



Interview

Yussef Al Tamimi

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16 May 2025

Anne Saab (AS):

Good afternoon and welcome to Yussef Al Tamimi. We're really delighted to have you here in Geneva and to have this opportunity to chat with you. So my first question to you is, can you tell us a little bit about your career trajectory so far and especially your PhD thesis and what you explored?

Yussef Al Tamimi (YT):

Thanks a lot for having me as well here. It's great to do the interview and great to be in Geneva actually. I'm really enjoying my time here.

I started my career, I suppose, in Amsterdam. That's where I studied law initially and that's also where I got interested in questions of identity.

That was my original interest and it had to do a lot with my own background, like my family's background coming as refugees to the Netherlands from Iraq. And yeah, I guess always these questions that one has about where do they feel at home, where do I feel at home. So this was something that I guess troubled me throughout my childhood.

And of course, this feeling comes with a lot of emotions. It's a very deep, strong, and touches on so many aspects of one's life, these questions of identity. So I would say that that's initially made me think into the question of how can I tie this somehow to questions of law, which is what I was studying.

And that's when I decided to try to write a PhD on the sense of belonging and how through law the state might shape, create or destroy feelings of belonging. And so I started doing my PhD at the EUI (European University Institute) and I noticed pretty quickly that belonging as a concept doesn't really feature in the jurisdiction that I was looking at, which is the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights. So I decided to take it a bit broader than just the sense of belonging.

And I started looking at identity and how the court constructs the concept of identity in its case law, which it does in quite a lot of cases, actually, from like sexual identity to religious identity to ethnic identity and so forth and so on, in articles on the right to privacy, right of expression and so forth. And something that I noticed in all these cases – hundreds of cases – on identity that the court engages the concept of identity is that it deals with emotions differently in these different categories of identity. So when it's about certain categories of identity, the court uses a language like humiliation or a sense of shame or feeling like a second-class citizenship.

And so it's by using this emotional language really gives like a sense of interiority or subjectivity to the applicant, to the victim of the rights violation. While in others, the court is much more reticent to do that. And as a result, the applicant seems much more formal and abstract and objective to use these notions unproblematically for a moment.

So yeah, that was what came out of my PhD is this: that there's a level of inconsistency there, let's say, in how the court uses that language of emotions and the effects of that on how a case is read essentially.

AS:

Great. Thank you so much. Well, I really look forward to seeing where your completed PhD leads after this. So let me ask you a question now about your current research project. What are you currently working on?

YT:

Yeah, it's a good question because sometimes I also don't know what I'm doing at the moment.

I think that because of the state of the world that we're in now, in the last two years, I've focused a lot on public international law. So out of the sense of urgency and necessity. So I've worked on a lot of Gaza related stuff, IHL (international humanitarian law), etc.

And so my emotions research lagged behind a little bit, has lagged behind in the last two years. But I think now these two things that I'm doing, which is more of the public international law stuff, and my earlier emotions research is kind of coming back together in a way. Because what I'm working on now is grief and mourning in international law, or through international law.

And here, something that I'm writing about currently, or something that I wrote a paper on currently, is how at the United Nations level, there are different practices of mourning, as I call them in this paper, such as victim testimonies, and moments of silence, and lowering a flag to half-staff, how these practises of mourning, why they take the shape as they do at the UN level, so what ways of mourning are recognised,

and who these ways of mourning include by being the way that they are, and who they exclude by the way that mourning is accepted on the international stage, and what impact that has on whose grief is recognised and whose isn't.

AS:

Great, thank you so much. And I can very much see the links between your PhD work and your current thinking, even though I suppose sometimes those connections don't become obvious until much later.

So let me ask you a question which is a bit more forward-looking. So how do you see the future of emotions research as an international lawyer, or a legal scholar? What do you think are some of the pressing issues, or themes, or conversations that we should be having?

YT:

It's a good question. It's a very important question, I think, now.

So I think that many people say that international law has always been in crisis, and through different iterations of crisis, but well, we can at least say that there is currently a crisis of international law, at least in its latest iteration. And so I've been thinking a little bit about what is the role of emotions research in this particular crisis, or what can its role be? And I don't have a good response, obviously, it's a very difficult question, but maybe one way to think about it is, I mean, often I look at international law, and international human rights law, for example, as a system of belief, in a way. So with its own rituals, and temples, and scripture, and saints, and so on.

The UN Charter actually has, in its preamble, as one of the objectives of the entire UN system, to restore faith in fundamental rights. So there's this element of faith being lost, and faith being, or having to be restored, right? And so one thing that I'd be interested in, a theme that I think could be interesting for emotions research, is to think about what does the current crisis that we have now, with all the duplicitousness, the double standards, the hypocrisy, and all these issues, how do they affect this belief, or the faith? What exactly is the linkage there? How is faith affected when the world just sees the obvious double standards that are there, the inconsistent applications of standards? So that's something that I'd be curious, actually, for other people to research, and for me to learn from.

AS:

Great, thank you so much for taking the time to be here and speak with us today. We look forward to keeping our conversation going.

EC:

Thank you for having me.

