

Syrian student's family flees hometown to avoid violence

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Electrical engineering student Kusay Kharmandh grew up in Idlib, Syria.

Idlib, amid a country-wide, year-long revolution, is under fire.

Soon after the revolution began last March, Kharmandh's parents moved from Idlib to Aleppo with their daughter.

Kusay reflected back to that time.

"It has been almost a year and 7-8,000 people have been killed now," he said. "If I was there, I would be protesting."

They moved for safety and business reasons.

"Their business is not going well at all. They

sell used cars and used parts for cars. Since our trouble is with the government, they shut down all of the ports around the country. You can't import anything," Kharmandh said. "I used to get support from my parents, but now? Not at all."

Two of Kharmandh's brothers live and work with auto parts in Dubai, and have been sending some money his way.

Local Syrian families and friends have also chipped in to help support him.

When he hears the name of his country, Kharmandh automatically thinks of his parents. He does stay in contact with them, although the government

limits this contact.

"They ask me, 'How are you?' and I say 'Forget about me, tell me about you.' I am in trouble here but I am OK," Kharmandh said.

His grandparents remain in Idlib despite pleas from his mother to join them.

Kharmandh's grandfather's arm was injured after a bomb explosion.

Another of Kharmandh's brothers was captured by the Syrian government and forced into the military service.

"I am afraid that they will tell him to kill people. He would have two options: to be killed or escape," Kharmandh said. "I don't know what he would do."

Kharmandh came from

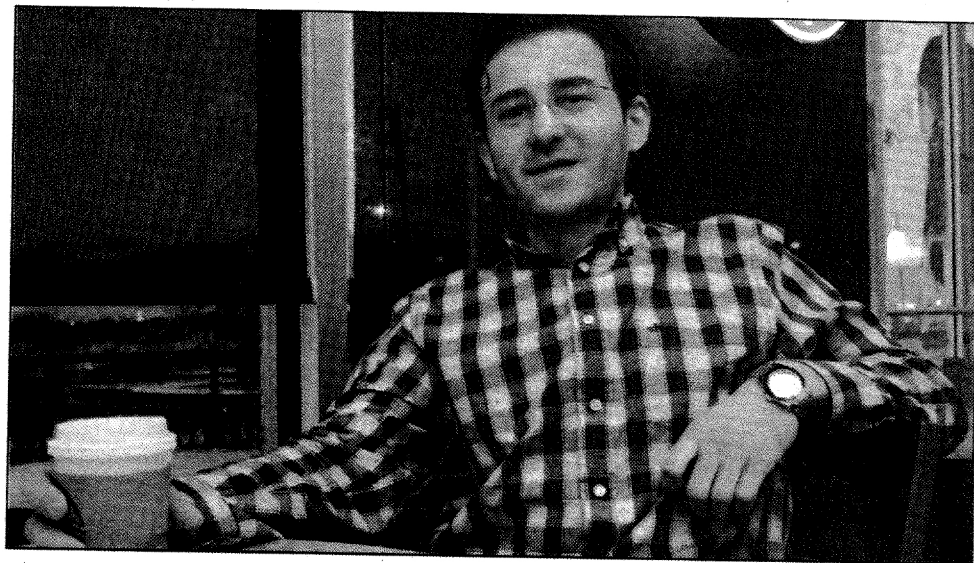


Photo by Sreedhar Vasomsetti

Kusay Kharmandh shares his family's story of turmoil in Syria.

Idlib, Syria, in fall 2009 to study electrical engineering. He spent his first year studying at the Intensive English Center before enrolling officially

in WSU classes.

Kharmandh's parents wanted him to stay in Syria.

"They asked me to stay in Syria, but I prefer to travel," he said.

There are 21 million Syrians in Syria and 18 million outside the country, Kharmandh said.

Please see SYRIA on PAGE 6

From **SYRIA** on page 1

He is among those outside, looking in.

"I didn't expect it to approach this point, I didn't expect to have all of these people killed. Every time I go to my place or to the library to start studying, I start thinking and say, OK, let's see what's happened. I open Facebook or try to listen to the news and spend a couple of hours there. When I try to come back to my studies, it's...what the heck am I doing here?" he said.

Kharmandh simply cannot focus on school when his mind is on his home country.

"I am proud I am Syrian, seriously, not from any other country. But at the same time, when you need to solve problems for your situations...like right now, I wish I was American so I could get a loan," Kharmandh said.

His grades from last semester were uncharacteristically low due to stress.

The minimum requirement for international students is 12 credit hours per semester, and Kharmandh ended up paying for them all while receiving nine hours of credit and one withdrawal.

Kharmandh is working hard to improve his GPA this semester.

He is unsure of where he would go if he had to leave the United States.

"Go back to Syria and be killed there or go to Dubai and forget about education and start working for my life?" Kharmandh said.

With everything going on, he remains hopeful.

"Here I can find my freedom, I can say whatever I want," Kharmandh said. "Nobody can control my mouth...at least my mouth."

He hopes the same freedoms will eventually

reach Syria.

"We are looking forward to seeing a new Syria," he said. "We need freedom in Syria. If I am in Syria, I can't talk about any disadvantages of the government. I have to state only advantages."

Looking ahead, Kharmandh will wait and see the conditions of Syria before determining what his next move will be. He hopes to search for an engineering job upon graduation.

However, he doesn't expect employers to be sympathetic about his situation.

"Maybe they would think I was lazy or was lying," he said.

He is not afraid to send a message to the United States government.

"Add some exceptions," Kharmandh said. "People are not always lying, trying to find the easy way out. If they are honest, try to help them."