

Interview 27

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: 28

Q. I am going to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I came to the United States when I was one year old and I grew up in Westchester County, New York.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. He was born in Aleppo, Syria

Q. And your mother?

A. In Switzerland.

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

A. When I consider categories in the United States I do actually consider myself Arab-American even though I always explain to people that my father is from Syria and my mother is from Switzerland originally.

Q. But you refer yourself ... you're considered to be Arab-American?

A. When asked what my ethnicity is, yes. When I fill out forms and I have to answer questions or check boxes I put Caucasian.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Catholic.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Twenty-eight.

Q. You're a U.S. citizen?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I received my law degree two years ago.

Q. From where?

A. From [school removed].

Q. What is your main occupation right now?

A. Right now I'm an academic researcher ... I focus in human rights law and consider myself a ... a human rights worker.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm single.

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

A. At 9am I was in Boston visiting some friends. I was preparing to leave for a one-year field job in Africa and I was visiting with professors. At that time, though, I went to visit a friend of mine at her apartment and was walking in the street, and by the time I knocked on her door she pulled me in to listen to the radio because she had heard that the first crash had happened at the World Trade Center.

Q. What was your first reaction to that?

A. I was listening ... I followed the news originally on NPR through the radio because we didn't have a TV. And the first speculations, I guess, immediately after the attack were

actually that it was a terrorist attack. And I was with a friend who studies Middle East politics and both of us were commenting and somewhat outraged that why was it immediately that when such an attack happened that it was immediately assumed to be ... a terrorist attack. Nevertheless, as we listened more and heard of the second crash and the crash on the Pentagon I think that we both fell silent, not really knowing what to think.

Q. What was your reaction to the possibility that the terrorists could be Middle Eastern?

A. Well, aside from thinking that without any proof at the time, that it was a terrorist attack, it's absolutely normal to me, or it doesn't ... it isn't surprising to me at all that once it was established, that it could have been a terrorist attack. That those terrorists could have been Middle Eastern seemed ... seemed ac-- not acceptable but not surprising.

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

A. I think later ... watching the crashes on TV – the repeated images on TV – that just kept on being played over and over.

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

A. Somewhat ambivalent. Somewhat confused. I wasn't angered. I wasn't shocked. I wasn't outraged, but I was confused in that I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know what the purpose of the attacks were and what the implications were for ... for New York, for the United States and ... and for policy, I guess, is what I was thinking at the time.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the event?

A. Not really, not towards the actual event. You know? I think I'm still trying to understand what ... what the attacks were meant to accomplish and trying to sift through

all of the ... all of the analysis that's coming out from different sources as to who's behind the attacks: was it Al-Qaeda? What it means for the state of international relations today? What it means for U.S. Policy and what it means for basic intercultural relations.

Q. And was guilt involved whatsoever because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack?

A. Not at all.

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

A. I identified as Arab-American. I ... as I said, I would always explain that my father is from Syria and that my mother is from Switzerland. And if anybody asked anything more specific about either of my parents' heritage, I would explain.

Q. What about immediately afterwards, after 9-11?

A. After 9-11 the one thing that I noticed was that in sort of day to day activities such as going to a doctor or filling a prescription or dealing with people that several more people had asked me what the origins of my last name were. And again, I pretty much answered in the same way, just saying, well, my father's Syrian and my mother's Swiss and I'm American. So ... some people asked me how I felt about being Arab-American and I would explain that it didn't really ... it didn't really effect how I felt in terms of feelings of guilt or any association or affiliation with the terrorist attacks nor did it really effect my ... my feelings of patriotism towards the United States. I definitely felt like a New Yorker, a suburban New Yorker, and I guess, first and foremost, I do identify as being an American and but didn't change any level of patriotism after September 11th.

Q. What do you say now? Do you continue to say Arab-American or... .

A. Yeah, I do. Again, it's always ... my answer is somewhat complicated so ... I have to explain a little bit more about both my ... my Dad's side and my Mom's side. But I do say ... I would say that I'm an Arab-American.

Q. Have your feelings towards the U.S. changed since 9-11?

A. They haven't changed. I ... as I mentioned earlier, I'm a human rights ... interested in human rights law and I think that growing up I've always had somewhat of a healthy outlook on American foreign policy and a certain skepticism. So in terms of my views on criticizing American foreign policy or the U.S. reaction in its foreign policy to September 11th, I would say that I remain almost as critical now as I used to be and try and maintain a balanced perspective and take into account September 11th as the tragedy it is but not that that should influence policy one way or the other.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the U.S.?

A. I do.

Q. You've always felt like this?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia, for example, in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. Perhaps I should ... I should explain that just a couple of weeks I'd say in the end of September I left the United States to live abroad in Africa for a year as a human rights defender so I don't really have too many personal experiences of interacting with people as an Arab-American when ... after that one month and I've just been back in the States for a couple of weeks now. But it's ... I followed the newspapers on the web from abroad and have been very much interested in following the issues of civil liberties and the

military tribunals and immigration laws while I was abroad, and it is absolutely clear to me that ... that there has been a change in the way that people have been treated, first of all, by the government. And my guess is also that ... I've heard ... talked to friends [who] are Arabs or Arab-Americans, and again, and just saying that they felt like they've had to explain themselves or that they've been questioned on their identity post-9-11.

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

A. Backlash, in a negative sense, no. The only first hand experience is what I was saying, just more people asking me what my name is and more interest and, say, a greater awareness. But I don't feel like it's influenced or effected me negatively in any way.

Q. Has a member of your family experienced backlash?

A. From my father who is really the only member that ... who I've spoken with I would say no, that he hasn't experienced backlash.

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

A. Again, perhaps I haven't ... I wasn't in the States enough to be able to specifically answer this question. You know, I know that since ... just in the last several weeks I've noticed several ads that were taken out by different Muslim associations or Arab ... Arab-American groups. And I always notice that they're not perhaps in the front section of the *New York Times*. They're located more in the back. And just in terms of advocacy strategy, whether it's based on financial ability or what, I've wondered whether ... how effective they've been. I nevertheless think that in terms of the articles that I've read in terms of response that certain organizations have been very prominent in fielding questions and working with the media in terms of providing an Arab-American or

Muslim perspective on ... on certain policies or certain actions that the government has taken since 9-11. But I would also say that, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union or other civil rights more general civil rights organizations has also played a positive role. And I wouldn't necessarily be able to say which one I think has played a more significant role in responding to ... to 9-11.

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

A. No I haven't.

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

A. What do you mean by nature of the relationship?

Q. Are relations, do you think, more tolerant or harmonious or would you say they're more strained or oppositional?

A. I wouldn't know how to say in terms of more harmonious or more strained. I think that what I have noticed is perhaps a more poignant expression of views ... negative views toward countries in the Middle East. You know? We're talking about Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq. But ... but in terms of policy and in terms of there support for Al-Qaeda or what not. But in terms of interpersonal reactions in the States I wouldn't know what to say. What I ... One thing that has really struck me though is that in some ways, post-9-11, I think that there has been a greater understanding of the Middle East, of countries in the Middle East, of Arab-Americans as a commun--as a community in the United States, and it's through, I think, stories that have been told through the media about different elements of the Arab-American community, different religious groups within the Arab-American community. And in some respects I feel like that's brought a prominence to Arab-

Americans as a cultural group of Americans in the United States that wasn't really that nuanced before 9-11. Arab ... I think previously the ... the information was always Arab equals Muslim and there was no differentiation between ... between country origins or even between Muslim affiliations. So to that degree I think that at least awareness has improved since 9-11.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Arab immigrant groups in the U.S. at this time, would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate here?

A. Well, I wouldn't discourage them to emigrate here based on the cultural interaction or society ... for societal issues being Arab-American in the United States. As for encouragement, I think that immigration is such a personal issue I wouldn't know ... I wouldn't know what to say based on individual scenarios. But I definitely wouldn't discourage based on the current societal reactions to Arab-Americans.

Q. We've talked about some of the negative consequences. You mentioned before that the positive consequences could have been that there has been more visibility and improved understanding. Do you think there were any other positive consequences?

A. Among American society?

Q. In American society ... or the world but I mean...

A. I wonder. I really couldn't say at this point that there have been any others. Whether an improved understanding will lead to greater cultural integration, perhaps, or acceptance, but I really couldn't say at this time.

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

A. I think that they happened because of a resentment toward the United States for its economic and cultural hegemony in the world today.

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

A. I think that some do hate America, and I think that others simply resent America. And some are searching for their own voice and for the expression of their own culture, their own religion, and also for finding their own economic sufficiency in the world economy.

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

A. I think that the United States needs to play a greater and a more balanced role in the Middle East policy, and I think that it can play a more constructive role in resolving the Arab/Israeli conflict in Israel and Palestine. I also think that its current rhetoric of wanting to go to war against Iraq is detrimental to its policy. I think the United States needs to show some sort of ... some sort of acceptance. I think in terms of its policy right now the United States is too combative and its position seems to be fairly clear that it is ... it is conducting a war against terrorism and by doing so that it's against the Arab world. And until it manages to express some sort of nuance: it's a not a war against a country or all Arab countries; it's not a war against all peoples, it's going to have ... have a hard time fighting the grassroots involvement in ... in terms of people who are drawn to terrorist organizations. So I definitely think that it needs to increase its activity, improve its Middle East policy, and more generally, act on the global stage in a less un-- unilateral manner. Again, as a human rights lawyer, I know that certain issues like the U.S. policy towards the International Criminal Court is just one small example, but it shows that the United States wants to go it alone in the international arena; holds itself above all other

countries; considers itself to be completely separate from ... from and immune from ... from impunity in its actions in the globe and that's just the wrong position to take when it should be cooperating more on a multilateral level.

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. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

A. Thank you.