

Interview 29

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: 29

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

A. In France; in Paris.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. Hmm, interesting. First seven years in France, second seven in Dallas Fort Worth, Texas, third seven in northern Virginia near D.C. and I've been here in San Francisco eight years.

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

A. Seven.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. My mother was born in Vietnam and my father was born in Tunisia.

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

A. Other. Vietnamese and Tunisian.

Q. So your mother is Vietnamese.

A. Yes.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. None.

Q. And how old are you now?

A. Twenty-nine.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. One year of college.

Q. In what country did you obtain your education?

A. The United States.

Q. What is your main occupation right now?

A. I'm the Operations Coordinator here.

Q. Okay. Is this a private company or...

A. It's a NGO.

Q. And what is your marital status?

A. Single.

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

Where were you on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. Well, I was coming in to work so actually ... my alarm is set to KPFA so I woke up to hearing about it on the radio.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. ... Well, since I was half asleep I was, like, what? And then ... I was kind of excited.

Q. In what way?

A. In the way that the United States finally ... is being, like, targeted for what ... they've been doing around the world for decades.

Q. Did you have any reaction to the possibility that the terrorists could be Middle Eastern?

A. ... You know, KPFA is pretty progressive and that as soon as I heard them say terrorists on the radio I was really disappointed that they used those words because in saying that word just conjured up Arabs in everyone's mind here in the United States.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events? You mentioned that you felt excited. And did you have any other feelings?

A. No, just kind of disbelief and I was wondering what would happen next. I was kind of hoping that it would wake ... the citizens of the United States up to what's been going on outside the United States.

Q. Did you feel any anger?

A. No.

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

A. No.

Q. The feeling of the disbelief and the excitement that you had mentioned earlier, have those feelings changed since September?

A. Yes, a big, well, 'cause I didn't take into account, like all the lives lost. That wasn't my first ... I mean, so ... I feel bad for all those people that were lost, especially a lot of the undocumented workers who are not getting benefits from losing loved ones. ... I feel ... I'm still in disbelief in a way that the government has turned it ... the government and the media has turned it around. It's not an opportunity to really kind of wake up some peoples' minds right now; like a way to brainwash people into believing that war is the answer.

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

A. Just coming into work and everyone being ... like, everything stopping in the way. You know? Like, everyone ... like, some people were just glued to their tel--to the televisions and watching the planes go into the World Trade Center over and over again. I didn't remember seeing that at all.

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 Vietnamese and Tunisian.

Q. And what about immediately after?

A. The same, except I think I was even more ... more specific in saying, like, Tunisian meaning Arab.

Q. After, you mean?

A. Yeah, after, meaning Arab, like making that more clear.

Q. Making it clear that you are Arab.

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. And what do you say now?

A. The same.

Q. Why after September 11th did you feel the need to make it clear that you are an Arab?

A. I guess to make it more visible that it's not the whole race of Arabs that are "terrorists or out to kill people."

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

A. Not very much, no. I'm still ... disgusted but not by the United States, everyone there but by the government and the media.

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

A. No. It's about the same. I think maybe a little bit more I try to keep up to date on what's going on in regards to mostly about Palestine and just the way the war muck is going.

Q. How do you feel about that, about the United States response to terror?

A. ... Like I said, I feel disgusted. And it's depressing sometimes 'cause I feel it so ... it's hopeless in some ways, like, to try to change the way the government works. How corporations are very, especially oil corporations, are very influential in the government. ... I mean, after September 11th I thought maybe there ... [would be] an awakening, a change, but it seems like in some ways it's gotten worse.

Q. And in what way has it gotten worse do you mean?

A. ... It seems that people are willing to question. They're ... going along with the patriotic rhetoric and ... you know. During the... . But also it's hard 'cause I actually went to Tunisia in February to visit my family and it's just very odd. Like, people asking me: Oh well, what do you think about your government doing this? They always ask me that when I go there.

Q. Like you're the representative of the United States?

A. Exactly. Right. And I'm, like, it's actually not my government. And it just ... yeah, it just seems like there's ... Yeah, 'cause I actually met one of my cousins just got engaged to a Tunisian who's been living in the United States for eighteen years. And I met him and he was completely go Bush. And I was like, what? And it surprised, like, my cousins

and their friends that I was, like, that's ridiculous. How can you believe in all that when there is so much racism in this country, right? So it was quite an awakening after that meeting someone of Arab descent, like, more full-blooded Arab than I am that was ... had completely bought... .

Q. Full-blooded in the sense that he's completely Tunisian?

A. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, and that he had grown up most of his life in Tunisia.

Q. Oh really?

A. Yeah, just like ... I think he's in his thirties and so he's been in the United States eighteen years already. Most of his adolescence and even beginning adult life has ... was been in Tunisia and yet he still believes in United States propaganda.

Q. What is about U.S. domestic or U.S. foreign policy that you do not agree with or you have problems with?

A. The oppressions of other ... of other peoples, mostly poor people and indigenous and people of color. Like, this is mostly 'cause I work for ... NGO and it is mostly about that ... exploiting other countries for their resources and using ... and the use of God as ... people checkers through those means.

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

A. Yes and no. Yes in the fact that I've made a life here and I have, obviously my closest friends are here and all that. And at this point I'm ... I speak better English than I do French. But no in the way that I've ... I'm not ... like, culturally I've come from two different cultures. And then I wasn't born here so it's always given me, like, an outsider perspective, as much as I've tried to fit in.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Yes.

Q. And what about since 9-11?

A. Since 9-11? I don't know. The day after the 11th, I had very strange interactions with people that I thought were friends. I mean, they weren't close friends but it was ... I had very strange conversations about: "Well then, why are you in this country?"

Q. They asking you that?

A. Yeah. How ... and I was, like, oh. And so, I mean, I.... I guess I've surrounded more of myself with people who ... I mean, even though I did this before, even more now, like, that think like me politically. So ... but it's, like I was telling my family, it's hard to know ... gauge the way the United States thinks as a whole 'cause we're so very separated and we don't really get any information from the media about what most people think. And living in the Bay Area I am surrounded by a lot of progressive thinkers. It goes both ways.

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

A. Yes.

Q. How so?

A. Just ... just they're ... the authorities are quicker to pounce upon them, act upon them, than before although it wasn't ... not that it was good before either. I mean, just the fact that automatically they assumed it was Arab terrorists even though the last terrorist attack on the United States was ... done by an ex-military white guy. So...

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

A. No. And that's because, in my view, I really don't look Arab. I look more Asian or Pacific Islander even.

Q. Has any member of your family experienced backlash?

A. Most of my family does not live in the United States.

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

A. To a certain degree, but it seems like there are so many cases that are not heard about that it's hard to really gauge that to see how effective they are. They are to a certain degree, but then there's so many undocumented cases... .

Q. Do you think these organizations have been effective or have managed to organize or mobilize the community politically --the Arab-American community?

A. Seems so. I mean, I mean, from the Bay Area it does seem like it.

Q. It does or does not?

A. Does.

Q. How have they managed to do that?

A. I guess making the Middle East and Arab community even more visible now I think has helped a lot. Yeah.

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

A. I've joined a couple on the ... not, like, very active, but Arab Women's Solidarity Association.

Q. In your opinion what is the nature of the relationship between the Arab group-- Arab-Americans--and others in the United States at this time? Are relations more tolerant now than before 9-11 or do you think they're more strained or oppositional?

A. You know, I really don't know about that. I mean, I would like to think that they're more united, but the way that things like this usually work it's not usually uniting. Yeah. I can't really... .

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

A. Build more coalitions and kind of show the ... show the factors that ... that are reason for us to unite ... that we face the same oppression here in the United ... like, the Arab-Americans and Middle Easterners are just a target group for now but later down the road and in the past, like, they just move from one ethnic group to another.

Q. What do you think organizations can do?

A. I think just to support visibility of Middle Eastern and Arab-Americans and support whatever actions or events that organizations have --Middle eastern and Arab-American organizations have to show solidarity.

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

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. Because it seems like they're ... I mean, they're a target group right now. It's more difficult ... It's unlikely that they would have any sort of legal status here in the United States.

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

A. I mean, I'd like to think that it's made people more ... think more about U.S. foreign policy. That's my hope. You know, I don't know. Like, I said earlier, it's hard to gauge that. Like, maybe here in the Bay Area ... it's kind of a bubble too here, I realize so... .

Q. Do you think that there's been a more visibility or an improved understanding of Middle Easterners in the U.S.?

A. Yeah. I mean, a little, it's ... I mean it's to what cost though? People realize we're different from Muslims because a few had to die and hate crimes for that, for an awareness to come ... come from that. So maybe a little bit.

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

A. It ... they ... I think it was supposed to be sort of a wake up call ... for those targets signifies a financial and military power of the United States.

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

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. Well, I think that they can separate the United States government from the American people.

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

A. It's hard to process. Well, to rethink their foreign policies and ... I mean, it's ... it's hard for me to see that. I just don't see it happening. Yeah, to rethink their foreign policies and... .

Q. In terms of what? What do you think...

A. Stop ... Well, stop putting money to other terrorists and stop terrorizing the world themselves with their, like, large multinational corporations and put their military force for peace keeping missions. It's ... it's hard for me to even imagine it 'cause I think it would take a lot.

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

A. No.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you.

A. You're pretty thorough.

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

A. Thank you.