

BETWEEN HOME AND HOMELAND

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Like many first-generation Americans, the overarching theme of my childhood and adolescence was a sense of difference from my peers, whose families had long histories in America and often lived a quick drive away. My favorite memories are my family trips to Turkey and Syria: visiting my parents' childhood homes, being embraced by their communities, and seeing where my ancestors lived for hundreds of years. My mother always says she feels lighter once she arrives in Turkey, and the more I travel to Turkey, the better I understand this sentiment. As graduation draws closer and I consider different career and life paths, I find myself pulled back to the Middle East. Speaking to my Arab-American friends, I learned that many of us feel this attraction, even though most of our parents worked tirelessly to escape the region's mass inequality, corruption, and instability. Why do we want to go back?

To get a clearer sense of this desire in others, I interviewed fellow Arab-Ameri-

can and sophomore Ranim Albarakawi, whose family is from Burqa and Tulkarem, Palestine. She shared that she first remembers wanting to live in the Middle East in middle school, when she first began to realize how unique her identity was. By understanding her ancestral connection to another region, Ranim began wondering what life there was like, wishing she could relate to the stories of her family in Palestine. To Ranim, Palestine carried a sense of home, and though she also views America as home, it lacks an integral part of her identity. We bonded over facing discrimination despite technically being considered white and—due to the recency of our diaspora—the absence of cultural channels as robust as other minorities'. With simpler lifestyles, shared customs, and a connection to the land, Ranim said she wants to "live there long enough to experience the life my ancestors have lived."

Ranim explained that her aspiration for a life in the Middle East was revived by her trip to Istanbul, Turkey, last



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summer. She found that Turkey's lifestyle embodied both the American and the Arab, with a healthy balance of time at work and with friends and family. Ranim also enjoyed being in a Muslim-majority country that incorporated religion into daily life, with mosques at each corner, the adhan (Islamic call to prayer) projected on loudspeakers, and halal meat available everywhere. Overall, she loved seeing a modern, open Muslim society, and said that she felt the "pieces of [her] identity being connected."

Though Ranim hopes to live in the Middle East sometime in the near future, she does not envision this as a permanent move. When I asked about her key concerns in long-term relocation, Ranim emphasized her fear of political and economic instability, which she rarely has to con-



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sider when living in America. Regardless, Ranim hopes to help improve daily life in the Middle East as part of her career; given the existing widespread corruption and weak governmental institutions in her home country that are products of Western imperialism and intrusion, however, she fears her individual voice cannot make a difference.

When I interviewed a few international students who were born and raised in the Middle East, they echoed Ranim's fear of settling down in their home countries and lamented the dearth of opportunities. Elie El-Kefraoui, a sophomore from Lebanon, noted that as Arab-Americans, we "don't realize the freedom, power, and privilege" of our American passports; however, he warned that while moving between the U.S. and the Middle East may be easier as an Arab-American, it is still both emotionally and logistically difficult to move once roots have been established in a different nation.

Like Ranim, sophomore Zaid Tabaza, born and raised in Jordan, wants to build a better future for his country. "I feel like I can do more to support [Jordan] if I'm not actual-

ly living [there]," he explained. Just as other Arabs who have lived in the Middle East, Zaid raised concerns about limited opportunities within Jordan, hoping to explore chances for success beyond his country to better advocate for his home.

I still hope to live in the Middle East after graduation so that I can experience the culture, lifestyle, and cities of my family and ancestors. My recent visits to Turkey and memories of pre-war Syria carry me between trips, but I always find myself homesick for a place that has never been my "home." That being said, I worry that my dream is based on a romanticized vision of the Middle East rooted in summertime memories. On the other hand, as a scholar and activist of the Middle East, I worry for its future, as wars and conflicts force its brightest minds into displacement and exile. It can be especially painful to see the disarray of the Middle East and continued suffering of its people, including my own family, while pondering the cost of my privilege. The opportunity of experiencing two countries comes with an eternal tug-of-war between regions.

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