

Ahmad Kaki



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57:36

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SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Ahmad Kaki



Moureen Kaki 00:03

Hello, hello, my name is Moureen Kaki. I am an oral history fellow with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. Today is Wednesday, December 21 at 4:31 Central Time. Here I have with me, interviewing my brother Ahmad Kaki today. Ahmad, would you mind introducing yourself and tell us where you're calling from today, please?



Ahmad Kaki 00:23

Hello all. Moureen, thank you for the introduction. I'm very happy to be speaking with you. I am calling from Washington, DC, or better yet Arlington, Virginia, right outside of DC. Am I introducing myself and saying where I am, or is that a just want to know where I am?



Moureen Kaki 00:40

No, go ahead and give us an introduction. Tell us about yourself a little.



Ahmad Kaki 00:43

So so like Moureen said then, my name is Ahmad Kaki. I now live in Arlington, Virginia. I lived almost my entire life in South Texas, mostly San Antonio, and a year in Palestine, but moved to DC in August of 2021, and have been here since. I moved to DC after deciding on a career change. I was working in business and business sales previously. Not really my forte, but it paid the bills, so to speak. I decided to make career change, came to law school here in the DC area, where I'm taking evening classes. And during the day, I work for the Council on American Islamic Relations [CAIR], Legal Defense Fund as a legal assistant, helping in impact litigation for all kinds of cases that affects Muslims and people of Muslim backgrounds across the country.

M Moureen Kaki 01:39

Very cool, Ahmad. Thank you so much for joining us and for giving us your time here today. I really do appreciate it. Now I have the wonderful pleasure, again, of getting to call you my brother. So a lot of the things that we're going to talk about today, I imagine I'll know, but if you wouldn't mind, let's backtrack. I know you're talking about DC now and mentioning the growing up in Texas and Palestine along the way. Would you mind telling us - you're always the one out of us who could remember stuff from way beyond, too. So what's the earliest childhood memory that you have? Would you mind sharing that with us please?

A Ahmad Kaki 02:12

Wow, the earliest childhood memory period?

M Moureen Kaki 02:16

Yeah, that you can remember.

A Ahmad Kaki 02:18

Oh, that's an interesting question. I have a random memory of my fifth birthday and a Power Rangers cake. But that's the extent of my memory, there is a chocolate cake with Power Rangers on it, and I remember being very excited. That's my first memory of any sort of sentience. I don't know. I remember a couple of things here about kindergarten and first grade and whatnot, but it varies. I don't know. If there's something specific, I'd love to get more into it, but yeah, first memory: five-year-old, Power Ranger cake.

M Moureen Kaki 02:59

What was your childhood generally like growing up in Texas?

A Ahmad Kaki 03:04

It was really great. I had three wonderful siblings, you, of course, and two younger brothers raised almost entirely by our mom, single mom for most of our lives. Didn't grow up too rich or too poor, just in the middle there. But we bounced around a lot. You know that we moved to lots of different neighborhoods, lots of different schools, pretty much a different school every year for a seven or eight year period. So it's always hard to plant roots, for sure. But we made it, and we had each other and made some friends along the way, so it's all good. Without jumping too quickly to the obvious context of this podcast, 9/11 changed everything. Definitely had a major impact, it was an inflection point, in my childhood, and if we plan on talking about that, there's plenty to say there for sure.

M

Moureen Kaki 03:58

Yeah, that's definitely something I want to get into here. But just for, I guess, additional context and contrast, pre-9/11, what was your time like in terms of - I mean, that's hard to say, right? You were how old when 9/11 happened?

A

Ahmad Kaki 04:16

I was eight.

M

Moureen Kaki 04:17

- if you can remember. Yeah, yeah. Whatever you remember between that first five-year-old Power Ranger cake and eight years old in terms of - again, just for context and contrast for the post-9/11 that we'll get into here shortly, what it was like. And you can talk about a specifically good memory or bad memory or whatever it is you're gonna talk about. Just memories, experiences, thoughts, feelings that they come up with too.

A

Ahmad Kaki 04:46

It's hard to pinpoint a specific age and stuff where things happened, but I guess pre-eight years old, definitely more normal feeling. I just felt like a normal kid in a normal place, not unlike anybody else. Unlike people in some sense. We didn't celebrate Christmas or Easter. We had our own thing going on, so that's the only distinction we had between us and other kids that were around us.

A

Ahmad Kaki 05:11

Also being Palestinian makes things a little different. You're naturally politicized. You really don't have much of a say in that. I have very young childhood memories of our mother driving us to protests before we could even form coherent ideas about things. I knew that Palestine was important, and it was important enough to drive from San Antonio to Houston, because San Antonio didn't have protests and Houston did. And standing on sidewalks with people of different backgrounds and yelling slogans about Ariel Sharon, and Palestinian freedom, and possibly at that time, the failure of Oslo. I can't remember specifically, but I imagine that was part of a given the timing. And so yeah, a relatively normal childhood, played sports, soccer, enjoyed school, and a little bit of difference with the Muslim and Palestinian background for sure.

M

Moureen Kaki 06:08

Yeah, and do you remember, you said you were eight when when 9/11 happened. And do you remember where you were? Do you remember where you were on that day, or maybe even the moment that it happened? Are you able to associate a memory there?

A

Ahmad Kaki 06:24

Yeah, I mean, what is - from that movie *Inside Out*. They had the core memories, those random memories that were so impactful or emotional that you have a really strong recollection of the events. I remember going to school not knowing what happened, but there was a ruckus at school about what happened. A friend of mine, I still remember his name, Philip Cabrera. I'm wondering what's going on, and he was like, "Oh, there was a terrorist attack this morning." And I was like, "What is terrorist? I've never heard this word in my life before." And he's like, "Oh, I think it's like a robber. Somebody robbed some building in New York, but it's a pretty big deal." I remember that being the conversation.

A

Ahmad Kaki 07:09

But as the day passed, if I remember correctly, they had on the news on TV at schools. Obviously a very tragic day. We got back home, even our parents - I remember my mom was keeping afloat of what was going on. And so as it happened, you get a better idea of what happened, like, "Holy smokes, it seems like a couple people flew planes into buildings. Must have been some deranged idiots." And then as time passes, you learned their identity, and that's when it really starts impacting us in a specific way.

M

Moureen Kaki 07:48

Yeah, yeah. And what are some of the things that you experienced that began to be different than what you described earlier about - aside from the relatively small differences of being Muslim and Palestinian are not so apparent. What became different after 9/11, after that day, you were eight years old.

A

Ahmad Kaki 08:08

Now being Muslim, being named Ahmad, and it was more than just the small difference of not celebrating holidays, or the other minor differences. It was everything. People associated you with what happened, and your faith with what happened, and your identity with what happened. A lot of bullying after that, both in school, incessant bullying, pretty much for the remainder of my childhood from the moment of 9/11 until high school was really when that dissipated. But bullying related to being Arab, being Muslim. Bullying in the neighborhood was a big deal. We had pretty normal relationships with neighbors. You play football with them, basketball, video games, and all of a sudden, you're called things like the son of bin Laden or other things. As time passes, it becomes worse and worse.

A

Ahmad Kaki 09:07

And there's a really, really strong anti-Muslim culture in the United States. You don't know that as a kid. You just know that this is what people think of you now, and it's a result of these events on 9/11. And everything on the news revolves around it now. We can think of a hundred different major headlines that never would have happened if it wasn't for 9/11. The Ground Zero mosque when we were young. The idea of building a masjid within the vicinity of where

this happened was unthinkable to people who are anti-Muslim bigots. We had anti-Sharia laws being passed in states. All of this is a result of 9/11. So, huge inflection point changed the relationships that me and other outwardly identifying Muslims had.

A

Ahmad Kaki 09:55

And even for me, it wasn't so bad. I think the most easily identifiable Muslims were the victims of the worst kinds of things. My aunt, Auntie [Name] tells a story. She wears a hijab. She's a beautiful woman, I love her so much. And she tells stories of being harassed randomly, people following her home from shopping or shouting things at her on the street. And the only reason being because she was very clearly Muslim, and people had a problem with that. And yeah, definitely a big change that impacted our childhood and impacts us today, by the way, which is a great conversation to have given the work that I do now. But I imagine that'll come up later in the podcast.

M

Moureen Kaki 10:41

Yeah, yeah, we'll definitely want to get into your work with CAIR. And I appreciate everything you've just shared. I want to go back and ask you to expand on a story where you mentioned that you were called the son of bin Laden and ask you if you wouldn't mind sharing that story in the full context of how you came to be called that.

A

Ahmad Kaki 11:07

Yeah, I mean, it was just an average conflict with some guy who was a couple years older than me over some game we were playing in the neighborhood. He thought it would be funny, I guess, to call me the son of bin Laden, a really, really cute form of bullying, I suppose. It hurt, obviously. The incessant bullying was tough. Basically when we were, for the next several years, like I mentioned, in school or on the streets. I had a hundred other bullying stories related to being in school, traveling to Palestine when I was twelve, and coming back, and then what happened after that.

A

Ahmad Kaki 11:43

But with regards to a specific incident, he called me the son of bin Laden. I remember going home and crying to my mom, I think, as average nine-year-old does when they're bullied, and they don't know what to do. And I remember my mom going to the neighbor and wanting to do the neighborly thing and say, "Hey, your son said this to my son. I don't think that's right. Maybe you should talk to him about that." And remembering the mother defending the actions. I can't remember specifically what she said. If you're planning on, at one point, interviewing our mother as well, she'll probably know the details of this.

A

Ahmad Kaki 12:17

But the sum of it is that the mom defended what her son had done, and I think obviously

reflective of not just some kids being idiots, but of a culture. What were these kids being taught at home? What was coming through their televisions and into their minds, in shaping the way that they saw Muslims in the United States? And so much so that a presumably thirty or forty-year-old woman thought it was okay for a eight or nine-year-old kid to be bullied around. So that was extent of it.

M

Moureen Kaki 12:49

Yeah, and I mean, you talk about this bullying ending in high school, but did it really end in high school, or did bullying just become something else as you got older, and you realized the - you get what I'm saying?

A

Ahmad Kaki 13:02

Yeah, I mean, the day-to-day stuff. This continued through middle school. When we as a family traveled to Palestine and came back for a year, I was in middle school for a year in the sixth grade, left in seventh grade, and then came back in the eighth grade, so eleven, twelve, thirteen, my age at the time. And I remember coming back from Palestine and jokes going around about me coming back from terrorist training camp. That one was kind of clever, admittedly. And at that point, I had a different method of conflict resolution, which worked out a little better from you [laughs]. [inaudible] But it turns out when kids half your size bully you and you physically intimidate them in return, the kids that are half your size no longer find it appropriate to say things about you.

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Ahmad Kaki 13:52

Anyway, I was I was actually very grateful after middle school to go to Health Careers High School. It was a little lottery-based school in northside San Antonio. It was extremely diverse, I think, in large part because the kids who wanted to go there were kids who wanted to enter the health profession. So we had Brown people of all backgrounds there. And with Brown people came less bullying, more people like me. In middle school, the only other Muslims I really remember were my siblings. And now in high school, we had enough Muslims to have a Muslim Student Association and have a lot of people that have the same background as you and can be your friends, and other people were generally more exposed to people of other faiths and knew that these kinds of things were bad. Obviously, the impact of 9/11 the implications of 9/11, stretch far beyond school bullying, and that's more of the context in which they're met as you get older, whether that's through the presence of a national security state, so to speak, or many, many other things. But as far as school bullying, thankfully, it stopped once I got a little bit older.

M

Moureen Kaki 15:09

Yeah. And what are the other ways that, as you left high school, transitioned out of high school, maybe into college or even beyond, whatever comes to mind with the question, really, but what are some of the ways that in that 9/11 impacted your life outside of interpersonal, interpersonal relationships and bullying like that?

A

Ahmad Kaki 15:31

Yeah, I mean, 9/11 had a general impact on my identity, I like to think, insofar as with increased scrutiny of my beliefs came a desire to know what my actual beliefs were. You and I know we didn't grow up in a particularly religious family, not a really religious family, at least. But I definitely wanted to know, like, "People say that my faith teaches this. I want to know what that means." And from an identity perspective, I think the more that I got bullied about my name, and about my background, the more I wanted to know about that.

A

Ahmad Kaki 16:07

And so it resulted in me taking an interest in the faith, becoming closer to the community, and I'm grateful for that portion. I'm grateful to have the ties to the community that I do today, to have the belief system and the faith that I practice today, something that I'm extremely grateful for. Many of my friends are Muslim, and I've met them in Muslim contexts, whether that's through student organizations, or through local mosques, and again, very grateful. My lovely wife, I met her through the Muslim Student Association. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that if people didn't bully me for being Muslim when I was a kid, that it wouldn't have ignited that desire for me to explore my identity more. And I think that chain reaction leads to where I am today in a social context.

A

Ahmad Kaki 16:55

But the implications are huge, right? As Palestinians, Islamophobia is very, very important. It's weaponized in so far as it's necessary to uphold the Zionist narratives, this idea of a progressive, modern people fighting against a barbaric people with barbaric beliefs and barbaric ideas. And 9/11 helps that, because it's built on that foundation. I think Islamophobia existed before 9/11. I'm certain it did. I see it in pop culture when you watch old movies and stuff like that, but obviously 9/11 made it much more intense. And I think that the pro-Israel side of the world appreciates it for that, for helping to create their narratives.

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Ahmad Kaki 17:50

And so in the context of Palestinian activism, being accused of being radical, or being accused of having a radical background, or having radical ideas and beliefs, is very important. Canary Mission exists. I don't think Canary Mission exists without the fears that creep into the United States as a result of 9/11. The weight of, "This student entered an organization, that's the same organization that some terrorist was also a part of forty years ago." I don't think that has a weight unless Americans are afraid of radical Islam. And so it permeates into that today.

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Ahmad Kaki 18:32

And I think I should probably give a little bit of context to that. So Canary Mission is a blacklist site for mostly students who do Palestinian activism. It's totally heinous. It's awful, it really, really is. They monitor Palestinian students on social media and in public events, and they often

post out-of-context quotes, and maybe even really, really old posts that I'm sure people often are emotionally remorseful of, and in order to blacklist Palestinian students in a way that challenges their ability to exist in the public. I say that, and it sounds very serious, but it's very true.

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Ahmad Kaki 19:20

I've heard of students who surely said some very idiotic things on Twitter when they were eighteen years old, and all of a sudden when they're twenty-five and applying to medical school, for example, these old tweets are uncovered by Canary Mission, put on their website, and these people have job offers rescinded. They have offers to medical school taken back, and that's for people who have said unfortunately dumb things that any kid would, by the way. All kids say dumb things. The premise itself is that they seek to, in some ways, criminalize pro-Palestinian behavior and speech, and they do it by being extremely secretive in their approach. They post out-of-context quotes, like I said.

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Ahmad Kaki 20:05

I have a Canary Mission profile. I was very blessed to not be on Twitter when I was so stupid as that, so that I would have said something stupid. But regardless, my Canary Mission profile is built on this idea that the way that they link me to radical ideas is by saying, "Ahmad was the president of the MSA, and here are some nefarious randos who were MSA members in the United States in the last fifty-six years." Just guilt by association, and that's even a stretch. It's guilt by unbelievably remote association. And their ultimate goal is to make people fear speaking out in support of Palestine or against Israel. Newsflash, it doesn't work.

A

Ahmad Kaki 20:47

Many of us exist in ways - being Palestinian and being pro-Palestinian has always been a threat. We've known that since we were young. We've known that when we've done our college applications, when we consider whether we're going to write about Palestine, in our personal notes, or whatever it is that you put as part of your applications. It's always been a part of who we are. And the Palestinian community and the pro-Palestine community has accepted for a long, long time that we'll accept any sort of repercussions that comes with speaking our minds and speaking for the freedom of our people. Nonetheless, their mission is extremely nefarious, and we should be doing everything we can to wipe them from any sort of relevance, because people shouldn't have to fear consequences for speaking out in favor of a very clearly morally upright position.

A

Ahmad Kaki 21:41

I don't know if we intended to go down the alley on Canary Mission like that, but Canary Mission is a big deal. I remember, when I was added to Canary Mission. It was the first day the website existed. They had ten people on there, and I was one of them for some reason, even though I had not even close to a public profile. All the other people on there had done really cool and amazing things like protest some schmuck of an Israeli ambassador who showed up at their

school or something like that. And all I had done was really local activism, protests, and stuff like that. And I still ended up being one of the first people on the website. I remember getting about a dozen calls and messages, if not more, from concerned family and friends that day. And I was concerned, and I called the lawyer, and a lawyer said, "This sucks, but there's nothing we can do about this." I understand that more now that I'm a law student. But yeah, it's a big deal.

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Ahmad Kaki 22:31

And this intent to create fear pro-Palestinian world is very much linked to Islamophobia. All of these profiles are deeply ingrained. I have a picture of me wrapping my head in a scarf that I posted on social media. It's a Palestinian keffiyeh. And they posted that on the Canary Mission profile. They didn't say what it is, but we know what the purpose of it is. Young Palestinian man with a beard, with a scarf around his head, that looks like your average militant that they post on TV. And that's the image that they were trying to portray of me. It'll still never stop me from posting a picture of a Palestinian keffiyeh around my head. So no luck for you, Canary Mission.

M

Moureen Kaki 23:17

Spoken in true Palestinian fashion. No, I think absolutely, there's no wrong topic to go on here at all. This is all about your experience. But I think it's really important that Canary Michigan came up, because to your point, this is intricately linked. The fact that these images can create this fear and sense of hostility amongst people, like you said, is intimately tied to the way that Islamophobia works. These images wouldn't be perceived as threatening as they are by Islamophobes if the atmosphere wasn't what it was. So I think it's absolutely relevant and pertinent to the conversation, and more importantly, to one of the many hurdles that you faced as a Palestinian Muslim activist, student, person in existence. And that was following your time in college, is that correct, that you were posted on Canary Mission?

A

Ahmad Kaki 24:17

Yes, yeah, it happened, I think, my junior or senior year of college at UTSA [The University of Texas at San Antonio].

M

Moureen Kaki 24:23

Would you tell us a little bit about your experience at UTSA and what that was like for you, in general or specific?

A

Ahmad Kaki 24:29

I mean, in general, it rocked. I made a bunch of great friends. Like I said, I met Neyal in college. I was the president of the Muslim Student Association. And we were able to do what I think was a lot of amazing work on behalf of local, domestic, and international Muslim community. We sought to raise awareness on Islam, but we also were very intentional about

not letting others control the narrative for us. Me and other Muslims my age have recognized at that point that ever since we were young, the entire Muslim priorities were to be reactionary in the context of how we taught people about our faith. It was always like, "This is what Islam says about violence, or this is what Islam says about women." Because we had to address these kinds of stereotypes related to Islam. And we were old enough and smart enough at that point to say, "No, we control the narrative now. We don't want to talk about violence, it's not our faith, and we're gonna talk about what we want to talk about with out faith."

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Ahmad Kaki 25:38

So it was really nice to be able to do that on a college campus. It was also really nice to mobilize a bunch of Muslims in combating Islamophobia in all of its forms, including the pro-Israel groups that were on campus, which I think were, we can probably say, for a period of time, we made them afraid of being on campus, because they were afraid we'd show up to their events and protest them [laughs]. So a lot of great work there. We made sure that anything that was said about Muslims or Palestinians on campus, that was incorrect, would be challenged.

A

Ahmad Kaki 26:12

And so we did challenge it, and we got a lot of backlash for that. There was a really gross anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic poster that was spread around campus by Christians United for Israel [CUFI] while we were on campus, and one side was about how Israel is the only safe place for Christians in the Middle East. And then the other side was about what they purported to be the history of violence in Islam towards minority religions. It was entirely nonsense. Anybody who knows anything about anything knows that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not even a religious one. To the degree it is religious, it's religious because Palestine matters to Muslims, because Jerusalem matters to Muslims, and I think that's extremely important, and that helps us mobilize our communities in support of Palestine.

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Ahmad Kaki 27:07

But as far as the actual roots of the conflict, they're not religious ones. Palestinian Christians are persecuted just as Palestinian Muslims are. But regardless, that goes to show you the Islamophobia at play here, in order to get a bunch of Christians in the West to agree with Israel's narrative, they have to convince you that what they're fighting is not Palestinians of different backgrounds. It's big, ugly, scary Muslims. And that that's why they posted those fliers are on campus. We responded by posting better fliers that were more informative and talked about the persecution of Palestinian Christians. And procedurally, we counted the fliers because they weren't endorsed by the school, and they had to be endorsed by the school to be passed around, so the school took them down anyway, so that was nice.

A

Ahmad Kaki 27:52

Yeah, school rocked, because we were able to do that. It's a great place to get your roots planted as an activist, to meet people, to learn what people want to learn, so you can be smart

and strategize about the things that you want to put out in the world. From a Muslim perspective, it's like, "What are the things that we should teach people about our faith?" And from a Palestinian perspective, it's, "What's the best approach in getting people to understand the Palestinian cause?"

M

Moureen Kaki 28:22

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. I'm laughing because they didn't get any more imaginative after you left. And it wasn't CUFI that posted posters, but they also did the same thing. And I just want to mention that to talk about what a reoccurrence, what a common event this is, with different folks. And I mean, we weren't the Muslim Student Association. I was running what was Students for Justice in Palestine [SJP] at UTSA, and they did the same thing, like you said, guilt by very remote association. Taking SJP students, who weren't even verifiably SJP students, from some other state, and putting random quotes supposedly from their Twitters, anti-semitic quotes and other crap like that, and saying, "Oh, these people are SJP from X state," that nobody can verify, "And so therefore, this SJP must be awful." But unfortunately, UTSA didn't respond as well. They found out who it was, and they issued a ban from campus, because they weren't directly associated, but Zionism knows no bounds.

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Ahmad Kaki 29:23

Yeah, I would be remiss in not mentioning that I believe the founder and father of Palestinian activism at UTSA should be shouted out, my friend Mohammad [Name], before any of us were at UTSA. In my opinion, one of the coolest acts of protest and education. On a whim, he showed up to school, at the time, there was no pro-Palestinian group on campus, and I don't think the MSA was very big at the time. And the pro-Israel group on campus, I don't remember if it was CUFI, Christians United for Israel, or if it was another group. They put up something they called "the wall of truth." And it was meant to put up a bunch of facts to spell out or to combat what they considered to be pro-Palestinian narratives. Of course, it was a bunch of nonsense.

A

Ahmad Kaki 30:12

And Mohammad went to the local bookstore, grabbed a white poster board and a marker, wrote "wall of lies" with an arrow on it pointing. And then just went in an act of protest and stood next to the wall of truth, or their wall of truth. And he attracted a crowd and people asking him. There were some blatant lies. For some reason, they wanted to challenge - I don't know why they thought this was important - but they were like, "In fact, nothing about Palestine is even mentioned in the Qur'an." Why that would matter to people, I don't know. It's also a blatant lie. And so Mohammad, when they were like, "Well, what's a lie about this?" And he was like, "Well, first off, there's a specific verse in the Qur'an about Jerusalem, and they're even outside of the Qur'an in our tradition in the Hadith and whatnot, there are references to Jerusalem and to Palestine." And so he highlighted that, and yeah, if I'm not mistaken, they actually took that off their walls to be like, "Well, since this is clearly verifiable, we're just gonna cross this out or whatever."

A

Ahmad Kaki 31:13

Yeah, shout out to [Name], because that's brave, honestly, and I know that you took similar actions later on while you were at UTSA, where you planted - may be a little weird to highlight the podcast host here - but you planted yourself next to a group of deranged pro-Israeli students in protest. And it's always effective. Great actions, I love the contrast of a single brave and honest person standing next to a bunch of liars and showing people that they're liars. It's very cool. So yeah, shout out to Mohammad [Name], just want to put that out there.

M

Moureen Kaki 31:49

Absolutely to Mohammad. But this is also, I think, a testament to the community. People don't like to talk about how there isn't an Arab or Muslim community that's very prevalent in San Antonio. And I think that changes, but I think at one time it was true. I feel like we did have a community where we did generate - like you said, we talked about protests. We went to protests when we were young, and of course being in Palestine and living there for a little bit politicizes you one way or another.

M

Moureen Kaki 32:17

But I didn't really understand the merit and value of protesting until I started joining y'all, you guys in the Muslim Student Association. What was it, 2014, 2015 y'all were doing this. And it was just those little offsprings of actions that led to what you ended up doing with the MSA and then SJP, and that kick started the stuff that I ended up doing at UTSA with the SJP. So I think it's cool that we can interlink these and trace the history of how it happened at a certain period at UTSA. And now there's a new UTSA SJP of a massive amount of young Arab students, and it's Arab led, and they're a group of thirty, thirty-five kids, mashallah, that are students that are doing great. They're enthusiastic.

A

Ahmad Kaki 33:03

Mashallah. That rocks. That's awesome to hear.

M

Moureen Kaki 33:03

And so yeah, it's cool. We can trace it. Yeah, it's really nice. And then I'm gonna bring this up now, but I just want to get your response to it too, on the podcast, if we can in the interview. I think it's really interesting, because I was interviewing two folks from the San Antonio community. I'm not gonna tell you who, even though their interviews are publicly accessible. But I was interviewing two folks from the San Antonio community, and I just threw out a question that is not uncommon for me to ask. I asked them who their mentors were. And on an off chance, two of them mentioned you by name, as mentor for how you've been an example for young adults in the Muslim community. And I want to ask how it makes you feel.

A

Ahmad Kaki 33:46

It's incredibly touching and humbling. And the San Antonio Muslim community means

everything to me. I've said this to people a lot over the years. It's my home, I go there, and whether I'm at a masjid or a local Arab grocery store, I feel like I'm at home. It was really early college, late high school, when I got involved with the Muslim community a little bit, and it's where I feel like home. It's where I met my friends, where I met my wife. It's where I feel at peace, whether that's a random event that we hold in the Muslim community, or if it's a prayer at night on a Friday. And so the community meant everything to me, and it always mattered to me that I could, in whatever way I can, impact the community, be a part of it, and be in service to the community.

A

Ahmad Kaki 34:47

In the Islamic faith, worship to God, worship to Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala, is about, in my opinion, among other things - there's ritual acts of worship like prayer and fasting, but there's acts of service to your community and making the world around you a better place. So I tried to serve God by serving the people around me as much as I could. And to hear that that affected people is very humbling. There are many people that affected me in the same way that I hope that I've affected others. And I hope that those people continue to affect the people after them, and it creates a chain of people who are active and serving their communities with the best of intentions. So yeah, very humbling, and very, very touching to hear for sure.

M

Moureen Kaki 35:30

That's super sweet. I want to ask you, you answered it a little bit here, but why does doing stuff like this matter? Why does it matter to you that you've been part of a Muslim Student Association, that you continue to do this work? There are some people who I'm sure that would say, "Oh, you're not gonna change any minds of people by sitting here and talking Muslims this and Muslims that and trying to combat stereotypes. There are always going to be people that think of us a certain way." What's the point of what you do?

A

Ahmad Kaki 36:04

I am not entirely against the idea. The people who are cynical about combating Muslim stereotypes, I'm with them. My goal, as I think I matured a little bit, was never about combating stereotypes. If it worked along the way, that was great. But for me, the purpose of the MSA was not about others, it was about Muslims and creating community for people on campus, where people of different levels of practice and faith still felt a comfortable place to be. Where if they wanted just to get a sense of community, they could. If they wanted to get more in touch with their spiritual side, if they wanted to feel like they were closer to Allah or to God, then that was the place they could do it. Me and the people I worked with, that was our goal.

A

Ahmad Kaki 36:55

And if along the path, by practicing our faith and creating a community on campus, people were affected in a way that challenged their stereotypes about Muslims, then that's great. And I'm certain that that did happen. I can think of a couple of stories. I should share one. We actually used to do one week a year, it was Islamic Awareness Week. I would say that was our

one outward week a year. Obviously, all of our events were open to the public. But this was a specific week where we focused on, "Let's talk to people of other faiths about Islam." And so we did that in all kinds of creative ways.

A

Ahmad Kaki 37:34

And I think this was on Hijab Day, which was just like, "Hey, if you're a woman, and you want to try out a hijab just to see what it feels like for one class, swing by our table before class, put one on, and then go to class and come back afterwards, and then share your experience." It was very, very cool to hear people talk about how it made them feel, how things were around them, how people responded to it and stuff like that was very interesting. We had a gentleman stop by the table. A group of hijabi women were sitting there, among them my future wife. And he told them that he had fought in Iraq for their freedoms, so people wouldn't have to wear these things. And there was a little bit of a back and forth.

A

Ahmad Kaki 38:29

I was eyeballing him from a distance. Maybe a little chauvinistic, but eventually I got involved and stood in front of the guy and told him to buzz off. And after a little bit of a back and forth, he spit on me, and the police came and pulled him away, and that was the end of that. We continued operations as usual. Obviously, don't let people who try to intimidate us actually intimidate us, so we can say we were persistent in our presence on campus. And that guy came to me later in the year to tell me that he was wrong, and he felt bad about it, and that he was glad that he was able to see me again, so that he could apologize to me, but more importantly, have his apologies heard by the women who he had addressed them.

A

Ahmad Kaki 39:15

I don't know what it was that changed his mind, but I like to think that it's how we continued to be persistent and conduct ourselves on campus. And again, that's not with the intention of combating stereotypes, it's just with the intention of community. And our community rocks. We had a little corner in the main area of UTSA, and every other Wednesday, we had a table outside, and there's thirty Muslims gathering around this table. It just rocked. And it was cool to know that people had a place to be on campus, for sure.

M

Moureen Kaki 39:44

That's awesome. That's really awesome. Thank you so much for sharing that.

A

Ahmad Kaki 39:46

Yeah, you're welcome.

M

Moureen Kaki 39:48



Moureen Kaki 39:48

Would you say that your work or your experiences with this throughout college and high school, with the Muslim Student Association in particular and just getting an opportunity to have spaces where you could connect with people like you, affected your current chosen career path? You talked a little bit about a shift. You were in sales, and then it wasn't exactly your schtick, and you decided to shift to where you are now. I guess I'm asking you a leading question, but would you mind describing what caused the shift and that transition for you?



Ahmad Kaki 40:23

Totally. So it should be said that I always intended to pivot to some sort of public service career path and specifically in law. In fact, I started with Enterprise, the rental car company, as an intern in college. Basically, if I remember correctly, I needed some intern credits. And I was like, "Okay, well, I'm not gonna intern anywhere that doesn't pay me money, because I'm broke." And so this random rental car company, you could work for them, and they paid you fifteen bucks an hour, which was a billion dollars to me at the time. And I was like, "Cool." And so my last semester of college in 2016, I worked there. And just by chance, it worked out that I was pretty good at renting cars, whatever that means.



Ahmad Kaki 41:07

And so they offered me not only a full time position when I finished my internship, but an immediate promotion past their training program and into management. And so, wide-eyed twenty-three-year-old Ahmad, for the first time, was offered a salary in his life, and a salary that started with a five. And it was mind blowing to me at the time. I'd never made that much money in my life. And for our family, we didn't have much money growing up, and so it was great. And Neyal and I had just gotten married, and she was wrapping up her masters and working in an unpaid internship. And so I would have been remiss to not take an opportunity for a little bit financial security at the time.



Ahmad Kaki 41:50

That job grew and grew, and so I ended up on the corporate sales side of things there. So I went from working in retail - it was an extremely difficult job. I mean, I was working north of fifty-five hours every week. It was physically taxing. I had to dress up in freaking just clothes and wash cars and be outside in the scorching heat or the freezing cold without the proper attire in either direction. Freezing cold, obviously in the context of Texas. But I used to get, no lie, between 20 and 30,000 steps a day, just in the course of my work without stepping into a gym or on a treadmill. I think my record is something like 37,000, which I don't think I've seen another person beat, for the record, without running a marathon. And so it was a taxing job.



Ahmad Kaki 42:41

And so a couple years after working the corporate job and in the midst of the pandemic, where I was working from home, that actually became an opportunity to be able to like, "Oh, I can do law school applications." And I talked to Neyal about it at the time, and she was extremely

supportive, and I'm so grateful for that, because she agreed to uproot her firmly planted tree in San Antonio, between community and family, and go wherever my law school applications took me. My law school applications to meet to DC area. And I got a very nice scholarship, alhamdulillah, which was, I think, the only way we would have been able to make it work financially. And so we packed our bags, moved up here.

A

Ahmad Kaki 42:41

And so I went from retail, and then got offered a job on the corporate side of things. Not corporate like I was stepping on little people to make a living, it was business to business sales. But it was classic American Dream stuff. Really, really good salary, great benefits, nine to five. Eventually, it was remote. I got a company car and my cell phone bill reimbursed and all good. Little did they know - and I'm still grateful actually, to the people, to my supervisors there who were actually very accommodating on faith-related things. That's a separate conversation. But I had taken my LSAT a couple of years into that job and just put it into my back pocket, knowing that the LSAT holds for five years.

A

Ahmad Kaki 44:10

I knew that I didn't want to be a bad guy lawyer. There was no chance of me working in corporate law and big law. I was gonna do something good in the world. Very, very inspired by lawyers who did amazing work in the aftermath of the protests when George Floyd was executed by the police, and the work they did to help people get out of jails, and I said, "Man, if I can do something like that, that's my place in this world." And so I came up here with intents of that, and very, very luckily, there was a job opening at the CAIR Legal Defense Fund, at their national office.

A

Ahmad Kaki 44:47

The attorneys there do incredible impact litigation. They're the guys who represented Bahia Amawi and Rasmy Hassouna in Texas in their fight against anti-BDS [boycott, divest, and sanction] legislation there. Also represented Abby Martin in her fight against anti-BDS legislation in the state of Georgia. We do prisoners rights. So Muslims who are incarcerated and denied the ability to practice their faith. And we're able to help people make sure that they have Jumu'ah prayers when they're incarcerated or have access to halal or kosher foods or the right to practice Ramadan, or their holidays, and celebrate and whatnot. And that might actually be my favorite part of the job is helping people who are incarcerated.

A

Ahmad Kaki 45:35

We help Muslims who face employment discrimination. So when they're denied rights to really basic accommodations, like five minutes to make a prayer, we make sure that we make those companies pay, both in the form of damages and in the form of rewriting their policies to be more accommodating, get every opportunity we can. And we do watch list litigation, and

definitely the big post 9/11 thing. This might be the most important work we do from an impact perspective, at least in my opinion. And these are all my personal views and not the views of my employer, etc, etc, etc.

A

Ahmad Kaki 46:10

The watch list is this extremely nefarious collective of people who are subject to extra scrutiny, secondary screenings when they travel. We have every reason to believe that the vast majority of people on this watch list are Muslim. And we have plenty of reason to believe that almost everybody who is on the watch list has no business being on the watch list. And the only reason they're on the watch list is because they're discriminated against by the government in the aftermath of 9/11. The United States said, "We need to be more secure." Well, without actually effectively being more secure, they wanted to present security theater, essentially, is what this is. And we are very familiar with security theater in Palestine, of course.

A

Ahmad Kaki 46:54

And so people who are Brown and have big beards or dress with long robes instead of pants, they like stopping them at airports and stamping their boarding passes with four S's and occasionally sacking dogs on them or asking them questions about their religious beliefs, making them miss their flights, etc, etc. And so a big part of the work we do is challenging the constitutionality of that watch list. Oh, maybe the craziest fact about the whole thing: if you're on the watch list, the government will never tell you you're on the watch list. You only know you're on the watch list because what happens to you repeatedly. And then when you try to inquire for why you're on the watch list, the government doesn't need to tell you why you're there. So you have no way to defend any accusations levied against you.

A

Ahmad Kaki 47:41

I'll give you an example of a recent plaintiff of ours. A wonderful man, a Somali man, and he, as a result of his watch listing status, he had his electronic devices seized constantly by the government. He had serious issues with his flights. His major crime was doing humanitarian work in Somalia to help rebuild infrastructure that was destroyed by Islamic extremists group Al-Shabaab.

M

Moureen Kaki 48:08

Oh my god.

A

Ahmad Kaki 48:09

And so to reward him, the American government watch listed him. And as a result of a lawsuit that we filed against the federal government for his placement on the watch list, he was removed from the watch list, which is great. But legal complexities aside, our ultimate goal as an organization is to end the watch list completely, because it's unconstitutional. If the

government wants - and this is me speaking - if the government wants to keep a list of people that they need to have extra scrutiny for getting on airplanes or crossing the border, they should keep that, and that's fine and dandy, but they should have a reason for that list. And people should have an opportunity to defend themselves if they're on that list. And the government should be able to spell out exactly what it is that makes them a flight threat in order to have them there. Anything short of that is awful.

A

Ahmad Kaki 48:54

But the watch list exists not because it makes Americans safer, but because it gives people the idea that they're safer, because something out there exists, and all it is, is essentially an ugly way to single out Muslims, is what it is, and they don't feel bad about it either. So I'm very proud of being involved with the watch list work that CAIR does. And I think that ultimately, the amazing attorneys that we have will be successful in getting that done.

A

Ahmad Kaki 49:22

And to answer your question, I would love to continue doing the same work once I finish law school, so going along the same path. And when we guarantee the rights of Muslims, we guarantee the rights of many. So for every Muslim who's guaranteed the right to keep a beard in prison, or to fast, there's also a Jewish person who is protected by those same principles and allowed to get kosher meals. And so those are the kind of precedents that we want to set for not just Muslims, but for all minorities in this country in having their constitutional rights protected.

M

Moureen Kaki 49:59

Absolutely. It's incredibly admirable work, and I'm glad for many reasons that CAIR exists, and they've got brilliant minds like you working for them. So thank y'all for the work that you do, and thanks for explaining why this is so important. I think it's really interesting to have your perspective as somebody who's experienced this, and then goes to work on it from a legal perspective, connecting the dots between interpersonal racism, and the systemic structures that coexist to help maintain this. And these two things work in tandem with one another, to create what are contemporary hostile environments for Muslims, like you've described. And yeah, it's wild. But yeah, I hope you get the opportunity to maintain that career path. I do want to ask this question just for our mom, but would you consider taking the MCAT yet?

A

Ahmad Kaki 50:57

[laughs]

M

Moureen Kaki 51:00

Sorry mom [laughs]. But seriously, can I ask you what you think about this pressure? Do you think that a genuine pressure exists in Muslim, Arab communities, because that's the ones

we're familiar with, to push your kids a certain career path, and do you have any comments on that?

A

Ahmad Kaki 51:19

Yeah, of course, of course, the pressure exists, and it exists for a reason. The overwhelming - a good majority of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim parents who want their kids to become doctors and engineers, want them to do that for financial security. Financial security is dandy, and I think there's some reputational things that come with that. Conversely, lawyers are not high on the reputation totem in Arab communities. They're pretty low, actually. Even the rich ones, which I most certainly will not be, that even the rich ones don't exactly get the same admiration as doctors and engineers do. But being a doctor, being an engineer, that's extremely admirable work. You get to affect people and be involved with different levels of ingenuity and creation. And from an engineering perspective, and from a doctor perspective, you have the ability to help people get through their physical ailments, which which rocks.

A

Ahmad Kaki 52:24

But I think we need to be a little more open minded. There are all kinds of careers. I strongly believe that people should be encouraged to go into careers where they can positively affect the people around them in whatever way that is. And not only people around them. Whatever it is, it should not be limited to those things. And people can do amazing work outside of the doctor, engineer, even the lawyer route. But I think that our communities are starting to recognize that. Moureen's joke about the MCAT was that my mom really, really wanted me to be a doctor, and I changed my major about halfway through college and didn't tell her about it. And she found out via a letter that UTSA mailed home that signified my major, which was political science, which shocked my mother who thought that I was doing some sort of biology major. I was not. And I'll say to my mom, you've got a doctor on the way, so I appreciate him for all the pressure he's taken off of me. And now I can do whatever I want. So I'm happy, and look, I don't have the chops to be a doctor.

M

Moureen Kaki 53:34

Yeah, thanks Mohamad.

A

Ahmad Kaki 53:35

Yeah, thanks Mohamad. We appreciate you. I was never gonna be a good doctor anyway. I think I'll be a good lawyer, but I don't think I would have been a good doctor.

M

Moureen Kaki 53:42

Por qué no los dos? [Laughs].

—

A

Ahmad Kaki 53:43

[Laughs]. That's what mom would say.

M

Moureen Kaki 53:50

That's funny. Ahmad, I asked this question, like I said, to a few folks in the interview, but any mentors in the community that you want to talk about from any perspective that have impacted you, your life, your life path, whether Muslims, Arab, or just folks, anybody?

A

Ahmad Kaki 54:06

I definitely have a lot of people I've looked up to over the years. I'd be remiss not to mention our mother, who planted the spirit of activism and wanting to make the world a better place in all of us from a very young age and taught us that speaking the truth is more important than anything, and so I appreciate that. It also happens to be a principle of our faith, that teaches us that the greatest form of jihad, the greatest form of struggle, is to speak a word of truth to an unjust ruler. I live by that, and I think my mom exemplified that in very many ways and putting us in opportunities. So I think she's person number one, no doubt about it.

A

Ahmad Kaki 54:57

Other than that, the general San Antonio community, always got love for them. Shout out to Shaykh Omar, who is a religious mentor of mine, a teacher of mine, who I look up to, who was extremely humble, and was always there when I needed him for all kinds of questions, and supported me in everything that I did, and encouraged me one day when I expressed some concern for maybe the career path that I was on and feeling like a dead soul, encouraged me to trust Allah and move forward with what my heart wanted me to do. And so I always got love for him and how he helped me grow over the years, both spiritually and otherwise. Yeah, let's say mom and Shaykh Omar, those are my two peeps.

M

Moureen Kaki 55:42

I feel like those are pretty good answers. It's hard for anybody else to make that list with those two on top. So yeah, thank you so much, Ahmad. I want to give you any last chance to give any closing words. I know we talked about a lot during this interview, give you a chance to fill in any gaps go back on something, if there was something that I didn't ask that you wish I would have, or just a final statement, anything like that.

A

Ahmad Kaki 56:08

Oh man, that's a lot of pressure. I don't think I'd be able to recognize any gaps right now. Maybe a shout out to the Muslim community listening to this. Always remember that when you fight for the rights of others, you're also fighting for the rights of your own. So always be

constantly standing and supporting for people who have their rights taken away from them, and fight for them to have them, because when other people's rights are protected, your rights are protected as well. And never forget that.

M

Moureen Kaki 56:38

Thank you so much, Ahmad, for your time, for your energy, for your willingness to share your stories with us. It really was a wonderful opportunity to get to interview somebody that I admire and love so much. And I've always found you remarkable - not always, not when we were young - but in recent memory, I found you remarkably admirable, and you're just one of my favorite people. You light up a room, you're remarkably intelligent, you're remarkably kind, you're markedly humble. And I just think it's awesome that other people get the chance to hear a little bit more about you, because more of you should be shared with the world. So thank you so much.

A

Ahmad Kaki 57:16

Wow, I'll express all the same things. The admiration and the love is absolutely mutual. It was a pleasure, because it just felt like a conversation with my sister, so that's pretty easy, so I appreciate you.

M

Moureen Kaki 57:27

Thank you so much. We're gonna go ahead and pause.

A

Ahmad Kaki 57:29

Take care folks. [inaudible]