

Chapter 3

Studying in the United States

From Medicine to Industry

With his brother Mohammed shouldering responsibility for the family business, Abdulaziz Al-Zamil could continue his studies. On the geopolitical stage, relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia had deteriorated to such an extent that in 1961, Crown Prince Faisal recalled Saudi students from Egyptian universities. The following year, a Nasser-inspired revolution overthrew the Yemen monarchy. In the resulting civil war, royalists were supported by Saudi Arabia, and the opposing revolutionary forces were supported by Egypt.

Increasingly, the Saudi monarchy sought alliance with the United States. The government began offering scholarships for Saudi students to study at American universities and colleges. Abdulrahman Al-Zamil explains, “There was a major shift: from the Arab universities to the American ones. American universities opened their doors in a big way to accept all the Saudis. I was just old enough to be in the previous wave, going to college in Egypt.”

Abdulaziz still clung to his dream of a medical career. He spoke with a cousin studying in the United States, who encouraged him to talk with officials at the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. Abdulaziz acted quickly.

I then sent my documents to the academic attaché in New York City. He encouraged me to apply for a scholarship. I didn't consult anyone in my family because I was in Britain and had exams.

The scholarships from the Saudi government paid for all travel, tuition, and living expenses. Any Saudi with a high school degree, wherever he lived, was eligible for a scholarship to study abroad. Through the 1950s, abroad had meant Egypt, but after the disagreement between Egypt and the Kingdom, abroad for many Saudis meant the States. At one period, fourteen thousand were studying on scholarships in the U.S. It was an offer you couldn't refuse; it was so good. I was given two choices of location, either California or Texas. I had a cousin studying petroleum engineering in California, so I decided to go there.

Abdulaziz applied to the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles and was accepted. He arrived in 1963. His time in England, spent

studying for O- and A-level exams, prepared him well for the transition. It “made it easier for me,” he recalls. “I was exempted from taking one year of English-language study. Saudi students used to have to take one year of English, but because I’d been studying in the U.K., I was allowed to immediately enroll in regular university classes.”

Al-Zamil finally abandoned his dream of becoming a doctor when he learned that medical studies in the United States were organized differently than elsewhere and that his scholarship would not cover the years of study required to obtain a medical degree. He explains,

In the United States, you have to complete several years of undergraduate study before applying to medical school, and then you have to complete an additional five years of medical study. My scholarship would only allow me to study for five years total. I decided not to pursue medicine.

Having made this pragmatic decision, he turned instead to industrial engineering. “I chose industrial engineering. It was a new field, offered at that time by only a few universities. It appealed to me. I was among the very first Saudis to major in this area.”

Abdulaziz’s first two years of study in the United States covered basic engineering subjects, including math and drafting; after that, he took more specialized courses. “Because of the courses I had taken in the U.K., I was able to finish my first degree in fewer than four years, and then I started taking graduate courses.” Thanks to his determination and his ability to focus, Abdulaziz obtained not just a bachelor’s but also a master’s degree in industrial engineering within his five-year scholarship period.

Industrial engineering was a fortunate choice: not only did the subject suit him, but it equipped him to meet emergent needs in Saudi Arabia at a critical juncture in his country’s history. The 1970s saw the ambitious first phases of a major Saudi push to modernize and industrialize. Al-Zamil’s training positioned him to play a key part in molding the country’s future. “It fitted me for work that was coming up in Saudi Arabia. People were starting to talk about creating industry.”

As the 1960s progressed, a growing number of Saudi students joined him at USC. Of these, some would in years to come work alongside Abdulaziz Al-Zamil in the great task of industrializing their country.

Explorations and Formative Friendships

Life in California was utterly different from that in Saudi Arabia—and a change again from the United Kingdom. “In the United States, education means training. In Europe, it means giving you the chance to educate yourself by yourself,” an American teacher told Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, who had also arrived at USC in the early 1960s.

The teaching environment was a welcome improvement upon that in Egypt, where lecture classes were frequently jammed with more than a thousand students. At USC, there were often just thirty students to a class, enabling instructors to give more attention to students and allowing for more interaction. Life in America was also far less formal than in Britain, as Abdulaziz remembers:

I was impressed by the informality of the Americans compared with the more conservative English people I had met. Everything was so much easier to do, from obtaining a driver’s license to getting a telephone. Everything involved far less red tape.

During his first year at USC, Abdulaziz stayed on campus in a student dormitory and roomed with someone studying medicine. “I didn’t have a car or a driver’s license, and I wanted to be close to my classes. We had a nice park next to us and good sporting facilities.” In his second year, his brother Hamad arrived. The two moved into a one-bedroom apartment together.

When Abdulrahman also moved to USC from Cairo University, to embark on a PhD in international relations, the three brothers rented a two-bedroom apartment. Abdulrahman reasoned that international relations would build on his training in law and hoped “this could help fulfill my expectations to play a part in promoting our national objectives in terms of the Arab image,

the Islamic image in the world.” With the arrival of Zamil, also close in age, the four brothers moved to a three-bedroom apartment. “Then, in my final year, 1967, my fifth brother came, so we moved into a white house near campus that we called ‘The White House.’”

The White House became a social center, as the brothers entertained their Arab and American friends. Abdulaziz recalls,

We had a very active social life with my brothers there. We had many friends: Saudis, Kuwaitis, other Arabs, and Americans. They came to our house on the weekends. We also hosted some Saudi students when they first came to the States; we had a hospitality allowance. We mostly studied in the library but also at home. We were able to progress quite satisfactorily and were engaged fully in university life.

The brothers convinced Mohammed, their oldest sibling, to send them additional funds. According to Abdulaziz,

We used to estimate how much money was needed to live comfortably. It was all done by mutual agreement. If we needed money for something specific, we asked Mohammed for it. He was in charge and sent us our allowances.

We used to send letters to him, but sometimes he wouldn’t open them because he knew all they contained were requests for money! He used to joke with us and say that we were bad investments. We would reply that we were a long-term investment, and, indeed, we were.

The first car we bought was from my cousin when he graduated. Scholarships were only sufficient for tuition, food, lodging, and so forth; we could barely afford a car. Then we bought an old Buick after convincing my older brother to send us the money. We’d drive with friends to places near Los Angeles or farther away on the West Coast, all the way to San Francisco, to Arizona, to Las Vegas.

Like his father, Abdulaziz loved to spend time with a wide range of people. One American student taught him the rules of football and engendered in him a passion for the game. Abdulaziz points out, “It was a most difficult thing for my brothers and for me to understand American football. Then I

had a friend teach me. When my brothers came and I was watching football, they became very upset. They wanted to watch basketball or soccer until I explained football to them. Then they started watching it, too.”

Another American friend invited him to spend a week on the family farm near Lake Tahoe:

We were going first to Las Vegas. My friend’s father used to be a fighter pilot and had a very small plane. His mother went by car to Las Vegas, but we flew there. I told my friend, “Tell your father that I don’t like flying.” When we were in the plane, he was joking about the up and down, and I told him, “Look, I’m really scared.” When we landed in Las Vegas, I said, “Enough. I’m taking the car to the farm with your mother.”

The flying experience notwithstanding, Abdulaziz Al-Zamil’s five years in the United States gave him an invaluable background in American society, politics, and culture. He remembers, with humor, one mild cultural hiccup:

My brother Abdulrahman was born only six months apart from my brother Hamad because they are from different mothers. That was very weird in the States. We were living in the same house, and we had the same car, but the insurance company became suspicious. How could we be brothers, they asked?! Luckily, the secretary at the company was an Arab-American, and she explained how Abdulrahman and Hamad have the same father but different mothers.

In addition to explorations in the American West, during Al-Zamil’s time at USC, Saudi scholarship students studying abroad were provided each year with a round-trip airline ticket; so the Zamil brothers usually joined their wider family for summer vacation in the mountains of Lebanon. Abdulaziz recalls, “My father had encouraged us to spend the summer together. We continued that tradition as much as possible after he passed away.”

Another valuable educational experience had begun during Abdulaziz’s time in the United Kingdom. With an eye to the future, he had spent two months completing an internship with Aramco, in its procurement department in London. Later, while enrolled at USC, he joined the Aramco program for a second time during one of his trips to Saudi Arabia. This internship took

place at Ras Tanura, where he learned about such issues as productivity and scheduling. “It was a very useful experience,” he remembers. During the internship, which coincided with Ramadan, the Muslim period of fasting, he decided to study the effect of fasting on the productivity of workers.

My professor encouraged me to pursue it. “Yes, go ahead. Why don’t you write a paper on it?” It was difficult to find sources, but I found that some researchers were doing experiments on rats. I was also able to do fieldwork and interview my colleagues who were fasting.

I found that productivity while fasting really could go up, depending on the task. If the environment was bearable—the heat and the surroundings—one could be extremely productive because when you are fasting, you have more concentration and more time. If the physical work is within the boundaries of human capabilities, productivity is not affected. It was very interesting.

The Arab Student Association

Abdulaziz thrived on study and on friendships—including those with Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan, Khalid Al-Gosaibi, Abdul Wahab Al-Attar, and Fayiz Bader—but he also invested time in an extracurricular activity: USC’s Arab Student Association (ASA).

Studying in California was very exciting because of the interaction with people of different nationalities. Almost half of the foreign students were Arabs, and from the remaining non-Americans, there were almost twenty nationalities. I had an active social life. We had gatherings on Muslim holidays and so forth. I had friends from the Gulf, Kuwait, and others from Morocco who were studying with us.

We were very active in the Arab Student Association, especially in our commitment to the Palestinian cause. At the time, Saudis always dominated the Arab associations. Money had nothing to do with it; we dominated because we were the majority.

The ASA's president was Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, who was studying for a master's degree in international relations at USC. "Ghazi was older than me, we had different classes, and we had a strictly professional relationship in the association." Al-Gosaibi's two vice presidents were Abdulaziz Al-Zamil and a Moroccan friend, who succeeded to the presidency, followed by Al-Zamil.

The ASA concentrated its efforts on enhancing American understanding of the Arab world and of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Abdulaziz reflects that he and other Saudi students were, at the time, captivated by the rhetoric and popularity of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was calling for a united Arab front against Israel. The efforts of the ASA to make the case for Palestinian claims were unsuccessful, which Abdulaziz attributes to Zionist influence on the media.

I started understanding American political life and especially the American political system. I began to see more clearly the relationship of the U.S. with the Arab world and how U.S. policy was influenced by special interests. More and more, I saw the power of mass media and how powerfully it serves certain purposes, intentionally or not. I was amazed by this great nation, the United States. From the assassination of Kennedy five years earlier to the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, it was a turbulent and eye-opening time.

Then, in 1967, there was the disastrous war in the Middle East, the Six-Day War. We Arabs thought we were going to win, and when the Arab armies retreated, we were very shocked. It badly affected us emotionally. We used to listen to Ahmad Saeed as he announced the news, and we relayed it over the phone to our friends. During the crisis, we organized big protests, even during exam time. We were very active. This was accepted by the Kingdom because Saudi Arabia backed the Palestinian cause politically. We tried to avoid any topic that divided us as Arabs and concentrated on the issues that were important to all of us and united us. We tried to explain the Palestinian conflict to Americans and provide them with the true vision of Islam.

The media reported the Six-Day War as a big victory for Israel. When I was in Los Angeles, Golda Meir visited a part of town that had a big Jewish population, so we held protests in front of the

stadium in which she was going to give a speech. All the Jews were celebrating. We were devastated, trying to swallow our pride and think of a way to overcome this defeat. We had a very limited impact on campus. Yet this experience was very beneficial, and it came in handy when I was in governmental office and when I negotiated with Americans because it taught me how they think.

All this gave me the feeling that we Saudis could not rely on outsiders. We had to rely on ourselves. People would respect us only if we were strong internally and not dependent on outside help or aid. We had to strengthen our economy, rediscover our values and our own basic inner strength, and stick to that.

Al-Zamil's role in the ASA helped him develop valuable leadership and strategic skills, and the period influenced his thinking at a wider level. Working alongside Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, as vice president of the ASA, Al-Zamil developed a good rapport with him. Al-Gosaibi would go on to forge an eminent career in the Saudi government, becoming the country's first minister of industry and electricity. In due course, he would nominate Al-Zamil to that same position and to the most challenging task of his career. Al-Zamil notes,

I didn't excel in Bahrain, but I did excel in the States. The educational system there encourages you to understand more. I didn't want to stay for a PhD; I didn't want to be an academic. In engineering, a master's degree is more than enough, and it is always advisable to get some practical experience before pursuing a PhD.

Studying in the States was a very satisfying experience. It gave me a determination that we could do things here in Saudi Arabia. California was completely different; the only thing I regret about America is that it spoiled my English!

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