Transcript of Interview with Dr. Azizah Y. al-Hibri

Introduction

My name is Hisham Elkoussf and I am a third year student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Today is Saturday, March 21st, 2002. It is 12:20pm in the afternoon and I will be interviewing Dr. Azizah Y. al-Hibri.

The interview commences on the next page.
a point of coming together, planning. I think of those days in a very warm
way. In fact, I laugh at myself how I read and then, when I did have siblings,
whom I could read to, I don't know how I did it, but I was so
childhood was mostly spent alone reading a lot of books and magazines.
there are quite a number of years between me and my siblings, so my

Your relationship with your siblings, did you guys get along very well?
If you could just quickly tell us when your childhood was like in terms of

sister.Huda is a doctor.
My brother Ibrahim is an international business person, my brother Jamil
and where do they do?
I have three brothers and a sister.
How many?
Yes I do.
do you have any siblings?
These mostly and macroeconomics.
What kind of business is he involved in?
Father was a business man and still is.

My mother was a good house wife and mother, and caretaker, and my
What did your parents do for a living?
Damascus, Syria.
my father was born in Beirut as well, and my mother was born in
where were your parents born?
I was born in 1943 in Beirut, Lebanon.
Where were you born and when?
Arabic literature in the country, so he couldn't see what I would gain from
literature. I was already published, and we had at home one of the best
well my father's argument was that I was really excellent in Arabic

and what would have been the option, the other option, had you not gone

well that I wanted to go to a university and my brother backed me up, and so I
university. I had to convince my father, not my family, but just my father,
that was not an option at the time. And I was fortunate that I went to a

Why did you decide to study in Beirut, Lebanon, as opposed to attending
college years at the American University in Beirut ("AUB")?
I am going to continue my questions now and focus a bit more on your


Was... in a very humanistic way, I remember Mr. Creat. I can't

and were there any high school teachers also that stuck out in your mind as

and did you have, at that age, any particular authors that influenced you?

when I say English, it was English, not American.

and which were your favorite subjects or extra curricular activities that you

Latin. I was an honors student I could say. I went to the American school for

and what type of student were you in high school?

Yes, I did.

and did you attend high school also in Beirut?
It's counterpart in here the United States.

You practice any major difference between an education say at A.J.P. and

having attended Graded school in the United States afterwards, did

very kind and sensitive person.

of him in the American press. I just didn't know it. I found him to be a

wonderful guy. True, I did not have to deal with the stereotype image

I did not know about Malcolm X until he arrived on campus. We had

a great leader such as Malcolm X back then?

and how was your experience in being in the same environment with such

Malcolm X. I didn't know it then, but I remember Malcolm X and Malcolm Boyd. I don't know if people remember

can I remember what position? I read in the Harvard at one point

yes, I well not political, but I was a member of the debating society. I

and in term of any political activity all

and then went extremely well.

them to have a very comfortable and welcoming few days in the beginning.

American coming to spend a year in Berlin and we wanted

and quite large which was a welcoming program for junior year abroad

I did a lot of things. I remember one program which was very successful

and what did you do most?

quite a bit... quite a bit.

with student government.

in terms of extra-curricular activities, were you involved? For instance

science.

discovered chemistry, much did we not very well with me, but I liked the

no. For some reason I just loved it. It was different. I loved physics.

literature and now all of a sudden focused on physics?

so was that a tough transition having all the years previously focused on

have a physics lab at home (laughing) so he sent me to college.

it was actually physics... yes because I argued to my father that we didn't

and while at AJP, what was your undergraduate major?
I guess this is a good time to make the transition from your studies in Beirut to the United States. You attended graduate school before law school at the University of Pennsylvania. When did you first become interested in graduate studies?

Elkouf: yes. At AUB, I found that the teachers knew their students, almost on a personal level. It wasn't quite, but nobody was really anonymous. But in the US, I think partly because I was an immigrant and partly because of the nature of the campus, I felt a lot more anonymous and basically, not uncared for, but somewhat marginalized to some extent.

al-Hibri: when I was at the American University, in my last year, I had moved from physics to math and then from math to logic, which was the closest thing to math but I still count my credits for the other campus, Arts and Sciences.

Elkouf: And at that time I applied for graduate school in Beirut and I was rejected because while I was an honor student in high school, I did not do very well in undergrad because of all the activities. So I decided that if I was going to have a graduate education anywhere, it has to be outside.

I think of the days doing philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania in a very positive light. It was very difficult when the Munich events had taken place, you know there was that massacre and shooting, and it was a very tough time for all of us. But the department did not identify politically or ethnically it seemed to me. We were just a family depending on our thought, and there were different schools of thought in the department and I found a comfortable group and had a great time.
could you just tell us briefly what courses you taught?

El-Hibri: Assistant Professor at Texas A&M. Very fortunate that when I applied I didn't get an offer and I got it from Texas and I was accepted, I was able to get a Ph.D. in Philosophy, you get a job right when you get your Ph.D. in Philosophy; you get a job right after your Ph.D., you become an Assistant Professor. I apply, I applied for your Ph.D. Your first position or your Ph.D., you become an Assistant Professor. I will now just go ahead and quickly shift to your teaching experience.

And what was that first experience like from being a student to making the transition to teaching?

El-Hibri: It was wonderful. Being, you see, once I became a Graduate Student, I was an Assistant Professor. I was teaching, and I was teaching all the time. I don't believe I laughed, I didn't have research assistantships at the time. I have difficulty remembering because it's been such a long time. It's been such a long time since I taught classes in the first years of my career. I went to my book a long time ago. All the courses I have offered assistantships, and I did not.

El-Hibri: What was that experience like?

El-Houbal: Yes, I did.

Teaching Assistant: During your course of graduate studies did you teach any courses as a teaching assistant?

El-Houbal: Yes, and even the faculty in Philosophy came to me. I was just wondering about the diversity of the family and whether there were other faculty. And you speak of your notion of family. I was just wondering about the diversity of the family and whether there were other faculty.
Think I can come up with any useful ideas.

This year, I've allowed me to produce and I feel less heard lately. I don't th

I hope this question isn't too redundant, but when is your favorite aspect of

I think my teaching style might be changing just a little bit as I grow up.

and how would you characterize your teaching style?

and during that time at Texas A&M, did you visit anywhere else?

Teaching is anything.

Logic (laughing). Isn't that boring? I love logic and in a way I regret not

and among those various, incredibly interesting courses, which one would

Those courses.

My day at Texas A&M I was also asked to teach English, and I did teach

Yes. I was hired to teach a variety of courses. Ethics, logic, and a new

the fact that I have (pause) ... you could say this is not true but

I would definitely not expect much I have (pause).

Being a professor

Putting a museum showing chemical exhibits, so you know we did a lot of

I've been to a museum showing exhibit. I also see my students

It's to connect with my students. So I like to get a lot of questions and

not in any way that I am aware of. But I do like order and discipline and I

and get order. But it has never been authoritarian or hierarchical at least

and sometimes outside the course. For example in the chemical class I took this year in

answer type of free flow discussion and interaction. I also see my students

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response of work over anxiety?

Elkoussait:

finding problems with it. It began very frustrating
uncannily considering every single arrangement a professor made and
because I was the only student and I was a lawyer, I was supposed to
be back in law school. I found out, after playing an academically process to
which you expressed, how does the law work. But the most difficult aspect of
developing, how do the laws fit into the law? I really didn't have much
for the American experience in terms of the material, the mode of
my family back home put law in the law is different and I was not
reality did not prepare me to figure out what law is. I had lawyers in

Elkoussait:

Yes it was partly difficult because although I decided to go into law, I

Elkoussait:

traditional difficult year everyone goes through?

speaking of your first year of law school, how did you find it? was it the

Elkoussait:

to continue the formal even though I was doing my first year in law school,
Penn a deal whereby I could have offi... and assistances, and so on, to
with the philosophy department and the woman studies at
conveyed together with the philosophy and I had
my friends, and I had been established the first feminism journal in the
school. And I had been established the first feminism journal in the
school. I could keep my consciousness with the philosophy department where I
still
one reason I found Penn's very interesting as a law school was because
issue of diversity and feminism in the law. I was able to mention to you
the school. The student body was diverse. I felt like the school felt short on

Elkoussait:

Graduate school, how would you describe it?

Elkoussait:

and just in terms of the student body, how was it?

Elkoussait:

positive. I knew the area, I knew the place, so why not thought
I wanted to go back to Penn. My experience the first time around was so

Elkoussait:

and very consistent with each other

Elkoussait:

to go, but here too, for different reasons it would be law and law and philosophy
do need to be clear in my mind about which way and which way
through philosophy with the philosophy is very important, and I
not able to really interested in change, it's not really going to happen
women's Rights, and specifically pluralism women's Rights. I came to me

Elkoussait:

When I was writing to write more and more on feminist issues such as

Elkoussait:

attending law school?

Elkoussait:

When did you first become interested or seriously considered

Elkoussait:
The first summer, I split it, when I was 18, between a magazine and

just briefly tell us what you did your other two summers?

you mentioned Davis Polk before one of your summer employers, can you

well these days…has good quarters (laughing),

with the money still sitting in savings and having done anything with it, but on the

for the Journal Unanimously, the decision process took forever and I left,

we had Dean Minderman, I think to negotiate with him a better headquarter,

we had dean Minderman, I think to negotiate with him a better headquarter,

for the Journal so that we can finish the property, and so on, at that time

amount of money from Davis Polk when I was a summer associate just

for that, I go to, I think about four months of there. I don’t know if I even

for that, I go to, I think about four months of there. I don’t know if I even

companied to the other journals, and made a point of trying to get money

law. And it was a band new Journal…well, somewhat uninsured

about securities markets and business law. Capital markets and business

think at that time it was business law. Lain’s law (laughter). something

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the editor in chief of the Journal of…which he keeps changing this name, I

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used to be the Journal of 2003, and then he selected as

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now you mentioned you were able to attend the first ever Emory Journal.

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not only at Penn but also in the entire county, what other activities were

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in a way maybe I should have also considered being a labor law

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which I have in class because one professor was very similar in many

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that other person who also affected me a great deal was Professor

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Yes, Professor Reitz was very good. He taught me contracts. But at the

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speaking of professors, does anyone in particular at Penn law stick out in

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pressured. Less concerned about their abilities of my professors.

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me really less concerned when I heard arguments that were not so well

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than a smart kid sitting in your class (laughter). But I sometimes make

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no I am not to criticize the professors too much. There is nothing worse
Speaking of Debesose, you were there for five years after Sullivan and

Cromwell so it must have been something else aside from just less hours.

Ekonwast:

well there but it turned out that you still had to work long hours (laughing)

and I was told that at Debesose you can have more normal hours and so I

got in to look around and I decided to look for something less demanding

giving two nights without sleep or shower and I thought that was

adjustment of being seven when we were working sometimes. Remember

working so hard, it was all the hours of the activity just before the

did you know that at the time and I did not know why but we were

worked long hours but we got results. When we

shared done things like acquisitions and so on I was my interest but I

shared done things like acquisitions and so on I love doing securities practice. When we

shared the task, I really enjoyed very much the tasks that I

shared the task, I really enjoyed very much the tasks and there I

proceeded and commenced. So we did this for a couple of weeks and then I

you... and part of the preparation is reading a lot of books. So that you get

take you there same day and tell you to do this or that. They prepare

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how to read in preparation. You know you don't... at least when I went

to read in preparation so you know what was your first

thing. When I entered there were a lot of books there we were asked

First hour:

Ekonwast:

year like at Sullivan and Cromwell?

as a corporate associate, could you just briefly tell us what was your first

one semester. I could have stayed for a year but I thought that would

and how long were you there?

Ekonwast:

there as well.

that I love so much. So it was a wonderful experience and I did lecture

Professor where I was responsible was actually to just write on the issues

to resurrect that name and I went to the Divinity School for World

taken away from me. put on hold until I got my law degree. So I wanted

thinking process I was engaged in a professor had been something

well you remember as mentioned earlier I was already working on

Ekonwast:

sparked your interest in religious studies?

Center for the Study of World Religions. Can you just tell us what

immediately after law school you went to the Harvard Divinity School's

I guess again this is a perfect transition period. As you mentioned,

then I went to Sullivan and Cromwell.

and then went to Harvard to do one semester at the divinity school and
Well you know... you know the market (laughing) when you go out and start interviewing at various universities for a job. What happened was you sort of you most then to the University of Richmond Law School.

So what attracted you most then to the University of Richmond Law School?

as my stepping stone and mainly submitted it, they accepted it. It was published and I used that seriously researching that article and very much took me many months. And I said since I thought this would be a good transition and I in fact very said sure. I thought this would be a good transition and I could, an article about clinical law. And I saw a professor I got a call from Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law. And I saw it a bit to think about academic and I don't. I want to go back to a philosophy easy to shift to academic and I don't want to make the shift to was shifting in my department office position to have to make the shift to not at all. In fact the transition was very good. What happened was as I private practice.

Did you think about going to a professor. Was it difficult leaving in 1992 as you mentioned you decided that I guess you missed the world of academia and you missed being a professor. Was it difficult leaving.

do you and I am sure much of this had been worked out since. Getting a choice professor as the best place to graduate these were the early seventies? Professors at went for its view of women so that some women felt they were not included and in some places. Whether academic or female. There were problems. There were problems... I will not speak of which harms. But there were.

and if you could just briefly tell us about your experience as a woman in private practice.

Hopkins law firms again, I sit there until I tell them I was time. Hopkins a professor was really when I was looking for a faculty professor and looking for and then when I really needed to do is become a professor and I wanted to become professor I think. I should not have let off being tumultuous at the time and in depression I think Hopkins was more conducive to

Your other interests as opposed to Sullivans. Do you think I have had culture at Deprose and Sullivans?
Elkouf: and it was in a suite there was an entry room and then the suite and in the entry room there were two professors one on the left of the door one on the right arguing about a very important case in Virginia, and... VM actually and they were on each side, they were on opposing sides of the case and I got so involved in the case and in the time of the reception ended and I did not even enter the other room and the next day I was eating in the cafeteria and I see one of them the professors and he calls me by my name and he says why don't you join us by my first name so I got very impressed that they were very personal as opposed to a Wall street which was very cold and distant (laughter), so when they made it offer on campus I accepted it on the spot.
I just sort of want to bring the interview to a close to give you a break and also to sort of focus on your activities outside of the academic realm, and I guess before I do that, I just want to mention a couple of things that also go to sort of focus on your activities outside of the academic realm.

Elkonstein: Yes. When I went on sabatical, I was a scholar at the Library of Congress.

Hilbert: You were away from Rhode Island?

Elkonstein: You were on leave of absence, I believe, 2000-2002, and then on sabatical leave in Spring of 2000. Could you briefly just tell us what you did when you were away from Rhode Island.

Hilbert: I told me they did, so I said ok. I'll teach it in the curriculum and then I stopped teaching it and then this semester well I taught it originally because we were looking for diversity of course.

Elkonstein: Of course just wondering what has been the reaction from your students to that course that you teach? It is the only one that seems real of place. I was sometimes reluctant to the idea because it requires a lot of patience, but share with you that your teaching patience, a great deal of patience, and I think...I would like to

Professor of Philosophy and also as a Law Professor, you learn from your students both at the graduate level as well as from them as well. So if you were to say...what are some of the
These people: various countries, what has been the lesson that you’ve drawn from

you mentioned that from your students you’ve learned the value of

Islam is: when it approve or disapprove, it’s just telling them, you know, what

where else do I try and let them know that this is about getting

realizing that this is the same lecture I gave to Muslims. So it takes me a

whether in the situation and make them think positively about it, not

I, some of them, that is anNAILING my statement about Islam in sort of

speaking in the United States about Islam, the audience thinks to think that

dependent on the audience, I’ve had a couple of reactions. When I talk

a government representative

not the typical law student but rather the lay person, or a representative of

representation. When has been the reaction from this audience who is

Yemen, I’m hearing, you’re also spoken in Capito Hill, let’s house of

institutions and many countries including Qatar, Pakistan, Kuwait,

let’s characterize you as a social activist, you have spoken in many

now you can specifically talk as a law professor and I don’t know if I can

that word,

religion of the other, and Karmam means dignity, that’s why we choose

child of Karmam to order all human beings, not just people with one

language and that word means that God has given dignity to the

which mentions Karmam in one of its forms, we regard Karmam

Karmam... actually we picked the word because there is a verse in the

now again aside from Karmam... could you just briefly tell us what the

voice some of their concern.

from Karmam is bond with Muslim woman in other places and also to

not lock down here. So I found it necessary, more so with other places, it’s

importance to a lot of people in the world, the Muslim woman’s voice was

years ago, it became clear that while Muslim laws for human rights, for a few,

Karmam, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, yes, I think a few

Yes, at the moment I am actually the president and executive director of

al-Hibri:
necessitated a break in the interview.

Doctor: Of all the Syrian refugees, I just want to ask you... women's rights. I have many questions, but I have a specific question. You have the title of Professor, and you have many ideas and you have a world-renowned research group. In what way do you use your personal perspective in your research?

El-Koushal: I believe you spoke with my law students about this. If you are a woman with a specific perspective, you have a vision of what you think is right. You are not thinking about what others think is right. And you do not want to change your own perspective. You want to change the perspective of others. This is my advice. When you grow up, you will see the world differently from the way you see it now.
Thank you so much. I just want to say on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, I hope I have time to do.

Eli Konstant: Still something that you need to do or accomplish?

Eli-Hibri: You should ask. Yes, I see myself towards the end of my life settling into the area of Sunnim or mysticism and that's the one

Eli Konstant: Hmmm...Funny you should ask.