
Beyond His Milieu, and Loving It

It's a long way from Oman—a country of 3.5 million that borders Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates—to Ann Arbor. But Salim Al-Jahwari found the journey worthwhile. The fifth child in a family of eight, Salim always wanted to study in America. After winning a government scholarship from among 40,000 students, he went first to Austin, Texas, to study at a local community college and perfect his English. His next stop was the University of Michigan, a school recommended to him by his country's office of cultural affairs as one of the best in the U.S. When one of his friends asked him why, in particular, he wanted to study at U of M, he said, "I want a challenge from the best."



Salim's first surprise upon arriving in Ann Arbor was how cold it was in Michigan. His second was the intense competition. After getting a C+ on his first Statistics 350 exam (after achieving a perfect 4.0 average in his community college courses), Salim was discouraged and thought about leaving. But he credits the course instructor for giving him the extra help he needed to eventually get an A- in the course. Salim learned to make every minute count at Michigan. He says that prioritizing was the key to graduating with a 3.7 overall average and a double major in Hebrew Studies and Political Science.

One of Salim's most cherished accomplishments was winning the Leroy T. Waterman award in 2006 for the best student in Hebrew and Judaic Studies. Salim decided to study Hebrew because of his interest in current conflicts between Arabs and Jews, and because he believes that only by studying the language of another culture can one cross cultural boundaries. "Language is not just a tool but comes with a whole package of culture and ways of thinking," he says. It can help one understand a culture's "fears and hopes."

Before Salim came to Michigan, he knew very little about Israeli society or Jewish culture. He only knew that Jews were supposed to be his enemy, despite the fact that Arabs and Jews "are actually cousins and have lived for centuries in the Middle East." He was one of only a handful of Arab students in the program. "The other students in the program thought I might be a spy,"

he laughs. And he did not tell many of his Arab friends that he was studying Hebrew. The resistance of others to his chosen field was difficult, but his teachers' uniform acceptance encouraged him.

Salim's honors thesis examines the history of Iraqi Jews between 1948 and 1952 (when they were expelled from Iraq). He chose this specific point in time because, before this period, Jews were fully integrated into Iraqi society. Salim says that it was during this period that the real rupture took place between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East, and the current animosity developed. He chose Iraqi Jews because they were the most assimilated Jews in the Middle East at the time. Salim tried to understand why suddenly things changed so dramatically for the Jewish minority, such that, less than fifty years later, Arabs seem to have forgotten that a significant Jewish minority once lived among them peacefully.

On top of his coursework, Salim kept his calendar full of activities. He co-founded the Arab Student Association and served as co-chair of the Michigan Student Assembly International Student Affairs Commission. Salim worked as an orientation advisor at the International Center and also as a research assistant for Professor J. David Singer on the Correlates of War project. He also enjoyed playing intramural basketball and soccer.

The most important lesson Salim learned at Michigan was "to approach life with confidence," and he credits his honors advisor Professor Ruth Tsoffar for teaching him that, with patience and diligence, everything is possible. Clearly Salim's three years in Michigan have had a big impact on him.

Asked what he will miss most about Ann Arbor, he says, "Snow. Big flakes of snow coming down."



Salim with other student leaders at graduation

Salim will return to Oman this fall and plans to enter his country's diplomatic service or foreign affairs ministry. He hopes to eventually return to Michigan to study politics at the graduate level.