

Interview 2

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: Female

Age: 21

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

A. I was born here in the United States.

Q. Where in the United States?

A. In New York, Queens.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in Queens.

Q. What is your ethnic background?

A. I am Egyptian.

Q. And your father was born...

A. ... Both of my parents were born in Egypt.

Q. What is your religion?

A. I am Muslim.

Q. How old are you?

A. Twenty-one.

Q. And are you a U.S. citizen?

A. Yes I am.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Bachelors degree.

Q. From what school?

A. Baruch College.

Q. And what are you studying?

A. Business administration.

Q. Have you graduated?

A. No. I will be graduating spring of 2003.

Q. What is your main occupation right now? You're a student?

A. ... I am a student. I'm unemployed.

Q. A full time student?

A. Yes.

Q. I would like to ask you now a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on the day at around 9 a.m.?

A. I was in the city [Manhattan]. I was in my class, [attending] a lecture. And I came out of that class at around 9 o'clock. And I was ... as I was waiting for my next class, I was with a bunch of friends. And one of the girls was listening to the radio and she told us that a plane had crashed into one of the buildings, the World Trade Center ... one of the Twin Towers. And then soon after that, a couple of minutes later, she said a second one hit it so we had no idea ... We thought it was an accident but we didn't think it was a big deal. But from where we were in the building we could see smoke.

Q. And where is your building located at...

A. 25th and Lexington, between Lexington and Third. So we were able to see smoke. We couldn't see the World Trade Center, but we were able to see the smoke coming out. It was very thick. So at 9:30 we went into the class and class ended around 10:30, 10:45, and when I came out I saw a friend of mine that lives next to me and he said that the ... that the buildings fell--completely fell. I was extremely shocked. I had no idea ... I actually didn't believe him, but then I saw everyone very upset. Everyone was out and from there ... You know...

Q. What was your first reaction when you heard that the towers had been hit?

A. I was extremely shocked. It was very hard to believe because they had been there for so long. I even used to meet friends and we used to go shopping there or just meet and then go somewhere else, take the train and go into the city, so it was very shocking, very,

very.

Q. ... Was there in your mind the possibility that the terrorists could be Middle Eastern?

A. Honestly I didn't even ... It didn't come across my mind that it could be terrorists until I heard people talking about it and then, soon after, it made sense. But I mean, they heard it from the radio. They said that it ... it probably was terrorists. For them being Middle Eastern, I think it was 50/50, especially what happened at ... with the Oklahoma bombing. So I wasn't too...

Q. What do you mean with the Oklahoma...

A. ... With the Oklahoma bombing everyone thought it was Middle Eastern, the terrorists were Middle Eastern, and then they found out they were Americans. So I wasn't too sure. I wasn't going to assume anything and I didn't want to. I said, let me wait and see. And that honestly wasn't my main concern at that moment. You know? The buildings fell, people were dying and no one knew what was going on.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you wouldn't forget?

A. Well, yeah. Well, considering that bridges were closed, the subways were closed, I had to walk from Manhattan, from 25th and Lexington to Queens. It was extremely crowded. Everyone was walking. It was so crowded. In fact, it was ... the people had the right of way, not even the cars had the right of way. And I just remember stopping or resting and talking to the people, them saying how they feel; them being shocked. And watching it on TV, all the smoke and people running and crying and trying to call their family and friends to make sure everyone's okay.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards, as you're walking home or as you heard of this? Did you feel anger or...

A. Honestly I wasn't angry and I wasn't upset. It didn't hit me at that moment. It was just, this is what happened. Get out of here as soon as you can, go home as fast as you can

and, you know, walking, skipping, whatever. Just get home and leave the City. That was the ... tremendous shock--state of shock and so was everyone else.

Q. Well, since the events did your feelings change from that? From the shock did it develop into ... any other feelings?

A. Yeah. I was upset, hours after just watching the TV 'cause they had ... Seeing the planes go ... going into the buil--building. I mean, I can't even imagine. If I was actually there [how I] would have felt. I was very, very sad, especially seeing people jumping off from the towers. It was ... it was just sad. I never felt any anger though.

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

A. I told them I was Egyptian.

Q. And after 9-11?

A. The same. I never changed. I never had to lie. I don't feel that I have to lie. This is where I'm from. And there's no reason for me to fear the other people.

Q. How do you feel when you tell them you are Egyptian?

A. Well, I mean, most people probably think that people are going to discriminate against them or what have you. But, I mean, I'm proud to be Egyptian so I have no problem saying it. It ... To me it's natural. They're asking me a question, I'm answering it.

Q. Are you ever nervous to tell people what you are?

A. No, never. I'm ... I'm very proud to be Egyptian and there's nothing for me to hide, especially with what happened. It's not like I'm the one that caused it. And it's not like Egyptian Muslims are all like that.

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

A. No, they haven't. I was born and raised here. This is ... this is where I live. I love this country. I'm used to it and it'll always be my home.

Q. Has your level of political awareness changed somehow?

A. No, it hasn't. It hasn't because for the ... for one month it was all about the World

Trade Center and the same thing over and over again. They ... they played it out. After a while you just get sick of hearing it. I mean, even till this day--what are we in June, the end of June, or July actually...

Q. July, the beginning of July...

A. The beginning ... the beginning of July, and every single night if I try ... attempt to watch it [TV] to wait for the weather or something, something's mentioned about the World Trade Center. And they're ... Honestly, I think they've ... they've killed it. I mean, I understand people are worried about what might happen, but they keep on mentioning it and there's no need for it.

Q. Would you say that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the United States have been treated since 9-11?

A. Yes. People ... they ... I think a lot ... some Americans, not all, treat ... might treat Middle Eastern Arabs in a bad way considering what happened.

Q. In what sense? How would they treat them?

A. In attitude, not giving them the time of day. You know? A lot of Arabs are worried, especially since the job market is down, a lot of them are worried they ... they won't even get a job because of discrimination because of who they are. So I ... over all, I think that some of them do ... some people they think logically and they don't consider that ... Yeah, they're Arab. Yeah, they're Muslim, but they have nothing to do with it.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9-11 such as harassment or racial profiling or any kind of discrimination?

A. Not directly. But I did sense it from one of my professors.

Q. What did you sense?

A. Well, I missed a class and I went to explain to her why...

Q. What class was this?

A. This was a speech class.

Q. Okay.

A. Actually, I was late and I went to explain to her why. So I told her why and ... Her last name is [last name of professor], so you automatically know that she's Israeli, which is fine by me. And so I went and explained to her why I was late and she asked me after that where I was from originally. And I said I was Egyptian. And most of the time when I tell people I'm Egyptian they ... they're usually, like, Oh, that's so cool. Wow! I've never met anyone from Egypt, things like that. Her response was ... I'll never forget. She looked at me and she goes: "Oh. Well, that's interesting:" in such a tone where I had a feeling I knew what she was thinking. But I ... I don't want to jump to conclusions but that's what I sensed. And from then on when I'm in class she stares at me and she looks at me in such a way ... I was actually up in front of class doing an interview and we had to pause for a couple of minutes because there was an alert. An alarm came on and they said please stand by. So they started to talk about what happened since 9-11. And...

Q. Um-hum. When was this? When did this alarm happen?

A. Maybe two weeks ago... About two weeks ago.

Q. Which is mid-June 2002.

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay.

A. So ... so she starts talking about it. We were pausing 'cause, you know we have to stand by just in case we have to leave the building, and she starts talking about what happened on 9-11 and how everyone felt, and so on and so forth. And she turned around and looked at me, but didn't just stare at me and then turn away. She looked at me from head to toe. She started with my hair all the way down till ... till it finished my hair and at my lower back. She looked at it and looked into my eyes, looked at what I was wearing. I felt as if she was trying to ... as ... in case anything happened she would be able to describe how I looked incase I was a suspect. That's how I felt. But I took it, you know ... I'm just going to finish this class. It's going to be done soon. I'm not even ... I'm not going to pay no mind to it. But that just felt me ... made me feel very uncomfortable.

And, I mean, I don't blame her being worried, but don't judge me because of who I am. And actually, I think it was two ... two days ago ... No. Actually it was yesterday, sorry; excuse me, yesterday alarm came off again.

Q. In school?

A. In school. I guess maybe it's gone wrong. I don't know what's going on these days. But she ... it feels like to me ... Again she mentioned 9-11, of course, and she was, like, "let's talk about it for a little bit. Let's talk about it. Let's... Tell me how you guys feel. I think it's important that we talk about it." And it seems to me like she wants these people to be against us. That's the ... That's the feeling I got.

Q. To be against what?

A. To be against Arabs, to be against Muslims because of what happened. All right? A lot of the responses ... I mean, I didn't say anything. I was just listening. I wanted to listen to what these people said. And a lot of them were just saying I'm afraid to go on a plane and I'm afraid even to go on a subway or come into the City. And in my head was, like, you know, if these terrorists are going to do anything again they're not going to get little things like the subway, even though the subway's a big thing. But the World Trade Center was ... was done for a reason. It was symbolism from years back and nothing to do ... the World Trade Center is very important to ... to the United States, to the country, and they hit it. They're not just going to get a subway station or a subway train just because they feel like it. And that's how they made it seem. You know? They're not going to just hijack a plane for absolutely no reason. And another thing, they hijacked the plane because it hadn't ... hadn't been done in twenty years and no one expected it. And they're not going to do it again because people will expect it. This is what they're looking for. So if they're going to do anything again they're going to pick or choose a way that no one's been thinking about. That's going to be at the top of their head.

Q. Did your professor ask you any questions or direct any questions towards you?

A. No, not at all. She ... she asked them a question and she let them listen, but, like,

while people were speaking she would stare at me and look away.

Q. How...

A. And maybe I'm making too much of it because I'm thinking that ... I'm thinking that she's discriminating, but I think, especially that she's Israeli and I'm Egyptian and what's going on between Israel and Palestine these days, I think that also has to do with it a lot. But I think her main concern is what happened on September 11th.

Q. How did it make you feel that maybe she ... How did it make you feel? Did you sense this from her?

A. It pissed me off. I was angry. I was like, I'm a student, I ... I'm not a foreigner. I was born and raised here and I'm not the one that caused anything. And I never ... And it's not like she had a conversation with me and I said I agreed with what these terrorists did. But I guess she's one of those that just assumes that all Arabs and Muslims are like that, and this is their faith and this is their belief. And she's just ignorant about it. This is what I sense. But it ... it pissed me off. It pissed me off because there's no need for that. I haven't done anything to her. She's not being mean to me at all. You know? Now and again she smiles. I just think it's her personality. And it hasn't effected my grade thus far.

Q. Has she ever made comments in class that made you uncomfortable?

A. It's just the way she speaks. When she mentions, it's a horrible thing what they did. It's just her facial expressions, her tone. And then she'll stare at me

Q. Um-hum.

A. And it feels like she ... she... like she's doing it on purpose. I'm sure everyone ... everyone in New York, everyone in the United States, feels uncomfortable whether you're an Arab or not, Arab-American, what have you. But she just ... she's mentioning it one to many times. It's almost a year, and I understand there are people who are still mourning for their family, friends. But at one point, there's no need to keep on mentioning it. And she talks about it as if it just happened.

Q. Um-hum. Has a member of your family experienced backlash?

A. From what I know of, no, no one has.

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

A. Well, after 9-11 I really didn't keep up with the news and what's going on, but I didn't hear much about them doing anything,

Q. Organizations.

A. Organizations, that is. I didn't hear much that was going on. I think another thing is that they tried too hard.

Q. What do you mean?

A. I think ... Maybe not organizations but people in general, that they're trying too hard to be accepted from fear or what-- whatever it might be. And like I mentioned before, I do think that ... You mentioned before the question if they've changed the way they act and I said yeah, they have. They want to be accepted. They don't ... They don't want to be outsiders. They don't want any problems for themselves. I understand that. Like veiled women, they took off the veil because of fear of what might happen to them, which was understandable because a lot of them were getting threats. And in fact, I heard from one of my friends that a girl in Brooklyn, she lives in Bay Ridge, got hit by a car because she was veiled. But to go back to your question, I do not think ... I mean, I haven't kept up but I haven't heard much that's being done.

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

A. No I haven't. I just went about my regular daily life. I mean if I stop my life or change it or ... I honestly don't think there's much I could do or anyone could do. If they're going to ... If terrorists are going to do something, they're going to do it.

Q. In your opinion what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic group and others in the United States at this time? Do you think that relations are more tolerant now than before 9-11 or are they more strained or oppositional?

A. Relations between my ethnic group and Americans?

Q. Yes, your ethnic or religious group.

A. It's definitely strained. Actually, there was always...

Q. In what sense do you mean strained now?

A. Religiously. Oh, I definitely have to say religiously because, especially since ... The reason for the terrorists ... I mean, one of the reasons was they're going to die for Allah. And then I've heard people say that for Allah, when they go to heaven they're going to have, like, fifty virgins. And people be laughing and making fun of that. I mean, it's not the faith of Muslims. Many Muslims don't believe this. It ... there's always been, what's the word, debate over the religion, especially Christianity and Islam and Judaism. There's always been debate over that. And I think it just brought it up more.

Q. How do you think people react to each other now, like if you are an Egyptian Muslim or just an Egyptian and you encounter another group?

A. Well, a lot of people don't really feel as if I'm different or others are different. But those who do just think that we're just complete opposites from them, just totally different from them and as if they can't even have a conversation and they shouldn't. And we're just complete opposites, different, and we wouldn't be able to communicate or understand each other.

Q. What do you think members of your community can do to improve the relations, since you say they are strained?

A. Just don't put any ... anyone else around you to consideration about what happened. They're not the ones causing the problem.

Q. What about your community?

A. My community?

Q. Yes, Egyptians are Arabs or Muslims. What do you think....

A. Well, I mean, I can understand why Americans actually have some hate because it was even on the news that kids from Jersey were dancing. Arabs, I think they were Lebanese, were dancing then they found out what happened.

Q. After 9-11?

A. After 9-11. So at one point ... at some point I can understand how they feel. What my community could do is just understand why they feel this way and don't argue, just walk away. Let them give their opinion, don't get offended, and just walk away. You know? Don't cause any problems. And I see a lot of people try to defend themselves and argue, yell, curse them. I mean, if they try and show our Muslim faith and part of it is definitely not to cause any problems. And I think if you are [an] American, if you are living here, then support the United States as much as possible.

Q. You mention that they argue, Arabs may argue at times. What do they argue about?

A. Well, about what happened. Actually, the Internet, going into chat rooms all the time just people arguing who was right and who was wrong. What happened...

Q. Arabs arguing?

A. Arabs. And sometimes Americans come in ... they ... trying to ... they want ... they want to start up a conversation. It's an Arab chat room. You know? We're just chatting, having a good time, and then an American will come in and start talking about it and cause problems. And then...

Q. What would the American say?

A. Oh, this was so long ago. Let's see. They would say ... Basically, one specific was they were saying that ... that Muslims are crazy and the Muslim religion, the religion Islam, is ... it's a bad religion. And I've read the Koran, he said actually, and it says to ... to hate the Jews and go against the Jews and go against people that aren't of your kind and this is your Muslim faith. Basically, he's saying the Muslim faith is ... is bad. And I actually had to ... one person [?] because in the chat room and wanted to talk. And I said, you know what, I don't ... I don't feel like talking. He got angry and he started cursing and he was saying ... Really, like they were just saying you Muslim ... and I curse ... is it allowed?

Q. No.

A. Profanity? No? Okay. He was just insulting Allah, insulting the religion, and just because I didn't answer him, he started mentioning, you guys are crazy. This is what happened in the World Trade Center. They don't get into specific details, which is what pisses me off. They have no basis for their argument. They're just saying you're crazy and your beliefs are ... are ... I don't even remember, but basically saying that the Muslim religion is no good. And they don't even bring history or facts to prove what they're saying.

Q. So what do you think we as Muslims can do to make sure that these arguments or these ... this hatred, or our relations between each other gets better? If somebody insults your...

A. I mean, if someone insults ... If someone came to me and insulted me I would try to defend myself but not show the hate. When people show the hate that's what causes the problems.

Q. And which people...

A. And this is ... if Arabs show hate to an Amer--to Americans or in actuality to an American, this is what they want. This is proof to them. This will ... this will just prove to them that they think Muslims are crazy. It will just prove to them more and they'll just say, "you see? We're right." So I think that they should just mind their own business with neighbors or what have you...

Q. You mean Arabs?

A. Arabs, yes. Because me, Arabs and just ... just be friendly. It has nothing to do with them. They have no control over it.

Q. Do you think Arab organizations can do something as well?

A. Arab organizations here in the United States?

Q. Yes, here in New York and anywhere in the United States.

A. Well, if they show sympathy, or if they had showed sympathy, I think ... I think a lot of them have, mosques. I'm not too sure. I really didn't keep up with it. But I think if they

showed sympathy and helped out as much as many sponsoring ... giving blood, you know, something like that, then it'll show people ... show the Americans that Muslims are not like this; Arabs are not like this. Because a lot of them just assume that these ten or twenty terrorists, [because] they did this, that all Arabs and Muslims are terrorists.

Q. Okay. Given your understanding of the status of Arabs or Middle Eastern, the immigrant groups in the United States after 9-11, would you encourage people from these countries to emigrate to the United States?

A. Repeat that please? I'm sorry.

Q. Would you encourage any Middle Easterner or an Arab to come to the United States?

A. To come to the United States? Yeah of course. But I was born and raised here, as I mentioned many times before, and this country gives you a lot of opportunities. It's a safe country to live in. I'm very comfortable living here and they could gain so many opportunities. They have...

Q. What kind of opportunities?

A. Working, living, like comfortably, just meeting different people. You have so many different people, so many different cultures. It's an experience that people that live in the Middle East should come and see.

Q. We have talked about some of the negative consequences of 9-11. Do you think there were any positive consequences in terms of...

A. There is one thing that actually got me happy.

Q. One positive thing?

A. One positive thing. Since September 11th more people have converted to Islam.

Q. How do you know this?

A. Statistics. I read it. Someone told me and I wanted to make sure, and I found it on the Internet. And also my history professor mentioned it and so did my sociology professor. A lot of people converted. They ... After what happened they wanted to see what the

religion was about and they read the Koran and they converted. And I think that's one positive thing because it shows that not all people are against Muslims. And they read the Koran and they interpret it the right way and that's what happened.

Q. What about the fact that Middle Easterners or Arabs ... there's more visibility to them in the United States. Is there an improved understanding of Arabs or Islam?

A. An improved understanding ... I think ... what I think it is ... is that people have come to terms to it. People have been used to seeing, like, women ... veiled women, and that they're here and that they're just as American as they are. Or maybe they just got used to it; that it's almost a year that it just became, you know, something that's just there. And they're not going to leave and they shouldn't leave.

Q. Do you think there has been an improved understanding?

A. Honestly I don't know because I don't really talk to American ... I mean, I'm an American citizen but I'm not surrounded by Americans. I mean, all I hear is that they fear what could happen from the terrorists but they don't fear the people around them.

Q. Okay. You mentioned before that the World Trade Center was attacked because it was symbolic and such. Why do you think ... expand on that. Why do you think the attacks happened?

A. I don't think ... I don't think ... I think symbolic was the wrong word.

Q. Okay.

A. But from my understanding Bin Laddin helped the United States in the war with Russia. And I think there was supposed to be some kind of deal. I think that was the ... that ... that was the main idea with this ... that ... that was years ago. I don't even remember how long ago that was, maybe the '70s. I'm not sure. And he ... After that they ... they won the war against Russia and he asked them for help and they refused ... they refused to help him. And I think it ... I think a lot of it is just built up anger and ways to get ... get the United States back. And he's told them that many times.

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

A. No. I don't think they hate the Americans. I just think it's the way ... what the Americans follow, the way they think, the way they believe, whether it's religiously or culture, but it's the...

Q. What is it ... what is it that America ... American values do you think...

A. Honestly, I think Americans have lost their values. A lot of them just ... a lot of them don't know what's going on. They don't ... they're very ignorant. A lot of them have ... don't have solid facts. They just talk about how they feel without knowing anything so it's not ... It's just the way they go about things, whether it's the government or just the people themselves. I don't think they hate the United States, it's just ... or the people, it's just ... I think they just feel that they're stupid. (chuckles)

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

A. Oh, it's hard thing. It's really hard even or ... for the President, the government, to figure out how to stop it because I ... honestly I think it's too late to stop it honestly. The way the terrorists ... the way Bin Laddin, the way the Taliban feels about the United States will never change. It will never change. I honestly think it's too late. What happened, happened, and it could easily happen again. Their minds will not easily be changed. And Bush isn't going to do anything ... how to put it ... I mean, he's not going to go about it a nice way. He's...

Q. What do you mean? How do you think he's...

A. Well, he ... the war against terrorism. I mean, some people think that he should just go and kill them off. And actually, I got an e-mail and American soldiers were in Afghanistan and they had I don't know how many Afghans hostage and they threw ... they were torturing them. They were throwing acid on them. They would cut them and then throw acid on them. They were torturing them. So...

Q. This was an email you received?

A. This was an email I received.

Q. Who did you receive this from?

A. It was from ... I joined an Islamic group on line and I receive e-mail about ... not necessarily about just that but about Islam and, you know, it's culture and the religion. What should be done and what shouldn't be done. And then part of it is also showing what's going on with Palestine and Israel.

Q. Okay.

A. And they were just showing that. And this came up and it said that they were torturing them. And doing something like that isn't going to prevent harm. It's just going to make things worse. And if ... if he condones this then he...

Q. He who?

A. Bush. It's not going to help at all. So honestly I think, as I said before, it's too late to do any good to prevent anything from happening because what Bin Laddin is upset about was already done. It's not what's going on now. It's not what they're doing to him now. It's what happened years ago. So he's holding a grudge, pent up anger ... whatever his reasons are, I don't think anything could stop him.

Q. Are there any other issues or points that you'd like to comment on that I haven't asked you about?

A. No. I think that's about it.

Q. Okay. Thank you very much for your cooperation. I appreciated this interview.

A. Any time.