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Faces of Immigration: The American Dream is Not Dead

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Department of Political Science and International Studies.

By:

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Darin H. Van Tassell

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the history of the United States, we have been a nation not of one people but of many. Immigrants from across the globe have come to the U.S. bringing their cultures and histories with them; making this country the proverbial “melting pot” that it is today. This thesis looks at the United States’ immigration policy through featuring three people from Middle Eastern countries who are linked to the immigration process. These stories give insight into the immigration process of the US and the adjustment of Arab immigrants to life in America in a post 9/11 world.

Thesis Mentor: _________________________
Dr. Darin H. Van Tassell

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Dr. Steven Engel

April 2016
The Department of Political Science and International Studies
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University
This work is dedicated to my mentor, Darin Van Tassell. Thank you for sticking with me to the end.
Author’s Note

Wow, I can’t believe it’s finished! To those who are reading this, thank you for taking the time to read my work. I just want to say in this Author’s Note briefly what I set out to do with my thesis to give you a better understanding of where I’m coming from. I originally was going to write my thesis on the current political environment in Iraq. However, my research was stalling, and I had difficulty finding inspiration. Then I heard Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, and I suddenly found my moment of serendipity. I then decided to set out to write on the Arab immigration experience in particular, because of its prevalence when discussing the Syrian refugee crisis the world is currently facing. I think the Arab people today are seen in a very negative light in terms of media portrayal, and I wanted to give readers an opportunity to see real faces and hear real stories. These people are those who I’ve met and fostered friendships with over the course of my university experience. I fully acknowledge the bias of having only people employed or attending at a university as the crux of my thesis. But bias is not a relevant issue because I’m not trying to prove anything. My goal is to show a brief glimpse into the Arab immigration experience. It is by no means a full and complete picture. In today’s age of numbers and facts, we lose the human aspect in many of our discussions. And yet this humanity is our most prized and glorified virtue. I wanted to bring a little humanity to the immigration conversation. That’s all.

~ Meg
Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.  

Franklin D. Roosevelt

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A Brief Note on US Immigration Policy

Since the goal of this thesis is to highlight the immigration experiences of three people from a qualitative approach, an in-depth report on the United States’ immigration policy is not a primary topic of focus. However, there are two important aspects of United States immigration that should be touched on, so that the reader can gain a more informed perspective when reading the interview summaries.

The first aspect of immigration policy in the United States for the reader to understand is that it is paradoxical in nature. In the United States, there is this celebration of culture, of diversity in your ethnic identity. Yet at the same time there is this unspoken expectation that immigrants and their children will assimilate and become “Americanized.” Since the Second World War, many Americans feel that immigration plays a central role as a “symbol of the US and the nation’s strength’s – while also disparaging present-day immigration” (Foner, p. 497). People are able to rationalize the two wildly different beliefs through romanticizing the immigrants of old. “Americans can thus support the notion that immigration is good and makes the US great while at the same time distancing themselves and their ancestors from contemporary arrivals” (Foner, p. 497). This grandiose idealization of past immigration experiences to the United States makes it very difficult for Americans to conceptualize a time when immigrants were not welcome, and yet in every phase of immigration to the US there is a clear backlash of anti-immigration rhetoric. For example in the most recent years, the United States starting seeing huge waves of immigrants staring back in 2009 coming from South and Central American countries. While most were legal immigrants, the focus was on the growing
number of illegal immigrants, which was estimated to be at 11.5 million in 2011 (Foner p. 497). This backlash can be realized through an in-depth reading of numerous state anti-immigrant laws passed in 2010, the most famous of which was an Arizona law that allowed for the arrest without a warrant for people suspected of being an illegal immigrant. The Supreme Court struck down this provision of the law and two others with it in 2012, putting states on a warning “in terms of writing their own immigration laws that impose punishments on the undocumented” (Foner, p. 497). So while the United States heralds itself as the epitome of cultural pluralism, it struggles with a dark side of ignorance and xenophobia (See Donald Trump’s Success in American Presidential Race for Further Reference).

The second aspect of US immigration policy is how it is viewed by policymakers through the lense of a post 9/11 America. “After September 11, US representatives frame terrorism around security issues that expand much further beyond illegal immigration, and strongly reinforce this particular security dimension of its immigration policy orientation” (Frederking, p. 283). With terrorism as the ultimate enemy since the War on Terror was declared by President George W. Bush, every person who enters the United States is not only looked at for their general background, but they are also being screened through a potential threat level. Given that the attack on 9/11 was by foreigners, it was a natural tendency for the public to favor restrictions on immigration following the event for a time. But “in the USA there is a clear long run impact articulating immigration in terms of terrorism which emphasizes the salience of security over economy” (Frederking, p. 285). In the past, immigration policy was determined through a battle over the status of
the economy versus the security level. But since 9/11, there has been a more permanent shift towards concerns of security than over the economy. There is no denying, “exogenous shocks demand responses from political representatives that may include policy change and new discourse” (Frederking, p. 294). However, in the US this new entrenched viewpoint from policymakers on immigration in terms of security is shortsighted and debilitating to the American international presence as a world leader. Starting in the summer of 2015, the world saw a massive influx of refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war flood into Europe. Instead of showing support and offering to help, the United States was among many countries of the opinion to want to severely limit the influx of refugees to their countries for security reasons. This prospective terrorist threat was again placed upon people who would have to prove their innocence to a biased committee. The refugee crisis provides a clear example of the US placing security over the economy for policy decisions on immigration.

These two aspects of US immigration policy provide a brief overview and some context for the reader for the following interviews. As previously stated, these interviewees are all of Arab descent and inherently bear the brunt of many of these US policy decisions. It is important to know the policy structure set in place today for how the US views immigrants, particularly Arab immigrants.
I also wanted to make a brief note before moving to the interview summaries to establish to the reader some background on the three places the people I interviewed are from. Youssef, Abdul-Rahman and Omniya are all Arab people, yet they come from vastly different countries and cultures. Youssef is from Morocco, an Arab country in North Africa close to Spain. Morocco is known for being a progressive and western friendly country, with deep roots in Arab, French and Spanish cultures. Abdul-Rahman is from Yemen, a small country to southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen is a very poor country filled with political strife and war in the past years, with hardly any economic development due to the conflicts. Omniya is from Saudi Arabia, which is also on the Arabian Peninsula above Yemen. While Saudi Arabia is known for its radical

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religious conservatism and repressing women’s rights, it is still a very rich country. I think it is important to distinguish the countries themselves to readers who don’t possess a lot of knowledge about the Middle East. These three countries contrast vastly with each other in terms of economic prosperity, political stability and social culture. By knowing this the reader can gain further insight into how coming the United States effected each of the three people I interviewed in a unique way relative to their home country.
Some Americans need hyphens in their names, because only part of them has come over; but when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name.\(^3\)

Woodrow Wilson

America: The Love Story

Youssef Salhi

Youssef with student Jeremy Burgess at his army commissioning ceremony in December of 2015.

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4 All quotes in this section are referenced from "Youssef Salhi Interview." Personal interview. 21 Jan. 2016.
Youssef Salhi was born to a loving mother and father on August 28, 1974 in Casablanca, Morocco. He was raised in a middle class Moroccan family, where his father worked with the health department of the government and his mom stayed at home to raise him and his two younger brothers and one younger sister. Growing up in Morocco in the 1970s and 1980s was not as progressive as it is known to be today. They were much more isolated from the world, not only from the inexistence of the Internet but also a by conservative government which heavily monitored and controlled the media. In fact, there was only one television channel, as Youssef recalls growing up in the 1980s, and it was a state-controlled channel. But the Salhi family household was of a moderate and open mind in the raising of the children, encouraging them to further their schooling and exposing them to other cultures. Youssef’s father would take him to the cinema in Casablanca regularly on the weekends to watch American films since he was as young as six years old. This is where Youssef’s love affair with America began. Through these movies, Youssef was enlightened about another world apart from his own. “My first movie that I remember going to see with my dad was Terminator... From those movies I started dreaming about America as a kid.”

From this point on, Youssef’s love for America only continued to grow. He loved the English language and made an effort starting at 14 to really learn the language and begin to search for ways to make his dreams possible. He listened to American music, watched American movies, and started practicing his English with zeal. Starting in high school, Youssef and his two other friends starting looking for ways to find out more about America. Through a pen pal system, Youssef and his friends were able to talk to real
Americans and find some of the answers to their questions -- one of which was “How can I go to America?” After a pen pal told Youssef of the immigration lottery system that America had, whereby the recipients receive an automatic permanent residence status, Youssef starting applying. In the seven years it took for him to receive the lottery, Youssef went on to graduate from high school and college. But it was in high school that Youssef realized his full dream; to not only go to America, but to be a teacher. “My high school was in a rough neighborhood, and the students were from rough areas. And in that neighborhood, at that time, there was no electricity. And I remember his class, my first year, used to be from five to six pm. In the wintertime in Morocco, from five to six pm it gets dark. And I remember that teacher used to bring us, each one of us candles, so that we could learn. And I will never forget that.” Youssef’s English teacher inspired not only a life long friendship with Youssef but also sparked a desire in him to pursue a career in teaching.
After graduating the University of Hassan II in 1998 with a degree in Sociolinguistics, Youssef’s dreams were finally realized. He won the green card lottery, and all his dreams were about to come true. He immigrated to the United States in the beginning of 1999, the process only taking a short six months before he could officially move as a United States’ resident. Upon moving to the United States, the biggest difference he noticed was in the individualized lifestyle of Americans as opposed to the communal one of Moroccans. This difference was also one of the more challenging aspects of the culture that Youssef had to adjust too. “It was a lot different. Growing up in Morocco, you know it is a collective society, so coming to America it was tough at first to make friends, or to integrate into this new society.” But luckily for Youssef he had a support network of family who he stayed with when he first arrived, whose friends in turn became his friends. After a brief adjustment period, Youssef went on to pursue a Masters’ in Linguistics from the University of Louisville in 2003. During his graduate studies at Louisville, the attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001 occurred, forever altering Youssef’s path. Instead of teaching Linguistics, he would choose to teach Arabic instead. “I wanted to show a different side of the language, of the culture, and of the people.” Since leaving Louisville in 2003, Youssef would then go to teach Arabic at the University of Tampa and finally move to Georgia Southern University in 2012. Through mutual friends Youssef met his American wife Christina, whom he married in 2004. “Just like I fell in love with America quickly, I fell in love with my wife quickly.”

Also during this time period, he unfortunately saw a darker side to America, gaining first hand knowledge of racism and bigotry -- which perhaps is no surprise considering
the way Arabs and Muslims are portrayed in the American news outlets. “[But] I chose to do this because I want to try and be a drop of sanity in this ocean of ignorance for the next generation. That is the only reason I chose to do this. To combat ignorance with knowledge, that is the only way. And I’ll keep doing it until I physically can’t do it anymore.”

Given the escalating language in this year’s United States Presidential election, many have wondered if staying the U.S. is in their future or not. But for Youssef, he will never leave. “I would never choose to live anywhere else but here.” Even given the current climate of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the American media, Youssef’s love for America is so strong and he has an unwavering faith that the American people will see that immigrants will not be the end of this country. “For foreigners and immigrants, a lot of us love this country more than some of the people
who are born here because we know how much this country gave us. How much it’s worth. And we will do everything to pay her back.”

I asked Youssef what America meant to him. These were his closing remarks:

“I fell in love with America before I ever saw her. And when I saw her, I fell even more in love. And America gave me a lot of things to that I will never be able to pay back. For that reason, I feel like this is my love. That she, is my love. This was where I was able to make my dreams come true, and I can’t express in words how much that means to me.”
In America, with all its evils and faults, you can still reach through the forest and see the sun.\textsuperscript{5}

Dick Gregory

America: The Sanctuary

Abdul-Rahman Alhawsali

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Youssef and Abdul-Rahman at an event at the Statesboro mosque in 2014.

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6 All quotes in this section are referenced from “Abdul-Rahman Alhawsali Interview.” Personal Interview. 25 Feb. 2016.
Abdul-Rahman was born on March 3, 1985 in the small village known as Ezzan in the mountainous northwestern region of Yemen. This poor village was the community in which Abdul-Rahman grew up with his three brothers and nine sisters and went to high school. He was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to go to neighboring Saudi Arabia for college at King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, where he received his B.A. for Teacher’s Education in 2009. He then went on to receive a M.A. in Curriculum Planning in 2013 from Sana’a University. He then went on to work at the Exceed Language Center, teaching linguistics courses, as well as many other universities in Yemen, like Lebanese International University and Sana’a University. But for Abdul-Rahman, the course for becoming a teacher was not one of his own choosing. “For me as a person, you know growing up in a poor community you didn’t have the choice to decide what you want to do. It’s just a fact. If it were up to me, I would have chosen a totally different style of life, different major and everything. But the only scholarship that was given to me was in teaching English.”

While Abdul-Rahman was in graduate school in Yemen and pursuing his career, the Arab Spring began in 2011. The Arab Spring started in Yemen as a protest to the regime of the Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who many view as a dictator. Abdul-Rahman wanted to, and decided to become a part of that movement, along with his wife. “As young people I feel like it our duty to speak out for the coming generations. I didn’t want my two daughters to be raised in fear and under a dictatorship. So I felt like that democracy could be achieved.” They went to peaceful demonstrations but as in any political movement, the tensions between the political groups and the government were
bound to erupt. “The country went into total chaos. The people there lost whatever peace or hopes of prosperity that they had. So it was really tough.”

Times were very dangerous for Abdul-Rahman and his family, along with all of their fellow Yemenis. “We lived horrible moments that I can’t even describe.” Abdul-Rahman and his family used to live near one of the biggest university campuses, where many of the peaceful protests were staged in Sana’a. These protests, usually in the form of a sit-in, happened to also be near a military base that was pro-revolution. After seven months of protests, war broke out between the rebel groups and the government. “We used to live in fear because violence was everywhere. Bombs. I lost one of my best friends. We were together in the M.A. program at the university of Sana’a. And they were killed by mistake, him and his brother.” His friend who was killed lived close by to Abdul-Rahman, further increasing his own fear for his life and the lives of his family. “So you just sleep and you believe by chance, if you are lucky, that you’ll wake up in the morning. We thought that these were the worst moments, but what came later, that was even worse.”

After several months of clashes between rebels and the government, the Gulf Initiative was signed between the warring groups to end the conflict. It stated that the President would transfer power to his Vice President and then there would be democratic elections. For two years, things calmed down significantly from what they had been before. But the two groups, the rebels and the government, each retained control over a part of the capital city, making it still a country split in two. “People were still in fear that
war would just break out again.” It was during this time however, that Abdul-Rahman managed to finish his MA program and pursue opportunities outside of Yemen.

After he explored many different opportunities for scholarships in Germany, France and the US, he was offered a position in the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program, which is a part of the Fulbright\(^7\) scholarship system. However, the decision to accept this position to come to the United States was not an easy one. Abdul-Rahman lived a somewhat settled life in the capital city of Sana’a in Yemen with his wife Arwa, whom he married in September of 2010, and two daughters. Not only that, but the tensions between the two opposing political groups was such that people were still unsure of what the future would hold. “The decision for me was difficult because I had managed to settle down already… It was difficult to just leave everything behind and just go by myself to the United States especially, since the FLTA program does not allow us to bring our families with us.”

But what made the opportunity more valuable to Abdul-Rahman was the fact that this University had a doctoral program, which he thought he stood a good chance at getting into. Getting a Ph. D. was the ultimate goal for him and would be “life-changing” in terms of his career. Another point of favor with Abdul-Rahman was that for the first time he would get to see the culture which he had been teaching for the past seven years. “You know, I was teaching a culture that I haven’t seen with my eyes. I was talking about issues that I haven’t seen. I was talking about a people who I had never met.” So taking

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\(^7\) The Fulbright program provides grants for individual research projects or for English Teaching Assistant Programs. If selected, the candidate will spend one year in their new host country to learn and experience an international educational exchange.
all of this into consideration and with the support of his wife and family, Abdul-Rahman decided to come to America, to start on this new adventure.

His arrival to the US was on August 5, 2014. The first city that he arrived to in the US was Philadelphia, which he had some time to explore. It was very strange at first, but there was not as much of a culture shock since he had been teaching the English language and culture for several years. After coming to Georgia Southern University to work as a teaching assistant, he also applied for admissions to the doctoral program of Curriculum Studies. One thing that struck him the most was how much he liked it once he got to the US. “Life here was not what I imagined. I used to think I’ll just spend some time here and then go back to my country.” But that decision would not come to be as easy as he once believed. Soon after Abdul-Rahman arrived to America he started working at Georgia Southern University as an Arabic teacher. Through interacting with students and the local culture, Abdul-Rahman experienced his own version of culture shock. “Once I started as a teacher in which I got the chance to talk to people, that was the time where I felt my first shock because no one knows about the Middle East or our culture. Students are very
educated and everything but when it comes to different cultures, they just know nothing about it. This was very strange.”

It was only within a short time of Abdul-Rahman’s arrival to the United States that war would come once again to his country. But this time, he was far away from home, and from his wife and children. “At that time, I felt just so completely helpless.” To make matters harder, one of Abdul-Rahman’s daughters has a chronological spinal disability, which requires a lot of surgeries and care. But when war broke out a second time, total chaos meant no medical care. Hospitals closed down and many doctors escaped the country. “I thought of going back to Yemen just to take care of my daughters because my wife couldn’t take it anymore.” However, due to his obligations to the FLTA program, Abdul-Rahman decided to wait for his contract to end in May of 2015 and then he would go back to Yemen. He was about to go back to Yemen, when he received his acceptance into the Georgia Southern University’s doctoral program. Not only that, but due to Fulbright’s own moral obligation to not send their scholarship recipients back to country’s in conflict zones, his contract with them was extended by another year. But Abdul-Rahman was adamant about going back to take care of his family. So after two weeks of communicating with the Fulbright staff and their sponsors, “they told me that they could get visas for my family. I was very lucky.”

At the time when Fulbright granted his family visas, Yemen was still a closed country. The gulf countries were waging war against the rebels at the request of the legitimate government. The only way to get out was through the port of Saudi Arabia, through the Empty Quarter desert known as Rub al Khali specifically. “My wife was so
bright. She travelled for about 600 miles with my brothers who went with her.” The distance wasn’t the only obstacle to the border either. There were no operating supermarkets in the city because of the war. There was no readily available gasoline to operate cars. Gangs had started taking over certain territories and so traveling was made all the more dangerous. “We had to find the necessary supplies for the car, gasoline and everything, and then pay for protection. Because there was no central government to protect people. So at least three people should go with her and they should have their own guns and everything. They spent three or four days trying to find gas.”

The first time, they were denied access to cross the borders into Saudi Arabia, even though they had all of the right documentation. And during this experience trying to cross the border, in the crush of the desperate crowds, Arwa almost lost one of their daughters. Thankfully though, they were all right and would try again another day to cross the border. They waited for a month and then tried again. “She [Arwa] knew how horrible life was there and so she tried again.” In the meantime, Abdul-Rahman worked tirelessly to get all of the proper documentation to get his family to America safely. “I mean every day it was deteriorating there. How can I describe it for you? Can you imagine you have kids and at night bombs drop nearby and it shakes the house and makes a lot of noise and the kids start crying in horror. And you just don’t know what to do. This was the least thing that I can do to try and get them out.”

After a second denial at the border of Saudi Arabia, Abdul-Rahman decided to try and get his family to Jordan, since they had recently started allowing two flights a day to from Yemen. He found a host family for them to stay with in Jordan while he worked at
getting their immigration documentation approved with the US embassy. The first embassy appointment resulted in failure for Arwa and Abdul-Rahman. They applied a second time a month later in September of 2015. “She went to the embassy with our two kids. And she got accepted. And it was the happiest moment of my life. During that past month, I had a lot of thoughts about leaving everything and going to be with my family. I was thinking of taking them to India. No, seriously. Because India is cheap, I can pay for my studies, provide care for daughter and everything. But thankfully, it worked and before they [US Embassy Staff] changed their minds, I put them on the first flight out.”

So it was in late September of 2015 that the Alhawsali family was finally reunited. “It was unspeakable moments of happiness… You know I didn’t really start enjoying life in the United States until they got here.”

Since the arrival of his wife Arwa and his two daughters Noor, 4 years old, and Aisha, 2 years old, the family has been experiencing the adjustment process to America together. The move has been particularly beneficial for his two daughters, who were deeply traumatized by what they had experienced in Yemen. Noor, when she first came to America, would associate loud noises with airplanes that were dropping bombs. But step-by-step, Noor left behind those dark memories of being in fear and instead embraced the sunshine of the outdoors with fear no longer in her movements. “For the first two months, she used to ask us not to leave her alone because she was scared that something would happen. But now, she has gained some confidence and is no longer afraid. I can leave her alone to play outside in the yard and she’ll be fine.” But while Abdul-Rahman, Arwa and their kids are here in the United States enjoying their new lives, most of their
families are still back inside Yemen. And while they can communicate somewhat through the Internet, the electricity is very unreliable. Sometimes it would cut out for 10 or 11 days at a time. Water comes on only around once a week. “From my perspective, people just got used to it. Sometimes the airplanes just come and drop their bombs and everything and people just watch.” It has been over a year since the war broke out again and the end of the conflict is nowhere in sight at this time. Many of Abdul-Rahman’s family members are actively trying to seek opportunities to get out of Yemen but they just don’t have the options. Most of them want to go to Saudi-Arabia because of the work opportunities, but getting in is quite difficult. But Abdul-Rahman remains hopeful that they will be all right as a few of them have gotten out of Yemen already.

During the first couple of months, Abdul-Rahman and his family enjoyed life and being together. But they did start to worry after the Paris attacks in November of 2015 occurred. As a Muslim family, they would be objects of hate and fear in the media after these kinds of terrorist attacks take place. “We were really just scared of going out into places after the attacks. Because I don’t want my wife to get hurt. I don’t want my kids to feel that they are different.” Abdul-Rahman felt a mixture of anger and fear when viewing the media’s portrayal of Muslims, particularly that since the November attacks. “I would agree what happened is wrong, but it’s not me. Why do I have to apologize every time someone [Muslim] does something wrong? Why is it me?” But as time progressed, things did die down and Abdul-Rahman and his wife relaxed a little. There were even occasions when people came up to his wife and expressed solidarity with her
for choosing to wear the dress appropriate for a conservative Muslim woman, known as the hijab.

When asked he would ever consider leaving the Unite States, Abdul-Rahman said that he would want to go back someday to, if not Yemen, then some other Arab country, but him and his wife wouldn’t actually do it because of the kids. “I don’t think there’s a place anywhere else in the world like the United States for kids to grow up. I lived in Saudi Arabia and I know what it means to live in Saudi Arabia and gulf countries. Here, you can find that, your kids will grow up in a culture that does not look at them as strangers, at least your kids. There is this kind of space here for you to enjoy living and focus on your goals. If you go back to Saudi Arabia, Qatar or any of the other gulf countries, you would not be able to enjoy that space.”

Currently, Abdul-Rahman is working on receiving Temporary Protected Status for his family from the US government, which would allow them to stay in the US for an extended time period. “I don’t know why, but I don’t have the feeling that they’ll get deported or something. I have the feeling that they are safe here. I don’t know why. Though my visa, for example, will end soon, and I’ll have to work for another kind of visa or something, try to find something for them. But seriously, because I have lived here for a while, I don’t have the feeling that they’ll be unsafe again because someone will ask them to leave.” If possible, in a few years if they are allowed to stay, and all of the regulations and rules are with him, Abdul-Rahman wishes to pursue full citizenship for him and his family. “I think it would be a wonderful thing for my daughters to belong to such a great nation. It is something that I would love them to be a part of.” Abdul-
Rahman’s visa, the J-1 visa, will end May of 2016. And after their incredible journey, he is confident that no matter what happens with his immigration applications, that there is hope for the future of his family and himself. “You must always have hope, you must always have hope.”

Abdul-Rahman with his two daughters Aisha (left) and Noor(right).
[America]'s higher education system is excellent, both in terms of quality and accessibility. Here anybody can go to college. Many countries simply can't accommodate many students. And by the way, most people who came here in the seventies came to get an education. They didn't wake up one morning and say, 'I'm going to America to be free.' they said, 'I'll go there to get an education.' That's an important distinction. It was only after they were here for a while that they fully appreciated the freedoms we enjoy here.8

Mahbod Seraji, Rooftops of Tehran

America: The Liberty Phenomenon

Omniya Alomainy

Omniya in December of 2013

All quotes from this section are referenced from “Omniya Alomainy Interview.” Personal Interview. 26 Feb. 2016.
Omniya Alomainy is a “Yemeni” who was born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on May 20, 1990. She grew up with her parents and two older brothers all of her life in Riyadh Saudi Arabia, attending elementary school all the way through high school. Her father works for a prestigious bank in Saudi Arabia, while her two older brothers Raouf and Akram have worked outside of Saudi Arabia and moved to the UK and the United States. Growing up in Saudi Arabia was definitely different from the American or Western European way of life. She had to cover herself if she wanted to go outside. It is Saudi law that she would have to wear an abaya. An abaya covers almost every part of your body, which Omniya would have to wear over her clothes “so I wouldn’t be attractive to other men.” Life in Saudi Arabia is segregated by sex completely. Schools are separated male from female. There are restaurants for men only and female only. Men and women cannot date, the only way a man and a woman can be together in public is if they are related or they are married. The only things that are not segregated by sex are shopping malls and hospitals. Another aspect of life for a woman in Saudi Arabia is the fact that a woman may not drive. “So I would have to get my father to drive me or get a taxi.”

But by growing in Saudi Arabia, she was used to these facets of life. She didn’t know any different for most of her childhood. “I lived there all my life, so I got used to it. But we didn’t have freedom for women there. I mean we have universities for women and women can work. I’m not saying everything is all negative. But still when it comes to our personal life, there’s a lot of regulation.” But starting from the age of eight, she would make regular trips to Europe, mostly to London, in the summer with her mom for vacation. Omniya had the opportunity from a young age to explore another culture such
as the one in Britain that is so unlike her own. But this exploration was still limited due to
her family’s supervision of her at such a young age. She also had a chance to see the
United States, particularly New
Jersey, in 2005 when she travelled
with her parents for vacation to
visit her brother Raouf. They spent
three months visiting and going to
see surrounding areas like New
York and Virginia. Omnia’s first
American experience was a
pleasant one, while she particularly
enjoyed New York. It wasn’t
incredibly different from her
European experiences in terms of
the way the culture operates. “The
only difference was that people were very friendly here, not like in London. ‘Cause in
London, if you look at someone else and smile and say ‘hi, how are you doing?’ to them
they think you’re weird… But here I found it very nice that everybody asks ‘how are you
doing?’ and smiling. The first time it happened, I was like ‘Wow, are they trying to speak
to me?’ and my brother said ‘No everyone here is just friendly.’”

In 2008 she moved to live with one of her older brothers in London in order to attend
Queen Mary University of London, where she would complete her freshman year at the
university. “When I moved to London for college, I was very terrified. I was very, very, very terrified. I still remember the first day: I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep. That whole day my mom was there trying to calm me down. Cause you know in Saudi Arabia we didn’t really interact with other men. We didn’t talk, we didn’t speak up in Saudi Arabia basically, because it’s against the culture for a woman to have voice there [Saudi Arabia]…We couldn’t speak up.” To go from a completely segregated lifestyle for most of her life, to complete freedom was the biggest culture shock to Omniya. It wasn’t that she was unaware of her culture. On the contrary, by visiting other places outside of Saudi Arabia from such a young age she was able to realize that in her country, women were treated differently by society. Lower in status, lower in worth.

But then she moved to the UK at eighteen, and suddenly she could do whatever she wanted. The biggest shock for her came from the freedom that men and women had to interact with each other. London is a very liberal city by today’s standards, and Omniya recalls being very shocked at how men and women behaved. “I remember a shock for me. London you know is a very liberal city and so couples can kiss everywhere. That was sooooo shocking to be sure for me.” Despite her upbringing in the very conservative country of Saudi Arabia, Omniya has received the full support of her family to pursue her dreams outside of Saudi Arabia. “My family wants me to stay here [US]. They don’t want me to go back to Saudi Arabia. They want me to get out.”

In 2012 Omniya moved to Huntsville, Alabama to stay with her brother and go to the University of Alabama. It is a much smaller city than what she was used and the adjustment definitely took some time. There were several things about coming to not only
America, but southern America that made even her experience in New Jersey seem very different. “The first year was the hardest year for me. It was very hard. Everything was new; people, culture, food.” But something that Omniya came to appreciate after being in the United States for an extended period was the holidays. “One of the things I really like here is the holidays. Americans really celebrate holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas and others way more so than it was even in London.” But probably the biggest surprise to Omniya was how prevalent religion, predominantly Christianity, was in Huntsville. Much of southern America is known for its religious values, which is why it has garnered the nickname of the Bible Belt. People are much more open about their religious views and evangelicals actively seek people out in the streets and other public areas. “The religion, that was the biggest one [difference] for me. Cause they go around the school and they talk to you about God and about Christianity. I think it’s cool but it’s illegal in London.” This religious freedom was very new but Omniya really enjoyed the idea of openly discussing God in a school by choice, unlike in Saudi Arabia where lessons in the Qur’an are an absolute.
Another major difference between American and Saudi Arabian society was, not surprisingly, the social life. However, the differences were not obvious ones. She noticed how isolated Americans are from each other, even relationships between two friends of the same sex. “I feel like here, Americans don’t really socialize that much. Friendship here is different that my culture. In my culture, with my friends, I used to see them everyday. Everyday. We don’t have ‘Oh I’m busy’ excuses to not hangout.” Omnia and her five best friends back in Saudi Arabia were inseparable. “We used to do everything together.” They slept over at each other houses, ate together constantly and would go out to events often. But in America, that sense of constant companionship is not present.

A third difference Omnia noticed in Huntsville is the racial identification of everyone. “Here people see each other as color not culture. You’re Black, White and Hispanic. That’s a huge thing that I noticed here.” Within this racial identification she noticed that a lot of groups of friends don’t mix races. “I noticed that in one group of friends, there is not a lot of mixture.” This was something that was wildly different from the very diverse city of London and even Saudi Arabia. “In Saudi Arabia, we see nationality -- not color -- really to identify a person. So it’s just different.” But after arriving to Huntsville and then when she came later to Georgia Southern, she found herself the object of speculation. Because she is not Black, White or Hispanic, she was an anomaly, feeling she did not fit into people’s preset racial identification box. “Everyone looks at you by the color of your skin first. That’s the first question I get asked a lot here is ‘What are you? Are you Hispanic, are you Black?’” But despite America’s very racially structured social culture, Omnia’s interaction with the local community
remained very friendly. In 2013 Omniya went back to Saudi Arabia for a month long
vacation and to see her family. Since she has returned to the United States, she has lost
her permanent residence status in Saudi Arabia because she is not a citizen. Every though
she was born in Saudi Arabia, because her father is not a Saudi, Omniya cannot be Saudi.
Instead she carries a Yemeni passport, the country of her father and his family. When she
went back to Saudi Arabia after being away in the United States for the past year, several
things struck her. For one, putting the abaya back on felt different from the times before.
“Honestly, the first time I put it [abaya] back on, I felt sad. Like I felt like I have to wear
this. I don’t like it, but I have to put it on anyways, and I don’t know why. But because I
grew up wearing it, this was a little easier to understand. But when I put it back on the
first time, it was like a click in my mind and I thought ‘I can’t believe I grew up wearing
this?!’”

Another major change she felt in herself was in the way she interacted with men. In
this segregated society, men and women cannot interact, and yet Omniya was used to
being friendly with whomever she came across, man or woman. “I forgot that I couldn’t
do it honestly. I forgot that you cannot just be nice, or else they think you want something
more. Like there was this guy at the shopping mall, and I said hello to a guy and then he
asked for my number. I was just being nice! I didn’t want to give him my number.”

Omniya graduated from the University of Alabama with a degree in Chemistry with a
minor in Business in 2015. In the fall of 2015, she moved to Georgia Southern
University, where she is now in the Chemistry Masters program with a concentration in
Material Science. She hopes to graduate with her Masters degree from Georgia Southern
by the spring of 2017. Upon graduating she has not quite decided what her immediate plans would be. She is currently on a F-1 student visa with the United States government, and she may continue on her until she achieves a Ph. D. But looking forward to her future for a place to start her life, Omnia sees that life back in the Arab world. “I wanted to go back to the Middle East. Not to Saudi Arabia though probably the Emirates, because I can get a good job.” To Omnia she enjoyed America a lot, but she wants to go back to her culture. “My first purpose was for education definitely.” She will have completed her college education here by 2017 and is hopeful for the future of her career. And after losing her residency papers, there is no guarantee that she can go back to Saudi Arabia, not that she would want to. “I don’t think I could handle going back to live in Saudi Arabia after all of these years being away. After having all of these freedoms, I wouldn’t want to back to not having them there.” But looking towards finding a place to settle down, the Middle East is where her heart is. “I’m really homesick right now. I just want to be close to my family. America is very far from my family. Being away from my family all this time has been hard for sure. And I want to go back to the Arab way of life. Saudi Arabia is a very rich country, so I never had to struggle there. I just want the Saudi life, but I want the freedoms at the same time. That’s what Qatar has and what the UAE has.” She came for her education and was able to experience freedoms that she had never thought she would want. In her reflection of her American experience, she had nothing but good things to say. “America has been very good to me. Americans have been good to me. If I find the right job, I would love to stay here.”
When asked to reflect on her Western experience, mostly American, and what it meant to be able to have the opportunity to study and learn in a much more free and open society, Omnia particularly expressed immense gratitude for her time in the United States. “The first lesson I learned here was to find my personality. I know who I am now. I found myself, what my interests are, what I like… I feel like if I was still in Saudi Arabia and had never come here [US] I wouldn’t know these things about myself. I wouldn’t know who I am. The Western experience has taught me to find my interests and passions and showed me how to pursue them. To get a job from your passions. And also to be independent. In Saudi, my father did everything for me. But now I’m much more independent as a person.”
With everything that she’s learned and experienced here in the United States and Europe, Omniya is an exemplary model for illustrating how having the freedom to choose effects who you are. Even though she will probably go back to her culture somewhere in the Middle East, she will carry these ideals of gender equality, freedoms of speech and religion, and the right to pursue your own happiness with her. These inherent beliefs of freedom and equality have become ingrained into Omniya’s consciousness, so much so that she cannot be without them. To lose these freedoms would mean to lose herself to the repressed shell she was before. She has experienced the phenomenon of liberty. This transformation that has occurred within her is amazingly and wonderfully irreversible.
Conclusion

America, the life long love. America, the refuge from the storm. America, the liberty phenomenon. In the end it is many things for many people, and that is what makes her so beautiful. Because in this amazing land of opportunity and life, there is hope. Hope for a better life, a safer life and a freer life. The possibilities are amazingly endless.

I hope that at the end of this thesis, you have a better understanding of what a small part of the Arab immigration experience looks like through the narratives of these three people. These stories are real. These people and their lives are forever interwoven into the American identity. Who we are as a nation, as a people, is as a compilation of our individualities. Our hopes, dreams, fears, are all interrelated across barriers like religion, race, and ethnicity in an exchange and assimilation experience we relegate as the American culture. What this thesis sought to wrestle with and demonstrate to those reading it is how three people from different countries came to the United States and joined this exchange. To be sure, it is not the full picture. But in this glimpse, you can fully grasp the glorious way in which someone can fall in love with a country, be rescued by one, or be taught self-transformative philosophies to take when they go. And perhaps that is the finest commentary that anyone can offer about the country that I call home.
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"Youssef Salhi Interview." Personal interview. 21 Jan. 2016.