



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Peter McMullin Centre
on Statelessness

Oral Histories of Statelessness

Interview with Amin Abbas

25 October 2022

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Interviewed by Jordana Silverstein

Q: Hi, I'm here today with Amin Abbas, and I wonder if we can start with you telling me where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Kuwait in 1970, that was in September.

Q: Yeah? Were you stateless when you were born?

A: Not technically, I have an ID. In fact, I'm not entirely sure about the time when my father managed to get his ID back. I think it would've been after my birth, because my dad became stateless after 1967 technically. Although, he had a Jordanian passport, but he could not go back to his homeland. He was in Kuwait at the time, but eventually, he managed to get what we call in Arabic lam shamel, which is basically the ID to be able to go back to the West Bank and that was definitely a few years after that. I'm sure that was after I was born.

Q: Yeah, so tell me about your parents.

A: Okay, my father is from Jenin. He's originally from a town called Qabatiya which is about 10 kilometres from Jenin. His father, my grandfather, migrated from this village to Jenin where he's had a business in the heart of the city. In fact, a lot of the older pictures of the city which show the [Jenin] roundabout, that shows his shop in the background, and my father was one of the kids that definitely wanted to get an education and he managed to study in Egypt. He became a pharmacist. He was one of the first pharmacists in town and established the first pharmacy in Jenin. There is probably a little story about that. When he started the pharmacy, he called it the National Pharmacy, where a lot of people, including family and friends said, "You should call it Khalid's Pharmacy." And that's his name, Khalid.

He said, "No. Why would I call it that?" Eventually, when he decided to go to Kuwait a couple of years later and sell the pharmacy, he sold it to a person who called it – his name's Salah. He called it Salah's Pharmacy or "Saidaliyet Salah" in Arabic. It's funny how obviously that pharmacy is still there until today and is still called Salah's Pharmacy, as opposed to The National Pharmacy, that my father gave it, initially, the name. My mother is from Jerusalem. She was born in Jerusalem and her father had a business in the old city with a Jewish partner. In 1948, the situation was very difficult for them. Their house became a makeshift hospital. It was very difficult to keep a family there, so my grandfather decided to take their family to Jordan. That was not long after the events of 1948 when that happened.

She moved with the family to Amman briefly and her father decided to go to Kuwait. Pretty much since she was maybe six years old, she lived in Kuwait. My father came to Kuwait at a much later age, after he graduated and after he's obviously had his first business in Jenin and then he decided to move to Kuwait. They met in Kuwait. They got married and I'm the third child to them. I have two sisters, both older than me. One of them lives in Australia and one lives in the Emirates.

Q: Wow. What made your dad move to Kuwait?

A: In the 60s, I guess, a lot of the educated Palestinians were having some difficulties financially, obviously due to some of the restrictions, some of situations that were actually based on the way Palestine was divided. I'm sure everybody knows that Jerusalem, Yaffa, Haifa, where the hubs of business, and actually not just business, obviously, Jerusalem, when it was divided it was like slicing a knife through the hub of Palestinian life at the time. And definitely a lot of the coastal cities where all the ports were and exposure to the world. Business and life in Palestine were not the same in spite of being under the Jordanian rule for quite a while, but definitely it was not the same and opportunities were very challenging for educated Palestinians and a lot of them found opportunities in the Gulf and that was at the start of building the Gulf, obviously, getting the countries from colonisation as well.

Some people believe that was part of trying to empty Palestine from particularly educated Palestinians. The way the timing worked was interesting as well. Again, I'm not a conspiracy theorist but it's really interesting how a lot of Palestinians that left Palestine basically built all these Gulf states. Kuwait is one. Saudi, Emirates. If you look at the education system, it was really set up by Palestinians. If you look at the medical system, it was set up by Palestinian doctors. If you look at the roads and construction, it was actually set up by Palestinian civil engineers. There's a lot of Palestinian brain power and blood and sweat and tears in really creating the Gulf and the way it looks today. This is the sad reality and if you look at the situation of the West bank today, the roads, the infrastructure, everything under over 50 years of occupation, had the Palestinians been there and built the country, it would've had a much better place than what we have in the Gulf. Let alone the whole of Palestine. In part, that was the reason. Obviously, the case for my mother was different because they were refugees. They had to leave their home in a rush and left everything behind, like the story of everybody else in 1948. With my father being from a north – north of the West Bank, actually they left in 1948, and there's a story also behind that where the youngest daughter in my father's family, one of the siblings, was left as a baby in her cot and they rushed out and then an hour out, they discovered they were carrying a pillow. That is actually a common story, a story that happened in my family too.

They were cuddling the pillow in the rush and they realised that Siham was left in the house, and they went back to get Siham and they decided not to leave afterwards. Which is really a good thing, otherwise they probably would've ended up in a refugee camp somewhere in Lebanon or somewhere nearby, or Syria. So yeah, that's one of those stories that we get told.

Q: What was your childhood like?

A: I grew up in Kuwait. There's definitely a lot of Palestine in our household. My father was extremely connected to the community. He was also extremely connected to his family. Probably too connected. He would go to Palestine to visit his parents sometimes twice a year, so we'd actually take every holiday to go to Palestine and visit my grandparents. We're heavily connected. Even after my father passed away and when I was seven, in a car accident coming back from Palestine, we continued to go there regularly to spend time with my grandparents. So Palestine played a very big part of my childhood and my upbringing. In the Gulf states it was generally a life of, to an extent, luxury. After my father's passing, I felt that

things have changed a little, but to a large degree, my mother and the family wanted to protect us from that, and look, my father did well in spite of leaving us when he was only 39, but he provided for us to really not need anybody.

It was a normal childhood, nothing too special, other than facing the regular trips to Palestine where there's an element of coming face to face with the occupation. As a child, crossing the bridge was an experience that I don't think I'll ever forget in my life. Spending nearly all day, maybe 15 hours to get across where you get strip searched as a child with two soldiers in the room, where you get your shoes thrown away in every direction purposely so you get humiliated – where every single garment gets searched. Searching female items culturally, being a conservative society was not really an easy thing for a lot of women. It was definitely challenging. There's always interrogation. My uncle would always be interrogated for a few hours and we won't know whether he was going to be turned back or not. He didn't have an ID. We were always like listening to the news, the war in Lebanon, Sabra and Shatilla, all these moments are major moments in our lives where as children, we would come face to face with extremely tough and challenging realities.

Q: As well as those confrontational moments with the occupation, what was it like going to Palestine so regularly?

A: We loved it. We loved going to Palestine. I really enjoyed being part of a bigger family when you go there. Interestingly, from both sides of my family, nobody lives in Palestine today. I once counted, nearly 100 members of the children and the grandchildren from both my mum's side and my father's side and none of them live in historical Palestine today. But there is obviously the extended family, some of the cousins, sometimes my cousins would come and join us as well. I love the culture. I love the food. I love the music. I'm a dabke dancer. I taught dabke until a few years ago. I loved every aspect of that life and we loved going to Jerusalem, in particular when we go to my mum's family. The old city, is one of the most beautiful places on earth. It's really magical in every corner. History, everything is there. You name it. Definitely, that was a highlight for me. This is one of those memorable things that I always enjoy and this is why I love to try and take my kids there. Although Jerusalem is off limits for me these days, but it is definitely a place that I feel so strongly linked to.

Q: What ID did you have when you were living in Kuwait?

A: In Kuwait, we were born as Jordanian citizens, although we always identified as Palestinian. Credit to Jordan for giving Palestinians of the West Bank Jordanian passports where we had a lot of that freedom. For Palestinians born in Syria or Lebanon, they don't have such freedom. Majority don't have full citizenship status. This has changed years later, and became basically a different status to full citizenship Jordanians, Palestinians of the West Bank. For us, we were born with a Jordanian passport, so we had that freedom to go to Jordan, and to a large extent Jordan did not really discriminate, but there was definitely a lot of discrimination in Kuwait between us as non-locals and the locals.

And it wasn't just Palestinians, although, there were times where there was strong support to Palestinians and there were times where there was a policy of basically localising everything in Kuwait; all the jobs, even universities, the intake had to be all local. Palestinians felt

strangled in the country.. There was definitely some discrimination. The difference between us and everybody else whether you're a foreigner or you're another Arab citizen, there's a place to go to. For Palestinians, it was much more difficult. For us, potentially Jordan was an option, but for many of my friends and some relatives in Kuwait, if they had a travel document from Egypt or Syria or Lebanon, they can't go anywhere. And the events of the Gulf war, which I'm sure we'll get to, was definitely a significant event for us in many ways, and experiences – not just my experience, but also of many of my friends that had such documents was extremely difficult.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: In 1990, Saddam invaded Kuwait. We did not expect that to happen. Again, life in Kuwait was fine for many of us. We probably didn't know any better, but the disruption of that war flipped everything upside down. For me personally, there was suddenly a massive change. Funny, I lived in an area called Salmiya. It's known in Kuwait to call areas by the royal family members, first names. So Salim was one of the sheikhs or the rulers. Salmiya is after that name. Salim Elmubarak was the name of the street I lived in. Iraqis came and within a couple of weeks they actually changed the names and the street signs. My address changed to Hai Nasir, the area of victory. Sabatash Tamooz 17th July, date of the revolution in Iraq.

So suddenly, everything was changing and I knew that this is not going to be a long-term proposition for me to stay, so I moved to Jordan to continue my education. Luckily, I was able to continue. Many of my friends did not have that option. If you're Palestinian, in spite of coming to the same conclusion that I came to about Kuwait, they had no choice, many of them had to stay, which was difficult because they basically had no education, no life, no future.

Things have changed over the years, but it was definitely very challenging for people that stayed. There were a lot of stories of friends that were stuck in airports. A friend of mine who is extremely smart, an extremely successful person in one of the tech companies, him and his brother. He lived in airports for three weeks, he had a university acceptance to go to Cyprus, after he was stuck in Jordan for a while, but eventually he managed to get to Cyprus. Cyprus realised he's Palestinian, so they declined to allow him in, in spite of having a visa. They shipped him back to Jordan and Jordan did the same, and set him back to Cyprus. Cyprus sent him back to Egypt, because this is where his travel document was issued from. Eventually he was in airports for three weeks before his brother managed to get him a visa to the US..

This is not a unique story. I know of somebody who was on a ship for two months because every port would refuse to allow him in. A couple of my friends that were studying in Syria knew nothing about their families for months, and one of those, a dentist, was telling me recently that only a couple of years ago he managed to get back on his feet.

Q: Yeah, wow. Just going back, when you were born, you got a Jordanian passport. How old were you and how did you get your Palestinian ID? How did that happen?

A: I'm not entirely sure when my father managed to get his ID, but my grandparents having no children with IDs were applying to ensure that at least some of the children are able to come back, look after them

Q: Did your mother also have –

A: Eventually, my father applied for my mother as well and she's got it too. Both of them got their ID. My mother's ID, though, was a West Bank ID given by her husband, as opposed to the one from Jerusalem where her parents came from.

Q: Sure.

A: There's a difference in the status. I was telling you before, there are varying statuses based on what you are. For example, if you're a citizen of – like a West Bank Palestinian, you would have an ID, which means you would be able to go back whenever you want. Although, you potentially, at any point in time, can be detained for no reason. Administrative detention is where you could be detained for absolutely no reason. There's also documents given by the Jordan government, a green or a yellow document. Yellow means you're a citizen of Jordan, and you have full rights, to live in Jordan, to buy property. If it's green, that means you're Palestinian, you can only visit. It would restrict your status as you're really a Palestinian with a Jordanian travel document, as opposed to being a full citizen of Jordan.

Q: Sure.

A: That's definitely something that a lot of Palestinians suffer with. The Oslo reality, obviously, with Palestinians that live outside would be different. You have the Israeli – Palestinian citizen of Israel. You have people in Lebanon that have slightly different status to living in places like Iraq or Kuwait. It's a variety of statuses and differences in the way you get treated as a Palestinian. We were one of the lucky ones with a Jordanian passport where we could go to places and get visas without being blocked.

Q: Yep. Yeah, and so you still travel on that same – when you go now to Palestine you travel on that same ID?

A: Correct. When you travel to Palestine now, I can't use my Australian passport. I have to use my ID to get in, and this is how you basically get treated like everybody else in Palestine. You get stopped at checkpoints, like everybody else, which is probably the best way to experience it. I was telling my kids – when I took the kids, we were at checkpoint for about maybe three hours between Nablus and Ramallah, and literally, three hours of basically waiting. It was a torturous wait and for no reason. There were two young soldiers, probably not even 18, feet on a chair and waiting five minutes between every person that passes and then just give a nod. These are the experiences we face. Unlike maybe somebody who would go with an Aussie passport and visit as a tourist.

Q: What's it like taking your kids there?

A: We loved it. It was amazing. They have heard a lot about the place from me. We're very Palestinian in this household. We went – and I was telling them lots of stories before. We went to Jenin. They saw my family home. It was sad in a way, because it was all these photos of people with a lot of dust. All these keys that we didn't know what they open. We looked through the garden. We could see all the trees that my grandmother planted: pomegranate, lemon trees, almond trees. It was beautiful and they could relate and connect with the people

that they're hearing about through the trees and place, and the only thing that they can touch physically would be what they left us, the trees, the oranges, the pomegranates that we took photos with.

Then we went to Nablus. We spent some time there. We ate knafeh and experienced the culture. In Jenin we went to places where my father would go as a schoolboy, to eat falafel and hummus. We went to Jerusalem, that was a highlight. I remember getting smuggled to Jerusalem. When I was in the Old City, I was telling my son how amazing the experience is, through a small gate, it opens up to the Dome of the Rock area, an extremely beautiful site. I was telling him that, then suddenly, a soldier stops me and starts interrogating me. Mistakenly, I present my ID, not realising that I'm speaking to a soldier not the guard. Next thing he preparing to detain me. A Palestinian guard from the Dome of the Rock area suddenly comes and starts an argument with the soldier and next thing I manage to get out. I think it was intentional. We were all a little upset after that encounter. The trip though was extremely beautiful. See al aqsa, the church, visiting all those shops in the Old City and the small streets is definitely the highlight of any trip to Palestine. The kids loved it and connected with some of my cousins. Loved the food, loved the music, loved the culture. I would love for them to go to regularly.

Q: So when you say it's a very Palestinian household, what does that mean?

A: The kids grew up with a lot of activism. Exposure to Palestinian youth that visit our house and talk and explore the things that we do. We organised trips for some of them to go Palestine on a regular basis, through partnerships. We started the dabke group when they were really young and they all were trained and performed in lots of events like festivals. We performed in a big festival in Canberra to a big audience, maybe 6-, 700 people. It was a big moment for them. There's definitely the active people that come here regularly. We started a charity organisation many years ago by the name of Olive Kids that they're part of. I was active with Australians for Palestine. So all of the events, the kids would be dragged to it. Every protest for Palestine, we'd be there.

I occasionally do write, and they get to read my writings. So there's always something about Palestine; a film festival or an event or a meeting – They know Palestine is definitely something that is part of our DNA and they have to – have a strong sense of purpose. It's not just about an identity or a place that you can visit. It's what makes us us and making sure that they feel very proud and have that strong identity, is very important to us.

Q: Yeah, so tell me about coming to Australia. How old were you when you came to Australia?

A: I came to Australia as a maybe 23, 24-year-old. My two sisters and their husbands came here after the Gulf War. I wanted to finish my education in Jordan. My mum decided to follow them and I was the last member, so it was a very easy process for me to come to Australia. I didn't want to. I had some of my uni friends. My wife was my university sweetheart. I wasn't sure I wanted to come here. Eventually, under pressure, I decided to check it out, so I came in '93, early '93 to visit and I liked what I saw. A part of me was still very connected to that Middle Eastern culture. I thought maybe I'll give it a shot for a couple of years. Rest is history.

Q: What did you study at uni?

A: I did computer science in Jordan and an MBA here in Australia.

Q: What made you want to study computer science?

A: I was super interested in computers when I was really young. Did some programming. Worked a couple of places doing some programming work when I was really young, at 15. I had some passion for programming. Had a lot of friends that were some of those friends that I just described, extremely smart. Actually, Palestinians in Kuwait set up a Palestinian committee that did a lot of courses and software including software about Palestine, called Palestine Geography. I was involved with the graphics and images. I was really good with the drawing on the computer. We were Palestinian cities and landmarks, and I helped with the design of the logo for the group and some of the basic programming.

The Palestinian committee campus which was at the PLO office in Kuwait. We had a centre there and – I guess, being influenced by a lot of the smart Palestinians helped me firm up the fact that I really want to do this and this is what I ended up doing.

Q: Cool. What brought your sisters here? They were the first ones to come. Why did they want to come to Australia?

A: After the Gulf War, after Kuwait was taken over, it was very obvious for them that Kuwait was no longer the place to live. A couple of years before the Gulf War, the policy in Kuwait was extremely restrictive to all foreigners, but particularly Palestinians because they were the people that were unable to go anywhere. Just to give you an example, in what's equivalent to Year 12, to get to Kuwait university, you'd have to be in the very top – I don't know, maybe half percent. If you get less than 95%, you will not get accepted. So Palestinians without financial means would typically go to either to India or some of the Soviet Bloc countries. Some that can afford to go to the UK or America, but most couldn't. The only choice for Palestinians was to study hard and get to Kuwait Uni. What's amazing is, a lot of them did exactly that. Every year, the top students in Kuwait were predominantly Palestinian. It was amazing, being put under pressure to enable you to get an education. Palestinians obviously are known for this – education is considered the weapon we have to survive. It's a way of survival. My two sisters did extremely well and got into Kuwait Uni. I tried to set the bar a little lower as I wanted to go and study at AUB - American University of Beirut, and my mum agreed to that.

I completed my paperwork. I had a cousin who was studying there and I was fascinated by the campus. When I finished, I got 95.8%. So I was able to get to Kuwait Uni, and my mum said, "Well, you better save your money and instead of spending it on your education now, maybe you can spend it later." I wasn't overly happy with that. Kuwait was not very easy for Palestinians and many decided that this is not really a long-term proposition, and they decided to leave, my two sisters decided to come to Australia for that reason. Many Palestinians decided to make similar moves, to Canada, the US or Australia. And in part, us witnessing the Gulf War – the people with citizenships like Canadians or Americans– or not even citizenship, even Green Cards or even immigration visas, were collected by buses, taken to Jordan and were flown to these countries. The Lebanese were getting evacuated, Lebanese,

Syrians, everybody. The only people who were left in Kuwait were the Palestinians. That definitely had something to do with being stateless – and again, we spoke about being, Jordanian, but that's not what the Jordan government did. Probably the fact that it's not really a rich country.

Q: Yeah, we'll come back to the feeling journey, but tell me about the flight to Australia when you immigrated here. What was it like?

A: The first time I came was only for a trial, but the next time I came, it was a mixed feeling. It felt like going to the end of the world. I was excited to be united with my sisters and my mother. I had – friends, not very close friends, but friends here at the time. I have a lot of close friends now, but it was a difficult decision in many ways, because you also feel like you're going away from where you belong. Palestine was still not far from where we were, and to be very honest with you, when you think about being stateless and having so many, like in my case, I have Australian citizenship and I have the Jordanian one, but I still feel Palestinian deep inside. I'm not sure if my kids would feel the same. I think they feel Australian first and then Palestinian. For me, I am Palestinian through and through.

This is where, when you get to Palestine, you immediately feel you are amongst your family. My kids were telling me that, they'd say you walk to a shop, and you end up talking to somebody for half an hour and they offer you food, and they offer you nuts and tea, and then you walk away and go to the next store and the same happens. "Do you know these people?" No, I don't, but it feels like I do. When you go and ask somebody for a small amount of something and say, "How much should I pay?" and they wave you off and say enjoy. And you keep on getting these experiences all the time, because they feel – this is how they treat each other.

You feel at home. You feel you belong. Yes, Jordan has a lot of Palestinians, but we don't feel the same. You don't feel the same in Kuwait. You don't feel the same in Australia. You go to Palestine, you feel you're at home. In spite of you probably not going back for years, maybe three, four years and then you go back and immediately you feel, "Oh my god, I've just returned." That feeling makes it so special. Yes, maybe I also not fully belong in some other ways, but – and this is where it's that confusion for us. I was born in Kuwait. I ended up in Australia. I identify as Palestinian with a Jordanian passport. It's like a weird blend, and ultimately it makes you think who you really are, and I'm not the only one. There are a lot like me out there.

Q: It just makes me think of how unhelpful these country categories are, that you can live for a long time in a certain place or be born in a place and it's just that's the place that you've lived, but you don't feel connected to that country. It's so –

A: Very true. was born in Kuwait and I lived in Kuwait until I was nearly 20. Honestly, I left it and I had no strong connection. Yes, when I listen to some of the old songs when we were at school I get a little nostalgic. We had a reunion of my school friends recently after many, many years, 30 years to be exact. It was beautiful. We bonded, we connected, we sang old songs and all that, but really, do I have a strong connection to the place? no. Interestingly, I did not live as much in Palestine. It was the regular holidays and connecting through all these strong bonds and cultural experiences, but I feel far more at home there, as opposed to

Kuwait or Jordan. Look, Australia is an interesting one. I do feel that Australia has a lot to offer especially around freedoms and being able to write and talk and be active, and protest. Not something you can do anywhere else for us. But Palestine is home. Palestine is where we – even if we temporarily go back, it's that temporary return that we truly cherish and love.

Q: Do you feel Australian?

A: To an extent, to be honest. I feel Palestinian, first and foremost. But yeah I do feel Australian too. But it's that overwhelming – that feeling of being Palestinian that I think trumps everything else.

Q: What is it like to be stateless? How does that feel?

A: I have the privilege of feeling stateless, without necessarily having the repercussions of being truly stateless like many that live in Lebanon refugee camps, or Jordan refugee camps under very difficult circumstances. Or some of those friends that I've told you the stories about with Palestinian travel documents. But I still feel like I don't strongly belong anywhere. Being home is not just about me returning. I could potentially decide to go back, and it's probably going to be extremely difficult for me to do so. It's about really growing up and living and connecting with you feeling at home. You have your cousins around you, not just your siblings. You have your parents. You have your grandparents. Your living experiences all belong to a place. We don't have that. It's very fragmented.

It's in part in Jordan or Kuwait or Australia or Palestine, for that matter. It's really fragmented. That fragmented experience makes it feel not right and gives you that feeling of being stateless. Not really belonging to a place. You're part of a lot of things, not one.

Q: Yeah, sure. Is there a word for stateless in Arabic? How do Palestinians – do you talk about statelessness in Arabic?

A: Laji is literally a refugee, and yeah, 'stateless' is somebody who is, I guess, a refugee, who is a laji.

Q: Do you talk about these sorts of questions in your family and with your friends? About being stateless and about these senses of belonging and how you fit in?

A: Yeah, we occasionally do. Typically, this question comes when I speak to the younger ones especially. A few years ago, that very question was an interesting one where a lot of the younger ones that were born here in Australia to Palestinian parents, were not very clear about that sense of identity. It was really vague for them. We were actually talking about this recently, about this paranoia of some parents where they don't want to talk too much about being Palestinian, because they would fear that this would – I don't know - compromise their citizenship, or they'd be kicked out of the country. I remember a lot of those growing in the Gulf States and the Middle East in general. There was a lot of strong fear from the secret service, or Mukhabarat. The Mukhabarat is a common fear, it created a massive feeling of always being afraid, always fearing being kicked out, including in Australia.

Some people would do this in the census, would not put 'Palestinian', because they would fear that would have implications. When we were workshopping this with some of the young people, here, quite a few of them didn't actually know where their parents come from, which Palestinian towns. Even a lot of them would not say they're Palestinian when they're asked where they come from. Some might say, "We're Jordanian, we're Australian". Some of them would say, "We're from Kuwait." The ones that came from Kuwait. And after going back and asking the parents and doing some homework about what exactly does it mean for them to be Palestinian, and researching this, a lot of them actually changed their perspectives.

Some of them are super active now. Some of them are board members of Palestinian organisations or active in many ways for Palestine. This has changed a lot of things for them. Sometimes it is bringing this idea to try and think more deeply about that sense of identity, but even for them, does it have that pure meaning of what does it mean to be Palestinian? Probably not. The ones that went back to Palestine, they have a much stronger feeling now, about that sense of identity. Again, that feeling of being home, everybody experiences it. You're fascinated by how beautiful the place is, how beautiful the people are, how rich the culture is, you have to come back with a stronger sense of identity and belonging. Again, they would not necessarily feel the same to somebody who grows up in Jerusalem or Jenin or Nablus, but they would feel much stronger about their sense of identity, and again, they wear it with pride.

Q: Yeah, there was something – when I went to Palestine. It struck me how beautiful it is. The landscape is so stunning. I was just struck by the – we don't talk about that enough in Australia, just how beautiful Palestine is.

A: Absolutely.

Q: The hills and – yeah, it's gorgeous. What does it mean to you to be Palestinian?

A: I think it's the best identity. I don't know. Part of me thinks that we're – we have a beautiful culture. We have beautiful people. We have a very strong cause. We have a reason to continue to explore and protect our identity and seek more freedom and fight for it and be who we are. I love being Palestinian. I don't want to be anything else, honestly. I want to stay – yes, in one sense, we're speaking about this idea of being stateless and really missing out on really growing up normal. We're not the only ones. There are a lot of refugees out there, many places and for all sorts of reasons. It's that fact that you feel it's totally unfair for us really to bear the consequences of something that we had nothing to do with, that strong feeling of wanting to return and wanting to belong. We want to have that right, even if we choose not to exercise it.

Q: You talked a bit about cultural sides and you talked a bit about going to rallies, but yeah, you're involved in Palestinian politics very much.

A: Yeah, I have been. I've been involved with Australians for Palestine when it was formed, very very early days with Nasser and Sonja and others. I was involved with doing some writing. I've got a few pieces published in the last few years. I've been involved with some of the community work as well through the Palestinian Community Association, continue to help with organising and transition and instilling a bit more structure and stronger sense of

purpose. Particularly about doing things that reflect this beautiful Palestinian identity, like events, cultural events, activism and supporting the community.

We ended up doing some of those trips to Palestine on an annual basis, and they still do them until today. The exhibition, Palestinians in Australia. we did a lot of work to ensure that Palestinians are able to tell their story, and for Australians to go to a Museum and see an exhibition about Palestinians. Occasionally, doing things with the media. So yeah definitely trying to, as much as possible, get Palestine out there. I think it's a duty for all of us, really. If I go anywhere, I used to donate blood across the road here, I would take a book about Palestine with me so that somebody would ask the question and we'd talk about it. It's definitely something that I take pride in continuing to be active and speaking about Palestine.

Q: Do you find that people will ask questions about Palestine?

A: Yeah, absolutely. Early on, when I first came to Australia, people would not really know where Palestine is, they'd confuse it with Pakistan and that was very common. Now, I think people have a lot more understanding of what's happening. Credit to our collective work, also the world changed in many ways. Social media changed things. People now have these devices called phones and they can take videos and people can see reality. It's amazing how things shifted, around understanding of the Palestinian issue over the years and how many people come to me and say, "Oh my god, we understand what's happening to you guys. We feel for you." Like with the recent decision by the Australian government revoking the decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. A lot of people would message me, and whilst I wasn't excited about it, the sentiment is changing. You'd have to educate people about how you feel about things.

Q: Yeah, sure. What was it like when you came here? How was it finding housing and getting a job? Yeah, what was your experience of Australia at the beginning?

A: I worked briefly in Jordan after graduating. I did not want to come here immediately and under pressure like I said I ended up coming. It wasn't so hard to find a job. I felt at the start it was a bit of a challenge to try and get used to a different system. In both Kuwait and Jordan, you get education in English. It was okay for me in terms of the language, but it wasn't my spoken language every day. There was a little bit of a barrier there, something that I needed to get used to, but also getting used to the culture and fitting in with the system. But at the same time, living the life that I thought made sense for me as well, as a Palestinian, as a community organiser. Immediately, I looked for people that have a similar interest to me.

I became part of the Palestinian community, all that activism started very, very early. It definitely helped in a way to connect and still deliver on the things that you wanted to do, and at the same time, fitting in in the society. Workwise, yeah, I can't complain. It was really a good trajectory professionally for me ever since I came here to Australia.

Q: Sure. You don't feel like you experienced discrimination?

A: There were often things that were said, that I laughed off, but I was wondering about. once – one of the recruiters, maybe week one I was here, – when we met face to face, said, "When you talked to me on the phone, you said something weird. Did anybody tell you there's

something funny about your name?” I said, “No.” And he goes, “oh. I thought you were saying, ‘I’m in a bus’.” I said, “Oh, okay. Nobody’s said that to me.” and took it as a joke. I’ve told that story to my kids schools as one of those funny migrant stories. And occasionally we’re told things about being Palestinian, being a terrorist, once my son was told, “Are you wearing the belt?” Probably my son had a lot more of that than me, being at school and facing some of that.

Again, both my kids are proud Palestinians, so when they say, “Where do you come from?” They say, “We are Palestinian.” So yeah definitely all faced some of that. In the soccer club, the coach once said similar things to my son, and I asked if he wanted me to do anything about it. “Nup, I can take care of myself” he said. There were occasional episodes, but nothing too drastic. I remember a couple of these episodes that made life a little bit challenging for me for a period of time at work when somebody said something along the lines of, I’m discriminating about them because of my Palestinian views. I was a manager in this organisation, after an investigation, it was cleared, zero merit to any of those allegations. But occasionally things like that happen because you’re vocal about what you do where you come from, but nothing really to cause anything drastic for me or us.

Q: So, you were married in Kuwait before you came? No, you got married here.

A: I was engaged before I came here and I spent just under a year and then went back and got married. I knew my wife from before. Actually, I met her in Kuwait University. After the Gulf War she went to the US briefly and she came back to study in Jordan. And eventually we got married and came to Australia.

Q: Your kids were born here?

A: Yeah. Both my kids were born here.

Q: Yeah. So you all have different documents, yeah? Your kids have Australian passports, but then also they’ve inherited your Palestinian ID, is that right?

A: Correct. I went back to – in a couple of different trips when my kids were at the right age, 13, 14 you can get a separate ID. They both have separate IDs. My son was telling me when he’s got his, “Why did you get me the ID now? I want to go to Jerusalem first before you do that.” Because the year that we did, he could not go to Jerusalem. For us, Jerusalem is a highlight in such trips. So for my daughter ended up going. That’s probably what pissed him off even more, because Nada and Teema got to visit Jerusalem. For me and him, we could not go.

Q: Right.

A: Which is what makes you also more angry when you’re there, that you’re like – this is the birth place of my mother. This is where half of me comes from Jerusalem. It’s one of my favourite places on this planet. Being denied the ability to go there is very unfair.

Q: Yeah, it’s awful. It’s just awful. Is your mother still alive?

A: Yes.

Q: How old is she now?

A: She was born in 1942, so she's 80.

Q: Wow, and so how did she feel about migrating to Australia, do you think?

A: I think for her, she was open to the idea because of the fact that her children decided to do that move. Initially, I think she was apprehensive. She's got a couple of siblings in the Middle East. Her sister and brother in Jordan and another brother in Kuwait. So she was not sure at the start, but she was open to it given that my two sisters were here already. This is where in part she wanted to make sure that we're reunited together. Eventually, I think she's quite happy here.

Q: When did you get Australian citizenship?

A: That would be around '97.

Q: Right. What was that like, to get that?

A: Look, in a way, it was good, because that would give me the ability to go back, in my mind to go back and be a bit more free to visit other places, including Palestine. That did not really matter much in the end. I discovered it makes absolutely no difference whether you're Australian or not when it comes to visiting. It was a good thing. Gives you a bit more freedom that you're probably not going to have, if Jordan for whatever reason, and they do in that part of the world, changes the rules or basically takes back your full citizenship because you happen to have a Palestinian ID regardless if you're living in Palestine or living outside, they could. At least you have that fallback in terms of giving you that freedom.

Sometimes you feel really privileged with such freedom. You have these passports. And then when I go and visit a refugee camp in Lebanon and see what it's like for people who are no less human than me, they're better than me in many ways, more resilient. They just happen to be born in a refugee camp, and I'm talking about some potentially very well-off Palestinians that ended up displaced after Nakba and had nothing. How unfair. Do I deserve to really get this when they don't?

We've been working with a group of young women in a refugee camp recently. It's a women's empowerment project. We've done a lot of interviews with them. I've seen some of the discussions with these young women. Amazing women. They can't go anywhere. They can't get jobs. The men can't do any jobs in Jordan, why? It's really sad.

Q: Yeah, it feels like it's luck.

A: It does.

Q: How do you handle these emotions and these kinds of experiences?

A: Honestly, sometimes it's really hard to reconcile them. It's difficult being privileged in that way when you know a lot of your people don't have these privileges, don't have the ability to even get decent medical treatment. I remember I was in the office of UNRWA in

Jordan where the manager of the relief program got me to meet a few of her social workers. I was doing some Olive Kids work then and someone came for one of the social workers with a piece of paper and said, “We’ve given this person such and such permission to go and get treated in the hospital.” And he replies, “oh, he’s passed away last week, waiting.” This person had cancer. They’ve tried to get permission to allow this person to get treatment in Jordan hospitals because government hospitals will not allow Palestinians with no Jordanian national IDs, and this person passed away waiting. I cried that day, even something as basic as this is not an option for these Palestinians, and this is where it's sometimes really hard to reconcile, especially with someone like me who sees and hears about those cases all the time through some of the charity work we do. Sometimes you have to be resilient and think, “We need to continue to do this work.” This is where that strong sense of wanting to contribute, everybody has a role to play. We can’t be in Australia by just live the good life. We have to do our part, and maybe this is what helps – maybe to an extent, helps you reconcile a little bit. I can never reconcile it, to be honest, but at least being able to contribute and do something. We had the AGM for Olive Kids on Sunday and we probably raised nearly half a million dollars’ worth of aid for Palestine.

There’s nearly 400 children that are sponsored out of Australia. This is Australian sponsorships for these kids. We’ve built 400 grand worth of an orphanage for the young children. We’ve done a lot of great work, right. Do I think it’s enough? It’s really a drop in the ocean. I think, “I’m just going to keep on doing what I’m doing, because at least this is our contribution.” Educating the young people, getting them active through that work is also part of it. It’s one thing that we could do to help us maybe reconcile.

Q: It must be hard particularly in the last few years but longer as well, when there were attacks on Gaza. Watching from this distance, is that –

A: Extremely difficult. Especially with Olive Kids, the focus really is on children, and when you see how nearly 90% of the children in Gaza are traumatised with what’s happening. We hear the stories. We understand the implications. We work very closely with the orphanage in Gaza and they tell us the facts – I think in 2018 there was like 4,000 orphans. Orphan may lose a father in that part of the world, and be an orphan. Sometimes losing both parents. The father typically provides in that part of the world. They see these numbers and ask is what can you do? we’re 100% volunteering, so we’re talking about 400 and it’s a struggle. So when you’re talking about thousands, we say can’t take them all. We can’t do it, but we want to help and this is where you’re really facing those big challenges all the time and sometimes, we just have to say we can’t do it.

The May 2021 events were horrific. 67 children were killed. At Al-Amal the organisation we partner with, the street opposite was a warzone.

Q: Have you been to Gaza?

A: I can’t go to Gaza, it’s off limits for me. I would love to. A lot of the work – and this is the thing with Gaza, when we started Olive Kids we wanted to do work everywhere. We did some work in the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan. We did some work in the West Bank, a couple of medical trips, medical missions, but really the bulk, 95% of what we do

goes to Gaza because everywhere we look the situation is so horrible, so we end up directing our work there. I would love to one day. Not possible with my Palestinian ID to go to Gaza.

Q: Sure. Was it always? When you were a kid –

A: Always.

Q: Right, okay. Yep. Tell me about Olive Kids. You helped set it up?

A: Yes.

Q: And What does it do?

A: Olive Kids is the Australian Foundation for Palestinian children, Olive Kids. We started working on Olive Kids and registered it in 2007. In 2009, we started to grow and deliver. We've been operational for over a dozen years. The mission is "Improving the lives of Palestinian children." There are three key elements of our work: financial support, sponsorships of children, contributing to projects that help the children. Education, programs with young children, usually through partnerships with the orphanage, and we have scholarships with the Islamic University of Gaza. We now have 11 scholarships. Mostly in nursing, mostly for women, because we wanted to help educate women.

The third area is medical work. We work with the union of health workers. We typically help them with aid, especially when there are major attacks on Gaza. We've nearly done that every year, because there's – without fail, there has been attacks on Gaza regularly. We helped with COVID with protective gear and fuel power for the hospitals during the attacks. We used to send medical missions every year, Professor David Croaker used to go annually. They'd go there, do operations, educate the surgeons over there, but at the same time, also do complex operations. We have not been able to do the missions since the pandemic, and the year before – the year of the March of Return. We're hoping that we're going to embark on that again in the future. Those are three main elements of work that we do at Olive Kids.

Q: Yeah, and so why focusing on the children?

A: Well, we could not focus on everybody, and children are the future and, I think Palestinian children deserve better than what they have. They're often the forgotten people. Obviously, adults can maybe look after themselves, but children quite often are the forgotten ones. Especially orphans. If you're an orphan anywhere it's difficult, let alone if you're an orphan in Palestine or a place like Gaza. We feel that we need to be a voice and help them.

Q: Sorry, jumping around a little bit. Going back to getting Australian citizenship, was there a ceremony that you had?

A: Yep.

Q: What was that like? Tell me about that.

A: I remember my daughter - my first child was born. Teema was there as a baby. My mum got her citizenship before me, and I got it maybe a few months after. It was interesting,

because I – part of me was thinking, I'm also the beneficiary of another colonial project, and here I am, a Palestinian waving a flag that has the English flag in the corner of it.

Q: Union Jack, yeah.

A: The Union Jack, yeah. Part of me was thinking, that's the country that colonised my place and ended up giving it to another people, and I'm here now waving that flag. Part of me was obviously happy to get citizenship. It was a memorable day in many ways. You get the native plant to put in the ground, and I was telling my wife, "Maybe I should also get an Olive tree planted." I actually have two Olive Trees in my backyard now.

Q: Yeah. Did your wife get citizenship – you got it at the same time?

A: She eventually – not at the same time, because I came a year before her, she got it around a year after me as well.

Q: Yeah, you're wearing an Aboriginal flag T-shirt as well. Thinking about colonisation here and solidarity with Aboriginal people, is that something that's important to you?

A: Absolutely. Very important to me. The more you live in this country, the more you understand the connection between the struggles, and I have to tell you that the story of the First Nations here, the Indigenous people of Australia, is not understood by many people outside Australia, especially in the Middle East. We learnt some stuff in school, but it was extremely tokenistic, extremely high-level, and to be honest, even here in Australia I was surprised and still hear a lot from my friends – things are starting to get a little bit better, but they're nowhere near where they need to be. The stories are not told the same way that our story is not told there. There are differences between the two experiences, but there are definitely a lot of parallels. I feel that this is something that we strongly relate to.

And we're definitely beneficiaries of that settler colonial system, and we owe it to the First Nations that would allow us to be part of it. There are definitely a lot of strong and growing relationships between us and the First Nations people.

Q: What did you know about Australia before you came?

A: I knew that Australia is very far from where we were. In the Southern hemisphere, and that water flows in the opposite way in the sink to us in the northern hemisphere. I remember couple of people tested this as soon as they came to Australia. I knew very little, to be honest. I knew that Australia was a White Australia. For many years, it was a racist country like South Africa and things were better and they got their act together way before South Africa did. I knew it was, for a while, a friend of Israel, which is something that you could relate to all these countries that are with you and not with the countries that are against you. Australia was one of those countries, with South Africa, that were friends of the Zionist state. Bit it was very little that I knew, bits and pieces that relate to some politics of the day, but not really too much.

Q: Do you feel like you've picked up much Australian culture? I don't know what that would be, but.

A: Yeah, for sure. Nobody would live here for that long without picking some of the culture. Look, I love many things about Australia, but also, I don't necessarily like many things. The positives outweigh the negatives, and this is why I'm here for all that long, otherwise, I would've gone elsewhere. I love the freedom. I love the comradery. I love the fact that we're trying to reconcile with our history. Not enough. Definitely not. Depending on your political leanings, there's a long way to go, but at least many in the public, especially the young people, are starting to come to grips with that, which is something I like. The freedom. This is not something we have in the Middle East, no matter where you are. Not in Kuwait. Not in many of the Gulf states or Jordan for that matter.

Let alone - probably Palestine is the free-est place out of all these countries, by the way, and I mean it. You can probably speak and do more there in spite of, obviously, the occupation and the PA. The Palestinian Authority is anyway just another arm of the occupation, no different. In spite of that, there's still probably a bit more freedom.

Q: By 'freedom' you mean political freedom, or what?

A: Yeah, political freedom, to an extent. Obviously, there's still PA and it's – the police force are always – they're quite authoritarian if you try to challenge or question. But in terms of what you can write and what you can say. Probably a little bit better than still, other places in the Middle East where – you have the Mukhabarat, the secret service, they're everywhere.

Q: Do you think you'll stay in Australia long-term?

A: I'd love to return. This is something I always talk about with the family here. I used to say, if there's one place I would leave here to, it would be Palestine. It would be going home. I'd love for that dream one day to happen in a free Palestine. Would I do it without going to a free Palestine? I don't know. It's a big question in my mind that I'd love at some point to be part of rebuilding, as opposed to being occupied. The question always in my mind is, can I help more from being here? or can I help more from being there? It's a question that I'll keep on asking myself. There'll probably be a moment where I think maybe I should be there.

Q: What do you think that moment will be? How do you think about that question?

A: I think had there been no Oslo and no PA, I would've thought differently about that idea of returning, but the way things are going, the fact that even if you have a genuine interest in rebuilding and helping your people, it's going to be very difficult to do it properly and authentically with people who are extremely corrupt and an extension to the occupation. It's not the right place. Probably not the right time because of that reason. I'm really optimistic that this is not going to take long before PA falls and the occupation falls as well. The fact that this is – because the young people, everywhere around the world, are actually on side and they see it for what it is. I don't think it's not going to take long. I'd like to think it will happen soon and it definitely is going to be during my lifetime, and hopefully I get to contribute.

Q: Yeah, so you're optimistic about –

A: Very.

Q: Yeah, that's great. Have you been back to Kuwait since you left?

A: I have been. I've been a couple of times – first time I went when my wife's brother got married. Went there for a couple of days and it was interesting. And again I did not really feel too emotional about going there. And yeah, I've been a couple of times since then for family reasons. Generally, I don't have a strong feeling of not liking the place, but I don't feel a strong bond or connection. I only went, not because I wanted to go and I had a strong feeling or nostalgia to go back. I went for family reasons, and I would not have done this by choice.

Q: Do you talk to your kids about Kuwait? Do you –

A: Sometimes, but not much.

Q: Do they have a sense of connection with it at all?

A: Not even like a 0.1%, Palestine is our story.

Q: Yeah. Does the label 'stateless', does that feel like a meaningful and useful label for you?

A: I don't know. Just thinking about this today, I was trying to think, what does it really mean to me? Do I feel that I belong to one place? We spoke about that and I think the feeling is I feel I belong to Palestine more than anywhere else, but I don't feel I'm really a true Palestinian, in the full sense of the word where you're free and you live there, you belong there. As much as I have that strong feeling, and part of that is maybe that desire to be a full Palestinian, a full-fledged Palestinian, but in many ways, I do feel stateless, because of that fragmentation through these lived experiences that don't make it whole, doesn't make it really full. You don't feel like truly belonging to one place. Kuwait is still part of me. Australia is a big part of me. Even Jordan is part of me. I feel that the overwhelming piece is Palestine – I don't know. It might be the biggest chunk, and that is stronger than all the other pieces, but I still don't feel whole.

Q: I'm interested in that sense of not feeling fully – it's not fully Palestinian, but fully –

A: Belonging to a place.

Q: Yeah, or particularly of Palestine. Is it because you haven't lived there for an extended period, or is that – yeah.

A: Maybe because I have not lived there, but also maybe because I know I can't live there. It's because I can't really fulfill this ability to really being there. I'm not in Jordan by choice. Maybe I'm not in Kuwait by choice, and many friends did go back to Kuwait. Would I want to go to – had I had the choice to Palestine, I think I would. If I had that sense of normality and be part of building the place. This is a much more special feeling that I would love to be part of.

Q: Is it a feeling – You said when you go to Palestine that you're welcomed there, that you feel at home there. What is the sense that you get from Palestinians who live in Palestine, looking out at Palestinians who don't live there?

A: You feel family. Honestly, when you go there, you feel as if you've never left, and that's the feeling that they give you. It's funny. I was telling a friend that when you go to Jordan, they often complain. They tell you, "It's very expensive here. It's very difficult." They complain about everything that is happening in the country, and then you cross the bridge to Palestine, and everyone tells you about how everything is great, everything is good. They're thankful and content. I once asked. I said, "Look, I was just in Jordan and everybody was complaining. And here, and you guys are the ones under occupation, in one of the most of expensive places on earth and everything else that you're facing, checkpoints and lack of freedom of movement, oppression and you're so positive and happy."

This person said, "Oh my god, don't tell me about the people of Jordan. When they come here and talk to us, we feel sorry for them and feel depressed." then I asked, why do you feel so positive?" They said, "You know what? We're home. We've never left. There's food on the table. Yes, there are bad days. You lose friends and people you love, things are not easy, but we're home, and that's what counts." This person said to me, "The Turks came and went. The English came and went, and one day the Zionists will leave too."

Q: It'll be over one day. When you describe it as 'home', what constitutes home? What is it?

A: Home for me is a lot of things. Home is where you feel that you belong. You feel that you're settled. Your family, your friends, your connections, your life. All blend in a nice way where you feel content and happy. It's a place where you feel that if you die, you can be buried and feel okay about it. On this, I remember Sara Saleh capturing it in a book about Arabs in Australia. When I was reading her story, I was thinking, "Oh my god, this is exactly how I felt for maybe the first 10 years of being in Australia." I was thinking, "If I die, please don't bury me here."

By the way, my father, when he died, he died in Jordan on our way back from Palestine to Kuwait/ Apparently asked to be buried in Palestine, and it was extremely difficult. We're talking about '78. This is at the height of the occupation and restrictions. So through the Red Cross we managed to go back and get him buried at home, and he returned like he requested. That idea of where to be buried, I thought if my father did this, would I want to be buried in the tail end of the world in Australia, or do I want to be home like my father?

Apparently, my father asked to be buried next to his grandfather, it's the most beautiful spot, overlooking the whole village. When my grandfather died also, they had to bury him next to his father and son, but our relatives then said "That's it. We're not going to turn this into a cemetery."

So yeah that question, back to your question of where does it feel home. I know it feels a little bit dramatic. It's also that element of home where you feel okay if you get buried in that place.

Q: Yeah, that's such a – yeah, I've heard other Palestinians talk about wanting to be buried in Palestine. It's such an important thing, it seems.

A: I think right now, after so many years, maybe it's okay if – I don't want to trouble everybody! Sorry, if they're listening to this interview after I've passed. Maybe it's okay. You can bury me anywhere. I don't care anymore, my soul will definitely be in Palestine.

Q: You've seen – you've been to those graves? Those three graves?

A: Every time I go, I actually go and I take my kids there.

Q: Yeah. Wow. That's in Jenin? No, it's in the village.

A: This is in Khabartiye. My family had property and live in between Jenin, Khabartiye, an area called Shuhaba. This is where there was actually a lot of Iraqi soldiers that died around in '48, but this area is where we have property. We have some of my father's cousins that live there and some in the village up in the mountain. This is where – my great grandfather had his house there and was buried not far from where he lived.

Q: What about the wives, your grandmother and your great grandmother? Where are they?

A: The grandmother was buried in a cemetery not far from that, but in the cemetery. Everybody else, men and women also, the siblings of my grandfather, were buried in the cemetery. Interestingly, the sons and daughters of one of them live near the graves, but it is my father and grandfather near them, not theirs.

Q: Right. Why do those three men get – what's –

A: The story is this. My great grandfather asked to be buried there, and because he lived there, and loved the spot. That was his will. When my father died and was really young, he was one of the favourite sons of probably the whole village, let alone the family. His wish was also granted.

I remember, I was really young, at my dad's funeral cars were blocking the whole of Jenin city. When we went back to our house in Jenin, there were people from everywhere. He knew a lot of people throughout Palestine. Many people came from overseas, many from America, from other places, anyone that was allowed in came. Many of his siblings couldn't.

He was really young. He was extremely popular. As a pharmacist, he was known to help everybody. He was very involved in the community. His death was a major loss to the family. My aunties, until today, tell me, "We never recovered."

For my grandfather it was purely because his father and his son and it was something that he wished for, and they said, "That's it. We're going to make that third exception and that will be the end of it."

Q: What was your father like as a father?

A: I was lucky enough to know him for seven years. He was somebody who was super busy, but at the same time, very available. He was extremely gentle, extremely kind. My mother was definitely the – also very gentle, but she was definitely the person who was going to drive a lot of the discipline in the house, as opposed to my father. He was always somebody

who was extremely proud about being Palestinian too. Everybody knew that. He would take us – like I said – to Palestine every year, because he wanted us to grow up as proud Palestinians. I remember him taking me sometimes to his medical centre where he worked all the time.

I remember in our home, we used to have the large jars of medicine and he used to make some at home. People would ring up at midnight and say, “we have a sick child,” and he would make the medicine and drive and drop it off. He was kind and extremely helpful to everybody. That’s something that I think maybe part of me was influenced by. I think if I reflect now of Olive Kids and some of the work that we do, maybe in part that’s influenced by being brought up in a family where that was part and parcel of what we do. Palestinians do that anyway. Help is the norm.

I was quite young, but I remembered a lot of things about him.

Q: Do you think he – your memories of him have influenced the way you are as a father?

A: Yeah, I think it would. I’m obviously carrying that strong sense of identity, maybe that of helping others, but also being – I don’t know – quite engaged with people around me, with family, with community. Helping when I can, but also connecting people. I am kind of a bit of that connector of family, the cousins. I like to bring people together, which is something that my father was always known for.

Q: Community’s really important to you.

A: Yeah.

Q: Are you involved in non-Palestinian stuff in Australia?

A: I started to get involved with the Greens, but to be honest not enough – I have a demanding job. It’s definitely a challenge for me to be too involved with too many things. Olive Kids take a good chunk of my time. Some of the Palestine activism takes a good chunk and obviously, being able to do my job and do it well. I try and contribute within my capacity. I did help in the last federal campaign with the Greens, but I don’t do enough.

Q: What work do you do now?

A: I manage an organisation in information technology, in technology, one of the large tech companies.

Q: Cool. I guess, coming to the end of maybe, but - thinking about your experience of statelessness and migration, do you think of yourself as a migrant? Is that a category that you think about?

A: Definitely. Coming to Australia is definitely, we fit under that category.

Q: What do you feel like you’ve learned about humanity or community or collectivity as a result of your life experiences?

A: In the Middle East, you know about challenges or some of those situations or political implications of wars or refugees within your region. Obviously, a lot of us, we're well read or we know about the rest of the world, but at the time, I don't think I knew enough about many other conflicts. Some of the things that I've obviously learnt about being here in Australia from other communities were extremely educational for me and brings you a much wider perspective. Definitely there was a bit of that learning. Australia's a truly multicultural society, there's a good chance - especially in the groups that I network with or work with, you would find a good diversity and that was an eye opener for me.

And like we discussed before, being a beneficiary of that settler colonial system here in Australia makes you always think about how you would feel if you're a First Nations person. In spite of everything else, aside from the parallels between the two narratives, between our colonial settler experiences. We are beneficiaries of that system here. I am conscious of that, being here educates you about a lot more than just your own story, your own experience.

Q: Yeah. Is religion a part of your life?

A: Absolutely, being Muslims is part of our life. This is another community that we're part of and belong to and embrace. That said, Palestinians are an extremely tolerant society and to be honest, growing up, I didn't know which of my parents' friends were Christian or Muslim. As kids, we used to get new clothes for Easter and Christmas, and they used to get new clothes for our two Eids. We used to exchange gifts and visits. We lived in a very – even in Kuwait, in a multicultural society and also in Palestine, maybe not multicultural but very tolerant.

Q: Is the unknown a big part of your life and a big part of the experience of migration and statelessness that you've had?

A: Yeah., the situation in Kuwait when suddenly your life is uprooted and you have no idea what's going to happen to your education. What's going to happen to the money that you have in the bank? What's going to happen to your siblings? What's going to happen to your friends? All of a sudden all of that becomes a big unknown. You have no idea what's going to happen to you. We have a good support system. We have family. A part of that gives you reassurance that you're not going to be alone, but there is a huge unknown. Then you leave Jordan and come to Australia and it's a huge unknown. You don't know what's going to happen. Am I going to find work? Am I going to connect? Am I going to have friends? It is a huge unknown.

Yeah, you think about how big was it for your parents when they went through those unknowns as well and you can relate. I can definitely relate a lot more to the experiences of my parents.

Q: Yeah, so you feel like you've learnt –

A: It was a much milder experience for sure, but it is definitely something that relates to their experiences too. And that idea of your friends and family are everywhere. Suddenly – like in Palestine, there was this major event that ended up displacing a whole bunch of people everywhere in '48 and then this event happened again in '67, and then for us, it happened again in 1990. The accumulation of displacement created all these experiences, and also

made a lot of our friends displaced everywhere in the world. I spoke about the reunion of my friends, and it's funny. Not all of them Palestinians – one Lebanese and one Syrian. And the rest Palestinian. There were six of us when we met. It is was amazing. T is the Kuwait experience, not being together for 30 years and then meeting again.

Interestingly, I was going to London and I messaged a friend. I didn't have his number, I messaged him on Facebook. Last time we exchanged messages was on also Messenger maybe six, seven years before that. I said, "Hey, Bashar. What are you doing on Sunday?" that's it. Not having touched base with him at all and suddenly I send that message. His response was, "Oh my god. Are you coming to London? Are we going to catch up? Am I going to see you?" And I said, "Yes. Keep your dinner plans free." So we connected and spent like six hours together. We started asking about our old friends; what happened to this person? What happened to this person?

I said, "Hey, I'm going to start this WhatsApp group and let's try and find everybody." He said, "Yeah, let's do that." We started to look for friends from our class. We were in school together for the last four years of our education, but that last year, that group was a selective class, a bunch of smart kids with good teachers who really bonded and connected. We started looking for friends, and over two, three months we got to 12 of us. Out of the 12, five of us agreed to meet in San Francisco.

Before the meetup, the first time I called one of these long list friends, after we spoke for about five minutes, he said, "Can I be honest with you? I know I know you, but I can't remember you at all. Can you send me a photo?" I sent him an iMessage, a photo of myself now. He goes, "No, I want a photo of you in year 12." After I sent an old photo he went, "Oh my god. You were one of my best friends in year 12, now remember you." Which is crazy right, after 30 years. He said, "If we're doing a reunion, I'm in." He was in, another friend lecturing at Stamford was in San Francisco, another came from Canada and one came from Saudi. We connected. It was the best reunion.

After 30 years we felt like we were 18 again. We felt that all these years meant nothing, but felt sad that we could not grow up together and see each other. It immediately struck me that this would have happened to a family, not just school friends. Many families, whether it was 1990, what happened to Palestinians in Kuwait, or Palestinians in Palestine who did not share these experiences together. Did not manage to grow up together and see each other as kids, as cousins or as siblings. It is that idea of home and being part of a bigger group and community in a country, in a common place that we missed out on.

Q: Yeah. I feel like that's a wonderful place to leave it, unless there was anything else that you wanted to share.

A: No, we've talked a lot. I hope that that was giving you some good perspective about our experiences.

Q: Thank you so much. It's really such a privilege to hear your stories. Thank you.

A: Thank you. I appreciate you taking the time and listening to my stories.

Q: I'll stop the recording.