

sometimes feels. He explains that students from the Middle East can feel like they need to conform to more liberal standards, especially on a campus where premarital sex is the norm and the full range of sexualities is openly discussed.

Abusaq says he tries to be honest about the realities of his more conservative background. “We need to represent our culture as it is,” he says. “We are not that open-minded.”

As for the Al-jadanis, they face a more domestic challenge — taking care of triplets. “We have come away from our family, so we have a lot of responsibility,” Asma Al-jadani says. She adds that when she was pregnant, her family encouraged her to come home to have the babies, but she decided against that because of the better health care in the U.S.

After the babies were born, both Adel and Asma Al-jadani went back to school the next term, so they found a nanny on Craigslist who was able to help them. But at the beginning of spring term, they learned the nanny would no longer be available. That’s when Adel Al-jadani decided to stay home with the babies. “He is a good father,” Asma Al-jadani says.

Abusaq says he only had one negative experience in Eugene, not too long after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. “I was walking beside the Willamette River here,” he says. “Someone on a bike comes by and says, ‘Boston,’ and then he leaves us.”

That experience did not diminish his enthusiasm for the area. “You can say I fell in love with Oregon,” he says. “It’s not hard like the East Coast ... like the South.” Abusaq explains he’s heard stories from friends who live elsewhere. “They really face some racist things,” he says.

Hamide, who has lived in Eugene for more than 40 years, has seen quite a few changes. “I remember when I came here, it was so beautiful,” he says, recalling how open people were, how they accepted him without qualms, how his neighbors used to come check on him. “I miss that innocence.

“Now it’s been tainted by the fears that the terrorists are going to come get us,” he says.

But the Eugene he loves is still there, he says, even after all these years. “I tried to leave,” he says. “I went to California. It just reeled me back. I love it here. I’ve been here longer than a lot of folks in Eugene.”

*‘I think in our country now,
everybody likes to complete their education.’*

— ASMA AL-JADANI, UO STUDENT

Perception and Reality

America is a dangerous, violent and racist place — if you just watch the news or movies. For Hadis Hadipour, a masters student in architecture at the UO, that is all she had seen, at least before she left Iran to study in Oregon.

Hadipour, who lives in Corvallis with her husband, says they were particularly concerned about the widespread gun ownership in the U.S. “It was kind of frightening for us,” she says. “It was a big issue.”

But she was pleasantly surprised when she came to Oregon. “Fortunately, I haven’t had any problems here,” she says. “Fortunately, people in Eugene, in Corvallis, are well-informed.”

Gun violence is relatively low in Oregon, and the number of hate crimes is low as well — 52 hate crimes of all types were reported in 2012, according to the FBI. But they do happen. A mosque in Corvallis was firebombed in 2010, an incident which occurred in response to an FBI sting operation that exposed, possibly through entrapment, a Muslim student’s plans to detonate a bomb in Portland at a Christmas-tree lighting ceremony.

Ebb and Flow

The trend of students from the Middle East is driven, in part, by policy decisions made by foreign governments, especially the King Abdullah Scholarship administered by the Saudi government.

Wigham says that when she first started at AEI in 1997, the student population was around 5 percent Middle Eastern. At one point, she recalls, the school saw an increase in its proportion of Kuwaiti students — until the Kuwaiti government changed its English proficiency requirements, bringing AEI’s enrollment of Kuwaiti students back down. “That’s international education,” she says. “You have a government decision. Boom.”

The latest trend of rising Saudi enrollment began in 2005, when the Saudi government launched the King Abdullah Scholarship, which pays educational expenses for Saudi students at select schools in the U.S. “When the scholarship opened up, we started getting students from lots of different parts of Saudi Arabia,” Wigham says. “We now have a variety of social classes.”

According to a 2014 paper in the *Open Journal of*



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

WEDAD AL-LAHJI

Social Sciences, Oregon has the tenth-highest number of Saudi Arabian students in the country. The paper says that not all colleges are eligible for the scholarship program, and schools are selected based on recommendations from specialized committees in Saudi Arabia.

Wigham says that, at first, the students were exclusively male and pursuing engineering degrees — the idea being they could go home and help build Saudi Arabia’s developing infrastructure. Now students study a variety of disciplines — everything from linguistics to special education.

And women can participate in the scholarship program, as long as they have a male sponsor (as is the norm back home, women are expected to have a male chaperone).

But Wigham wonders how long the current trend will last. “It depends on the government in place and their decisions,” she says. The late King Abdullah made the original scholarship deal with President George W. Bush a few years after 9/11, in part as a diplomatic gesture.

Today, the world is different — for example, King Abdullah’s successor — King Salman — recently backed out of a high profile visit to the U.S.

Student demographics can also depend on fluctuations in the global economy and changes in the price of a key commodity that the economy of Saudi Arabia depends on heavily. “What worries me is the price of oil,” Wigham says. “Are they going to be able to send their students to a country where the cost of education is absolutely ridiculous?”

An Education

Most students eventually return home after earning their degrees. That, after all, is the main motivation: to send students abroad for an education and then bring them back to contribute at home.

For Adel and Asma Al-jadani, there’s still a lot of work to do. Initially, they had decided to go to a school in New York next year, where Asma would be able to earn a masters degree in accounting and Adel could continue his studies in business administration.

But recently the Saudi government, without warning, removed that school from the list of schools approved for the King Abdullah scholarship.

It will be a long road. The Al-jadanis still have years of balancing their studies with obligations to friends, relatives and the Saudi government, all while raising triplets far from home.

They say they will continue looking until they find a school that is a good fit. “They encourage everybody — women and men — to complete their education,” Asma Al-jadani says about her family back home. “I think in our country now, everybody likes to complete their education.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: The author’s partner works at the American English Institute at the UO.



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ABDULMOHSIN ABUSAQ