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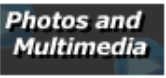
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- Racine
- Editorials
- Crossroads
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- Obituaries
- Letter to Editor
- Weather
- National Wire
- State Wire

Special Features



From the Archives



Weblogs

Nahal Toosi: Over There, Over Here

[Nahal Toosi](#), who covers immigration, cultural and international issues for the Journal Sentinel, explores the Milwaukee area's diversity and its connections to the world. [Print this weblog.](#)

THURSDAY, June 16, 2005, 10:47 a.m.

Iraqi labor leader visit

Two Iraqis who are pushing for the rights of workers in their homeland will be in Milwaukee next Monday.

They plan to discuss topics such as free trade policy, privatization and attacks on workers' rights. While the two - Falah Alwan and Amjad Ali Aljawhry - want a secular, democratic Iraq, they also believe U.S. and British forces should leave the country.

The event is set for 7 p.m. at the Teamsters Local 200 Hall, 6200 W. Bluemound Road. For more info, check out [this site](#).

According to a press release:

Falah Alwan is a 42-year-old trained engineer who refused to sign a Saddam loyalty pledge and was subsequently barred from practicing his trade. He was an underground union organizer in factories and the construction trades during the Saddam's regime after the first Gulf War. After Saddam fell, he began working with the Union of the Unemployed and then founded the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq in December of 2003. Falah has traveled widely to build support for union rights in Iraq.

Amjad Ali Aljawhry was born in Baghdad in 1966. He earned a bachelor's degree in biology at Mosul University in 1989. Because of his political views, and organizing among sewing workers, he was blacklisted by the regime and was unable to find employment in any state enterprise. With his family, he fled to Turkey in 1995 and was active among Iraqi refugees there. Since 1996 he has lived in Toronto, Canada where he has spoken widely on Iraqi issues and has been active in the anti-sanctions and anti-war movements. He was invited to deliver lectures and hold conferences in Japan, France, United States,

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and Iraq regarding the labor movement before and after the US led war on Iraq. He is currently the FWCUI's official representative in North America. [N](#)

WEDNESDAY, June 15, 2005, 10:31 a.m.

Welcome to America

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has produced a "landmark publication" that "represents the first time in recent history that the federal government has provided orientation materials for new permanent residents."

Here it is: [the guide](#).

I asked Marilu Cabrera, a USCIS spokeswoman, why it took so long to publish an orientation guide.

"We're concentrating on the fact that we did do it and that it is a positive step forward," she said. "The (now defunct) INS had a naturalization guide, but that was simply focusing on naturalization, how to become a citizen, how to study for a test, but not as all encompassing as this new immigrant guide. It's definitely more comprehensive."

The guide talks about everything from the role of public libraries to avoiding identity theft. It also comes in multiple languages. [N](#)

TUESDAY, June 14, 2005, 10:44 a.m.

Tagalog speakers? Where?

The Modern Language Association - stay with me here - has a very interesting site that allows people to find out how many residents speak a particular language in a certain area. Even down to the zip code.

Check out [the MLA language map links](#)

Click on "Find out more detailed information" to learn about your neighborhood. There are more Tagalog, Arabic and Urdu speakers in Wisconsin than you might think. [N](#)

MONDAY, June 13, 2005, 4:09 p.m.

Saudi information head's thoughts on women, Wahhabism, terrorism, and who's headed to hell ...

Anyone who reads the U.S. State Department's report on human rights in Saudi Arabia can be forgiven for wincing.

According to the most recent report: Freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia, and all citizens are officially Muslims; women are severely restricted from participating in the sex-segregated society - they can't drive, they can't travel without a male relative's permission, and they are discriminated against in certain segments of the workforce; punishments for breaking the law - based on the state's interpretation of the Islamic law of Sharia - include flogging,

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amputation, and beheading.

Not least because of its vast oil reserves, Saudi Arabia is a close ally of the United States. But especially since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 - 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis - the country has been, through representatives and media events, trying to better explain and justify the dynamics of its society. Of particular sensitivity is the very strict form of Islam sanctioned by the state, known to outsiders as Wahhabism.

On Monday, Nail Al-Jubeir, director of the information office of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, was in Milwaukee. During a luncheon at the Hyatt Regency, Al-Jubeir told a roomful of people that the Saudis were committed to stopping terrorism and were trying to increasingly engage their populace, including eventually women, in governance (the country recently held municipal elections, open only to men). He stressed that Saudis prefer gradual to abrupt change. Perhaps more importantly than anything, there actually exists debate about social and legal matters in Saudi Arabia, he insisted.

I interviewed Al-Jubeir after the luncheon. The following is an edited version of the Q&A.

Q. You keep talking about evolutionary change in your society. In respect to the rights of women, when will Saudi women have full legal and social equality with the men in your society?

A. Legal rights are the rights enshrined in the Qur'an in terms of rights and these rights are there. The question that's in some cases preventing them has to do with social issues ... Islamic law from the beginning gave women rights that in the West they had to fight for. The right to own property (for example). These rights are theirs, until today, are theirs... Now when she marries a husband who is trying to swindle her out of it, that's a different issue. But there are certain rights that they have, and the government and the religious establishment are stepping up and saying look guys we have issues we have to deal with. One issue is the right of marriage. A woman has a right to reject any suitor she wants. The highest religious authority issued a ruling just a few weeks ago, basically telling look guys, these are the rights, you cannot force your daughter into marriage if she doesn't want it. Period. You cannot. The law says she has to be consulted. The question is how do you do that? Do you have to ask her directly? Through mediation? It's like the letter of the law vs. the spirit of the law. And there are discussions in Saudi Arabia about this. Have we gotten to the point? No, we've got a long way to go on issues. I've got three sisters, I want (for) them a better life...

Q. In my lifetime?

A. I hope so, I hope so. I mean, things are changing gradually. When you look at women's rights in Saudi Arabia, what exactly are we looking at? Are we looking about health care, are we looking about education, are we looking about economic opportunity? ... They're getting there. Have we gotten there? No. Are you looking at the issue of driving, which everybody points out? Those are issues most people

in Saudi Arabia might not care about. Even the women might say we've got bigger issues to deal with... now driving, fine, we want to deal with this, but because it's been so popular, so much in the headlines all over the world, it became the dividing line... But there are issues. We'd love to get women to drive tomorrow. Think about it: \$4 billion a year is spent on drivers that's spent outside the country. (The women's drivers are often imported foreign workers).

Q. You obviously have traveled to both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia... Do you ever feel morally conflicted being in a situation like this, surrounded by women, shaking women's hands - couldn't you go to jail for that in Saudi Arabia?

A. No, no, no, you don't. Saudi Arabia was never about conservatives. The conservative issue that came to Saudi Arabia started emerging in the 80s... Conservatism went through the Arab and Muslim world in the 80s with the rise of Khomeini with the war in Afghanistan... We've got, what, 50,000 Americans living in Saudi Arabia, 30,000 Brits, foreigners from every country... So you have the exposure. People in Saudi Arabia travel to Lebanon, travel to Egypt... People are willing to accept certain attitudes outside the country but not inside the country. If you ask people in Saudi Arabia who go outside and stay on the beaches and enjoy the life and say 'Okay, we've got gorgeous beaches... would you like to have that lifestyle and open up that lifestyle to tourists here'? ... They say 'No, no, no, because it's the Holy Land, we don't.' It's that double standard. People tend to be much more conservative in their own views. The concept (is) that what happens outside Saudi Arabia stays there.

Q. You said during your speech that you hope in the next round of elections women can vote?

A. The women will vote - there's talk of women voting in the next round of elections. The reason they did not do it this year was an issue of a technical concern. An overwhelming majority of Saudi women do not have photo IDs. They have rights to get photo IDs but a large number of them just didn't have them. Trying to get them to get the photo IDs and get to register at the same time and then you have to have segregated polling stations because we believe our society will not accept this mix... The thing with the polling with the women, just technically we couldn't run it. But there's immediate talks, serious talks, that in the next round of elections (4 years from now) they will vote.

Q. Wahhabi doctrine preaches a lot against "infidels," even the Shia Muslims, religious minorities, things like that, we're all going to hell, apparently. Do you think, do you personally think that me, or most of the people in this room, or President Bush, that we are going to go to hell because we are not Muslims of your ...

A. No, no, absolutely not. I'll tell you why. What you have is Shaykh Abd al Wahhab's interpretation, and you've got the extremist version of taking what he said. And there is a big discussion in Saudi Arabia, one of the biggest arguments is you cannot tell somebody who is going and who is not going to hell. That is a decision for God, not for

you. Our senior religious establishment came very forcefully on calling people infidels - who are you to call somebody an infidel? It is not you to determine who is an infidel or not... In extremist views, everybody is an infidel who does not believe in their corrupt version of what it is. Because years ago, we didn't have the violence. If you talked to people who lived in Saudi Arabia in the 60s and 70s and 80s, there was no violence. You didn't hear about crimes, you didn't hear about ... foreigners being victimized. That was unheard of until the 90s when it started coming in ... Why? It's because these extremists pick up the idea and think OK, we'll justify our behavior, this is what you do, these are the evil guys, this is the people we're going to go after... Most of these guys don't have the educational basis...

Q. But you acknowledge though there are many extremists within your own community, your own religious community, your own sanctioned...

A. Absolutely, absolutely, we know that and we're going after them. We're going after those who preach violence, who preach hate. We're going after those and we've challenged them in a sense by getting them involved with some of the senior scholars who sit there and discuss issues. Part of the issue is meeting them and engaging them ... Some of the engagements are happening on the Internet where these guys are masked behind, on different sides. You don't know who they are. You're discussing the interpretations of Islam. When we catch some of these (al) Qaida or bin Laden sympathizers or extremist sympathizers in Saudi Arabia, the first thing you do is you don't throw them in jail and throw away the key. You sit with them and you start discussions with them figuring out what led them to the following. ☐

MONDAY, June 13, 2005, 10:48 a.m.

About me

Hello Folks,


A quick intro: I'm a 20-something who grew up in Texas and moved to Milwaukee in 2000 for a reporting position at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

I've covered everything from suburban villages to the war in Iraq to Wisconsin's universities. Just recently I started a new "beat" that will focus on immigration and Milwaukee's connections to the rest of the planet.



I hope to use this blog to publish some information that might not make it to the print edition of the Journal Sentinel. I also want to link to a lot of other Web sites with interesting stuff.

More than anything, I want readers to give me their suggestions, story ideas, tips and feedback. I want this blog to be interactive, so don't be shy, but please be civil - I might post your comments, unless you tell me otherwise.

Stay in touch.

Nahal 

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