

Interview 11

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 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Male

Age: 23

Q. First, I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. United Arab Emirates.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. The United States.

Q. Where in the U.S.?

A. New York City.

Q. When did you come to live in the United States?

A. I was about a year old.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Egypt.

Q. Both of them?

A. Yeah.

Q. And what is your ethnic background?

A. Arab, Middle Eastern, whatever way you want to say it.

Q. Okay. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Islam.

Q. How old are you?

A. Twenty-three.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen?

A. Yep.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Bachelors.

Q. In what?

A. Bachelors of Science in Business Management.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. SUNY, Stonybrook.

Q. And that's in Long Island?

A. Correct.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. Sitting at home.

Q. So you are currently unemployed?

A. Yeah. Yep.

Q. And your marital status?

A. Single.

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

A. Um-hum.

Q. Do you remember where you were on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. Yes.

Q. Where were you?

A. School.

Q. SUNY?

A. Yes.

Q. How did you hear of the attacks?

A. A friend actually called me. Oh no! I'm lying. I'm lying. I heard it on the radio.

Q. In school?

A. I was driving to school actually.

Q. And you had the radio on and what happened?

A. And it just ... they just said a plane hit the Twin Towers and they weren't sure what happened. And then later on, a few minutes later, another plane hit and that's when it pretty much sunk in that it was a terrorist attack.

Q. What was your first reaction to that?

A. I thought the world was going to end. Once I heard that the Pentagon got hit I was, like, alright, the world's almost over.

Q. And what about ... how did you react to the possibility of the terrorists being Middle Eastern or Muslim?

A. How did I react? I anticipated that it would have been.

Q. Why?

A. It was just a gut feeling that I had.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah, especially that it was the World Trade and that it had happened before, it was just ... just a feeling that I had that it was.

Q. Did you get the feeling from the first crash or the second one?

A. No, the second one. When ... when it was pretty much felt that it was a terrorist attack then I ... I pretty much figured out it was by Muslim people, Arabs.

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

A. I was in shock, no ... no real true feelings except shock. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe what happened. That's really about it?

Q. Did you feel any anger?

A. Nope.

Q. Did you feel pain or grief?

A. Yeah, I felt... Yeah. Yeah, I felt bad. You know? You know? A lot of lives were lost. It was sad, especially when I saw it on TV it hit home. It ... it ... it actually, you know, made my heart skip a beat, if you would like to say that. But, yeah, it definitely hit home once I saw it on ... on the television.

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

A. Not at all.

Q. The feelings you described, the shock and the sadness, have they changed since the events?

A. No, still the same, shock ... more shock. You know? More like it was an unbelievable day, you know that no one will pretty much ever forget, probably throughout the whole entire world. But that's about it.

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

A. My most vivid memory? Sitting in traffic with my girlfriend for about two hours.

Q. Did you two speak of the events?

A. Yeah.

Q. What was her reaction to it?

A. She was going crazy.

Q. And she is from...?

A. Syria.

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

A. I was Middle Eastern, Egyptian.

Q. What about immediately after 9-11?

A. The same thing. It doesn't change.

Q. Did you feel strange telling people where you were from?

A. No, not at all.

Q. And now what do you say? So you continue to say Egyptian?

A. Absolutely.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9/11?

A. No. Well, I don't like how the President is handling the business right now in the world. That's ... that's about it.

Q. In what sense? What do you...

A. In what sense? I don't like his ... his politics on ... on war. I don't like what he's doing at all. But to the United States as a whole, no.

Q. Would you say that your level of political awareness has changed since 9/11?

A. No.

Q. Was it always...

A. Always the same.

Q. Um-hum. And in terms of foreign policy?

A. Always the same.

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

A. Yes. I was raised here.

Q. And you've always felt like this?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East or Arab countries have been treated in the United States since 9/11?

A. It's a good question. I would think it depends where you are, where you live. I don't think in New York City as much. I mean, you will always have prejudice anywhere you go. But in New York City, it's so diverse here that I don't think so. You know? I think maybe the more you look out, maybe, meaning an accent or you know, a beard or you know ... But other than that I wouldn't really see it as much here in New York City than, let's say, in the Midwest.

Q. Have you heard of anything happening in the Midwest?

A. Well, in the beginning, the preceding few weeks afterwards, there was, yeah. I heard a couple of things, I think in Ohio or maybe Kentucky or something like that, a couple of incidences, maybe even in Michigan. So, yeah. But recently, no. Not at all.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9/11 such as harassment or racial profiling or discrimination?

A. No, not at all.

Q. Do you know if any member of your family have experienced backlash?

A. They might think they might have. I wouldn't know. But they...

Q. In what sense would you say that?

A. Just maybe an insecurity in one of the family members. Maybe they're just insecure and they're worried about it, so they might take things that people say in the wrong manner. But, you know, I think people are very careful. It's a very touchy subject on ... on what to say. So I mean ... I mean, I haven't experienced it and I don't think anyone in my family has, or at least intentionally. You know? It might be just their own ... their own personality thinking that somebody is backlashing them or harassing them.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern or Arab organizations have been able to handle the backlash against Arab groups after 9/11?

A. Sure.

Q. How?

A. I think Middle ... I don't know how. But I think Arabs and Middle Easterners in general are strong people and they pretty much care about their inner circle and I think whatever comes from the outside, they ... they don't pay any mind to it.

Q. So do you think that they've managed to organize or mobilize our community politically?

A. I would like to hear more of that happening. You know?

Q. You'd like to hear more of what?

A. Well, you know, organizing politically, as you were saying. Is that what you were saying?

Q. Yeah.

A. Am I correct?

Q. Um-hum.

A. I'd like to see more of that. You know? We have a Muslim community here in ... in the

neighborhood I live in, but I don't see anybody getting together and I don't see why not.

Q. Have you joined any organizations since 9/11?

A. Nope.

Q. Why not?

A. I don't have time, tell you the truth. Just finished school, looking for a job.

Q. Would you join one?

A. No.

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

A. I think it's fine.

Q. So...

A. I ... I think that anything that ... that arises is ... is either, one, from peoples' insecurities, whether it's Americans or Arab-Americans, or just ignorance from either end, whether it's Amer--Americans, like, I guess you would say your white bread Americans, or Arab-Americans it would just be you know, stupidity.

Q. Do you think that they're different, relations are different ... the relations are different now as compared to before 9/11?

A. I think people might be a little more wary.

Q. Of?

A. Of Middle Easterners 'cause it'll always be in the back of their minds. But I think it... it was always present in the back of their minds. This was a big one. I mean, I think this one really hit home. I mean, the two towers collapsing, I think that was a ... a huge thing. But I mean, I... I think it was... it was, I think it was always present. You know? I think always in the back of their minds, you know, some ... somewhat, you know? Not a main thing. But I always think, you know, that they would you know, judge us too soon as being, you know terrorists. So, you know, I think it was always there and, I mean, this just made it escalate. But, I mean, people just have to keep going and do what they have

to do.

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

A. I think get out in the community more.

Q. And do what?

A. Anything: charitable events ... I mean, open forums for people to come and speak, I mean, let people know, you know, who you are and ... and what you do and I just think it would make relations better. The thing is, with Muslims they like to stick ... either stick together or just stick by themselves and sit at home. They don't like to congregate and get together and ... and stuff like that, for the most part, with other people either ... besides their own inner family circle or just Muslims or Arabs in general and I think that's wrong. If they want relations to be better, if they think it's wrong, then step out and do something?

Q. What do you think organizations can do, Arab-American organizations?

A. I think spread the word about ... just about who we are, you know? Maybe hold speeches, hold an event, any kind of event.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Arab-American immigrant groups in the U.S. after 9/11, would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. Good question. I would ... You know, I would tell them yes, but just be prepared for ... for a hard time.

Q. Why would you encourage them to come?

A. It's a great country, in my opinion. You can do whatever you want here, like ... You can do anything you want. If you have a set goal and you want to do it, do it. You can do it. And I just think it... it... I mean, I personally think it will be harder because of the situation. You know? I think they have to come well educated, very well educated, and to break that barrier.

Q. We have talked about some of the negative consequences of 9/11. Do you think that there are any positive consequences?

A. Do I think there are any positive consequences? No.

Q. Well, do you think that there's more visibility?

A. I think... Before... before you ask that question, I think that there could be a possibility for something positive to come out if Muslims would come out and come together and... and try to embrace this country as what it is. You know? I mean, you hear on some interview on TV I remember hearing, you know people saying, you know, "Oh, we love this country. We don't support these people. But show it. So that's the way I think a positive outcome can come about. But as of now, no.

Q. Do you think that there's more visibility or an improved understanding of Arabs and Middle Easterners or Muslims in the United States?

A. No. No.

Q. At all?

A. Not at all. There's a lot of ignorance in this country. There's a lot of ignorance throughout the whole entire world. You know? People don't want to know about it. They're not going to know about it even if you tell them hundreds of times about it. It doesn't matter. They're ignorant. They have... they have a set stance. I have friends who've known me for years and still don't understand or grasp any concept I've said to them throughout the years about... anything about Islam or anything like that. So it's just ignorance.

Q. Do you think that we can do anything about that?

A. Yes, but it'll take time.

Q. What do you think we can do?

A. Like I said, just... I mean, the way it is right now we are considered part of the majority. We are considered white. When we check it on the list we are white. But in respect to being a minority, and as a minority in this country you have to... you have to

blend in with what the norm is here. You have to blend into the culture. And I think we need to do that more.

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

A. People were just pissed off. They've had about enough of what's been going on.

Q. People? Who?

A. I guess, in the Middle East: fanatics, definitely fanatics. They just... They just had enough. They had enough of the United States just sitting back and... and doing what the United States does.

Q. Which is?

A. Su--support Israel, give them weapons, you know? Going into Iraq. I mean, the U.S., in my opinion whether I was Arab or not, shouldn't have been in... in Iraq and they shouldn't go into Iraq now either, which they're thinking about doing. I mean, just... You know? Let the country be. They want to invade something, they want to invade something. The reason why the U.S., in my opinion, supports Israel is because that's their own little police force in the Middle East to control what's going on over there. But ... I forgot the question, but I think I've made my point.

Q. You talked about fanatics.

A. Yes.

Q. Being fed up with American policy. Do you think that the Arabs or the Muslims, the individual people, non-political, in the Middle East, do you think that they hate America?

A. Well, yes and no.

Q. Explain.

A. Yes and no. They... I don't think they hate the United States as a country. I think as political... politically they hate it. And I think that's a lot due to media because of the... Again, anything that's shown here is totally different than... than it is shown there. So

when people have a... a view about Muslims or... or anything from here it's because of what the media portrays. And I think that the same thing goes over there. It's what they portray. So what do people believe they believe the media, which is, I think, the wrong way to go. But, hey, to each their own. But, you know, so people there, they don't really understand what... what it is that this country is about. So yes and no. You could take it either way.

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

A. Nothing. Nothing. There's nothing you can do. When... when your own man, Timothy McVeigh, white bread American soldier, will terrorize as he did, how are you going to stop terrorism? You're not. You can't. It's an impossible war. It's an endless war. It's always going to happen. They might be able to stop it somewhat, reduce it somewhat, but it's just going to keep on going.

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

A. No.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation. It was a very pleasant interview.