**HED: New Arab Student Association at the U Provides Inviting Community**

Last fall semester, the [Arab Student Association](https://getinvolved.utah.edu/organization/asa) at the University of Utah had its first-ever social event. There was trivia, dancing and food — providing an inviting community space for Arab students on campus.

ASA was co-founded by President Amer Al-Shuqairat, who is Jordanian and Palestinian, and Vice President Mariam Safeudien, who is Egyptian.

Al-Shuqairat explained the idea to form ASA came to them when they were at a first-gen cohort and they saw a post about their friends launching an ASA for Brigham Young University.

"So we jokingly said, ‘Let’s make an ASA for the U,’"Al-Shuqairat said. “Once we completed the long process of making the club, a lot of people expressed interest very quickly, and we realized that it would be much more serious than we anticipated.”

### **Community**

For Al-Shuqairat and Safeudien, the association isn’t simply a club. It’s a place where passion and community collide.

Safeudien said the concept of community is very important to Arab culture and expressed that her love for family and her culture play a monumental role in her dedication to ASA.

“We wanted to create a community on campus [for] students who come from a Middle Eastern background ... especially those who are international students,” she said.

Safeudien added that she and Al-Shuqairat refer to the club as their child because it’s something that they’ve already seen grow in the short amount of time it's been around, and hope to see it grow a lot more.

“This organization doesn’t just mean an organization on Campus Connect,” she said. “For me, it’s making a change. I genuinely believe this club is like a seed — it’s something that we get to see, and we water through every single event, every single [piece of] advertising, every single social that people come to.”

Before they started ASA, Al-Shuqairat said it was difficult to find a place where he felt he belonged on campus.

“Being a freshman living on campus last year was difficult in regards to not finding people who can speak Arabic with and relate to things that pertain to us on a personal and cultural level,” he said.

For newly-recruited secretary Fatima Al-Saedy, who is Iraqi-American, the association’s presence has had a profound impact on her life.

“The Arab Student Association to me is like a warm blanket,” Al-Saedy said. “I feel it is a club where I get to truly be who I am and belong.”

For Al-Saedy, it’s exciting to have a place on campus where Arab individuals can be who they are without judgment.

“It makes me proud to be Arab-American,” she said. “I hope we can make those who feel that their ‘Arabness’ is not enough feel that the rich culture they come from is beautiful — just like their souls.”

Although ASA provides a social hub for those from a Middle Eastern background, Safeudien said it also promotes inclusivity to provide a safe space for individuals who don’t identify as Arab.

“I just think ASA definitely has a mission and a vision [to] very outwardly welcome everyone,” she said. "ASA tries to teach about our culture as well, so we are not just celebrating one another — we’re sharing our culture with everyone on campus.”

### **ASA Moving Forward**

This month, ASA held a game night where music, food and tea were provided. Safeudien said it was inspired by Middle Eastern traditions of going to a cafe late at night to play board games with friends.

“We want others to experience what we experience in the Middle East, and we want to be able to experience what our parents have experienced,” she said.

As far as [future events](https://getinvolved.utah.edu/organization/asa/events), the association is holding an event called Arabian Night in collaboration with the Union Programming Council around sometime in March before Ramadan begins. They also plan to hold a karaoke night in February.

“It will promote Middle Eastern culture and provide everyone with food and snacks that pairs with [the] Arab vibe,” Al-Shuqairat said.

Above all, the leaders of ASA want the association to be a place to unite people of diverse backgrounds on campus in order to provide a community for those who need one. Safeudien urged students still in the process of finding their place on campus to keep trying and consider ASA as a possible new home.

"We are here for you and we know the struggles you must face by the day due to your identity," she said. "We hope this club is just a place where you get to be who you really want to be and make friends who will understand you, not friends where you have to change yourself to fit their status quo.”