



## Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: RA 6.00

October 24, 2012

Name: Husam

Country of Origin: Palestine

Date of Birth: 1992

Year of Immigration: Born in U.S.

**Abstract:** The interviewee chose to remain anonymous and will be referred to as “Husam” throughout the interview. Husam identifies himself more with his Arabic culture rather than his American culture, although he addresses his difficulty of finding the right balance between the two contrasting cultures. American born and raised in Jordan as a young boy, Husam experienced many different environments and found a way to adapt to whichever setting he found himself in. He gives the audience a unique point of view of the difficulties he has faced with the English language and explains how he handled the obstacles in order to better himself. Husam explains that cultural clothing could show ones identity but in his opinion, clothing doesn't define who he is or who he will be but feels he will start wearing cultural clothing more often as he grows up. Husam's interview provides insight on the opinions and perspectives of a second generation Arab-American man who finds importance in attaching a greater meaning on his religion and culture.

**Key Themes:** Arab-American culture, immigration, identity, cultural clothing, second-generation

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

I: What is your name, age, and your level of education? When and where was it completed?

R: Would like to be known as Husam, 20 years old, student at Marquette University.

I: When you were growing up, where did you go to school (K-12): public schools, community schools, such as Salam School, or private/ religious schools?

R: I went to school first overseas; I went to Philadelphia school which is in Amman, Jordan. I went there from kindergarten to fourth grade then I came to the U.S. for fifth and sixth grade. I went to Shepherd Hills for elementary school then I went to Oak Creek West Middle School for sixth grade. Then I went back to Jordan I studied AhSS and for another two years so seventh and eighth grade, then for high school I came here, and I studied at Oak Creek High school then after high school I came to Marquette University.

I: Tell me about places and buildings where you spent a lot of time during your childhood.

R: Places I spent a lot of time during my childhood was around my neighborhood in my background and school also. I come home from school, and I used to play a lot of sports and when I got the chance I went outside. Then also when I was younger, I used to have my famous little house in Jordan we called, it was this little room that I used to spend a lot of time in.

I: Tell me more about your home, school or some such building that you remember fondly.

Describe the various rooms: who lived there; who shared these spaces, what activities happened here?

R: That's how I spent most of my childhood, it was a nice house, it means a lot to me and pretty much its two adjacent buildings to each other, it had a big backyard with a lot of trees and garden from peach trees to grapevines, we grew a lot of plants and a lot of flowers too because my mom enjoyed flowers. And then from the inside I used to spend most of my time in the study room which was my library in a way which we transformed it and changed it to the toy room because we kind of renovated, one we changed it the television room to the study room. I used to spend most of my time there, I remember I watched all of the 1988 France world cup in that room, and I used to play a lot of games against my brothers usually, then we used to wrestle a lot too, we got the mattresses and just wrestled. They were fun rooms.

I: Why did you move back overseas?

R: My father passed away when I was six months, so my mom wanted to be closer to her family and her and my father were already building a house in Jordan at that time, so my mom wanted

us to grow up over there well at least me. My mom wanted to be closer to my grandmother.

I: Tell me how you felt about being Muslim in these different spaces. How did you feel like you expressed your Muslim identity differently in these different places?

R: Well, growing up in Jordan I really didn't feel it was something that defined me it was just a given because everyone I knew over there were mostly Muslim, I knew some Christian but being Muslim didn't differentiate me from anyone else, I would go to mosque on Fridays and hear the call to prayer. When I came here it was somewhat of a culture shock because you don't hear the call of prayers anymore, the atmosphere is somewhat different, and the majority of my friends became rather Christian than Muslims and I felt like it did somewhat identify me as who I am but pre-9/11 I was identified as more than an Arab than a Muslim.

I: About how old are you?

R: 20 years old

I: Did you serve in the U.S. military and, if so, when?

R: No

I: Are you currently employed, which includes working outside the home? If so, what's your job?

R: I work at GE health care.

I: Are you married? Was your marriage arranged? If so, did you know your spouse before getting married?

R: Not married, no kids.

I: How do you define or identify yourself?

R: I would answer this question very differently through phases in my life, right now I'm just a human being, another person. I'm Palestinian and I'm also an American and then it's a very hard question to answer because you never really find the right balance of which identity you are. Like I was saying, you really don't find the right balance, it's highlighted pretty well in Edward Saeed's book just the title of all you need to you know all you need to take away from is pretty much out of place, being out of place throughout your whole life in a way.

I: Which culture do you identify most with, the American culture or the Arab culture?

R: I would say Arab culture and that is because most of my childhood was overseas and usually you base your culture on your childhood on how you grew up and who you're associated with throughout you know your juvenile years and just how the brain shapes itself, at least I would

identify myself more towards the Arab culture but I do like to take the good and bad of both cultures. I like to take the good rather than the bad so.

I: Do you feel like you identify yourself by the changes of your surroundings?

R: Like the environment I'm in?

I: Yeah, the environment.

R: Yes well I moved a lot throughout my life I went to a lot of different schools I associated with a lot of different people so depending on the environment I'm in, my core is my principles, my values will always stay the same. But depending on what environment I'm in, I adapt to that environment, meaning that if I go overseas for instance the language, I will be speaking in Arabic, then when I come over here it'll be mainly English. It just depends on your atmosphere, wherever I'm at I'll adapt different to it.

I: So where are the places that you must successfully express your identity?

R: Work place I would say because at work I express my identity though, well you see its interesting because you really never know yourself, you never know who you are, you're always lost in the cosmos, which is a metaphor. You really don't know yourself, I'm going to say which self of mine is the most real self or the self that I truly am because I really don't know because the place where I feel most comfortable I guess or most I don't know controlling in a way is work and that's why I mentioned that first but I guess it's not something about my identity if we are talking culture wise. Work everything just feels so right, everything is in your control and is just everything is smooth, and you know what to do.

I: Are there any traditions of your religion or your culture that you practice?

R: Well yeah, I would say yeah. I have this principle where if you feel on your religion, culture what not then at least you don't follow it by just the name of it because then it doesn't really have any effects on you in a way, it doesn't really mean anything. So, for instance for religion I do pray, and give charity, I do fast and all that. Culture wise, I don't know what I would associate with tradition but I eat Middle Eastern food so I think that would be one of the traditions. I listen to the music, to Arabic music, I look at different arts in the Arab world, I look at history, I read about history, and I guess that's some traditional stuff.

I: Do you think that your brothers identify more with their American culture then if they weren't

raised in the Middle East?

R: More than me I would say, yeah because as I said before, I believe the person how he's shaped is based on how he's raised and where he's raised and depending on the atmosphere and environment he's in. Most of who you become later on in life is the way you grew and your first couple of years on this planet so my older brothers most of them at least grew up here almost all their lives so I would say their more associated maybe or evenly balanced with the American culture yeah.

I: Okay so where do you usually pray?

R: Depends where I'm at. At home, I pray at home, at school, I pray in the prayer room, if there's a mosque nearby, I'll go to a mosque but usually there isn't no mosque nearby or what not so wherever I'm at.

I: So, do you still consider Arabic your first language?

R: Yeah, it is my first language, but I use it a lot less I would say. But the way I define it is the first language is the first language that you learned so that's how I could consider it, I do use it at home, but I also do use English at home but when I was growing up the only language, I knew was Arabic, I never knew English until I came here, I barely knew English, I had a thick accent too. But yeah, my first language would still be Arabic, but I use my second language, which is English, a lot more.

I: So how difficult for you was it to become fluent in English?

R: It was hard, it was difficult. I took like not even a literature class but an English class but we were reading a couple words in English overseas, but it really didn't help much at all especially with conversations. I'd never spoken English with anybody at least until I came here in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I got here I didn't know anything; I didn't understand anything. I remember when I was in elementary school, I first tried by myself without any tutor or classes, but I couldn't comprehend anything, especially math, I was always really good at math and math stuff. I know I knew it, but I didn't understand what it was asking for, so I really didn't know how to do it. So, it took me about 6 months I guess to really, I was still young so it's very easy to get used to the language so it took me about 6 months to get about I wouldn't say fluent but better at the language and able to perform to what I was capable of. But my accent, I was always made fun of from my brothers and friends because I had a really really bad accent. And until today I have trouble pronouncing some words, like nu- nu- numerator, yeah, I got it that time, but I do have trouble pronouncing

some words. I still have difficulty with language because I sometimes I'll try to translate something from Arabic to English so it's always been a struggle, but I notice that is one of my weak points because I'm more of a math science type of person more than a literature English or language at least so I always noticed since I was young I always noticed it was a weak point so I worked on it throughout my life. I've bettered myself at it, I've practiced it, and I still practice it today to get better at it but when did I lose, I lost I think my accent unless I still have one, I lost my accent maybe sophomore junior year of high school, I think that's the last time I remember.

I: Okay, so what are your connections with your parents' homeland?

R: Well, my parents' homeland is Palestine, my mother and father grew up there. My mom, she was 11 or 12 years old when she moved to, after the six day war in 67 where they moved, she crossed the Jordan river, her, her mother and her brothers and sisters, because her father at that moment, which is my grandpa, was a translator in Saudi Arabia so he wasn't with the family so he told them to evacuate or leave for safety because he wasn't there with them so they crossed the Jordan river and lived in Jordan for pretty much the rest of their lives. My father's family stayed in Palestine. Anyways usually when I do go, I do feel like there is a strong connection because I still feel those that's where my ancestry comes from and I do visit occasionally, I used to go every summer. Usually when I go, I visit my grandma over there which is my dad's mom and I visit family from there. I have one uncle right now over there and then two aunts and then my grandma so I visit whenever I can, and then also that's where my father's grave is so its where I go, so it still has that connection to me.

I: Could you see yourself living there in the future? Anywhere really, Amman or Palestine?

R: I'm not gonna answer that question but I don't know, wherever life takes me. I'll always leave that answer open ended; I never really want to say, sorry.

I: Okay, that's okay. Have any political events in your parent's homeland affected you?

R: Pretty much, war events or political events? Yeah, especially being a Palestinian because it was all politics, it was war so yeah it did affect me. It effected where I would through my life or what I would do, who I am, and where I am right now.

I: So how would you describe your political participation in the U.S.?

R: I vote, I watch politics, I keep up, I like that stuff so I would I read up on it and I follow usually every candidate and try to get as much information about it that can make an informed vote.

I: When it comes to candidates who are from your own culture, does that affect your voting behavior?

R: Maybe I'm not sure, never had a candidate that was from my own culture at least. Not sure though but usually I base my vote on if somebody's confident or not and not if they are of my race or culture or any of that stuff, I base it on who's the best to do the job.

I: What do you think about the Palestinian Israeli ongoing war? Do you see any hope in the situation?

R: I do see hope, I'll always see hope in everything even though I don't want to, but I do. It's a long struggle, it's been what over 67 years now, I lost track but if there's no real discussion, no real talks made or any of that stuff then nothing will be done but if it's taken seriously then we try to think that it will be then there is hope.

I: So, were you in the U.S. on September 11<sup>th</sup>?

R: I was, yes.

I: How did you feel at the time of 9/11 and what do you remember from that day?

R: I was in sixth grade, I don't know how old I was, 11 years old, I think. I was in class, I remember I was in history class, sitting down and all of a sudden, teachers were kind of panicking, students didn't really know what the heck was going on. I had no clue what the heck was going on and then I hear the twin towers. Being new to the state I really had no clue what the twin towers were, where they were located, I had no clue at all. And then I went home, I remember my mom was watching TV and she was in distraught, I come in and then I was like, "What's going on" and she explain it to me and stuff like that and I really don't know how I felt. I know I felt sad at that moment but you really, you really, I didn't know like because I don't know it's just, I was still so new that I didn't really know what the heck was going on but later on when it sunk in and I understood what happened I was, it was hurting.

I: Do you feel like the way people were reacting to your family changed after 9/11?

R: I mean it took about a year or two but yeah, I could tell especially when I'm out with my mom, grocery shopping, in restaurants, or where we are they look at her differently. When somebody is looking at you, you could sense something you know you feel something from, you just feel it I don't know it's very hard to explain but the mood and the vibe of people changed. Yes, at least, it's funny, let's see usually when I'm by myself nobody most people would think I'm Hispanic or something like that. They don't know if I'm Arab or Muslim or not and I can tell

when they don't know I am, and they talk about for example Muslims and what not I could sense the prejudice in a way. I don't want to say racism, but I'll say prejudice and I sense they talk about a Muslims and that and there's a lot of misconceptions and misunderstanding.

I: Okay so the next questions are about your life growing up. What aspects of your parents' homeland culture did they keep as you were growing up? Maybe when you were living here and not in Amman.

R: What aspects did I keep? Well, the language at the house, my mom would only speak to me in Arabic. Let's see, it's more characteristics than I would say aspects or culture. Culture I would you know I would wear a koufeya here and there, I would see my mom always wearing the thob or the food, the olive oil, which is famous, the I don't know it's very hard to parse through it. There's a lot of that culture that influences me today, of who I am at least. And it's just I guess like I said its more characteristics so for instance perseverance that's one, drive or motivation, being inspired, let's see and yeah.

I: Okay so when did you first start to drive?

R: I was 18.

I: How did your mom feel about your driving? Was she encouraging or discouraging?

R: She was encouraging.

I: Okay, let's see. How would you describe your mom's involvement in your education?

R: Strongly, she's the one pretty much that taught me when I was young at least. Overseas when I used to come back home from school, she wouldn't let me go outside at all or do any other activities until unless I have my homework done and she would sit next me and repeat the homework over and over and over and over again. I really did hate it at that time and then she would make sure I did it right and everything is a hundred percent, even more than hundred percent. She would just sit down, and she wouldn't get up until I was done. Yeah, she was a big factor in my schooling and her doing that actually gave me that drive, my drive was more than that too, she gave me the drive and the dedication, just doing more than one hundred percent every time I do something.

I: Did she influence your choice of a career and major?

R: Not necessarily no. I would say my brother influences me more my mom, she was always like kind of backed me on whatever I wanted to do. She wanted me to always do something good, something that will benefit me in the future, something that will make me happy and whatever I



chose she would've been alright with that but that time when I started picking majors and all that I would ask my brothers advice, my brothers and I would usually just think about it myself and see what I could see myself doing.

I: Did religion or culture influence your choice of friends?

R: No, no I wouldn't say so because when it comes to friends I do it based on who the person is and I'm usually friends with anybody I meet, I don't create enemies, I don't really see anybody not being a friend or any of that. There's something closer friends than other I understand that, but I wouldn't say because of my culture or my religion I am friends with this guy or this guy no but I can't deny the fact that it did somewhat influence friendship since some of the stuff that I would do or would like to do is more related to somebody that's from my own culture rather than somebody that's not. It did have a little effect but it's not something that would determine if somebody would be my friend or not.

I: Okay so when choosing your marriage partner what's the importance of religion and culture?

R: It's very important at least to me. Culture at least because I have let's say I have deep feelings for the language itself the Arabic language and I guess that would be one of the something I would want also food, I love food. Let's see but that's very stereotypical but it has a major influence I'd say because it's funny once I had a teacher it's the first time I heard it too it was a teacher when I was in high school, I'm not sure if I was a freshman or sophomore but my teacher he had a divorce before and then he got married again. I don't know why he brought this up he was my Spanish teacher he was telling the class he's like yeah if you want to marry somebody, marry somebody from your own culture somebody that you know understand you and all that. It's interesting he's like if you marry somebody from outside your culture or outside who you are then it won't work which is very wrong for a teacher to say anyways well there's a lot of reasons why it's wrong for a teacher to say but there is some truth to it, not one hundred percent true because I believe in interracial marriages and all that different stuff but at least for me it has an influence yes, yes.

I: Okay next is about culture clothing. Do you have any traditional or cultural clothing?

R: I mentioned earlier the koufeyah or hatta, that's one. There isn't much cultural clothing for guys as Palestinians so.

I: So, when do you wear them? Or where do you wear them?

R: Whenever I feel like it honestly nothing specific, I think when I get older I'll start wearing it

more because it just looks cool.

I: What does the cultural clothing mean to you, why are they important?

R: You see I could say like it shows an identity or whatnot but it's not really important, I don't really look at clothing as something that is important, it doesn't define who I am or who I will be so I don't see much significance in clothing at least for myself yes.

I: Does religion play a role in how you dress? Just on a daily basis.

R: No not for me no. No.

I: Is there anything else about your history that you would like to tell me?

R: Let me see. Regarding?

I: Anything, did I miss anything that you think would be important?

R: Maybe not to this specific research, okay I'll bring an example speaking of different cultures from being Arab and being also American. I've been trying to find the right balance and trying to find what you are because usually when I speak with my colleagues even, they are American just as I am, they don't like to identify me at least I noticed that it's different, I'm not as American as them in a way. For instance, I was in D.C. last semester and the question of my Americanness, I guess if that's a word, was raised I think 3 or 4 times. It wasn't just like a question it was just like oh he's just as American as we are and I don't see the necessity of that even being uttered, I don't think it has to be verbally agreed on or something I think it should be a given. I think that's yeah other than that I don't think at least nothing specific to this research or that needs to be said.

I: Okay just one more question. So, do you think the values of teenagers say in the Middle East are different than the ones here in America?

R: Yes.

I: Yeah, how so?

R: I knew there was a follow up, it's very difficult to explain because you really gotta see like from your own perspective in a way values overseas. There're always those same values that hold for every culture you go to, every nation you go to which is money's one, family's another and I guess being moral but overseas people are a little bit more at least not as openly expressive or as people in the United States. So, a little bit more conservative in thought at least I would say so not as liberal and America's not as liberal as Europe either so there's a little of different you know different balance between each nation or each continent at least. Family there is on a higher pedestal I guess than it is over here such as putting a parent in a nursing home is unheard

of over there let's see. What other values, being virtuous, everyone wants to be virtuous those are the main ones I would say yeah.

I: Okay well thank you very much for participating in this, I really appreciate it.

R: Yeah, no problem.