

Interview 18

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: 66

Q. This project is called the September 11th Digital Archive and we're archiving interviews and experiences of Arab-Americans in New York City to see what has been happening to them after September 11th. So I'm going to ask you a few questions about yourself and then a few about how you've experienced September 11th. First I'd like to know where you were born?

A. I was born in Iraq

Q. Where in...

A. In ... in a city called Kirkuk: K-i-r-k-u-k, and it is one of the more important petroleum production ... producing cities. And then I moved after high school to Baghdad. And I lived in Baghdad, except for evaluation when I went outside. All my life is in Baghdad.

Q. When did you come to the United States?

A. 17th ... January 17th, '95.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. My father was born in Iraq in a city called Mosul: M-o-s-u-l, in the northern part of the country.

Q. And your Mom was born where?

A. The same ... the same place with my father.

Q. What is your ethnic background?

A. My ethnic background? Arab.

Q. And your religious affiliation?

A. I am a Catholic.

Q. And your...

A. And my father is a Catholic.

Q. And your age?

A. Age? Sixty-six.

Q. So are you a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident or a Green Card holder?

A. I'm a citizen now.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. MSc degree in geology from University, United Kingdom.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. Teaching.

Q. What do you teach?

A. English, ESL.

Q. ESL? Where do you teach that?

A. We teach it here in the church and sometimes I used to teach in a Center for ... the [name of support center]. Maybe you know it. I don't know.

Q. On Atlantic Avenue?

A. Yeah, at Court Street.

Q. Okay. Your marital status?

A. Married with two daughters.

Q. And how old are your daughters?

A. {age}.

Q. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you the day at 9 A.M.?

A. I was watching television and I saw the ... the whole thing on television live, especially the second one. The first one, and then there was the second one and I think it was taken by an amateur.

Q. By amateur video.

A. I think so. But I was watching television and I...

Q. So after you saw the attacks what was your first reaction?

A. My first reaction? Not believing or ... I mean stunned. I mean, I don't know ... I don't ... I didn't ... I didn't know what ... what was going on, but something very ... very strange.

Q. What was your reaction to the possibility that they were Muslim terrorists?

A. I didn't have any ... any idea ... I was just ... because before the Oklahoma bombing when it happened, the first thing I learned from the television that it was Arabs. And then it proved that ... that it was not. So I didn't know. I didn't jump to conclusions at all.

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

A. The collapse of the two buildings because I had been there before. I mean, I had been there.

Q. Right.

A. So I know what ... On television, --you know--it looks like Hollywood. But when you are ... when you have been there and then you see the whole thing collapsing, unbelievable.

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

A. My feelings? I felt very sad about the people in the building.

Q. Were you angry at anybody? Did you feel guilt?

A. No. No I didn't have anybody.

Q. Any ... any relatives?

A. No, no, nobody I know.

Q. Did you feel guilty being an Arab?

A. Being an Arab? What ... sorry. Is it possible again?

Q. When they announced that they were Arabs...

A. Oh! They announced they were Arabs!

Q. Did you feel guilty as an Arab?

A. I felt it was not an Arab. It is an extreme background—religious background of those people. It is not ... One should not, when they talk about this terrorism or whatever and especially about the World Trade Center ... this event, they should not think of them as they are Arabs. They ... the ... the Arabs ... there are Christian Arabs and this is ... this is what a lot of people don't understand.

Q. Right.

A. There are a lot of ... I mean, not ... I mean, compared to the Muslim Arabs, of course, they are a minority. But there are Christian Arabs. So what ... that ... that happened is not because they are an Arab. They are not ... You can see in Pakistan. The Arab Pakistanis are not Arabs.

Q. Right. So you're...

A. So it is Muslims ... not all Muslims, of course. I mean, this is the extreme people. I mean, maybe someday you'll find Christian will do it. It is ... It is not ... not the nationality, not the Arabs as ... as ... as a nationality. It is the extreme view of those people who believe in ... of religion. You have it in ... in the United States differently. Those people who were in Waco who killed themselves sort of the same thing.

Q. Right.

A. So it's not our nationality. And that is the danger of what's going on these days.

Q. Right. Have our feelings changed since the events happened?

A. No I still am against ... my feelings toward those people, irrespective of their religion, as I said. You might find them in Christianity. You might find them in ... in Muslims but should not confuse with the Arabs. I am against extremism, --completely against extremism from whatever source. But mainly the ... the day ... today is of the Muslim extremists.

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

A. Arab. I am an Arab.

Q. What about...

A. And I am still an Arab.

Q. And you still tell them that now?

A. Yeah, Because ... because I ... this is what I believe. This is what we have to make clear that not the Arabs did that because he's an Arab. He did it because he's an extreme Muslim. And if you go in detail with what Bin Laddin is teaching it's all Muslim. He

never say Arab, all what Mohammed said and what ... this is distorted, by the way, we don't want to go into details.

Q. Right.

A. But what he is teaching he is teaching extremism through Muslim religion. That's what he's doing. So the Arabs have nothing to do with it as Arabs.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed?

A. No.

Q. Has your level of political awareness increased?

A. No, sweetheart because in Iraq we are very political. (Laughs) You don't need September 11th to make us aware politically. We ... It is with us at breakfast ... Always in our lives. It is part of our lives because of the history.

Q. Right.

A. You know?

Q. What about the country's domestic and foreign policy? Have your feelings changed toward that?

A. I think ... I think that the ... the domestic policy I think they are making unfortunately—this is what I believe--that it has been used, this September 11th. And if you look what happened to the economy, what ... the surplus is gone and defense budget, it's about ... about four ... four hundred billion dollars. And between now and then the attorney general there is a warning that the terrorists are going to attack, although I never believed that.

Q. Why don't you believe that?

A. Because they will not ... because they ... plan. This is not an easy job. What happened is not just like that.

Q. Right. So...

A. No! It is planned in ... in great detail. So, especially now that if they do some operation, something never ... never would ... would be that scale. It is out of frustration. Now, the ... the ... the chain has weakened because of the hitting, I mean. But it is, unfortunately, --this is my feeling, --what I feel it has been used politically inside.

Q. So you said that...

A. As for the foreign ... foreign policy, I think the United states is making a great mistake not looking far into the future. Maybe there are gains now, but they're always creating hatred and it will never ... it will never ... especially with the Arabs ... If you talk about the Arabs and even the Muslims, it's creating more hatred. And by the way, you know the closest ally of the United States from the Arab countries are the Saudis. And ... but for fifteen or sixteen of the hijackers are Saudis. And the next .. and the next ally Egypt, and the rest are from Egypt.

Q. So what do you make of that?

A. And Iraq is the most evil, and no one there (chuckles) and no--and no one from Iraq, because historically...

Q. What do you think of that?

A. I tell you. That's what I am insisting on. It is not Arab. In Iraq we are religiously liberal, even the Muslims. We don't have the Muslim Brothers. Historically Iraq is ... I'm not a historian to go back why, but in Iraq—I lived there all my life and I mean, I'm now ... what? Sixty years I lived there—we are ... most of my friends are Muslims. Maybe I

have one Christian, and all of them are Mu-- ... and even now they call me from from England, from many places. We never felt that religion is .. is part of our life. I was in college and when I graduated some people didn't know that I am a Muslim or a Christian. And it was not nice to ask somebody what is your religion. Iraq, historically, is not religious extremism. But with the ... with the Gulf War it's created something like that. This is very, very new to us. Historically, no. No. And I am a Chri-- ... and even ... even before I came I was the Chairman and I was the only Christian in the department. I was at the University ... Baghdad University in the department of Geology and I was the only Christian in he Department. I came ... chairman before I came here.

Q. So is that what you meant by frustration? You mentioned before that you think the terrorists are frustrated. That's why they committed this big thing. And you're saying in Iraq, because there's no pressure to be a certain religion, there's no frustration?

A. There is frustration in Iraq but it is not ... What I'm saying is there is teaching of religion. Religion, you can teach it this way or you can teach it the other way. I mean, I ... I read the Koran. One way they make Christ God in what ... in a certain way. In the other way they say Christians are the evil—the devil. You see? It depends how you teach it. And those people, they think ... You know, if you go further than that, political parties in the east .. in the .. in the Middle East failed in their ... in their. ... Now it is the tide of Muslims and Muslim religion ... what their teaching very pol--political. The Christians are not political. Because we ... Christianity goes to the individual. Christ is in the heart of the individual. It's a different philosophy. But Muslims, it is a very political religion because they have even law: how you get married, how ... how you inherit. So it's like

civil ... they have civil .. civil laws. So Islam is political. So they think now ... You know, this happened with ... in the Middle Ages when the ... when ... the Pope's in control of all western Europe. So now it's the Muslim ... Muslim doing that. And Especially now, we have a lot of countries like Iran and Pakistan. It is a wave. Now the Muslim religion is coming...

Q. It's a phase. Right.

A. At the top. Even in the United States the most ... religion is Muslim ... But this I don't think it will continue.

Q. Why do you think that the numbers are increasing, I mean, even among converts. Why do you think that...

A. In here?

Q. Yeah. Why do you think Mu-Islam is growing in numbers?

A. Well, most of them I think a lot of maybe African-Americans and maybe some people think that the economic prestige or the economic wealth is usually controlled by the elite, --Christian elite. Right? I ... I haven't ...I ... I cannot tell you exactly why because I haven't ... I mean, just ideas why. And it is ... We don't know whether the poor need a certain place to go. Usually it was political parties before. Now they go to Islam thinking that this is who's going to save them, the stage of political development. Maybe it will last twenty years, thirty? I don't know. I'm sure it's going to decline pretty much.

Q. Why?

A. Because they'll find out that it didn't do anything--any good.

Q. Okay.

A. As the parties didn't. They didn't do any good. So maybe something else will come on.
I don't know.

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

A. Me? It depends ... this is a very critical question. It depends on age.

Q. Really?

A. Because how do you think ... when you think of my daughter, she feels very much belonging to this...

Q. She was born here?

A. No.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. But I'm going to take it as stages. I mean, to me I was only seven years and when I came to ... I was fifty-nine so it was not from the ... I would not say anything to harm the United States—this I'll never do.

Q. Right.

A. Because I came to this country and it's part of my morals. They accepted me and I'll never do anything. But belonging psychologically it's not easy. You know? You ... you live in the United States now, for let's say, forty years and then you go to anywhere, how do you feel you psychologically will belong? I mean, culture, traditions, your relatives, friends all are. But surely the baby will ... will be born here ... for instance, it will be part of my daughter now, she is ... I feel she is very much belonging to this country, although she is not that old--I mean, not that young. She's about twenty-nine, twenty-seven years old, but she feels the belonging, I think, much ... much more than me. And this is psychology. You ... you eat ... you eat French fries for forty years or fifty years how can

you change it to ... to mashed potatoes. It is not .. You use the ... the idea ... Not in the sense that you ... you ... you hate the United States or in the sense of trying to do harm to the United States, but in the sense of people get habits. And it's very strong. And so I think belonging very much to do with age.

Q. Do you think there's been a change in the way People from the Middle East are treated here?

A. Change? Did they change?

Q. Do you think there's a change in the way Americans treat Arabs and Muslims after 9-11?

A. Did change? If there is some changes--this is, as I said, a good question, --sometimes you need ... study. But in ... in ... on the surface they might change. Not because they are Muslims or not Muslims, I mean, in the sense...

Q. Not the Muslims themselves...

A. Changing hearts ...

Q. Not the Muslims. I mean, is there a change in the way American public treats Arabs?

A. Ah! I ... we had ... I heard some incidents and this church was very well aware of what might happen and though our philosophy in this ... in this church that we ... we don't ... we don't ... between people. This is what we are. I'm a Catholic. It is beautiful.

Q. Right.

A. And the gentleman you ... you saw ... you spoke to, he's [religion]. This [removed], although it's called [removed], was from all faiths. Not only that we extend out hand to the Muslims, we extend our hand to the Jews. And we, with our initiative, we formed

what we call Unity Talk Force in the area before September 11th, by the way. It includes the Christians, the Arabs and the Jews. Also some political figures in the ... in the community and police officers. All this so that the community will be in ... live in harmony without any trouble. This was very useful September 11th ... when September 11th came. So to me nothing happened. To my family nothing happened. I heard some ... maybe some ... But in ... in general surely the public will have--sorry, --the public will have a negative attitude towards Arabs and this is one of our big issues that we have to clarify things: that, first of all, it is not the Arabs. We are Arabs but we are Christian. Secondly, that this is not all of the Muslims also. There are some teachings, or here are some lines ... As I said, maybe in ... in ... in Christians we have some extremism so we ... we have to clarify. But the ... but the American people in general, they're not politically minded. I mean, they care mostly about maybe how ... some of the, how the stock market is doing; some about their kids ... I mean, they are not politically minded. They don't think that their life has something to do with politics, which is wrong.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern organizations have been doing enough to promote harmony and to stop attacks after September 11th?

A. Middle Eastern organizations?

Q. Organizations...

A. Where? In the ... in the Middle East or in here?

Q. Oh, here.

A. They will stop ... I don't think they have anything new.

Q. No. Do you think that they've been ... do you think that they've been organizing politically?

A. I think mainly they ... this is ... As I said, again, I don't know them very much--very well, but I think originally they were organized to ... to safeguard the ... the interests of the people--I don't think they are ... --and they work within the framework of the American framework, I don't think have anything to do with it. And I see a lot of programs on television, --we have Arabic channel, --they are not ... I don't think they will do any--I mean, to stop. I don't think they have anything to do with it.

Q. Do you...

A. In fact, it's ... I don't think that they have any influence in this. It's all...

Q. Do you think they're doing enough to help their own community?

A. I have no idea. I don't ... As far as I'm concerned, I don't think they are doing enough because I ... I see other communities, like the Jews, like others, when any immigrant comes in New ... for example, in New York that all ... he has a house, he has job, --everything. I don't think the Arab organizations ... I ... I never heard of them, really, until September 11th. They are not--you know--very active or very useful for the community. I don't think so.

Q. So what do you think they could do in order to become useful and to help their community?

A. Well, I ... I think they ... they should have certain ... they should have goals.

Q. What kind of goals?

A. I mean, how to make the Arab ... the community get involved with American society. You see, I teach [removed], and one of the problems if the Arab who tries to learn English, I tell them: It's useless sometimes if you are not going to experience talking English. When you go to the Fifth Avenue and you'll find butcher shops in Arab,

groceries in Arab, the hair cutters in Arab, they have ... there is no need for them to use the English. So that's why you see some people that have been here for ten years and they still don't speak English. So the call of ... It must be the call of those people, if they're really sincere, not you make organization for your own interest for the people that ... who will control these organizations, they should set out goals how to help them—how to help and their work. For example, we are ... not ... not a Middle East organization but we are an Arab church and we have goals how to try to ... Beside the spiritual part of our [removed] we have a lot of social programs in our [removed] trying to help our community. I mean, I think the com--our community feels our influence more than those Middle Eastern organizations. But my feeling. I don't know them...

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious groups after September 11th?

A. Oh, joined, no.

Q. In your opinion what is the relationship between Middle Eastern organizations and the government?

A. The government here?

Q. The United States government?

A. I don't know because I have ... I don't have anything ... I don't know them. I'm not am member of any and I don't hear about them. I mean, only sometimes in the news. But I don't know their relation to the government here.

Q. Do you think that there's more harmony between the two groups?

A. Between the Middle Eastern and the government? I would expect that because it's a matter of interest. That's all. There's nothing. But those people, I don't know. I don't have, I mean, any idea about them so I cannot tell.

Q. Given your understanding of the way Arabs are treated now after September 11th, would you encourage Arabs from overseas to emigrate here now?

A. I mean, they should not put that in their mind, but if they want to ... I mean, they should put ... they should not put that in mind. That should not stop them if they want to ... to emigrate that should not stop them 'cause they want to ... don' talk to me. Up to them. But they should not put that in their ... in their mind. 'Cause the American people not the government. The American people are ... they are not ... They are not good hearted.

Q. The American people are not?

A. That's what I think. From my point, good hearted they're not. But anyway.
(Interruption) They are ... they are ... they are.

Q. Oh.

A. They are much good hearted than the English. I have been there. (Laughs) I believe so. They are very good hearted, and ... and maybe this is because of history because they always--you know--received new ... newcomers. So it's--you know.

Q. Right.

A. Part of their life, I mean, to ... to receive newcomers and live with them. And if you hate them, you'll not be able to—I mean, so maybe it's also history.

Q. So we've talked about negative consequences from September 11th? Do you think that there was anything positive that came out of the attacks?

A. Ah, positive. Maybe one thing. You see, I lived in Iraq and I experienced the forty-two days of bombing, living without electricity, without water, so I know what it is I believe. Of course, if it has any positive side—if it has any positive side—that maybe

make people think that there is sometimes hardship and maybe ... I don't know how ... how they would think about it ... are going to think about it, but if they are going to think that some people tried to harm them something. But I hope this will let them think about hardship and about other people. And about other peoples' hardship. You see? If some people lost their relatives, loved ones, they should, I hope—I don't know--think how other people, when they lose their loved ones in a tragic event.

Q. Do you think that there is an improved understanding of Arab culture and Islam?

A. Of course, because of connecting this to the Islam and the Arabs a lot of people started reading about our land from some Muslim ... some of our Muslim friends. But there is--you know--the people who want to read and there were ... a lot of books were sold about Islam. Again, it depends how they are going to ... to look at it, how they're going ... are they looking for ... You know, a person is not neutral. There's not neutral person. It depends how you look at things. If they want to educate themselves in general on what is this religion and what is Arab, that's great. But if they want to find out the bad things, well, that's a different story. If they want to educate themselves about ... as you want to educated yourself about anything.

Q. So why do you think ...

A. That would be a great thing because I'm sure in the ... in the long run they will understand the Arab culture, the Arab community, and they will come to the conclusion that this is not the Arabs.

Q. So do you think that most Americans are being educated or do you think they're looking for negative consequences, as you say?

A. (Chuckles) I cannot tell. But I hope ... Because I think the American people are good readers. Are they?

Q. Well, it depends.

A. It depends. Huh? So I cannot tell really. I'm not very much--you know ... I don't know much about...

Q. So why do you think that the attacks on the World Trade Center happened?

A. What I ...

Q. Why do you think the attacks on the world Trade Center happened?

A. Happened? I ... I don't know. It is very complicated, I think ... I think this ... because some ... a lot of theories: because of frustration ... of ... because of American foreign policy toward the Middle East, a lot of things. But I am not really sure why ... exactly why, because how those people think? Really, I don't know. I mean, why they did it? Surely to harm the United States. That's what they think. I don't know if that is ... that is the psychology that pushed them to do it only. I cannot say.

Q. So frustration at United States foreign policy?

A. This the classical thing that I'm saying. But I ... I don't think that is ... I think it's more complicated. It ... it involves religious teaching and religious extremism. Maybe they are thinking this is Christianity so they have to ... I don't know because this superpower doing harm to them. I have ... And it is ... it is maybe part of everything. And it really needs a good, impartial study to reach--maybe you can't reach a conclusion—or something. But to tell me it is only one factor, I cannot believe that.

Q. Right.

A. It is ... and, I mean, it's a lot of factors. You have to study what are those people, their psychology, their philosophies, what ... You see, a lot of things has to get into this before you make up your mind the reason of the...

Q. Do you think there is anything the United States can do to resolve terrorism directed against it?

A. It depends why there is terrorism against the United States, I mean, why terrorists want to attack the United States. Is it only economic? Is it only religious? It is ... so, I mean, this way of ... maybe ... I believe maybe what the Amer--Americans are doing at the moment, using force—all right? Maybe if the attacks are short term maybe it will disconnect this ring—you know? Al-Qaeda, whatever it's called. But on the long run if ... now and the United States has a moral, global responsibility. Now there is no superpower. The United States ... the Soviet Union is finished. It has a moral, global responsibility ... moral only towards its people. Either, if they want to exercise their power then they have responsibilities towards others. When they are going to use power, they are going to use power towards others so usually to attack authority. Then you have a moral responsibility. Now, what ... what is going to decide how they are ... are going to move? Is it the ... the big businesses like the ... whatever. We don't have to go into ... into that. Who is going to decide this very huge responsibility towards the world--towards the world? How are they going ... Is the United States going to keep poor people poor or are ... is it going to help them to develop themselves? This is going to decide in the long run, not in the short run, the ... the fate of terrorism. This is what I believe.

Q. Okay. Is there any other issue or point that you'd like to raise that maybe I didn't ask? Anything you want to comment on?

A. No. Well, I think your questions covered a lot of things. I only hope that maybe the last months of is of a point that the United States should be ... should be fair and should, because of its moral responsibility ... I mean, the whole struggle against the Soviet Union that they are the evil. All right. The devil is gone. Very well. Now you have it. Now, let's see what you are doing ... going to do. I mean, is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, will ... will it be like that and you'll see all the kids, the Palestinian kids, killed and you do nothing? Would you see AIDS on a global scale going to spread and you do nothing? Will you see hunger in Africa and you don't do anything? Now all this because of the evil of the devil. Now the devil is not there. Let us see the angel what it's going to do. And that's what the people are looking at it. That's what I said, it has the global, moral responsibility which is ... either they want to isolate themselves, the United States, and have nothing to do with the others, --okay? --get ... get the bases out of all countries and think ... think of your people only. Let the people do what they want. If you feel you have interests in all over the world and the devil is not there any more, now we have the angel, all the people will look what the angel will do to us. And that's what I think in the long run. Otherwise, you have also the some time. The decline will start in the United States. Nothing stays. The Roman Empire they used to boast, you know? So maybe we'll not experience this maybe another fifty years or more, but with a policy like that surely it's going to decline.

Q. Okay. That's the end of the interview. I thank you very much for answering.

A. You're welcome. You're welcome.