

INTRO

Stephanie Jackson: Now That's INTAresting. This podcast is about the Georgia Tech Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, its graduates, their careers, and how the Nunn School has helped to shape their future. Take a listen.

Stephanie Jackson: Welcome back to *Now That's INTAresting*. I'm Stephanie Jackson.

Sydney Piwonka: And I'm Sydney Piwonka.

Stephanie Jackson: Today, our guest is Ahmet Korkaya. Ahmet is a Fall 2020 degree candidate who will be graduating with a Biomedical Engineering degree and a Minor in International Affairs from the Nunn School.

Sydney Piwonka: And at Georgia Tech, Ahmet has been part of the Student Advisory Board, the American Red Cross Club, the Muslim Students Association, and the Model Arab League. In addition, Ahmet has been a Peer Lead Undergraduate Study Leader of the Center for Academic Success at Georgia Tech, a Peer Instructor at the HIVE at Georgia Tech, an Undergraduate Researcher at the Bio Interfaced Transnational Nano Engineering Group, and has studied abroad at the American University in Cairo.

Stephanie Jackson: So, Ahmet, welcome to the podcast.

Ahmet Korkaya: That was an incredible introduction.

Stephanie Jackson: Great.

Ahmet Korkaya: I feel, I feel very welcome. Thank you for having me.

Stephanie Jackson: Great. Great. We're glad you're here. You've had many varied experiences while a student at Georgia Tech. So, we want to ask you about some of them shortly. But, to begin though, so you're majoring in Biomedical Engineering. So, tell us, what led you to pursue a Minor in International Affairs?

Ahmet Korkaya: Well, so, it's funny because I did this kind of come to, come around realization after entering college about my own life experiences. And I am Turkish born, and then I lived four years of my early life in India, where then I moved to Michigan in the US. And then I moved down to Georgia for my last three years of high school, after which, obviously, I started college.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: And so, I've moved around a lot, and I've definitely experienced a lot of the world. And I realized that, coming into college, I'm going to experience more, because we're going to have an international body, we have a large international student body. And so, I was excited to take engineering courses with them. And then, Fall 2018, I took this class called The World Today. And its.

Stephanie Jackson: Oh, yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: It's taught by Vincent Pedicino, one of my favorite teachers, professor at Georgia Tech. And I did not realize that I could actually add to my engineering degree, a, a minor that literally is called

International Affairs—something that I've been passionate about for quite some time. Not just not just politics, not just language, but actually culture and, and learning about other people, and learning about societies and the differences--because that's honestly one of my favorite things is to talk to people about how different they are from me. And so, I realized this minor was basically meant for me. And I won't lie, sometimes I think back and, and wonder whether I would start over as a full on major.

Stephanie Jackson: Oh, well that's exciting to hear. I mean, you know, we can talk about it. I know your graduating, but... We also have graduate programs, and we can talk off the podcast about that if you're considering it. So, tell us a little bit more or less in some details about some of the classes you've taken as an INTA Minor.

Ahmet Korkaya: Okay, so I've taken, my first experience was The World Today and that actually just counted as a social science I'm pretty sure, from what I know.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: But for the minor, I've taken courses specifically aiming at Latin America or the Global South in general. With Dr. Bowman, I've taken three classes with Dr. Kirk Bowman—one of my absolute favorite professors I've ever had.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: He teaches a very, a class that's very dear to my heart because of my specific interest in soccer. He teaches Soccer in Global Politics—I recommend that to anybody.

Stephanie Jackson: Yes, he does.

Ahmet Korkaya: Then, I've taken a class with Dr. Reuben, a class that Sydney knows well.

Sydney Piwonka: Yes.

Ahmet Korkaya: Government, Politics, and Society of the Middle East.

Stephanie Jackson: Yep.

Ahmet Korkaya: And that, that, also, I found a connection to that course because I'm from the Middle East. I'm from Turkey. And so, that class was, was very interesting to learn about the other countries in the region, of course, but also about Turkey. Honestly, I learned some things about my own country. And then, what else. And now, this Fall, I'm taking my last course—Comparative Politics—again with Dr. Bowman, which wasn't planned. I don't think he was planning on teaching that, but with the global climate that's what ended up happening, and I'm more than happy. Yeah. And these, these classes, I have a friend, some that you, you may know, named Mimi Akuro. She was actually, right before me, a graduate for, with Biomedical Engineering and an INTA Minor. And she was part of the inspiration for pursuing this minor for myself. And she found that, herself contacting all of her INTA professors after graduation more than she contacts her BME professors.

Stephanie Jackson: Wow. Wow. That's quite the testimony to how approachable our professors are, but also how important the work that they're doing with their research and what they're teaching resonates. That's good to hear.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, yeah. That's definitely awesome. That's so cool that you've had such a great experience with all of that. So, now shifting to a little bit to what you participated in while at Georgia Tech. So, Ahmet, you were part of the Model Arab League—or you are a part of the Model Arab League at Georgia Tech. So, what exactly is Model Arab League?

Ahmet Korkaya: So, as I'm sure many of those who listen to this podcast know about the Model UN—Model United Nations. And this is a very similar concept but it's mainly it's, I mean it is geared towards the Arab League, which is a current like international organization of all the Arab countries—namely, centered on language speaking. But anyway, so the, the, the idea behind it is gathering together and kind of acting as if you can portray the interests of each country, their global interests, of course, mainly, and then how that relates to other surrounding countries within the Arab League. And, also, how the Arab League can make resolutions and like, you know, see if, if this can lead to solutions to problems that arise in these countries. I mean, it's very much like Model United Nations. And, in fact, the person who created the Arab League—at least spearheaded the creation of it—he was very involved with Model UN as well, so it's very much like Model United Nations.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, that's awesome. That's great that you've been able to get involved in that organization. And so, for students who are thinking about getting involved in organizations such as Model Arab League, or other organizations on campus, what advice would you give them for getting involved in those organizations?

Ahmet Korkaya: Absolutely get involved with what interests you right off the bat. Like anything you see that makes you look again. Say you, what do they call it during orientation or maybe right after orientation the club fair—the organization fair. That's what it's called—the Org Fair, right?

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: So, if you're walking around that with friends or by yourself whatever, and you see anything that you honestly take the time to read, get involved with that the person that they have as a representative. Talk to them. Give them your email. Get some information from them. And really think about your own experiences. And it, it should be a good balance of what you're interested in, and also what you think your quality and your skills can somewhat help or like push forward, you know. So, I, I was also involved with Red Cross Club, American Red Cross club a year ago for about, for over, just over a year. And I'm very involved with that just because I was involved with that in high school and it's just something that, you know, I, I, I've been good at organizing events that are in that service, public service domain. And so, that, an aspect of that was I was good at it but I was also, you know, it's interesting to me. Public service interests me. so that's why I got involved. I definitely recommend everybody to, as Stephanie was mentioning earlier, broaden in and get some breadth in your experience as well, while at Georgia Tech. And so, I recommend getting involved with, not too many organizations, but the ones that, but the ones that definitely interest you.

Stephanie Jackson: Right. Right. Right. All right, so let's talk about another interest of yours. So, this Bio-Interfaced Transnational Nano Engineering Group. So, transnational leads me to think there might be some international collaboration involved?

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes.

Stephanie Jackson: But you are an Undergraduate Researcher there. So, tell us, what is your research focused about?

Ahmet Korkaya: So, that group is, is quite a diverse group. It's, the PI—the principal investigator—the main, professor of that group—his name is Dr. W. Hong Yeo. He's a very great guy. He's Korean, and he did his education in Korea and then also in America. And he is leading this group that focuses on implants or on-the-skin healthcare-oriented devices, right. So, my specific contribution to that group has to do with implantable pressure sensors, or flow sensors. And so, the best example I can give is if you hear about people who have atherosclerosis or basically just a thickening of their veins, or like plaque buildup, because of something like high blood pressure, right. And so, these sensors are put in to track how flow is going through, and what pressures there are, and if there's a drop. It's actually Bluetooth-enabled so that doctors can monitor it without being any more invasive than the initial implant.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Ahmet Korkaya: And yeah.

Sydney Piwonka: Wow.

Ahmet Korkaya: So, it's, it's not a burden to the body because the material is biomaterial. And it's not dangerous or anything—nothing more than anything else you do regularly. And so that's, that's what I worked on while there, and we worked on basically biosensors is what we call them. And the transnational aspect of it is, we're mainly, we're not focused to the US or anything. We're focused to human needs and like human healthcare needs and, and what the medical device, what medical devices can assist those. And so, yeah, it's what the, the key term is Nano Engineering because you know the world, the tech world is getting smaller and smaller as we know, and so that's the, the key focus.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah. So how did you find that opportunity?

Ahmet Korkaya: Honestly, so I was asking friends who were older than I. They were doing some incredible research, and I was very intrigued by how they got involved. Same as you just asked me that question, I asked them that exact same question. And they told me they just reached out. They just reached out to anybody who they wanted to learn more from, and that's honestly what these professors want. They literally, they, they, their profession is to teach. Their profession, is to spread information, spread this wealth of information. And at an Institute like Georgia Tech, we know we have these professors here. And so, I actually, in the summer of 2018, before I was starting my third year, I made myself a list of BME/ME professors who are doing research that I was interested in. And I got their contact information. And I did a rundown of what their lab website entails and what they do. And I, and I pointed out things that I specifically was interested in, and also things that I specifically have experience in—things that I can help with. Because I've done Cancer Research when I was in high school—just simple like helping in a wet lab, and it's not, it's not very, I didn't need to know too much getting into that. But that definitely led me to be interested in my list; there was a few professors who were working on diseases like human diseases and potential research with that. And so, Dr. Yeo was on, was on the top of my list, and I am very lucky that he was very welcoming.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: And he, he let me in right away. He, it's actually funny, he emailed me about a week after I emailed him. I had, I had already thought that it was over; he wasn't gonna talk to me ever. He said, he said *"Sorry, I was in Korea. And I'm just now reading this. I would love to talk to you in person, and let's get you in."* And for me, I thought that meant an interview. I was so prepared. I had everything down. I had my resume printed out. I had notes. I walked in. He sits me down. We chat for a little bit, and he says *"When can you start?"*

Sydney Piwonka: That's awesome.

Ahmet Korkaya: And I, I had no idea. I was like *"Right now, if you want me to."*

Stephanie Jackson: Right. You were floored. Oh wow.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yeah. He was very welcoming. He's very welcoming to undergraduate students who are interested in what he does. And, and I think that's very consistent with many professors. And so, give it a shot. Just look them up. See what interests you. As, just as the organizations, getting involved with research is almost a given at this, at Georgia Tech. Like.

Stephanie Jackson: Right.

Ahmet Korkaya: I don't know if I can name a friend who's not involved in some form of research. And so, I, I definitely tell all my friends I, I, I've encouraged so many of my friends to get involved in research, research after I have. And it's, it's just a chain, a ripple effect. Everybody finds somebody they know, someone they know that encourages them to find somebody to work with. And, I mean, it's going to happen at, at, at our school.

Stephanie Jackson: So, that's the theme that I've heard you mention over the course of our conversation. Of course, reaching out to the faculty and them being open, but also reaching out to your peers and seeing the work that they're doing and using that as inspiration. That's really great to hear. I have one follow up question that in addition to reaching out to the faculty or following some of the work that your peers are doing, are there any other tips like courses that people should take or anything else students should do to prepare themselves for research opportunities?

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes, there are a few research oriented courses in terms of writing. I, I had the pleasure of having a friend who took that course, and I was able to learn from them. And this was like my first or, first and second years. So, I didn't. I, my, my family comes from a very heavy research-oriented background. My father has a PhD and he does his own cancer research. And so, it, it, it comes natural to me, but I know it doesn't come natural to everyone, which is completely normal. And the, the thing is though we're at an institution like Georgia Tech for a reason, right? We are all outstanding students. We all have motivation. And so, I, I, I would suggest like looking through your own majors curriculum—whether you're an INTA Major or something else—and there, there are so many options for every major in terms of what we call them in BME our Breadth and Depth Electives. And those can definitely help you orient yourself towards interests that can lead you in the future. Right. And so, because everybody has to take certain set of courses but then when the, when there's options, that's when you go towards what interests you. So, I, I, I, I definitely suggest taking a look at those and really, really going through them. And I, I, I, you know, we will know some people who just randomly pick whatever fits their schedule, that's, that's also fine, but there's an opportunity there to be, to be grasped. And I would suggest grasping that. And also in the INTA, in the INTA department, the classes that I've taken have all

been interests of mine—whether it be Latin America, or the Global South, or the Middle East. Yeah, they, they, actually, I was very close to doing a Vertically Integrated Project with Dr. Bowman in the Fall 2018—simply because I took a class of his—or Fall of 2019, sorry. I highly, like these professors are not just professors, right? They're not just teachers, they're also doing research. So, get involved with your professor more. I, I also suggest that, for sure.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay. Thanks.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, I think that's great advice. And so, in addition to the research that you did while at Georgia Tech, you also studied abroad at American University in Cairo, correct?

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah. So, tell us a little bit about that experience.

Ahmet Korkaya: That was a roller coaster. I, well, first off, it was this past spring, so the pandemic, the pandemic did hit about two months, two and a half months in.

Stephanie Jackson: Oh wow.

Ahmet Korkaya: And yeah, I was in Egypt. And the situation wasn't dire or anything, but it was, it was very unexpected, I guess you could say. But I'll be frank, all, everything that, everything went smoothly. There was no, like we were not scared of anything going on. The school took great care of us. And the people there were also very welcoming, like the people that worked in the buildings that we were all quarantining in and stuff. It was, it was what, they did, they treated us well. But prior to that, every, the two and a half months I had before the pandemic were also amazing. And I, the INTA, being among INTA students, INTA professors, the INTA department, in general, 100% influenced me in my decision to study abroad before graduating. And I really suggest it to everyone that I know that has the means to go abroad, of course. And so, the experience was great. I learned Arabic. I had known a little bit of Arabic before going, but I definitely solidified at least the Egyptian dialect, which was great. The professors at that institution are also wonderful. They, they really were excited for our corporate cohort of international students because we were the largest in 10 years.

Stephanie Jackson: Oh wow. Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yeah.

Sydney Piwonka: Wow.

Ahmet Korkaya: And so, that definitely has to do with the political climate, which has.

Stephanie Jackson: Right.

Ahmet Korkaya: Since eased, and that allowed Georgia Tech to open their exchange program. I, I, I believe I was the first in nine years to go, if I'm not mistaken.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah that, yeah that program had closed down.

Sydney Piwonka: Oh, wow.

Stephanie Jackson: After the Egyptian Spring.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes.

Stephanie Jackson: However many years ago that was.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: So yeah, it finally, its back open. Great.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes, and I've already identified some of my younger peers who I would, I'm gonna recommend go on the same exact exchange.

Stephanie Jackson: Cool.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yeah.

Sydney Piwonka: That's awesome. And so, I think you kind of touched on this a little bit, but how did you see some of your INTA coursework or what you've learned throughout the INTA Minor overlap with your studies while in Cairo?

Ahmet Korkaya: Oh, yeah. So, I actually took two INTA-related courses in Cairo. One of them was a, a great—it was actually the Intro to International Theories that I happen to take a little bit later than everyone else. But it was really wonderful because the professor actually was a practicing international lawyer, and.

Sydney Piwonka: Wow.

Ahmet Korkaya: A PhD professor teaching International Theories and a, numerous other courses. And she actually works on Palestine-Israeli relations and with Palestinian citizens looking to gain Israeli citizenship. Yeah. She's, she's, that was an incredible experience with the course but also are getting to talk to her outside of that. And if I didn't have an INTA minor, that wasn't going to happen.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah.

Ahmet Korkaya: So, I'm very thankful for that.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah

Ahmet Korkaya: And another course I took was on Judaism and, and modern versus historical Judaism and differences and how it's evolved and stuff. That was also very wonderful. The, that teacher was actually an American professor who has been living in the US for the past, or in, in Cairo for the past 20 years. That was a wonderful experience, as well. But in terms of studies, the INTA Minor definitely prepared me. So, before you go abroad, through Georgia Tech, you need to go through these ethics and empathy training and whatnot. Between my own experiences, and what I learned through the INTA Minor and like understanding of different societies—whether it be governmental politics or just the society in general—I was very well prepared as opposed to other, other students. And, yeah, that was, that was a fun little, I don't know, I guess bypass.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah. Okay. Well, that's good to hear that.

Ahmet Korkaya: Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: So, I want to ask you a question now about what is next for you. Since you're graduating in December, have you given thoughts about what your next steps might be in terms of a career?

Ahmet Korkaya: Yes. And no. So, I am at a crossroads of what I want to do with the rest of my life.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Ahmet Korkaya: I mean, sort of. I'm not gonna be too dramatic about it. I, I, I know, I know where I'm towards and that's healthcare. And whether that, whether that be as an engineer, or as a actual healthcare worker, which I'm somewhat leaning towards more. After, you know, my experience in the BME department, and of course the INTA department, I think I want to lean towards medical school. And so that, that's what I'm considering right now. But, in terms of what I've gained from BME and INTA, is, I definitely, and also my study abroad, the world is a, is a large, large place. And I'm looking at international organizations, if I'm looking for an actual engineering job, because I wouldn't go to Med School right away, obviously I'm graduating in the Fall, so I don't know of any medical schools that are, that accepted into January.

Stephanie Jackson: Right.

Ahmet Korkaya: So, I'll be looking for a job. I am actively looking for a job. But if not, I do have an opportunity to go to a school in Turkey for a Master's in Biomedical Engineering with a concentration on just a, a certain project that I've communicated with the professor there. But yeah. So, moving forward, I think one thing, one take away from my experience at Georgia Tech—BME and INTA combined—is I'm not going to center myself on the US, I don't think.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah. Well that's good to hear that the, this minor have certainly influenced you and expanded your—like you said—your, your thought process about what your options might be. That's good to hear. And also, you know, it's, thinking of graduate school or something like that, doing something abroad, there are also lots of scholarships. And I can talk to you a little bit more about that and some things that you may not have considered if you're thinking about graduate school abroad. That's just another service as an INTA Minor that we provide.

Ahmet Korkaya: Oh, I'd love to talk about that.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah. That's awesome. Well, good luck in the future with all of that. That'll be super, super great to hear about what all you're able to do in your future academic or professional career. And so, to—a little bit of a wrap up—but what, what advice do you have for students who are thinking of pursuing a Minor in International Affairs in the future?

Ahmet Korkaya: Do it. I, I. Yes. I absolutely advise.

Sydney Piwonka: That's good advice.

Ahmet Korkaya: Anybody who has even any, any inkling towards doing an INTA Minor, absolutely do it. And, and, of course, the number one thing that I have to suggest—because this is what I did—I took an INTA my, an INTA course before joining, starting an INTA Minor. And my, the course I took was some INTA students might say, not with the most welcoming professor. But, in my opinion, it was a great

experience with Vincent Pedicino. And the class really opened up my, my, my mind to. Well, first of all, it also just informed me that there was an INTA Minor. I hadn't known. I had no idea that there was an INTA Minor.

Stephanie Jackson: Right.

Ahmet Korkaya: I'm not saying I would have done it right away, but the course helped with that. And then, obviously, what I learned in that. But also, one other thing I'd suggest is talking to other INTA Minors. I mentioned, Mimi Akuro, she was a BME major and an INTA Minor—same as me, just a year older than me. And so, learning from her and seeing how she like experienced the combination of BME and INTA really, definitely influenced me. And so, I suggest anybody who's doing a different major to find somebody who is doing an INTA Minor with their same major, and that would be, you know, a great conversation to be had.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, I think that's great advice, definitely reach out to people who've done some similar things to what you're doing.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Sydney Piwonka: That's awesome. Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: Well, thank you for your time, Ahmet. This has been a really insightful conversation. And I think I can speak for Sydney when I say we are both glad to hear that the INTA Minor has brought, been so helpful in your academic and your career goals. And so, we cannot wait to hear more about your successes. And we hope that you are staying healthy, and we wish you all the best.

Ahmet Korkaya: Thank you so much. I definitely enjoyed the conversation. And I also can't wait to see who else is on this podcast because it's definitely very interesting to me.

Stephanie Jackson: Good. Good. Well make sure, thank you for encouraging others to listen. We hope that you'll enjoy it.

Sydney Piwonka: Yes. Thank you for joining us.

OUTRO

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