

Interview 3

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: 17

Q. First I'd just like to get some basic information about you. Where were you born?

A. I was born here in Brooklyn, actually in the U.S. by here. That's what I mean by here.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. Brooklyn.

Q. Where are your parents from?

A. They were born in Egypt.

Q. Both mother and father?

A. Yeah.

Q. What is your ethnic background?

A. American. That's like, 'cause I've only been there once or twice so I really consider myself just American. But my parents are Egyptian.

Q. Your parents are Egyptian so ethnically you're...

A. So I guess, yeah, that ... that makes me Egyptian.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Muslim.

Q. And how old are you?

A. I'm 17 right now.

Q. And you're a U.S. citizen in America?

A. Yeah. I was born here so...

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I'm in my third semester of college right now.

Q. Where do you go to college?

A. City College.

Q. What are you majoring in?

A. Mechanical engineer.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. What do you mean?

Q. I mean, are you a full time student?

A. Pretty much.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm single, single and liking it.

Q. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. I was in the subway ... at the 137th stop on the 1 train.

Q. How did you hear about the attacks?

A. Well, I was listening to Howard Stern so ... and he, like, works in the CBS building. I think it's ... I heard that it's pretty close to there. So ... so as I was coming out I was, like, trying to get reception on my walkman. I was listening to my radio as I was coming out. All of a sudden I'm listening to Howard Stern. Like, one minute he's talking about something totally different. The next thing I hear he's talking about, the World Trade ... one of the World Trade Center towers just blew up or something and that's how I heard

about it. And then he started talking about it. And then he said, there might be a bomb on there ... in there or something. It just blew up. And then he saw, I think from his view or something he saw a plane crash into the other tower. I'm guessing that's the second plane that everybody has on ... in videotape or whatever.

Q. And what was your first reaction?

A. I thought it was a joke. I started laughing.

Q. Why did you think it was a joke?

A. Well, one, it's Howard Stern I was listening to and, two, it just seemed a little far fetched so ... And then he was talking about something Arab ... something about Arabs or something before. He was making jokes about them so I was just thinking it's a joke or something.

Q. But what was your first reaction when you thought there was a possibility that they were Muslims, Middle Eastern terrorists?

A. Well, I knew from the start.

Q. And when did you know?

A. The moment I heard that this was not ... Well, I was telling my friend ... I was telling one of my friends ... I was like, "Yo. Howard Stern's talking about some guy ... something's just happened in the World Trade Center and it's on fire right now," and he's like, "Yeah, whatever. ... Don't believe it." Then some ... and this is as I'm going up ... going up to the college, somebody else with a radio, like, just stops us and starts talking to us and says, "No. It's a real thing." They were listening to the news or something and it's something that actually happened. ... And the first thing I said is I told my friend is

"How much you want to bet that the first guy they ... they talk about is going to be some guy named Mohammed?"

Q. What made you think that? ... You were almost definite that it was a Middle Eastern Muslim. What made you so sure about that?

A. Ain't nobody else crazy enough to do that except for maybe ... I don't know, maybe the Japanese revolutionists. But that was an unlikely possibility.

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

A. Like, what do you mean?

Q. Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you'll never forget?

A. Nah, honestly, well, except for maybe ... something like ... We went up to the eighth floor... of the North Academic Center, that's, the main building, and we went to, the south wing and we saw the towers on fire.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel anger or pain or grief, sadness?

A. I honestly didn't feel anything at all.

Q. Did you feel guilty as a Muslim for the...

A. No. Well, I'm going to make this clear. I told you this before. I'm not an Arab. I'm an American. I was born here. I was raised here. Egypt never did anything for me, or my parents. I'm an American.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. No, not really. They've only gotten more pro-American.

Q. How ... and why have they been more pro-American?

A. Because I just ... I mean, I sympathize with the Arab, cause or whatever. I mean, this is all supposedly because the stuff with Israel and the Middle East and whatever, but I just don't care more or less.

Q. And before September 11th when Americans asked you about your ethnicity what would you answer them?

A. I'm Egyptian. ... This is exactly what I'd say, my parents are Egyptian but I was born here.

Q. And has that changed since September 11th?

A. The same exact thing.

Q. Have your feelings changed toward the U.S. policy since 9-11 politically? Has your level of political awareness increased?

A. Not really. I mean, like, politic--no, not really. I mean, my parents are surrounded with this stuff all the time and watching Arabic news and things like that so I already knew about stuff like this and all that.

Q. What about our domestic policy?

A. Domestic? What's that?

Q. Just policies that focus on ... national policies, immigration and...

A. Oh. You mean in immigration and things like that? No.

Q. What do you think of the policies that have been put into action since September 11th detaining people who are maybe Arab and Muslim and...

A. I think it's smart because ... The irony about this is it's wrong but it's right as the same time 'cause... you can't just be like: Oh, that guy's got a towel on his head. He could be a terrorist or something. They learn to blend in to American culture. They've learned to...

Q. Who are they?

A. Like, Arabs in general. I mean, look at me. You probably thought I was Spanish or something when I first came in here. Yes. Exactly. So ... the worst part about it is you have to do this because even though ... people who are innocent are going to get hurt by it you have to 'cause that's the only way to...

Q. Do what, become part of the American culture, of American society?

A. No. I mean about the American policy, you have to detain, like, possible threats even if innocent people will get hurt by it or people will become victims because that's the only way to ... to protect us.

Q. So do you feel a sense of belonging in the United States? Do you feel at home?

A. Oh yeah, more so than I do in Egypt.

Q. And you've always felt like this? ... Do you think there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. No. I think people harbored the same feelings all the time. It's just that now they have a reason to portray them.

Q. Why do you think people have always harbored these feelings towards Arabs ... Muslims?

A. Like, basically anger ... yada, yada, yada.

Q. Stemming from where?

A. Government propaganda from the 1970s and things like that back when they hijacked ... I don't know if it's '70s or '80s, I'm not that good with dates, back when they hijacked Pan Am 103, ... Muammar Kaddafee when they bombed Libya ...

Q. So you think it's coming from their past history?

A. Yeah, pretty much. And I have this theory that news control over American industry.

Q. Can you say why?

A. Well...

Q. In what ways and how do you think that affects the public's perception, the American public's perception about Middle Easterners?

A. Whoever controls the TV controls what can be put on the TV. Whoever controls the industry controls what's sold, plain and simple, and they can buy ... sell whatever they want; put whatever they want on the TV.

Q. How do you feel about that?

A. Eh, it's a free country.

Q. And what if some of this backlash or some of this profiling ... happened to your parents?

A. Well, I think something has happened ... something did happen to my dad but he handled it very well and I still ... I say bring it. You want some, come get me.

Q. What happened to your dad?

A. Well, Dad's basically a janitor, although he's like a glorified janitor. He works as an elevator operator, he's the guy who pushes the button and says fifth floor, blah, blah, blah. So anyway, this guy was being a real...

Q. What kind of building?

A. I don't want to be specific.

Q. No, no, no. What kind? I mean, is it an office building? Is it a...

A. I think it's an office building. So anyway, my Dad was ... basically before he lets people in the elevator he has to see a pass and things like that for security reasons, whatever. And this one person ... wasn't giving him a pass or anything like that. He works in the building and he knows the guy, but still for security protocol he has to do it. He has to see his ... a pass and things. And the guy was really not giving him a pass or anything and he kept bothering him about it and harassing my Dad, or whatever. So my Dad tried to complain and he complained to the building ... and then after he complained ... they gave my Dad a warning for complaining to the building.

Q. What was the warning for?

A. ... Apparently he didn't follow some rule, procedures, about what, quote, unquote ... about who to complain to first or something. And they were saying if you complain to this person again we're going to fire you. And they suspended him for a day, I think.

Q. And you think that has to do with anti-Middle Eastern sentiment?

A. It might be. I don't know, ... 'cause after that ... this one guy started doing it, his friends started doing it as ... I think it might have something to do with it since it happened a little bit after the 9-11 thing, after the attack on the World Trade Center.

Q. How did your father handle it?

A. He just kept quiet.

Q. And you think that's the way to do things?

A. I don't know. I think you've got to do what you think is right.

Q. If this had happened to you, what would you have done?

A. I would have quit. I would have just left and found some other job. Then again, I wouldn't exactly be stuck in a job as a janitor. ... I wouldn't let myself get into that position.

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

A. I don't think it's so much harassment, just people making jokes and whatever.

Q. To you personally or...

A. Yeah, called me Osama because, my name...

Q. People who know you or people who don't know you?

A. Well, people who know me, friends.

Q. Do they do it in a joking way or...

A. Yeah.

Q. Have you experienced anything more threatening, insulting in any way?

A. Nah.

Q. Has any other member of your family experienced any kind of backlash?

A. No.

Q. Just your dad. Do you think Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling backlash against these groups after 9-11?

A. No.

Q. You don't think they've managed to mobilize and organize themselves quickly?

A. No. I think they've been doing too much political stuff and not taking too ... enough action.

Q. Like what?

A. Like ... like, you know about that rabbi who's trying to mobilize basically a militia to stand guard against his neighborhood? So if they want to do that, let's do that too, fight fire with fire.

Q. ... In Williamsburg?

A. Yeah, Williamsburg. I say, fight fire with fire. We should actually start ... should have started doing it ... like, some sort of, I don't know, anti-Arab backlash militia or something like that.

Q. So you don't think they're doing enough. But you said that they're doing too much politically. What kind of political activities?

A. Too much talk, plain and simple. Stop talking. Start doing.

Q. Have you yourself joined any ethnic or religious organizations after 9-11?

A. No. If anything, I've become less religious.

Q. For what reason?

A. I just don't ... I don't think it really has anything to do with 9-11. Okay. I'm sick of saying that. I'm just going to say the attack on the World Trade Center. I don't think it has anything to do with the attack on the World Trade Center. It's just as I grow more I just tend to become less religious. Too much stuff in my life, no time for religion.

Q. Have you ... Were you a practicing Muslim before September 11th?

A. Somewhat, although due to school and things like that ... and my father's not very ... not very pious about ... Well, he is, but he's not very, like, gung ho about going to the mosque and things like that. So I try to.

Q. So when you said you were somewhat kind of ... what did you do?

A. I ... I pray at home.

Q. Five times a day?

A. No.

Q. Once in a while?

A. Like, I tried to do once every day. I still try. I always try. I've never been to Mecca 'cause, frankly, I ... I don't have the money. Going to ... Mecca, prayer, fast, belief in one God and I did that. Charity, yeah, but it's not to Muslim charities. It's just whatever charity. Like, a bum on the subway, that's charity to me.

Q. So you consider yourself a Muslim though for now.

A. Yeah, because my par--my parents made me Muslim so I guess I do consider myself Muslim if I have to pick a religion.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious beliefs and others in the United States and others at this time?

A. Wait. That was a mouthful. Could you say that again?

Q. Okay. So you think that the relationship between Muslim and Arab organizations with the United States is strained or do you think it's better? Do you think it's more harmonious?

A. I don't think it's changed at all.

Q. How would you describe it?

A. The way I see it, basically, Muslims still complaining, U.S. organizations still giving them a bunch of political BS, bomb the crap out of some Arab countries, plain and simple. Oh, excuse me for...

Q. What about other ethnic groups? Where do you ... what kind ... You live in Brooklyn?

A. I used to live ... I lived there for most of my life.

Q. Yeah. So in Brooklyn there are not only Arabs and Muslims but there are many other ethnic groups.

A. Yeah.

Q. There are Irish, Italians ... there are...

A. I lived in Green Point. It's mostly Polish and Spanish.

Q. Okay. So in ... What was the relationship, in your opinion, between the Polish and the Spanish and the Arabs and Muslims in Green Point?

A. Well, the Muslims were severely outnumbered but the thing is that nobody really cared about that fact. Me personally, nobody really cared about the fact that I was Muslim or Arab, or whatever so it's like ... it's not so much that it's bad or good, or whatever. It's in, I guess indifference is the word. Nobody cares.

Q. People were indifferent to who you were and what you were and where you came from, or where your parents came from?

A. Exactly.

Q. That ... That ... Is that a positive thing or a negative thing for you?

A. I think it's positive.

Q. What do you think that Middle Eastern organizations can do to improve conditions?

A. Get a better army and start whipping some Israeli butt the right way, the legal way.

Q. Organizations ... here now.

A. Oh, you mean ... Oh!

Q. It's okay, charities, political organizations.

A. I think just take more action and less talk. That's about it.

Q. What kind of ... what kind of diplomatic actions?

A. See, that's the thing. I don't ... See, I don't know that much about that. I'm not really sure.

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

A. Yeah, sure.

Q. For what reasons?

A. 'Cause the U.S. is straight up the best country in the world.

Q. You mean you don't feel that there's a possibility that they would be harassed or a target.

A. Oh, there is definitely. But you won't be doing ... I guarantee you'll still be doing a lot better over here than you will from wherever you came from.

Q. We've talked about negative consequences of Sep. 11. Were there any positive consequences? Such as increased awareness of Muslims and Arabs and increased understanding of...

A. That actually, I think, is a negative consequence, increased awareness of Muslims and stuff 'cause that's starting to annoy me, people always asking me about my culture. And that's actual-- ... people have started to become more noticeable about Arabs and stuff and that kind of annoys me.

Q. Why does it annoy you?

A. Because I liked it the way it was before when people were indifferent. People didn't care about whether I was Muslim or not. They just cared about ... They see me.

Q. So you think it is an offense because of this.

A. Not so much as an offense but a nuisance.

Q. You don't think that an increased understanding is better for Americans and Muslims on the whole, some kind of cultural sharing and understanding so that tensions can ease eventually?

A. I honestly don't know. I don't know, seriously.

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

A. Well, one, this Osama guy's a maniac and he has a whole bunch of people basically brainwashed. And two, because of the Arab/Israeli conflict.

Q. Do you think that Arabs and Muslims hate America, mainstream...

A. Wait. Arabs and Muslims here?

Q. Both here and overseas?

A. Abroad? Oh yeah, definitely.

Q. Mainstream Muslims?

A. Yeah.

Q. Why do you think that?

A. So it's not so much a fact about Muslims. It's about the fact that ... Let me use Egypt as an example. It's more like the fact that here we're ... we've got lights, electricity, TVs that have full screens, computers. There the Egyptian dollar couldn't even buy a ... a stick of

gum here. They have to sleep in mausoleums because they have no shelter. They're homeless.

Q. So you think it's a jealousy factor.

A. Pretty much.

Q. You don't think it has anything to do with our foreign policy?

A. Well, I think this all happened because of imperialism and foreign policy, not ... not so much America's foreign policy but ... I think they see Americans and Europeans and white people in general all as one group.

Q. And what is that group labeled in their eyes?

A. White people.

Q. And that has a negative connotation?

A. I'm guessing so. I'm guessing negative.

Q. What about Middle Eastern and ... Middle Eastern Muslims in America? How do you think they feel toward America, hate, love, indifference?

A. I think they hate American policy but they love America, at least that's how I feel.

Q. Even the immigrants?

A. Well, they'll learn ... I'm pretty sure they'll learn to love it 'cause I don't know how you can live here and hate it, unless you're a homeless or something like that.

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

A. The same thing we're doing now, keep bombing countries until this guy decides to, like, show himself or until they can take him out, Osama or whoever happens to be, Sheik, whatever his name is, or this or that. I know he's in jail but...

Q. ... to them. These terrorist networks are huge and not...

A. Exactly. The only way to do that is to get ... to take ... to take them down as cell by cell. And the only way to do that is to flush them out of the countries. And the only way to do that is to bomb the crap out of these countries, unfortunately. 'Cause, like, as you've seen, they've got this ... they've got Osama running around, like the way Dick Cheney was running around when the attacks first happened. One minute he's in Florida, and the next minute he's over here. The next ... they've got him running around like a bunny rabbit on crack. So...

Q. And what do you think ... I'm sorry.

A. No. I was just going to say, so I think it's ... that's the only effective way to do this.

Q. So what do you think about the terrorist organizations that are routed in America, not overseas?

A. I don't know that much about them. Basically I only know what I read in the news and things like that and I don't know too much about terrorist organizations here.

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

A. America rules. That's about it.

Q. Okay. Thank you for answering all these questions honestly. I appreciate your in-put.