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Student returns to UConn after being stuck in UAE during war

by Kevin Guinan
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
kcg21003@uconn.edu



Evan Rhault (left) and Ryan Rivera Cabrera (right) speak as chairs of a Model U.N. conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, before air travel shut down because of Iran strikes and trapped him in Dubai.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF EVAN RHAULT

Evan Rhault, a fourth-semester political science major, returned to the University of Connecticut Storrs on Monday after being stuck in Dubai amid the war between the United States, Israel and Iran.

Rhault and his friend Ryan Rivera Cabrera, both from Woodstock, Conn., served as chairs for a Model United Nations conference hosted by Italian company WSC Italia. Rhault said he was aware of the tensions between the U.S. and Iran before the trip but didn't expect the United Arab Emirates to be a target.

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"I didn't think that would affect us at all in the UAE, which has nothing to do with the conflict," Rhault said. "We expected it to, maybe, disrupt the airspace... we didn't expect Iran to start striking the UAE."

Dubai's international airport, the Burj Al Arab hotel and Palm Jumeirah Island were damaged in retaliatory attacks by Iran, according to a March 1, Reuters article.

Israel and the U.S. launched strikes on Iran two days after nuclear negotiations between the U.S. and Iran ended without a breakthrough, according to Al Jazeera.

"We could hear the explosions, and the closest thing that they hit to us was about, I believe two miles away," Rhault said, referencing the Dubai international airport. "They hit the airport a couple of times, as well as the U.S. Consulate and some hotels."

Despite being nervous his hotel could be next, Rhault said he was overall "pretty okay" and thankful to be home safe.

"I wasn't getting much sleep when the attacks started coming in, so just being back is the most stress relieving thing," Rhault said, adding how his schedule was also crazy before the war broke out with the Model U.N. conference.

When the war broke out after the Model U.N. conference finished, Rhault said the UAE defense forces gave him a decent sense of security.

"The UAE has a really good defense system... the first couple of nights we were able to see missile interceptions in the sky," Rhault said.

Rhault didn't feel secure in every aspect, though. One example he gave was the fact that him and Cabrera were the only two Americans that were part of the conference.



Evan Rhault (left) and Ryan Rivera Cabrera (right) speak as chairs of a Model U.N. conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, before air travel shut down because of Iran strikes and trapped him in Dubai.

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"After they hit the [U.S.] Consulate, we were like, we could potentially be targets," Rhault said, describing how the strike gave them a sense of urgency to find a way to fly home.

Rhault said he and Cabrera were contacted by the offices of Connecticut officials Rep. Joe Courtney, Sen. Chris Murphy and Sen. Richard Blumenthal on arranging a flight home. Rhault said the offices didn't help much in their return.

"They all say the same thing... enroll in this STEP program so that you get updates, take shelter, fly out as soon as you can," Rhault said. "Telling us to fly out as soon as we can with airspace that is shut down is useless."

Rhault said the Model U.N. conference was mostly made up of Italian students who got flown out of the UAE by the Italian government as conflict escalated. He compared that response to the one he received from Connecticut.

"That was something extremely upsetting to us, that we can see that the Italian government will fly out its citizens, but our government doesn't care enough to do anything for us at all," Rhault said.

The process for Rhault and Cabrera to return home was difficult. Rhault said they had no luck finding a flight until Cabrera explained their situation to staff at the hotel they were staying at.

"They said, call this number. Everybody who's called this number has gotten a flight. We'd had about 400 people tell us to call numbers during our time, normally they were all dead ends, but he called this one anyway for some odd reason. It was a direct person at Emirates HQ or something," Rhault said.

Rhault said the person Cabrera was directed to call by hotel staff got the pair on the first flight from Dubai to the John F. Kennedy Airport in the U.S.

Rhault met Cabrera his junior year of high school through Model U.N. and said navigating their return strengthened their relationship.

"It got to the point where during the Model U.N. end, it was a lot of bickering back and forth like brothers, but as soon as the war happened we kind of forgot about that," Rhault said. "I'd definitely say our bond is a lot stronger."

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