

**Atif Abdunour**

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Esam Alhadi, Interviewer and Translator  
for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

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Also present, Richard Saltzburg

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Mr. Abu Diyab, for being with us today. We are very delighted to be here with you this afternoon in your store. My name is Esam Alhadi. I am a lecturer at the University of Florida and this is my colleague Richard. He works at the University of Florida Library. This recording is taking place at Abu Diyab's work place in Jacksonville. Today is Sunday, June 29, 2012 and it is now 12:25 PM. Thank you for being with us and also for welcoming us at your store.

Abdunour: You're welcome, and I hope I will be able to help you with what you are doing.

Alhadi: Thank you. We are going to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about your early life.

Abdunour: My name is Atif Abdunour. I was born in Syria in 1954. I had my education and early life in Syria. I moved to this country in 1986. After arriving here, I started working in different stores because I didn't know anyone and also because I didn't know the language. I started to gradually develop myself with the help of friends and other people.

Alhadi: Before going into more details about work, I need to know what kind of work you were doing in Syria. What did you study?

Abdunour: I had my education at a polytechnic school in Syria. I used to work as a jeweler. I moved to the Gulf and also to Libya and then back to Syria. I didn't stay in Syria for too long before coming here.

Alhadi: You said that you worked in the Gulf and Libya. Let us talk a little bit more about this period. What kind of work were you doing there?

Abdulnour: I was working as a jeweler.

Alhadi: And after that you came directly to Jacksonville?

Abdulnour: True. I came straight to Jacksonville.

Alhadi: Why did you pick Jacksonville?

Abdulnour: I knew that some distant relatives were living here. I didn't know anybody else other than them here in America. They received me, introduced me to the area and helped me get started. They taught me how to start a business.

Alhadi: When did you start this store?

Abdulnour: I have been in this store for twenty years.

Alhadi: Why did you choose the business field? I know that although it is possible for some of the immigrants who arrive in this country to do business, most of them think of finding another kind of work. Why did you decide to go into the business field?

Abdulnour: It is because the people whom I knew here are working in the business field. They took me into this field and trained me. I developed my knowledge of the business field little by little and finally remained in it for good. I also worked in the jewelry business at the same time. Later on and with the help of some friends, I was able to buy this store. I borrowed money from them and later I was able to pay it back in small installments.

Alhadi: Can you tell us a little bit about the business? What do you sell?

Abdulnour: It is a convenience store. I sell drinks, snacks, and some food items. It is not as big as a supermarket and does not include other items such as meat.

Alhadi: As a person of Arab descent, do you sell items that are typically Arabic?

Abdulnour: No. we have some items that are the same as the Arabic items but with different names.

Alhadi: But nothing that is typically Arabic?

Abdulnour: No.

Alhadi: Are there Middle Eastern stores here in Jacksonville?

Abdulnour: There are many of them that are selling only Arabic goods such as groceries and food and drink items.

Alhadi: Are you thinking of developing your store into a Middle Eastern store, or do you feel satisfied with the way it is now?

Abdulnour: No. Such a decision depends on the area where the store is located. This neighborhood is not good for a Middle Eastern store because there are no Arabs living nearby. This is the reason why we don't sell Arabic items.

Alhadi: Does your background as an Arab Syrian have anything to do with attracting customers who are Arabs and Syrians to your store?

Abdulnour: No Syrians come to my store at all because no Arabs live in this neighborhood.

Alhadi: Who helps you run the store?

Abdulnour: I have one employee.

Alhadi: Is he of a Syrian Arab origin?

Abdulnour: In the past, I had a number of employees of different origins including Americans and Arabs. The one who helps me now is of Arab origin. He was in Africa and came here to find work. He lived in a number of cities in this country before coming to Jacksonville.

Alhadi: How long has he been working for you?

Abdulnour: A little bit over two years.

Alhadi: Do you think that his plan is to learn how to run the business in order to have his own in the future?

Abdulnour: I believe he is aiming for that. It is true that when somebody gets used to a business and falls in love with it, he will plan to stay in it for good. It is not good to jump from one kind of business to another. Joining a new field will require learning new skills and your previous experiences might not be enough or different from the field that you are trying to join.

Alhadi: I want to know about the relation of your family members to your business. Are they directly involved in helping you run the store? Does Angela, for instance, help?

Abdulnour: Angela doesn't help. My son Diyab does, in situations such as the current one when my employee is absent because of sickness and surgery. Diyab comes and spends a few hours with me in the store. The customers like him a lot.

Alhadi: I know that Angela is older than Diyab. Why doesn't she help with the store business?

Abdulnour: Her time schedule doesn't allow her to do so, and also because she is not interested.

Alhadi: Is it because the Arabic mindset is not used—

Abdulnour: No, that is not how we think. It is just because she doesn't like it. It is also a fact that the store is a little far away from where our house is. I wouldn't even allow my son Diyab to come and help if not for the situation surrounding the guy who helps me. I feel Diyab is also still young, and making him drive all the way to come here might be risky.

Alhadi: Let us go back to some questions about the business. What problems might have faced you as an Arab immigrant to start your business in Jacksonville?

Abdulnour: The bigger problem that I faced was the language. Gradually, I was able to solve this problem.

Alhadi: Any problem other than the language?

Abdulnour: No other problem at all.

Alhadi: How about the paperwork filing and getting a license?

Abdulnour: These were the same as for anybody else regardless of being an Arab or any other foreign nationality. It has always been the same.

Alhadi: What plans do you have for the future of the business? Are you planning to develop it into something bigger, or do you feel satisfied to keep it the way it is now?

Abdulnour: I am satisfied to keep it the way it is. The limited resources I have form an obstacle for any plan to make it into something bigger. The only possible upgrading option is to add a gas pump. No more than that. It is not possible to change it into another kind of business. I have to keep it the way it is now, and possibly add to it from inside.

Alhadi: I am sorry, but I need to know if you are renting the place or is it fully yours?

Abdulnour: I bought the land.

Alhadi: I know that there is a big Arab population here in Jacksonville and mainly Syrian and Lebanese. I want to know if there is any form of organization that brings the Syrians or the Lebanese together to help each other in the business field.

Abdulnour: There is nothing like that

Alhadi: Does that mean everybody is on his own?

Abdulnour: Everybody is handling his matters by himself. However, in some cases a person might choose to come here because he has an uncle, cousin, or any other relative here in Jacksonville. This is the only case where people might help each other. But there is nothing when it comes to a formal organization or fund.

Alhadi: I asked you earlier about your work in Syria. Now if you have a chance to go back to Syria, do you think you will continue working in the business field there?

Abdulnour: Going back to Syria has never crossed my mind. I am now at the point of thinking about retirement. I have no problem doing any work that secures my well-being and my family's well-being. I am not the kind of a person who says I should be doing a specific kind of work or I won't work. I can do any work that is available.

Alhadi: Let us assume if new immigrants arrive from Syria, would you advise them to start immediately with getting into the business field, or is it better for them to try something else?

Abdulnour: My advice to them is that you can't start doing business without the necessary experience in this field. They need to get a job in the business field to measure their own interest and to evaluate their chances of succeeding in this field. A person who buys a business from the start will more likely fail. [A person] needs knowledge of how to administer [a] business, and a business without experience will not move forward.

Alhadi: Now, I want to ask you about your daughter and son and their relationship with your business. Do you advise them in the future to go into this field, or not? I know that in the Arab community, many parents would think that even after their children study and graduate from college, joining the business field might be better for them than finding any regular job. What do you think?

Abdulnour: I think the business field is better if it is a successful one. I believe it is better.

Alhadi: In your own case, do you advise Diyyab to think of a future in business, or do you think it might be better for him to find a job in his field of study?

Abdulnour: First, my advice to him is to go as far as he can with his studies. After that, it will be a decision for him to make. Of course there are some jobs better than others. If he felt that the business field is best for him then he should try it. A person needs to do what he feels is best for himself and his family. If he wants to get a job with a monthly salary,

then he should go for it. However, I believe having a career in the business field will be better.

Alhadi: This is a general question. I know that people from the greater Syria region are generally successful in the business field. They are everywhere in the business field. I am from Africa and I know that most of those who have businesses there are from that region. This is the case in West Africa and also in South America. What is the secret behind this?

Abdulnour: It is probably because they succeed in it.

Alhadi: It is true that their business always succeeds, but what makes them succeed in this field?

Abdulnour: It is their love of their business and also because they are smart. They know how to treat their customers. If you came to a store like this one and you were treated badly by the owner, I assume you would never come back to the same store. We know how to treat customers very good and make them feel happy in order to come back to us. This is the only way to make your business succeed.

Alhadi: This is why I asked you if there is any kind of cooperation between business owners and if they help each other. I think if the Syrians and Lebanese don't help each other, chances of success will be slim. I believe their success in the business field could be attributed to their cooperation and help to each other.

Abdulnour: One way of helping each other is that if I know of some item that sells good, I will tell my colleagues about it. If other items are on sale at some place, I will let them know about it. They do the same for me.

Alhadi: Let us go back to ask about your family in Syria. Did any one of your fathers and grandfathers have any connection with business in Syria? Did they do any kind of trade work?

Abdulnour: Some distant relatives worked in business, but none in my direct family.

Alhadi: By the way, which part of Syria you come from?

Abdulnour: I came from the Hims area.

Alhadi: What you are telling me is that your family had no history in business.

Abdulnour: That is true. They were poor and didn't have the money to start a business. It wasn't possible to start a business without money. I believe it would have been possible for them to do business if they had the money.

Alhadi: A small business doesn't require too much of money. Even a person without too much money should be able to open a small store or anything of the like and it will be okay.

Abdulnour: It doesn't make sense that everybody opens a small store. Otherwise, who will be the customers?

Alhadi: I am talking about different kinds of stores doing different kinds of business. I am saying this having in mind that the Syrians are known to manage business well.

Abdulnour: This is true, but I think it depends on everyone's own circumstances.

Alhadi: If you could go back in time to the moment when you decided to open this store, would you still make the same decision to start the same business or would you think of something different?

Abdulnour: I don't think I would do anything differently.

Alhadi: In that case, what would have you done to make it more successful? It might be successful now, but what could have you done to make it even better?

Abdulnour: In some kinds of business it will be impossible to change anything. In this business, it will be possible, for instance, to add a gas pump. It would make it better.

Alhadi: I want to move on to ask you about the Arab community in Jacksonville. Would you please tell us a little bit about this community? I want to know more specifically about the types of businesses they own.

Abdulnour: Ninety percent [90%] of the people that I know and who didn't have the opportunity to carry on with their education have the same kind of business I have. That is, a convenience store, gas station, or a dry-cleaning business. Of those who had the opportunity to continue with their education, they work as doctors or engineers or in whatever field they might have specialized in.

Alhadi: Is there any Arab-owned business that you might consider "big"?

Abdulnour: I don't know what you mean by "big."

Alhadi: I am talking about, for instance, big stores where you can do all the shopping you want.

Abdulnour: There is nothing like that here.

Alhadi: Are there Arab restaurants?

Abdulnour: There are many restaurants owned by Arabs here.

Alhadi: Do you go to eat there?

Abdulnour: I do.

Alhadi: Also, I want you to tell me more about the Arab community in Jacksonville. I know from previous interviews that we had last year that there is an organization with the name of Salaam Club here in Jacksonville. Do you know anything about it?

Abdulnour: I heard about it. I heard that at the beginning there was a Lebanese club where a small group of Lebanese and Syrians went to have meetings. I am not sure about the exact activities they used to perform there. The community grew from around one thousand to about twenty thousand, and started to spread over different locations instead of the limited geographical area they used to reside in. Also, the age gap between the

different generations has become clearly notable. These might be the reasons that led to the creation of this club, but I don't have more specific knowledge about it.

Alhadi: These are all the questions we have for today. Thank you again, Abu Diyab, for giving us this opportunity today. These details will be there for generations to come.

Abdulnour: Thank you, and I hope these details will be of use for others to benefit from.

Alhadi: Thank you.

Abdulnour: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]