

Interview 42

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: Male

Age: 32

Q. Okay. I'll go ahead by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. In Pakistan.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. In Pakistan, Kenya and the United States.

Q. Okay. How old were you when you came to the United States?

A. I was almost fourteen.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. In Pakistan and India.

Q. So you would be first generation. And what do you consider your ethnic background to be?

A. I consider myself to be a Pakistani.

Q. And your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. How old are you now, if you don't mind?

A. Thirty-two.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident?

A. I'd rather not answer that.

Q. Okay. Sure. And what is your highest level of education?

A. I have a degree in law.

Q. In what country did you obtain your education?

A. In the U.S.

Q. Briefly explain what it is that you do and your job title, your occupation?

A. I am a corporate attorney and my job title is Associate at a law firm.

Q. Okay. For whom are you working? Is it a private company?

A. Private law firm.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm married.

Q. Any children?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. I'll go ahead and ask you a few questions about September 11th and how you experienced it. Around 9 a.m., where were you that day and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was in the office and one of my secretaries told me about them.

Q. So what was your first reaction?

A. I thought, of course, a small plane had accidentally hit one of the towers.

Q. I see. After you heard that it was a terrorist attack did you think that it might be Muslims or Arabs?

A. I thought it was certainly a possibility and I was hoping that it was not.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th, something that will always stand out in your mind?

A. Favorite memory?

Q. Vivid memory?

A. Vivid memory.

Q. Yes.

A. The ... the images of the planes hitting the Towers that I saw on television...

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

A. I felt sadness.

Q. Did you feel any type of guilt knowing that Muslims were involved in this attack?

A. I did not know that Muslims were involved. I was hoping that Muslims were not involved. It wasn't until later that they started saying that Muslims were involved.

Q. Afterwards when you found out that they were involved did you feel any guilt being a Muslim?

A. I did not feel guilt. I felt anger because these people came to do it in the name of Islam, but ... but not guilt.

Q. Okay. Have your feelings changed ever since then?

A. Do I feel guilty now, no.

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

A. See, ethnic background is different from religious background.

Q. Absolutely. I'm asking you about ethnic background.

A. Ethnic ... yeah, ethnic back--Pakistani.

Q. How about immediately after September 11th?

A. I still tell them I'm Pakistani. I don't ... Yeah. Yeah. That's definite.

Q. Have your feelings toward the United States changed in any way, like your level of political awareness towards domestic policies or foreign policies?

A. I was always a follower of ... of politics and so it hasn't really changed since 9/11.

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

A. I have never felt fully at home here. But then again, I have never felt fully at home anywhere because I grew up in very different places.

Q. Okay. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated since 9/11?

A. Most certainly.

Q. How so?

A. There is more of a stigma. There is more racism and there is more discrimination. Much of it is officially sanctioned and some of it not officially sanctioned.

Q. Have you experienced any backlash since September 11th personally at the work place or outside?

A. Not at the work place ...

Q. Public areas?

A. Yes. There was one incident in which somebody said something to me in the subway and I responded and we sort of went back and forth but that was it.

Q. Can you briefly describe the incident?

A. Sure. I was waiting for the 7 train in New York City and somebody, a large Hispanic gentleman walking by me, yelled out, "Don't want to see no Arabs." I think this is when we had gotten on the train.

Q. Okay.

A. And I was sitting diagonally across from him and I said, "Were you talking to me?" and he asked me, "Are you an Arab?" I said, "No. But, you know, what you said was wrong." And he

responded, "Well, if ... if you're not an Arab I wasn't talking to you." Then the conductor walked by and he told me that I should just, you know, go to a different car because ... because there would otherwise possibly be a fight. And I told him that I wasn't going to move and I think that was the end of the incident. The other guy didn't say anything else to me.

Q. Have any members of your family experienced any harassment or discrimination?

A. No.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling this backlash?

A. It depends on how you define effective.

Q. Do you think that these organizations have been effective in mobilizing and basically organizing the community as a whole?

A. They've tried their best. These are, generally speaking, young institutions. They have not been around for decades and so ... and they have limited resources, but I think they've tried. Whether they've been effective ... Have they been? They've had some effect. Have they been able to staunch the tide? No. Do you expect such institutions to be able to staunch the tide? No.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organization ever since September 11th?

A. No. I mean, I've ... I've been part of ... I've been part of a Muslim lawyers group but that was formed before September 11th.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious community and other ones, like, let's say the Muslims and the Hindus or the Muslims and the Jews, after September 11th? Do you think that these communities are more tolerant and harmonious towards each other or more oppositional and strained?

A. I really couldn't say. I mean, my ... my interactions...

Q. Yeah, depending upon your experience.

A. Oh just ... my social interactions are ... are limited to the work place and close family and personal friends who come from all ... all backgrounds, different faiths, different ethnic backgrounds, and my relationship with these people has always been good. It hasn't been changed since 9-11.

Q. Looking at it from the news or what you read in the papers or watch on TV, how do you see it?

A. I haven't thought about it.

Q. What do you think members of your community can do to improve relations?

A. Yes. Individuals can always do things to improve relationships and ...

Q. How do you think they can go about doing that?

A. I think social interaction, education. I think, the two big things.

Q. Given your understanding of the South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant groups in the United States after September 11th, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States?

A. It ... that's ... that would be a question for each individual and ... People come here for different reasons.

Q. No, absolutely.

A. I mean, if they ...they're coming for education, yes, of course, I think, especially for higher education. The educational institutions in this country are usually better than what can be found in other countries. If you're coming for economic opportunity, yes. You know? If you're coming for a vacation and you have other options and ... and you don't want to deal with possible discrimination, then no. With the finger printing of Arab men, Muslim men by the INS and other such initiative,

you know, for certain purposes you'd discourage someone. But generally speaking I would say it depends on the individual and the reason they are coming.

Q. So far we've spoken about the negative consequences. Do you think there have been any positive consequences resulting from September 11th?

A. People are more willing to learn about Islam. I think that's been one positive outcome from this.

Q. Why do you think that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think that Arabs in the Middle East hate America?

A. This is such an open-ended question. I am not sure why these attacks happened. They are the result of perceived injustices and of perceptions about what these, you know, what could be done to ... to remedy the situation in, you know, in both cases, you know?

Q. Right.

A. Very false perceptions. Let's see. Do Muslims in the Middle East hate America? Yes, a good number of Muslims in the Middle East hate America. A good number of Muslims in the Middle East love America. A good number are indifferent to America. It's ... it's just ... it's a very broad ended question.

Q. What do you think the United States can do to resolve this issue of terrorism, which is directed against it?

A. I don't ... I don't know that any one country can itself resolve the situation. I think the U.S. can do several things on different fronts. They can do things on the security front and they can do things on an education front. They can do things on the foreign policy front, all of which put together might have an effect in ameliorating such things.

Q. Do you think that if the security that's provided at the moment was provided post 9-11 the attacks could have been prevented?

A. You mean pre 9-11?

Q. Yes.

A. Could the attacks have been prevented? I don't know that. If they knew that people were trying to hijack planes could they have prevented it by putting into place the policies you have now? It depends. I mean, possibly it may have prevented one or two of the planes from being hijacked, maybe all of them? I don't know.

Q. Have you traveled after 9-11?

A. I have.

Q. By plane?

A. Yes, I have.

Q. Did you feel more secure or was it the same for you?

A. I ... I mean, I felt more secure, but I was discriminated against. I was pulled aside three, four times right before boarding the plane, after having gone through the security check-in and the search, when checking in my bags. After checking in my bags, I was pulled aside and searched again and the first two times that happened I was the only person pulled aside, which made... which was, you know, made it clear to me that it was profiling. I don't ... I mean, after that it was more random and other people were pulled over too before boarding the plane and searched and I guess, to some extent, that does make the plane a little safer.

Q. Are there any other points or issues you'd like to comment on?

A. No.

Q. No. Okay. Thank you.

A. You're welcome.

