

Interview 65

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: 25

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

A. New York City.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. New York.

Q. And where was your father born?

A. Cairo.

Q. And your Mom?

A. Cai--not Cairo but ...

Q. Okay. So in Egypt?

A. Yeah, Egypt.

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

A. Egyptian.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. Islam.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Twenty-five.

Q. And you're a U.S. citizen. Correct?

A. Yeah.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. College.

Q. What did you study?

A. International relations.

Q. What year was your degree awarded?

A. 2000.

Q. Which university?

A. Tufts University.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. Kind of in transition. I was working at a public relations agency, but I just left them about two months ago. You can write ... you can write PR executive if you want. So I'm waiting to hear back from schools so I'm right now....

Q. For graduate studies?

A. Yeah. So but you can ... 'cause that's my ... my last job.

Q. All right. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September

11th itself. Where were you on that day around 9am?

A. I had just walked into work.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. Everyone was gathered around the TV at work. No one obviously knew what was going on. Everyone thought it was just--you know--an accident and we just ... basically

we were all glued to the TV watching it until--you know--everything ... all the events just unfolded.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Please let it be an accident and please don't let them be Arab or Muslim.

Q. What was your reaction to the possibility that they could be Middle Eastern or Muslim?

A. I mean, I ... it just ... it just brought up lots of--you know--conflicting emotions, anger obviously because I. ...

Q. Anger at who?

A. Anger at the ... at the at the terrorists who claimed that their actions--you know--coincided with Islam's teachings and that they're doing it for Islam and for our people just angers me because I ... I think it completely goes against the religion. And then fear basically of--you know--just how people would react to me being Muslim and me being Arab and then just having to explain to everyone--you know--over and over again, like we've gotten just--you know--when the World ... when the first World Trade Center bombing happened--you know--we had to go through this whole thing again, having to explain to people that this isn't what Islam is about; this isn't--you know--how most Muslims or Arabs feel. And then I also felt. ... It was very weird. This was the first time for me to feel very, very guilty.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. It was the weirdest thing ever because, I mean, obviously I knew that I had nothing to do with it, but I just had this feeling of guilt. It was ... it was such a strange feeling and I ... speaking with my other--you know--Egyptian-American friends they all

had the ... the same ... similar feelings. Not really sure ... I've never really pointed ...--you know--been able to ... to finger ... point a finger at exactly why I felt this guilt. I mean, I guess because technically they were--you know--my people that did this horrible act. But ... but, yeah. That was ... those are mainly the ... and then just obviously depression and--you know--fearing what would happen next. It was just lots of different [feeling].... It was very intense.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. They have ... I mean, I've become used to them, I guess. I mean, they're still there.

Q. Do you still have that feeling of guilt that you were talking about?

A. The guilt, not as much. It's more of ... of still the anger, of--you know--the frustration with ... with the people, like, the terrorists and other people who aren't necessarily terrorists but who were happy that--you know--something like this happened to ... to America. And, yeah. And, I mean, still, like ... It definitely after ... after September 11th there were lots of people. ... It was a time where people that I thought were my friends--you know--and I thought were open minded ... it ... it changed ... it basically showed me who I ... who was really open minded and who was really ignorant because people would start grouping me--you know-- with the terrorists, basically.

Q. Do you ... Friends? Friends or strangers?

A. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, not necessarily ... not ... not obviously being, like, Oh, you're a terrorist but--you know-- speaking up about racial profiling, how they agreed with it and thought that it was--you know--very important to enforce it. And they just didn't understand that--you know--I ... I would be racially profiled, my parents would be, and we have nothing to do with it. And they thought--you know--that it was just the just thing

to do and that even though it would humiliate us and ... and--you know--millions of others that at the end of the day if it's making everyone else safer than it'll be worth it. So that was ... I mean, that was definitely frustrating and ... and it was saddening to see that--you know?--to realized that some people were not really as ... as open minded. ... So yeah. So that definitely ... I mean, that still goes on. Those feelings are still there and just ... and the fear also of not knowing what's going to be next still exists as well.

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

A. Hmm. I think it was after the second Tower hit--you know--we weren't allowed to leave our ... our office. They left ... they ... they made us stay there for a little bit 'cause no one knew what was going to happen afterwards.

Q. Can I ask you where you were working at the time?

A. I was working in a public relations agency.

Q. Where? In ...

A. It was here in the City. It was on 28th and Madison. So they--you know--no one knew if we were going to be allowed to go outside or whatever. But then they kept us for a couple of hours and then they said--you know--everyone can just go home, but walk in groups and---you know--whoever lives close by if you can--you know--have some people over at your place just so everyone has a place to go, basically 'cause--you know--transportation was basically on hold. And I happen to live, like, ten minutes or fifteen minutes away from my office so two girls that I worked with and I were walking back home. And just the hundreds and hundreds of people in the streets walking uptown and it was just unbelievable and passing ... we passed by the ... the ... I guess it was ... it was some kind of army facility where they were having--you know--all the families were

gathering there looking for their--you know--their ... the names of their loved ones and stuff. It was just very surreal. And you could smell--you know?--you could smell all the ... the smell of the ... the smoke and you can kind of ... you could still see it at that point, just the smoke all over. It was just very. ... It was just definitely surreal. It seemed like a movie.

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

A. I always said ... I was very proud and never ... I always said I was Egyptian and I was Muslim and never had a problem with it at all.

Q. What about immediately after?

A. I was very intimidated and actually frustrated with myself that I was intimidated.

Q. What were you intimidated about?

A. I didn't know how people were going to react to me. I mean, I don't necessarily ... if you look at me I can pass for lots of other different ethnicities. I can pass for--you know--Spanish or ... or someone with, I mean, basically olive skin and dark hair so they wouldn't necessarily think I'm Arab necess--you know? But ... but I wear jewelry that has Arabic on it. And I wore my rings on my way to work two days after and got tons of stares when I was getting my coffee in the morning. So I just definitely felt intimidated and I kind of--you know--turned them around so that no one could see the Arabic on them. Yeah ... so it was definitely ... I mean, I ... now I ... I say what I am and I don't really care and I'm ready to ... to fight back.

Q. At what point were you comfortable enough to say that without being intimidated? How long did this. ...

A. Oh, it wasn't until months before. I mean, it was definitely for a good, I would say, two months it was very ... I was walking on egg shells and I only wanted to be with my Arab-American friends.

Q. Why?

A. Because they knew ... we all knew what we were going through. We all could see. ... We were like a support system for each other and we understood where the other was coming from. And we had all these different emotions. I mean, everyone obviously was ... was grieving--all New Yorkers were grieving--but non-Arabs and non-Muslims didn't have ... I mean, they had the sadness; they had the anger, but they didn't have the guilt. They didn't have the ... the fear for being targeted for their ethnicity or for being labeled as terrorists and that was just, like, a whole added emotion that we were all feeling.

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

A. Yeah, I think so. I mean, not towards the ... the country; towards the government and towards its policies. I think that we're at a very dangerous time and. ...

Q. Dangerous time in ... in what sense, in security or. ...

A. In a critical ... yeah, security-wise, I think that ... I ... I mean, I have lots of obviously different feelings about it as well and I don't really know what the right answer is, but I think ... I understand that--you know--America has to defend itself, but I think it has to be kind of more thought out. I feel like they're not really thinking it through and they're making more rash decisions and basing their actions on just kind of heat of the moment. Like they're not really thinking things through. They're not thinking of the consequences. Like this whole war on Iraq I think is going to just cause more domestic terrorism to

happen. Like, all the dormant cells I fear ... very scared of them just--you know--being activated. Yeah. So, I mean, I definitely don't agree with what's going on.

Q. So why would your feelings towards the U.S change?

A. Because I don't think that the administration is acting in a smart way. I feel that ... it's hard to verbalize it correctly.

Q. Is it domestic policy, foreign policy, any other reason?

A. I mean, I think that a lot of Okay. What ... what they need to understand is. ...

Q. Who's they? The government?

A. The government has to understand--and I think the average American has to understand this too--is that a lot of people, when they said--you know--the Arabs were rejoicing in the streets after September 11th, it wasn't necessarily because they were happy that--you know--people died. They were happy because finally--you know--America the invincible, something happened to them and they knew how it ... like, America knows how it feels now to have such a--you know-- severe, I guess, or atrocity happen to them just like what's happening, they think--you know--in Palestine and in Israel in the ... in the conflict over there. But I think that what ... what the government needs to understand is the reasoning behind it, not to justify it in any way but that it's ... it's built up a lot by--you know--Arabs and Muslims feeling kind of like America turns a blind eye when ... when it comes to their issues basically and that it's more, like, one sided and not as ...--you know?--they don't ... the government doesn't deal as fairly with ... with the Arabs as they do with the Israelis, mainly in the Israeli conflict obviously. So I think that--don't know--I feel like the ... the administration is creating more enemies right now and they need to do the opposite of what they're doing and they need to form more

alliances with the Arab and Muslim governments in order to ... to understand what's going on.

Q. Has your level of political awareness changed since 9-11?

A. I've definitely been reading a lot more about--you know--opinion pieces and letters to the editor. I'm just ... I've become more curious to see what the public ... what their sentiments are on ... on issues, and I ... I read more international sources as well. Yeah.

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

A. That's always been a very difficult question because, I mean, I was born and raised here. I'm technically American. I identify more with Egypt though and I think it's because it's how others perceive me.

Q. Others in the United States you mean?

A. Excuse me?

Q. Others where?

A. Others here, yeah, others ... like other Americans. I've always ... you know? when ... whenever people ask me where are you from when ... when they meet me I always say, well, I've said before, I'm ... I'm from New York. And they're like, No, no, no really? Where are you from? So just--you know--that ... being asked that question has always made me kind of identify more with Egypt. I mean, that's one of the reasons why. But I mean, yeah. I ... I guess ... it is home for me obviously. But, yeah, I don't know. I ... I mean is that a good answer?

Q. No good or wrong answers.

A. I mean, it ... does it. ... It's something I've had to deal with.

Q. So you've always felt like this.

A. I've always felt like this, yeah.

Q. Has 9-11 accentuated it at all or is it ... did it not have an influence on this?

A. It ... it ... actually, it's funny--it confused things even more because when I go to Egypt, or when I went to Egypt last summer and--you know--people, of course, wanted to get my insights and stuff being--you know--living in America and stuff on ... on all the situations. And I got into so many arguments with ... with friends over there because even though they're foreign educated or they've even lived in the States or--you know-- they've lived in Europe or something, or--you know--some kind of foreign influence they just-- I don't know--I feel like they have ... their ... their views have become much more different than mine. I've ... my views have become more of, like ... I feel like they've become more balanced in a way and wanting to address issues that I think are ... need to be addressed in the Middle East in order to move forward. And I feel like they're just doing the opposite over there. They're trying to ignore them ... been more and just put the blame on America and that just kind of--you know--it ... it upsets me.

Q. Well, why do you think this is happening? Why do you have a certain way of thinking and they're doing their own thing?

A. Well, I ... I mean, I think being in America probably definitely influenced that, being able to express ...--you know?-- having my own opinion and not having to be swayed by someone or having to be intimidated by someone or being threatened by someone. And I think for them it's just probably ... it's just very hard to admit that--you know--they have these major problems that they have to deal with. And--you know--how Egyptians are very proud people. I think it all comes down to an issue of pride.

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

A. People in the Middle East here? Yeah.

Q. Yeah.

A. Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. Definitely. I mean, we heard about all ... you know?--on the news we heard about hate crimes. We heard about people pulling the veils off of veiled women--you know?--little kids being tormented and--you know--racial slurs being thrown here and there, the pro--profiling in the airports. ... I think definitely more people are being profiled. An incident happened with my mother. You know? Like, it just ... people say things to ... to other people. Like, she ... she is a teacher and a parent--one of her students' parents-- came up there--who she was friends with before--and ... and my mother was wearing a necklace that had something in Arabic on it or ... and the woman--you know--the women had ... I think it was the first time that she had come back after September 11th. They all came back to school and my Mom came to give the woman a hug and the woman was very cold in--you know--in hugging her and ... and she was, like: Well, your people did this. Are you happy? And I think comments like that definitely increased and it just alienated Middle Easterners here. And I think they took either one of two ... I mean, they either got scared and they just kind of tried to kind of be incognito and blend in and--you know--raise the American flags all over the place. And then there are other people who take the other extreme, I think, and try to speak up and be active. So yeah, I think it definitely changed the way Middle Easterners are treated.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash?

A. Nothing .. I mean, nothing major.

Q. Okay.

A. Nothing ... nothing violent or anything, but, I mean, comments--you know....

Q. Comments at where, work, school, public?

A. At work and public as well. At work ... it was mixed at work. I mean, there were some people who were ... who said, oh--you know--don't worry. You're not one of them. You know? And I was like, well, technically, yeah, I am. They're my ethnicity and they're my ... and they're my religion. They're, like, yeah, but you live in America and I was, like, yeah, but--you know--it ... they're still my background so don't--you know--don't. ... It's funny 'cause I didn't want to be associated with them, but at the same time I ... I am associated with them no matter what. So ... and then there were some people who did make, like, flat out comments--you know?--just very ignorant comments. Just the one that I can think of is. ... I used to have to monitor an Arabic newspaper for one of my clients and the ... one of the secretaries brought it over to me. And I guess she ... I don't ... I mean, it used to come to me every week so I don't know why that made it special this week for her to ... to feel the need to say this, but I gue--it was around the anthrax time. And she came over and she ... she was, like, carrying it with, like, two fingers and she kind of placed it gently in my mailbox and she said: Oh--you know?--[name], I don't ... it's the *Arab Times*. I don't ... I don't think you should open that. So I looked at her and I was, like, yeah, that's mine. I monitor it. So she ... she kind of was, like taken aback and she was like, Oh! Oh, okay. You know? Oh, okay. Yeah, that's right. You do. You know? So it's just. ... I mean, it wasn't necessarily a comment made to me but it just made me

more conscious obviously that people were scared of my ... even my ... my newspaper. So
....

Q. Wow. Other than your mother, has any other member of your family experienced backlash?

A. My brother did in school.

Q. How old is your brother?

A. He's sixteen. He was fifteen, I guess, at the time.

Q. What happened to him?

A. He got into ... I mean, they got into arguments in school. I think they tried to have a lot ... a lot--you know--have a lot of debates, but they were very heated debates and--you know-- the kids were just saying stuff like--you know--you guys should go back to your country. You shouldn't be in America. And mind you, he goes to the [name removed] so ... and this is happening there. So I can't even imagine how it is if it's just in a normal--you know--regular American school. [Name removed] is supposed to be open minded--you know--to different nationalities and religions and stuff. So....

Q. How did your brother react to these comments?

A. He got very intimidated and very emotional. He didn't really know how to react. And I think that's a general problem with ... with us. I mean, I don't want to generalize and say all Arab-Americans, but I feel that a lot of Middle Easterners tend to just get very emotional with ... when people verbally attack them. And I think that it would be more effective--you know--if we tried not to be as emotional, to get our points across. But it's just ... I think it's ... you can't really help it when someone's attacking your identity.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern or Arab-American organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against these groups after 9-11?

A. Yeah. I think they have. I definitely think they've become more active and they are more in the spotlight. You had--you know--James Zogby from the Arab-American Institute on talk shows a lot debating against other people--other Americans. You had the Arab-American Family Support Center asking for people to volunteer to walk kids--you know--Arab-American kids to school and walk veiled women to the supermarket so that they wouldn't--you know--they'd feel more comfortable. So I definitely think, yeah, they did. ... They definitely ... it definitely did mobilize them.

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

A. I think a little bit but not as much as I would like it to be.

Q. Why is that?

A. I think ... I mean, I think it did kind of push us in the right direction. I think that people need to understand more or become more educated in that I feel like a lot of Middle Easterners are worried or more concerned about the politics in the Middle East and aren't really concerned with domestic politics. And I think that they need to understand that there's a connection; that if you can influence--you know--domestic politics in lobbying than you can eventually--you know--have some kind of voice for foreign policy. So I think that that definitely have to be worked on a little bit more.

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

A. Well, I gue--yeah. I mean, I guess the timing ... it just happened that way. It wasn't really intentional. I mean, I've always been involved. ... I mean, in college I was always

involved with ethnic organizations ethnic. But yeah. But I definitely ... it ... it motivated me more.

Q. What do you do in your organization?

A. In the organization?

Q. Um-hum.

A. Well, I mainly ... the organization ... I basically just help out with ... try to use the ... the experience that I--you know--in the PR firm that I picked up and just help with writing their press materials and their press releases and try to advise them in, like, ,what kind of media they should go out to for their events and just try to get people. ...

Q. Which organizations are these that you're part of?

A. Mainly ... mainly I've been involved with the Network of Arab-American Professionals.

Q. Okay.

A. Yeah, and that's just most recently I've been getting more active and more involved with them. Yeah. So....

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

A. I feel like there's kind of two sides to that. I feel like, on the one hand a lot of people kind of distance themselves from us, I mean, other non-Arabs and non-Muslims don't really want to be associated with us. But at the same time, I feel like there are some others who, after September 11th, they wanted to become more educated and have--you know--a lot of inter-religious dialogues have been established and--you know--people There's ... I think there's an organization, but I can't remember ... I think it's called

Muslims Against Terrorism that was established where they go and they--you know--Muslim-Americans go and talk to public school kids, middle school kids, about Islam and--you know--what their views on Islam are. Yeah. So I think it's pretty mixed. I mean, I think over all though, I think that we're definitely. ... I think that every generation there ... there is, like, a certain ethnic group in America that has to be kind of out-casted and--you know--scapegoats basically, and I think that right now that's us, unfortunately.

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

A. I think that they have to network more and I think that they have to be. ... They tend to be ... stick with themselves and I think that's a major problem. And I think that you need to ... I mean, I think it's great that they like to hold onto their heritage so much, but at the same time in order to be successful politically and--you know--and accepted socially and everything, I feel like they need to kind of become more integrated with other ethnic groups and they'll ... they'll ... they can be a little bit more stronger that way.

Q. What do you think organizations can do to improve the relations?

A. Middle Eastern organizations? I think if they have--you know--some sort of, like ... I mean, they can invite other groups to their events, to their ... if they have lectures or ... they can co-sponsor forums or even social events if it doesn't ... You know? It doesn't actually have to be anything political.

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 ... to the U.S.?

A. Good question. I ... I mean, I think so depending on what their views are though.

Q. What do you mean by that?

A. I think ... I feel like they need to ... I mean, if they're moderate--if their views are moderate, like, they're not ... basically if they don't agree with what--you know--Al-Qaeda and their views or--you know--that America is a Satan ... and I mean, I don't see why they would come here anyway. But I think so. I think as long as they know that it's going to be tough for them and that they're going to have to be a little thick skinned and that ... just to--you know--wait it out a little bit. I ... I mean, I wouldn't necessarily discourage them from emigrating.

Q. Why? Why would you encourage them to come?

A. I think in terms of opportunities, there's definitely more opportunities here than ... than back home. I think that ... Yeah. I think that's the main thing in terms of education and ... and opportunities for ... for ... for a better life. And then also for ... for being more balanced in views. I feel like you get to be--you know--to have your own identity here more than you do abroad.

Q. Okay. We have talked about some of the negative consequences of 9-11. Do you see any positive consequences of this incident?

A. Right now, no. I mean, I'm hoping that it causes people to be come more interested in learning about--you know--the true meaning of Islam and ... and what Arabs really think and I'm hoping that it kind of causes the Arabs back home to kind of look--you know--take a look at themselves and ... and kind of reflect inwardly and see what's wrong and--you know--how they can ... what they need to work on. Then hopefully more--you know--create more moderate voices about ... mainly about Islam so that--you know--it can eventually be avoided and it can be accept ... I mean, Islam can be accepted as one--

you know--as a regular religion and not seen as this terrorist religion or this religion that breeds terrorism and violence. So I guess just ... I'm hoping that--you know--it leads to understanding. But that's very optimistic of me and I don't think it's going to happen for a good--you know--ten to twenty years at least.

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

A. I think they happened out of frustration.

Q. What frustration?

A. I think frustration mainly because the ... the people who ... who committed--you know--these acts of terrorism came from countries where people are frustrated because there is a lack of jobs, there's ... there--you know--there's no freedom of speech. They're basically dictatorships so I think that ... And I mean, that's one source of their frustration. Another source of their frustration, I mean, against America specifically, is because they feel that--you know--like I said, America's policy isn't very fair in the way it ... the Arab-Israeli conflict. I think that's another factor. And then I think, again regarding America, I think that relating it back to, like, their lack of jobs, that they see. ... In their countries they have--you know--they have all the American movies and they have all the American ...--you know--they see the American clothes and ... and it's just this life style that they want. And America basically exports it and--you know--and it infiltrates their societies, but a lot of them can't even afford it. And I think that they feel that--you know--kind of blame America that--you know--well, you ... you bring it into our country, but you're not ... you're not helping us--you know--attain it. So. ...

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

A. I don't think they hate America or Americans. I think they dislike American foreign policy. And I think that's a major misconception here in America is that when they talk about--you know--the Arab streets and how it hates America. And after September 11th,--you know--Bush and ... and his ... everyone in his administration was saying: Oh, this happened because they hate our freedom. I think it has nothing to do with that. I think it's ... it's not any--you know--I think it's not the freedom. I think it's ... part of it is that they want freedom and it's ... I think they ... they actually respect America in that it is such a free--you know--the ideology basically. You know? Anyone can have a free, basically, way of thinking, I guess. Yeah. So I think that that's a major misconception.

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

A. I think the main thing is that--you know--the administration has to somehow ... has to educate itself more about the ... the reasons why terrorism ... how it came about and--you know--work with other countries who ... who have had--you know ... countries in the Middle East, like, I mean, ... I don't know about other countries. I'm most familiar with Egypt, but, I mean, Egypt was facing terrorism problems ... problems for years. So I think if they if they--you know--if they work with other governments to see what the similarities are and ... and ... and how they ... how the different governments work or--you know--finding some kind of solution. And I think it'd have to be exchanging ideas and ... and cultures as well and understanding--you know--where these people are coming from. I think that's the main way to fix the things or start fixing things.

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

A. I think I've talked enough. I've talked your ear off. I think I covered everything.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you so much for this.

A. You're so welcome.