

Interview 25

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: Male

Age: 25

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

A. All right.

Q. Where were you born?

A. In Cairo, Egypt.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. In Egypt.

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

A. Twenty-five.

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

A. Egyptian.

Q. Were both your parents born in Egypt?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Islam.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Thirty-six.

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

A. U.S. citizen.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. A Master's degree.

Q. In what?

A. [Removed].

Q. When was your degree awarded?

A. In [removed].

Q. And in what country did you obtain your education?

A. My Bachelor's in [removed] and my Master's [removed].

Q. Where [removed]?

A. In [removed].

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. I am an engineer.

Q. What exactly do you do?

A. I manage engineering projects, construction engineering jobs, basically civil engineering and environmental engineering assignments.

Q. And what is your marital status?

A. Single.

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

A. I was in my office in Queens. We have a Queens office.

Q. Okay. And you had another office as well?

A. Well, yeah. We had an office in the City but I wasn't there that day. I was working on a bid due at eleven o'clock that day so I was in Queens office.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I think I was in the office when ... when somebody said there's an accident. A plane hit into one of the towers. And we weren't sure at that time if it was an accident or what exactly, like everybody else. And then ... I wasn't really focused because all my concern was to finish up that bid due at eleven o'clock. So I wasn't really following the news until things become ... until I think, the second one hit. And that at that ... at that time started ... we turned ... I think we turned on the TV. We have a TV in the office. We turned on the TV and then I ... I still didn't see the ... the thing hit on ... on TV until I got back home that night. But we ... we went on the roof, I think, and we saw the smoke coming out from Manhattan and then we knew there's something serious. And we started hearing the news. And then I stayed in the office. I didn't want to leave. I just stayed in the office. And then went home, get home late that night, but watched TV and the news. But I didn't want to stay home. A lot of people just took a couple of days off. I just went. The next day I went back to the office normally. You know? I didn't want to people feel that I'm just trying to be away or avoiding any situation. So I just show up as normal made ... 8:30 next morning I was in my office.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. I hope it's an accident.

Q. How did you feel to the possibility of the terrorists somehow being Middle Eastern or Muslim, or did that cross your mind?

A. Well, after they said it's a ... it's a terrorist attack I ... I wasn't sure. I was kind of ... I mean, I wasn't a hundred percent sure that it's ... it's something that could be coming from the Middle East because as everybody noticed, it was very well planned and very well

calculated. So I wasn't really sure that ... I ... I've been telling people this. I mean, my personal feelings about the whole thing did not really develop until maybe two weeks later. I mean, the hit was so ... I was so much surprised about what's going on and I was so much ... I felt like I have to do something about it ... about it right away that took my real feeling from being really developed out the surface until two weeks later when everything kind of settled. Then I started to think about it. But my immediate feeling was let's go and do something. Let's go and do something because we're ... we're all part of this, especially that I used to work there. My office was only one block south from the ... from the building ... from the World Trade Center and I was very personally ... personally attached to the place since I used to commute to the basement of that building every morning and walk up to the street ... to the street level and watch the buildings coming back home. So I felt like I have kind of a obligation to do something--anything. I wasn't sure what I needed to do, but I wanted to do something for myself and for people to know that I'm part of this.

Q. So you wanted to get involved somehow in helping.

A. Yeah. And that's what happened. And that's exactly what happened. What happened that the next day we put--in less than an hour we put ... I'm a member of the [name removed], and in less than an hour we put about sixty names--a list that has sixty names from different engineering disciplines and I took that list personally and went to the Javit Center, which was at the time the center for volunteers and I submitted the list. And I told them that me and my group were ready to ... to be dispatched any time. We were basically on call for two days--for the first two days, and then we were ... I was dispatched with a couple of other people who were ... who were present at the Javit

Center because it was very ... it was not practical to call people in. And so whoever was there at that day were dispatched. So I was basically doing manual work--labor work--because it was kind of chaos in the beginning. And we went there. And then actually two days later, my ... the company I work for, we get formally involved under an emergency contract with the Port Authority Company ... the company that I work for, we already had a crew down in ... on the West Side Highway. We were doing some ... some work on the West Side Highway, right by the World Trade Center, so we basically have some people--crew and equipment down by the disaster area when this happened. So our President jumped into the situation obviously and we worked ... we worked ... I think for the first couple of days we worked basically for free with no contract until the Port Authority and the City granted. They nominated four general contractors to take care of the general clean up of the site. Basically they split the project into four different corners and they gave ... they gave each one to one company to deal with the ... with the engineering, recovery and removal of the debris and help them with the Port Authority, Police Department and Fire Department, helping the body recovery.

Q. How did it make you feel being involved in this?

A. I don't know. I think you heard ... I think ... I don't know. Everybody's going to tell you the same thing. It was unbelievable, it was surprising, ever--all these things. But I think it's ... I don't know if you heard ... if you heard that before, it's like, no matter what or how I describe it ... it's indescribable. You have to be in there at that time. Because I remember the first night. It was the night. I worked night shift, seven in the evening to seven in the ... seven in the morning. And it was basically there was so fumes and fires along the sides and ... And I really wasn't feeling ... as an engineering, I wasn't feeling

anything about who did it and why they did it. I was feeling that I was just dealing with the disaster. It was a disaster site and it's an emergency and we're there to help. We have to help. We have to deal with whatever ... with the nation and what struck ... what strike me really was the ... the bond between people, the bond. You know? Everybody is helping each other and it working together. Even though it was so was the full care. There was no planning--real planning the first week but I ... we put ourselves together. But everybody was ... was coordinating with each other. It was ... it was... sad harmony, but we were ... we were all working. And then, after we ended our shift you'd see people hugging each other and kissing each other. And like I told you, we ... on the way you really had to ... you saw that those real New Yorkers waiting for us out--outside the barricade and clapping their hands for the crew coming out from the site and small girls, giving you cookies and ... it was very touching obviously. But as I told you, it wasn't as much as that feeling but it was a responsive feeling that here I am, I'm an engineer spending all my life studying how to put buildings up, and now I' dealing with a site where I have to put the building down. Well, the building was going ... went down already and I have to deal with the situation which is different than what I had learned throughout my career.

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

A. That's exactly what I told you before. It...my feeling was not as much as ... more of a feeling or ... or why ... why this happened or who did it as much as I am in the middle of ... I was in the middle of it and I wanted to help and I wanted to react as an engineer to deal with an emergency. That's what they taught us in school is you have a problem and you have to find a solution for it. There was no immediate solution for this ... for this

scale. Because it was a huge disaster there was no immediate solution but at least we were trying to deal with whatever it is. And gradually, actually The first two days I just felt like I'm part of the whole thing. And then, after the first forty-eight hours, I had to deal with another components or another factors with, Wait a minute. Now I'm .. I'm Egyptian and I'm here working, but--you know--people ... apparently people are looking to me that ... I don't know if they were really looking to me on ... with eyes or ... or not, but I got that feeling that, my gosh, people are looking to me like I'm from this area of the world where ... where apparently or supposedly the people who did that came from. So that was not an ... that was not an easy feeling. It was ... it was ... there was ... I felt for the first time in ten years in the City that I need to defend myself and tell them that good people and bad people are everywhere. So it wasn't ... it wasn't a great feeling that. But it wasn't, like, immediately afterwards. It took me some time to feel it. I don't know why. I mean, I think because I was ... I was doing ... I was, as I told you before, I was an engineer dealing with a problem and trying to find a solution. And then the personal and the moral side of the story started to develop.

Q. It came later.

A. Right.

Q. When you did get that feeling, did you feel anger?

A. No. I shouldn't say anger, no. Anger toward what? Towards what happened?

Q. Towards what happened, towards the people who did it, towards anything; whatever your feelings were, whether you felt anger or pain or sadness?

A. It was a mixed feeling. It was ... It was a mixed feeling. I can't describe it now. It wasn't ... it wasn't anger, though. No, it wasn't. It was ... it was, no, this was not

supposed to happen. And at the same time I'm dealing with different types of average American people who know the difference and who knows that good and bad are everywhere, and people who are below average education who really are kind of so--I guess I have to use the word ignorant, but people who don't know. And they were angry. You know what? I mean, now I remember the feeling that I got. I didn't really have ... I couldn't blame them for their feelings because we were all surprised from what happened so I kind of ... even though I wouldn't-- I mean, I shouldn't say that I would take any stupid comments from anybody, but I kind of understand their feeling. I couldn't blame them because they know ... I mean, I ... this whole incident shows me how very few people know about our part of the world.

Q. Was guilt involved ever because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack, on your part?

A. Guilt, yes. Oh yeah, that was part of it. I don't know if it was guilt or whatever you want to call it, a guilt or a shame. But, yeah. Well, I ... definitely I wasn't proud of that because of Arabs or Muslims were involved, no. But it was ... I don't know if I should call it guilt but it was kind of uneasy feeling. As much as I was always proud to be an Egyptian, even though I'm an American citizen. But the first time that ... the first thing that come to my mind when people ask me where are you from, I always say Egypt. I never say I'm from here.

Q. Was that before September 11th you used to do that?

A. Yeah, always say I'm ... and still. I never hide my identity even after. Now when people ask me where are you from I'm from Egypt. I was ... I was from there. I'm still from there. I never hide it. But the ... maybe after September 11th I have to admit it that I

have to say I'm from Egypt and follow that with ... with more elaboration or more explanation or more ... I have to ... I had to add into this, whether before that I wasn't really adding into this. So, yes. That is, my response to my background or identity changed a little bit or ... after September 11th?

Q. Do you still do that now?

A. Yes.

Q. Have your feelings--the uneasy feeling that you had mentioned before, or the feeling of anger--have they changed since 9-11?

A. Well, they ... I think it's mellowing up a little bit. It's amazing how people can forget. And I'm ... day to day with this interaction. I was dealing with people who were actually working at Ground Zero on a daily basis and I ... I was personally going there every ... at least once a week until ... until, like, the last month. But, yeah. It mellow ... I have to say that it mellow ... it mellowed a little bit. It's different than the first few months.

Q. Your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you'll never forget?

A. Well, view of the site, obviously, when I went there on September 13th is something that I will never forget. You know? A week ago ... a week before that day I was there looking into this huge, humongous building and saying, Oh my gosh ... I'm proud to be of this industry who can put that building up. And then September 13th at seven o'clock in the evening, I'm sitting there, still part of this industry, who's cleaning up this ruins. It was kind of unforgettable feeling. I don't think I will forget that view of the demolition activities. And, I mean, the other thing that really was effecting was when we'd take a break and we'd go eat together, the--you know--the laborers together with the engineers

and policemen and fire ... firemen. We had ... I think the Red Cross had assigned place for catered food. And when they'd go together and eat on ... on the break, that was a nice feeling 'cause you'd feel the bonds between them. And that feeling was so great in the beginning, the first two weeks. Because after that it changed dramatically because most of the people--I'm not going to generalize--but a lot of people who were actually working in Ground Zero, they're ... they transferred or their ... their behavior altered later on into an absolute--how can I say that? -- into ... their mind was ... were very money oriented later on, while in the beginning we were very ... let's do something. Let's help. Let's do something. And then, later on--I'm telling you this--I mean, a lot of people made a lot of money because the laborers, policemen, firemen, they put a lot of hours there and they were paid sometime time or time and a half or double time for the time out there so ... and they were working long hour shifts. So a lot of people made a lot of money. And they found out ... they started touching this later on and on the project. And the beautiful--the beautiful human bonding that was there the first couple of weeks gradually disappeared and was replaced by I want to make more money. I want to make more money and... .

Q. Greed, you mean. Yeah.

A. And actually, a lot of people made a lot of money out of this, I mean, the laborers, policemen and firemen--different individuals who were working down there. So that's something that is very ... was very interesting, that ... being that how a human being can reaction and ... and behavior can transfer from ... from and ... an immediate moral and human reaction into ... into a real life reaction later on which is basically financially oriented.

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

A. No. No. I mean, it's an incident that ... that changed my own ... like anything that could happen in your personal ... personal life that make you think a little bit differently. But I still feel like I came here deliberately. I wanted to come here to study. And then I got a job and I like what I'm doing and I like my job. But I don't feel- never ever felt that I ... I'm obliged to stay here. I'm free to leave whenever I want and it's my call to be here. And no, no. I shouldn't say that my ... my view toward the United States ... it's a very generic question, but I don't think that my gen--my general view toward the United States is different. Maybe my views have changed toward the media--I'd have to admit that, but not toward ... not toward the United States as a whole.

Q. Would you say that your level of political awareness has changed since 9-11?

A. No. No. I always considered myself above average in terms of political awareness so it didn't change. No.

Q. You had mentioned the media. What is it about the media that you may have problems with?

A. There was no problem about the media. You just asked me if my feeling changed toward...

Q. Toward the U.S.?

A. Yeah. It did ... it did change my feelings ... [interruption] ... changed? Yes, it did change because I felt that it ... it's a whole industry that I wasn't ... I mean, I wasn't that aware that media can effect peoples' thinking and apparently it does.

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

A. Wow, very, very, very tough question for me. I mean, it's different 'cause I wasn't born here. So do I feel at home here?

Q. How long have you been here?

A. I've been here for ten years or almost eleven years so I don't know. It's different. Yes, I do think I feel at home here because I miss my home ... my place when I ... when I travel I miss my place and I want to come back. So yes, I do feel at home. But I still use the term, when people ask me where are you going for vacation? I still use the term I'm going back home to [country removed]. So it's kind of strange, 'cause I consider [country removed] home and yet here is my home, too, because ... I can't answer that question.

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

A. Yes. Oh definitely. There is people ... There is different ... I mean, people in the States were ... Now they are more prudent in dealing with people coming from the Middle East because of what happened. I mean, it's a fact. You can't change it. And I thought about it positively and negatively and ... and ... and I have to admit that if we were ... if we were in Egypt and a couple of ... a couple of people from God knows, --from Zimbabwe came and hit our Cairo Towers or pyramids, we'll have ... we will all have kind of a different feeling toward people from Zimbabwe. So I would understand. I'm not ... I'm not saying that they shouldn't be feeling that. It was ... It was an immediate response and I, no, I don't feel, oh no they shouldn't, no. I mean, I have to be realistic.

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

A. No. Nobody ... nobody even ever direct or told me a direct comment straight to me, -- straight to myself directed to me. I heard comments that have been said in front of me.

Q. About what?

A. About the whole thing. I mean, name it. I mean, but...

Q. But nobody directed anything towards you?

A. Nobody direct ... directed anything to me personally.

Q. You had mentioned early in the conversation that you may have felt an uneasy feeling that people were maybe staring at you, like, Oh, here you are, the Egyptian working here.

A. Oh yeah. Oh yeah, always.

Q. What made you feel like that?

A. The whole thing. The whole thing what happened made me feel like that because you feel like you came ... you came from an area where ... where these people that supposedly did this came from the same area so you are automatically ... automatically being put in the same basket because you came from there. And you can't ... and you can't change that. It's a fact.

Q. Have any of your family or friends experienced backlash? Do you know of anyone who has experienced backlash?

A. No. No. I don't know of any.

Q. Do you think that Arab-American organizations have been effective in handling some of the backlash that have happened against Arabs after 9-11?

A. I will just say a simple ... I will say yes. But I don't have enough information to say yes or no. But I will say yes, I think they did. But I ... I did not hear any major problems for people from my surroundings.

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

A. No.

Q. In your opinion, what do you think the nature of the relationship between the Arab-American group or the Muslim group and others in the United States is at this time?

A. I'm not part of any of these groups, so I can't...

Q. No, no. I'm not talking about organizations or groups. I'm talking about just the nature of the relationship between our community, for example, and the other American community, whether it's the African-American community or the Latino community or Americans in general.

A. Well, I ... I only saw one example in the City that ... You know, there is a couple of organizations that they feel ... they feel the same feeling with us and I think it's kind of increased the bonding between us and other minorities.

Q. So would you say relations are more tolerant now than before 9-11 or are they more strained?

A. No, more tolerant.

Q. Why would you think that they're more tolerant?

A. Because minorities usually united when they feel that they are being treated ... they are being treated as minorities.

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

A. Oh, let's put it this way. I would ... my encouragement or discouragement will not ... would not be different before and after September 11th. You know? Maybe I'm different than others but I always believe that if you feel that you want to go somewhere and

experience, go there and do it. I don't feel like there is ... if they can come here and be ... and get a better education and le--and legalize their status here, yes, they should do it. I didn't blame myself that I did it. Maybe ... maybe their chances or their opportunities will be ... will decrease. It's not the same as before. But I don't know if it's September 11th or it's the world global economy or it's the local or regional economy that's going down the drain these days that's effect them. I will ... my cousin, for example, he asked me to ... if he should come or not. I said, Yeah, if you can come, if you can put yourself into a school and ... and get a better education, come and do it. I always believed that education is the ... is the place to start with. But if they want to come and ... and go pump gas somewhere, I wouldn't encourage them to do that, obviously.

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

A. Yeah, of course. Above average people--above average people, educated people, they want to know more about our culture, our religion and our traditions. So I think ... Well, you can take that into negative account too.

Q. Do you think that there's more visibility and an improved understanding now of Middle Easterners or Islam in the United States?

A. No.

Q. Why do you think that?

A. I told you that above ... as I said before, above average people wanted to know more about our background but the majority of people, they only know what ... what they know. They only know what they see on TV and what they read in the paper. And somehow ... somehow, for some reason, Islam has been kind of related to terrorism lately

and you see Islamic terrorism as ... as a statement now,--as a drasti--widely used sentiment in the media. So unfortunately, it... .

Q. How does that make you feel as a Muslim?

A. It's making ... it makes me feel that I want to think ... I want to think about it more. I mean, I want to think about it. I want to go back and think about our ... the reason that ... that created that extreme ... extreme wings of Islam.

Q. You want to do this within our culture?

A. Yes. I want to do it within our own culture. But I want to do it with my own people. I don't want to share it with ... with anybody else because it's me that I want to understand. And that's from ... from the other end. From ... from here--from this end--I just want them to be, I just want them to be fair and ... and use ... like a lot of people have already used that term before, I mean, used ... like, when this whatever--when this Oklahoma thing happened, they never called this guy a capitalism terrorism or Christian terrorism. They called him a wacko guy, a crazy guy. So they should ... media should be a little bit more fair. But -- you know--that's how they made money. That's how they make their existence, by making ... by ... this is the news secretly is by magnifying things and making a big deal out of nothing.

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

A. I think it's an accumulation of ... of anger.

Q. Anger from whom?

A. From whoever did it. Because it's an act of hate obviously. And I'm not ... I mean, I'm not even sure who did it. But whoever did it was ... did it for a purpose and that purpose

was ... I mean, to do that it's definitely an accumulation of anger and hate. It definitely was not done for fun or for ... to prove something. It was an accumulation of anger or hate and that was ... that's the reason in my ... in my eyes. Who did it or ... I don't know. But why they did it, it's obviously they did it because they were ... they hated something and it was an accumulation. And then they wanted to send a message.

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

A. Well, they might ... they might hate the American foreign policy but one shouldn't say they hate America. Because remember, I mean, I have ... we also have to be ... that our media ... our media back in ... in the Middle East, they do the same. I mean, like, the ... the American media pumps people against Islam and our media sometimes there. They pump individual people against America too. I mean, things happen in both ways. This is the media game. They do this in both ways. And it's amazing even Americans who live in ... in our ... in the Middle East get effected by our media. Like we are Middle Eastern background people who live here, we get effected by the media here as well. It's amazing how media can really alter your thinking.

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

A. Mind their own business.

Q. In terms of what? How do you... .

A. In terms of stop insisting in being the world policeman.

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

A. I think you've mostly covered everything.

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

A. You're welcome.