

# AL'ATHR: THE TRACE

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## The Director's Column

### Cultural Dress and Identity Narratives among Arab and Muslim Women Immigrants in Greater Milwaukee Area

AMWRRRI continues its mission of documenting the experiences and histories of Arab and Muslim communities in the Greater Milwaukee Area. Since 2010, it has addressed the dearth of information and marginalization of these immigrant groups, by creating an oral archive where men and women share their stories of immigration, integration, and identity.

Their collective testimonies provide valuable contributions to American immigration history. AMWRRRI's current project highlights how cultural and Islamic dress influence individual and group's identity. Material culture such as dress signals and asserts identity, culture, and heritage.

Emphasis is placed on women, given their principal, if not determining roles within family, community, religious and secular life. Their negotiation between cultures (homeland and host society) is fascinating and inspiring, challenging and breaking stereotypes. As women narrate their stories, they raise a variety of important issues that tackle social, economic, cultural, and political assumptions. Women's eagerness to tell their stories from the perspective of a protagonist highlight their conviction of their key role in writing and shaping their family and group history.

Arab and Muslim women's narratives show that their identity is a complex and a significant influence inside and outside their domestic and familial lives. In particular, events in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s, the Gulf War, 9/11, the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the American invasion of Iraq, among others, have played contributory roles in the perception as well as assertion of identity.

These testimonies reveal that women's identities and perceptions are multifaceted; they also speak of an array of determinants that influence the degree to which integration and acculturation shape identity.



AMWRRRI is preparing an exhibit titled "Cultural Dress and Identity Narratives among Arab and Muslim Women Immigrants in Greater Milwaukee Area." This image is part of that exhibit.

**Photo Credit: Yance Marti**

*The fashion project underscores one of AMWRRRI's goals to educate the general public about the Arab and Muslim communities' membership and the importance of appreciating diversity and differences in appearance among communities living in Greater Milwaukee.*

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These factors include the level of education, time of immigration, the consistency of keeping ties with the homeland, the geographical region from where they migrated (village, refugee camp, city, and country), their contribution to family economy, and the level of interactions with members outside their ethnic and religious group. Consequently, as each of the stories addresses its multiplicities and uniqueness, simultaneously it shares communality, a general pattern that connects them to their group's history.

AMWRRI contends that clothing serves as a multifaceted metaphor in this rich history. For example: To what extent does dress express cultural and familial identity? How persistent are women in transferring such a cultural marker to their children and grandchildren? How is fashion an expression of aesthetics? The testimonies gathered so far highlight the importance of cultural as well as religious clothing (hijab or head cover) and its meanings to various Arab and Muslim women who immigrated from different Arab and Muslim countries. Women from different generations continue to re-create or adapt different elements of their cultural dress. For example, some women, especially first-generation immigrants, wear their cultural and ethnic clothing daily; others wear them during special celebrations, events, family visits and holidays. Furthermore, many women such as those originally from Palestine, combine wearing cultural and Islamic dress to confirm the linkage between religious and cultural elements in their personal identity.

AMWRRI's oral history project has included specially-trained students, who gained and gathered information regarding the role of attire in the sustenance of identity and community. Their role will be an expansive one. These students developed first-hand knowledge of how to conduct oral history interviews with Arab and Muslim community members by attending AMWRRI's training workshops and being in the field collecting these personal records. These students gained exceptional knowledge on different topics on immigration, especially those connected to culture and religion and its link to identity and belonging.

The information collected so far will be used in different ways and areas. Events are planned between February and April 2013. At these events, college students will present and reflect on their experiences as interviewers and researchers. Some of AMWRRI's board members and staff will facilitate discussions and answer questions from the events' attendees in a roundtable format. One such event will recreate a Henna Night wedding, when the bride, the groom, their family, and friends wear cultural clothing. Ceremonies, music, folk dance, and songs will take place as part of the celebration of this event.

Most of the research data gathered in this current project will be shown in an exhibit, currently being planned. An explanatory web exhibit, complemented by educational ancillaries to aid teachers, is also planned.

The fashion project underscores AMWRRI's commitment to educate the general public about the Arab and Muslim communities' membership and the importance of appreciating diversity and differences in appearance among communities living in Greater Milwaukee. Muslim women's heritage preservation contributes greatly to Milwaukee's multicultural and plural society. Ultimately, the goal is to aid the community to overcome stereotypes that are linked to Arab and Muslim women's manner of dress and appearance.

## Enaya Othman

Enaya Othman Ph.D., serves as the President of the AMWRRI Board of Directors. She directs of the Oral History Project and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Marquette University



**wisconsin**  
**humanities**  
**council**

Our oral history project of the year of 2012-2013 titled "Cultural Dress and Identity Narratives among Arab and Muslim Women Immigrants in Greater Milwaukee Area" is funded in part by a grant from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State of Wisconsin. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Wisconsin Humanities Council supports and creates programs that use history, culture, and discussion to strengthen community life for everyone in Wisconsin.

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## Advancing knowledge of cross-cultural identity

**Alexis Sammarco**

As a Marquette student studying Arabic language and culture, I had very little background about the Arab and Muslim societies and found it critical to broaden my knowledge and expertise on the subjects. AMWRRI has been an eye-opening experience for me not only as a student, but as a person as well.

Being able to interview and speak with women and men from various Middle Eastern backgrounds has allowed me to learn about the different identities associated across the Middle Eastern cultures. It's fascinating to see how some people associate themselves with their country of origin as their choice. For some, it was because that country refused to grant them citizenship and for others it was because their identity to their homeland culture is very strong. Either way, my personal definition of identity has changed because although it defines who a person is, identity is also dependent on the culture a person is most comfortable with.

This project has highlighted the importance of cross-cultural identity and the different ways in which it affects people. For example, although the interviewees have lived in America for a long time, they are still concerned about the events that go on in their home country. It's important that they are able to connect with their home country while still seeing themselves as American citizens. Maha, a woman from Palestine, is a good example of this. She lived in Palestine until her twenties and then immigrated to the United States to be with her husband. She explained to me that being one of the first Arab families in Milwaukee was difficult because they didn't have family or friends to celebrate their holidays with. However, she made sure to incorporate her Muslim and Arab culture directly into her children's lives by making Arabic food, speaking Arabic in the household, and teaching them about their religion. Her children were able to combine their American culture from what they learned at school with the Arab culture they learned at home. Maha also spoke about how she and her husband made sure to watch Arabic television so they would know what was going on in the Middle East and make sure their families were safe. She and her husband would have the children watch the news as well so that they were aware of their Middle Eastern history and recognize how the United States' action often directly affected the events that happened in the Arab world. Maha's determination to combine both cultures and create one strong Middle Eastern and American identity for her children is something that is common for immigrant families. It is important to recognize the different traditions and identities that are created from multi-country families. It was also interesting to hear about the challenges Maha faced as she immigrated to the United States.

As mentioned earlier, she was one of the few Muslims living in Milwaukee at the time and therefore she faced some unexpected differences. When she lived in Palestine, she was always very friendly and trusting with her neighbors. She could leave her children with them and run errands and accomplish whatever tasks she needed to do. After moving to America, Maha found herself trapped in her home because she did not have anyone to watch over her children, and couldn't drive herself anywhere. She lived in fear of leaving her kids because she was in a new land filled with strangers. Maha was also dependent on her husband because she had to wait for him to come home from work to watch the kids. She lost the community feeling of being able to rely on her neighbors for help and this isolated her from assimilating more easily into American society.

It was also difficult for her to become accustomed to how "loose" some American women were. She was very used to women being modestly covered from head to toe and it was hard for

## Mark your Calendars!

AMWRRI has planned multiple educational and cultural programming for 2013. These events are free and open to the public.

Reception for Aïcha Ech Channa, 2009 OPUS prize winner. Sponsored by Marquette University, the Islamic Society of Milwaukee and the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute.

Aïcha Ech Channa is founder and president of the Association Solidarité Féminine, an organization serving single mothers in Casablanca, Morocco.

February 5, 2013, 6:30 PM  
Islamic Society of Milwaukee  
4707 S. 13th St., Milwaukee, WI 53221

Cultural Dress and Identity Narratives Among Arab and Muslim Women Immigrants in Greater Milwaukee Area

Public Meeting and Reception  
February 13, 2013, 5:30-7:00 pm

The Pabst Mansion  
2000 West Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Immigrant Identities: Oral Histories and Muslim Dress

Community Roundtable and Reception  
March 9, 2013, Check AMWRRI website for time.  
Islamic Da'wa Center  
5135 N Teutonia Ave  
Milwaukee, WI 53209

Henna Wedding Day Celebration

April 6, 2013, 5:30 pm-8:30 pm  
Alumni Memorial Union Ballroom  
Marquette University, 1442 W Wisconsin Ave  
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Muslim Identify: Oral Histories and Cultural Dress  
Community Roundtable and Reception

April 21, 2013, Check AMWRRI website for time.  
Islamic Society of Milwaukee  
4707 S 13th St., Milwaukee, WI 53221

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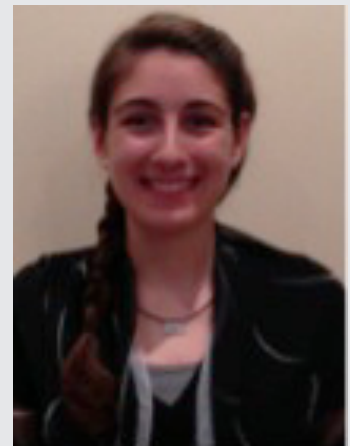
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her to respect women who didn't act as modest as she was used to. However, Maha overcame these challenges by eventually getting to know her neighbors and being very social with them. After living in America for a few years, her husband taught her how to drive so she could be more independent and she was able to learn more about her new community and be a part of it through children's lives at school. The last challenge Maha faced and still struggles with is the United States' relationship with Israel. As an American and Palestinian citizen, she often feels conflicted when America gives money to or assists Israel. She feels like a part of her is betraying her other identity and she feels angry over not being able to change what goes on in her homeland. However, Maha is very active politically and makes sure her voice is heard both as an American and Palestinian citizen by voting in elections and paying attention to the local and international news.

Another case study that represents the differences in identity is Ahmad. Ahmad was born in Lebanon and lived in Kuwait until his twenties, but identifies himself as Palestinian and American. Ahmad explained that he didn't truly feel comfortable in a country until he immigrated to the United States for a better education. He left Kuwait at the beginning of the Gulf War and he explained to me how he was never granted citizenship in Kuwait because of his Palestinian heritage. He was never able to develop a sense of belonging while living in Kuwait because his Palestinian heritage prevented him from certain rights. Ahmad was determined to make a life for himself and found one in America by being completely independent. Living away from his family and friends, he was forced to develop new relationships with people who were from completely different backgrounds. Here he was able to find his true identity—an American and Palestinian that he represents in different ways. He represents his Arab culture through his four *dishdasha* pieces. *Dishdasha* is a long dress made of thin, white material, which he mostly wore socially overseas and occasionally wears to the Mosque in America. The *dishdasha* reminds him of his homeland and his roots. He is proud to represent his country and relive those aspects of his culture through his *dishdasha* which is also a reflection of his religion that emphasizes modesty. It was very interesting to see how Ahmad viewed his life in the Middle East compared to his life in America. In the United States, he felt a stronger sense of community through his friends and activities from school; the only part of Kuwait he missed was seeing his family. Ahmad was able to transform his life by immigrating, obtaining a respectable education, and finding love and a strong job. He views his wife's family as his own and he is able to connect to his Muslim and Arab culture through the holidays and traditions he celebrates with them as well. Ahmad's American and Palestinian identity was created in a different way from that of Maha, but in the end, each person was able to find an identity they felt most comfortable with. The greatest commonality between both interviewees was their ability to combine traditions from both cultures into one.

This research project is critical to the advancement of knowledge of cross-culture identity and learning more about how identity is a constantly evolving concept. As an interviewer, I was able to learn about the different parts of the Muslim and Arab culture. The most fascinating traditions to learn about were the different types of cultural clothing. The *dishdasha*, *thub*, *kufia*, and *hijab* each represent a part of identity. The *kufia* is a scarf that symbolizes different Arab nations and can represent the pride a person feels to wear their country's colors. The *dishdasha*, *thub*, and *hijab* are clothing worn by Muslims to represent modesty and to preserve the sanctity of their bodies. Each person can wear them when they feel ready and confident enough in their faith and are able to recognize that these cultural clothing are an important part of their religious history. From interviewing people of many different backgrounds, I was able to come to understand parts of the Muslim religion and recognize the dedication of the faith. This project is eye-opening to any person who is willing to expand their horizons and learn something new about a religion that can often be tainted with untrue representations. By simply listening to different interviews, a person will be able to develop a newfound respect for the Muslim and Arab culture. This project recognizes the importance of discovering the small details in traditions of different cultures and celebrating the differences. Overall, the AMWRRRI project emphasizes the importance of learning about culture and will allow researchers to relate across various cultures.

*"As an interviewer, I was able to learn about the different parts of the Muslim and Arab culture. The most fascinating traditions to learn about were the different types of cultural clothing."*



## Alexis Sammarco

Alexis Sammarco is a sophomore at Marquette University. She became involved with the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute through her professor, Dr. Enaya Othman. From working on this project she was able to broaden her knowledge about the Arab and Muslim culture and recognize the importance of cross-culture identity and religious traditions.

**Photo Credit: Alexis Sammarco**



## Learning with and through others

**Sarah Marie Gresser**

As an oral history researcher with AMWRRI, I was given the opportunity to help and act on behalf of Arab and Muslim women by listening to and recording their stories. Oral researchers journey across Milwaukee to meet and listen to first- or second-generation immigrants.

We hear and collect the stories of women in order to gain a historical understanding of their experiences. Sitting at tables, on couches, office chairs, or desks, researchers listen to and record the experiences, perspectives, and stories of fellow community members. Not only do such stories contribute to our historical understanding of the experiences of Arab and Muslim women as a part of world history, but also, they contribute our understanding of the diverse populations that make up the Greater Milwaukee community. As such, the stories of these women are the stories of world history and the stories of Milwaukee history. The interviewee's perspective, experience, and understanding of events fills in, corrects, and enriches a historical, political, and cultural understanding of reality.

This year, AMWRRI paid special attention to the role of cultural dress and identity narrative in the life of our interviewees. For the women that I interviewed, their decision to wear or not wear cultural or religious clothing seemed to be an expression of their identity.

None of the women I interviewed wore cultural clothing on a regular basis, although many wore a head covering for religious reasons. For many Americans, there is no distinction between cultural and religious clothing. In contrast, most of the women I interviewed saw religious

clothing (such as modest attire, head coverings) as distinct from cultural clothing. Nevertheless, this distinction was ambiguous and the difference or overlap between the two categories varied from woman to woman. For instance, one immigrant from Palestine who wore a head covering every day still claimed that she did not wear cultural clothing except to weddings and special events. Likewise, she stated that her decision to wear the headscarf was influenced by a visit to Palestine: for her, the cultural influences of her homeland lead to a religious choice. Other immigrants saw cultural clothing as having no religious significance at all. Prior to such interviews, I had never considered a distinction between Arab cultural and Muslim religious clothing. As such, my interviews highlighted a shifting and ambiguous distinction between the two categories. Despite varying descriptions and distinctions, the interviewees who I had the opportunity to meet explained their decisions regarding clothing in a way that reconciled clothing choice with identity.

For instance, an immigrant from Iran stated that she did not wear any cultural or religious clothing, in part, because no one in her family ever did. Moreover, she stated that wearing the scarf was less important than one's intentions. Furthermore, she stated that she always tried to dress modestly: "even when I was

a child, I didn't have a lot of interest in kind of dressing that exposes my body. I do not like to define myself, that way, you know. I want to more of define myself as a person who is interested in education, in meaningful life, uh, not you know, how my body looks, you know." For her, cultural or religious clothing was not a significant factor in her self-understanding.

In contrast, an immigrant from Palestine saw cultural clothing as a clear expression of her identity. When I asked what cultural clothing meant to her, she strongly replied: "it's uhm, past- and if you don't have [a] past you'll never have [a] future... That's our roots, our things, and we have to keep it alive." She only wears the Palestinian dresses at weddings or Palestinian community events. In the same way, another first generation immigrant from Palestine saw the preservation of cultural clothing as a necessity. Out of all the women interviewed, this woman had the largest collection of cultural clothing, even though she claimed that she only wears them to weddings and engagement parties. When asked how she felt while wearing the clothing, she said: "it's just gives you a, a beautiful, a beautiful feeling, a beautiful look, a beautiful feeling, it's all over, it's just you feel like you just came from that country..." Interestingly, when AMWRRI spoke with the interviewee's daughter, she stressed the importance of cultural clothing but did not know what the importance, significance, or reason behind such clothing was. Nevertheless, this first generation Palestinian interviewee saw cultural clothing as a way to assert and reclaim her heritage and identity as an American with Palestinian roots. She claimed that her growing interest in the cultural clothing of Palestine was due to a growing interest in her identity as a Palestinian-American. Although in slightly different ways, both mother and daughter saw cultural clothing as a key

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aspect of their identity.

In sharp contrast, an immigrant from Palestine stated that she only wore cultural clothing after coming to America. Her answer draws out the ambiguity between cultural and religious clothing. Stating that she only wears Palestinian dresses since coming to America, she said that people in her home village in Palestine did not wear cultural clothing to weddings; rather, they wore religious coverings over their western clothing if men were present. Her acquisition and decision to wear Palestinian dresses like the other three immigrants from Palestine was a result of her involvement and integration into the American-Palestinian community. Thus, her decision to wear cultural clothing, which she did not see as religious, was an expression of her desire to connect with other immigrants in Milwaukee. Moreover, she saw her religious clothing as a more important aspect of her identity. In her self-definition, she saw herself as someone who loves God and is a mother to her children. Thus, religious clothing or clothing that is modest and covers her body and head in an appropriate way is a very key aspect in her self-identification.

These are just some of the things that I learned as a researcher for AMWRRI's Oral History Research Project. The women that I had the opportunity to interview had stories that challenged my conceptions regarding identity and clothing. Furthermore, they revealed that the common link between Muslim religious and Arab cultural clothing is not a clear connection. Each woman defined the distinction in a way that reconciled her self-understanding and life story. As such, their stories challenge our conceptions about Milwaukee women and about immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries. Their stories show that clothing is an act of personal definition: an outward expression of our life stories. What we wear is who we are, and who we are is often influenced by what we wear. Just as the words of the interview are the words of history, the clothing of the interviewee functions as an illustration of history.

## You can participate too!

"The goal of our work at AMWRRI is to have our history written by our community, so that our children may read about their parents' struggles, accomplishments, culture, religion, and other important aspects of our life. We want our history to be documented as part of American history and as a manifestation of the plurality of American culture and society that many ethnic and religious groups share. Your story is very important for the overall project. Please get in touch and contribute your stories!"

Contact:

Dr. Enaya Othman at [eothonman@amwrri.org](mailto:eothonman@amwrri.org)

Visit Our Website at: <http://www.amwrri.org>

*For many Americans, there is no distinction between cultural and religious clothing. In contrast, most of the women I interviewed saw religious clothing (such as modest attire, head coverings) as distinct from cultural clothing.*



**Sarah Marie Gresser**

Sarah Marie Gresser is a senior at Marquette University. She will graduate with a B.A in philosophy and political science this May 2013. Gresser firmly believes that engagement and experience are necessary parts of historical and cultural understanding; that one must learn *with and through* others, not simply *about* others. Her experience as an oral history researcher for AMWRRI challenged and enriched her understanding of the rich history, complex politics, and diverse culture of Milwaukee immigrants from the Muslim and Arab world.

**Photo Credit: Sarah Marie Gresser**

## The Strength of Cultural Identity through the Generations

Rawan Atari

During my interviews with first- and second-generation members of the Arab-American community in Milwaukee, I spoke with a multitude of Palestinians who allowed me to understand the obstacles and emotions they faced as Arab-Americans.

As many immigrants leave their homes with an expectation of a new life, they carry the roots of their past with them. Whether immigrating to escape political tensions or to find new opportunities and relationships, a person may find himself or herself among two different cultures. Straddling two cultures forces a person to make a conscious decision on how to stay connected with one's heritage while living in a place other than their homeland. First generation immigrants retain a strong connection with their homeland, leading many Arab immigrants to identify with their Arab culture first and foremost. During my interviews with first- and second-generation members of the Arab-American community in Milwaukee, I spoke with a multitude of Palestinians who allowed me to understand the obstacles and emotions they faced as Arab-Americans.

I interviewed Muslim-Palestinian women and men residing in Milwaukee, and they shared their thoughts, concerns, and reasons for immigrating to the United States with me. Many interviewees believed in the American dream that would afford them an unimaginable amount of freedom that they themselves had never felt before. Expecting to come

into a life of luxury and privilege soon after they arrived, they realized that America granted them opportunities that they had to continually strive towards in order to live the life they dreamed of. The women and men I interviewed were originally from the West Bank in Palestine. Many of them made the decision to leave their homeland because of political tensions and the Israeli occupation. These people were affected by events occurring in their homeland, starting in 1948 and through the 1967 war in which Israel occupied the rest of Palestine. Many of them were encouraged by other families living in the United States of America to immigrate.

Rafik Imseitef was 6 years old when the 1976 War took place. He explained, "I remember the war in 1967 and how we left our home and we lived in a cave for two weeks then we came back to our home and we found the house clean from everything and we have to start all over again." Rafik was the young age of 16 with one year of high school completed when he first came to the United States. He expected to make just enough money in the U.S. so that he could return back home to Palestine while helping his family and his people strive for a better future. But his life took him on a different direction and he now

identifies himself as Palestinian-American.

Marouf Dahir, another Palestinian man I had the privilege of interviewing, also said that he did not plan on staying in the United States initially, but wanted to get an education, make some money and then return home. I understood the sense of loyalty Marouf had felt for his country when he stated, "My goals, to be honest with you, [were] just to come here, get an education, get some money just to go back home and try to help whatever you can by educating my people, my country and helping my country to improve ourselves back there." Marouf and Rafik showed a strong sense of pride in their homeland and while both men never had the intention of spending their lives in America, they nevertheless had families and raised their children in the Milwaukee area.

I also interviewed two first generation Palestinian-Muslim women in the Milwaukee area. They provided different reasons why they immigrated to the United States. With two distinct backgrounds, Hanaa Almoghrabi was raised in Kuwait and Fatmeh Saleh was raised in Palestine. Each woman was afforded different opportunities and circumstances that led them to where they are today. While living in Palestine Fatmeh's freedoms were restricted and she felt that the United States would be an escape for her, a land of incredible freedom she never felt before. On the other hand, Hanaa was encouraged to break ties with traditional views of women and work towards getting an education and a career. She grew up in Kuwait for most of her life and followed her older brother's footsteps in coming to America in order to get a better education. She explained during the interview, "I want to come and study; you know I didn't want to just finish high school and just sit home or just get married and sit home right away. I wanted to study to work first then

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after that think about having my life." Education was a major priority in Hanaa's life and her parents encouraged her to pursue her goals independently without the expectations of marriage holding her back. After successfully completing her Associates Degree in word processing, Hanaa returned to Kuwait where she eventually got married. She had hoped to settle down in Kuwait with her husband, daughter and son but in 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait initiating the Persian Gulf War. The war left many people insecure about their safety and futures in Kuwait. Hanaa and her husband decided to evacuate their home and leave their families behind in order to obtain their safety in the United States. Their son and daughter, Sami and Aseel, were both citizens of the United States, which gave them the opportunity to leave Kuwait and reside in the U.S. The rest of their families fled to Amman, Jordan.

Fatmeh Saleh grew up in Der Debwan, Palestine and was the first member of her family to immigrate to the United States. Fatmeh told me she was very excited to start her life in America although when she arrived she felt very homesick and lonely. Her main reason for immigrating was marriage. Fatmeh's husband received his education in the United States and Fatmeh came to live with him after her papers cleared. She shared with me stories of her childhood and expressed how the traditional view of women and the Israeli occupation affect her to this day. When talking about the 1967 war Fatmeh said, "I remember when we have to go leave our house you know go hide because of the yahood would go after us." She emphasized the fact that she could never forget the sights she has seen, and the way Israel treated the Palestinians because as she expressed, "you always remember the bad things about what happened, the scary things." After the interview came to an end, Fatmeh started to remember her past visits to Palestine and shared with me the feelings

of disrespect and cruelty she endured while trying to cross the border into her homeland. After sharing with me her experiences Fatmeh told me, "Inshallah [God willing], yes, my dream is one day I will go back and Palestine will be free." For a person to still maintain a hope of freedom after experiencing injustices firsthand shows us that the fight for Palestine remains in the hearts of its people, both women and men.

Cultural clothing signifies a connection to their homeland for the women I have interviewed. While being so far off from where they grew up, these women feel a sense of security and comfort when they wear their traditional clothing. First generation women Hanaa and Fatmeh, both revealed the importance of clothing in staying close to their roots, making them feel like individuals. I asked Hanaa why cultural clothing is important to her and she said, "Once you get older ... you feel like you want to wear something from your own country, it makes you different you know." Hanaa explained the role of cultural attire as being passed down from daughter to daughter. Hanaa will pass down her cultural dresses such as the *thob* and the *dishdasha* to her daughters, just as her mother passed hers down to her and her sisters. Seeing the dresses in her closet brings a sense of ease and bliss while bringing back memories of her mother. Hanaa says, "even if they [Hanaa's daughters] don't wear them but I would like to have them in their closet just like sometime when I open the closet, see my mom dresses, it reminds you with them. You don't forget parents, it reminds you with things." Fatmeh also emphasized her fondness of cultural dresses and the essential role they play in remaining connected to her identity. She hopes to pass down her dresses to her daughters and continues to wear them with pride and a sense of loyalty to her homeland. As dresses are passed down from immigrants to their daughters, they carry with them a piece

of identity for succeeding generations.

The first generation Arab immigrants I interviewed are greatly influenced by American cultural values. Yet, cultural attire keeps them tied to their Arab identity. As a child born of immigrant parents, Aminah Hamdan explained, "In a way, you're kind of representing who you are, where you come from..." As Aminah grew up she was handed down dresses from her mother, and during her last visits to Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, she bought her children and herself dresses as well. Aminah's mother encourages all her daughters to wear the cultural attire to religious events and parties. As Aminah identifies equally with her Arab and American culture, cultural attire is a way of holding on to her Arab identity.

Cultural and traditional dresses vary from country to country. That is why each dress is so unique. Hanaa collects dresses from Jordan, Palestine, and Kuwait because they are all distinct. As the years go by, dresses become more modernized. The stitching and intricate beading on the dresses may take weeks to finish and the craft is unique to the country or region where it is made. For example, a *thob* or a *dishdasha* from Palestine can help us identify which part of Palestine it was produced. These dresses take on vast arrays of colors, some leaning towards a traditional look, while others exuding a more modern look. Cultural clothing has the ability to foster a strong sense of cultural identity.

As a second generation Palestinian American, I have had the opportunity to not only learn about the struggles Arab immigrants experienced throughout their lives but also, working on the AMWRRRI Oral History project has given me a chance to learn about my identity as an Arab American. When asked what my nationality is, I have always said "Palestinian," but I never truly knew



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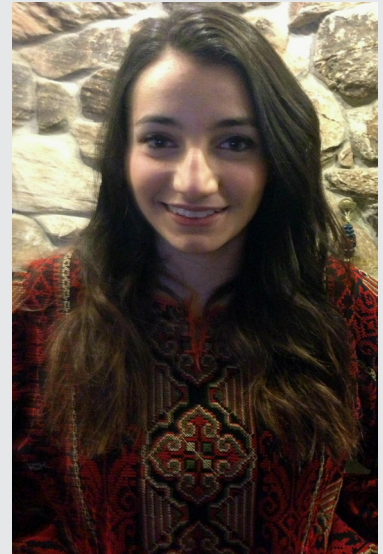
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how much power that single word held. Palestine remains alive due to her people who are courageous enough to fight for her presence. Through all of my interviews, each individual has helped me realize the significance of my roots and my heritage. They have given me the ability to express the pride, dignity, and bravery that my people exude in every aspect of their lives. During my interview with Marouf Dahir, he spoke about his participation in demonstrations against Israel occupation while living in Palestine as a teenager. He admits he was afraid, but that never stopped him because the courage of the people around him kept him from giving into his fears. This story, along with the stories of Rafik Imseitef, Fatmeh Saleh, and Hanaa Almoghrabi inspired me to become more aware, active, and knowledgeable in the history of my people as well as the current struggles they face. Feeling the undeniable hope and integrity these people embody, I am honored to be a second generation Palestinian American.

## Rawan Atari

Rawan Atari is a sophomore at Marquette University majoring in Psychology with a focus on Middle Eastern studies: As a second-generation Palestinian American she is grateful to be a part of the AMWRRRI Oral History project. She had the privilege of interviewing many Arab women and men in the Milwaukee community and has seen the strength and courage they carry with them from their past into their present. The project has given her the opportunity to understand the roots of her Arab identity because "in order to know who we are, we must first recognize where we come from." She is proud to be a part of a project that sheds light on the contributions of the Muslim and Arab-Christians in the Milwaukee community.

Photo Credit: Rawan Atari



In addition to collecting oral histories of community members, we also collect archival documents, family photographs, and actual pieces of clothing. This family photo commemorating Munjed's Henna wedding is from the Ibtisam Ahmad's family album.

Photo Credit: Ibtisam Ahmad

YOU CAN  
**HELP!**

If you want to share your family albums with us, please contact Dr. Enaya Othman at [eothman@amwrrri.org](mailto:eothman@amwrrri.org).