

Interview 63

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. Well, I would like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. In the U.S. in New York City.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. In New York and New Jersey.

Q. Okay. Where were your ... where was your father born?

A. Egypt.

Q. And your mother?

A. Same, Egypt.

Q. Okay. So you are ... you were born here, right? So you're second generation.

A. I .. Yeah. I mean, I guess first, second. I don't know how it's defined.

Q. Oh okay. I got it.

A. I guess first 'cause they weren't born here.

Q. So what do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. My ethnic background? Egyptian.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Twenty-nine.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Bachelor of Science and a CFA.

Q. From? And what year was your degree awarded?

A. '95.

Q. In what country did you obtain your education?

A. U.S.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. Consultant.

Q. And what do you ... what exactly do you do?

A. Like, business consulting and, implementation of new systems or conversion and work flow, like, business and all this type stuff.

Q. Oh, okay. And what is your marital status?

A. Single.

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

A. I was arriving at work in Brooklyn.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. When I walked in there were ... there are actually TV monitors as part of our exhibit in the lobby and the monitors were on, like, CNN or whatever.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Shock. But it was actually ... when I walked in the first tower had already been hit and I thought it was--you know--an accident. And there were a lot of people ... I mean, I walked in. ... Actually, I was driving to work and I was driving on Flatbush Avenue,

which leads up to the Manhattan Bridge. And as I was just turning into Metro Tech in downtown Brooklyn there were, like, an enormous number of emergency vehicles with, like, their sirens on, undercover, I mean, unmarked vehicles, all kinds of stuff, and I was, like, what is going on. And so when I walked in the lobby and I saw all these hoards of people and I was, like, what's this, and that's what I thought.

Q. Did you have a reaction ... when you found out that it wasn't an accident what was your reaction to that or. ...

A. Well, when the second one hit, which, I guess, is when most people realized it wasn't an accident, definitely shock and definitely ... I mean, shock was the biggest one. And I guess just not knowing--you know--what does this mean, just trying to digest it really. You know? What does this mean in terms of people--you know--hurt and--you know--all that kind of stuff.

Q. Did you have a reaction to the possibility that this could have been a terrorist attack by Middle Eastern or Muslim groups?

A. Yeah, and I was just really hoping it wasn't.

Q. Why ... what would make you think that?

A. Think what?

Q. That it could have been Middle Eastern?

A. Just because that's ... at least that's the first speculation--you know? So generally, I mean, I definitely remember Oklahoma City and definitely everything was being speculated that that was the case and what not. So I just thought--you know--definitely the speculation would be there. Now, if it was turned ... I hoped not, but ... you know--that's how it would start.

Q. What would you say is your most vivid memory of September 11? Was there anything that stands out in your mind that you'll never forget?

A. Well, definitely when I was ... I mean, number one, everything. Number two, when I was in the office a couple of things, a couple of things from--you know--from comments, from hearing on the radio that one Tower fell--you know. The first Tower fell, well, actually, the second one had been hit fell, and I was like: Oh my God, where did it fall and how did it fall? And actually the first thing I said was, Oh my God! The other one's going to fall like the first one fell. And I just didn't ... couldn't comprehend what ... with ... had fallen onto. Like, I don't know--I just thought it had toppled, like, sideways. I ... I didn't think it had just impacted on itself type thing. A variety of things. I mean--you know--a co-worker of mind saying: Oh yeah--you know? I could hear her on the phone: Oh yeah. Well, that's what they do. They pay these kids to do these crazy things and--you know--blah, blah, blah. You know? That's what they do in Israel all the time, blah, blah, blah, and it was just disgusting. And ... and--you know--at that point I was, like, excuse me, is there something you know that the rest of us don't?--because it was literally, like, fifteen minutes after it happened--you know--just crazy stuff. I mean, ... I mean, the one thing, like, personally, which is crazy, I actually had broken my toe on my left foot on August 11th and the reason I remember that is because I definitely remember when it happened--it was August 11th on a Friday--and I never have broken anything. And actually, I used to commute through the World Trade Center to Brooklyn. And so I had, like, commuted by car service for two weeks and ... and then I started driving through Staten Island 'cause I ... at that point I was living in New Jersey and commuting to Brooklyn. So I ... I just really couldn't believe it. I was, like, wow, like, that was

definitely--you know--something that happened to keep me away from that area on September 11th. I mean, I ... before I had broken my toe I was pretty much traveling through the World Trade Center at, like, 9am.

Q. All the time. Do you remember what your feelings were immediately afterwards? Did you feel, for example, did you feel anger, pain, grief, sadness, anything like that?

A. Probably everything.

Q. Yeah?

A. Yeah. I mean, I just really couldn't believe it. It was actually surreal. Because I had driven in, I drove three of my co-workers to New Jersey through Staten Island and across the Verrazano [Bridge], and you could see, like, they weren't there. And you could see the smoke and you could see everything and--you know? So that was, like, surreal. It really was. It was surreal. I was watching TV. I wish ... I wished there was more I could do. I came in a couple of times to bring in, like, supplies, whatever I could. It was ... it was definitely bad. I mean, I had a class in the World Trade Center. I thought my teachers had--you know--perished. You know? I called the association and they said they were fine. You know? I definitely. ... My first job was in downtown Manhattan, like, just the whole thing was bad.

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

A. I wouldn't say guilt. I'd say embarrassment.

Q. Oh yeah?

A. Embarrassment or resentment because, in essence like, my religion was also hijacked—you know--in ... in more than one way.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events, this feeling you said ... this surreal feeling of everything changing around you and the embarrassment in religion being hijacked. Have they changed since the events?

A. I don't think they've changed that much. I mean, maybe they've slightly changed. But for the most part, I think it's still there. I mean, I've only been downtown, like, twice or by Ground Zero, like, twice, once because a friend of mine from D.C. really wanted to go and ... and I didn't and actually, I wanted to--you know ...I was actually just going to leave my friend to go to the site alone and I was going to take the subway back. But all the subways were shut so I had to ... I had to end up passing by, which I really didn't want to. that was, like--I don't know....

Q. Why didn't you want to?

A. At that point there were a lot of people there, like, a lot. The streets were blocked off. You know? A lot of people, tourists and all this stuff. And I just, number one, I didn't like that they were there because these were people that probably maybe had never even been there before or--you know--didn't really have the connection or didn't experience it, and it was kind of like a little exploiting to just come and watch or--you know--something like that. That was one. And I just--you know--I don't know--I just didn't want to be there. The other time I went actually, last week when I had a meeting in the World Financial Center and still--you know--I still can't believe it. I really can't.

Q. How did you feel being there?

A. Very different. I mean, I spent ... like I said, I spent a lot of time in the World Financial Center and the World Trade Center. I remember how bustling of an area it was. There was, like, nobody in the World Financial Center. I guess they had rebuilt the

atrium. There was, like, nobody and downtown was like a ghost town in places that I knew and experienced--you know--before.

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

A. Egyptian. You know? Yeah.

Q. What about immediately afterwards?

A. The same.

Q. And do you ... what do you say now?

A. The same.

Q. Did you ever feel strange or worried about saying this?

A. No. But recently I've come to feel like any time I say I'm, like, I speak Arabic or ... or I'm Muslim--you know--sometimes I feel like I'm saying--you know--a dirty word or something. You know what I mean? It's like--you know--you say you speak Arabic or something and it's like--you know--I don't know 'cause you hear on the news everything ... Oh, this thing in Arabic, blah, blah, blah. You know? It's kind of like, ridiculous.

Q. Have your feelings changed towards the U.S. since 9-11?

A. I don't think so. I don't think so. I've never had a problem with the U.S. What I do have a problem with is the media.

Q. The media?

A. Yeah.

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

A. Maybe slightly, yeah. Yeah. I mean, when I say the U.S. I don't mean our political leadership 'cause I do have problems with them. But ... but, yeah.

Q. You mentioned the media. What is it about the media that ticks you off?

A. That it's so one sided. I mean, ... you could say it's partly the community's fault because we're not in the media--you know--so we're not in control. ...

Q. You mean the Arabs?

A. Yeah, Arabs or Muslims or--you know We're not making sure, or we're not there--you know--so it's kind of a free for all. And most of the news--you know--is commercial. They need to sell ads.

Q. Of course.

A. So

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

A. Oh, definitely.

Q. You feel at home here?

A. Oh yeah. I don't belong anywhere else. I mean, sometimes people, for some reason, say oh yeah, when you go back home, and I'm, like, home where? And they're, like--you know--Egypt. I'm, like, ... I'm, like, Egypt's not home. This is home. You know? I visit there, yeah, once in a blue moon, but that's not my home.

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. Has there been a change? Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. I mean ... I mean, at least reading about it--you know?-- racial profiling--you know--being, like, fired for undue cause--you know--that kind of stuff.

Q. Okay.

A. Discrimination.

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

A. No. I mean, yes and no.

Q. How so?

A. Yes, through my parents 'cause my Mom wears the hijab.

Q. Oh, okay. So members of your family have experienced. ...

A. Right. Myself--you know--maybe here or there when--you know--the customs officer asks me why I've been to Egypt twice--you know--in the last year. You know? It's kind of like, I can go wherever I want--whatever. I mean, I don't think that's profiling, no. But if it got ... I mean, fine. He can ask, but that's about it. If it gets beyond that I think it's not reasonable.

Q. You mentioned your mother. Has she experienced backlash?

A. I mean, there have been things that have been said and I don't know if it--you know--if it would have been said if 9-11 didn't happen. You know what I mean?

Q. Like what? To her personally?

A. Yeah,

Q. Okay. When?

A. Like, to go back to her country or something. I mean. ...

Q. Had this happened before 9-11? Did she ever ...

A. If it was before 9-11, it was, like, years ago, like maybe in the '80s or something. You know what I mean? It wasn't, like, ... it wasn't, like--you know--a year before 9-11 or anything like that.

Q. Okay. Do you think Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling certain backlash against Arabs or Muslims or South Asians after 9-11?

A. I think so. I think ... well, I think so and I don't think so. I think so because, for example, two of my biggest ... like two of the organizations I really support and think they're doing a great job is CAIR and the Islamic Front, Council on Islamic-American Relations and then ADC, which is, like, Arab Anti-discrimination Committee--something like that.

Q. Yeah.

A. And so I think--you know--the first one from Islamic Front, the second one from the Arab front and--you know--Arab nondenominational--you know--Arab Muslim, Arab Christian--whatever. It doesn't matter. I think they've both been doing, like, a very good job. But they can only do so much because, like, a lot of times people are saying, like, how come the Muslims haven't denounced and how come we haven't heard more from the Muslims, and this and that and the other thing, and I think that's where the media comes in because--you know--these organizations have issued statements, like, left and right and... and this and that. But if we don't get the coverage and we only get the coverage when the bad things happen then--you know--of course it's going to look like we're not denouncing it. So that's--you know--that's that one. And then it gets to a point where it's like, okay denounce it once. Why do I have to denounce it, like, every day of my life and, like, defend, like, my sheer existence. You know? Like, that definitely introduces, like, resentment if you're going to have to explain yourself every day.

Q. Do you think such groups, for example, have managed to organize or mobilize the Arab-American community politically?

A. Politically, like, in terms of their vote?

Q. Um-hum. In terms of vote ... anything politically.

A. Well, I don't think those two groups are very political. There's like, one group, like, American-Muslim council, I think, like, there's another group that does, like, Arab-American policies and stuff like that. But I think they've done a decent job. Well, they're improving. Let me take that back. They're improving and I think they still have a lot more to go, a lot more ways to go, because we still don't, as a community, have a bloc vote and that's one of the reasons why we're not as influential as we could be. And. ...

Q. What do you think needs to be done or could be done to change this?

A. To change, like, or voting ... our power?

Q. Our power, level of political awareness, just organizing and mobilizing as a strong front?

A. What it would take?

Q. Um-hum, whether it's from individuals themselves or the organizations?

A. Right. I mean, I think it's a combination. I think ... I think it's both the organization in terms of being public--you know? And it's, like, okay. This organization is sponsoring this candidate for the following reasons--you know?--or ... or these are our issues. You know? What can you do for us? You know? That's definitely number one. I mean, and we did. You know? We did it for Bush actually. I mean ... I mean, I think one of the main reasons Bush barely won in Florida or whatever was because of the bloc, like, Muslim and Arab vote there. I mean, they did ... that community did mobilize, like, a little bit in the ... in the Presidential vote back then. And then definitely individually. You know? I think Muslims and Arabs have to start becoming--you know-- candidates for office.

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

A. Since? No.

Q. No?

A. I was already a member before.

Q. Of what?

A. Like, CAIR and ISNA and ADC.

Q. Oh, okay. In what capacity?

A. Member.

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

A. What's the relationship?

Q. Yeah. What is the nature of our relationship? Is it ... are relations more tolerant and harmonious now than before 9-11 or do you believe them to be strained or oppositional?

A. I think it really depends. I think it really depends on the community itself like, the community and the location, quite honestly. Like, I mean, it may be somewhat strained, let's say, here in New York but it may be more strained--you know--in ... in the Midwest. You know?

Q. So here ...

A. I think it really depends on the individual. I think overall it's being depicted as like, strained and ...

Q. It's being depicted as so.

A. Yeah. Well, I think it is too,

Q. Okay.

A. But it may be a little exaggerated. I mean, I guess most Muslims and most Arab-American for the most part, I mean, I don't think they're isolationists. I think for the most part, most try to integrate somehow or are integrated. So ... so, for example, they may be so integrated and then maybe now they might be mentioning more about their background or whatever, just so people know that, like, they're normal. You know what I mean?

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

A. I mean, honestly I think we're at the point where it's, like, ... I mean, definitely the organizations still need to do, like, outreach--you know what I mean?--whether it's for a holiday or for ... for, like--you know--an open house--for the mosques to have open houses--stuff like that. But I think ultimately it's on the individual level because ... because, I mean, if I'm normal and you're normal and I know--you know- fifty people and they know I'm a normal person and I'm Muslim and I'm Arab and you know fifty. ... You know what I mean? People won't know unless they know individuals. You know what I mean? Like, you can sit and say--you know--this community is great and they do this and they do that, and come to our open houses and this and that, but unless you know people I think ... I think it'll still be far from you. You know? It won't be close to you unless you actually know individuals.

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

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. Because they're precisely, I guess, the profiled group. You know? I mean, it's hard enough for people that have been here--right?--and it's become harder for them.

Q. Okay.

A. Right now, I mean, unless they really wanted to; I mean, unless they're really young and really want to. I mean, if they're ambivalent I would say no. Forget it.

Q. Why would you tell them no? Because of profiling?

A. They ... well, and they may not be ready for ... or anything ... they might not be ready for the environment toward ... like, the whole INS registration, all the stuff like. ... I mean, first of all, I don't think they would get here that easily, first of all. But I guess if they did--you know--get the authorization and stuff like that. ... It really depends on their mind set. But I guess my point is I would more readily ... I would actually consider saying no to somebody when maybe before 9-11 I would have been like, yeah, totally--you know?--come over; whatever.

Q. So what changed after 9-11?

A. What changed?

Q. Yeah.

A. Being a suspect before--you know. ... Being profiled. You know? I think I heard someone say it best when really our position right now is the same as, like, the African-

American community when--you know--anybody before that was, like, African-American was, like, a possible drug dealer. Now it's like, anybody that's Middle Eastern or Muslim is, like, a possible terrorist.

Q. Yeah. Well, we've talked about some of the negative consequences. Do you see any positive consequences of 9-11?

A. Any positive consequences of 9-11? I mean, it's definitely been a wake up call to the Muslim and Arab-American community, definitely, because ... because, I guess, part of the problem ... and its like, here we are--right?--a community of people that mostly emigrated here for, like, freedom of religion and this and that and the other thing--right?--and ... but we're not exercising them as much as we could be and we're letting, like, the rest of the world with their tainted form and religion and tainted ... the--you know--political environments and--you know--basically everything that our parents left for or my parents--you know--and my generation of, like, first generation of, like, first generation Arab-Americans here, our parents left for those reasons, like religious intolerance or religious, like, skewedness or whatever you want to call it, and then also, like, political, like, tyranny. And so--you know-- we're here but we're still letting the rest of the world, like, speak for us on those two issues. And I think we need to have more, like, Muslim Americans, Arab-Americans need to have more of their own voice. I think it's actually more Muslims 'cause, quite honestly, I mean, if it's a Christian Arab-American I don't really think they have anything they need to speak out about. You know what I mean? I think it's mostly the Muslim Arab-Americans that have to speak out about the ... the way--you know--the religion's being hijacked. You know--that it's not normal for, like, women not to drive. That's not condoned by the religion. That's not ... that's not

dictated--you know what I mean--the oppression of women in, like practically every single Muslim country, that's not Islamic. You know what I mean? 'Cause ... 'cause here we are living amongst them and ... and we're not ... we're not subject to those rules and ... and everything's fine here. But what they see there is ... is what defines it for someone who doesn't know.

Q. Do you think that there has been more visibility or an improved understanding of Middle Easterners, Muslims or Islam in the U.S.?

A. Since 9-11?

Q. Um-hum.

A. Maybe for some people.

Q. Such as whom?

A. I guess such as the people that may, for one reason, think or ... or, like, not believe that, like, all Muslims are like this. You know what I mean? So maybe for some. I mean, I honestly don't know. I mean, I honestly think those people would only be in urban areas 'cause those are the only, like, culturally diverse. I think if it's anywhere in the U.S. where it's not culturally diverse, definitely not.

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

A. Why? I've never thought about why ... why? Well, I mean, it's definitely exploitation—right?--and it's definitely a way for someone to, “easily,” like, united--you know--against the U.S. And ...

Q. When you say exploitation you mean by whom?

A. I mean by, like, the evil-doers exploiting, like, their people. You know?

Q. Okay. Yeah.

A. Kind of recruiting them--you know--for these crazy un-Islamic, unjustified things and—I don't know--just wanting to attack. I really don't know why.

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

A. I don't think so.

Q. Why? Why or why not?

A. Well, okay. People ... I don't think people do on the individual level, people to people, but I think definitely they don't like the policies of our country ... definitely, like, they like America. They like American things. They like the American dream--you know--innovation efficiency--you know--what we are and what we do. They like that. But .. but definitely not the American government's policies.

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

A. I think the only way it could do it is ... I know there's a phrase for this but I don't remember. But like, basically we all know, like, America could pretty much beat up anybody they want to anywhere in the world. Right? But if you ... if you don't use, like the iron fist and I don't want to say show mercy, but maybe show the example or not exacerbate the ... the situation, 'cause I guess ultimately people ... people are the ones that get hurt. I mean in Iraq--you know--how many hundreds of thousands of kids have died in ten years 'cause of sanctions? And actually going back to why the attacks happened in the U.S., I mean it's--and I guess I didn't realize how obvious it is because I guess I've been saying it, but definitely because of the U.S.'s policies. And ... and to a certain point it's--you know--arrogance or the government's arrogance in terms of--you know--you

know--having a military presence in places where--you know--there's a volatile situation, kind of their truly biased and screw ... skewed policies--international policies-- stuff like that.

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

A. I don't know. I mean, I think ... I think definitely the only way the U.S. ... I think your last question, to end terrorism is pretty much to stop terrorizing and stop being a bully. That's the only way, I mean, that's the only way it maybe ... But by ... by answering back, kind of, it's definitely not going to

Q. The U.S. by answering back to ... for attacking basically?

A. Like, for the people of Iraq or, like ... I mean, I know Iraq has nothing ... I mean, I know and I've read over and over that Iraq had nothing to do with 9-11. And I actually resent the government's attempts at linking the two 'cause I just see that as exploitation of 9-11. And I think it's ridiculous that ... I mean, I don't believe it. I don't believe it. I haven't seen hard evidence that ... at all, least of all evidence to convince me that there is a link. And it's just horrible. It's horrible to exploit this, like, horrific tragedy and, like--you know--use it for other purposes. No. There's nothing really else.

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

A. Okay. Thank you.