



Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: AAS 2.00

Date: October 11, 2012

Gender: Female

Name: Fawziya Al-Ramahi

Date of Birth: 1947

Country of Origin: Palestine, Kuwait

Year of Immigration: 1990

Abstract: Fawziya Al-Ramahi is a 65-year-old 1st Generation immigrant. Fawziya detailed her immigration from Kuwait to the United States, including her original to only visit her siblings in the Milwaukee area. However, Saddam Hussein's rise to power and Kuwait's collapse motivated her to stay and greatly affected her ultimate decision to remain in the States. Fawziya found that her family life and raising her children in the United States was particularly successful because she remained a firm believer in Islam. She explained how she has been able to continue to practice her religion, especially in the United States. This interview has been translated from Arabic to English.

Key Themes: 9/11, Saddam Hussein, Kuwait, Palestine, Islam and Qur'an,

Note: In the transcript, "I" refers to Interviewer, and "R" refers to Respondent/Interviewee.

I: This interview is for the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute, and it is on October 11th 2012. And it is with Fawziya Al-Ramahi. to start off, can you just tell me where you're from originally?

R: From Palestine, from El Bira, yes.

I: And then when did you come to the United States?

R: I came in 1990.

I: You can speak in Arabic if you want.

R: I came, I came from Kuwait. I was in Kuwait. I got married, and I moved to Kuwait. And I came here from Kuwait, since '90, when Saddam entered the country.

I: Uh huh, okay.

R: We came here in the year '90. Like 1990, we came here.

I: Okay, but you were born in Palestine?

R: I was born in Palestine, El Bira. El Bira is by Ramallah. Do you know Ramallah?

I: Mhmm.

R: Here's Ramallah, El Bira is next to Ramallah.

I: Okay, why did you move from Palestine to Kuwait?

R: Because I got married, and my husband used to work in Kuwait. He took me with him to Kuwait.

I: Okay.

R: Like, I got married around the War in 1967, in the year 1965. So, I went to Kuwait, the country fell. I came here, Kuwait fell. [laughs] Thank God, we survived the war.

I: When you came here, did you have your kids with you as well?

R: When I came here, because my sister was here, my older kids were studying here. I had three kids here, when I came here.

I: Hmm, okay.

R: And my sister was here. So, I came to visit, I came for a visit here. Kuwait fell, and I was here. So, the eighth month, I was here. In the beginning of the eighth month, Kuwait fell, and they stopped letting Palestinians return to Kuwait.

I: Okay, what year was this?

R: Hmm?

I: What year? What year was it? Like...

R: Oh, what year?

I: Yes.

R: The year '90. 1990, it happened. I came here, and my siblings had done paperwork for me. 1983, they did paperwork for me. So, when I came here and we went to the

immigration here, they told us they had paperwork and we should wait here. They let us stay here. They put my kids in school, I had two kids, and they had to start school— one in high school, one in first grade. They entered my kids in the school here, and I swear, the Americans are the best here, better than the Arabs. If it were with the Arabs, they would have left us. [laughs] I swear! No, they told us, enough, I'll tell you I'll do paperwork. You'll have paperwork, like you have a Green Card. Like, enough, stay. No, and my paperwork came out in '92. The year '92, my paperwork came out. I had a Green Card. And in the year— after five years, the year '97, I got citizenship. I got a passport, and my kids were with me. All of them got passports with me. But the two oldest children, because they were older than 21 years, they didn't get it. They got married here to Americans, and they got it.

I: Okay, is that why you stayed in the Milwaukee area? Because your sister was here?

R: Yes, sister and brothers. My brother, my uncles, my—

I: When did they come to—

R: All my relatives here!

I: When did they come to America?

R: My relatives?

I: Mhmm.

R: Since maybe 1960, maybe they came here. The year '60, they came here. My uncles. But my siblings, no. My siblings, the year 1070. 70. 1970. They came so they could study here, and they stayed here.

I: And are you Muslim?

R: All.

I: Okay [laughs]. Has adjusting to America been hard for you? And for your children?

R: Like was life was hard on us? No! Because we— we have money! Like, they transferred it from the Kuwait bank to here for us. They transferred the money. From Kuwait bank, to the bank here, USA. They put the money for us— like, we have money. My husband opened four businesses. Like, four businesses. One is furniture, one is grocery, and one is— also groc— gas station, it was also. And he opened a gas station. And he let the kids here study and work. They started working in them, the businesses. Yes, he started them. We still had money, like. Yes.

I: Okay. And how many kids do you have?

R: I have five boys and one sis— and one daughter.

I: And you said they were in older when you moved here? Like—

R: There were three who were studying here. Do you see?

I: Okay. In college?

R: Yes. You, see? The other two were with me when we came to visit. One was tawjihi— high school— he had to take it in Kuwait. One was entering first grade. Even in high school, he would his brothers in the businesses. He would help his dad. So, all of them, when we first got our money— our money came in August— we were with my sister, we were living with my sister. We came to visit my sister, you see? And my kids were at my sister's, as well. You see? So, when our money came, we went and rented a house and we furnished it and we stayed in it, and after a year, we bought this house. We bought this in the year '97. We're living.

I: Okay.

R: But we're happy.

I: And you said you came when Kuwait had fallen into trouble with Saddam Hussein and everything?

R: Yeah.

I: Was it— were you scared for that or what was your experience with that situation?

R: Yes, I was scared. I am here, but because our money was there. Our house was there. Our belongings were there. Our cars were in the garage. You see? I would yell. But you know, I would yell, but when I would hear how the Kuwaiti people left when Saddam came, Kuwait imprisoned the people and imprisoned them. And why did I yell about belongings and cars? My kids were with me, thank God. Right? Thank God, I stopped yelling, and I put my head on my pillow and I would say oh God, I have this and this and I have this and this. And look now you have come here, and see what you have now. You leave, and you can't go back anymore to your house. A person would be sad. But thank God, because I have my children with me, I didn't worry too much. Thank God, my kids were with me in peace, this is the best thing. Better than all the belongings.

I: Did you have any family there that was still left in Kuwait? Who weren't able to get out?

R: Like, do I have parents still?

I: Parents—

R: My husband's parents were but they all left; they went to Amman. They left. Like, right when Saddam entered, they all got out.

I: Have you been back to Kuwait or Palestine since then?

R: Me? No, I like America. [laughs] And I love America.

Daughter-in-law: Have you been back to Kuwait or Palestine?

R: No, of course, Palestine is my home. Yeah, Palestine is my home. I love America. Even if they asked me if I want to go to Palestine or America, I would tell them no, America. I love America.

I: Do you still have family and relatives in Kuwait and Palestine?

R: Of course! I have a brother there, like, all the time, and I have a sister there all the time. I have brothers who come and go. Come here, go there. I have— all of my family. All my family in Palestine.

I: Okay, and then for your family in America? Are they all in Milwaukee?

R: Mhmm.

I: Okay.

R: Like, I have six siblings. From them, there are three here.

I: And then are you the oldest or youngest?

R: I am the oldest one. Yes.

I: And your husband's family? What was—

R: My husband in Chicago, he have. Do you know the Trahbal side? In Chicago? The Trahbal side? These would be the kids of my husband's sister. Like, children, my husband has the kids of his sister and his brother. His cousins. He has in Chicago. My husband doesn't have anybody here. My family is here in Milwaukee. We came here so my kids could study here. We came here to stay with my kids, you see?

I: I know you said you wear the scarf?

R: Mhmm.

I: But how would you describe your religious life? Like do you go to the mosque frequently?

R: Yes, sometimes. Sometimes.

I: Do you find that you have a strong Arab community?

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Here— here, the Arabs and Muslims are greater than Chicago. Like, the religious ones are greater. You see? Like, here you go to— you go where— you go to the mall, you go anywhere here, and you at least see ten women wearing the hijab. There's a lot of women here who were the scarf. A lot, a lot, a lot. I— you know, my family, we have faith. As soon as the girl reaches puberty, she wears the hijab. You see? All the girls were the hijab here. Like, I attended a wedding once in Chicago. How the girl undresses! It's not possible. If you want to dress, you were half-sleeves. If you want to dress short, you were past the knee. You see? But Chicago, no. The girls— there's a lot of girls— they're not dressed fully. Like here, they have faith more than Chicago. The standard of faith is a little higher.

I: And your daughter wears the hijab too?

R: Mhmm.

I: And she has kids?

R: My daughter? Yes, she does. She has three sons and a daughter.

I: And how old are they?

R: The daughter– the daughter of my daughter? My granddaughter is in her second year of college. Like, she would be twenty? Or nineteen?

I: Twenty. Does she wear the hijab too?

R: No, her daughter, no. She's loose. [laughs] These kids, like, someone can't force and force them. Right? She has to be decided on this matter.

I: So, do you find the children–

R: And also, my daughter isn't here. She's in Jordan.

I: Ah, okay. Does she live in Jordan?

R: My daughter? Yes. She got married there.

I: Oh, okay. And your other kids, do they live here or in Jordan?

R: My other kids, mine, you see, like I have five in-laws. The four where the hijab. But this one– first her husband is young, they got married young, in school they got married. My son was in school. My son was in high school. She was in the first year. She was in

ninth grade, and he was in tenth. He loved her and wanted to marry her, so they got married.

I: Oh.

R: And he loved her. So, my youngest son got married— here, I'll show you the pictures. Come look. This is my husband here. This is my husband.

R: The grandchildren are nice.

I: Yes, they are very nice.

R: They entertain.

I: Do you see them a lot?

R: Yes, the ones that are here. But there's my son in Saudi Arabia.

I: Oh, okay.

R: Yes, he went to Saudi Arabia. He wanted to raise his children there. His daughters. He has three daughters. Like, he wants to raise them, they get a little older, then bring them back. Like, they have citizenship. But he liked to raise them a little on Islam. But it's worth the move. And he let it be worth it for us. Each year, we go to them, and they are a year older.

I: When did he go to Saudi Arabia, and where does he live?

R: He lives in Riyadh.

I: And when did he go?

R: It's been four years.

I: Four years?

R: Mhmm.

I: And your daughter is in Jordan?

R: Mhmm.

I: And the others are here? Yes?

R: Yes. But my daughter is coming because she got the Green Card. She got the Green Card; she's coming here. She's coming here. God willing.

I: God willing. God willing in peace.

R: God willing.

I: So when you came here, your children were older, like they were in college and they were entering high school, but were you scared that America would affect them negatively? Like, they wouldn't be like the Arabs, they would be like Americans?

R: No, no. I, I raised my kids, like, with religion, I raised my kids with— like even her husband, he came here, he was six years old, he came here. He entered the first grade here. But during the whole time, I would talk to him. I would tell him what Allah said, what Allah talks about, what Allah this and that. I would tell him like, we aren't like the Americans. Every day. I would tell him, and tell him, and tell him. Like, I would tell him how, like, we say heed your mother, heed your mother, heed your mother, this everyday probably fifty times. I would tell him heed your mother, heed your mother, heed your

mother, I'd tell him. I'd tell him the verse. Every time he would talk back, like that, I would tell him the verse. You see? But thank God, Lord of the people. Like, he lives with religion, he prays, he fasts. You see? Like, his manners are good, good— thank God. Like, ask anyone here in Milwaukee, in regards to al-Ramahi, thank God. They all vouch for them. All the Arabs here that Muslims, they vouch for my kids, they vouch for my husband. Thank God, thank God. The others came here when they were older, even the one in Tawjihi. He came here when he was eighteen years old, he came here. He understands everything, but I was scared for the young one. I was worried about the young one, and he would go and— you know how they. The kids here are difficult, they are difficult, difficult. And raising them is difficult, difficult. Like my siblings didn't raise them here. My siblings— as soon as they reach school, they go to the Arab countries. There, like, they raise the kids there. And when they're older, they come here. It's difficult raising kids here— do you have younger siblings?

I: I have an older sister and a younger sister. She—

R: And brothers?

I: I don't have brothers.

R: Better for your mother and father. [laughs] Because the daughter continues to care for her mother and father! Right? But the boy is hard. Raising the kids in this country is hard. Like, for example, when you're older, when your mother wants to go to the mall, you like to go the mall with your mother. You like it, right? But the boy doesn't like to go with his mom to the mall. When he gets older to be ten years old, at the tenth year, he refuses to go. He doesn't go, like, it's difficult to leave them. Like, raising— you need to keep— you can't go out and go about. You can't do it. You see? But the girl stays with her mother. Really, wherever her mother goes she goes with her. So, it's hard, it's hard, I swear. But thank God, I stayed with him, and I read him the Qur'an. Like God willing, the other day, he came and recited to me, he memorized on the Internet and memorized the Qur'an too. He memorized more than twelve small chapters. Memorized all— others he memorized

too. Thank God, and he prays, and he fasts. Like, thank God, Lord of the people. His manners are good, his manners are good. Of course, the manners of the Arabs and Muslims are good. Thank God.

I: And the daughter of your son and your daughter—

R: Oh, thank God, they are well-behaved. Thank God. Thank God. Like, my son, my oldest son— his children are still young— he was married before and nothing came of her. And they divorce, and then he married when he was older. Like, when he got married, he was thirty-two years old. So, his kids are still— the oldest his now going to high school. While the younger one, he has two kids in school that are studying. Like, they are very well-raised and well-behaved. Very good. Even my other son. Like, no. They say that raising kids here is worse than raising kids in the Arab way, raising kids with religion. Like, their manners are good. Thank God.

I: Okay. Were you here during 9/11?

R: Yes.

I: Okay. How did it affect you and your family? Because you are living in Milwaukee, but everyone was affected by what happened. What happened to you?

R: Nothing to me. I, like, the exact day it happened, my son told don't go outside, because they'll attack anyone wearing the scarf, you know. Wearing the hijab. So, I stayed in the house that day. I didn't go outside. I drive a car, so I can get out. You see? My neighbor, the one here, even though I, if I see the neighbors like this and see them, I will say hi, hi. Nothing big, you know. But this was the first time I had seen him still. He knocked on the door here, the side door here. He knocked. I was— when my oldest son was married, they lived with me upstairs. Like, my daughter-in-law was upstairs, in her room. I looked outside at the door here, and it was him— I knew him, I knew it was the neighbor from behind. I got scared at first. [laughs] I went and put the scarf on my head,

and I opened the door for him, and what would he do? Attack me? If he did, my daughter-in-law would call the police, you know. And he said, it's a shame! If you could just see! Like, he said you are a good neighbor, you are a good whatever. And if anyone from the neighborhood bothers you, tell me. Like, I told him I don't English that well, but if I could talk to you, you would understand. On that guy, that killed those people. What's his name? Dahmer? Yes. This Dahmer. This guy was in Milwaukee. He cuts them, and he drugs them, and he kills them, and puts them in the freezer. Right? I told him, do you do that too? He said no, no. I said okay, then why do all Muslims— okay, it was a Muslim who blew it up. Are all Muslims like this? I told him he was crazy. Are we crazy too? Do you see? Yeah. He said no, no, you are a good neighbor, you are whatever, all these nice words, he started to tell me. He said if anyone bothers you, anyone from the neighbors, just come talk to me. I told him God willing, no. And it was the opposite, all of them, hi, hi. It's a shame. Our neighborhood is good. Our area, all of it. The people are good, you know. Not bad.

I: Okay. Is there anything you want to tell me on your history? And anything you think I need to know about you and on your family and all the people?

R: No, thank God, we are living and happy. Thank God. Thank God. My kids are happy, I'm happy. I'm having— I love America. I don't know, you know. I swear. Like, my car is here, I can go out, and come and go. And my kids are living here, in Franklin, all my children are here. My siblings are here. All of us, all of us are here in the area. My siblings— I'm not in a foreign place, I'm in my country. And I have Arabic satellite, I put everything Arabic. Like, Arabic series. You know, thank God, I'm happy. I'm happy here.

I: Thank God.

R: You know, if they told me go to Palestine, no, I'd stay here. Thank God.

I: And how old are you?

R: I am sixty-five.

I: Sixty-five.

R: My birthday is in '47.

I: And do you know anybody who would like to do an interview with us? So, they can also tell us their history?

R: I swear, I don't know. I haven't asked anybody. I don't know.

I: Can I give you my phone number? If you thought of anyone?

R: Yes. Like, if anyone talked to me about it, I'll tell you. Give me your number.

I: I'll write my name also.

R: What's your name?

I: Ayah.

R: Ayah is a nice name. Ayah. My granddaughter's name is Ayah.

I: Oh, really?

R: Mhmm.

I: Thank you.

R: Her manners too. She's pretty and smart, Ayah. This is Ayah. But now she's older than this. A little older, this is Ayah.

I: Oh, okay. She's pretty.

R: But is it okay that you come and not drink anything? I can make you tea. I have cake too. There's cake, yeah?

I: I ate before I came here.

I: Okay, I'm just giving her my name and my contact information, and then I wrote down the website too if you guys wanted to look at it.

Daughter-in-law: Okay.

I: Just to do that. And I told if you guys think of—

R: Oh, but no pictures?

I: No, no pictures.

R: So, they don't photograph?

I: No, no. and then if you think anyone you think might be a good candidate for the interviews, you can always give me a call and let me know. And then I can always call them up and tell— and ask them if they would like to be interviewed by one of our interviewees. But that's—

Daughter-in-law: It's a 630 area code.

I: Yeah, I'm from Chicago.

Daughter-in-law: Oh, you are?

I: Yeah, yeah.

Daughter-in-law: Oh, okay. But you study at Marquette?

I: Mhmm.

Daughter-in-law: Oh, so you go back and forth every day?

I: No. I stay at Marquette. I live there. And then— I'm a Resident Assistant, an RA. So, I live there and then I get to go home whenever have time for it.

Daughter-in-law: Oh, okay.

I: Next time I see my family—

R: Like, you study at Marquette?

I: Yes.

R: You got every day to Chicago?

I: No. I live in Milwaukee.

R: You stay here?

I: Yes.

R: And where are your parents?

I: In Chicago. And my sister is in Madison too. And my other sister is still in high school. She lives with my parents.

R: Well, come visit me if you are in Milwaukee! [laughs] I swear, come visit us.

Daughter-in-law: She has a granddaughter— a granddaughter and a grandson that goes to Madison too.

I: Oh really? Oh. That's so interesting. How old are they?

Daughter-in-law: one is uh—

R: Nineteen and eighteen.

I: So, sophomore and freshman?

Daughter-in-law: Yup.

I: Oh, okay, cool. My sister, she's a senior. At Madison, she's a little older. She's almost done. She's graduating soon.

R: What do you study?

I: Me? Um, International Affairs. I want to work in Syria, or Lebanon, or in Jordan.

R: In travelling then? Oh, in travelling you would work.

I: God willing.

R: God willing.

I: And my sister—

R: Maybe in Jordan with travel, we can come see you.

I: God willing.

Daughter-in-law: God willing.

I: Well, you guys can call me anytime if you have any questions or anything. I'd be more than happy to answer them.

Daughter-in-law: You'll call her to let her know when the article is ready so she can—