

Hassan Mohamed Safda

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Ocala Islamic Center, Ocala, Florida

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. Today is Saturday, July 17, 2011, and it is now 2:50 PM. I am here with Mr. Hassan Mohamed Safda and we are conducting this interview in the Ocala Islamic Center, Ocala, Florida. This interview is part of the Arab Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library Collection.

Alhadi: We need to know your name in full, your place of birth and anything else you want to share with us about your social background.

Hassan: My name is Hassan Mohamed Safda from Saudi Arabia, the State of Jeddah. I have a number of brothers and sisters. I am the fifth one among them.

Alhadi: What about your education history?

Hassan: I had my elementary education at Almansouriya Elementary School in Jeddah, then EL Farouq Middle School, then Elfalah High School, and later I joined the King Abdulazia University in Jeddah.

Alhadi: What did you study in college?

Hassan: I studied geology.

Alhadi: When did you graduate from the university?

Hassan: In 1399, Islamic calendar.

Alhadi: What is that equal to in the Georgian calendar?

Hassan: Around 1979-1980.

Alhadi: You said your field of study is geology?

Hassan: It is geology and chemistry.

Alhadi: Where did you work after graduation?

Hassan: I worked for the ministry of petrol and mineral resources in Jeddah. I worked for one year in the field, then I was dispatched to America to study English in St. Pete.

Alhadi: Where is that?

Hassan: Saint Petersburg. I joined the ALS School. I spent one year there.

Alhadi: And what happened after that?

Hassan: I went back to Saudi Arabia. I returned to my work.

Alhadi: Is it the same job in the same ministry?

Hassan: Yes.

Alhadi: In which area did you work in Saudi Arabia?

Hassan: I worked in Jeddah. But as far as the fieldwork, it used to be in different places in the kingdom such as Tabouk, Jizan, Najran, Eltaif and others.

Alhadi: You continued to do the same work?

Hassan: Yes. I worked with a French company and also with an American company. Part of the contract with this company is to arrange through the American department of geology—USGS—to train the Saudis, and that is how I came here for the language study.

Alhadi: For how long did you continue to work for the ministry?

Hassan: For twenty-three years. That was up to 2001 when I had my early retirement. The reason is that my family was here. It was irrational to leave my family alone here and I remain there.

Alhadi: I am sorry to ask, but did you leave your family here?

Hassan: My family was with me in Saudi Arabia before my mother died, may God rest her soul in peace. My mother told before she died that when she passes away, I should let my wife go to stay beside her elder mother and father.

Alhadi: I am sorry for the personal question, but is your wife American?

Hassan: Yes she is American.

Alhadi: Do you two have children?

Hassan: My children are all adopted.

Alhadi: So, because your wife's family was here, you decided to come back.

Hassan: Yes, they live here. My wife used to take care of my mother whenever I had a fieldwork.

Alhadi: That is good. When did you get married?

Hassan: I think it was in 1984.

Alhadi: Did you get married when you were here?

Hassan: Yes, I began to know her in 1984. I came here in 1982 and in 1984 we got married.

Alhadi: I am interested in this issue because it has to do with intercultural relations. I want to know if she is a Muslim?

Hassan: First, she showed some interest to know about the Islamic religion. I began to tell her after we came to know each other. After one year of study here, we developed a relationship between the two of us. After I returned back to Saudi Arabia, I had to get permission to go forward with my marriage plans. After obtaining the permission, I came here and had our marriage completed. When I was still there, she proceeded with her plans of converting to Islam. She went to Tampa and declared that she is a Muslim.

Alhadi: You know, Mr. Hassan, that prophet Mohamed had said, “If a person is behind converting another person to the right path, this will ultimately be better for him than acquiring all the material fortune in the world.”

Hassan: Yes, and I never forced her. I told her that in Islam, we don't force a person to become a Muslim. We just show them the way and leave it up to them.

Alhadi: Do you agree with me that the aforementioned statement by prophet Mohamed is a great one?

Hassan: Absolutely. When I came here and began to teach, I used to receive people here and I advised them it is not necessary to convert to Islam, but it is important that they should know about Islam first. They need to know that Islam is not about terrorism. It is, on the contrary, a religion of peace. Islam spread to Arabic and African countries through peaceful means, through trading and good treatment. Reflecting true religious values depends on the way you treat others.

Alhadi: Mr. Hassan. How long have you been residing here in Florida?

Hassan: I came here around 2002-2003. In 2001, I was back home for a break. One of my sons was driving me crazy. He was hesitant between coming and going. It is the typical nature of teenagers.

Alhadi: Why did you pick Florida and not any other state?

Hassan: I lived here for a year before. Also, because her mother and father were living here. They were in the north in New Hampshire before moving to Florida six or seven years before I came here. This is the reason behind my decision of getting settled here in Florida.

Alhadi: My next question, Mr. Hassan, is about your children. How many are they and what level of education are they in now?

Hassan: As I told you earlier, God's will is that I don't have children of my own. For that reason I adopted children. One of them is now in the last year of high school, the other one dropped out while he was in middle school. His entire attention was focused on girls and cars, and this is what he saw what the Americans care about in movies. He gave me too much of a hard time. I sent him back to Saudi Arabia.

Alhadi: Did you adopt him from here or from Saudi Arabia?

Hassan: From Saudi Arabia. The adoption system in Saudi Arabia is different. It is more of a foster home system. This is why his last name is different from mine. This is the Islamic way.

Alhadi: In Islam people should be affiliated with their own fathers.

Hassan: True. Here in America, adopting children gives them the right to carry your last name.

Alhadi: Mr. Hassan, what role do you and the mosque members play towards other communities and groups?

Hassan: We introduce Islamic culture and Islamic religion. We try to show that Islam does not mean extremism or show-off or terrorism. We try to show them that Islam means peace and it doesn't advocate war or anything of the like. We try to show them that in Islam there is mercy for everything including animals. We narrate the story mentioned by Prophet Mohamed that a woman will be thrown into hell on the account that she didn't feed her cat, nor let it go free. We also tell them of the other story that one person took a chick from a nest. The mother bird came to Prophet Mohamed and complained. Prophet Mohamed asked, "Who annoyed this bird?" That person answered, "It is me," and

vowed to take the chick back to the nest. We have been instructed to have mercy on animals and all creatures regardless of religious affiliation. Prophet Mohamed instructed us to be considerate of neighbors, even the Jews or whatever their religion might be. When Prophet Mohamed's Jewish neighbor died, he went by himself to convey his condolences. One day, the Prophet Mohamed stood up for a funeral procession. When he was told that the funeral was for a Jew, his reply was, "He is a human like us." We present Islam following the example set by the prophet. It is not a matter of prejudice or show-off.

Alhadi: But, do you think that American society accepts the different vision, views, religion and cultures?

Hassan: Some people accept Islamic religion. They are eager to know about Islam. I learned that after 9/11 many people here became more willing to know about Islam. This means that Americans were living in isolation from the outside world and they were completely manipulated by media and TV. It was a true brainwash. They never see other channels to know about Islam. They are very kind people. However, a small group which is the government controls everything. This is the story. I reiterate that Americans are really kind people. When I first came here, an elderly lady was greeting me in a very friendly way. However, they listen to the media which keeps telling them that the Arabs and Muslims are terrorists. When they go by themselves, they discover a different truth. The media that is surrounding them is not open.

Alhadi: Mr. Hassan, you lived part of your life in Saudi Arabia and another part here in America. When you compare life systems in the two regions, which one do you think tends to be better? I am talking about the general life system including the social aspect.

Hassan: Everybody has a feeling of longing for his homeland. We came from an environment that is impacted by religion, integration, and cooperation where neighbors and brothers care about each other. There if you needed something, you will find a brother ready to pay for you. Here the society is disintegrating. Brothers don't care about each other and their relationship is not more than greeting each other. No one will be ready to give financial help to others even to their own father. I saw it here in my wife's family when I noticed that caring about others is nothing more than a verbal expression of sympathy such as, "I feel sorry for you." You don't find something such as the Arabic generosity, love to help and nobility here. One case I know is that when my wife's older sister died, none of the father, mother, or brothers were able to manage providing \$5,000 for the funeral and burial arrangements. Her son who was fifteen years old was very confused as to either to burn or to bury her. Moved by my Arabic sense of generosity, I told them that I will be ready to pay for the funeral if they will pay me back. Four years later, and I still haven't gotten my money back. I reached the level of warning them. What I know is that here you are equal to how much money you have. If you have nothing, then you equal nothing. The atmosphere that we have here for Muslim community is built on cooperation. If somebody is going through a difficult time, he might seek comfort by talking to another community member. It will be very hard if I decided to talk about these things to my wife's father or mother. One case I know is that of a fellow doctor who was fired from his work and was put on trial. When he needed money to cover his costs, I gave him the money. When he wanted to pay me back, I rejected and told him that we are brothers. This is because of my Islamic background. We don't just talk the talk but we walk the walk. We help others to overcome their difficulties. The Islamic

tradition is that, “He who eases a believer’s difficulty, God will ease his difficulties on the day of judgment.” In the case of my wife’s sister, I have actually eased a difficulty for a non-Muslim.

Alhadi: Now, Mr. Hassan, I want to know what you feel America has given you and what did you give in exchange? People usually give and take.

Hassan: In my personal opinion, when I first came here I heard everybody talking about freedom. I asked what freedom you have that you are talking about? If it is for the freedom of speech, I do talk. I recall the Egyptian saying that, “You don’t pay tax on talking.” On the surface, it appears that you are free to move. However, there are limits. If you talk about the country’s sovereignty, you will be stopped. This is not freedom in the full sense of the word. The government knows how many rooms you have in your house or how much you have in your bank account. Whatever you do is under surveillance. The Congress had even legalized eavesdropping on people’s phone conversations. My question is, “Where is the freedom?” Freedom is limited here. In the Arab countries, there is also no freedom. If they are truly Islamic regimes, there will be will freedom. In Islam, no one will enter your house without your consent. Here, they don’t need permission. According to Prophet Mohamed’s tradition that no one should come knock on somebody’s door at night on the account that you may scare them. Prophet Mohamed used to pray that, “May God protect us from those who knock on a door at night.” It is scary. Also, in the Prophet Mohamed’s tradition that if a person is coming from a trip, he should inform his family in advance that he is coming. According to Islamic tradition, it is preferred that a person sleeps outside rather than coming home at

a late hour. This is the discipline that Prophet Mohamed left for us. It is unfortunate that we are not committed to these principles.

Alhadi: Then do you think the claim that America has given us freedom is not right?

Hassan: I believe we have freedom, but it has a limit. As Mandela has said, each country has its own definition for freedom. You can't apply freedom and democracy in all countries. This is what Nelson Mandela means by his statement.

Alhadi: Isn't there anything else other than this incomplete freedom that America has given you? Don't you feel that America has added anything to your personal life?

Hassan: I don't see anything. My life in Saudi was as happy as it is here. I don't see anything to make me believe that life there and here are different. Here my movement is limited.

Alhadi: Do you think that you will be here for the rest of your life, or do you think you will take your wife and children and go back?

Hassan: Frankly, I came here because education for my children is easier than what we have in Saudi. There, if you failed two times, that means you have no future. There are more chances here. Education is easier here. I came here to provide education for my children and as I said, we have education there and it is free, but it does not have the same quality as here.

Alhadi: Mr. Hassan, did you travel outside America?

Hassan: When I was working for the ministry in Saudi Arabia, I visited France, Austria, Scotland, and Germany. These trips were all related to our fieldwork. I also visited Italy for a show there. They were all work-related trips.

Alhadi: Do you speak any other language other than English and Arabic?

Hassan: No.

Alhadi: What Arab countries have you visited?

Hassan: I visited Egypt only and that was last year.

Alhadi: Only last year?

Hassan: Yes, I took my family to Saudi Arabia and then to Egypt.

Alhadi: We have just been talking about freedom, and now we are following the news of all these revolutions in Arab countries such as Egypt specifically and also in Yemen and others. Do you think this is part of people's search for freedom? What do you think is behind these movements?

Hassan: In Arab countries, we try to copy America. The Islamic prophecy told us that, "We will follow the footsteps of those who came ahead of us." The problem we have is those young people who are educated, but they are not religiously knowledgeable. They think this is freedom. It is true that in Egypt you will find injustice, but the way they approach freedom is very superficial. I stand in support of the Arab revolutions and no one should accept injustice. However, I am afraid that in the name of freedom, other misdoings may be conducted.

Alhadi: Does that mean you think the outcome of these revolutions will not be as expected?

Hassan: If they take the right path, then their outcome will be positive. Only God knows what will happen. I recall the case of that Saudi young man who was always playing Michael Jackson's song and when I asked him if he understands what these songs say, his answer was no, and he said he listens only to show that he is up-to-date with the style. In Saudi, you will find young men wearing fashionable clothing on the account of searching for freedom and copying the West. This is a blind imitation which will eventually be harmful. We should take the good things and leave the rest. We should stand in support

of freedom, change, and justice for all. We will get there if we follow and apply Islam literally. Those who govern may come and claim that he is applying freedom, but he ends up conducting unfair acts.

Alhadi: Do you practice any personal hobbies?

Hassan: I am retired now. I do gardening in my back yard. I grow tomatoes just to help me kill time. I am not doing this because I like it, but as I said I came here for my family and for my children's education. It is important that they get a certificate from an American school to raise their chances for employment. I feel sorry that I exchanged the chance of doing the five daily prayers in God's holy shrine and hearing the call for prayer five times a day for only one prayer on Friday. I feel I am growing old and that one day God will ask us about everything we have been doing. As the saying goes, "Those who are far from sight are also far from heart." I feel my belief in Islam will be weakened. We try to bring the community to the mosque and do things together, but we are being obstructed by lack of sufficient financial resources. It is a different feeling when we hear the call for prayer in Mecca. I went there last year, and the moment I stepped in, I felt like I was leaving all my miseries behind me and totally forgot about them. I wish to die in Medina.

Alhadi: I hope you will live longer.

Hassan: Here when somebody dies, the sorrow doesn't come only from losing him, but also losing all the fortune he might have earned. When you die, there should be \$5,000 ready to be paid in order you get buried.

Alhadi: I wish you health and long life, and that we all conclude our lives by doing good.

Hassan: We came here to help. I told Sheikh Zafir that I am ready to help with any Arabic language or religion teaching. It is important to teach our children before they forget

their religion. This is our responsibility. We came here for peace, not for terrorism or things of the like.

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Mr. Hassan, for this good interview and for these good words.

Hassan: You are welcome, but what is your name again?

Alhadi: My name Esam.

[END OF INTERVIEW]