

Oral History Final Project Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Firas Hashmi (FH)

Interviewee: Ehab Jaber (EJ)

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[Begin Transcript]

FH: Do you consent to the recording of this interview and the storage of the interview in the archives?

EJ: Yes, I do.

FH: As the official interview introduction, my name as you know is Firas. I'm a first year at the University of Chicago. The class that I'm doing this interview for is called Energy and World Civilizations. We're studying how agricultural society and industrialization happened. Now, we're doing more modern stuff like how oil has shaped regions and the growth of modern energy. I think that your experiences growing up will be very valuable to hear about. As I said, the informed consent has been done, and there's also that form. I'll give you like what I wrote for the intent. Then, I'll ask you some questions. It's pretty open-ended. The point is to hear what is most memorable and interesting for you to talk about.

EJ: Sure.

FH: The purpose is to hear your perspectives on the everyday experience of energy usage in your household. It's a very loose term, including human labor as well as electricity and such when you were growing up. Also, large-scale energy production, which is very relevant to you because of where you grew up.

We'll start now with an introduction of you if that's okay. Could you please introduce who you are, when and where you were born, and where you grew up?

EJ: My name is Ehab Jaber. I was born in 1970 in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. I grew up there for the first 14 years of my life. My father worked for the biggest oil company in the world, called Aramco, which stands for Arabian American Oil Company. Dhahran was the biggest. Aramco has several compounds where the employees lived and worked. We had our own schools, recreation centers, cinemas, women could drive. It was a completely different environment than the rest of Saudi Arabia, which at that time was a very conservative country. That's basically where I grew up. At the age of 14, I went to the US to continue my education.

FH: I've seen some pictures which made Dhahran look very Americanized. Was that the experience or was it just more liberalized?

EJ: Absolutely. I believe someone told me it was modeled after a suburb somewhere in California. I've driven around a lot in the US. For example, one time I was in Columbus, Ohio. The houses looked just like houses in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. When I grew up there, we lived in an old part of Dhahran, where the houses were mainly made of stones. They're stone houses. In Canada, we call them bungalows. They're like one level. They're like four bedrooms or more, flat, with a big garden. Each house looked different. It looked better. As they expanded the compounds as the company grew, they built more houses. There was a new area called Dhahran Hills. The houses there looked kind of like Arizona, all like adobe, like concrete spray paint. I don't know how to say it, stucco, whatever it's called. That was the newer houses, next to each other, much closer in proximity. Whereas the old Dhahran, it was more spacious. The houses were more unique and interesting to live in.

FH: What was it like in terms of: you said you went to Aramco schools and recreation... How did recreation work, and how were the schools? How did things feel living in that company town?

EJ: It was a very nice life. Everything was structured and organized, clean. There were rules. They even had speed limits within the compound. People had to follow certain rules. We had very nice recreation centers. For example, we had a cinema which would bring the latest movies. Back then in the seventies, Grease, Saturday Night Live, Rocky. All those classics, Star Wars. We had one cinema. We had several swimming pools. Growing up in a hot environment, it was nice to be able to go to a pool. Some had pools in their houses, but my house didn't have a pool. You could go to this public pool which was very nice and cool. I remember one of the most memorable things growing up was, you could get a swimming badge if you passed the swimming test. Then, you could come without your parents, as a young person. It was a stepping stone in growing up. I got my swimming badge. It was this cool little piece of... you know like you get in scouts. You embroider it, then you attach it to your swimsuit. That's how you would enter the swimming pool. As a kid, it was so fun to be able to go there without our parents. When we were young, we'd have to come with our parents. Our parents could only come when my father wasn't working.

One other important thing about our schools, it was different than the US. Even though it was an American school with American education, American teachers, American curriculum, our calendar system was different. School still started in September, but instead of going through the year from September to May and then having the whole summer off, because the summer was so intolerable. It would reach like 40 plus degrees Celsius. What they would do is we would have one month in between each trimester. We had three trimesters. The first trimester would be like September to November, then we'd have like a month off in December. You would go back to school in January, in the new year, January to March. Then you'd have April off. Then you'd go May, June, July. Then you'd have August off. It was three months on, one month off. This was a challenge when we wanted to go on long vacations. Our parents used to take us on long vacations. Sometimes, we'd leave in the summer since that's when it was the best time to leave. Sometimes we'd miss school. We'd leave in June, miss several weeks of school, so that we could extend our trips and have like a six-week vacation. I don't know how my dad had so much vacation. He would get a lot of vacation.

Oh, I know how he did it. He was a doctor, a GP, a family doctor. He would attend medical conferences in Florida, in Vermont, in Chicago. One time we were in Stowe, Vermont in the summer. He would get a paid trip to go to these medical conventions where he'd learn the latest medical data. We would be on vacation at these luxury hotels, having the time of our lives, we kids. That was some summers. Other summers we would go typically to either Lebanon where most of my relatives live, and we would visit them, or we would go to Jordan. From Jordan, we would take a tour and go around Europe. We went to countries like Romania, France, Italy, and Spain. We went all around Europe on these organized tours from Jordan.

FH: I was curious about the demographic breakdown then. Did you speak English generally with everyone, with your friends, or sometimes Arabic, too?

EJ: I spoke Arabic at home. We only spoke Arabic with our parents. That's their first language. They spoke English with an Arabic accent. We had American accents, and then we spoke to them in Arabic. School was, like I said, an American school, so everything was in English. However, as Arab students, we had two Arabic lessons a day. We would have one that was part of the school day, between the hours of seven and three. We had an Arabic class just for the Arabic students. That's where we learned grammar, literature. We did all Arabic materials. In addition to that, they had an optional extra-curricular Arabic where you would do lessons in history, geography, and other topics like that in Arabic. I did all those. I did the Arabic in the school day, and I'd come in early. School started at 8:00. I would come in at 7:00, to do one hour of Arabic extra-curriculars. Then go on with my day.

FH: Were there a lot of... Well, what was like the breakdown of demographics in terms of Arab students, American students, Europeans? How was the breakdown?

EJ: Ninety-nine percent Americans. My Arabic class, out of a class of two hundred students, let's say, there were about ten of us that were Arabic. To do the math, it was like five percent. So 95% Americans and then 5%. There were other nationalities. There would be people from India. But it was mostly Americans. Even if someone was Indian, they'd probably would be American, originally Indian, but an American citizen. They hired them mostly from the US at the time.

FH: And what was going on in Dhahran, with respect to oil production? Was it mainly administrative or processing, or extraction?

EJ: I believe most of the oil... We did have oil. There was oil in that entire eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The main refineries, from what I remember, were in areas called Ras Tanura, Abqaiq, and Najma maybe... I've forgotten all their names. When I was born, my parents lived in Abqaiq because that's where my dad worked, in the hospital there. However, they didn't have a maternity ward. They had to bring me to Dhahran, which was an hour away. We had to drive to Dhahran for my mom to give birth to me. I was born in Dhahran, but my parents at the time were living in Abqaiq. Eventually, we moved to Dhahran. Dhahran is the biggest one. It is the administrative center, it's where the president lived. That was the center, the headquarters of the entire company. I believe the refineries were in those other towns, those other compounds like Abqaiq and Ras Tanura, were the main refineries.

I think in Dhahran, we would drive by these huge tanks of oil. I don't know what they were doing with the oil there. We weren't really exposed to the oil industry, the history of it. We were just living there. My father wasn't in the oil industry. He wasn't an engineer or something, he was in the medical field. We didn't really have any exposure to what was going on with the whole oil industry.

FH: So they didn't teach you anything about it in school? It was just completely not really discussed within the whole place?

EJ: No. No. We had no idea about anything in the world except we had an entire year of US history. We had one year of US history and one year of world history. We knew... The only Arabic history I would learn was from that extra-curricular class that I took, optional. That's where I learned the history of my own people. Mainly, it was geared for the Americans. Everything was American, American-centered.

FH: So within your community...

EJ: I remember gas was so cheap for our cars. We had like two cars. I think my dad had a company car. Even though my mom didn't drive, but we had multiple cars for some reason. Gas was so cheap. I think it was cheaper than water. It was literally cents to the liter, talking like 7 cents a liter. Thirty-three halala. I remember because we would go and get gas. It was 33 halala.

The US dollar has always been the Saudi currency. You divide by 3.75. So, 33 halala, that's 33 cents of the Saudi currency, divided by 3.75, so it's less than 10 cents.

FH: Was water expensive then?

EJ: Water was desalinated. We didn't have fresh spring water. Water was desalinated. It was all... which was unusual for the Middle East. All our tap water was potable. Whether it was from the sink in the bathroom or the kitchen, it was potable water. My dad said it has a high percentage of chlorine, so we had really good teeth. That was our water. It had come fresh into our houses, fresh, drinkable water. We didn't have to pay for water, we didn't drink bottled water. Also, when I grew up in the seventies, we didn't have fresh milk. We didn't have fresh cheese. Everything was like astronaut food. We had Nido, powdered milk. That's what I actually grew up drinking, powdered milk. We didn't have fresh milk because they didn't have farms. They couldn't bring fresh milk from Europe. We would drink powdered milk. Cheese came in a can. It was Kraft. It was in a blue can. That's the cheese that you would get. Tang. We drank a lot of Tang, powdered juice.

FH: So this seems like there was a major deficiency in this utopia that they were trying to create, right? Because everything else was, they tried to make perfect, or not?

EJ: We had our own commissary, supermarkets. They imported a lot of stuff from the US, what they could import. If it was frozen, we'd get frozen waffles. It was weird. You wouldn't have the luxury of fresh foods at the time that I grew up. Now they have everything of course. Now they have farms and their own everything. When I grew up, everything was imported. We still had access to a lot of things. I grew up on things like Sloppy Joes. We had burgers and fries, Sloppy Joes, things like that.

FH: And in terms of appliances?

EJ: We had everything, we had dishwashers, TVs obviously. TV was black and white when I was growing up. Then, one day, it switched to color. We had our own TV channel. Aramco had its own TV channel. It would bring all the latest US sitcoms like, Different Strokes, Facts of Life, all the 30-minute sitcoms. But without ads. Ads were banned in Saudi Arabia until the nineties. When I grew up there were no ads. Everything was censored. You couldn't see couples kissing or anything. It was all censored. We had trash compactors for the trash. It would press down the trash. We had the latest stuff. We had carburetors. We had appliances. We had fridges, washing machines, dryers.

FH: Was this a big change for your parents? Did they live in different, like did they have different amenities before working for Aramco?

EJ: They grew up quite poor because they were born in Palestine and displaced in 1948. They grew up as refugees in Beirut, in a one-bedroom apartment with their entire family, with like six kids. They grew up very poor in Lebanon, but my father got a scholarship from the UNRWA. They actually sponsored my father, and that's how he was able to get a BS in biology. He got his MD from the American University of Beirut. Prior to that, they were very poor. They didn't have any of these luxuries. So when they came to Aramco, to Saudi Arabia, of course Saudi Arabia is very ugly as a country. The eastern province is just desert, very barren, ugly. Lebanon is beautiful, it has beaches, greenery, cedar trees. It has mountains and skiing. They have everything. To go from there to a desert with nothing, no life whatsoever, except in the compounds. They grew their own trees there. We had gardens in our backyards. The general topography of the country in that area was just desert. Just sand.

FH: It was just sand? No desalination?

EJ: No, that's just naturally how it is. Like Saudi Arabia has the Rub' al Khali, which is the empty quarter. It has no life. It's so odd. Nothing grows there, nothing lives there, even so hot.

FH: No, I mean for the plants. The plants were growing from the desalination?

EJ: We would water our gardens, obviously. We had lush gardens and trees. We had a palm tree in our backyard. There was a lot of water usage. The golf course. They had a golf course, and they didn't use grass for the golf course. They used oil. They would mix oil and sand. It was this dark brown golf course.

FH: That sounds very bad.

EJ: I know. That's how. I never played golf. When we came to the US and we saw how beautiful golf courses were, we were like, wow, this is what they looked like.

FH: So that was one way which you saw the oil, right?

EJ: That's pretty much the only way. The sand wouldn't blow, otherwise they would have just left it as sand. It would blow in the wind. The oil sand or whatever they would add to it would make it stick and stay. We also had access to a beach. Even though Dhahran was not on the beach, Ras Tanura was on the beach. Abqaiq was close. Dhahran was more inland. We had our own private beach that we had access to. And, on top of that, there was this even more upscale area of the beach. If you owned boats, it was called the Yacht Club. If you owned a boat you had access to this even nicer beach that had a snack bar. It was so cool. My dad really liked fishing. He bought a boat, and we always used to go to the Yacht Club. That's where we spent a lot of our free time on weekends.

We spent a lot of our weekends going to the beach.

We had a lot of family members in the area. There were a lot of family visits.

FH: Were they all working for Aramco?

EJ: No. We had one aunt, my aunt, my mom's sister, and her husband. Her husband worked for Aramco. They were our closest relatives. My mom had cousins that also worked there. Most of our relatives lived outside of the compounds. We would visit them for weekends.

FH: Were they living in Dammam or somewhere else?

EJ: Al Khobar. A lot of them lived in Al Khobar. Some lived in Dammam. But there were a few in Al Khobar.

FH: One thing I was really interested in knowing about is the contrast between life in other communities versus in the compounds. Because Saudi Arabia was growing. The economy was growing so fast because of Aramco. Was that transferred outside of the compound to elsewhere?

EJ: Remember, our compound had nothing except houses, recreation, and schools. It didn't have retail. It didn't have stores other than the commissary where we bought our groceries. It didn't have stores to buy clothes, to buy anything. We would have to go to the town. If you wanted to go to a restaurant, we had our own dining hall and snack bar in the compound. But if you wanted to go and try different things, to answer your question, because of this large community of Americans living in the area, some of the stores and retailers were catered for them. There were like fast food restaurants. When they started coming in and becoming popular, we didn't have McDonalds, but we'd have some burger, but I forgot the name of it. There was a go-to place for burgers. Or even if you wanted Middle Eastern food, there were tons of like Lebanese kind of restaurants. It was kind of fun to go into the town. Of Al Khobar, where we would have, that's where you do your shopping, eating out, and stuff like that.

FH: What was Dammam like? Was it more modern then?

EJ: In the eastern province, it's mostly oil. But there was farming. I think palm trees. In Al Hasa, which had palm trees. I think that's what their industry was there. Then, Riyadh was the capital, and then Jeddah had Mecca. They had the tourists, the pilgrimage, coming in through Jeddah to Mecca, so that was driving the economy there. But in the eastern province, it was mostly oil.

FH: So before oil came in, did you ever talk to anyone who had been there before the oil had moved in?

EJ: No, because there were hardly any people living in that region before the oil. It was, before Saudi Arabia was created as a country, in I think 1930 something. I don't know the exact year. But before that, it was just all these tribes living. They lived in the desert. It wasn't until oil brought the whole country together. Every province was different. You had the eastern province,

the western province, the southern provinces close to the border of Yemen. Each was very distinct and different.

FH: So only Al Khobar and Dammam, what were they like before the oil came in? Were they even existing then?

EJ: Good question. I'm sure they did, but I don't know the history of what was there before.

FH: I was also curious about what you said about the censorship and the rules which were set in the compound. Were those set by the Saudi Arabian government, or Aramco directly?

EJ: I think a combination of the two. For example, I think it was the government that didn't want teenagers, American teenagers, around because they knew they would be troublemakers. That's why they didn't allow us to do our high school there. They would ship us off to boarding schools to do our high school. I think that was prescribed by the Saudi government. Within the compounds, I think they created their own rules. Like I said, women could drive. That wasn't allowed outside of the compound, but in the compound, they were allowed to drive. We had cinemas. There were no cinemas outside the compounds. We had speed limits. There were no speed limits outside of the compounds. They had some kind of autonomy to create their own rules within the compound. Remember everybody was an employee for the company. It was not like a real city like in North America. You live in a city and you work for whoever you want. There they're living and working for the same company. You're kind of being watched. They're watching what you're doing. It was a different kind of mindset.

FH: So was that like a tangible feeling that people were being watched?

EJ: Not in our day-to-day lives. Of course, some people would get into problems. To give you an example, one time I was learning how to drive stick shift. If you've ever driven stick shift you have to manage between the gas pedal and the brakes. I wasn't doing it right, so the car kept skidding. I was doing it close to my neighborhood. All of a sudden this security guy comes and asks me where my license is. I was still too young to have a license. I told him I'm still learning how to drive. I did have a license, but I was about to go to college. I had a learner's permit. He asked me what are you doing? I said I'm learning how to drive stick shift. He said, and that's why I was. He thought I was drag racing, racing around and just skidding, like a crazy teenager. But I was actually learning how to drive. He didn't believe my story. Why am I learning how to drive, but I already have a learner's permit? I've learned how to drive. He wouldn't believe me.

The next day they had to call in my dad because I'm a minor to punish me. It turned out that the guy who complained called security and said, there's this kid skidding outside my door, outside my house, and I'm trying to sleep. We did it late at night. It turned out that the guy who complained was a doctor, and my dad was his boss. He was so embarrassed that he got me in trouble. He got his boss's son in trouble. I truly was trying to learn how to drive. I was a pretty

good kid. They withdrew the ticket. Like I said, there were strict rules. We had speed bumps, there was safety. All that would have been administered by the actual company.

FH: I see. So that guard was working for the company too?

EJ: Exactly. We had our own security. It was a gated community. I forgot to mention at the beginning. This area that we lived in was all gated. There were fences around it all. It was huge. I don't know the acreage. Thirty thousand people, I think, lived in there. We had a fence. It was all fenced in, so nobody could come in from the outside. You had to go through a gate. If you came through the gate you would have to have a sticker on your car so that they know that you work for the company. If you had a visitor, they had to park and sign in. They would call you and say, you have a visitor, will you allow them in? It was very strict in terms of coming in. And same with our recreation centers. You needed an ID, an Aramco ID, in order to get into their recreation centers. Even a visitor that came to the compound to visit someone, if they lived outside, they could not access the recreation facilities. They were only open to the residents, the employees, and their families.

FH: I see.

FH: I just have a couple of final questions. One is, when was the last time you went back, and what were the most striking changes that occurred in Dhahran and overall Saudi Arabia during your time there?

EJ: My parents retired. My dad retired at the age of 60. That would have been the year 2000. By then I was already working. I started working in Saudi Arabia in 1993. I used to visit them during my time off. When they left, I stopped going there. The last time I went there would have been in 1999. That's when I came to Canada also. That's when they retired.

FH: Well, what were... What were the changes?

EJ: It didn't change much during the nineties, during the time that I was there. It was getting more, they called it Saudization. They were trying to replace American employees with Saudi employees. I forgot to mention when my dad joined the company, in the late sixties, it was an American company. It was like a conglomerate of Standard Oil, Dutch Oil, Shell Oil. It was a bunch of American oil companies that started Aramco. Then in 1983, the Saudi government bought it out. It became a Saudi government-owned company. Then it went public—I forgot—like ten years ago. Now you can buy shares in the company. It's one of the biggest companies, not just oil, it's one of the biggest companies in the world. It's up there with Amazon and Walmart in terms of billions and billions of dollars of revenue.

During my time, it didn't change much. Other than expanding. During my childhood it was expanding. They grew an entire, they added a whole other section to the compounds. But since

then, it hasn't changed much other than the demographics of the city. Now there are much more Saudis that live there. For example, in my class there were like one or two Saudi students. At one point, they did not allow them to study there anymore. No Saudis could study in Aramco. They had to go to Saudi schools.

FH: So, the Saudization picked up in the eighties?

EJ: Saudization was, correct, for the employees.

EJ: But the school remained, like I said, mainly catered for Americans. In the summer, when the Saudi students were off of school from their Saudi schools, and we were off from our school, they allowed Saudis to come to our school to learn English. But those schools were still owned...

Saudis either went to private schools or public schools, but they were in Arabic. The whole curriculum would be in Arabic. They had religion and Arabic. Even if a Saudi worked for Aramco, they could not put their children in Aramco schools, which was weird.

But I don't know if that's the same situation today.

FH: So, thank you again for all these points. These were basically all the stuff I wanted to know, and more. I just wanted to ask: are there any other memorable or important things you want to share given the interview's context?

EJ: Well I should mention, coming back to energy, there was a lot of water usage from desalination. I don't know how bad for the environment desalination is. I have no idea. I don't know the process. But a lot of water had to be desalinated to provide for all of these compounds. Not just for our homes, but for our gardens, the parks. There were parks with grass. That's a lot of water consumption. All the houses were air conditioned. There was a lot of energy used to cool the houses for most of the year. In the winter it actually got quite cold because it's a desert environment. Sometimes it would get too cold in the winter. Our AC system switched to heat in the winter.

They were dual. I'm sure that used a lot of energy as well. Like I said, we had a lot of cars, and gas was very cheap. Those were the things that I remember.

FH: You had two cars? You said you had a company one and a personal one?

EJ: Most of the time we had two cars, personal. At one point, my dad had a company car in addition to the two personal cars.

FH: And was that because he was making house calls, if he was a GP, or was he in the hospital most of the time?

EJ: No, he was an outpatient. I believe he dealt with outpatients, so no house calls. He just had two. I don't know why he had two cars. He'd have like an older one, and a newer one. He had a hobby. Like, he took care of his cars like he took care of patients. He would understand every mechanical part of a car and he would sometimes do the oil changes and all the maintenance of the cars. We had a 1966 Buick Electra. It was a really old car, but he kept it in really good shape for many years. Finally, he sold it to a car collector.

FH: Really? What were your parents' names?

EJ: My dad's name was Adnan, same last name. And my mom was Salwa.

FH: I see. And you, how many siblings do you have again? You have two or three?

EJ: There's four boys. I'm number two. They had four boys and then a girl. My sister is the youngest. So five altogether.

FH: That's very interesting. This is a very unique part of history, where you have a company town.

EJ: I'm very grateful. Like I said, we had a very solid education. It was a very sheltered environment. That's the best way I would describe it. We didn't see any poverty, we didn't see anyone with disabilities until we traveled. When we traveled we saw all sorts of things. That's how we came to understand the world. But within Aramco you're just living amongst employees of a company. It's really not a natural environment.

FH: And was Deerfield a shock?

EJ: Deerfield was a whole other experience. No, it wasn't too much, because I was mentally prepared for it. We knew it was coming. We knew life in Aramco ended at grade nine, and then you get shipped off. We had many years to prepare mentally for it. Once we got there, you just kind of adapted. The environment at Deerfield was great as well. Everything was taken care of, including our laundry. We would put our clothes in a laundry bag, and then they would come back washed and cleaned. It was very structured. Your day was structured from the minute you woke up until curfew at night. That really instilled a lot of discipline. It helped shape who I am because it taught us discipline. It taught us to be not just academically focused, but we had to take sports. We had opportunities for extracurricular activities, for working, for volunteering.

We also had those things in Aramco, too, by the way. I forgot to mention that. I was part of the AV club in Aramco. Then we had yearbook clubs. It was just like a typical American school. So it wasn't much of a shock to get to Deerfield. It was just a continuation. As you're getting older, you get more exposure to different things. But very similar.

FH: Well thank you very much again. I really appreciate it.

EJ: You're very welcome. Nice talking to you.

[End of Transcript]