with an overwhelming sense of amazement and apology. The camp is directed by the government of the United Arab Emirates, and hosts education and health services provided by the King Hussein Foundation. Often labeled a five-star refugee camp, EJC has complete health facilities, high security, entertainment and leisure facilities, and provides each family a comfortable trailer home to themselves. This is unusual and fortunate compared to other refugee camps, so I hear. King Hussein Foundation’s work at EJC focuses on general health, reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention and response, women’s health, and special needs education.

My responsibility for the day at EJC was to follow Her Majesty Queen Noor, take pictures and live tweet about her visit to the refugee camp. It was inspiring to see how passionate Her Majesty
was about the work of her foundation. Her Majesty Queen Noor took an hour long walking tour, discussing all the services with the camp directors and doctors. She took every moment to stop and engage with the residents, warmly welcoming the children who crowded around her. After my duties I spent a while with the children of the refugee camp. I was humbled by human ability to be resilient and hopeful. Given the smiles, laughter, and sheer welcoming attitude of these youngsters one could not imagine that within their first 10 years (or less) of life they have already experienced the worst of wars and human suffering. They have fled their country, leaving behind friends and families, but are able to embrace me—a stranger to this deserted camp they now call home. We exchanged notes in English and Arabic, as they showed off their bilingual skills. They laughed as I stumbled over my words and we made sense of our inability to comprehend each other’s sentences. We sang songs in English, Arabic, and even Hindi. These young children were smart, innocent, outgoing, and simply looking to have a healthy childhood. Their experiences have forced them to know of the darkest of humanity, but there was the strongest of spirit that remained unbreakable.

My summer in Amman has been exciting, educational, and enlightening to say the least. This city has truly grown on me, and I hope to keep a part of it with me. Boarding at Queen Alia Airport will most definitely be a bittersweet moment, as I look forward to my senior year at Columbia but long to return to a place that offered me the most fulfilling working and living experience. I want to return and immerse myself more in Amman, hopefully living independently with a similar meaningful job that will grant me more than two months.