

Interview 17

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 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Male

Age: 19

Q. This project is called the September 11th Digital Archives. I'm going to be asking you questions about yourself and about how you experienced September 11th. There are no right or wrong answers. I just ask you to be as honest as you can. We insure you complete confidentiality. First I'd like to know where were you born?

A. I was born in Syria.

Q. Where in Syria?

A. North Syria. It's a small city named [name of city]: [spells name of city] City.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. Syria.

Q. When did you come to the United States?

A. 1998, September 9, 1998.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. Syria.

Q. And your Mom?

A. Syria, a Syrian town.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. And how old are you?

A. Nineteen.

Q. Okay. Are you a U.S. citizen, a Green Card holder or other?

A. Well, a green card.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I don't think the highest ... I'm just taking now the GED.

Q. Where are you doing that?

A. Kingsborough College. Oh, we have summer vacation now. We're going to go back September 12th.

Q. What is your main occupation now?

A. Like what?

Q. Your job. What do you...

A. Well, it's like a waiter, but very soon I'm going to change it; find someone else.

Q. Okay. What is your marital status? Are you married?

A. No, single.

Q. Now I'm going to ask you a few questions about September 11th and how you experienced it. Where were you on that day at 9 a.m.?

A. Home.

Q. And how did you hear about the attacks?

A. Well, my father called me from his work and he tell me "Do you know what happened?" I said, "No. I don't know." He said, "Turn the TV on and watch the TV what happened." So I turned the TV on and watch it and I see the two buildings, like the first building it was fall down [sic]. That was like nine-thirty or nine- thirty-five -- something like that. Yeah.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Well, the first reaction, like, the people who did that they was very bad people -- any kind of people to ... whatever, if they are Muslim or they're not a Muslim. I don't care about their religion.

Q. Did you think that they might be Muslims?

A. Maybe Muslims or maybe something else. Who knew? There is a book now who say the Muslims did it, but I think American and ... they help him. They cannot do that alone

because it's a small group. You know? It's like, a couple of guys taking on all that stuff? Even the airport, they can, like, catch it, like, from the radio, from the Internet or ... the people from the airport, there's some people they helped them. You know? It's hard to get in the air in flight on the airplane.

Q. Why do you think that America would help them?

A. I have no idea. Maybe something political or something like that. They help them and then they get something else, especially the war, the war in Afghanistan. Maybe they helped them. Then they make the war in Afghanistan. And they need ... Even now they need to punch Iraq too.

Q. A bunch of drugs?

A. Iraq. Iraq in the Middle East.

Q. Right.

A. They need to kick Iraq too. I think it's like ... like a map. They do it like that and they need, like, a reason to do it so they have to find a reason. They find the people who did it. And they just want to go up and hit troubled countries, especially Iraq. They're ... They're like ... They don't find no reason to hit Iraq. They have only that reason. So I think they do it and they want to hit Iraq now. Because Afghanistan is, like, nothing. It's a very small country. They hit it, like, right away.

Q. But Afghanistan has oil?

A. Well, Afghanistan ... But Iraq is much harder than Afghanistan.

Q. So what's...

A. Technology and everything. Look. First when they bombed Afghanistan they said we control the skies twenty-four hours. Can they control the skies in Iraq for twenty-four hours? Never. That's right. You know.

Q. So what's your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that you're never going to forget?

A. Well, I think the ... think the Twins Tower, I'll never forget it because I went up one

time before they burned it down, me and my Mom.

Q. When did you go up?

A. Like, two years ago before it happened, like two years. The ticket was nine dollars.
(laughs) But not anymore.

Q. So what were your feelings about what happened right afterwards?

A. Well, I feel bad. But there are a lot of people they make, like, ... like, figuration about the Muslims or the Arabs. You know? Like, they hate the Arabs and they don't like the Muslims, and they don't like the Arabs any more, especially, like, the older American people. They talk about the Muslims when it ... when this happened, like, it was 10:30. I got off the phone and was walking to work and I see, like, a couple of American people, they was ... they was working construction and they was ... fuck all the Muslims. All of them is stupid. They did that, they did that, they did that.

Q. They said that to you?

A. No. They're not talking? They don't know, I'm Muslim or not, but they're talking, like, all about the Muslims. So that was my feeling. And I feel sometime like maybe those people are right. And sometimes there are people like I don't expect. You know?

Q. What makes you think that they're right sometimes?

A. Well, because I am an American guy and this thing is happened to me I'm going to be like them. Whatever any guy would do that I'm going to hate him or I? Punch him too. So they have a reason. But the thing is not right, they don't have, like, prove the Arab Muslims do it and not ... Because the first hour ... that was happened they say the Muslims, the first hours. How they know they are Muslims from the first hour?

Q. So who do you think it could be other than the Muslims?

A. Maybe the Americans.

Q. Okay.

A. When Oklahoma happened they say the Muslims too. The first couple of months they said the Muslims. After that they say an American guy did all that stuff, for sure. But then

they don't say the Muslims. They don't do anything for Oklahoma. Then the first thing it happened in New York here in Twin Towers they say the Muslims. But who know. Well, now they have proof the Muslims that did it.

Q. Right.

A. But they don't know who's the people who helped them to do that stuff. Like, there must be people who helped them. Like, if you put any money ... there's a couple of guys, they can do all that ... I don't think so. Some people helped them come in from the airport too, especially the airport.

Q. Have your feelings changed lately?

A. A lot.

Q. How?

A. Well, before I got my green card ... I just got my green card. Before I got my green card they was [sic] catching a lot of people, especially Arab people, to find the guy and they? show me ID. They see ID and they go, like, to your home. "Are you an American citizen?" You go, "No." "[You] have a green card?" You say no. "Okay. Let me see your passport." They give him the passport and they go okay. They [take] You to jail for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours. Then they transfer [you] to Immigration. Then he go back to home, Syria, or in other countries. I have a friend of mine who's from Syria too, and after I go to his home on 86th Street ... that was, like, after what happened for a month and a half -- that was like in November -- they go to his home and ask him for someone if he lived with him? And he said, "No. No one lives with me." But the name ... They have a name, "Do you know that name? He live with you? He used to live with you?" He say, "No." "Then show me your ID?" And the guy showed the ID and they told him, "U.S. citizen? American citizen?" He said, "No." "Let me see your passport." They opened the passport and they looked. [It] expired already. "Sir, can you go with us?" Did nothing. He just knocked on door and they take him. That's not a reason. If you want to take all the American people, like, all the people? Like, American citizen or a green

card ... Most of the people who live in New York they have no papers. They're not a resident. So why don't you do that with the other people, not only the Arabs and not only the Muslims?

Q. That's because we're afraid of Arabs at this moment.

A. That's right.

Q. But it seems that you understand why they're doing that?

A. Well, I understand. But it's not supposed to be that much ... Now, we come here to work and live. I have been here, like, for, four years. I like to live here? I'm going to still live here. I'm not going to go back to my country because I like America. You know, America's very freedom, much freer than my country. That's why I like America and I believe in America. Whatever you say, Mr. Bush, I'm going to live here.

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

A. That was very good.

Q. No. When people ask you where you're from...

A. Syria!

Q. Before September 11th you told them...

A. Syria.

Q. Syria. What about...

A. After September 11th, too Syria.

Q. And now?

A. Syria. It never changed.

Q. You're ... You don't feel any ... whatever? You're not afraid to tell people where you're from?

A. Oh, sometimes. I was ... Let me tell you something, like, the story was [true]. I went to [my boss] and I working for him (unintelligible). So I went to him and I sit in his store, like, for one hour. That was in the nighttime. When I go out ... when I go out from the

store, me and him, I met a girl -- she worked with him -- and she asked me "Where are you from, man?" I said, "Syria." So goes, like, "Are you Arab?" "Yes, I'm Arab." She goes, like, "I hate the Arabs! I don't like the Arabs!" I go, like, Why do you still talk to me like that? It's fine to me you don't hate the Arabs. I don't hate the ... She's Puerto Rican. You know, the Puerto Ricans are American citizens. I'm ... I'm ... I'm not going to say I hate the Puerto Ricans, but you don't have to say, like, that. You know? I feel bad. Now when you're, like, when you're living here and you, like, you live with people ... there are people around you. You live with them, they hate you, what do you feel?

Q. Very isolated.

A. Yeah. That was my feeling.

Q. Is that the only time someone has said anything to you or attacked you or discriminated you? Have you had anything else like that?

A. That's what I'm telling you. And my teacher...

Q. Your teacher?

A. In school...

Q. This is in Kingsborough?

A. Kingsborough College, she's Jewish-Russian because she had ... We was in class and she goes, like, and a student he opened a story [sic] about September 11th. And she got ... she told me ... It's all ... I'm the only Muslim in the school. In the class, I'm only the Muslim and my name's [name], a special name. (Laughs) So she goes, like, ... a student asked her how she feel after September 11th and she goes, "Look. When that thing is happened I know the Muslims did it, the first thing." That's what she say. She say, "Then, like ... then, like, after that I feel like I'm not going to teach the Arab students any more 'cause I don't like the Arabs any more."

Q. So did you do anything?

A. Confront, no. No. I don't say nothing. She was talking and ... talking to me and she said, "The Muslims ... I don't know if the Muslims do it, but after what happened, like, I

figured I'm not going to teach the Arabs any more, any students, Arabs." And after that she looks in classes, the ones she teach, and she find Arab ... like a lot of Arab students, she had to teach them. She goes, "Like, I had no other way to not teach the Arabs. I had to teach the Arabs. That's why I'm teach[ing] them now." I was class ... I was in the class. I'm an Arab student. I'm the only one. She goes stuff like that. After that she told me, "Oh, I'm sorry."

Q. Did that effect your...

A. She goes to me, like, "Oh, I'm sorry." I don't have to be sorry. It's not the only [person] who responds like that.

Q. Did that effect your work in any way? Did that effect your grades?

A. No.

Q. Were there any...

A. Let me explain something to you. Even the work now, if you go to any residence--if you go to any place and they ask you, like, gentleman, I need ... you need help. I am looking for a job. They ask you where you're from. You say Syria or you say Arab, Syrian Republic or Egypt whatever. They ask you what's your name and you go, like, I'm saying [name] ... a lot of people they call me [nick-name]. They don't call me [name]. So I'm saying [name] and the American guys say, "Oh [nick-name]?" I say, "Yeah, [nick-name]." "Oh, we don't have a job for you, sir." (Laughs) We don't have a job for you because I'm Arabic. I have a green card so you can work and he says I don't have a job for you, just like, ... I don't know.

Q. Where have you been looking for jobs?

A. In Manhattan.

Q. In American restaurants?

A. In American restaurants. I used to work ... I used to work in an American restaurant before. That was two years ago.

Q. And what made you leave?

A. I left the job because the first reason was it was far from my home. It's on 42nd and Ninth Avenue and I live all the way in [address], takes me always an hour. The first. The second thing, (unintelligible) got his owner and he told me "come and I pay you more and I get you more money. And you're working good ..." and blah, blah, blah, blah. So I like, I figure I'm going to move. I mean, I'm going to leave and work another job, more money and easy also. But look. When I ... when I left the other restaurant and I came to work here I find the opposite. Trust me. I feel like I liked there much better than here. They first. Before everything because I liked. With them. The first time I came here? He working stock boy in an American company, a company. You know [name of restaurant]?

Q. Yes, yes.

A. Good. I used to work there. I worked with them, like, for six months. They don't pay me good but they was very good people. And most people that worked there, they was Arab people from Egypt. So they teach me how to work and they teach me everything. So I like to work [with] the American [businesses]. Then I just worked another restaurant and I liked the restaurant ... I liked the restaurant much better than here. Yeah. I worked there, like, for a year and something -- a year and a half -- something like that. And the owner was American and he likes me a lot. And I was, like, sixteen years old but he likes me and all that. All the time he's telling me, "I'm going to make you a man. I'm going to make you a man." Like a little push. Yeah.

Q. Have any members of your family or friends been attacked or...

A. No. Nobody's been discriminated.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern organizations are doing enough to stop the way the American public is acting toward Arabs?

A. They can made a lot of ways to stop them.

Q. I'm sorry.

A. They can ... they can stop...

Q. Do you think they've been doing that?

A. Nobody think about it. Nobody think about it to do something like ... do like start an organization with the Arabs.

Q. Well, there's a few already. There's one on Atlantic Avenue the Arab-American Family Center. There's a couple in Bay Ridge that are already established. But you don't think that they're doing their role?

A. I don't think they're doing very well. If they do, like, very well it wouldn't be like this. Even the Arabs, they don't deal like that,--never.

Q. Have you joined any groups, any religious groups or any political groups?

A. No. Although what's happened is the Jewish speech after September 11th for a month.

Q. A Jewish speech?

A. Yeah, on Atlantic Avenue. I was walking with some Muslims and the Muslims they're hanging the ... there was an American flag and a Palestinian flag too. I was walking on Atlantic Avenue, Muslim and Jewish, the first time in America in New York, Palest[inian] -- I mean, the Muslim and Jewish... [a march].

Q. Right. I saw it on the news.

A. You saw that? That was on Atlantic Avenue. Yeah.

Q. Were you a participant in that?

A. Yeah.

Q. Yeah.

A. I was there.

Q. What do you think that members of the Arabic community can do to stop Americans from attacking them, --to stop all this hatred that's going on?

A. Well, first, they're supposed to have a channel on TV, and Arab channel, like, an American-Arabic channel on TV so they can ... they can, like, show the people we are, like, good people, no matter Muslim or ... Like, the Jewish people, they have a lot of channels.

Q. Such as what?

A. CNN, the first channel, CBS, ABC ... the most News channels ... the most new channels ... We have only one channel.

Q. And what channel is that?

A. Jazeera. You know? (Laughs)

Q. And what kind of stuff would you like to be ... would you like to see on this Arab-American channel?

A. Well, like, Arabic-American program.

Q. Programs about religion? About...

A. About everything. About religion, about how the people live, about, like, Arabic and American, that happened after September 11th and how they feel and how those people feel -- something like that. They should have programs like that. They should have a channel. Every channel's an American channel. In America, show the people--American people--that it's like, ... Any kind of people they have groups small groups that they are, like, not good people. And sometimes we have a group too. So now, look. In Italy there is a fight. In Colombia there is a fight. In England there is a fight for us. In Pakistan there is a fight. In India there is a fight. In Palestine there is a fight, a small group--small group. So what are you all teaching all the Arabs. They Irish people, they still fight for England. And over in Turkey they're ... they're still fight[ing]. In south of Turkey the Kurd ... the Kurdish people they still fight too for a new country. Why do you only care about the Arabs? I don't know why.

Q. Okay. The way Arabs are being treated here now, would you encourage somebody from the Middle East to live here?

A. Guys who come from the Middle East and who live here?

Q. Would you tell them it's a good idea or it's a bad idea?

A. Oh. Right now it's a bad idea. It's hard to find a job. The economy go down. You know that?

Q. Do you...

A. A restaurant where I was working, we buy the restaurant for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars? For owner. Now they sell it for a hundred and seventy thousand. Look how much he lose, eighty thousand dollars. And all the business in New York is very slow now.

Q. So even though business is bad right now and the economy is down, you don't think that Arabs would be better off here than there? Or do you think they'd be better off in their countries where they are now, eco--economically?

A. Well, here is still better.

Q. Economic--

A. Better, yeah.

Q. What about socially? Just the way the culture is...

A. Well, there it's better. Yeah. But the economic is here much better than there, whatever's happened here.

Q. Okay. Do you think that anything good came out of September 11th?

A. A good thing? Well, let me think for a minute.

Q. Such as more people understanding Islam and understanding Arab culture, and anything else do you ... Do you think is good that came out of that?

A. Well, I know a story that was in a mosque. Do you know? mosque down on Atlantic Avenue? There is American guy who went there and he was ... the people was praying the afternoon prayer. That was. ... We call it the ... And so they was praying. And an American guy who came to the mosque and he said, "I want to be a Muslim." This was after what happened September 11th, like three or four days. He came to the mosque say, "I want to be a Muslim." And he goes, "a Muslim ..." We have like whole ... You have to read it to be a Muslim. So he read the ... and he's a Muslim. So, like, a lot of people from the American people understand the Muslims and the Arabs after that. That's good for us. But a lot ... a lot of bad things.

Q. How do you feel when people ask you about Islam and when people ask you about Arab culture?

A. Well, I have to tell them the truth.

Q. Right. But how do you feel about people asking?

A. I ... I have to tell them the truth about how the Muslim is. Like, the Muslim, the religion's like, very honest and you say everything the Koran. But the people -- even the Muslim people, they don't do what they say in the Koran. Like, there are people doing stuff the Koran says they never feel like that. But nobody never think about even the Koran or never think about nothing. They just do whatever they want to do.

Q. When some American walks up to you and says: Hi! You're Arabic. Can you please teach me about Islam? Can you teach me about Arab culture? Do you feel good or do you feel bad or...

A. No. I feel good.

Q. You feel good that they're interested?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay.

A. I feel good to teach them.

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

A. Why?

Q. What do you think?

A. Well, if that thing happened from a Muslim I can tell you one thing. Do you know the tape--the videotape on Osama Bin-Laden? What did he say? He said we did that attack on America because America in 1990 it was hit, like, and more than two million kids that was dead from the uranium and the ... the other thing ... and now the Palestinian people who live and Israel attacked. And America, the first country to support Israel -- to support Israel at five billion dollars a year. Five billion dollars a year ... Like, Israel, they don't

need five billion dollars. They have the ... the rich country in the world. Even here in America the Jewish people is the best people. Like, they own all the economy in America. So I think they have messed on America and they did that ... this is the only reason that the Muslims and Arabs do it.

Q. And if Muslims didn't do it?

A. I want to tell you something. I don't know if I want to say it or not, but it's okay.

Q. You're anonymous. It's okay.

A. Okay. If the Jewish did that, there is a reason for Jewish...

Q. And what would that be?

A. They think when ...when the Muslims ... they saw the Muslims do it and the Jewish, they're behind it so because America, they're going to hit the Arabs and they're going to, like, kick all the Arabs, especially Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. At first when it happened there was ... there was, like, almost ... they cut the whole collection between Saudi Arabia and America. So I think if the Jewish people especially -- the Israeli people are -- what's the name, Mosad -- Israeli Mosad.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. If those people who did it they're for only that reason, because they need all Palestine and they cannot do it because they know all the Arabs are going to fight them. So they need, like, a stronger country to like, to go on them and stop them, so they can do anything they want in the Middle East. That's the only reason that Israel did it.

Q. Right.

A. But any other people I have no idea.