

HHA# 00789

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Wagih Abu-Rish

Interviewed by: Aimee Bachari
Date: February 19, 2013
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Wagih Abu-Rish's home

Keywords: Palestinian, Organization of Arab Students, University of Houston, politics, immigration, International Student Organization.

Abstract:

Wagih Abu-Rish was born in Al-Eizariyah, or Bethany, Palestine in 1942. He left with his siblings in 1947 as the Arab-Israeli War intensified, first staying with family in Egypt and later joining his father in Lebanon where he finished high school. Abu-Rish came to the United States in 1961 to attend the University of Houston on a scholarship through an oil company. He graduated in 1966. During his time at the University of Houston he served in the Organization of Arab Students (OAS) and as president of the International Student Organization. Later, he served as vice president of the national OAS. Abu-Rish continues to work on Arab American causes, mainly civil rights, human rights, immigration, and public policy.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Wagih Abu-Rish

Interviewed by: Aimee Bachari
Date: February 19, 2013
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Wagih Abu-Rish's home

AL: My name is Aimee Bachari, I am here doing an interview. Today is the 19th of February, 2013, and I am here with Wagih Abu-Rish at his home. I guess the first thing that I wanted to talk about was just a little bit of personal background, your early life where you were born, where you went to school, things like that.

WA: Sure I was born in the village of Bethany. It's called al-Eizariya in Arabic, but Bethany is according to the bible is where Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, which is two miles from Jerusalem, east of Jerusalem. I was there until I was five years old then in 1947 as the Arab-Israeli war got into a heated period it was decided that the children of the family would move out of Palestine, and so we moved to join my grandfather in Egypt, and I lived there between the ages of five and seven. At the age of seven my father had already moved to Lebanon, and I joined my mother and father at the age of seven in Lebanon; went to high school, went to school and high school in Lebanon and graduated from there and then came to the United States in 1961 one year after I graduated from high school. Initially I had a scholarship from the University of Arizona, and then one of my co-benefactors unfortunately happened to pass away and so I had to delay my coming to the United States from 1960 to '61 until I secured another scholarship

through an oil company. That oil company designated that I come to the University of Houston University of Houston

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

and despite the fact that I used to take courses at the University of Texas, but I had to graduate from the University of Houston, which I did in 1966. I went back to Lebanon again working there for one year in journalism, came back to the University of Oregon and got my master's degree from the University of Oregon in advertising and then went on to work on Madison Avenue for two years and then came back and joined an ad agency, a very small ad agency after I was working for a huge ad agency in New York. I came to Houston to work for one, and shortly thereafter, six months after I got here, it went broke.

AB: Oh no!

WA: So I was unemployed for 8 months. I was working odd jobs but I was at least 75% unemployed, very deep recession and then in 1971... First of all, I need to mention that in 1970 I got married in New York City, and I moved in 1970 to Houston and when I started working for the ad agency. Then 1971, I decided to get into marketing, which was the training that I got in New York and some of the education that I got at the University of Oregon. I got into marketing and slowly I built a business in advising oil equipment and oil companies how to be set up in the Middle East. Between 1971 and 1983, end of 1983, I was in that capacity, and then the oil market again collapsed in a very bad way, and at that time I decided to leave town. We went to Seattle, which we had planned to go to because we used to vacation there every year, and we moved to Seattle and I got into the business of acquisition of small business which I did between, starting January 1985, first I took a year off and I went around the world, I and my wife.

AB: That's nice.

WA: Then in 1985, we moved to Seattle in 1984, 1985 I started a business of acquisition of small companies with one business at the very beginning and later on I added and sold and bought until 19... 2012. At that point, in March of 2012 I finished with my business, retired and

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih**Interview Date: February 19, 2013**

had sold all the businesses over the years and now I'm retired. I live seven months in Seattle area, five months here and most of my work concentrates with Arab American affairs still and it relates to civil rights and human rights and immigration and public policy.

AB: I just wanted to ask you one question about something you said in the beginning. When you were five you left and you went to Egypt, what was that like to be without your parents?

Was that a difficult time for you or were you so young it didn't register what was happening?

WA: Actually in my case it was not, because I had been raised by my grandparents because my mother had two young children and then my grandparents decided that they would raise me and then they would just kind of bring me back to my mother every day at the age of you know three, four, and five and I would stay for four hours, and they would take me back.

AB: So you were use to it.

WA: So I was used to go, but I can say that on the way out of Palestine we were attacked. I don't know whether this means anything, but we were attacked by the Jewish underground.

There was no Arab underground to talk about but the Jewish underground, but that was the only bad experience. Otherwise we went to Egypt and lived relatively comfortably.

AB: I guess we can talk about your time with the Organization of Arab Students. I know in our correspondence you said you thought it was founded around 1960 or '61.

WA: The chapter here you mean?

AB: Yes, yes at U of H. And when was the national organization founded?

WA: I really, I believe a few years before then, yeah a few years before then exactly when I don't know. I think somewhere in the mid '50s to the best of my recollection.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Okay. I was reading something on the Arab American National Museum site about how immigration to the U.S. was pretty restricted at that time until 1965 it sort of eased up and I think a lot of Arabs were coming as students. Do you think that that was most of the immigration?

WA: Well I really, I think there is a professor at the University of Southern California and I can get you her name ... [Sarah M. Gualtieri] and she is specializing in Arab American studies. And I think she would be a huge source of information and she has published some books Her name escapes me but I will send my nephew an email. He is finishing his Ph.D. in History, Middle Eastern History at UCLA and he knows the professor so I'll get it. I think she could be a great source. Of course my immigration into the United States started long time ago. Of course the Lebanese are the most famous and the Yemenites out of all the people also, the Yemenites of course came to work in the assembly plants, the auto assembly plants so they got menial jobs. The Lebanese on the other hand they came and they took the route of many other immigrants, the Jewish immigrants, the Italian immigrants, etc. by opening stores and they became rather successful. They were at that point most of the Lebanese were Christian Lebanese, they were fleeing the Ottoman conscription policies. It went on for a long time and you've had difficulties but there was a policy at my time of "brain drain." Anybody that had a master's degree in arts or a bachelor's degree in engineering would have, I believe if I'm not mistaken, six preference what they called, whereby you can apply and they got the most Arab Americans at that point that they got where Egyptians because they came for their Ph.D.'s. [Egyptian President Gamal Abdel] Nasser used to send lots of Egyptians here to get their Ph.D.'s or to get their medical specialties etc. and the United States policy at that time "We want them to come here and we want them to stay here," (which is totally different then the policy now).

AB: Right.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: So this is a kind of history by itself. The history of the attitude of the government of the United States and its immigration departments towards the ease (or lack there-of), of Arab Americans coming into the United States and possibly other [people from] Middle Eastern countries. I am not too versed in that. I know that for a long time it was a very strong policy of keeping people here. And when did it change? I know that the biggest proponent of that was John Foster Dulles, I don't know if you remember the name.

AB: No.

WA: He was the Secretary of State under the Eisenhower administration.

AB: Okay.

WA: And his brother was Allen Dulles who was famous for the Bay of Pigs invasion. He was the head of the CIA. So things have changed since a lot.

AB: Yes they have. Let's get back to talking about the Organization of Arab Students. Maybe you can just tell me what some of the goals were at U of H?

WA: Well I mean the goals were very similar across the country at that time. The Palestinian problem was the foremost issue for us and we wanted to interact with the American society and to try to promote our, our own ideas and principles and interests here, and we were very welcome actually at that time. I mean any one of us they had, I don't know whether they have it now, they have what is called the "host family," the host family arrangement, whereby each student is offered to have a host family to teach him or her the American way of life. And despite, although I was connected to an oil family here through the oil company that was sponsored me it so happened that the family also was my host family. The man of the house was the president of a gas company. They would bring us into their churches, their homes, things like

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

that, all these things and it was a very welcoming atmosphere. My experience now or my thoughts about it is that it's not as welcoming now as it used to be.

AB: Yeah I would think so as well. The same would be nationally just basically...?

WA: Yes it's basically the same.

AB: Okay.

WA: Like I told you in my, in my email, my rough estimate is that the Palestinian issue probably occupied 70% of all our work. The rest was cultural, musical, things like that.

AB: I'm wondering why not have a Palestinian organization? Was there not a lot of Palestinians at that time or was this just a better means of cooperation?

WA: No, at that time, the thought of an Arab unity was very strong unlike it is now where we are having problem in every country and they are particular to those countries. The overriding, the overriding emotional thoughts were that of Arab unity. So we never thought of even considering having a Palestinian organization and a Lebanese organization and a Syrian organization. It was all under the banner of Arab. Now there were Arab students that did not believe in the Arab unity and mostly they just did not participate. They did not attempt to create their own Syrian or their own Lebanese or their own Palestinian because just about 80% of or 90% of the Arab Americans or the Arab students believed in Arab unity at that point.

AB: Now at U of H there are a lot. There's a Lebanese organization, they have I think they had a Tunisian, but there's a bunch of different organizations...

WA: Yes there is.

AB: ... but in the past couple of years they just started a new Arab Student Union so I think that idea's starting to come back a little bit.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: Well the thing about it is that at this time while first of all numbers wise it makes sense, one. But second is that sometimes the practicality of it brings you to this point you know. I don't know how it is at the University of Houston at this time, but the people, the Lebanese, the people who belong to the Lebanese organization usually are separatists in their approach, especially in the case of the Lebanese. They're usually more Christian than Muslims, more Maronites than Orthodox.

AB: My next question, which you sort of addressed, I was wondering if the organization was mirroring what was happening in the Arab world at the time. So I know Nasser's idea of Arab nationalism...

WA: Yes, it was everybody. This 80% or whatever we are talking about their hero was Nasser at the time. And then the value of Nasser without getting into politics a whole lot is, those individuals saw that Nasser was the only person that fought for the dignity, which really relates to what is happening now in the Middle East. He fought for the dignity of the average person. And after him the different regimes regardless of whether they are left or right, they just totally ignored, and abused actually, the idea that the average person has dignity. They became oppressive, little by little, by little, by little, by little and in their case of course separation was the way that "I can control you rather than have my neighbor also involved in my control."

AB: Divide and conquer.

WA: Of course it was divide and conquer, and it has been successful.

AB: We talked a little bit about how often the organization focused on the Palestinian issue but maybe you can talk a little bit (if you remember) about what types of events or activities you had in order to sort of raise awareness on campus.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: Well most of our activities were concentrated on lectures. We would have speakers come down from the Arab League. Speakers, we'd invite ambassadors. We'd invite professors. It is worthwhile mentioning now that I've been living in the United States here for 50 years or more [and] we did not understand the American political system. We really totally were oblivious to the workings of the Americans. Not only were we kind of very idealistic, we did not understand even the working of our own countries' political system. While we were effective (but you know it was a microcosm) so it was a small, very small arena and we lacked what I have learned in the meantime the main ingredient of political success in the United States, it is money.

Money! I mean we would have meetings and we would have Arabic food and we would have Arabic festivals. The other side of course, the pro-Israel side was the other side. I mean they would get, we would collect \$700 and they would collect \$7,000. It's just as simple as that and \$7,000 went a long way beside the fact that we were foreigners dealing with Jewish Americans and at that time there were not many pro-Israel Jewish Americans. I mean, it's not that they were anti but you know mostly Jewish Americans were active. Between money and lack of expertise on one side or lack of affinity to the culture on one side and ten times the money and pretty much 100% affinity to the culture, it was a lop sided.

AB: In 1976, I know this is after your time but I don't know if you participated in the International Week while you were there? Was that even around yet?

WA: No, I severed all relations with U of H in 1967. I have had no dealings with them. I've got in a few invitations, a couple of them from the university from the School of Journalism, but I have never really participated in anything since 1967.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Okay. There was a big incident in International Week where they had to shut the whole thing down because there was an Israeli student organization that was basically offended by the Palestinian flag and a map of...

WA: Palestine.

AB: ... the Arab world that said, it said "Palestine" on it or "Occupied Palestine" and that offended them. It was the Organization of Arab Students, actually their table and they came back and said, "Well what you have is offensive." So then they had to have a big meeting and it was a little intense, so I was wondering I guess you are saying at your time it wasn't so much like that, there weren't Israeli students?

WA: Oh there were many attempts not to mention Palestine at all. I mean you know there were all kinds of attempts. People had thought that Palestine never existed okay and things like that. You get all kinds of arguments. One time I went to an attorney and he said, "Oh the word Palestine is forty years old." I said, "What? Have you read the history of the Romans?" You know? I mean this is an attorney not and he was doing an immigration case on behalf of my sister. You get all kinds of arguments. The people did not recognize that Palestine did not exist. Palestine existed, but it was mostly Jewish Palestine you know all kinds of arguments. Really, in many cases whatever carried the day, I mean the argument from the other side is whatever carried the day including, "Oh look at those people they don't speak English well" things like that. I mean all kinds of things or you know this, that or "look at those..." at that time I actually will tell you that all the females at the University of Houston were not wearing any kind of head cover. There weren't many but maybe ten, but none of them, this is a new phenomenon in the Middle East. This is a phenomenon after the "glorious" Iranian revolution.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: That was actually one of my later questions but since you mentioned it we can talk about it. I was wondering if there was a lot of Arab women students at that time?

And I noticed in some of the earlier pictures.

WA: She was. [Secretary for OAS, A. Rabie, 1969.]

AB: Yes, there is one woman in 1969 and I think in '73 you get more, there's four.

WA: Yes, yes I mean we had a couple at the same time that were kind of active but not regulars.

AB: Okay I see.

WA: I mean she was a regular but, because in this case her brother, she had two brothers at the university. So it depends. You had two Iraqi females and they used to come all the time but they didn't want to be regulars. We didn't have, I don't think that we had more than ten.

AB: Ten total or ten that were active?

WA: No, no ten total women.

AB: Oh wow! Okay.

WA: At that time we didn't have that many women at all.

AB: I think at that time there wasn't that many women [in general].

WA: Now of course the new generation.

AB: Right.

WA: You have what you've got is the new generation. Now I wouldn't mind going and seeing what they are doing at U of H.

AB: You know it would be really interesting for you. Anytime you want to come I'd be willing to show you.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: Yeah sure I'd like to see what they are... I mean just curious what their emphasis is, what the thing. Why they are trying to create a new? Is it in existence now? [Arab Student Union]

AB: Yes, yes.

WA: It is? Who [does] it belongs to? I mean is it the new generation? Is it Arab students from the Middle East? What is it I mean?

AB: It think it's a little of both. I know a couple of people that are the officers in the organization and some are, a couple of the girls I know are Palestinian but American, born here. One person I know in particular is a Saudi student so from Saudi [Arabia] here for school. But there's also different organizations now like Students for a Democratic Society.

WA: Sure!

AB: They work a lot on the Palestinian issues.

WA: Yes you have a Jewish organizations,

AB: Israeli Apartheid week.

WA: You have Jewish something for Peace and End the Occupation, both Jewish organizations. So you have lots of others, and I'm in touch with them, that exist and this is in my opinion just getting off the subject, the most interesting phenomenon that took place in the last ten years and that is two things. One is that the existence of Jewish organizations that are totally against the establishment posture in Israel, the government and the fact that there may be at this time a majority of Jewish Americans that don't support the policy of the Israeli government except that out of this majority, only a small portion, a small percentage have become vocal. And if you talk to even some Rabbis and things of the sort and they tell you that they have this fear that if you are talking against Israel, I mean it's not as easy, and there has been write ups in

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

the *New York Times* about Rabbis that wrote op-ed pieces and a congregation would object and a couple would withdraw.

AB: I was also wondering if you know (during your time obviously I'm not going to ask you about the future). But were there a lot of Palestinians in the organization that you know of?

WA: Yes.

AB: Was the majority Palestinian or do you think there was a pretty good mix of people?

WA: I think it was (proportionally speaking) the Palestinians were over represented in the organization but not to a great extent. In other words, probably the Palestinians represented twice as many as any other thing. The people that were not active and there was a political party that belonged to the national, but many times they did not belong to the local, were the Egyptians. They were all on government scholarships, brilliant students. All of them coming for their Ph.D.s and most of them were straight "A" students. Because Nasser did not really care. Before Nasser it used to be who your father was and Nasser just said, "Whoever gets the grades goes." And he used to send those students and they were very bookish. I mean basically here you have you think, but they were just all of them, "What are you doing? Are you going to?" "Oh no I have to do this report. I have to write this thing." So they were in this sense so their participation was much more limited. But they went, they were represented at the national level the organization was big and things of the sort. They were not an Egyptian organization they were an extension of the political party that belonged to Nasser.

AB: I had mentioned in our various emails about some of the other histories that have been done on some organizations at the time like the Afro Americans for Black Liberation and they were working to get African American Studies and the Mexican Americans were working for the same thing. Was that at all in the scope of the organization's mind to sort of, I think maybe they

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

had some Arabic classes or something like, but was there any real impetus to sort of change the University and have more of a focus on Arab history?

WA: Well it was a focus on Arab history definitely. There wasn't much maybe if there was anything maybe a course or something like that at the University of Houston there was very little. I know because I used to go to the University of Texas in the summer time. That was a different story. University of Texas had a huge Middle Eastern Institute, and they had maybe four Arab language courses and four history, four political science... all those things. It was a major thing. But at the University of Houston no, very little and there was no outreach in the true sense. The only outreach community that we did was through the International Student Association, which I was president for one year also. But there was really, we did not, although we supported the civil rights movement, but like I said we were not, first of all we were limited as far as our activities. I mean we could not demonstrate or go to a demonstration. But at the same time we did not understand the political system, and of course it was (at that time) it was the Vietnam War was really the upper most [issue]. We did not have a robust outreach to any extent.

AB: What was the reason you couldn't go to demonstrations?

WA: Because of our Visas. Our Visas did not really allow us to participate in these things. We would be kicked out of the country.

AB: That makes sense. I wouldn't demonstrate either if that was the option.

WA: Yeah we could not I mean some, some wanted to go, very few, maybe one or two or three. They wanted to do this and this guy came to us one time and he said, "Let's go pray at the black Mosque." [I said,] "Black Mosque, is there a black Mosque?" He said, "Yes there is a black Mosque." There used to be a black Mosque in downtown Houston. Is it still there?

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Yeah. What's his name, that basketball player right?

WA: Oh okay you mean Hakeem?

AB: Yeah.

WA: Yeah maybe.

AB: Is that the one?

WA: Possible, possible. There used to be a black Mosque at that time. Most of us were secular. We did not want to...I mean I did not want to go to the Mosque in the first place period.

AB: Right.

WA: Black, white, or in between. So we didn't, but we were curious. I went as far as going downtown and looking at the Mosque.

AB: Not stepping inside?

WA: No, no because I didn't pray in other Mosques and so I didn't. But we were (believe it or not I mean this is another thing) we were closer to the Orthodox Church than we were to the Mosques. There were not, there were no Mosques in town here. There were no Mosques. There was a black Mosque. That's it. There were not Shiite Mosques, Sunni Mosques. There were no Mosques.

AB: Now there's a ton.

WA: Twenty-two, twenty-three. There were quite a few very rich people. I went there because my father, when my father passed away we buried him here in Houston because my sister lives here and her husband is buried here. So we buried him in Houston, and I went to the Mosque that I had not been to even a single time and I said if they could do the service. I was shocked it was a Friday and the guy said and he was counting and he counted \$85,000 donations that day.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Wow!

WA: I said to myself, "\$85,000!" By the way you know the religious people donate much more than the secular people.

AB: Right, I'm sure.

WA: There are people there, taxicab drivers, Pakistani's, Bangladesh's that go to the Mosque, \$200. For a taxicab driver \$200 is lots of money, but they do it.

AB: That's interesting.

WA: Yeah well I was really, but they have no the Mosques here have no community activity to talk of. I mean they teach Arabic, they teach the Koran, things of the sort. They tell you where to buy Halal meat but as far as true outreach and because I tried to help... there was a problem with the Mosque in Katy I don't know did you ever hear about it?

AB: Was that guy next door who was?

WA: Trying to raising pigs around?

AB: Parading his pigs around and being awful?

WA: That and I went to them and I said, "Listen let me tell you this. I haven't been to a Mosque except at funerals, funerals since I was nine." (Voluntarily, this is not voluntary at the funeral.)

AB: Right.

WA: But that has nothing to do with going to your Mosque or not. This is a civil rights issue. So if you want let me get your group a civil rights attorney. I know how to do it. I've done it several times. Let me do it. They wouldn't even take my advice. They wouldn't even accept it.

AB: Really?

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: They were just insular. They wanted to pray. This guy, this is the story, actually he came to see me in the Rothko Chapel do you go to the Rothko Chapel?

AB: Yeah I've been there for a couple of speeches.

WA: Yeah the Rothko Chapel and we had a panel discussion there and I was involved (against my better judgment), I was involved because you can't. This is my thought, you can't argue religion with some believers regardless of which religion. But even something it has, it doesn't have to mean anything. I mean there is no logic to it. And say, "The Koran says this so that's it. That's the end of the argument."

AB: Exactly.

WA: So anyway, he was in the panel, I brought him here and I said, "Listen I am I want you to help me. This is a big civil rights issue. I have nothing to do with the Mosque or any other Mosque, but I am one that just got a couple of families, big families out of prison right now by getting the right civil rights attorneys. They had been languishing there and they had zero possibility of getting out on their own. But when the media got involved and things of the sort they got out." I mean it was a long story. "So I want to help. But nobody is responding." He said, "They're chicken!" I said, "Okay let me tell you I have a congressman coming here from the state of Washington." We ran out of money in the state of Washington. My community is not that big so I promised I'd collect for him a certain sum of money. "Come down here I'll collect it from the Arab Americans here." He's at 100% I mean he gets, first of all he's elected with 82% plurality I mean this is unheard of. Either you have to be in a real tea party area or a very liberal area, and Seattle is very liberal, and he's in the Seattle area. So he comes here and he's 100% I would say for the two-state solution for the rights of the Palestinians, etc. so I said, "Come to the gathering. We have \$500 minimum but in your case since I'm inviting you I have

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

other people to pay for, for you so don't worry about it. So just come to the meeting" and he said, he said, "I don't think I will come." I said, "Why you don't have to pay anything? I have people that will pay the \$500." I said, "Can you explain to me why?" He said, "Because I am chicken too!" I said to myself holy cow! So anyway just to tell you.

AB: So the Rothko event, was that after 9/11?

WA: No they had Rothko about Islam I thought I mean they needed somebody who is not religious and they got me and I did it as a favor but I knew it was going to go nowhere. And they had this, you know, black, black American female and two Muslims from the Middle East and myself. And there was no way. Everybody was saying the Koran and the Hadith and the Koran and the Hadith... And you, sure I didn't need to have a panel discussion to know what the Koran said. I would have said it myself. I mean it's to go there is no way to you! Anyway...

AB: That's crazy. So let's I guess we can start back talking about the OAS. So the group always had this sort of pan-Arab identity?

WA: Yes absolutely.

AB: Okay that's what I thought. I was wondering because did this sort of idea of Arab Nationalism decline somewhat after the six days war? I mean that was a pretty big defeat?

WA: Yes.

AB: So I'm wondering did that impact the U.S....

WA: The six day war was a major threshold but here is the whole Arab world, not the whole the majority, the overwhelming majority, Nasser at that time, Nasser was a peaceful man. I mean people thought he was a revolutionary really he was not. He was very peaceful. He sent to death one person in all, in his whole regime. One person! I think Berkley did the analysis

comparison between Nasser, Gandhi, and Stalin and they found that Nasser was 10% from being

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

a Gandhi and 90% from being a Stalin. So this guy could have taken over the whole Arab world, but he just was not a revolutionary. This is the attitude of revolutionaries, that you take opportunities like this that don't come again. So when the Syrians seceded from him he just stood there. So he was not a revolutionary, so we believed in him. '67 was a huge defeat, threshold, major threshold. People started doubting this man. Doubting this whole regime, I mean, he himself did not really understand many things including the importance of the central committees and the central you know the viable organizations and things of the sort. He thought because he was popular to the extent that 90% of the Egyptian people supported him that that was good enough. But the problem about it... that six months after he died they forgot about it. So that was a big threshold yes '67. There was introspection and things of the sort. People started falling, falling out of the, you know, scheme of activities etc., etc. Yes.

AB: And do you know why? I know that was sort of after your time here at U of H but did you have any idea whether that sort of effected this organization its sole focus?

WA: I have absolutely no idea.

AB: Okay.

WA: At that time I was only active at the national level. I was the Vice President in '65 but I stayed in touch at the '67 after '67 I myself even got disheartened and went through the professional. I became active with the Arab American University Graduates then and things of the sort so I was less involved, much I was not involved in the organization at all after '67.

AB: Okay. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about your time with the national organization. What exactly did you do as a Vice President?

WA: Okay well first of all the national organization maintained contact with the countries of origin and the governments there. So we used to one of the functions that, every year we would

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

go and visit a different Arab government and give them our point of view about things about the United States. Some of them did not know anything about the United States... big guys big government and things of the sort and we knew a little bit, not a whole lot a little bit. So we used to go there. I, in '65, I was supposed to meet Nasser he was busy he did not meet me. We used to meet him all the time, which was a great treat for us. I met his Prime Minister instead. We used to exchange and ask them for books to give to this library and books to give to that library and things of the sort and to create possibly an Arab library in Washington all of these ideas or an Arab museum and things like that. So we used to talk to them about this. This is on one hand. That for instance is to signify the President of the United States used to send the message with us every time we would get a message from the President. So my message I remember it was the President was Johnson. So Johnson through the White House they called me and said, "Tell Nasser let's not fight in public. Let's talk quietly." This is the whole message? Yes, this is the whole message. I said, "Are you sure?" So when I went to meet the Prime Minister to meet Nasser I was supposed to tell him. I went to meet the Prime Minister and I didn't know what to do with this message. I said this is the message that I have. He was expecting the message because it was a routine thing. So I sat down in his office, and I said and I spent with him three hours, which was unusual. He took me all over Cairo and what they are doing with this, what they are doing with... explain what they are doing with the Suez Canal, etc. things like that, most of it is economic and some of it was political. So I said, "I need to relay you the message from President Johnson" and I told him the message. I said, "Let's not fight in public. Let's talk quietly." He said right away (to my surprise), which meant he was much more experienced than I. He said it would not happen. I looked at him with surprise because I didn't... even I didn't know the meaning of the message to the... He said, "They want us not to

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

involve the people. And if we don't involve the people we have no power. We have to involve the people. They [United States] have weapons. They have money. They have power. We have nothing. We are a poor country. We've got to have the people behind us and the only way to do it is to talk about issues publically." I thought, you know, I thought to myself, oh what a stupid guy I didn't know what the guy was talking about. You know and yeah anyway, so we used to try to bridge and you know I'm giving you an example of what happened, one instance. But the rest we used to be invited anytime that a head of state came to Washington and things of the sort. And try to bridge the gap, to try to, you know promote understanding and all these things and things of the sort but still the Palestinian issue was the main issue. I mean this is... I mean to the Arab mind, "How could this happen?" I mean this is whether we were right or wrong, but our approach of how could a country disappear from the face of the earth and another country be created instead of it? That was... and of course the people in politics know that anything could happen and we were naive enough to think our approach. In 19... and are you recording this?

AB: Yes.

WA: Can you just?

AB: Turn it off for a second? Okay. (turned off) You guys met a lot with?

WA: Yeah we met with. We tried to meet.

AB: U.S. Government.

WA: The congressman and there were congressman and senators that supported that and many of them were Republicans by the way unlike now. The people who supported (many Mid Westerners, congressman from Illinois, from Nebraska, from things of the sort), you had Unitarian congressman and things of the sort you know that really supported the Palestinian cause. And it was a totally different thing because Eisenhower himself was... believed that

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

injustice has happened and the way to do it at that time people would have forgotten if I tell people, "Now bring 500,000 Palestinians to America and then they can live happily ever after!"

That's exactly Eisenhower's solution.

AB: Huh I didn't know that!

WA: Oh yes.

AB: That's interesting.

WA: And now if you tell them bring 500,000 I think they will bring 5.

AB: Yeah really! That's interesting. My last couple of questions are more about how you've stayed active since this time as a student?

WA: Well I have become active in the local... I am active now in supporting public officials. I am not a democrat, but I end up supporting, I supported the governor in the state of Washington (my activities are mostly in the state of Washington.) The governor, the two senators and two congressmen. All won. Of course it's easier for us than here. They all won and that's good. There was only one congress woman whereby our support meant something because the others, I mean this guy McDermott, Congressman McDermott when we support all the time he gets 82% I mean if the whole Arab community does not support him (although we do support him) it's not a really big deal. Senator Cantwell, Senator Murray the Governor Inslee and so that's most of my activity. The other one is civil rights. I am involved at this time with disseminating information to the degree I may get a little bit more involved to the different organizations about the plight of the Palestinian refugees in Syria that are trying to flee to Lebanon and Jordan. We just got, I just got a report from a UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency], are you familiar with the UNRWA?

AB: Uh-huh (in the affirmative).

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: There are 3,600 Palestinians that were allowed to cross into Jordan Palestinian refugees. There are more Palestinians trying to cross and I don't have the information. I asked for it too now into Lebanon the Lebanese said, "Oh yeah, yeah anybody, all of them can come through but they have to pay this (I think \$300, \$200)" I don't know the figure. I absolutely know they have to pay this sum for a Visa. Of course the refugees \$100 or \$50 to them is big money! They can't do it. So they use these chicaneries you know and things of the sort. So I don't know how many have come through, went through to Lebanon and how many are living in open fields.

AB: Wow. There's... I know that was happening also with the Iraq war. There was a lot of Palestinians that had lived in Iraq and now they are refugees again.

WA: Well they got rid of them.

AB: Yeah there's some in Houston I know.

WA: There were 30,000 okay that... the last batch came the United States got about 1,500 the others went to Australia, to Sweden to but here it was a very nice young active fellow who owned, who was a partner in 17 gas stations here. So he was a young guy about maybe 37 and (relative to me young), 37 years old or something like that with a nice cash flow and he took care of about 25 families that came to Houston.

AB: Wow!

WA: He managed he hired maybe about 7 or 8 of them. But what happened in the meantime is that they were in the desert. The new generation could not read and write. So I mean they fell behind over an 8 or 9 year period to a degree that was absolutely astounding. Astounding! Some of them don't know what work is. One guy told me and I met him the other day. He said, "I tried to get this 18 year old kid to work he didn't know what work was." He was 9 ½ years in

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

the desert between the age of 8 and 17 in the desert. Nobody worked. They just sat down for 9 years.

AB: I can't imagine that.

WA: Can you? I mean these things. Somebody it probably takes a sociologist or a human anthropologist or something like that to think of these things but he said, "I tried and I tried and the guy would not respond." He said most of them are working now, but he said they have 2 or 3 that they kind of in a cocoon. They don't know what work is and they are not able to get out of their cocoon.

AB: Wow. I know you were also involved with the Arab American Secular Coalitions.

WA: Yes this is an organization that I started myself.

AB: Oh you did I didn't realize you had started it.

WA: Yes I started this because and it's an advocate group only. What we do we have a core number of people, and we just want anytime that there is first of all it's a multi faceted. It's about secularism. So we are not trying to convince the Americans or the United States but also we are ready to confront the tide of fundamentalism by, just by advocacy nothing else. I mean you go there, and it's so happens that the most active group in Seattle is a secular group. So to give you an example we tried to get, we got some complaints from some of the mosques. "Nobody listens to us, nobody listens." It's very easy. "Do you want to talk to Senator Cantwell?" "Yes." "Fine, we will arrange a meeting." So we arranged a meeting and they talked, but they talked like we used to talk 50 years ago. "Islam and Islam and Islam." I said, "Listen, stop it." After the meeting I said, "It's money. Do you have? Can you collect?" I mean, they had a, they wanted to build a mosque, a new mosque in the area Seattle is around a lake.

Have you been to Seattle?

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: No I haven't.

WA: It's around a lake. You have the west side, which is Seattle and the east side which is kind of like the Galleria you know. Like you have downtown and in between there's a lake and then you have the Galleria. They wanted to build a new mosque in the Galleria a new Sunni mosque. So they collected a million dollars over 6 weeks.

AB: Wow!

WA: So this Pakistani fellow comes after they collected the million and said, "Listen" (he's a big shot with Microsoft – big shot, in the top 20 or 25). He said, "I will give you a million dollars provided you collect another million." Within two weeks they collected another million and got the million. Three million dollars in 8 weeks!

AB: Wow!

WA: And we as the secular people, we if we collect \$160,000 a year we feel so happy. Those characters collect. So we got them there and we said, "Listen this is money. America is built on money." Anybody that tells you otherwise is deluding himself and if you think I'm going to... I feel I can give great lectures. But if you think that my lectures are going to change anything, also I'm deluding myself. If I had instead of \$160,000 that we collected this year for this purpose another \$160 I'd have two more Congressman I can bring to my side. And they tell you. I mean they tell you, "I have to have money. If I don't have money I cannot advertise and if I don't advertise I'm going to lose and then so you are going to lose me. But I cannot I cannot have you pay \$10,000 and the other side spending \$100,000 against me. It's just not going to work." So and they couldn't grasp it. They said, "Okay here are our conditions." I said, "Listen who do you think you are? Conditions? Who do you think you are? I mean this senator collects \$4 million dollars when she runs, and you are telling me that you are going to give for \$50,000

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

you are going to three full-scale pages of conditions? It doesn't work this way. Get yourself situation. She starts knowing you. You start asking for things, you up the ante a little bit, little by little that's the way and it's the money. You give \$20 this year you are going to give \$30 next year. You give \$30 next year you are going to give \$50 the year after to stay in the..." I said and things of the sort. I said, "Listen..." and they tell us. The senators tell us and we are very close. The state of Washington is different to here this very Arab in my estimation antiquated state here you know. I mean we talked to them as equals. We wanted there is this book about the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Have you heard about it?

AB: Which one is it?

WA: I forgot the name of the author. Anyway it's this is an Israeli author.

AB: Is it Ilan Pappé

WA: Yeah Ilan Pappé. So we gave it as a present to one of the congressman and he said, "Can I be honest with you? I have 3,000 pages of legislation that I haven't had the chance to read.

There is no way I have time to read a book. Can you summarize it for me? Just 10 pages, just I need 10 pages and do some quotations. Just like a book review and do some quotations and I'll take it and read it but there is no way. If you give it to any congressman," he said, "We're going to put it on a shelf whether he or she supports you or not." He said, "The average congressman is really familiar with what they vote on 1/5 of the time. They have no time for the other 4/5th."

AB: Yeah.

WA: He said, "I'll be honest with you. I'm not going to say it in public, but I'm going to say it to you. There's no time. I mean the system is not working properly for us to spend one year out of two years doing nothing but promoting ourselves to get reelected that means we are spending

50% of our time only on legislation and then legislation is 10 times as much as we have time

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

for.” And we told this guy, “Listen don’t give him 3 page. Give him 3 things that you would like, that you would be happy to see happen okay?” And hope that is what happens. So that’s basically our activity. These are the two activities, public officials and advocacy of secularism.

AB: Okay and I know there was a time you served on the board of the Houston Palestine Film Festival is that correct?

WA: Yes I was involved with the Houston Palestine. I was not really, it was kind of a general involvement. In other words also trying to bring them into, into a more realistic outlook of things. They did a good job, but they didn’t, what happened is that they got involved or got stuck with too many intricacies. I said, “You’ve got to look at the big picture. You’ve got to look at you know if you reach the right person he or she can make your life much easier than going and I’m not telling you to abandon, then having a dinner and collecting \$3,000. You need to have people that can have lunch or dinner.” I told them things like that. Invite people I’ll pay for lunch. I don’t have to be with you. It’s money. It’s can you go to this nice restaurant with somebody? You’re not going to get every time you go to Fadi’s you go to Fadi’s sometimes?

AB: No I don’t like Fadi’s that much.

WA: You don’t?

AB: No it’s okay, it’s good but.

WA: Are there some Iranian restaurants that are really good. There is one on Richmond?

AB: Kasra is really good. That one is really good.

WA: Good? Yeah anyway I said, “You can’t invite them to Fatty’s all the time. You need to invite them to nice restaurants. So if you invite somebody for lunch \$100, \$120 I’ll take care of it.” They just, they are not in this, I mean it took a long time for me and I realized this to

understand this is what makes the country tick. I mean people all the time speak about the

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

“talking heads.” The truth of the matter is that in a vacuum the talking heads are very influential. The average man is just talks. But this guy talks to 300,000 people, 400,000 people. Not like me talking to you or you talking to me. So at one time I used to think, “What are those talking heads talking about?” Morning show, day show, mid day show... they are the ones that set the course of the ideas that the United States would consider or be it that some of them are conflicted with each other but that’s it. That is the arena whereby the part of the challenges and competition takes place and if we don’t realize this, if we say, “He’s a talking... he doesn’t understand the Middle East.” I mean it’s very easy to say. True! But what he says happens to be respected. So this is, I mean I try in my dealings at my age to bring the different organizations to realize that the American political system is of a nature just like 90% of the political systems in the world that it is set in stone. You are not going to change it. I mean the Tea Party will take 3, 4 years and maybe 6 years and it will evaporate and the left that is the counter weight for the Tea Party also will evaporate and you will always come to this nasty middle. There is no way out of it because the revolution is not in the offing and doing nothing is not in the offing so where do you congregate? There it is. Back to the same thing. You move 10% to the left. You move 10% to the right and that’s it. Maybe 15% but that’s it and I mean the sooner we realize this the better it is. I mean all the books, Ilan Pappé and 15 people like him can write books like this and they do not move things as much as one “Meet the Press” show.

AB: Or like Bill O’Reilly.

WA: Or Bill O’Reilly.

AB: Who has sold millions of books!

WA: Yeah I mean look at this. They control 22% of the population almost and hey, I mean

how could this have this guy dreamt of making \$35 million dollars a year, you know and once

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

you make it. And now you are worth \$150 million in no time. Everything is open to you.

Everything is open. Look at this Trump just because he's rich. And these are realizations that need to be done and to be done intelligently. I mean for instance in the case of Congressman McDermott, the pro Israel lobby does not spend one penny against him because they know he is going to win. There is no power, there is no power at this time short of a real scandal that they will stop him. He is just very popular. So they don't spend their time. I mean this is an act of intelligence not to get excited about what McDermott says. It's just an act of intelligence. And that's the way when you have a political cause regardless what it is.

AB: It's a good point. So when you got involved with the Film Festival do you think it was because they are... I mean I know it's a pretty secular organization and they are...?

WA: Yes.

AB: Was that one of the main reasons?

WA: Yeah absolutely. I do not get involved in anything that is other than civil rights and human rights of a religious nature.

AB: Because I think there's even some Palestinian organizations in Houston like maybe PACC for example and they will sponsor the big festival but then they won't offer beer or something. Or sometimes the film festival is criticized because they have alcohol.

WA: For your information I made them offer wine.

AB: Oh good for you!

WA: No I know the PACC people and last time I went to a gathering where they were not offering wine I insisted even at that meeting they had not prepared to offer wine that now they do. They offer wine.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Yeah because I mean I know some Palestinian Christians and they said, “Well why assume that people don’t want to drink?” Then that also cuts off I think some segment of the American population that might want to come and enjoy the food and see what the culture is about.

WA: That is true I agree with you. I mean of course there are some Christians that do this just as an excuse and there are some Christians that do it because they are too conservative. When I make these statements and I’ve made lots of statements about these very strong statements like there is a guy that got a... to know the political system in a very superficial way. He knew how to invite public officials but he didn’t know how to negotiate. I mean it’s true that you have to invite public officials but there is a negotiation process. They know I mean in the state of Washington they will tell us how much they expect us to collect. It’s not that we call them and say, “Can you come and say collect money for us.” And they come and we collect \$2,000. No it does not work this way. They expect that you collect no less than \$15,000 or else they are not going to come. I mean regardless of our charm you know they will not come.

AB: Yeah.

WA: So this is a vital problem. So this guy collected (supposedly I did not see this) \$200,000 for Hillary Clinton and they didn’t say anything. Actually he insulted her in the meeting.

AB: Oh no!

WA: He was so unwise that he insulted her. So she took the \$200,000 and told him, “Go screw yourself” basically. And then some political mannerisms you know. Then he was about to go to invite Nancy Pelosi. Now Nancy Pelosi for anyone who is active knows that she is 100% pro Israel. More so, more so than the Tea Party. So one time we had a congressman who is now the governor and called us and he said, “Minority leader Nancy Pelosi is in town can you have a

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

fundraiser for her?" So I was talking to him and I said, "Jay listen Nancy Pelosi is 100% pro Israel. What is in it for us to collect money?" Then he said, "You're really not collecting money for her you are collecting money for me because I promised certain sums of money and I did not achieve. So can you do it as a favor to me?" I said, "But you know we'll do it but that doesn't mean that we won't talk about our issues. We can't go there and just play dumb." He said, "No, no, no feel free. No I'm not no..." So I said, "Listen you are calling us. This is 4:00 p.m. and you want us to have a fundraiser by tomorrow noon?"

AB: Oh wow!

WA: I said, "Listen what I'll do. Let me see and call you back. So anyway I called around and I got 6 people to donate, contribute \$1,000 a piece. I called him back and said, "This is what we have. I mean you didn't give me any time. You know you called me on the rebound because you couldn't collect and I just there is no way we can collect the \$15,000 like we usually do on short notice." He said, "Oh \$6,000 that's great!" That's the way they talk.

AB: Yeah.

WA: So we got the six people and we usually agree who leads the discussion at that point I was leading the discussion. I said, "Congress woman, tell us about your stand in regards to the Palestinians? We would like to hear it from you." So she said, "Oh I go to the Ramallah convention like I mention every year and I love..." just a joke. The biggest joke you will hear in your whole life.

AB: Yeah.

WA: I said, "Congress woman with all due respect we are talking about the Arab Israeli problem. Where do you stand? Do you support the two state solution?" Do you support this, do you support that? I gave her a few options to get her talking. And she said, "If you are trying to

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

create a distance between me and Israel I don't think you will be able to. I love Israel. My heart goes..." it's just like this. I'm sitting at a table, a round table for basically 8 people she and her aid and 6 of us. "I love Israel. My heart goes for Israel and what more can I tell you?" I said, "Nothing I think you answered me." Okay? I said, "You answered the whole thing." So she left. This character he collected \$200,000 here in Houston okay? Had a fundraiser for Nancy Pelosi and I sent him a letter the like of which he had never received in his whole life. He is a famous plastic surgeon and collecting, basically I said, "Are you an idiot or what? Do you know, have you ever read what Nancy Pelosi stands for? You are talking in the name of the Arab community in Houston and selling us to this and that and let me tell you what happened with us, although we knew exactly where she stood in the beginning." I have never received so many phone calls from Houston to Seattle from people here thanking me for this letter and one guy, two guys... two physicians here told me the same almost statement verbatim. "We were too scared to confront this SOB. I'm glad you did it!" So they come and they have this thing and in the end what this guy did came very influential. He could get people into Rice University. I mean you know Universities yourself, if you have a connection... I mean Harvard University said publically on 60 minutes that 25% of our students don't deserve to be at Harvard, but we have to collect money just like everybody else.

AB: Yeah.

WA: And we have to go to the people that can add to our endowment and things of that sort, same with Rice. So I mean the Arab community gave them one million dollars for a chair, to endow a chair so the people that fronted that thing became influential to some extent and things of that sort. This is the thing where, where the Arab Americans and even the Iran... there's a new organization Iranian organization. PAIIA..

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

AB: Oh yes it's like PAII..

WA: PAIIA. [NIAC – National Iranian American Council??]

AB: Yes.

WA: I'm on their mailing list and I send them a couple of very nice letters not like this telling them that you are making the same mistakes that the Arab Americans did. It is not Iranian food and it's not Iranian music in the end that would make the day. You've got to donate money and engage in argument. Of course their position, which is very proper is that not to attack Iran because in the end it's the Iranian people that have to pay the price.

AB: Right.

WA: Which is very solid this is what I support and things of that sort. I said but you've got to, your rich I mean most of them are really pro-Shah (I mean the old regime).

AB: Yeah.

WA: You can feel it among the things. I said, "It doesn't matter your policies. Go to those people and ask for your demands. Tell them you don't want to see an attack on Iran." First collect money. Pay them the money. Support them and then ask for your demands. Not to invite them to a Chelo Kebab or whatever.

AB: Yeah.

WA: Which is good, but it's not the essence.

AB: It's delicious, but it's not going to change anything.

WA: So I write them every now and then. What else?

AB: Well I was thinking as we were talking about politics because I think one of the reasons I got interested in this subject of sort of the traditional aspects of political activism and politics

was when Farouk Shami ran for governor. That was interesting to me.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: It is interesting, but he also I know Farouk Shami he doesn't like me as much as he used to okay? Farouk Shami happens to be a country boy in every sense just a country boy, just a hillbilly actually. A Palestinian hillbilly that used to be a hair dresser (and there is nothing wrong with that) that had the foresight to get into things that deal with woman's hair and got to be a billionaire. Okay?

AB: Uh-huh (in the affirmative).

WA: He is the richest Arab American in Houston, Texas. Farouk Shami has a net worth of no less than \$1.5 billion dollars. That's lots of money. I mean he cuts himself, I know that because he showed me these things, he cuts himself a check for \$6 million dollars every month. That is what he pays himself.

AB: I don't even know what I would do with \$6 million dollars ...

WA: \$6 Million. But Farouk Shami has maybe 1% knowledge about what his money can do.

AB: Yeah I mean it seems to be he's so rich and if there's... I mean there's a huge Arab American community that was not much support.

WA: He spent \$17 million dollars. I would have turned Houston around three times over with \$17 million dollars. The guy has no concept of what money can do if it's applied properly. Who does he think going into the arena and if I go into the arena and what I'm telling you know if I were to run, and what I'm telling you now they can manipulate it and make you look like I worked for Stalin himself at one time. Who does he think going into the arena of political not being ready for it to say unequivocally about certain things that need not to be equivocated and to equivocate when things he can equivocate. This guy didn't know one from the other and he thought that the Texan... Texas is one of the most conservative states in the whole nation.

AB: I know.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: Not only you know in the south, in the whole nation! So he goes and spends \$17 million dollars. He has no idea about political organizations whatsoever. He is a good person. But he could... this guy I mean the other day he was supporting a guy, I mean everybody knew he was working for the CIA a famous doctor, a Palestinian doctor, well established. I don't know how the CIA got a hold of him and they started an organization and this organization and he got to Farouk and Farouk started giving him money. And Farouk would not take no for an answer. Farouk, this guy is a CIA agent. I mean it's this simple. So Farouk didn't listen and in the end this gentleman meets, goes and extends his congratulations to the Ambassador of Israel on the Israeli independence day! I mean that is... you are negating Palestine itself by doing this.

AB: Right.

WA: So then in the end I and about maybe 15 other people wrote Farouk and said, "This crazy! I mean don't you understand what this means?" Then he dropped him. But... that's Farouk Shami for you.

AB: Yeah it was interesting to me that he thought he could win in Texas.

WA: It is.

AB: I mean just being a Palestinian American I thought to think that Texas... I mean Houston is, there's a lot of Arabs in Houston and I understand there's a lot of Palestinians in Houston so it's sort of different in Houston, which is more Democratic but to go on a state wide...

WA: Also, nobody sits down and analyzes things. In other words, you do have Arabs. You do have Palestinians. You do have organizations of all kinds and you do have rich people. But in the scheme of things it's just like people say, "Oh Saudi Arabia, oh my God! So rich!" but in the scheme of things, compare the GDP, the per capita GDP of Saudi Arabia to the per capita GDP of the United States and you will find out that Saudi Arabia is not a rich country. It has 1/3 the

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

GDP of the United States. So when we talk about the Palestinians and the Arabs we have to be cognoscente of the fact that despite their successes and their engineers and their physicians, there are about 500 Arab American physicians in town, okay? Despite all this thing what is their political and economic prowess in the scheme of things? So in order not to, I mean I'm not in the exercise of diminishing their power but I am in the exercise of channeling their power to be most effective.

AB: Right.

WA: And they, Farouk Shami himself could have changed, changed the political landscape here for the Arab Americans (to the degree it can be changed. I mean you're not going to convince somebody who things that the Israel is the fulfillment of the New Testament. I mean you're not going to change his). But instead of being 20% effective you can be 80% effective and reach this degree of effectiveness although you may be not reach the degree of dominance or the degree of prevailing. But at least you are on your way there. And this is something they don't understand. They keep falling into traditional things. I mean, getting people to say all the time, like this organization I mean it's a fine organization, you wrote me about, you sent me an email about the Heritage or something?

AB: The Arab American Education Foundation?

WA: Yes, no, no not the Arab the Patriots and Peace Makers.

AB: Oh that's from the Arab Americans National Museum.

WA: Yes.

AB: It's an exhibit that's coming.

WA: I mean it's fine... It's fine, but it is still very superficial.

AB: Yeah.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: I mean we know that the Arab Americans have had several four star generals. You know, we know that there are like they say this thing in Gebron and Gebron is this thing has the third most popular book in the history of the United States, the prophet and things like that. Yeah but in political reality where are we? I mean fine, if you want to support this organization. I'm not opposed to it, no. But I'm saying this is not the shortest distance between political action and political results. That's not the shortest. This is a cultural thing.

AB: Right.

WA: You understand priorities and attend to them. So by creating the Arab American Secular Coalition, you have an onslaught of fundamentalist thought that comes on and says you know, first of all you have to sit there and accept this notion (and it's only a notion) that there is an inherent cultural conflict between Islam and the west, which is not true. There is no inherent. I mean if you, very few people that one of the greatest Muslim thinkers are Avarroes have you heard of Avarreos?

AB: No.

WA: He is on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican I mean of the, you know, and this guy was an 11th century philosopher. He is the father of secularism in Europe and in the Arab thought and in the Muslim thought. And you get this thing and you accept it as a thing, so what we have decided not having somebody speak to the limited, you know to the limited engagements that we have because we are of limited resources. If you don't have, you will live in an era where this onslaught of Islamic revisionist thought will take over. And it is a revisionist thing. I mean, you know, I know that Shiite Iranians don't like Omar. Have you heard of Omar the Second? But this guy when he went, I mean the 7th century he went to

Jerusalem and refused to convert any synagogues or churches into mosques. When Europe, they

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

didn't know what marriage is in northern Europe. They had only raids to kidnap woman and rape them and this guy has the forethought to be tolerant. So this idea that there is a historical conflict between the two cultures is bologna. It is as bologna as anything. So you have to sometimes be reactive and actually the Arab American Secular Coalition is a reactive in this sense is that when we solve all this thing everybody, Muslim this, Muslim that, Muslim this... oh wow, what about all the Arab and Iranian philosophers and Omar Khayyám and you know what's the name of the famous poet in Iran, the...

AB: Rumi?

WA: Rumi and things of the sort. What happened to those? They just went by the wayside just like this!

AB: Yeah.

WA: I mean just because somebody opened a mosque in Houston, Texas and started saying that Christians are infidels. Forget it no!

AB: Yeah.

WA: Have you read ever a poetry for another Sufi, you know Rumi was a Sufi.

AB: Yeah.

WA: There is a female poet in Iraq called Rabia Al-Adawiyya.

AB: Oh no I haven't heard of her!

WA: She is phenomenal.

AB: Really I'll have to get that. I'll have to find her.

WA: I will send you one of her poems.

AB: Okay.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: It is the best poem about love that anybody has ever written in my opinion. That's my personal opinion.

AB: Yeah I'd love to read it.

WA: Oh she was a great Sufi and can you imagine that Rabia used to go from one coffee shop to another in Bagdad and do poetry at time unmolested by anybody and today in the 21st century you cannot go two blocks in Bagdad.

AB: Yeah really!

WA: I mean this is...

AB: Wow!

WA: That just tells you that things can go backward. What else do you have?

AB: Those are my only questions if there's anything else you wanted to add?

WA: No I believe I think first of all what I want to add is that activism is a duty. Whether you are an Asian American, a Persian American, an Arab American, a Hispanic, whatever. Activism is a duty or else the forces of backwardness will take over. And outreach is an absolute necessity for this activism to reach a higher level.

AB: You need to find your Arab Bill O'Reilly.

WA: [Laughter] We'll see.

AB: Then you'll be all set.

WA: There are some. You have some do you watch MSNBC sometimes?

AB: No, not really I don't.

WA: Okay there is MSNBC, which is answer...

AB: Pretty left leaning.

Interviewee: Abu-Rish, Wagih

Interview Date: February 19, 2013

WA: Pretty left, Chris Hayes, I mean you have people that are... first of all of course you can see I know them because I watch MSNBC about three hours a day. That's the main station that I watch other than the regular news. And they have people that you can feel that they support basically liberal causes that include, it is not supporting the Palestinians or supporting the Muslims or supporting them, liberal principles that include the Muslims and include the Palestinians and include the Iranians and include everybody else. But they cannot speak to the level. The only one that can speak and very high intellectual is a guy called Chris Hayes, young. I think he was the editor of *The Nation*, which is the most leftist of the left in the American spectrum. But I think that and I watch by the way from time to time I watch *Fox News*, because you've got to stay in touch.

AB: Yeah.

WA: You can't keep talking about *Fox News* as being bad without staying in touch with *Fox News*. I mean sometimes you can take it for about 10, 15 minutes but that's about it.

End of Interview.