

# Suleiman Masoud



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## SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Suleiman Masoud

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Moureen Kaki 00:02

Cool. So today is the 28th of September, 2022. And as you know, my name is Moureen Kaki, and I'm working as an oral history fellow for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm currently in Boca Raton, Florida on a Zoom call, and I'm here with Sal, Suleiman Masoud. Do you prefer Sal or Suleiman?



Suleiman Masoud 00:26

Oh, Suleiman is good, yeah.



Moureen Kaki 00:29

Okay. Suleiman, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining the call from today?



Suleiman Masoud 00:35

Well, my name is Suleiman Masoud, and I'm currently living in El Paso, Texas.



Moureen Kaki 00:41

Thank you so much. Like I said, this is a matter of personal story, so just to start, would you mind telling me a little bit about your childhood, maybe one of the earliest things you remember?



Suleiman Masoud 00:53

The earliest memories of my childhood?

M

Moureen Kaki 00:55

Yeah, or just noticeable things about your childhood. Anything.

S

Suleiman Masoud 00:58

It was actually in Palestine, in the village of Burqa. Soon after I was born, I was only months old, my dad sent me with my mom back to Burqa to live with my grandma, because she was ill. So I spent the first three years in Palestine in that family house. Parts of that house was built close to 600 years ago, and then other parts are actually newer, but the whole entire family in that house is like a compound. So you got all these mothers that you could have, and all these uncles that could treat you like they're your father. So you had to answer to everybody. So it was a unique experience for me to grow up and see my grandma, because she died when I was just about three years old, and we moved to Kuwait after that.

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Suleiman Masoud 02:10

Funny that I still have vivid memories from that time in my life, and I still go back to it even now, every time I go to that house, and I just remember myself climbing up those stairs, because it's very, very dangerous stairs to climb for a child. It's almost the equivalent of four story high, but the stairs were just one go from bottom to top. Each stair was actually a stone buried into the wall, just carved in there. And the rail was wood, and it was very shaky. But anyway, we made it.

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Moureen Kaki 03:00

And you said from Palestine you went to Kuwait?

S

Suleiman Masoud 03:03

Yes. So once my grandma died, my father had already been in Kuwait since the early 50s, actually. So he came back, and we flew actually. We flew out of Qalandia, from the airport just outside of Jerusalem, and it was still under Jordanian rule at the time. It would have been 1963. And I remember also vividly getting in that airplane. We had the two propellers on the sides and just excited to be on a plane. When we moved to Kuwait, my dad had rented a flat on top of a supermarket actually. The first thing I did was climb on the rail of the balcony [laughs]. I thought I could do all that, like I was running around in Palestine with no supervision whatsoever.

M

Moureen Kaki 03:42

And about how old were you when you guys moved to Kuwait?

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Suleiman Masoud 04:15

About three years old.

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Moureen Kaki 04:17

Oh wow, okay. And can you describe more about your time in Kuwait?

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Suleiman Masoud 04:24

Well before joining school - I had sisters. By age three, I had already three sisters, one older and two younger, okay. And when we were living in that one apartment above the store - because my dad and my mom didn't like it because they'd have to lock the balcony all the time. Otherwise I'd be on the rail. And finally they said, "No, we're gonna move and get into a first story house." They moved, and we moved closer to where the beach. Not exactly on the beach, but not far. And we moved into, again, another flat. It was on the first floor. There was many more neighbors in that, so we could make friends and run around.

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Suleiman Masoud 05:25

And then by age, I would say five or five and a half, my dad wanted me to excel and and go to a good school. He enrolled me in, actually, a Catholic school, which is Al rahbat Alwardiah. So we were actually taught by nuns for a couple of years. And it didn't take very long before he realized I need to be moving out of there. And he put me in another school, also Lebanese school, private school. I was not allowed to go to government schools. So it was called Al-Jamil School, private. That school, it turned out to be probably one of the best things that happened to me, because education was really good at that school. They taught us languages. And every year since I was in middle school, the top five, there should be one from that school in the country. So they had really strict ways of teaching.

S

Suleiman Masoud 06:46

My memory of living in Kuwait mostly was mixed feelings. First, you as Palestinian, you were always told, "This is not home. We're here temporarily." How long is temporary? Seems like, We're not buying this, because we'll just buy a better one when we move back to Palestine. Oh, we need this until we -" So everything was temporary. Everything was just waiting, waiting 'til life gets better, and our whole life we're thinking of utopia, and life gets better only if we move back. Of course, I'm talking about - this is even when my dad put me in Al Jamil School, it was still the 60s. And I remember vividly 1967, when the war happened. And of course, then they felt that group feeling that they can't go back, because it became occupied. And if you're outside, you cannot go back unless you fix your papers. I still remember my father, my mother listening to the news and my uncles, and everybody's tearing up and thinking, "Oh what am I

gonna do now? I mean, are we stuck here forever?" It was a daunting moment where they figured out, "Okay, we better start living our life a little bit, buying things and getting better furniture," stuff like that.

S

Suleiman Masoud 08:32

By 1970, my dad moved us into a bigger flat that had more legroom. He always worked for the government. He was in the auditing department, HR basically. So some like a clerk, wasn't a big job. But for us in that newer house that we moved into 1970, it was a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood. I mean, I would say 90% of the population in there were Palestinians. But to the side of it, there was a few buildings that were mostly Kuwaiti bedrooms. And it was still strange where they don't accept us, and if we ever wander into their neighborhood, they would throw stones at us. And we the same, if they come our way. And so it was kind of hostile, to be honest with you, as children can kind of like that. But then as we grew older, and we became more, things changed, and life. We just adapted to that way of life, and the kids figure out how to spend their time in the summer between marbles, flying kites, playing soccer. In the hot of the summer, just playing soccer in the dead heat. I can remember that I was playing so hard to the point we would start bleeding from our noses, some of us. But who cares?

S

Suleiman Masoud 10:23

And then in 1972, my grandfather was still alive. He successfully got our paperwork fixed, where we can go back to Palestine, go back live in Palestine if we wanted to. It's called Lam Alshimel. So us and my uncle's family, where I have three cousins that are close to my age, we grew up like brothers, they decided to move and just go back to that big house and live there. Right off the bat. We took that one trip in 1972 to go cross the border, so that was my first encounter with Israeli soldiers at the border at age eleven, having to be strip-searched at age eleven, believe it or not. It was - how should I say - traumatizing. My biggest worry is I didn't want the female soldier to come near. I didn't mind the male ones. But anyway, it was like, for us, thinking going back to Palestine, going back to the village is like really stepping into heaven. So excited, so happy.

S

Suleiman Masoud 12:06

But we only stayed for three or four weeks. But in those less than four weeks, in those three weeks, my dad had arranged that we take a trip, and we went all around Palestine. We went all the way north to the Lebanese border and to Mount Carmel and Safed, Haifa, Jaffa, all the way, and then took a second trip, and we went to Gaza, went to the beach. It was exciting. At that time, you could still go and visit. So I remember vividly every other summer, we would go to Palestine, and I couldn't wait 'til the summer comes where we'd just go and be able to spend time with my cousins in the village.

M

Moureen Kaki 13:03

So you mentioned that your some of your siblings wanted to go back to Palestine, and you chose a different path eventually, right?

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Suleiman Masoud 13:13

Well, not my siblings. My uncle.

M

Moureen Kaki 13:16

Your uncles.

S

Suleiman Masoud 13:17

Who, we were very close, and my cousins, I grew up with them like my brothers. So they lived in a building next to ours, not very far. We spent a lot of time together. And the things that the families would do in Kuwait in the summertime is they would go to these seaside cafes. And they would just get coffee and tea, and they'd play backgammon or cards. And us, the kids, would just play in the playground or get into the water and go get crabs or things like that. That was almost every evening, just like Thursday nights and Friday nights. So when they got their documents fixed in 1972, with that trip, they decided, "We're gonna stay." They're not coming back to Kuwait. They just came back briefly, packed the things, and then went back to the big house. And every summer we go, we'd go and live in that big house, in the same house that I was in when I was three years old. They live in a different section of the house, so other relatives and other cousins and uncles and aunts, mostly old people.

S

Suleiman Masoud 14:38

And it was a great experience. Still, people back then really farmed. My uncle, of course, gotten into it, and he started to take care of the land. And we'd come in in the summer, and we would either go pick onions or go get the wheat. I mean, we didn't harvest the wheat, they had a machine doing it, but we would bag it and sew the bags shut and load them on the trailer. But yeah, I got to experience some of the things that my father got to experience to an extent. Like hiking the mountains and going to all these places that my dad talked about when he was a kid and things like that, things I wish my kids could do. I mean, right now, when I took my son, I wished I could have taken him hiking to where I went to this one post above the village where it was built at the time of Saladin and the Crusades. And you go up to the top of that mountain. Even though this is in the West Bank on the hills in Burqa, which is kind of a northern part of the West Bank. But it's such a high mountain in comparison to the rest of the hills around. Once you get on top of that mountain, you could literally see Nazareth, you could see the sea, you could see Haifa.

M

Moureen Kaki 14:47

From the West Bank?

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Suleiman Masoud 15:09

Yeah, it's not that far. Honestly, it's not that far. But once you get that high, and there is not much haze, it's wonderful. You see Nazareth. You could see the domes in the churches in Nazareth that far away. And it was such a treat, because it had this old building that was built by Saladin's soldiers, because when you get there, you get a 360 vision of all around you. You can tell if an army's coming couple of days ahead if you see that far. So it was a good post. So we'd go up there, and they have dug a well that would collect water like a cistern. And we knew that we'd get there, and we'd crawl down that well and get some water. It's things like that I experienced that my father talked about when he was a child, I got to do. I got to do trips where I go to different villages on donkey and come back with fruits and vegetables from the land.

S

Suleiman Masoud 17:23

But my kids never got to experience that. I wish they could have had that. Right now, I tried to take my son on a hike and actually rented a four by four. And we went up the mountain, but people would start to warn us that the settlers - because they had built a settlement right on top of the village - they say, "If they see you around that area, they'll come and harass you." And of course they have guns. So I didn't want him to get that experience. So that's how I grew up, between Kuwait and Palestine. And I could say I had pleasant memories in both. The longest time would be in Kuwait, my buddies were in Kuwait with my cousins. I grew up with best friends as well. I still keep up with everybody from my childhood. It was hard to find them, but after a while, Facebook helped. I could locate people through Facebook, but for years, I got disconnected from a lot of my friends that grew up in Kuwait, because 1990 when the war happened, everybody got scattered, and there was nobody left in there.

S

Suleiman Masoud 18:37

So in 1978, my uncle who had actually moved to the US for a medical reason, because he was with Fatah back in the 60s, one of the first people that joined and fought in Lebanon and in Jordan and, of course, in the interior, until in 1969 he got into a major accident after a funeral. And everybody died in the car, except he survived somehow, but he was crippled. He spent months and months in the hospital motionless basically, just voice. Eventually he got better and did start to move, and then they gave him a bit of money to go get treatment in the US. They said there's certain orthopedic and nerve doctors in Dallas actually, at the time. And he came. Well, he didn't go see the doctors. He just went and registered at the university and started his studies. And that was the end of it. He just stayed, kept going to school, kept going to school, got two masters and a PhD. And then finally got his citizenship through the University where he had worked as a foreign student. Not gonna say advisor, but more a foreign student liaison. And when they bring the foreign students, especially from the Middle East, he would be the one guiding them on how to - So everybody that came to Denton knew my uncle Ali, which, by the way, he just passed away less than a month ago.

S

Suleiman Masoud 20:47

We always idolized him being fedayi, a freedom fighter. I didn't really know him through my childhood, because he'd already moved out in the mid 60s, and eventually tried to go to college for one year in Pakistan. But then when the war started in - Well, of course, the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] was formed in '65, I think he joined at '67. And anyway, he finally

decided that - this mosquito keeps biting me. And then he decided that he wanted to get married. My grandparents have a house in Irbid, Jordan. So we traveled to Irbid for his wedding. And we were there before he arrived, and he came in, and he was supposed to be there for only two weeks, get married, and then move back, and get her paperwork done, and then send for her. So during those two weeks I spent almost every day with him.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 22:11

And he's the one who seeded the idea in my head. He said, "You know what? Your behavior, your mannerism, it's completely American, and you would fit in really well if you would move to the States." And I didn't really take much to that in the beginning. Not until I got to high school, and I started paying attention, watching shows, especially then there was a show that was quite famous, it's called Dallas. I don't know if you remember that.

**M** Moureen Kaki 22:43

I don't think so, no.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 22:45

Yeah, J.R., "Who shot J.R.?" You need to Google that. But it's a famous sitcom show that lasted for years. It's called Dallas and actually filmed in Dallas, and you could still go visit that house. It's a historical marker now. People go visit it from all over the world.

**M** Moureen Kaki 23:11

That's cool.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 23:13

Yeah, so got more interested in that. So I wrote him, and I said, "Yeah, I'm interested. So what should I do?" "Okay," he said, "Go take the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] test. English equivalency, so if you pass it, you can just come straight to university, if you don't pass it, you can come study English first." So he sent me the paperwork, and I applied for it. And so I figured out, "Okay, I'm going, and I'm going to Denton." I learned that I'm not going to Dallas, I'm going to another town called Denton. It was different for me. In our school, Al-Jamil School, I stayed in it from first grade till twelfth grade. So I knew everybody. The guys that were in my school from first grade, they kept moving with me all the way to twelfth grade. So I grew up with these people, that's why I say some of my best friends, except the ones that failed and got behind. It's hard to keep up with those guys.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 24:25

But yeah, so we were a very close knit group. And in high school, of course, the thing to do is

you skip school, you go to the supermarket, and you buy cigarettes and smoke cigarettes. That's what you do. And so we used to go to this little supermarket, and we'd keep our pack over there with him, and then we'd just get it, smoke a couple of cigarettes before class starts, and then there's actually an American school not very far away, and the American kids would do the same. They would come to the store, and they'd buy cigarettes [laughs]. And these two kids actually were there, and with our broken English, basically got introduced, and I learned that they are Texans, and they're from Dallas. So like, "Hey, I'm coming to Denton." And then they told me so much about the area and what's going on and how it is, and that Denton had universities, all women. It's like, "Okay [laughs]. That's interesting."

S

Suleiman Masoud 25:29

But anyway, eventually time come where it needs to go. I knew my dad, my father didn't have lots of income or means or savings. So I worked the summer of my eleventh grade and the summer after high school, I worked as a maintenance guy in the engineering department at the Sheraton Hotel. We had a relative that ran that department. The first summer was just purely work. They paid us. I worked as many hours as they would give and then saved up all the money. And then on the summer [after] high school, got really to know a lot of people there. And they asked me to bring more of some of my friends to work because they needed to finish on time. So I was working there with three or four of my friends. And we ended up doing business with them, we're buying the used furniture that they're getting rid of, and we started selling it in the neighborhoods, and we made really good money for kids in high school. So I figured I'd go buy my airline tickets. I paid my airline ticket myself actually. Had enough money to do that. Anyways, so came to the States, 1979. Straight to Denton. And that's when I realized that it can't get any better than that. This is the place to stay [laughs]. Pretty much early on. I mean, think about it. I felt free here in a lot of ways.

M

Moureen Kaki 25:37

Can you elaborate more, like how and why?

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Suleiman Masoud 27:41

First of all, being away from home for the first time as a young male, that's very important. Where you don't have to answer to anybody, you pretty much have to make your own decisions. So that on its own is a liberating feeling. And I just wanted to blend. I didn't want to be a sore thumb. Literally the first two weeks, I got rid of every bit of clothes that I brought with me, and I went and bought all my clothes from Kmart and Gibson's and all these Western clothes, cowboy hat, boots and tennis shoes. I wanted to look like everybody else. I didn't want to look foreign. And I made a point of making friends of the locals and basically not just completely isolate. A lot of the Arab students would just congregate with each other. They'd move like packs, they'd go drink coffee altogether, they'd go to the club together, or they all just congregated to sit in the Union building, big crowd, all smoking, loud. I wanted to be a little different.

S

Suleiman Masoud 28:56



But the question that you asked and I elaborated on, how I felt that this is the place I'm going to stay? First of all, you could tell that there's so much opportunity. You see wealth all around you, and you could see that everybody speaks their mind, everybody's acted confident, there's no fear in their face, whether to say this or that. Even in Kuwait, where it's far away from any conflict, you still didn't feel comfortable speaking your mind, because people had different political backgrounds, and people would judge you differently. But over in the States when I came in, really you could be whoever you want to be. That's one of the first things I had to realize that everything I grew up with as right and wrong really doesn't fit here. People all think different. They have their own rights and wrongs, and who am I to judge? So you have to adjust your way you think. And that also opens your mind to new experiences, all that is just - I was like a sponge just absorbing all this. I cannot describe. I wish that my kids would experience something like that where they get to live two different personalities.

S Suleiman Masoud 30:32

But of course, after the years, Moureen - and I don't know if you feel the same way - but we live our life here, but we still have that pull of our traditions and our culture. So you still live for them, you still try to act proper in certain situations and do that, in that contradiction in our lives that just doesn't go away. We do contrary things to what we first thought and believed, but yet we're comfortable with it. You know what I mean?

M Moureen Kaki 31:12

I do, I do. Would you feel comfortable sharing some of those contradictions that you've run into that you've had? Whether that's in conflict while raising your kids - who are wonderful people, by the way.

S Suleiman Masoud 31:23

Thank you.

M Moureen Kaki 31:24

Or even with your own experiences before you had kids, just what some of those contradictions were like? Because I know what that feels like, but I'd love if you could elaborate.

S Suleiman Masoud 31:36

It's hard to pin one or two of those contradictions, but there's enough of it that I could just mention one thing. The way we grew up, where men and women are separate. I mean, you don't mingle, dating was not something that is acceptable in society, okay. For a young woman to speak to a man outside, being alone, it was a big no-no, especially in our community, being a farming community, very strict. In that sense, even me as a male, to have a girlfriend would have been something - of course, you can't resist not having once you're here, and every guy I knew did, and a lot of them just lied their way to their parents that they are doing this and

doing that. So that's one obvious contradiction. Well, drinking. I drink, and I know that I didn't grow up - we grew up thinking if you drink, that's a sin, and you shouldn't be doing that. But yet, almost everybody I knew did. So even though you accept it, and you're doing it, but in the back of your mind, you're doing something wrong. You just know that you're doing something wrong, and you said, "Okay, well, what the heck, I'm doing it anyway."

S

Suleiman Masoud 33:24

So a lot of these things that still doesn't make me feel comfortable, but at least after I got older and more comfortable with myself, I no longer hide it. This is me, that's how I am. Even to my mom or my sisters, I'm not going to drink in front of them, but I'm not going to deny it or lie to them that I don't. So I'm a whole lot more comfortable. And if I feel that one day I'm not going to drink anymore, so be it. It's another choice, another time, another feeling. So I'm accepting it that way. But back then when I was young, it was harder to feel this way that I'm feeling now. Somehow you felt a bit of shame for doing the things you're doing. And I mean, there's lots of these contradictions that I could go on and on about, the way we were raised versus the way we live.

S

Suleiman Masoud 34:36

But then today, the other portion of it is I lived here so long, and of course, I married an American woman that born and raised here, English and Dutch heritage. She did try her best to understand our culture, but there's no way that she's going to see it or feel it the way I feel. And I became completely immersed in American culture, American mind. I dream in English. I pretty much caught on to every - the humor, just the language itself. I'm so in depth, I'm much more in control of the English than in Arabic sometimes. Yet I still have that other part where I go back to Palestine and start speaking Fellahi the way I know how since the 60s. People don't speak the way I speak anymore. They think I'm backward when I go back there. They think, "Wow. Really? You live in America?" They don't accept it or they don't believe it.

S

Suleiman Masoud 36:11

But I could make that transition. I could actually live the two lives. But there, in my own psyche, I don't know where exactly I belong. I would love to be able to say I could move back to the village and live and build me a house somewhere atop of the hill, retire there, but I know that's impossible now. Been just realizing. Before it used to be more of a goal, but I know that now I can't do it. There's so much wrong over there. I mean, the health system is bad. The law, there's no protection. The police are really literally just - they're ineffective, they can't really protect you. They're there for a totally different reason. It's complicated. So I go, and I see it, and I enjoy the two weeks or three weeks that I go there, but then I can't wait to really get back to where I feel secure and safe. Here in the States. That's a true feeling.

M

Moureen Kaki 37:28

I appreciate you sharing that. I understand it can be a complicated relationship. And it's hard to balance that sense of needing to move forward in your life with being attached to an identity that's still so meaningful and provides so much of your cultural and historical background. So I

thank you for sharing that. And so you said you moved to the US in '79, and you went to college here, because you had to do the TOEFL exam. Can you talk about college a little bit, your experiences through that? I know you alluded to some of them in terms of the contradictions and stuff, but maybe one of your favorite parts about college here?

**S** Suleiman Masoud 38:09

Well, when I first moved in of course, the first thing that we had to study is English. So even though I did pass the TOEFL, my uncle said, "You know what? Just take the course anyway, and you'll strengthen your English and your accent." And sure enough, that was actually a great experience, because you get to go to school with people from different parts of the world. From Thailand and South America, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela, there are people from all over China, Japan. It was a very colorful experience those four months. They took us on trips, it was like the honeymoon of being in the States. It's really fantastic.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 38:58

And then, of course, I started university at UNT, which back then it used to be called NTSU, North Texas State University, it had a different name. And went to my first football game. That was just out of this world. My cousin said, "Hey, let's go watch football." And I thought I was gonna watch football, like what I know what football is. But then all of a sudden, they're playing with their hands. And I'm like, "What the hell is this? What do you - What? How?" And then, of course, I noticed the cheerleaders, and that was it. But again, college got more exciting as I started to decide, "Yeah, I'm gonna go into an engineering school." And NTSU did not have engineering, so my uncle said, "Well, stay as long as you can here. Get your humanities, get your maths and whatnot.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 39:59

So I took as many classes as I could, then I moved with a group of friends that wanted to. They said, "Hey, there's a university in Beaumont, Texas, Lamar University." It was actually a good university. But I did not like it that the town itself was kind of backward, filthy, and the university itself was outside the city, so it felt isolated. Not like when we were in Denton, we were in the middle of everything. But over there, it was to the side, only a couple of stores that you can go to, and it was next to a refinery and smelled really bad every morning. The refinery, when they spit out the gas, what is that, H<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, which smells really horrible, like rotten eggs every morning. And I had to stay at least two semesters because I already committed to the program. As soon as I finished it, I went back to North Texas to UT Arlington, actually, where this program has been done. And I studied there for about a year at UT Arlington or less than a year, two long semesters. Same like Beaumont.

**S** Suleiman Masoud 41:19

Until a group of my friends moved to El Paso. And they said, "Hey, this is it. Come over here, it's a really nice town. We go to Mexico every night, and we just party there in Mexico 'til morning." All right, cool. So I moved to El Paso in '83. But I was thinking that, "I need to get settled, I need

to get married, I need to stay. That's it." So I met my ex-wife, actually, Judy, I met Judy, on the third day I was in El Paso. Right out after registration. So that was quite an introduction to El Paso. We were together about a year, and then we got married.

M

Moureen Kaki 42:18

Wow. Because I know your kids, of course, I know that you guys had kids. And you mentioned earlier that your experiences in Palestine as a child, you wish you could take your kids to experience them the same way. Can you talk a little bit about how you did or didn't, how the inability to do that affected your relationship with your kids or the way you would have raised them, for instance? Basically I'm just trying to get at how you think the inability to experience Palestine the way you did and share that with your kids affected the way that you raised them and your relationship with them, if at all. Maybe it didn't.

S

Suleiman Masoud 43:10

Well, I raised my kids - of course, the divorce came in the middle. They were still young. And for a period of our life, we moved to Dubai. And that period, in my mind, I thought, "Okay, that would get them immersed in the culture and they would learn Arabic and whatnot." It didn't work because everybody in Dubai wants to speak English. They want to be more westernized. So it's the other way around. Also, I was able to focus on them a little bit more, and I tried to get them to learn Arabic, but it didn't really work. And our marriage wasn't all that settled, even then. So it was hard for me to focus on them. And one of the things that I really regret not doing is not push the Arabic language on them and speak with him in Arabic all the time.

S

Suleiman Masoud 44:27

My dad passed away in 1995, so in 1996, I actually took Yasmin, Fatima, and Sara to Palestine, and they stayed there the whole summer with their grandma. And miraculously, even in those two and a half months of the summer after I came back to pick them up, they were speaking Fellahi. I mean, it's amazing. Sara was there, there was a swing in the backyard, and she was telling Fatima, "Zukeeny, zukeeny," like she hears the kids in the neighborhood talking.

M

Moureen Kaki 45:07

That's cute.

S

Suleiman Masoud 45:08

Yeah. So they got to experience that portion, but just the freedom of being in the village, running around, going from place to place, getting into mischief, just being a local kid in there, because your cousins basically just get you into their own mischief when you're there. And that's it, that's the end of it. That was hard for them to experience. They were more sheltered. At least I thought so, but I'm sure they probably have a different memory of it.

M

**Moureen Kaki 45:52**

Wow, have we've been going this long? I didn't realize how late it is. I don't want to keep you too much longer, because I don't want to take up too much of your time. I didn't realize we'd been here so long. But I basically just wanted to ask - I guess I'll leave this as the last question, because you've explained your story pretty well through without me needing to even intervene. But I wanted to ask you if you have anything that you wanted to add onto anything that is related to what we spoke that you wanted to expand on, or something you just want to put out there, given the context of what you spoke about. Anything, whether it's the cross-cultural aspect and trying to fit in in different places, and finally finding your home here, or if it's about something you didn't talk about at all that you wanted to mention also.

S

**Suleiman Masoud 46:46**

Well, one of the things I might - when we first started the interview, you asked me whether I prefer to go by Sal or Suleiman, and I said Suleiman because of you, Moureen, you're Palestinian. But with everybody else here, I much rather when somebody asks me, I'll just say Sal. And the reason I say that, because once I say "Suleiman," they want to know a story. "Why? Who are you? Where are you from?" And then you end up telling the same story that you told maybe a million times before, and then you're immediately put in that category. You're no longer just - I'm a local here in El Paso. But the minute that I identify as Suleiman, and they know where I'm coming from, if they don't already know me, if it's a new new meet, I get put in that category. The Palestinian, the Arab guy. They forget everything else I said about my experience in engineering and land development, and that becomes secondary to how I identify myself.

S

**Suleiman Masoud 47:58**

And that's something you learn to live with being here, as an Arab, as a Muslim, as a Palestinian, in Texas, especially. I mean, I'm lucky here in El Paso where people are less - how shall I say? - less right-wing. When I go to East Texas, or when I attend these meetings at the Association of Builders, and mostly just good ol' boys that even though they're educated, and they understand the difference and where you're coming from, but still, you're so far off the spectrum from what they grew up seeing. Even though there's so many immigrant communities in Texas, that's still different for them. So yeah, in a lot of ways I much prefer to say Sal when I'm just anywhere. I go to the city or the county or any municipality. That's it. "Sal, so don't ask me anymore. I don't want to tell the story again." But it still comes up, whether I like it or not, it still comes up. And so it's always a reminder that, yeah, I've been here well over forty years. Pretty much everybody I meet right now, I've been here longer than they lived, maybe twice sometimes. But they still, once they know Suleiman, [I] don't belong as much as they are.

M

**Moureen Kaki 50:00**

Okay, I know I said the last one was the last question. But do you have any words of advice you would share to fellow Muslims who might feel that same otherness that you just described? If,

let's say somebody was listening to the interview, and they heard you talk about why you call yourself Sal instead of Suleiman, and they said, "I can totally relate to that, and that's something I understand," would you have any general advice for those kinds of people who are trying to find their sense of belonging the same way that you found yours?

S

Suleiman Masoud 50:35

Well, I sometimes admire some of these guys where they're strict, and they pray five times a day, and they make the mosque their life, and they're good, wholesome people. And whether they choose to limit their life to that or experience anything outside of it, that's a choice they make. Even sometimes the way they dress, they dress totally different with shalwar kameez and keffiyeh, and they walk like that outside. That's a choice they make, there's no way I can advise them any other way. But if there is somebody who is very proud of being Muslim, like me - I am very proud, I'd never denied and never - but I'm not militant about it to where if somebody were to say - I'd try to convince them in a good way why Islam is not an extremist religion. There's no way, there's a misinterpretation.

S

Suleiman Masoud 51:46

But if somebody wants to blend in and wants to have a successful business, let's say - not to say that you couldn't, everybody adapts to their own needs. But at least for me, I figured this would be easier and makes it less strange when I'm conducting business with people. But once I get to know them and everything, and they know who I am, it's different once they're comfortable. But the first impression, which is important in a lot of ways. People want to judge you really quick. I chose to go by a different name. I always thought to myself, if I was back home, let's just say where I was raised in Kuwait, okay. And in my school everybody named Ahmad, Mohammad, Hassan, Adnan, Ibrahim, and then you get this one guy, Leonard. It's different, totally. Immediately, as soon as he says his name, you ask him where they're from, why do they have this name, and every kid treated him like, he's not part of this culture, like he's different. So it goes both ways, whether you're here or there. So I figured if this guy, instead of just went by Leonard and just said I'm Louay, he would have absolutely no problem with anybody. So I gauged it like that, because in my school, there were several kids that had Western names. They got singled out, even though they treated them the same, we played soccer together, we played basketball and volleyball, and we hung out and smoked cigarettes together. But still, you got the [inaudible].

S

Suleiman Masoud 52:03

Yeah, well, thank you. Thank you for sharing and contextualizing thing that further. I think that was really helpful in understanding the distinction in it. It's something that a lot of people, I'm sure, have asked about before too, so I appreciate you sharing that. But that's pretty much all I had, Suleiman. I can go ahead and stop the recording unless there's anything else you want to ask. Okay, let me go ahead and pause it here.

M

Moureen Kaki 54:04

So late with you now.