

Interview 71

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: 23

Q. I'd like to ask you a few questions first about yourself. Where were you born?

A. Beirut, Lebanon.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in the UAE, went ... went to high school in Beirut, college here in the United States.

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

A. Seventeen.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Lebanon.

Q. Both, father and mother?

A. Yes.

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

A. I'm Arab.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Christian.

Q. And how old are you now?

A. Twenty-three.

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

A. A U.S. citizen.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. A Master's degree.

Q. In what?

A. In mathematical sciences. It's a Master's in science and engineering.

Q. And when did you attain this degree?

A. May, 2002.

Q. Okay. What is your current occupation?

A. I'm an analyst.

Q. And whom are you working for? Is it a private company or....

A. Yeah. It's a private company.

Q. Okay. And what is your marital status?

A. Single.

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

A. I was in class.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was walking through the hallways and ... after class. People had their doors open and they had the radio on and TV on and that's how I heard about it.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Well, we heard about the first plane, so I thought it was just an accident. And then ... but then when we heard about the second plane it got a little more serious. So my first reaction was getting more information, I guess.

Q. When did you hear about the attack on the Pentagon?

A. Also, I guess, around the same time. It came after so there was ... I heard about it ... actually I heard about that at home, not at school.

Q. So you had made your way home by then?

A. Yeah. I was at home.

Q. Did you have any reactions that it could have been a possibility that it was a terrorist act and it could have been Middle Eastern?

A. I think ... No. I mean, I wasn't really sure. Like, I didn't ... I didn't formulate any opinions till I wanted ... till I got more information. So I was just, like, trying to seek out more information.

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

A. Sorry. Can you repeat that? I didn't hear that.

Q. Your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards. Did you feel anger, sadness....

A. Yeah. I mean, both, I guess. I mean, I was ... I was angry because I know that this was going to backlash on ... on Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans and I was sad because, I mean, all these ... like, a lot of innocent people were killed. And that's not the way I would approach certain ... I mean, I don't know--I wouldn't approach frustration with ... with ... things that way.

Q. Did you feel guilt at all because Arabs were involved in the attacks?

A. Guilt because Arabs did you say?

Q. Um-hum.

A. I don't ... No, I don't think so. I don't think I was ... I didn't feel responsible for anything so I didn't feel guilty that it was me but I felt that ... I didn't feel guilty because it

was an Arab related issue but I was ... I was more upset at ... at the id--at the ideologies of the people who carried it out. Like, I was upset about what ha--about their beliefs.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. My ... my feelings changed since the Feelings towards what, like what?

Q. You mentioned, for example, that you felt angry and that you felt that there were going to be repercussions for the Arab-American community. Have these feelings changed?

A. I mean, I've kind of ... kind of grown ... like, I've kind of accepted the repercussions, I mean, in terms of--I've come to terms with them. I mean, you fight them ... basically, it changed in terms of, well, now ... now I got to do something about it so I'm not going to sit and dwell on the issue. I'm just going to go out and do something about it and educate people, educate the American public about our culture and .. and kind of. ... It was kind of the ... I mean, the only change is that it changed from sitting there being sad and angry about it to, let's say, I'm going to go out and do something about it.

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

A. Vivid memory?

Q. Um-hum. Is there something that stands out in your mind that you'll never forget?

A. With September 11th?

Q. Um-hum. Just that day itself, I mean.

A. You're cutting up a little bit. I'm not. ...

Q. Oh, I'm sorry. Let me see if I can. ...

A. Can you repeat that? Sorry.

Q. I was asking you about your ... is there anything about September 11th specifically that day, that you'll never forget?

A. Well, I guess the ... the image that stands out in my mind is the ... the toppling of the Towers so that ... I mean, and the dust over the sky--the Manhattan skyline. So that was ... I mean, they played it over and over again on the TV so that's one of the things that stands out.

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

A. I'm a Lebanese-American.

Q. What about immediately after 9-11?

A. The same thing, Lebanese-American.

Q. And now you. ...

A. Now the same thing, Lebanese-American.

Q. Did you ever feel nervous or scared of saying it?

A. No. I mean, I think the only difference now is I'm more aware of their reactions. Like, I'm ... I'm ready to ... I guess I'm ready to respond to ... to their reactions right now. So before it was, I guess you would say it ... I'd say it without, like, think--without thinking about what they're going ... how they're going to react. So now it's more like ... well, I mean, I'm just prepared for anything. But I'm not--I'm not afraid of saying it.

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

A. In terms of ... like, how? I don't know. ...

Q. Politically. Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. I guess ... well, I've been always active on ... on the Palestinian issue so in terms of the American awareness of what goes on in the Middle East or ... I guess I haven't ... like, I still expect that they don't know what's going on and they don't ... they're not understanding what's going on. But bas--basically, I mean, I've seen the difference that I've seen between before and after is that now I'm more aware how ... how the media ... how big a role the media plays on swaying public opinion and stuff like that. So that's ... I mean, I'm more aware of that and that ... that kind of helps me approach things differently and helps me prepare myself when I'm approached with, I guess, ignorant statements about the Middle East and stuff like that. So I hope that answers the question. I don't know. ...

Q. No, no. It did. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States?

A. Yeah.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Yeah. I mean, there was always some sort of connection because, I mean, I knew always visiting the United States, always knowing that I was going to come here for college. And so I always knew that the United States was going to play a role in my life. And ... and I mean, the opportunities here are unlike the ones you'd find in the Middle East, so, I mean, there's always that connection.

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

A. Oh yes, definitely. I mean, I went to New York last weekend and I attended a comedy show. And in every I think there were, like, five comedians up there and everybody had a segment on Arab ... on Arabs in the Mid--in the United States. So, I mean, people

have become more aware of Arab-Americans in the ... in the United States and ... and they have more of a prejudice towards them, I think.

Q. What about on the government level?

A. On the government level, sure. I mean, I ... I ... You know? I guess, even though, like, they ... the government ... after September 11th President Bush and a bunch of other people tried to, I guess, make the American public aware of that they shouldn't be ... they shouldn't, like, I guess, be biased towards or, like--you know--what's the word? I'm not....

Q. Discriminate them?

A. Yeah, discriminate. Yes. That's the word. Sorry--yeah, discriminate against Arab-Americans. But I guess you can't help but notice that there ... there is, like, ... there is kind of like the government is leading tow--not Arab-Americans specific, but towards I mean, their actions towards Arab ... the Arab countries and their ... how they respond to certain situations in the ... in the Middle East, it's always going to kind of backlash on Arab-Americans in the United States. So

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

A. Me personally? No.

Q. Has any member of your family?

A. No.

Q. Okay. Do you think Arab-American organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against certain Arab-American groups after 9-11?

A. I haven't really been ... well, I think ... like, I know of certain--like, I know certain Arab-American organizations like AAI and ADC, I mean, they do a lot of--kind of more ADC does a lot of, like, handling the legal ... legal cases in terms of discrimination

against the Arab-Americans so I think they ... they've tried to, like, send out literature and ... and handle that ... that kind of aspect. But I haven't really ... like, I don't know of any specific cases, but I know that they do that type of work, so I know it's ... that it's being done somehow.

Q. Have they managed to organize or mobilize our community politically?

A. They've tried, but I don't think it's working yet.

Q. Why not?

A. Well, I think 'cause .. I mean, there was one experience with ... they tried to create this PAC [Political Action Committee] in the Presidential elections of 2000, and I guess there was ... there was ... the PAC wanted to vote Republican. And then there was some kind of resistance. Some wanted to vote Democratic and it was ... there was a lot of, I guess, disagreement and stuff like that. So I don't know ... I don't think they've ... they've ... they've really gotten there yet. It just needs a little more work.

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

A. Yeah. I've joined the Network of Arab-American Professionals.

Q. In what capacity?

A. Well, I'm a very active member and currently I'm the [removed].

Q. Okay. In your opinion what is the nature of the relationship between the Arab-American community and others in the United States at this time? Are relations more tolerant now than before 9-11 or are they more strained and oppositional?

A. I'm not really sure. I think ... well, it depends who you ... I guess it depends who you're talking to. If it's somebody at ... at a intellectual level ... I don't think it's ... it's cross- cultural. I mean, we've always been kind of on the same ... like, we've always been

on good terms with, like, the Latin-American community. But ... but I think it's more on a ... on an intellectual level, not an ethnic level. So it depends who you're talking to in terms ... I mean, more ... people who are more are of the situation and read up more on it tend to be more tolerant. But if you ... if you have ... if you're talking to--I hate to say this--but if you're talking to your average Joe, sometimes they're not ... they're not as tolerant.

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

A. Just, I guess, just kind of be out there and ... and educate them and tell them, well, and show them the different sides to ... basically just show them that we're not terrorists and show them, I guess, our cultural uniqueness and that we're ... we're not all out to get the U.S. or ... or out to hurt anybody. We're just ... we're just ... I mean, we're part of your community. We're trying to be productive elements of the community. I guess it's just education, just getting the facts out there to people and making them aware of the situation.

Q. What do you think organizations can do, Middle Eastern organizations?

A. Basically do the same thing, just get out there and get emersed into the other communities and, like, yeah, just be ... I guess, be like, model people to--I mean, so that they can ... so that people ... so that the other Americans can be aware of the good qualities of the Arab-Americans and stuff like that.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the Arabic immigrant population in the United States after 9-11, would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. Oh yes. I mean, I would ... I would always encourage it because, I mean, the opportunities here are ... there are a lot of opportunities for immigrants ... I mean, it may be a little more difficult now but I would still ... if they can get ... get ... if they can come in here I think they ... they should do it. I mean, it opens up a lot of doors for them. It's a great thing, I think.

Q. Do you think there were any positive consequences of 9-11?

A. I ... Like what? I don't know. ...

Q. Do you think that there's been more visibility or an improved understanding of Arabs or Islam or the Middle East in the United States?

A. Oh, yeah. I mean, yeah, definitely. I mean, not. ... I don't know if it's more of an understanding, but people are seeking to ... to get more information on Islam, on Arabs, on. ... So in that sense, I guess, if ... if people I mean, if people want to learn more and, like, about the Arab ... Arabs and about the religion, in that sense it ... it would be somewhat positive. But I don't ... I don't have the statistics to say ... to know, like, what percentage of Americans have been seeking out more information because, I mean, a lot of the people that you encounter are ... still have this negative impression of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans so.... If ... if ... I mean, if the whole country mobilized to learn ... to learn more about the Arabs then ... and Muslims then I think that would have been one positive aspect.

Q. Um-hum. But you don't think that's happened?

A. I don't think it's happened in the ... in the quantity that it's ... I mean, I don't think it's happened enough to ... to be called positive. You know? It's happened a little bit so, I mean, it's ... it's okay, but it's not, like, happened in ... I mean, like, in ... in masses. So I

don't ... I don't feel that ... that people, like, a large percentage of people, are doing it. So I don't know if ... if it's ... if it's big enough to be called positive.

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

A. Because of certain ... because there's a certain ... because there was a certain ideology of ... out there that disagreed with American politics and decided to handle it a certain way. I mean, there are a lot of ideologies that don't agree with American foreign policy but try to approach it through other means. And this ... and this particular group of people decided to approach it through violence and just through ... through a totally different, I guess--what's the word?--I don't know--just methods. They used different methods. And I don't totally agree with that, but it's not, like, something you can stop. ...

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

A. No, not ... not all of them. I mean, they may have, like, reservations on foreign policy--American foreign policy and how some Americans think and. ... But, I mean, America is a melting pot so not everybody agrees with everybody else. So ... but I don't think everybody ... all Arabs or Muslims hate America.

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

A. Change its foreign policy.

Q In what way?

A. First of all, it shouldn't be one sided on ... on the Palestinian issue. It shouldn't be supporting Israel all the way, and ... and be more tolerant of the Muslim religion.

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. I think that's about it. I don't know. ...

Q. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation.

A. Thank you.