

REPRESENT

Leap of Faith: An Immigrant's Perspective JANUARY 2022 on a Future Career in National Security

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Sama Kubba, an Iraqi-American, sheds light on her perspective and views on patriotism and what it means to be an American today.

Like every other American college girl, I have an intense self-care routine. I wash and moisturize my face twice a day, condition my hair three to four times a day, and touch up my makeup every couple of hours. This routine means I am looking in a mirror quite frequently, observing my Arab features. Every time I see my olive skin, almond-shaped dark brown eyes, reddish-brown curly hair, and bold hooked nose, I am reminded of the fact that I was born to be an Arab woman.

Growing up, my parents insisted that I hold on to my background. My Iraqi family and I came to the United States in 2009 when I was seven years old, and while it was a dream opportunity, it meant that my little sister and I weren't being raised in an Arab culture, we were being raised in an American one. In an effort to preserve our heritage, my parents always emphasized speaking Arabic at home, practicing Islamic traditions, and keeping in touch with family back in Iraq, who often disapproved of my life choices such as the American clothing I wore.

Yet here I am, with American citizenship, studying political science, the Middle East, and international relations at Harvard University after living in Virginia for 10 years prior, and planning to work on foreign policy for the U.S. government when I graduate. I love the United States. I love being American. I have a lot of pride in the country that raised me with democratic and just principles that gave me a voice and gave me opportunities to succeed. Especially being a woman, I know that my life would have been significantly different had I stayed in Iraq.

It was still difficult being in the United States with a low-income, single-mother family, but this country's emphasis on creating equal access was phenomenal. My mom, little sister, and I relied on food stamps, section 8 housing, Medicare, and the support and love of those around us to survive. In high school, my International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and SAT were free. I even earned my high school diploma, my IB diploma, and my AP Capstone Diploma for free. And now, I am attending Harvard on a full scholarship.

There have been so many pathways made available to me to build my own life, regardless of my background. Being American is empowering and I feel compelled to protect and improve the possibility of an American life for future generations—especially female minorities like myself. This mission is what motivates me to seek a career in foreign policy. It means that I can promote U.S. global leadership and advocate for a world that shares its principles of pursuing equality and liberation.

Although I feel patriotic, I know I do not look like someone you expect to be in U.S. foreign policy. I don't usually see Arab women at the decision-making table. Here at Harvard, I have a wonderful friend group that I am dearly grateful for, and nonprofits like [Girl Security](#) have provided me with amazing female mentors who are currently in the field. But I rarely meet other minority women my age interested in U.S. national security—especially at Harvard. I often feel as if I do not have a professional cohort or a network of like-minded women to rely on. I work in what feels to be male-

dominated environments, which creates a culture of “bros” that feels alienating. Although I know that I can pursue what I want professionally in the United States, it is hard to feel like I am doing it with very few female role models.

On the other side of my identity, I have found it hard to connect with the Arab community. Some Arabs think I have Stockholm syndrome by working for the country that invaded my place of origin. The United States is seen as a corrupt, imperial force in the Middle East, and my efforts to advance U.S. interests paints me as a traitor to my own ethnicity and culture. To many, my planned career with the U.S. government is misaligned with Arab values of country, family, and cultural loyalty to the Middle East.

In the spring of 2021, I had the opportunity to virtually meet Queen Rania of Jordan and when she told me to take my Harvard degree “back to the Middle East,” my heart dropped. Her words juiced the common obligation felt by migrants to their extended family, and to their home culture. That was the moment I started to realize how important my nationality meant to me over any other part of my identity. The idea of leaving the United States, much less working for another government, felt wrong. My plan of working for the United States, however, leads to rather awkward conversations with other Arabs—to the point where I now reconsider attending Arab gatherings at Harvard.

At a societal level, there are steps we can take to alleviate feelings of alienation and isolation for immigrants who want to enter national security. Building a network through high school and college conferences for students of all backgrounds focused on foreign policy; providing diverse university career counselors competent on foreign policy career development; and broadening course options and faculty focused on foreign policy are potential ways of addressing the gap.

Personally, I feel that working in national security does not make me a traitor. Reconciling my Arab and American identities is a personal challenge I decided to address by leveraging my perspective as an Arab woman to advance U.S. global leadership. It makes me honest, and it makes me who I am: an Iraqi-American.

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Sama Kubba is an Iraqi-American sophomore at Harvard studying Near Eastern Languages and Culture and Government for her Bachelor's degree and Modern Middle Eastern Studies for her Master's degree. She is the President of the Harvard Undergraduate Foreign Policy Initiative where she organizes undergraduates to conduct policy research for entities such as the U.S. Department of State, United Nations, and Facebook. Sama also works as a research assistant for Harvard Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative and Belfer Center for International Affairs and Science.

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