

Interview 30

This interview was conducted by The Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – June 2003)

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 24

Q. I would like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself first.

A. Okay

Q. Where were you born?

A. Oklahoma.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I was raised in Oklahoma until I was about nine years old and then we moved to Saudi Arabia. And then, after that, I was raised in Abu Dhabi for most of my junior high and high school days.

Q. So when did you come to live in the U.S.?

A. I came for good in 1994.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. My Mom was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and my Dad was born in Cairo.

Q. In Egypt?

A. Um-hum.

Q. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Arab-American, Egyptian and....

Q. And what about the ethnicity of your mother and father?

A. My Mom's white. My father's North African Arab.

Q. Egyptian?

A. Egyptian.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm a Muslim.

Q. How old are you?

A. Twenty-four. You know what? I'll be twenty-five in just a few days.

Q. Oh. Happy birthday! Are you a U.S. citizen?

A. Yeah.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have a bachelor's degree.

Q. In what?

A. Journalism.

Q. What year was your degree awarded?

A. 1999.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. University Of Oklahoma.

Q. What is your main occupation right now?

A. I'm a journalist, a reporter.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Now I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. I was driving to the courthouse, which I cover--part of my duties is Legal Affairs Reporter for [name removed]-- and I heard it on the radio. And I heard about the first plane and I just thought: my goodness, what a terrible accident. And then heard a few ... I was on the phone ... I mean, I was on the ... I was driving and I heard on the radio that--you know--a second plane had hit, that it was reporting live and that's when I started to get scared.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Disbelief, shock, like everyone. You know, my first reaction was a journalist's instinct, which was to call the newspaper and say: Hey, what's going on? Do you need me to come straight there instead of going to the courthouse?

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards?

A. I was devastated. It was grief and disbelief. And I have friends who work in New York that I wanted to make sure they were all okay. Just sort of calling my friends and staying glued to the television. And immediately I was assigned to do the Arab/Muslim backlash stories ... for fear of retaliation against Muslims and Arabs.

Q. Do you feel guilt as an Arab or a Muslim-American?

A. No. I didn't feel any guilt but there was a ... a reaction of I hope this is a McVeigh type situation where everyone's accusing ... I guess kind of my friends and I, some of my Arab friends and I were talking how one of our first reactions was God, please don't let them be Arab because our culture and our religion is already saddled with the stereotype of hijacking terrorists and now we just didn't want to have another incident to lend credence to that. So, yeah, it was just something that ... that could be pinned on us.

Q. When you did find out it was Middle Eastern or Muslim or Arab attacks what was your reaction to that?

A. You know, I remember seeing the photos of the hijackers when they were first released and the names, and just looking at them and thinking, they look like my brothers. They look like my father. They look like my uncles. And I was just sad more than anything because these were not stupid young men. These were educated, bright men who ... whose notions of justice were so misguided that they would take innocent lives rather than fight for social change in some other way, and ... and distort our religion. I mean, I was just sad that these nineteen or so bright young Arab-Muslim men would choose attacks. It was sad.

Q. You mentioned that immediately afterwards you felt devastation and grief and ... did you feel any anger?

A. Yeah, I did. But, you know, I'm from Oklahoma and I was in Oklahoma City during the Oklahoma City bombing and so for me it was also some déjà vu here, 'cause I was, like, oh, here we go again. You know? Just these ... I remember ... It just brought up a lot of memories of the Oklahoma City bombing because that was, I mean, was thirty-two blocks away. I felt it and my friends were immediately sent down there for a first aid class to help tend to the injured. And so it was just really a ... a sense of not again and anger that someone would do that.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. No, no. I mean, I still think it was a horrible act that caused harm to people who have no hand in U.S. foreign policy, who were innocent.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. You mean of the images from New York or of....?

Q. Whatever memory you have, is there anything that stands out in your mind that you'll never forget, whether it's images in New York or just something you felt?

A. You know, I can't get the ... the image out of my head of the people jumping from the buildings and I just remember thinking--what a horrible choice to decide whether to jump to your death or to be burned alive. And to see this final act of desperation: people just sort of clinging to pieces of a building and falling down. It was just surreal, so sad.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background over origin before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. I said I'm Egyptian-American.

Q. And what about immediately after?

A. The same thing.

Q. And what do you say now?

A. Yeah. I still say I'm Egyptian-American.

Q. Was there any point ever where you felt uncomfortable or you kind of felt like you had to hold yourself back from saying that?

A. Sometimes I would be doing phone interviews with people on my court beat, I'd be interviewing judges or something and they would make some Arabic joke, or some joke about Arabs being terrorists and... .

Q. Did they know you were Arab?

A. No, no, they didn't. They thought my name was [name] or something like that. People always misspell my last name. And I don't have an accent so they really don't know unless they see me. But I kind of am ashamed of myself because I did not say: Hey, that's

not so funny ... I just glanced over it and went on to the next question because I just didn't want to make it a big political thing.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States change since 9-11?

A. No. I don't know. I love this country and I think it's a land full of opportunities that I would not have anywhere else in the world. But at the same time I don't agree with a lot of U.S. foreign policy and I don't think it's un-American to disagree or dissent from U.S. foreign policy. I think there's ... can be patriotic and love this country and the opportunities that come with it but also question some of our ... on issues and aid to other countries and just general foreign policy issues. I don't think those two things are mutually exclusive.

Q. What about politically? Has your level of political awareness changed because of 9-11?

A. Yeah, it has. I've been a lot more interested in issues of civil ... civil liberties, especially for Muslims and Arabs, and I finding myself writing about it a lot more even though it's not really on my beat. But my editors have been kind enough to let me delve into some of those issues.

Q. What about foreign policy? Has your level of political awareness changed towards that?

A. Well, I've always been kind of interested in ... foreign affairs and read *The Economist*. I mean, I've always been pretty aware of U.S. foreign policy. But I would say a lot more with relation to Palestinians and to Iraq.

Q. This is since 9-11?

A. Since 9-11.

Q. Why is this the case?

A. Because I'm frankly scared that ... well, for first humanitarian reasons. These are other Muslims and I don't want to see them dying because of sanctions or dying because of U.S. aid to a country that's arming people to go slaughter them. I ... I don't want to see that. And then selfishly, I think that if we attack Iraq or engage in any big combat maneuvers in the Middle East that we're going to have ... there's going to be horrible repercussions for Arabs and Muslims living in this country who are already still reeling from 9-11.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States? Do you feel at home here?

A. I do.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. ... Because I've lived back and forth in the Middle East and here it's always some culture shock either way. But, I mean, no. I mean, when I'm ... especially when I'm at home with my American family, my Mom's family, and eating chicken, fried steak and-- you know--just being a country girl in Oklahoma, I do feel really Am-- ... I feel American even when I'm listening to Arabic music or watching Al-Jazeera, or whatever, I mean, with my friends because I don't think that there's one face of Americans. So, yeah, I do feel ... I do feel at home here.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. Well, I mean, I guess ... I mean, certainly we're ... we went from being a basically invisible community to being one that's singled out for suspicion, for police surveillance, for crude remarks, for blame and for possible civil liberties violations then people talk about color coding drivers licenses and INS crack downs and things like that.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9-11?

A. Just a few things. I mean, I don't wear hijab so I'm not that visibly Arab or Muslim. So most people think that I'm Puerto Rican actually and so ... I don't really go around waving a big Egyptian flag or anything. I just kind of go with the flow. But ... but the only time that it happens to me really is when ... because my name is clearly Arabic. And when it appears in two hundred thousand newspapers every morning some of those people are not just sane reasonable people reading the paper. Some are crackpots and they'll call. And they've said things like: "Hey, if you ever get bored of [name removed] I hear Bin Laddin needs a press secretary." And another one said ... called and said: You can tell

Q. They call you personally?

A. Yeah, they call because our phone numbers are listed in the newspaper so they call me at work or email me. And one said: "You know, I don't even know why the [name removed] would hire you when obviously English must be your second language." And-- you know--just emails that say, "Muslims ... all Muslims should get out of my country and my ... my country right now--should be kicked out of my country." And others just saying that I write with too much sympathy on Arab issues. But I never heard that charge given to people of other ethnic backgrounds who write about their own communities, never!

Q. Have you ever responded to any of these ... to these people?

A. Yeah. Normally I just write, "Thanks for reading."

Q. Has a member of your family experienced backlash?

A. Yes. I've got two brothers, who are [military] and they were both sent to Afghanistan. And one is an [name removed]. And he was sent and he did decoding for the intelligence in Afghanistan. And the other is a satellite communications operator and he was sent over there to run that and he actually had hand to hand combat in Afghanistan and around the Pakistan border. And both of them received awards. And you know, I think it was more just military culture, just kind of mean-spirited jokes. I mean, they said: I don't even know why you're training with a rifle. We should give you a box of rocks. And they called them haji and they don't even know that haji is a title that's used to [people who make the pilgrimage]... haji and they don't even know that. And so they just think it's a funny name, haji or Habib or something. And so they always used to call them that and just... .

Q. This is within the military?

A. Yeah, question their loyalty and everything. And my brothers were there willing to give their lives like everyone ... as the American soldier ... was there. They're willing to give their lives for this country that they weren't even raised in and they have the audacity to question their loyalty. This makes me really mad.

Q. How did this make them feel? Did they talk to you about how this made them feel?

A. They're both out of the Marines, no. They left.

Q. They left because of this?

A. I think they'd just had enough. What they saw over there... . Like one was telling me, [I] fired my gun at people and I saw bodies fall. And he said: I returned fire. People were firing at me. I had to ... to return fire and I saw bodies fall. And now I just can't sleep because I wonder how many were also named [...]. And it's really kind of messed him up. He's really upset about [it]. He's a different person. And then both of them told me about just how sick it made them feel to see these thousands of Afghan refugees, children just emaciated; whole families hungry. So, I mean, they have those images still in their minds even though they're back in Oklahoma.

Q. Wow. Do you think Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against Arabs after 9-11?

A. I think that unfortunately we were not really proactive. You know? We were not constantly educating the public and there was very little in the way of ... and everything. There was just not ... really no outreach. And then ... but to their credit, after September 11th, there was just this very quick, almost overnight mobilization that was really amazing. I mean, within hours press releases from ... condemning the attacks. You saw people gathering in front of state capitols to protest and condemn the attacks and saying, we stand in solidarity with you. And this was them leaving their homes to go to something like that when they could have faced backlash for wearing hijab. So it was No, I think that they've done a good job. I think CAIR in D.C. has done an excellent job at summarizing the news and sending our bulletins. And ADC has been pretty active, from what I've seen. And then, I'm really proud--I'm most proud of just the little hometown mosques that--you know--just ... you know, you'd see each other at ... and

that's ... I mean they'd just go and pray and that's it, I mean, go home. And they've become these ... instead these ... they've held open houses and invited people and held all these public events. And they've really done a good job.

Q. Have you joined any organizations, ethnic or religious, since 9-11?

A. I'm not allowed to because of my journalism job where it's a conflict of interest. Because if I report on the ADC and Arab issues I can't be a member of it.

Q. Okay. I understand.

A. So, no. I mean I go to the mosque. I did before, I mean, and not--you know--not consistent. I just go when I can.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between Arab-Americans and others in the United States at this time?

A. I would say it's strained and that there's mutual fear.

Q. What do you think members of the Arab-American community can do to improve the relations between the groups?

A. Well, I think we should continue to be visible, at the same time, unapologetic. We didn't do anything here. But just, yeah, remain visible, keep holding these outreach efforts and making sure that we're active vocal parts of society and that our voice is part of the national dialogue.

Q. What do you think Middle Eastern organizations can do?

A. You mean organizations based over there or...?

Q. No, here.

A. Like ADC and CAIR?

Q. Yeah.

A. Al-Awda. Just keep on ... keep vigilant and take these important policy decisions, scrutinize them and make sure that people are really aware of possible changes to our lives and our civil liberties.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Middle Eastern immigrant groups in the United States after 9-11, would you encourage people from these countries to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. Sure.

Q. Why?

A. I mean, if ... if they want to, I don't ... I don't see why they shouldn't. If they think that there's better opportunity here, yes, I would encourage them to come. I don't think that anyone should be discouraged by this. And Germans experienced a horrible time after the World War and they ... feeling subsided and they were able to make healthy, prosperous communities here. I mean, after getting over that guilt of being associated with something like the Nazi regime. You know? So I think it'll just take time to heal those kinds of disconnects for us too.

Q. We've talked about some of the negative consequences. Do you think there were any positive consequences of 9-11?

A. Yes. And, I didn't mean to only harp on the negative because, oh my goodness, there were so many examples of people ... I mean, church groups offering their buildings for Muslim congregations to come and worship there if they didn't feel comfortable in a mosque; if they were afraid of someone throwing a rock through the window or something. I mean, when this ... and bakery here got a death threat people just came out bringing flowers and candy and, I mean, just showed support. So there have been so

many kindnesses as well. So that's something is just that neighbors who might not have known each other made a point to go over and say hi. I live next door to you. Would you like to come over and have tea some time. So just that on a very, very local level. And then nationally, I mean, I was very encouraged by reading stories about bookstores selling out of Korans, selling out of Islamic history books and ... deal these, books having to do with Islam and the Middle East. And that was ... that was wonderful! At least people are reading. At least people are looking into this religion instead of just saying, relying on stereotypes.

Q. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened?

A. Well, I think there were ... you know, I think that there were extremely frustrated young men who could find no other outlet for their ... in their minds. They had ... in their minds they had no other outlet for their frustration and their anger and their I guess, mission to restore the world to the kind of world that they wanted to see, other than to make this kind of devastating headline getting ... tragedy that they felt that this, I guess, was their only outlet for people to pay attention to them and their cause.

Q. Do you think Arabs or Muslims in the Middle East hate America?

A. No. I think that large ... large pockets might hate American foreign policy. But I can just know from my Mom's experience when we went over there, and when we lived over there, I mean, she was very welcomed in everyone's home. And the same with other American friends of ours who were not married to Arabs or who were just over there ... whole American families. They were very welcomed and beloved. And I think that ... yes, I think there are pockets where people can't differentiate between a foreign policy

and the actual residents of this country and they just lump it together: America is evil, American materialism. America is greed. America is not Islam. You know? And then I think that there are others who saw who were extremely devastated by the attacks and said these were just innocent people. They're not the policy makers, the decision makers.

Q. What do you think the United States can do to resolve the problem of terrorism directed against it?

A. I really don't know. I guess I haven't ... I haven't thought about it because to me so many other countries have lived with terrorism for so many years it's almost why should we be exempt? Because we're the world's police and we're the world's superpower? I mean, I think everyone's position of strength and power will be challenged at some time. And so I hate to say that this was inevitable, but that's kind of how it was looking.

Q. Do you think it can do anything to prevent further attacks from happening to it?

A. Well, I think a good start would be reexamining our position on Palestinian issues and Iraq and examining how much aid is sent to Israel versus how much aid is sent to other countries in the Middle East.

Q. Are there any other issues or points that you'd like to comment on the we haven't mentioned in this interview?

A. No. I don't think so.

Q. All right. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation.

A. No problem.

