





By Karen MacEachern

The Journey West

What some Middle Eastern students face when coming to Canada, and what they leave behind.

Conflict is nothing new to Ziad Raslan (above). In 1996, as a child in Lebanon during a 16-day military conflict with Israel, he hid with his family in the basement, trying to judge how closely each bomb fell. No water. No electricity. Nothing but time to worry.

"I begged my parents to take me away," he remembers. It was ironic, therefore, that 10 years later, as war once again encroached on Lebanon in July 2006, that all Raslan wanted to do was go home to his family.

Ziad Raslan is a student at the University of Windsor studying biology and psychology. He is one of about 1,650 international students, who almost universally experience a degree of isolation, homesickness, and a feeling of being overwhelmed when adjusting to university life in the West. However, many Middle Eastern students, who comprise about 13 percent of the university's international student cohort, face that and more. Leaving families behind in a fragile region of the world, they forge a life for themselves here, while trying to keep fear and apprehension at bay. For them, a university education sometimes comes at a cost greater than money.

In summer 2006, Ziad Raslan planned to return home to Lebanon for the first time in two years while on break from his studies. His hopes derailed on July 12 when Israeli forces attacked Beirut's airport, just 15 minutes away from his family's home. The strike was part of the battle raging between Hezbollah and Israel.

"The first few days were okay, lines of communication were pretty good," says Raslan. "I got a hold of them directly and was on the phone to them the whole time." His parents reassured him that they were fine. "But afterwards, when it started getting really bad. I couldn't get through – the phone rang and no one answered." Raslan feared for his parents, sisters and his young nephews ages six, four and one month. "My nephews had never experienced it – they were terrified." His family fled to Syria, a dangerous trek over backroads. Raslan tried to reach them by cell phone to no avail. Six thousand kilometres lay between him and his family, and he could do nothing about it.

"There was no way to go there; the airport was closed, and

my family didn't want me to come. I felt so helpless. I could only watch the news and pray."

Adding to his frustration was the fact that he knew no one from Lebanon with whom he could share his feelings. "I did not feel that any one could relate to what I was going through. You can't explain it. My Lebanese friends were born here and couldn't relate."

At first, Raslan handled the situation on his own – but eventually, Brooke White, director of the university's student development services, sat down with him and encouraged him to talk about what he was going through. "She made me talk for two hours – she was phenomenal. She made me feel that I didn't have to worry about anything but my family. Like, 'we'll take care of it 'til you can.'"

After learning his parents were safely relocated out of the country, Raslan still feared for them, because his father continued to go back and forth to Lebanon to check on his business. "I tried to convince him not to go, but he didn't listen."

He distracted himself by taking one class and working almost full time with disabled children. "It helped me get my mind off things. But even at work, I'd turn on the news and be reminded."

The conflict came to an end in mid-August, enabling Raslan to breathe a sigh of relief and reflect on his life in Canada.

"I really appreciate Canada. Security isn't something you worry about. You don't worry whether your house will be there. It really made me realize the things we take for granted in Canada. We really don't have a lot to worry about. We worry about money and clothes, but that really doesn't matter in comparison to health and security."

Raslan's goal is to practise international law; he doesn't expect that will be in Lebanon. "I could end up anywhere. I love my country, but I think I can better it through my education."



Sinan Tawfik

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Sinan Tawfik is the product of many cultures. Born in Iraq, he grew up in Nigeria, attended an international school with Lebanese, American, Italian, Asian, Indian and British students, and toured Europe. Yet, coming West to begin life as a student in Canada was still a great adjustment.

"I came with an open mind – I was very excited to be coming here." But, he adds, "I have to admit, that when I first arrived, I didn't really like it that much. Everything was incredibly different – the people, the culture, the environment, even people's mentality.

"When people would have conversations – even the topic of conversation and the way conversations were addressed – (they) were different than what I was used to. I gradually adjusted – and the truth is that, right now, I actually like it here," he says. "When you spend a year in a place, you eventually get used to the things around you."

When Tawfik, now in second-year electrical engineering, arrived at the University of Windsor, "I met all kinds of new people and the university community does their best to make you feel at home and help you settle in. I met many other students from Nigeria; many of them are my friends now."

Tawfik was drawn to Canada by its reputation for providing an excellent education and a degree that is recognized worldwide. He wanted to experience North American culture, selecting Canada over the United States based because it's known as "a more multicultural and open-minded society.

"I've found education to be more flexible here; you get many more opportunities, like working experience in your field, co-op jobs and internships."

Beyond that, he has a distinct line-up of a few things he's still having difficulty adjusting to, including the weather, the distance between cities, and the kicker – why North Americans refer to football as soccer.

But Tawfik says the most difficult challenge for him going to school so far from home is leaving friends and loved ones behind. "I talk to them as often as I can, at least once a week on the phone. I have 20th century parents – we use e-mail regularly to keep in touch."

Maryam Mirtaheri

When Maryam Mirtaheri BComm '06 left her home in Iran to attend university in Canada, she cried for two weeks straight. Still, being stubborn and wanting to make her own way in the world, she finally decided to dry her tears and immerse herself in western culture.

"I knew I wanted to go away to school – but coming to the West, and Windsor, I wasn't prepared for the realities of such a vastly different culture, language barriers and the loneliness.

"At the time I came to Canada, there was a crisis back home, so my dad had no way to send money. I had no means to support myself and I didn't know anyone. This was a personally challenging and frightening time for me."

To make matters worse, she had difficulty with the language once she arrived – despite her years of English studies in Iran.

Mirtaheri had been to England and Germany with her parents in the past, and had studied English for many years.



Maryam Mirtaheri

"I had options to go to university in England, Germany or Canada. Canada seemed more diverse – I felt I would feel more at home there than England or Germany. As well, in Germany, I would have had to start from scratch from a language perspective."

Separation from her family was often made worse by media reports: "The media in the West tend to blow things so out of proportion that, when I watch the news, I get worried whether my family is in danger in Iran. But when I call and speak to them or after a visit home I realize their reality is very different than the one portrayed by the western media. Still...", she says, a passionate note in her voice, "I want my parents to come here to Canada with me. That's what I want."

Mirtaheri said if she had one piece of advice for other international students it would be to prepare well for the first difficult weeks and months. "It takes time to get used to the people, culture and language. There are a lot of adjustments to make."

Now employed with the university's Office of Liaison and Student Recruitment, Mirtaheri recalls how she eventually acclimatized to life in Canada.

"I intentionally avoided contact with other students and people from Iran during my first year here. This approach really helped my English, and most definitely helped me fit into Western culture more quickly.

"If you want to be successful in Canada, you have to live the culture and the language. You need to understand the customs and how to act in order to be able to live here and find success here."

Restricting her interaction with the Persian community

was tempting though: "The fact of the matter is, you can live in an entirely Persian community here in Windsor. It's easy to come here and associate almost exclusively with other Persians. Many people do that."

While being a strong proponent of western immersion, Mirtaheri hasn't forgotten her roots. She celebrates the Persian New Year, (Norooz) marking the arrival of spring. And, this year, on its last Wednesday, as is tradition, she will observe the ancient Iranian festival of "Chahar Shanbeh Souri" (translation: Wednesday Fire), far from her home. Her Persian friends and other Persian families will gather, collecting brush and wood to be lit shortly after sunset.

"We line up and take turns jumping safely over the burning piles, giving thanks for the fortune of having made it through another year and exchanging pain or darkness with the life and warmth of the bonfire." And, perhaps, she will take a moment to remember the sacrifices, bask in her success, and fuel her dreams for the future.

