



Scouts climb in an obstacle course during the 2019 World Scout Jamboree in West Virginia.

# World SCOUT

**T**HIS SUMMER HAS BEEN A GOOD ONE FOR Ahmad Alhendawi. The tall, earnest Jordanian has seen the fruits of his work in a most impressive format: He was witness to a gathering of 45,000 youths and young adults from all over the world who came together to do what Scouts do in a camp. For 10 days in the Appalachian hills in West Virginia, they did a lot of camping, singing, talking, having fun and posting stuff on Instagram. The 24th “World Scout Jamboree,” as they’ve called it since 1920 when the first such camp was erected just outside London, was the biggest ever.

When Mr. Alhendawi looks back at the event, he still exudes the excitement of a kid after a day at a particularly great theme park. For him, the Jamboree was more than just action, though, it was “simply globe-changing.”

Mr. Alhendawi is the Secretary General of the World Organization of the Scout Movement, an organization that is much larger than many might realize. More than 50 million children and youths

**AHMAD ALHENDAWI** tells Brunswick’s **TOM LEVINE** about a century-old organization making a difference in the lives of 50 million young people.

are registered Scouts worldwide at any time, and “we estimate that close to 500 million people alive have gone through the Scout program,” Mr. Alhendawi says. His mission is to double the reach of his movement by 2023.

Scouting has come a long way since it was founded by Lord Baden-Powell, a British Army commander, in 1907. The recent Jamboree saw lots of tree-climbing, abseiling, bow-shooting and other activities traditionally linked to Scouting. A similar focus, however, was put on the global mega-trends of our time. Every participant checked into the “Global Development Village” to talk to UN organizations or NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund about the UN’s global Sustainable Development Goals, about health, faith, tolerance and climate change. There was even a tent promoting free trade.

Quite a long way from the cartoon image of a proper Scout: honest and trustworthy, with scarf and hat, building tents and roaming forests, if not helping old ladies across streets.

“See, I quite like that image,” says Mr. Alhendawi, when he sits down to talk about leadership and integrity. “I know it’s outdated in some aspects.”

Today, Scouting is open to all genders, is diverse and inclusive. “But we still need people around who are helpful and supportive,” he says.

For him, the core principles of Scouting haven’t changed all that much over 110 years. “The value of integrity is still at the center of the Scout program,” he says. Discipline, kindness and helpfulness are key elements of what Scouts learn and live in their weekly gatherings, trainings or summer camps. “Our young members take pride in living these values, enshrined in the Scout law. It is what makes them come back every week, and it is what connects us all.”

For Mr. Alhendawi, it is all about impact—about what Scouting as a method does to young people who take part in the youth program. “We take a long-term perspective. If young Scouts learn to be helpful to others at all times, loyal and committed to trustworthiness and honesty, if they embrace these values, then this is changing society in a good way. Quite honestly, we never needed these values more than today.”

But with integrity being such a central asset of the brand of Scouting, how can he as Secretary General keep up standards in a decentralized organization with 50 million members? “I learned my first lessons of leadership at home in my family,” Mr. Alhendawi answers. He was born and raised in a big traditional family in Al Zarqa, a mid-sized city in northwest Jordan. “We are 10 siblings. There is no way anyone could control the behavior of my sisters and brothers. Controlling is a challenging notion. So I rather think of myself as an enabler for the right thing to happen.”

Mr. Alhendawi earned a master’s degree in Advanced European and International Relations from the European Institute of High International studies and a bachelor’s degree in Computer Information Systems from Al-Balqa Applied University. While working for the Arab League in Cairo, he was talent-spotted by the UN, which in 2013 made him its first Youth Envoy. He came back to the Scout Movement in 2017, serving as its youngest-ever Secretary General.

“By constantly rewarding behavior that respects the principles of the group, by praising social interaction rather than results, the movement reinforces its values,” he says. “If someone doesn’t act within the values of Scouting, the first line of defense is the people around him or her at the grassroot level.” It is his job, Mr. Alhendawi says, to strengthen these local defenses. “We do this by enhancing transparency,



**Lord Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden Powell (1857-1941) was a British Army officer and founder of the World Scout organization.**



**A Jamboree attendee is all smiles, above. Below, Ahmad Alhendawi, Secretary General of World Scout, speaks at the event.**



by democratizing information, making knowledge more accessible. When you want to keep control, you need a lot of gatekeepers. They quite often turn into a structure of people who keep knowledge to themselves. We go the opposite way, making services, tool-kits, information, policies, e-learnings available to as many people in as many languages as possible.”

Recently, the defense of integrity has taken center stage within Scouting. Like churches, schools and some sports, the Scouting Movement has been confronted with a string of allegations of child abuse, especially but not exclusively in the US; the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), one of the largest Scout organizations in the world, is cooperating with authorities in more than 12,200 possible cases, stretching back to 1944. “As a youth development practitioner, I am sickened and outraged that anyone would misuse our method, and that any adult abuses children,” says Mr. Alhendawi. “This outrage is fully shared by Scouting in the US.”

Keeping children and young people safe from harm is not new to his organization. A string of policies are in place and have been constantly upgraded since the early ’90s, fighting “all aspects of physical, emotional, intellectual and of course sexual harm.”

Other topics facing the Scout Movement, like sustainability, are more complex. In a time of accelerating change, in which truths and facts can be hard to distinguish, “we need to help our leadership understand how they use ethics as a compass when navigating critical issues.” The objective is simple: “Act with integrity.”

As a proud enabler, Mr. Alhendawi has changed the role of his office from manager and administrator of an organization to a servant leader for the entire Movement. His message is simple: “As leaders, we cannot afford to shy away from speaking up on issues that are defining our human experience for generations to come,” he claims. He quickly runs down his own list: peace, planetary sustainability, acceptance and understanding, friendship, global citizenship. As an example of the power of the young, he points to the #FridaysforFuture movement started by the 16-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden.

“She is an excellent, remarkable reminder to us of the power of young women and young men, the power of this generation. Only if we speak up can we bring positive change in the communities we live in,” Mr. Alhendawi says. ♦

**TOM LEVINE** is a Digital Director in Brunswick’s Berlin office. He is also a Fellow of the World Scout Foundation.