



Interview for Study on Impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. Muslims

Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRI)

Interviewer/Number of Interview: AP1

Date: 2/12/2021

Name of Interviewee Assigned by Researcher (to protect identity): Respondent

Year of Birth: 1981

Gender: Male

Country of Origin: Palestine

Year of Immigration: 1987

Current State in which respondent resides: California

Note: In the transcript, *I* refers to Interviewer, and *R* refers to Respondent/Interviewee. To protect the identity of the interviewee, some responses to questions are not provided. In such cases, this statement will show in the transcript: Information is not being made available. In other responses, specific details that might identify the family members are omitted or made more general.

Abstract:

This transcript is focused on how this participant has adjusted his life during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has begun working from home, spending more time with his family, and has been able to rely on his religion to help him through this time. He has been able to communicate with friends and family through apps focused on video and/or audio communication. He has also been able to connect with his faith through having more time to read and watch videos connecting him and his family closer to the scripture. He also touched on how social justice issues should be a focus within the Muslim community and how his generation should contribute to this focus – that it's his generation's duty to get on boards of mosques so that they can play a role in educating the members about social justice. He sees a generational gap in awareness of social justice issues and actions that should be taken to promote social justice. He also presented a thoughtful and perceptive analysis of the generational differences regarding social justice.

Key Themes:

COVID-19, family, communication, virtually connecting, his family has been financially secure during Covid, social justice, generational gap regarding social justice awareness. Benefit of Covid: more time to bond with wife and children.

Edited Transcript

I: So, before we get started, I just wanted to remind you that this interview will be recorded, but that it won't be made public. Any questions you have before we get started?

R: Uh, no. I'm ready.

I: Alright, sounds good. So yeah, these questions are just about the impact of COVID-19 on U.S Muslims. These first few questions are just going to be about demographic background information. So, if you could just say what your name is.

R: Alright, my name is [Respondent].

I: And your age?

R: 39.

I: And where were you born?

R: I was born in Palestine and I immigrated to the U.S when I was 6-years-old.

I: Alright, and what year was that?

R: 1987.

I: Alright, uh and how would you identify yourself in terms of your national background?

R: Uh, I would consider myself a Palestinian-American.

I: And what is your highest level of education that you've completed?

R: Uh, bachelor's degree.

I: Alright and what's your marital status?

R: Married.

I: Alright, um including yourself, how many adults live in your household?

R: Two.

I: Alright, and how many children 18 years or younger live in your household?

R: Three.

I: Alright. So, these next set of questions are going to focus more on the COVID-19 impact on your personal relationships, financial well-being, and physical/emotional health. So just going to have you focus on the changes that have been made to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and how those changes have affected you. So, this next question will be how has the outbreak of the covid virus affected you personally, in terms of your financial, social, and health situations?

R: Um, really socially and you know, (sigh) it's been tough. You know, you don't get to see your friends and your loved ones as much as you'd like to. Um, health wise, obviously you know, nervous. Every time you go out, you don't want to catch it and spread it to everybody in the family, you know. Everyone that lives with me, my wife, my kids. And it's the same thing when my wife goes grocery shopping or whatever, you know that's hard. That was our biggest concern throughout this whole pandemic -- catching it and then spreading it amongst the family because you know as you watch the media and the news and it's just uh I guess (clears throat) you get a perception that it spreads so easily, which it does. Right, but that was our biggest concern initially. Now as time went on, it's been about a year and you become kind of use to living that way. Right, you know being extra cautious when you go out, making sure you wash your hands, and social distance. So that was the biggest um that's how the virus has affected us initially.

I: Mhmm, mhmm. Yeah um, how has the outbreak of the virus affected the way you conduct yourself with people close to you, so that includes like other people that either live in the country or in other countries?

R: Mhmm. Oh yeah, so I have a-we have a kind of unique situation. My parents live right next door to us. They're in the house right next door so as far as my immediate family, my mom, dad, siblings, um we still saw each other. Now in the beginning of the pandemic, because you know my siblings go to work, we kind of still uh, even though they live next door, we would just FaceTime each other, right. We would just talk over the phone, stuff like that. Um and because you know, like I said, it was just the fear of we don't know where- who's going where. How could they be infected? Could they you know, it was kind of a learning curve as far as we seen -the habits of everyone, are they- would they I guess are they masking up, stuff like that. So, you know you feel protected and (clears throat) it's almost like you want it to um I guess you know like my younger brother, he goes out and kind of works in the retail world so that was kind of you know like I would have conversations with him to be extra protective because you live with mom and dad, they're older you know take the proper precautions so you don't bring stuff back. But, um now it's you know like I said, as time went by, we kind of laxed a little bit because it was just like okay you know you can't live like this forever right. So, it's like we would go -- like I said we live next door to each other, it's hard to not go you know to go next door to see your family, right. So, it was just like we have our own little ecosystem amongst each other. We go over to their house, they come over to ours. And uh as far as other families outside of the country and friends that live in the area you know it's been tough. We don't really see each other. It's mostly FaceTime, phone conversations, like on the kids' birthdays they'll drive by and wave and say hi or drop off a present, stuff like that. But uh as far as hanging out, there has been none of that.

I: Mhmm, yeah. Since the virus outbreak, I guess you already kind of talked about this but any other ways that you have communicated with people who aren't in the household?

R: Yeah, so the kids and their friends and our friends we put on these little zoom meetings. And we play uh they have these little online games that we can play in zoom. So, we have been using zoom a lot with friends that live in the area especially cause the kids are all friends and they want to see each other, so we have been using zoom a lot. Uh you know WhatsApp to conversate with people, you know FaceTime, any kind of virtual, you know any kind of camera facing app that there is out there, I'm pretty sure we've used it. But definitely zoom, FaceTime, telephone conversations.

I: Mhmm. Any kind of challenges with these new ways of communicating with people?

R: (sigh) Uh, just if you are talking to people that are not tech savvy, getting them (haha) through how to set it up the first time. Um, but most people figure it out eventually you know what it is, it's just the internet around the house, the Wi-Fi issues in some people's homes. Things like that where it just lags and overall, it's ninety percent of the time it's been good you know figure it out and you know have nice little conversations and you get to see each other so that's been a plus.

I: Yeah, any unexpected benefits from having to be able to communicate this way now?

R: you know, um (sigh) I guess the only I don't know if you would really call it a benefit, it's just like you can call and see anyone at any time. Where before it was like "hey let's make plans to meet on Friday" for example for pre-covid. And then you make plans on Friday, and then drive somewhere and meet. So, I guess it's more convenient in some cases right. Just kind of FaceTime or zoom, it's instant, you see each other. I guess it's just that human interaction and just being there in the moment with each other, you know FaceTime and the technology just doesn't make up for that, right. So, it's just uh just I guess the convenience of it would be the only unexpected benefit of it.

I: Yeah. No definitely. So, during the pandemic, are there any specific apps you have begun to use or maybe even blogs or podcasts you have started to listen to?

R: Um, I would have to think about this one. So um, as far as social media, I spend more time on social media now than I ever did before because there really is nothing to do, right. Home all day, time off work, so you spend time on social media. Facebook, Instagram, um I read a lot of the news articles online. Like for example, from yahoo, NPR, that type of thing. Whatever-sometimes my friends or family post, I'll click on that and it takes you onto a whole other site. So, a lot of information, maybe more Facebook more than anything. And just kind of spirals from there. Takes you to other spots and just kind of read into things. And you know how it is, sometimes you go on Facebook and are reading something and then you got to fact check it and make sure it is legitimate, (haha) takes you on a whole other world.

I: Yeah, yeah. For sure. Um, before the outbreak, were you employed?

R: Yes.

I: Alright and if you wouldn't mind specifying your occupation.

R: So, I am an associate director.

I: Alright and have -pre-covid- what would you say on average how many hours a week would you work?

R: Uh, so pre-covid or uh-?

I: Yeah, before covid.

R: I worked about 50 hours a week. 40-50 uh yeah that's about as much, 40-50 a week. It's always been and obviously sometimes if it's closer to the end of the year, towards the quarter then it gets a little more you know more towards the 60, but on average probably about 40-50 hours.

I: Alright, and are you still employed at the same job?

R: Yes.

I: Alright, so now during covid, what would you say kind of be your average weekly hours?

R: During covid?

I: Yeah.

R: I do find myself working uh probably a little bit more only cause you're in front of the computer and there is nothing to do so you just – like I end up putting in more time just to finish stuff. So, I would say probably about 50-60 a week now.

I: Alright and do you work from home or do you still go into the office?

I.: Yes, yeah, I work from home.

I: Alright, um, and so these next set of questions will be a bit more finically focused but if, in any ways, has covid affected your family's financial well-being?

R: (sigh) thankfully, no it has not. Thank god it really hasn't affected us um, I almost see us like you know the field that I'm in, it's more than anything made us more – covid has made us more busy just cause I'm in the corporate real estate. It -you know making sure that these buildings are safe for people to work in for our essential workers to work in and stuff like that.

I: Mhmm.

R: So, work has been work, it hasn't either slowed down it did pick up more so financial wise, and as far as financial personally you know thank god we've been doing fine.

I: Good. And have you received any help during this time?

R: No.

I: Alright. And do you have any current needs financially?

R: No, no. I don't.

I: Alright. But um have you given any help to other, and that can include friends inside the U.S. or outside?

R: Uh you know we, me and my wife, we try to kind of go through and go to any local mosques or like Islamic relief any of those and donate regularly. Especially during this time because we know there is a lot of hardship going on, so we have been giving to charity. We even had the kids go through their things and try to give up one thing that they don't need any more and would like to give away. Uh so yeah, we've been doing things like that just to kind of to help others in time of need right. Trying to make things a bit easier for other people out there for somebody out there since thank god we are in a good position.

I: Yeah, um any ways, if any, has covid affected for physical or emotional health?

R: (sigh) Uh physically, I mean I'll be honest, we've put on a bit of weight because you're just sitting around a lot, more than you used to right. Used to be more active and a positive side is that me and the wife and kids do our daily walks now that we didn't do before. We were always at work, come home and you're tired or whatever. So, we have a routine, we go for a mile walk every day. Um, if the weather permits and if it's nice, we take the bikes and go for a bike ride. So, you know, in the beginning of it, yeah, we did do a lot of sitting around but we got out of the rut. Kind of just went out and started being more physical and so there is more exercise than there was before to be honest. Um, emotionally, at times you know you get sad and you get anxious a little bit with things going around and you see – I've had family members get affected by covid in the middle east. You know my grandmother, she got it and we were really worried. We didn't know how she was going to react to it. Thank god, hopefully she made it through. But that was an ordeal so yeah there was a lot of that and being anxious uh as far as what's going to happen in the future.

I: Mhmm, yeah. Have you used any kind of strategy or strategies to kind of help you cope with the challenges?

R: You know, uh being positive and just accepting at some point you got to look at, you know – I mean, you have to look at the scriptures that we follow, read into and you know, being Muslim you know you got to let you know except fate as God has it written out for you. You know, I think that's helped. And just being positive really, if it's meant to be, it's meant to be kind of mentality, right. You do what you can to protect you and your families, but if you're going to catch covid and get sick and pass away the you know, that is what God has written for you. Just like you know when you go outside, you drive a car. You could get into a car accident, right. So, it's – you know, I guess just kind of staying as positive as possible. And you know when you get, you know that kind of rut and you're just sitting around at home all day, go out and do something physical, get your you know your serotonin levels up and just doing some kind of physical activity, I think that's helped a lot.

I: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Alright, so these next group of questions are going to explore more the impact on COVID-19 pandemic on your religious practices and beliefs. So, I'm wondering how you been able to continue religious traditions and religion programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

R: Okay um. Obviously during Ramadan is tough. You know, usually during that time everybody gets together you have family over friends over, you break your fast together. That was probably, this last one, Ramadan, it was tough, right. Because you know that's what that Ramadan feeling that you get that when you're with friends and family, right. You get to break your fast together, eat together, so that was tough. As far as like Friday prayers, I'll be honest since the pandemic started, I haven't had a chance to go do – only cause where I'm at and the county I'm in it's very strict and they shut down all kind of religious, any kind of gatherings, not just religious but any gatherings. I know that some of the mosques have recently started doing like a sign-up sheet and you can sign up for the first like 15 people used to go there like Friday prayer. I did attend some virtual khutbahs that they have for my local mosque where they have that, you know you don't pray but you just listen to the sermon right and then you could pray on your own with your family so, there's been that. Let me think yeah, I mean and just kind of watching videos on YouTube and you know, just kind of it has been a good time because we do have more time at home to teach the kids more and just kind of uh let them you know learn more about the religion and teach him or have him ask questions. I did find a couple good series on YouTube and just online resources. I know it's the some of our local mosque they did put on some virtual classes for the kids and for adults and everything else like that. So, it it's been, you know we were trying our best right. And in some cases, you know, I almost feel like the silver lining to this when it comes to religion is you have more time now. You don't have the excuse of saying in life, “okay, I'm busy”, “I'm working this” and this and that. There's no excuse now, it's like are you just being lazy and you're not teaching, and you know you're not practicing yourself just out of pure laziness because before it was just like “hey I don't have time” so it's been positive in that effect. To teach – I'm learning more, my wife, my kids, so it's in that case it's been okay. Just kind of reaching out and looking around and then reaching, you know, going to different websites and going through the mosque and stuff like that and learning stuff online.

I: Yeah. Seems like you're definitely getting to do at least some you know religious activities, even if it is online. What are your kind of your thoughts and feelings about practicing virtually?

R: You know (clears throat) it's good cause it's at your own pace, right. You can pause it if you don't understand something, rewind it, and you can kind of replay it I guess, right. but that's I think that's a positive. On the other hand, you know, sometimes just being in the mosque or being with the congregation, it feels I guess I don't know, there's a special feeling to it I guess, right. You know you're at the mosque is this the House of God right. So that's the only part of it that's missing. But as far as knowledge and stuff like that, I think virtually it's good. I mean, it's not a bad thing. I like it but, you know it is definitely – I miss going to mosque and praying there in congregation with, you know, another 150 to 100 people with that part, you just, there's something to it, it just feels good.

I: Yeah, anything else that you like or dislike about it?

R: Well that's about it, I think.

I: Okay. How have your imams or religious leaders drawn on scriptural or Muslim history sources to kind of help the community members to understand and cope with the COVID-19 crisis?

R: So, you know there have been pandemics all throughout history of the world, right. And in the Quran, it states it very clearly. You know, there're pandemics and how the Prophet Sulayman handled it and how he, you know, if you have it stay in your town, don't go out so you spread it. So, it was like okay you know that part of it when you start hearing that and then you start hearing about social distancing and stuff like that, you're like okay, makes sense, right. My religion tells me this is like 1400 years ago right. So, there is, you know you're like okay, you know this makes sense. I'll see – I'm going to follow what that said. So there – you know from some of the stuff that I've read online, and some of the things that friends and family have shared, you know that there's definitely some correlation from there. It's been gone on through history multiple times, so it's helped, you know, just to have that reference, right. Yeah, and how to kind of deal with some of that stuff. So yeah, they definitely touched on that from some of the stuff that I've seen online, and some of the things that I've read.

I: Yeah, definitely seems like it is definitely played a role in kind of how you understand COVID-19.

R: Right, right. Yeah.

I: Okay. Any other way that COVID-19 pandemic has affected your religious beliefs or faith?

R: Um, you know uh, I guess it's just uh I look at COVID-19 from a religious standpoint, I guess. So, you know there's going to be hardships, right. It tells us in our scripture, in the Quran over and over, you know there's going to be hardships – you're going to face hardships right. And then what happened? You know you just got to be patient and you'll get through it, right. So, I always remember this one in one of the surahs in the Quran. It says with hardships comes peace. So, I always – that always makes me feel better. Puts my heart at ease right where it's like, okay, this is a hardship. Now thankfully it hasn't, you know, we've experienced some light hardship but compared to others out there that you see what's going on in the world, other parts of the region and everything like that, they they've had it really worse than us, right. So, you're obviously more thankful, you know, for being in the position that you're in and you pray, and you wish the best for everybody. So, have I started praying more and making more time, stuff like that, during these hard times. Yeah. It's made me appreciative for what I have and more thankful for what that's about.

I: Mhmm, yeah. Okay. So, these next few questions are going to be a bit more focus on like social justice issues. Kind of focusing on the Muslim and your own response and engagement with issues. These will focus little bit more on the Black Lives Matter protest that happened, you know in 2020 and all that. But how has your mosque or the Islam center responded to calls for social justice made by the Black Lives Matter movement?

R: It's definitely been, you know, I'm in the [urban area in California], so it's like we're super civil rights, it's very liberal so that you know that the mosques are very diverse than other parts of the regions of the United States. To have people from all over the place, so it's definitely been

talked about. I know that they put out the flyers whenever there's protests, whenever there is any kind of conversations about what's going on and addressing some of our own in our communities. Maybe, you know, diversity and kind of talk about some of their own racial biases that we have within our communities here in America, even in the Muslim community. I honestly think it's a positive thing and I'm glad they're talking about it. Any struggle from any for any people, doesn't matter if it's African Americans, Arabs, whatever it is, any social injustice is bad, right. So, I'm glad that they you know when, when the rise of the whole Black Lives matter and all that the protestors going on, it was discussed and I would get emails about it from my mosque discussing some of the events that are happening. So, there has definitely – It's been raised and it's been communicated to the community.

I: Yeah, yeah definitely. Any ways that you personally have shown solidarity with the movement in addition to like having conversations and all that.

R: You know in the past, I've been to protest before pre covid, I've been to protest and things of that nature. During the covid, I obviously I haven't. I haven't. I know there there's been protests, I just haven't personally, I just didn't want to put myself in risk of catching covid. But you know, conversations, talking to people even in my at work, you know and seeing, you know, the whole talk about diversity and some of the things that happen around the world and just kind of um bringing awareness to what's happening, you know. Cause a lot of people have blinders on, right? So, I think sometimes just having conversation with people that have different opinions, obviously. You know a good conversation; we don't want to like have arguments and stuff like that. I just went – when people argue, I just kind of backup and am like, alright, you know that's not the right person to talk to, but if people want to have open dialogue, you know, I try to shed some light on it and the best way I could, right. So, I guess just kind of having those conversations. I know at work we started recently having these diversity and inclusion conversations and just everybody kind of sharing their perception of what's happening in the world and racial injustice and stuff like that.

I: Mhmm, alright. So, kind of in addition to kind of more additional social justice issues like issues with race like Islamophobia, violence against Muslims, Blacks, Hispanics, LGBTQ kind of anything like that, how do you think the Muslim communities in the US like should be doing?

R: (Sign) Honestly, um the older generations that um – it actually have seen it here, you know, the older generations that are on the boards of some of these mosques and stuff like that, they're in the old way of thinking, right. Now, as the new generation comes up and I don't blame them for the top process, they came some immigrated from these countries, Third World countries where life was hard, they come here for a better life, they're scared, you know. So, they spent 30 years, 40 years working probably rough jobs, hard jobs, physical labor jobs. They're tired and they go to the mosque and they stick to each other, right. But now, our generation likes our generation, my generation first generation of Palestine-Americans, it's our duty and to get on these boards and show the world that hey, the Muslim communities and I and I see it happening. You know across the other parts of United States like Dino in Dallas they go down in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and they reach out and they have sermons and they mentioned the racial injustice in their sermons and things like that matter. So, my generation now we need to step up get on the boards of these mosques and let our voices be heard and work with other groups. Even if we don't share the same page, work with other groups and kind of (clears

throat) you know, work together and show that we can start from here and look at each other's differences and still not – I'm not, you know everybody still practice what they you know, believe – at the same time we all have to be good to each other and things of that nature and at the end of the day, you got to be good human no matter where you from or what you believe, you know, what's your background is right. So, like I said, the older generation there on the boards of these mosques, I think that wasn't there -social justice wasn't their first priority, right. It was kind of survival. You know, even getting the chance to set up these mosques when I from what I heard, even here in California, you know it was so hard, just some of the things they faced, with cities of trying to even get mosques built in certain areas and how hard it was cause racism and everything else. And so I think it's moving in a positive direction just cause we, our first generation kids and people they've grown up here now, we're more American than we are Palestinian, right. We've been here for 30 something years, right, 36 plus years. So, it's we need to kind of influence the best way we can right, led by example. So, is it getting better? Yeah, I think so. I think it's going to be in the future generations, it's going to be good. It's going to be there's going to be more good conversation.

I: Yeah, definitely. This kind of gets us into our next section, our last section for the interview. Talking about more about inspiration and hope and the good things to come in the future um so these questions are designed more to explore that aspect. What would you say that the most uplifting experience since the outbreak of COVID-19? Something that has you know inspired hope or happiness for you?

R: You know (sigh) to be honest it's the fact that I'm spending more time with my wife and kids more than I ever have. It's because, you know, I don't have to drive to work, commute, spend 8/9 hours at work, come home, you know, I just had another hour sitting in traffic and then coming home and I'm beat right. I'm tired, I want to eat, and I just want to relax. But now it's like, okay, you know, I've set my schedule up where, you know, we're home together all day, we get to do more things together as far as like I said we take our walks, we get that you know we're bonding more than we would pre-covid only cause of just how life is set up right. School, sports, and there was so many things going on right and you really just got to spend the weekend together, right. And then the weekend for two days and they go by they fly by, so you know bonding, building great relationships with each other, and helping, you know, build up the kids self-esteem and keep them staying positive as possible with them and trying to stir them through all this craziness that's going on and just kind of explaining to him, to my best ability, what's happening right. So yeah, there's definitely I would think that's the most positive thing is that the bonds that we're building through these crazy times and hopefully in the next you know, year by next year and next year we can look back at this and just say man look at you know we made it through all this stuff it was crazy, can't believe it happened but it's in our rearview now.

I: Yeah, So, what would you say that you're looking forward to doing most once COVID-19 is gone, or if you get the vaccine?

R: Definitely traveling somewhere you know, being cooped up in the same area in the house for this long. Definitely want to travel, go somewhere. Hopefully when they you know it's just kind of gets a little easier in the travel restrictions and so on and so forth. Or maybe we get all vaccinated, but definitely going somewhere traveling with – it is funny cause we were planning on going to Palestine right before all this stuff happened. Like we had bought airplane tickets in

2019 to go in 2020 in June and obviously that didn't work right, we ended up canceling. But yeah, definitely want to visit. It would be my kids' first time. I haven't been since like 19 like 96. So yeah, it's I definitely want to travel, go somewhere, see something different.

I: Yeah, definitely you know that they will come one day soon, hopefully. Yeah, um, anything else that you'd like to share with me and it could be about anything we talked about today or if there's something I didn't talk about that you'd like to share, anything that you'd like to add?

R: No, no, I think we've covered everything. Thank you for doing this. I think it's good to get a everybody's opinion and get good feedback from everyone. And you know, I hope 2021 is a prosperous and healthy year for everybody and for yourself. And thank you for your time.

I: Yeah, thank you. I appreciate you spending your afternoon with me and getting your feedback. I appreciate it a lot and yeah, if you know anyone else would be interested in being part of the study, you know you can share the link. I think it's on the list of questions I sent you, feel free to share that out. But yeah, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

R: No, you're welcome. We have a great weekend.

I: You too. Bye.