

Interview 13

This interview was conducted by the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 44

Q. I want to ask you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. In Lebanon.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I grew up most of my life in Lebanon. And I used to go away on vacations, summer or little courses, but generally till... until thirteen years ago I was living in Lebanon.

Q. When did you come to live in the United States?

A. This is the thirteenth year so thirteen, fourteen years ago.

Q. And what is your ethnic background? Your ethnic background, like, you're Lebanese, Egyptian...

A. Lebanese. Let's clarify, Lebanese of European origin. My grandfather was Swiss.

Q. What is your religion?

A. Christian.

Q. Okay. And are you a U.S. citizen or permanent resident?

A. A U.S. citizen.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. Graduate, currently completing my Ph.D.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. In... in the U.S. at... at the Graduate level.

Q. Okay. And what... what did you study?

A. A variety, from Political Science to Sociology and Education.

Q. Okay. What is your main occupation?

A. I'm a researcher and I do consulting. [Graduate student.]

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

A. I was at home and I woke up when I heard the explosion. It was... It wasn't very strong here but still, it woke me up. And then I was wondering what it is and my niece, who was staying with me at the time, had turned on the TV. And we heard about that so I kept on watching it on TV.

Q. So you initially heard of the attacks on television?

A. Yes, but as they were happening.

Q. What was your first reaction when you saw it?

A. My first reaction when they... if I remember correctly, at first when they said a plane had gone into the World Trade Center they had not mentioned that there was anything, probably had reserved judgment to see if it was an accident. But, like, in my mind I was thinking this cannot be an accident. No plane can go that slow. This has to be... I... I didn't know if it was a planned act of terrorism, but I thought this has to be something, that somebody's planned, whether a personal, you know, somebody who's mad or... But I just thought that this was planned.

Q. Did ... did you think that there would be a possibility of it being Middle Eastern?

A. Yeah. One of the possibilities I... I mean, after the... the attacks that had happened the U.S. polls and... and the previous things against the U.S. and also certain... like when the

U.S. responded in Sudan and they ended up hitting a pharmaceutical plant, you know, I... I thought that these are acts and... and reactions that might... might get some responses. So I... I didn't think in my mind it's Middle Eastern but it was a possibility.

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

A. It was shocking to say the least. It just seeing what was happening was... was to me... I think it... I think to me it was even worse than a regular person who has not seen things like this happening. I grew up in... during the civil war in Lebanon and I... I'd seen the American Embassy going down like this. I'd seen other buildings that were targeted and... and it just... it just revived this... this... I'm not sure if it's scared feeling but it's a feeling of my God! Is... is life so non-consequential and so non- important in... in a way, like, in a second all... all this huge... these towers tumbling down and all these people are dying. This just was not so much shocking as unbelievably sad just seeing all these people...

Q. Have your feelings changed since that time?

A. In that respect to... to how sad I felt and how... how shocking I thought it was? No. No. It still is... It still is to me a disastrous thing. It would be a disastrous thing to me if it was even against other countries. It's just... it's just a shame to see people killed this way.

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

A. Probably... probably when I saw the Towers crumbling. The first one was... was shocking. I thought nothing could be worse than that. And then the second one. In my mind there isn't just like one thing that comes... it's the way it feels that comes to my mind. Later when the third one, because of the heat and probably the effect of the first

two falling on it as well, just the whole idea of people dying so easily I think I can always remember that.

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

A. Before September 11th I used to say I'm Lebanese-American and I still say that because simply that hasn't changed.

Q. Even immediately after September 11th?

A. I mean, if they ask me. Generally I don't volunteer information. Generally people, when they detect an accent, they ask where you're originally from and I just say I'm originally from Lebanon.

Q. And you say the same thing now?

A. Yes. I might have concern if I know that the person is narrow minded, but to me it's like lying. And I don't see any reason why I should lie or should feel any shame or regret or anything about it.

Q. If you do detect, like, a narrow-minded person do you...

A. I usually try to avoid getting in... into this at all. But, like, maybe a couple of times I was in a cab, and that was right after, and people asked me where are you from and I just said from the Middle East and that's it. They could jump to any conclusion. But generally ... I remember maybe once said it doesn't matter in New York at all from all over the world, so if I really feel I have to respond like that I... I cannot lie about it. It's... it's a fact.

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

A. Towards the U.S. as a... as a culture, as a country, as people? You see, there are variations here. Towards the U.S. as... as people and a country in general, no. No. I

wouldn't be here if I didn't think that this was a country that gave opportunity to any people; that the Constitution itself, if we follow the letter of the Constitution, is... is something we all dream of or we all respect and want. We wouldn't be here otherwise. But the U.S. maybe as a government at certain points in time, I am always... I'm always a bit skeptical of... of people in general. People in different circumstances behave differently and might behave badly at some points; that we... we respect some decisions of some Presidents and others we don't. So I always have doubts, which doesn't mean that I... that I am saying I have them now. But I'm just saying that... I can't say they've really changed 'cause I know if I look at the McCarthy period, for example, you know I didn't respect what happened then, but that doesn't make me say I don't like America or the U.S.

Q. Would you say that your level of political awareness has changed?

A. Maybe in the terms that I always... I'm not sure exactly what you mean by political awareness.

Q. In terms of ... are you more politically aware of domestic policy now or U.S. foreign policy in a way that you weren't before?

A. Maybe just a little more but not much because I always watch BBC and French news. I've always listened to their views than the mainstream American news. And this is something from day one when I was here I thought was lacking in the sense that you don't have enough representation about what's going on in the world except maybe sometimes from a certain perspective. And it's healthier to listen to other views and perspectives.

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

A. Yes I do.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Yes. I think even from the beginning I... I... Even before I became a citizen I always felt American in some ways. Now, maybe because of my education and... and... and because... In fact, I have to say I had, in a way, a much more idealistic view of the U.S. before I came here because I thought it was perfect and, you know, like, this is the country that is always thinking of the rights of the under-trodden and stuff like that. You realize when you come here that this is not entirely the case, but that's also because no human being is entirely fair or... or right in a way and we... there is always the possibility of making mistakes. And that's why I respect the Constitution because it, to a certain extent, has checks and balances. And I feel a sense of belonging to what I see maybe as the U.S. We live in New York and it's a community of people from all over the world. I don't know how comfortable I'll be if I'm in Utah somewhere with... with people who have just one perspective and thought. Yes, I... I still feel a sense of belonging. Sure.

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

A. Certainly.

Q. How so?

A. I think there is much more intolerance towards them. This is obvious in... in the news. This is obvious in... in the events that happen. This is obvious even on the street. I mean, yes I am Lebanese-American and but I... I blend in entirely. My... My looks are like any normal white American and I dress the same way. But for people who do not conform to this, although this is in a way something that we respect about the U.S. that it has all these varieties. But in a way, people who don't conform these days are... are looked at

differently and... and I can certainly sympathize... sympathize with them. I do understand why people are treating them like this. Let's be honest. If I'm on a bus and somebody is going to tell me that there's a bomb on this bus and I see two people with long beards and ... and dressed in traditional Arabic garb, maybe I will suspect them before others. And this is where... this is where human beings sometime are judgmental. I am of an Arab-American origin and I think this way. But will I let it effect me in the sense that I only focus on these two people, no. I should not. And that's what I see. Yes, I understand why people are suspicious and if they treated everybody and checked everybody the same way I wouldn't have a problem with that.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash since 9-11 in terms of harassment or racial profiling, discrimination?

A. Not... I... not really, not directly. But then I have not been traveling or have not been dealing with ... with lots of people that I don't know, in a sense. I think... I think if you're in... in a situation or a profession whereby you're meeting people for the first time you might... you might face that. Honestly I haven't. But I've... I've faced some situations where if people didn't know me for long times, nei--neighbors maybe, who know everything about me and know how open minded I am and know that I am from Lebanon and... and talk to me in an almost attacking way: Look what they did? Look... why do they do this or why... why do Arabs do that, as if, you know, I'm the person responsible or I'm their defender. I take it with a joke sometimes. Sometimes you... you ... you know, you get into a debate where you're trying to explain certain things to them but I'll try... discrimination? I haven't been in such a situation that... It might have happened. I don't know that I wasn't in such a situation.

Q. Have you had any members of your family or friends experience backlash?

A. Yes. I know of some friends who were... who were, I think, treated a bit unfairly at the airport when they were traveling. A couple of people even at work one didn't get a promotion. Of course, he was not told that but... but then he felt it 'cause everybody was kind of avoiding him and he really felt strongly that that was the reason. Another person who was on a plane and he looks very European. He doesn't even have an accent. Unfortunately, he has a name that is an Arab name. And they got him off the plane and he missed his flight because they had to interview him because they thought: Oh, you have an Arabic name. You might be a terrorist. I thought this was... this was unacceptable.

Q. This was here in the United States when they did this?

A. No. He was coming... going onto American Airlines from London to here and it was... it was the... the security on American Airlines. It's American. I'm sure many others face the same thing. I've heard of a friend of mine who was on a plane and the same thing happened. And the guy came back but they... they... they were pestering him for a couple of hours. So...

Q. Would you say that Arab-American or Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling this backlash against our community since 9-11?

A. Have they... Have they been effective enough? No. But I think, considering that before that they were not extremely active, I think they... they made a big effort. Do I expect them.... Did I expect them to be effective? I don't think so, considering how... how pervasive this feeling of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim in this country what could they do? I... I don't think I can blame their inactivity. If I want to do that I have to blame it

retroactively in a way, because for the past, long number of years they have not stood up and tried to... to organize themselves, to... to... to lobby the... the people in high places. But then again, I don't know if I would blame organizations because I think it has to come from the people. And unfortunately, most people want to blend in and are... because of this feeling are scared of being affiliated with Arab-American or Arab organizations. So...

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

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. I don't have the time. I was active in social organizations before and I had to get off those so I really don't have any time to join any new organizations.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between Arab-Americans and other Americans in the United States right now?

A. You mean as a... as a group, in general?

Q. Yeah, in general.

A. Or you mean as specific organizations?

Q. No, no, no, in general do you think relations are more harmonious or tolerant or more strained at the moment?

A. If I want to generalize I'd say it's more... more strained. But I think in... in many cases it's... it's a personal thing. It depends on who knows who, and... and that once they know people they might look at them differently. But certainly in general I would say they're strained and they are marked, at least on one side if not on both, with ignorance, I would say, ignorance and bias because... could... could be on two sides as well, depending on...

on who the groups are. If... if we're talking, let's say, about groups of Arab-Americans that are into themselves and into certain communities that might happen. But I think regarding the regular, your regular Arab-American who live and has blended into the community it's more on the side of Ame-- some Americans and maybe the Americans in general who, the moment you say Arab-American, like, oh, they think of terrorism or they... they think of... of fanaticism without even thinking of giving the benefit of the doubt to or saying: Okay, so who are these people, before we jump to conclusions.

Q. So if the situation is a little intolerant right now, what do you think members of the Arab-American community can do to improve the relations as individuals, individual members of the community?

A. As individual members you... you can do things that are really active and things that... that just... Okay. The inactive or the... the kind of passive way is just, you know, behave and show people that there is no threat from us, just... just... Kind of like when... when... when still they're... they have needed assistance right after September 11th I remember many Arab organizations were encouraging people from the Arab-American community to go and volunteer. Things like this where you show that you think of this country as home and... and places where you, you know, you get involved just like every other American, whether it's celebrations or... or in terms of other opportunities. But I... I think mainly most people try to do that and I think that by blending in they think that is the best way. But I... I do believe we need to be more active in the sense of trying to explain certain things to people and not... not be scared. And I think many of us are scared, and maybe I am at some points as well so I... this is also self-criticism, not just criticizing the community. But I think at some point we have to stand up and say this is not acceptable

these... We... we... we have to make an effort to... to have our opinions heard, to respond to... whether it be the... the elected officials in our community, just like, you know, the active organizations groups. That's what they do. That's how their voice is heard, when people raise concerns, when they send letters, when they protest to their Congressmen or politicians. The problem here, although I am proposing this and I'm saying this is something we should do, I don't do it because we're all afraid of maybe being associated with... with extreme groups. Or if we're activists we'll be looked upon negatively.

Q. By whom, by the government or by, like, Americans, individuals?

A. Maybe by both. I'm not... I think many of us are more concerned by governmental actions and ... although we don't think there will be something that obvious. But sometimes the worry is that if somebody's an activist that they'll be, I don't know, in the FBI list or the CIA list or... and I think most people who are here really want to blend in and ... and although they think it's unfair that the Arab-American community is characterized this way and that there is some intolerance towards it, they don't feel that on their own they... they want to do something. I think there's also another reason. If... if... if we felt like we all were similar and we felt that the target is all of us I think we would act more. But let's be honest. Many of us do not even associate with other Arab-Americans in the community. I mean, I know some Arab-Americans here that are maybe too religious, according to me, or maybe feel that their loyalties are always with Arabs and Muslims than with the American government and I and many other Arab-Americans who come from ... who are Muslims and come from... I mean, have recently come from Arab countries don't feel this way. There are different currents. I mean, I think most of us do not at all in any way associate with the terrorists that did this, nor do we condone it,

nor do we accept it. And we wouldn't accept it if it was targeted against the U.S. or elsewhere. So we might understand why it happened more, we might think there were some things that the U.S. government could have done that might... might have probably avoided... I'm not sure that it could have avoided, but maybe could have avoided having the Middle... people in the middle East feeling as negative as they do towards the U.S. but then again, many of these people who have to face this are being taught from when they're young to hate anything that's western and hate the U.S. and we don't associate with that. So the problem is we're all lumped together and it is unfair to us and it's... it's making us feel like we don't blend in here or there, in a sense. And that... that is a shame. That also is, I think, one of the reasons why many people are not being active in the community or active in defending Arab-Americans.

Q. You mentioned before that the Arab-American organizations were, in essence, even before 9-11 somewhat ineffective. What do you think organizations can now do to try to improve the relations between Arab-Americans and Americans?

A. I think they're doing a lot. I think, for example, the Arab-American Institute, James Zogby, has been quite involved in... in everything that... that happens in congress that effects the Arab-American community. And I... and I think... and I think their actions need to be commended. There's no doubt about that. The thing is, as I've mentioned, at least my feelings are, that they started getting involved much later. And their efforts, I'm sure, intensified as a response to the backlash of September 11th. But I think at that time it was a bit late and it was not enough specifically as you're also fighting the media. I mean, many, many people in the media are ignorant and... and are quick to jump to conclusions about the Arab-American community. And it's... it's cock fighting millions.

It's... so... In a way, I don't feel I should really criticize what they've done, especially if I as a person am not doing anything about it. Because, again organizations are only representative of their members.

Q. Yes.

A. But we have to admit they've been ineffective, and the fact that they have been, not entirely but somehow, and the fact that that is so, scares people from again joining in. So it's becoming a little bit of a... of maybe a vicious cycle. We ... we still should ... we still should support them, I believe, in as much as you can, whether financially or in efforts to stand up and ... and let our voices be heard.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Arab... Middle Eastern groups, South Asian groups, immigrant groups in the United States since 9-11, would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate to the United States?

A. I guess I'm biased. I always would. But I... I see immigration as slightly different than how other people see it. I don't... although I see myself as a Lebanese-American, I don't feel in a way that Lebanon lost me or... or... I think it gains if the members help back and there is feedback between them and their countries, or they maybe, whether they help communities there... and... and to me, although I'm not planning to go back to live there, I'm all... I always will visit. And I would like to encourage people, not necessarily to emigrate, but to give themselves the opportunities to come here. If they live for certain years to get... to get the... the experience and the knowledge that they would gain from living in another country. Also, if it were possible at this time, I would encourage even Americans to go to... to the Arab world and... and get more involved and understand more about how those countries work, and, I mean, understand more about their cultures

and... and... and in a way, understand how to deal with certain problems that... that... that have ... that arose and... and are still going on regarding this feeling on the part of Middle Easterners against the U.S. or feelings against Amer-- on the part of Americans that the Middle East or the Arab world is against them and it hates them, 'cause I don't see it exactly in these terms. I think there are actions and reactions. In some situations, some people in the Arab world maybe have reason to distrust the U.S., not entirely to hate 'cause I... I don't think hating gets anybody anywhere, but certainly to distrust, they... they might have their reasons.

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

A. Certainly there is, as I just mentioned, lots of hatred on the part of some Arabs or Arab Muslims or just Muslims, but we're talking about some fanatical people. Did this hatred just come like this because... because Arabs and Muslims hate anything that's western? I don't think so. I think there are perceptions that the U.S. has done things that were either uncaring or ... I'm not really talking about uncaring as such as... as much as seen as taking advantage of the Arab world or being aggressive or... or unfair in their policies, and certainly this is a result. Is that correct and are we condoning it? No. But I think if we understood it and understood that maybe some of the policy decisions on the part of the American government were... encouraged this to happen, and... and if certain actions were to be taken that maybe we can limit this hatred or... or stop it. But you're always going to have some crazy people somewhere so we can never have entirely have control over that. And... and maybe we might not have been able to stop these attacks because certainly these people are murderers. To kill ... I'm going to specify. I'm talking

about the... the World Trade Center. Because quite honestly, the Pentagon, although I'm entirely against everything that happened, but the Pentagon can be even as... as, you know, as a military target or as a target that is allowed in battles. Now, yes, there is no actual battle but I think there is one implicitly in... in the sense that many... maybe many Arabs see the decisions taken against Iraq, although that's another ball game there and I... I don't want to get into it because I entirely oppose the... the regime of Saddam Hussein. But I'm just saying that certain things have effected... effected the people there that... that... For example, I'll give an example, when they hit the pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan, and I... I might be wrong, and correct me if I am, but I didn't hear any apology for those ... for the effect it had. And there wasn't even an acknowledgement that this really was a pharmaceutical plant although... plant although the U.S. ... the... the UN has proof of that. So in a sense you feel that Arab life is .. is inconsequential to them and that's how they perceive it. and ... and so to me it's... it's... unless you come out and show that we are treating people equally and... and if we are... and we oppose the killing of civilians anywhere, then... then... then they have maybe a certain right to consider it a battle and to consider the Pentagon as a... a military target. So... and I... and I also in my mind think that the U.S. understands that because, if you notice, since September 11th the focus has been more World Trade Center because the World Trade Center presents the humane and the civilian aspect of it. And I think things... reactions might have been slightly different had... had the... had it just been an attack on the Pentagon, for example.

Q. You mentioned somewhat how the U.S., I mean, in your previous answers, 'cause this next one basically relates on that, how ... what do you think the U.S. can do to resolve this problem of terrorism directed against it?

A. Resolve it entirely? I don't think it's possible. As I said, some... some people... you're always going to have fanatic groups here and there just as with the Oklahoma bomb thing. You can never control... control small groups of fanatics. I do think that maybe American policy can be more... or let's say, less biased towards the Arab world, and maybe... maybe less encouraging of certain transgressions of rights, civilian rights, that have been happening in this country on the pretext of security. I... I... I personally never supported secret evidence. I don't think anybody has the right, even if it's just to... to... even if there is the... the excuse that for security reasons you have to do that. You can solve security in a different way. You can put more security than... than just topping people or... or withholding their liberties and... and having them in detention centers on the basis of secret evidence. I can never understand it. I will not accept it in any country. I will not accept it towards any group. And I certainly don't think it's acceptable that... that we relax on this because it's... because it's Arab-Americans.

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

A. Yes, certainly.

Q. Can you name some?

A. I mean, let's put it this way. No positive consequence, whatever, whatever, can... can stand... is... is one per thousand of any of the negative effects it had, specifically on the people that were lost and... and on the tragedy that it cost for families and, you know, people connected to this whole... to this whole tragedy. But considering that it happened, some things that I thought were good is that the community... Specifically here in New York they always used to say New Yorkers don't care about anyone and New Yorkers,

you know, just think of themselves and their business and... and they won't talk to anyone. And it's amazing how this humane aspect when... when there is a problem with people that people lend a hand to others and people go and volunteer and... and show support and show emotional support as well, though, of course, to a large extent that happened because of this patriotic feeling that also was encouraged by the media as well as the government itself 'cause I think that was used to some extent to... to accept the... the decisions that were taken by the government as a response, whether... whether that is to bomb Afghanistan or to... and al-Qaeda. People were to... to go after some people in the Arab-American community, which I'm not saying they shouldn't have. They should, but ... but I would like it to be on the basis of things that are... that are seen, even if it's just to the lawyers. And... and... and also to take a firmer stand against anyone who feels that they can attack or insult or... or, you know, badly mistreat a person who is Arab-American.

Q. Would you say also if... do you think there's been more visibility or a better understanding of Arabs or Arab-Americans or Muslim or Middle Eastern issues?

A. That's an understanding in general, I wouldn't say that.

Q. Or... or more... more visibility?

A. But... but certainly many people and many groups and... and people and in government tried at least to... to point... to point out or to initiate certain initiatives to bring people together, to make them understand each other with President Bush himself ... I don't know if he... that was perceived as... as credible by everyone in the Arab American community, but he... he made the effort at least to say that this does not... these terrorist actions do not present Islam in general as a religion or ... or all Arab Muslims.

On the other hand, the... the, you know, some of the actions that were taken do not show that same understanding. But... but sometimes in a way I don't envy the position that the people in... in the government are in, to be quite honest. I mean, I don't know what I would have done in... in President Bush's shoes. But ... I don't think enough was done, let me put it this way. And I also think that the media should have done much more than it did. I think many people in the media as such are biased in the way that they reflect things. And I mean, I'll give an example. Paula Lezan on... on

Q. CNN?

A. CNN... has shown how biased she is as a person in her commentaries has... had shown the way she even asked questions. If it's... if it's... If the same action is taken by some group that she supports she doesn't ask the crucial questions that need to be asked, whereas she attacks and is rude to anyone who... who shows any support of acceptance or is Arab-American. I've seen her a couple of times and to me it's just... just... she... she... Bill Maher is another one. I mean, I ... I can name people. I'm not going to go into all of these. But even on the side of the more moderate, you don't see many people who made an effort. I mean, Peter Jennings made an effort, made... made... had a couple of... had a couple of, like, whole hours in which there were reports and interviews and... that showed the ... the ... the, like, how closely knit and... and how the members of the Arab-American community are within the society here and what contributions they've made, and even showed an understanding of the Arab world and of the Muslims. Look. Other people did the same thing but they didn't do enough. They didn't do enough. And I think they are in some way responsible for... for some of this narrow mindedness that is being reflected by the people in general.

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

A. Not really. I would be very interested in finding out the results of... of this survey although I have my reservations as to how honest people are going to be. Now, maybe I have been. But I think, considering the whole situation, many Arab-Americans see themselves in that some might not be outright in how they feel about this. And I do pray and hope that... that we will get beyond these, I don't want to call them divisions, but kind of the... the biases that have been happening. And... and maybe they were in a way an expected reaction to a huge enormous tragedies that is what had happened. And I maybe think we need to look forward. And this country has done a lot and given lots of opportunities to many Arab-Americans here. It probably needs to keep on making them feel that they are welcome and they are considered as active members of the community. And that's what we all hope for being here. And I'm not likely to leave because of this, and... and it hasn't changed how I feel towards... towards the U.S. or to my American feelings. So... so I just look forward towards the better.

Q. Thank you very much for your cooperation and interview.

A. Thank you.