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Interview Bassim Alim

A Saudi attorney, **Bassim Alim** was among a prominent group of Saudis who in early 2004 petitioned the royal family for reforms, including constitutional changes and a larger role for women. He discusses why young Saudis today are attracted to extremism and why political change is the strongest weapon for combating radical Islamists. "Those extremists who would further confuse society, would be simply exposed for what they are." As for the prospects for change, he says, "... reform is yet being debated by the top people in the ruling family. I would say that some of them are perhaps pushing for some kind of reform; others are resisting it. But nothing concrete is going to be done until we have a consensus." This interview was conducted by producer Martin Smith on Dec. 6, 2004 in Jeddah.

colleagues and their friends -- that whole era was an era of openness. To them, it was the lifestyle; it was, as they say in the States, the "in" thing. ... And when they left the country to [go to] Egypt or to Lebanon or to anywhere in the world, they wore normal Western-style dress.

But then I saw that this phase went out, and there was a shift, a change. ... It came from many different facets. It depended on who affected your way of thinking, who was influencing you. For instance, most of the religious influence I received was from foreign ideologues and foreign books and foreign input. I was not tied to a certain set of religious edict[s]. Some others were only getting information from Saudi Arabia, for instance, or from a certain part of Saudi Arabia. So they were influenced by that certain set of philosophies and thoughts. ...

With the openness of our society, with people being able to travel outside, with the students going to the States and to Europe, they started getting into contact with others. I would have a Syrian friend, an Egyptian friend, a Jordanian friend, a Palestinian friend, a Moroccan friend, rather than sitting in a classroom with all 40 pupils being Saudis. And this is where you get this interaction, and this is where you get the understanding that life is bigger ... than our own simple country called Saudi Arabia.

Can you tell us anything about the kind of openness that existed in Saudi Arabia in the '70s?

Yes. There was indeed an openness. But I don't think it was all of Saudi Arabia; I think it was mainly the western region. Most of the embassies were here. Most of the expatriates were here. And there was an overall culture of openness, which was overtaken by the religious movement. ...

Why was there this openness? And then what happened to trigger the religious revival?

Well, you have to understand the '60s and '70s. And even when I go back and I see pictures of my aunts and my parents and their



"I want transparency. I want accountability. I want freedom of association, freedom of press. Many things. I hope I can see it in my lifetime, but I don't know."

And then there was a change. What happened beginning in the late '70s?

There were actually two different changes, I would say. There was a normal graduation of people becoming more and more religious. The religious movement did take place, but if you are alluding to the fact that there was an abrupt change by a governmental policy because of the 1979 attack on the Great Mosque, al-Haram, yes, there was. That actually served right into the hands of what we today would term more of a demagogic movement or a one-way stream ideologue movement. But we always have to understand that the normal mainstream movement was not affected by that. It was moving all along in simple, systematic phases. ...

What was the government trying to accomplish?

Simply trying to appease the extreme religious movement and reverting back to the basics of what they want. For instance, at the time, the television in Saudi Arabia had women [singing] songs and music. After [1979], there were no women allowed to sing songs on TV. ... I'm not condoning it, nor am I condemning it, but I'm telling you the effects of what took place. And this played right into the hands of [the] religious extremists. ...

[Are you saying that after 1979, the government contributed to the increasingly powerful religious movement?]

The government at the time was very reactionary. They tried to appease them. That incident shook the very foundation of the government. For the first time, somebody else came up and told the government: "We are more religious than you. We are holding the banner of religion high up, and you are not."

And the government said: "No, no, no, no, no. I came here as a religious government. I came here on a religious mandate. And I'm going to show you that." It was an appeasement of that certain movement, and it played right into their hands. They couldn't do anything better. And this is how it developed.

In 1979 Juhayman al-Utaybi was executed for seizing the Great Mosque at Mecca. People have said to me, "Juhayman lost his head, but he actually won the battle" in the sense that the appeasement basically played right into the hands of the radicals.

It's possible. I would say for a while, yes. You know, the sad thing is that the government was not able to differentiate between different religious movements in the country. There are [different] religious movements in the country, not all with the same mind-set of Juhayman and his followers. But unfortunately, there was no differentiation.

The ulama, for a very long time, had ultimate power on any religious movement. Although they were not Juhayman-like in their political thinking, they were very close to his understanding in terms of the religious edicts and religious rulings.

The next real opening you experience in the country is after the Gulf War. And why is that?

Let me step back and say something very important. For you as a Westerner, you look at the '60s and '70s as being a period of open society. It was not the case. It was a period of a society open in their lifestyle, an open lifestyle society, but politically, it was a very harsh period. There were several coup attempts. There were lots of political prisoners. And at the time, we had the Yemeni war [over] problems with [Egyptian president Gamal] Abdel Nasser. So politically, it wasn't a period of openness; it was just the issue of lifestyle. People were more prone to being Western in their outlook than being religiously oriented in their outlook.

The second so-called opening was not an opening of the same kind of vista. People were very religious. It was their religious fervor and movement that asked the government to reform and changes. And this time, those people are more sophisticated. [From] '79 until the Gulf War, they became more sophisticated. ... They came back with different ideas. They started calling for things that are more in line with what we call a civil institution in our society. They wanted more freedom, more responsibility; they wanted [their] votes to be counted; they wanted transparency -- these kind of issues.

Why at that time?

It was a matter of an opportunity. The government started by approaching the people. It was a time

-- a grave period, you know -- when everybody was shocked with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Many of them thought that he's not going to stop at the borders of Kuwait; he would simply be continuing. The government was in a deep sense of shock, and they had to quickly approach their people: "We are promising this; we are promising that; we will do this after the war. Just give us some time. We need your support now."

And people said, "All right. You need our support, but these are our demands. This is what we believe should happen. And by the way, this all happened because of your shortcomings."

And there was sort of one-to-one dialogue. It was not institutionalized. The crown prince at the time and the king and the rest of the princes met with people and with groups of people. And there was this sort of thing going on until the war ended.

And at the same time that there are these progressive reformers asking for a civil society, civil institutions, there is a radical Islamic awakening movement taking place, gaining some steam. I mean, do people such as [the radical cleric] Salman al-Auda and others --

You in the West seem to always confuse the issue of progressive reformation in our country with the religious fanatical movement. We always put this label on anyone we don't like, as being religiously fanatic, all right? I might not agree with Salman al-Auda on many of his religious edicts, but he has the right to these edicts. Salman al-Auda is not simply a religious fanatic. He's a person with insight, and he's a person who is calling for a more reformed society based upon an Islamic foundation.

These people represent the fanatic movement that want to carry arms and destroy everything. These people are religious, but they want reformation, and they want to participate in the democratization of the country. These people are very liberal, and they want the Western, laissez-faire society. [But] now every person [who] calls for --

What is the reaction inside Saudi Arabia after 9/11?

... Let me put it this way: I might hate someone's guts, but I will not condone his murder. If by chance he was hit by a bus and passed away, I wouldn't cry for him, you see? And this is the kind of feeling that took place in a segment of the society [regarding the attacks of Sept. 11]. Another segment was extremely worried person[ally] because of their own interests in America and Europe. The government was, of course, dramatically worried because of the participation of the Saudis in that attack.

[Saudi] society is just like any other society. You have different people, from the very extreme to the very liberal. But after a while you find that everything sort of faded away, and everyone in society came together in a common anger against the United States. Whether it's right, whether it's wrong, the reaction of the U.S. made it easy for everyone to have a common view that the U.S. is just looking for an excuse. The U.S. is a country of a racist regime, and they are not fair with us.

I [knew] somebody who spent half the year living in the States, who has a summer home there and another home somewhere in a ski resort. He loved going there every two or three weeks. I was shocked when I heard him -- and he's one of my clients -- saying, "I'm not going there anymore." It's that dramatic.

So there are people that rejoice in this. I mean, rejoice [is] perhaps too strong, but [they] are not unhappy about what has happened. Why is there this anger [toward] America?

Let me say, it's not that they're not unhappy. They're not; it doesn't concern them. America is king everywhere. [America] is giving us a hard time everywhere. So if this happened to America, we will not stand up and say [that] we are the defenders of America and this should not happen. We know it should not happen, but they're not going to cry over it. It's this kind of feeling that took place amongst a certain segment of society at the beginning.

[At] this stage, many segments of society are actually quite entrenched in being opposed to America as an idea. They are dismayed; they are disillusioned by America. We thought that you really meant what you said in your constitution, all these issues of freedom and rights and carrying the banner of human rights, and the Wilsonian doctrine -- it all went out the window because of 3,000 people?

It's a significant number, but there are hundreds of thousands who are dying all over [because of] this, hundreds of thousands. Look how many died in Palestine, in Iraq, for all these years when Saddam Hussein was ruling Iraq -- [who], by the way, was supported by America -- and you didn't shed a tear. You only shed tears when it starts affecting your own policies, your own interests. In the Arab world, that's not right. You don't look at your interests alone. If you claim something, you have to be fair. It has to be an equal ruling for you and for me.

What are the consequences politically, socially, inside the kingdom of [the attacks of] 9/11?

...

I think there was a sense from the West and from America telling us, and telling everybody else in the area: "You've got to reform. This [happened] because [of] a lack of reformation. This is because [of] the austere philosophy that you have." And yes, the governments in the area started this so-called preparation for reformation, OK?

And then the States invaded Iraq, and people were extremely worried that after Iraq was finished and done with, the United States would turn its head and start targeting countries like Saudi Arabia, like Syria, like Egypt, Iran. But I think God blessed these governments with something called the Iraqi resistance, and it's the only thing that engulfed America and made it step away for a while from its previous intentions. It was then and only then that the government said: "All right, we can also roll back as long as the pressure is away from us right now. We can roll back and take things [back] to their old ways."

In other words, "We can roll back our efforts at reform" ?

Yes.

So initially what you're saying is there's a sort of introspection on the part of the Saudi Arabian government to make certain changes.

Well, right now I believe so. There is no real will to make concrete changes at this point in time. I don't know what they have planned in the future, but whatever is planned is not being shared with us.

But you consider yourself a reformer.

I consider myself a simple citizen of Saudi Arabia. I call for reforms. I believe in them wholeheartedly. I am also somebody who believes [in] his religion. I belong, philosophically, to the religious movement that society is based on our religion, not a theological government, but a theological society, a Muslim society. ...

And so you, as a reformer, as someone who wants to see certain civil institutions take shape, use the opening after 9/11, to push [for reforms]. How do you do this?

The word "push" is a bit difficult in Saudi Arabia. You don't really push anything. You simply petition the government. There are no means, there are no venues, there are no civil institutions through which you can do this so-called pushing -- no lobbyists, no special interest groups, nothing; no parliament, no Senate or House of Representatives, as in the States. ...

So what did you do?

We signed petitions and sent [them] to the crown prince at the time, and the crown prince did meet with a group of those who signed the petitions. He kindly received them and told them, "Yes, I believe in what you are saying, and your concerns are my concerns; your demands are my demands." And everybody went out of that meeting extremely happy. But then there was some sort of difference of opinions within the government that interrupted this plan.

Tell me.

Very simply: These words by the de facto head of state do not match with the deeds that took place later on; for instance, the jailing of the 15 reformists, and right now, the detention of the three who are in prison. ...

I For more information on the imprisonment of the Saudi reformists, read the ["House of Saud: A Chronology."](#)

If you can, give me a complete explanation of what went down in that meeting.

Well, the crown prince called the group of the petitioners, I think the first 10 signatories, he called

them in. He invited them. They went. They met him. They were received very kindly and gracefully by him. He sat down, listened to them and to the elements of their demands, of their petition. He told them that "Your demands are indeed my demands, and this is what I'm working on. And it's a matter of time. But we need time. Be patient, and rest assured that we are working on this." It was a simple, short, precise meeting. And when we had the meeting with them later on, everybody was jubilant and happy [that] finally, this is a new era.

And then?

And then, later on, there was another petition, which was also sent to the crown prince. We had a meeting with the minister of the interior, and he asked that these petitions should stop. That meeting did not go very well. There was sort of tension.

What did he say?

At that time, he told them that "You should stop these petitions. You should not write anymore. It's not going to be accepted anymore." And they told him that this is our only means of doing it, and we are doing this for our good and your good. And this is the gist of the meeting. And they left.

Later on, in less than a month, some of those people were jailed in prison. It's not a secret. And then another meeting took place in which, again, the minister of the interior brought them in and was very upset and said: "You know you should not have meetings, and you should not have congregations. And we are not going to condone the whole concept of reformation the way you think it should be. We are doing it the way we think it should be done. And it's not really reformation as in fixing things; it's reformation as in natural evolution. There is nothing wrong to be fixed. It's a matter of natural evolution." ...

So what does this say to the outside world about the prospects of reform in Saudi Arabia?

I don't know how the outside world would perceive it, but to me as a Saudi, it says that it's still an idea that is not set in stone. It's an idea that has no basic elements that we can measure it by. And the basic fixture of what we call reform is yet being debated by the top people in the ruling family. I would say that some of them are perhaps pushing for some kind of reform; others are resisting it. But nothing concrete is going to be done until we have a consensus in that matter.

... But doesn't it really spell in the long term the end of the monarchy?

We don't know. That's not for me to say, but it is my own desire. This is being a little bit philosophical, [but] the so-called revolutionary mandate, which came in with King Abd al-Aziz [when] he came in on his horse and unified this country, [was that] it's time right now for this mandate to shift into a constitutional mandate. It's the same thing that happens in any country in the world where you find a revolution taking place: After a while, the revolutionary council must reform into a president and a state in the modern sense.

I think that concept should be understood by the government and by the ruling family. And if that is understood, and if that takes place where they say, "OK, we are not simply rulers who came in with a set idea; we are the rulers of the whole country," [then] the whole country [will be] engulfed in the making of this society and the making of this nation. "We are going to be the rulers of it through ... any mechanism." Then they become the constitutional rulers, who are there with a constitutional mandate.

That's a huge difference, a huge transformation. This gives them longevity for hundreds of years. There is no problem as long as there's a social contract between the people and the government.

But instead, they've arrested many of the reformers. Three of them are still in jail.

Three of them are still in jail, yes.

It doesn't make one optimistic. It can't be encouraging to you.

Unfortunately, no. It cannot be encouraging unless you say that this is hopefully a fluke, something that they did and perhaps [now] they regret it. Perhaps they're sort of stuck with their decision, and they're trying to just do away with it and not go back to the same tactics. You never know. It's possible. It possible that it was a moment of anger. But whatever it was, it was dramatically disturbing, dramatically negative for all of society. ...

Why should the family give up any of its power? Why should it devolve its power to the people? Saudi Arabia has been successful from the time of Abd al-Aziz until now.

Saudi Arabia has been successful from the time of King Abd al-Aziz up to now for different elements that no longer exist. The whole tribal mentality is being devolved. People are more educated. The world is becoming a small village. You have the satellites all over. You see what's happening all over the world around you: how people are demanding their rights, how people are asking for better livelihoods. And it's time for the government, in order to cope with these tremendous and quick changes, to actually develop a plan in which the government [belongs] with the people institutionally, [on a] long-term basis.

Paint a clearer picture, if you can, of the consequences of not putting in place real reform. What will happen in Saudi Arabia?

I think a great period of confusion and instability will follow. Right now you have extremists who are carrying guns and using bullets to [move] their point forward and calling for certain sets of reforms. People are getting confused more and more. They're saying, "These [people] are crazy, but they're calling for the same things we are calling for." If you have a person who is shooting others, who [is] putting bombs, blowing up cars, and he's saying [that] he's doing all this because he's calling for transparency, for less corruption, they are deliberately confusing the issue.

But if they government says, "OK, let's have the voice of our society be broadcast, be open" -- and we have venues for that; "let's have political parties; let's have a parliament; let's have elections and free press in a way [that] society can vent its concerns and what it wants," then all of a sudden, you're simply taking the carpet from under their feet. Those extremists who would further confuse society, confuse the situation in the government, would be simply exposed for what they are. They would either throw their guns [away] ... or they would continue in their way, and they would be simply exposed and chastised by society.

But if that doesn't happen? Egypt took 10 years for them to battle the so-called terrorist movement. And what happened? It did not stop. They had to go into a dialogue with them. It was then that it subsided.

You know what makes us more successful than the Egyptians? I don't want to reinvent the wheel. I don't want to have the government, our police force, us as citizens and these people, suffer for another 10 years before we discover the inevitable.

It's not the perception among most Americans that those who are bombing compounds and shooting people are in favor of any form of democratic change.

I don't think the Americans ever cared about understanding what these people are all about. No one said, "Let's hear what they have to say; let's read their literature and what are their opinions about things." I'm sure they have a huge amount of fanatical, destructive ways of thinking, just like the militant movement in the States. But I'm also sure that they have valid grievances that they are adopting. And I don't know if these adoptions are genuine or not. How would we know? Let us allow the inculcation of our society into these social movements, social participation, and then people will be exposed for what they are.

But they're saying that it's necessary to crush those who choose to take up arms, that Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia must be crushed.

... If somebody is going out on the street to kill innocent people, yes, of course you have to face these people and put an end to it. But you are not solving the problem. You are not addressing the main issue, the real disease behind it. You are simply attacking the symptoms. You have to look beyond them. You have to address the grievances overall. If they have misconceptions of what Islam is all about, you have to start addressing that by credible people. You have to start to show it yourself in the government as being more pious, more restrained, less corrupt, more transparent.

But yes, of course. If somebody carries on and goes on the street and points a gun at me, I'm not going to start a dialogue with him.

But because the government has been too corrupt, or because there's not open enough dialogue, these grievances continue, and you're going to have more violence. Is that what you're saying?

The grievances continue, and the government is losing credibility in their stance. What the government is arguing is not very credible because of the way it's conducting itself. In order to be

credible, it has to show that it is self-reforming. For instance, I need to know how much the royal family is getting in terms of allowances out of the total Saudi Arabian government, and that the crown prince decides that this would be cut or frozen. I need to know how the budget is really being managed. I need to know who decides what ... [is] wrong, and whether my word counts or not. I need to know that [each different] part of the government is not going to be overspending or living lavishly at my expense.

When the government says you have to [tighten] your belts for some austere measures, I'm willing to do so. But I won't feel good if I'm being treated austerely and suffering because of the good of the country when others, at my expense, are living lavishly abroad and traveling here and there and not really showing me that they care about me and the state I am living in at the moment.

So you want transparency?

I want transparency. I want accountability. I want freedom of association, freedom of press. Many things. I hope I can see it in my lifetime, but I don't know.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

I'm always an optimist. It's very important to be an optimist. I left America. I was offered several jobs there in America as a lawyer to work in New York or here and there. But I left and came back to my country because I simply want to die one day, and on my deathbed, I want to feel that I have added just one simple iota [to] the betterment of my society and my country. I wish I can do that.

One of the demands that you make in the petition that's been presented to the crown prince is to increase the role that women play in society. What are the prospects that that will happen?

Well, let me put it this way. I don't want to demand progressiveness for women. And there's a difference, because you cannot demand something from someone who is not willing to participate. It's very important to put it this way. But I demand to give women the choice to participate or not. If they want to, it's their right to vote. But if women and all society votes not to allow women to drive, it's a choice. It's their choice. But at least make it be a consensus in society, something that has to do with votes and [is] not based upon a religious edict.

So maybe one day down the road, in the next year or the next five years or the next 10 years, another vote will come through and say, "Well, now we think women should drive." And women say, "Yes, actually, we want to drive now." I don't know. It's their choice, you see?

Allow women to become whatever they want to become -- airline pilots, engineers, whatever they want to become. If they don't want to go into an engineering college, it's her choice. It's just the matter is giving the choice, is not pushing her to do something. You see, you can't push a society to do something. You have to [give it] the freedom to examine what is going and to have its own direction.

I get the impression from listening to you that you believe Saudi society is in some way seriously out of step with the world in terms of rights, civil institutions. Why is this the case?

Well, I think the government is dragging its feet right now. I think the government is not yet fixed on its direction and where it wants to take us. They're trying to appease the fanatical right. At the same time they're trying to find a way to move. It's never going to happen. You have to set a course and give it to society, tell everybody: "This is not just what I want as a government. It's what society demands of me. It's the will of the people."

There's a kind of crisis, then, of legitimacy, is there not, for this government?

It has not come to that point yet, but if it continues the way it is, I'm afraid that with the confusion of things, in the future the legitimacy of the government will be called into question.

And what real hope is there that the elections, as they're currently formulated, are going to really make any difference?

Well, it depends. Are these elections a drop in the bucket, or are they a [link] in a chain of movements and a chain of reforms that are going to take place? We don't know. But I don't see why this kind of election should take place with only 50 percent of the people voting. I don't see

why, with only 50 percent of the candidates being elected and others being appointed, is all this being done.

... For the time being, the government is wary. They don't know what these elections would bring about, how they are going to be perceived. Therefore, I would say in the government's mind it's a safeguard. ... [If] this is part of a full movement, which I hope it is -- I've heard that it is actually a part of the full movement -- then it might be meaningful.

And at this point in time, though, as you explained earlier, there's no real pressure on the government to change, as there was after 9/11. Things have evolved to the point where the United States can't make any real demands. The outside world isn't making any real demands that the Saudi government has to pay attention to. Is that correct?

... Americans usually demand things, and then after a while they simply forget about it. Why should I give [up] power if the Americans are very much involved in Iraq, and they're not giving me any pressures? Unless I myself, from within, feel that I need to give power to my people, I will not do so. And that's why I always am one who claimed that power should not be given to us; it should be demanded by us, and it should be there as a right and not as a privilege.

And I don't want America or the West to pressure Saudi Arabia, to say, "Give your citizens power, " because one day when America says, "OK, now you can take the power back," it will be taken back. And I don't want that. I want these powers to be earned, to be demanded, to be some kind of a social contract between myself and my government. That's my ideal situation. ...

There's a bomb coming from Saudi Arabia. It's often referred to the demographic bomb?

Yes. It's a youth[ful] society, and we are mushrooming. The latest population census was about 22 million, 17 million of which are Saudi citizens and the rest are, I think, expats.

But how can you look at this situation and not just see a disaster, when the average man has nine or 10 kids and such a large percent of the population is [unemployed]? Where are the jobs?

Where is the disaster? Is it because our country cannot absorb this much? No, I believe the potential in this country can absorb more than that. We can be a regional superpower. We can be as populous as Turkey or Iran or Egypt with the potential that we have.

We are not a simple country. We have petroleum. We have two great coastlines with huge potential. ... We have mind power. We have everything. That's not where the disaster lies. We should not curb our population growth because we cannot accommodate them. The disaster lies in not having good and proper plans to accommodate these people, to create the jobs for them, to create the industries and the working society that will absorb these kind of people. That's where the problem lies. It's not because people are making more babies.

In the '70s in Saudi Arabia, it was a time of outside influences. Tell me about what you were seeing, what you were experiencing.

... [The] people here -- I'm talking about this region, the Hijaz -- they were practicing Islam as a tradition, and only the men were going for worships, like going to pray, ... fasting, going to hajj. [But] in their life, maybe they're not practicing many of these. ...

Then in the '70s, some here start to practice the Islam in their own daily life. Of course they were being influenced by scholars coming from Egypt, from Syria mainly --

Why are the scholars coming from Egypt and from Syria?

Those were mainly from the Brotherhood, the Muslim Brotherhood, and after they have been jailed and killed in Egypt and Syria [by] their governments.

Explain to me what was happening.

In the early '60s, and even you can say in '48 it started, [when] Hassan al-Banna started his movement there. And it was something that is amusing for everybody. This guy, he was talking about Islam in all aspects of life, which was something strange. How can a person ... talk about Islam, then at the same time talk about politics? At the same time he's talking about the sports, arts, all [of it]. He's saying that it is [all] included in Islam, [when] people before, they were [just]

talking about Islam in praying, fasting and these things.

So this guy, he came and said: "No, Islam is not like that. Islam is politics. Islam is sport. Islam is a way of life. So in all your life, you can practice [it]." ... And he's giving real verses from the Quran and the sayings of the prophet. So it was a nice explanation, and it was being accepted by the professionals, especially -- not only professionals in Islamic studies, but professionals in all the other [areas]: doctors, engineers and so on. ...

Why was it so attractive to you as a young man?

Because it gives you that flexibility of life, and at the same time, it puts you on the track that you are Muslims and this is your Quran saying these things. So you have to follow it to be a real Muslim.

For instance, I was an ordinary person here: playing, dancing, singing, watching whatever movies. I didn't care if I [had] a relation with girls or not. So when I get this idea, I realize that this is something wrong. It's contradicting our religion. So at the same time, with all this happiness, with all these things, still for myself I'm really saying that we feel that we are not satisfied. Still whatever we are doing, whatever we are playing, we are not satisfied in our life; we feel always something wrong inside. But this way ... we've even started to be practical in our life. Even we started to be successful persons in our education, in our jobs, in our work, something motivating us to be good always in all our life. Our relations with one around us, it becomes better. So it's really giving us something valuable. That's why we like it, and we go on in this way.

One of the people that you were in school with was Osama bin Laden. Do you remember the conversations you had with him about religion and about the importance of where these influences were taking you?

Yeah. Osama -- we were together in university, so I can say we grow up in this kind of change together. We were young. And at the same time we came from this kind of society to the new one. And we, together really, [were] going to lectures in the university and others, so I can say that we grow up together in this kind of life.

And what was he like as a young man, before he became a serious religious figure?

The same as everybody. The same as all the youth here in this country -- as any young guy.

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