

Interview 72

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: 35

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

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you born?

A. In Morocco.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Morocco.

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

A. How old has it been?

Q. Well, how old were you when you first came here?

A. Oh, how old I was.

Q. Yeah.

A. I was thirty-one.

Q. Okay. And how long have you been here?

A. Four years.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Morocco.

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

A. My ethnic background? I'm part Arab, part Berber.

Q. Okay. So how would you identify yourself?

A. Most Moroccans identify themselves as Arabs even if they have ethnic--you know--Berber genes. But Morocco is an Arab country.

Q. Okay. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Thirty-five.

Q. Okay. Are you a U.S. citizen?

A. No, I'm not.

Q. Okay. A Green Card holder or other?

A. I have a work permit.

Q. Okay. What is your highest level of education?

A. Master's degree.

Q. In what?

A. In Business Administration.

Q. And where did you receive your degree?

A. Here in Washington D.C.

Q. What year?

A. What year? This year.

Q. Oh, okay, 2003 then.

A. Yeah.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. I'm a recent graduate. I'm currently looking for a job. I just finished school actually.

Q. Okay. And are you married?

A. No.

Q. Okay. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th.

A. Uh-huh?

Q. Where were you on that day around 9am?

A. I was at home.

Q. How did you hear of the attacks?

A. By telephone from Morocco.

Q. Really? You heard about it from Morocco?

A. Yes. I saw I read an article on the Internet, but they were talking about an accident at the World Trade Center so I didn't know it was a terrorist attack.

Q. Okay. And what was your first reaction?

A. Disbelief. I did not believe it. When they told me that I told them they must be wrong.

Q. Did you have a reaction to the possibility that it could be a terrorist act and the terrorists could be Middle Eastern or Muslim?

A. Yes. One of my roommates came later during the day and told me he ... he was ... he is Norwegian, but he said everybody thinks that it's the Middle Easterners, it's the Arabs. And I ... and I got--you know--angry and told him no, it can't be that way. It can't be the Arabs.

Q. How did you feel that ... about what he was saying?

A. I felt that it was just kind of profiling Arabs as terrorists. I did not feel that it was based on rational judgment or anything. At that time they still had not come up with any information on ... on TV or anything so I just thought: Oh, you always accuse Arabs.

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

A. My God! Once I realized that it really happened, it was the worst thing I had been through in my life.

Q. What ... did you feel anger, pain, sadness?

A. A lot of helplessness and fear and not knowing what was going to happen next, if--you know—if--you know—if we were going to be bombed or something. You know? As we were watching TV and seeing what is happening and just not knowing if the White House was going to be bombed. And I live in Washington D.C. so I live fifteen minutes far away from the Pentagon, so a lot of fear.

Q. Was guilt involved at all because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack?

A. When I realized ... when they started coming out with the--you know--Arabic names, Mohammed Atta, later during the day I was partly feeling guilty, partly thinking they might be wrong; that they are just ...--you know--that he was probably just a passenger; that they were just profiling him. At the beginning I didn't want to accept it that the Arabs did it. So it was part guilt, part thinking no, they are just saying--you know--they just picked the Arabs and said that they are the ones who did it.

Q. Have your feelings changed at all since the events?

A. Yeah, a lot.

Q. In what way?

A. That I actually accepted the fact that it was done by Arabs and--you know--thinking that--you know--something should be done to change what is happening in the Arab world. I think the responsibility is shared between the United States and the Arab countries, the foreign policy. But at the same time I think that we have to assume our responsibility and clean up our backyard.

Q. What about this fear that you were talking about, fear of further attacks? Has. ...

A. First, fear to be targeted since I live here in the U.S. and I live in Washington D.C.--you know—that I would be targeted by the terrorists. The second fear was that I would be targeted by Americans as an Arab myself. So basically, like, for three days--you know--my ... my parents were calling me every two or three hours and--you know--making sure that I was staying at home and not getting out of the house. For three days I did not leave the house. I just didn't know what was going to happen.

Q. Since then has this fear changed?

A. Yes, because I had a lot of support from my American friends, actually.

Q. Okay. What would you consider to be your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. Me standing in my pajamas watching TV, standing. ... You know, I was not sitting. I was standing for probably one hour with ... I live with roommates so another roommate was also watching TV with me. He is American and he looks like he has been punched in the eye. And--you know--just waiting for a bomb to be dropped on ... on the house where I live.

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

A. Oh, I was Moroccan, but people don't always associate Morocco with the Arab world so sometimes the next ... next question would be what ... what language do you speak? I'd always say Arabic. I also happen to always wear ...--you know--I have a--you know--a chain and I have, like, verses of the Koran and wear so people would ask me what it is and I'd tell them it's verses from the Koran; that I'm Muslim.

Q. What about immediately after 9-11?

A. I ... my first reaction was to take out that chain that I was wear--wearing with verses from the Koran. I did not wear it for probably one month and then after that I ... I figured ... I just couldn't continue like that. I don't have ... anything.

Q. So after 9-11 if somebody asked you. ...

A. Oh, I still answered Morocco.

Q. You answered that?

A. But there would be a fear inside of me that there would be a backlash.

Q. Okay. And what do you say now?

A. Oh, Morocco always if they asked where I'm from. But at the beginning, like, I was hoping that nobody would ask me for a month after September the 11th. I was just hoping that nobody would notice my accent or anything.

Q. So ... but when you say you're Moroccan now do you still have that fear that you were talking about earlier?

A. Not at all. Not at all, no.

Q. What changed that?

A. Pe--peoples' reaction. You know? I was very surprised by the support I got from Americans here. You know, talking to me and telling me ... because a lot of them know that I have American roommates and tell me if you have any problems with your roommates you can come and stay in our house.

Q. And these are other Americans, not Arabs?

A. Yeah. Yeah. And I haven't ... didn't have any problems with my roommates at all, actually.

Q. Okay. Okay, good.

A. Quite the opposite.

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

A. Yes.

Q. In what way?

A. In the sense that when I came to the U.S. I came, like, I had gone through some bad personal experiences back home and I was thinking I would start a new life in the U.S. And ... and--you know--I was idealizing the United States. After September the 11th ... and I was also thinking things like I could probably get married to an American if he converts to Islam it would be okay--you know-- and things like that? And after September 11th I realized that there is a huge gap and that that gap is very, very, very difficult to bridge no matter what.

Q. It's a gap between whom?

A. Between the two cultures, Western and Eastern--you know--Arab ... and that political problems can only make the ... this gap--you know wider. And I realized that there was a huge political clash between the ... the Arab-Muslim interests and the American interests. And I realized that the terrorists were also giving a very, very bad name to Arabs and Muslims and that it would be very hard for Americans to get over that image. And I do not blame them. You know? We just had a terrorist attack in Casablanca a few days ago and kind of understand how they feel.

Q. What about politically? Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. Yes. I used to be totally detached from the--you know--what was happening in the political arena. I just didn't care. I was here in the U.S. I was not in my country. You know? I didn't care who became President, care about anything. Since 9-11 I became a political addict. I would say I'm just always reading--you know? It enlightened me a lot.

Q. Is it because of U.S. domestic policy or U.S. foreign policy or. ...

A. Both. Now I'm ... I'm careful about both because I know that if we have--you know--a Senator or a Congressman who is anti-Arab then I would be affected so I pay attention to that too, who is going to be elected locally. And the foreign policy, of course, is ... is the main--you know--the main interest. So I ... I pay attention more to foreign policy than to domestic policy, but I do not neglect domestic policy. I think of it as the core. ...

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

A. I beg your pardon?

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

A. At home? To a certain extent. I do like it here. I think people are very. ... You know, despite everything I still think very highly of Americans as individuals. I think they try to be tolerant and politically correct and everything. But there is always--you know--that feeling ... I wouldn't say 100 percent. But I would say that I am comfortable in the U.S. I don't feel ... You know? I ... most Moroccans go to France and to Europe, and I think that they suffer more in Europe because there is a lot more racism and a lot more--you know--racial profiling.

Q. In Europe you mean?

A. In Europe; a lot more racial profiling in Europe. Like in the streets, if you look like an Arab they would stop you and ask for your papers. This, you know would almost never happened here.

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

A. Yes, I think so.

Q. In what way?

A. I think that men are paying the price a lot more than women. I think one of the reasons why I was spared any backlash is that I am a woman and I do not wear the hijab so people cannot really say where I'm from. I've also been mistaken for being Hispanic or Greek or--you know--other nationalities. But men, especially those who look Arab, I know that they have felt a change in the way people behave towards them; there is ... that they perceive them as a threat. You know? They feel that they have to do more in order to earn their trust.

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

A. Not real backlash but slight reactions, like, nobody was angry at me but I've noticed sometimes when I say ... when I play Arabic music, for example, and somebody would listen to it and then they would realize that it's Middle Eastern music I would see the expression--you know?

Q. Is this ... at ... at home, you mean, or in public?

A. In my car or at home sometimes. I have--you know--American roommates so they get ... sometimes their friends come here and visit us--you know--or visit them and they would hear--you know--the Arabic music. Oh, what is this? This is Arabic music--you know?--and I would see the expression of their face changing but nobody ever said anything to me. But I can ... I can tell that people react.

Q. Okay. Do you have any members of your family here in the United States?

A. No. And my family actually have ... they were coming. ... They came and visited me and they were about to come when September 11th happened. And since that day they have refused to visit the United States.

Q. Why? Is it fear of flying or. ...

A. No, not the fear of flying but they just feel that there is so much aggressivity and animosity. And ... and I think that media also portrays it in a very--you know--very forceful way, since my parents watch Al-Jazeera and so they were seeing all the backlash against Arabs and Muslims and in the...--you know--Al-Jazeera portrays a lot of the United States foreign policy and everything so they just feel they just didn't want to come to the U.S. anymore. It was no longer enjoyable for them.

Q. Did ... had they been here before?

A. Yes.

Q. And now they don't want to come here?

A. They don't want to come.

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

A. I think they've tried to. You know? I can't ... I'm not sure how effective they have been, but I think they have tried.

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

A. Well, at least I know one organization here which is--you know--the Network of Arab-American Professionals which actually--you know--came into existence because of 9-11 ... 9-11 so there is--you know--there has been some initiatives. And ... and they also try to ... to ... people particularly involved and lobby for causes that are relevant to Arabs and everything.

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

A. Yeah, to the NAAP actually, and also the Council of Islamic-American Relations here in D.C. and the ADC.

Q. Okay. In what capacity? What do you do with them?

A. I wasn't active with them and I was a student when I joined them, but at least--you know--I became a member. I just wanted to stay in touch--you know--know what is going on and also ... because--you know--they send you all these updates on what is happening. And also in case I ... I--you know--I needed their help and I knew that at least I'm a member so I know how to contact them. And then I ... I joined NAAP and I ... with NAAP I'm very active and [removed].

Q. And you mentioned that NAAP was created as a result of 9-11?

A. Yes. It was mainly created by students who belonged to the Student Arab Association and after that--you know--and especially after 9-11 they decided that they had to form a group to defend themselves, although other groups ... already existed--you know--like the Arab-American Institute and the ADC and everything. But somehow they felt that they had to ... --you know--there was still room for more groups.

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

A. The relationship?

Q. Yeah. I mean, between the Arab-American Muslim community and other Americans. Are relations more tolerant now than before 9-11 or are they more strained or oppositional?

A. Well, I am ... I am lucky to live in an area where most people are very knowledgeable. Washington D.C. has a lot of very smart people and very bright people. I've met Americans who have lived ... lived overseas ... lived overseas, even some of them who speak Arabic, actually. So in this area I would say that Arabs ... Muslims are okay. But if you go outside of Washington

D.C.--you know--where there is more ignorance and more stereotypes I think they would be a lot less tolerant.

Q. Okay. Given your understanding of the status of the Arab immigrant group in the United States after 9-11 would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate here?

A. No, not at this point.

Q. Why not?

A. Because I just don't know what--you know--what is going to happen politically. Right now ... Just one second please.

Q. Okay.

A. It was a bit difficult right now and I think--you know--like, Iraq has been bombed. You know? That's one thing. Next target will probably be ... be Iran and the third one would probably be Syria. So I think it's going to be more and more difficult for Arab-Americans since it ... it's very hard to live in a place that is the aggressor to--you know--where you're from. So I wouldn't advise anyone to come. If ... if people are already here, well, they are here. It's very hard to leave the U.S. once you're here. You get used to it, get used to--you know--all the positive things that are part of at this society. But to emigrate to the U.S. at this point, I think we are in kind of a changing point of history right now and better to wait about a year or so and see how things unfold politically. And see also if Bush is going to be reelected 'cause I think if he is reelected then there will be trouble.

Q. So then you ... you wouldn't encourage anyone at all?

A. No, exactly: stay home.

Q. We've talked about some of the negative consequences of 9-11. Do you feel that there were any positive consequences?

A. Yes. I think there were some positive consequences, which is that a lot of people have developed interest in the Arab world and in Islam. And among all these people who have ... Islam, some of them have come up with the conclusion that there is a lot--you know--of ... of positive things in the Arab culture and the Muslim culture. That's from one point. You know? A lot of them--you know--are studying it precisely to destroy it or to bash it--you know?--but others have come up with positive conclusions.

Q. Okay.

A. On the other hand, for us as Arabs and Muslims, for me I know, like, it was kind of an awakening for my identity--you know--and it kind of strengthened it; that I will ... I would--you know-- like, I started to join all these Arab and Muslim groups and be active with them. And I want to be active with the Moroccan community here in D.C. and I want to make sure that I can help--you know--if I want to help and things like that. So it was good for the Arab community in ... in one sense; kind of strengthened the identify and everything.

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

A. Why do I think it happened? The first idea that came to my mind when I ... when I started slowly realizing that maybe ... maybe it was Arabs who did it--the first days I was still in disbelief--the first thing that came to my mind is the first Gulf War actually. As I come from Morocco where--you know--which is the furthest country geographically from ... from--you know--from the heart of the Middle East--the heart of the Arab world--and which is very, very

influenced by Europe, and I still remember very vividly during the first Gulf War, just for the first time in my life I saw a surge of anti-Americanism.

Q. In Morocco?

A. In Morocco. I saw demonstrations. I saw people--you know-- like, arguing verbally with Americans and being kind of aggressive because America was attacking Iraq, starving Iraq. And I saw that for the first time in my life and it was very new for Morocco at that time. And I was-- you know--I think, like, somehow--you know-- somehow it just didn't ... outside. It was, like, a changing point in the Moroccan attitude towards the United States. And the first thing that came to my mind is that people are taking their revenge. If the governments are helpless and the leaders are incompetent--you know--the people are taking their revenge themselves, which is not a good thing--absolutely not. I totally condemn what has happened. But--you know--this is what happens when you're leaders are totally inept and cannot ... 'cause Morocco is also part of the coalition against Kuwait with the United States--you know--with ... with a lot of other Arab countries and a lot of Moroccan citizens who were--you know--appalled by that, but they had no say in the policy. It was a decision of the government. So--you know--when people feel helpless and frustrated--you know--they kind of resort to very stupid things to get even.

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

A. No, I don't think they hate America in itself. The proof is that people still want to come here every day. You know?

Q. Exactly.

A. No. But I think there is very, very strong resentment against the American policies. I'm ... I'm almost certain there is no hatred against America or against Americans as individuals, but there

is a lot of resentment against the current administration, President Bush, the foreign policy, the backing of Israel ... so that's what I think.

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

A. I think it should solve the problem at--you know--at the root and not ... and not just try to cure the symptoms. You know? Cracking down on terrorist groups is just part of the solution. It's not the whole solution. I think the main thing is to show the Arab world that is it not totally biased against it and totally pro-Israel. I'm hoping that what is happening now with Mahmond Abbas is part ... I'm hoping, but I'm not sure it's going to take us anywhere. I'm just hoping, because the fact that, like, Yasser Arafat has never been received by President Bush, I think is a terrible thing, no matter how good or bad he is as a leader. Just out of fairness if you receive Sharon you have to listen also to Yasser Arafat. So I think this is ... this is where they can start and they should help the Middle Eastern countries, like, if they contribute to their ... economically, just show in an active way that there is nothing anti-Arab--you know--in the policies.

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

A. No. I think I have--you know--I think I have ... I've covered everything. I just ... maybe the only thing I would like to add is that I think that the people who are most vulnerable to 9-11 were ... were precisely the Arabs who live in the ... in the United States who were doubly victims. You know? From one side--you know--they ... they felt targeted from the terrorists; that the terrorists are targeting them as residents of the United States. And secondly--you know--[they felt] targeted as potential terrorists themselves by Americans. So I think that it was, like, the worst

thing I've probably been through in my life, even though I personally, like I said, did not have a bad personal experience. But I have seen things happening to people, especially guys. You know?

Q. I'm sorry. How does that ... how did that make you feel when you see this happening or when you hear about it?

A. Oh my God! It hurts. It hurts a lot. And, you see, like, even friends who are not actually Arabs--I have friend who are Indians and who have had bad experiences because people felt they were Arabs because they are darker or something, and just the idea that they were treated that way because people felt that they are Arabs--you know--it .. it hurts a lot. And then--you know—I started--you know--flirting with the idea of maybe I want to go back home. Maybe we're not welcome here anymore. Maybe it's time to go. That's why I would not encourage anybody to emigrate to the U.S. at this point. We'll have ... we'll have to wait for things to unfold and see how they will develop.

Q. Do you still feel like that? Do you still feel like you want. ...

A. Politically yes, not from--you know--from the side of people. I don't think there would be, and I'm hoping there wouldn't be, any backlash from the American people, like what has happened right after September the 11th. But politically--you know--we just don't know what's going to happen. I think it's a scary time.

Q. Would you feel safer in Morocco?

A. It's ... I wouldn't say so either. The thing ... but it still remains my country, so I ... I know I wouldn't be racially profiled--you know--in Morocco. But I wouldn't say safer because terrorist events are happening all over the place and we have had our first one just a couple of weeks ago

in Morocco. So I wouldn't say safer, like, in terms of safer, like, my life; I would stay alive if I go to Morocco, but--you know--at least I would not be targeted so that makes a difference.

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

A. Sure.