

Interview 8

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: Male

Age: 46

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Egypt.

Q. Where in Egypt?

A. Cairo.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. In Egypt.

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

A. I came in 1980.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. In Egypt.

Q. Also in Cairo?

A. It was south of Cairo in the south of Egypt called Mina.

Q. And where was your mother born?

A. In Alexandria, Egypt.

Q. Your ethnic background is Egyptian?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. And your age?

A. Forty-six.

Q. You're a U.S. citizen or permanent resident?

A. I am a U.S. citizen.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Diploma, high school ... commercial level high school. It's commercial. It's like assistant accounting.

Q. What is your main occupation now?

A. Right now I'm on disability. I'm a handicap.

Q. What was your last full-time job?

A. It was in 1988.

Q. Doing what?

A. As a cabdriver. I was an owner cab driver, yellow cab.

Q. And your marital status?

A. I'm married.

Q. Do you have children?

A. Five children.

Q. What are their ages?

A. [Ages of children].

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

11th. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. I was here in the campaign.

Q. How did you hear about the attacks?

A. Through the ... through the TV.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Unbelievable. I couldn't believe it.

Q. Did you think about the possibility that they were Muslims?

A. No.

Q. What did you think happened before you found out it was Muslim terrorists?

A. I thought this was something like it happened before, like in Oklahoma or something.

You know? I couldn't believe it.

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

A. Yeah, how those two buildings came down I cannot forget.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened right after that?

A. Very bad; very bad.

Q. Were you angry? Were you...

A. Angry. I was angry. I was sorry for all these families, for all these people died for nothing.

Q. Who exactly were you angry at?

A. Who ... whatever did it.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. No.

Q. When Americans ask you about your ethnic background and where you came from before September 11th what would you answer them?

A. I used to tell them I'm Egyptian-American.

Q. Has that changed since September 11th?

A. Yes.

Q. What do you identify yourself as now?

A. American.

Q. Do you tell people that you were born here or...

A. No. I try to not to answer that somehow?

Q. Have your feelings toward the United States changed since September 11th?

A. Yes.

Q. How's that?

A. I just ... You know, since the treath we've been getting from the people here in the ... in the cafe people come through cursing us. From stories we hear about happening to people.

Q. What do you think about the U.S. politically?

A. Well, this system I cannot say nothing about it but I've seen some things it's been done unfairly and ... and I think it's wrong.

Q. You said the system is acting unfairly ... unfairly towards what?

A. Towards us,

Q. Us?

A. As Arab community and were being given very bad treatment from the official people. I just heard an incident two days ago.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging? Do you feel like this is your home in the United States?

A. Of course. I've been living here for twenty-three years.

Q. So you think that there's been a change in the way people treat Middle Easterners, South Asians, Muslims?

A. Yes.

Q. What kind of change do you see?

A. The way they used to like us. Now I could feel the change. Now nobody like us no more. And some people they ask us questions. We don't have nothing to do with it. How I would know these people, what they want to do. It's like, we know they're going to do it.

Q. Have you personally experienced backlash because of September 11th and you've had attacks, discrimination, or racism?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you please speak about that?

A. Okay. Three days ago I have a car accident. I have a sign on my truck ... I have a van. In the back of it I have a sign written in Arabic. Somebody came out ... I came out from the highway, he came out behind me. He gave me his finger. I tell him thank you and I left. He came in the back of me, he hit my car, an accident. He hit my car, made me stop and I stopped. I tried to come out to see what happened. He met me with punches and punches and punches. Unbelievable if I tell you over twenty, thirty punches. I was bleeding all over. I fall on the floor. People are standing by looking. The traffic is stopped.

Q. Where is this?

A. It was on Green Point when you come out from BQE, the first exit in Green Point. And the ambulance came. They take me ... put me in the ambulance car and removed the cars. They saw the position, who hit who. And after that the police came. He did not even

ask me what happened. All he did, he asked me what's your name. The ambulance guy, he was filling out the information, he told him my name "His name is [name]." He came out. He talked to the other guy. I didn't know what he did. He came back in, he tell me "You're going to be under arrest." I tell him "why I going to be under arrest?" He hit me from the back and he came hit me personally. Why I'm going to be under arrest"? He said he was trying to run him over and he was driving as a reckless endangerment. I tell him me I reckless endangered anybody? He said that what he said. I tell him, "I have witnesses." He said, "No witnesses outside." I tell him all these people that were standing there, was no witnesses? The ... the sergeant is telling me. I tell him, "where is the witnesses?" I look from the door ... from the ambulance I didn't see nobody. Everybody left, even cars were ... were stopping there left. You know? Everybody left. He tell me there's no witnesses. And everybody was saying you were driving like crazy." I tell him "I drove ... That's crazy. I was driving normal. He hit me from the back. How I would be driving as crazy."

Q. What happened immediately after that?

A. After that he ... they make me sign the release for the ambulance. They take me to a ... to a private doctor. And I tell him, "You're not going to take me to the hospital?" He tell me, "I don't have nothing to take you to the hospital for. You could go to your private doctor. Otherwise we're going to arrest you for reckless endangerment." I signed the release. That way I wouldn't be arrested and I asked him to make me a report. I asked him to make me a report. He said, "That's a waste of paperwork." I tell him, "why? It's an accident. It's an accident. We should, you know, fill out a paper at least and he said, "This is a waste of paperwork." I tell him, "Okay. It's a waste of paperwork? It's okay. I'm

going to make a phone call." I went, I talked to my wife and when I came back I told him "I talked to my lawyer." Right now I don't have a lawyer but I told him this. I tell him, "I talked to my lawyer and he told me you have to make me a report. Otherwise I'm going to call another cop to make me a report." He tell me, "did you talk to your lawyer?" I tell him, "Yes." and I tell him, "believe me, I have a very good lawyer." I told him that and he will know what he's going to do. He should make me a report. He said, "well, we're going to file your report, accident report and a harassment report." I told him, "Harassment? Only these punches. This is going to be a assault report, not a harassment report." He tell me, "that's all I'm going to do to you, a harassment report." And gave me the harassment report and accident report and make me sign it and he just left. I have my pouch in the car ... my pouch in the car with all my personal stuff and when they took me to the ambulance I tell them, "Please, my bag is in there." They tell me, "It's okay. Don't worry about it." They came ... they searching my car as the ... looking for my glasses I ... I got lost and they searched my car. I came out after they released me from the ambulance. I came out looking for my glasses in the floor, all over. I found my pouch. It was from the car ... in the car. I found it in the street in the ... in the bushes. They took my pouch, they threw it outside in the bushes. That's the cops. You believe that? I called the sergeant. I tell him, "Why ... what's my bag is doing in the bushes here. I tell him, "You were searching my ... searching in my car. Nobody else went to my car. Nobody else went to my car except the ambulance guy and your guys. Why my bag is doing here?" I told the guy, "My bag is in the car. I have my money in it. I had all my personal life in it."

Q. Okay.

A. Why it's in the bushes?" He tell me, "I don't know nothing about it." I took my bag, I put it around my waste and I was walking in the crutches. That's what happened.

Q. How are you now?

A. Well, I came here I was in my way coming here. When I came here and he took me to the hospital at 6 o'clock. It was around twelve. They put me to sleep here. I was really feeling very bad, dizzy and all that. After that they called the ambulance because I was feeling really, really sick and they took me to the hospital ... in the hospital. The doctor there he looked at everything and he did for me CAT scan. He tell me its all pounds the hitting and it's no fracture and thank God there's no bleeding in the brain or anything like that. It's from the hits. And that was it. I call ... I went to the Senator's office to make a complaint. They tell me, "This is City. We cannot do nothing with it." They will only do with federals. That's not our place. I called Internal Affairs. I made a complaint. They told me, "somebody's going to be in touch with you." and I started going to my community people to talk to them about it and I'm going to see a lawyer. And Monday I have an appointment with a lawyer.

Q. Have any of your family members been attacked or discriminated?

A. No. They just came from Egypt last month for a vacation.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern organizations have been doing enough in handling the backlash that Arabs are getting?

A. I don't think so, no.

Q. You don't think they're doing enough politically?

A. No.

Q. What do you think that they can do to change that?

A. Well, they have to make, what you call it, I don't know like write papers, get some meeting with people, make them understand we don't have nothing to do with this. That's not us done this, exactly like these people they got killed today and they don't have nothing to do with it. We are victim also. Now they're doing to us the same thing that his guy did to these families. They're doing the same thing to us. Why? If they were saying this guy is a terrorist and he did all that, and he's a stupid guy to did something like that, why we can ... why we would be stupid like him? You know what I mean?

Q. Yes.

A. We're doing the same thing like he's doing. We're not fixing things.

Q. We're not.

A. Even if I loved a place like that and they've been treating me like that, how can ... how can I keep the love to that ... to that place, how, if I get beat up like this because of stupid other people. How I'm going to keep my loving to the United States on and on, how, if I'm getting all this treatment. At least ... When this has happened at least you should make me feel safe and that way I could love you. That way I could protect this place and more and more, not getting beat up and getting bad treatment from the cops and getting bad treatment from everybody like that 'cause we don't have nothing to do with it at all. We're here because it's a nice place. We spend our whole life in here. I refuse to spend my life in my own country. I came to spend it here, to give my blood here. And I have another incident

Q. Tell me about it.

A. A while ago, I was ... when I was driving the cab I got in traffic dispute also and I was shot by a correction officer.

Q. Where were you shot?

A. I was shot in my head, twenty-two. That's why I'm walking on crutches. I was not handicapped.

Q. And you think that's because you were Arabic?

A. No. That was a traffic dispute. She was blocking the road. I came down to ask her to move the car. Two girls started beating me up and in the middle she shot me. And she got and she ... I win in court and she went to jail. And it was the case against the City and I won it then. That was in 1988. Now the story is written themselves but in a different way. And I feel very sorry, targeting me again in that way.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since September 11th?

A. I am Muslim. Now, I'm with ... I am with the Muslim religion and the Muslim community.

Q. In your opinion what ... how does the relationship between Muslim organizations and United States government agencies?

A. Well, I was today with one of the responsible people for the mosque beside us here, a holy mosque, and I've been talking to him about it, about my incident. And he knows all the commanders and the chiefs of the Brooklyn area and he promised me he's not going to keep quiet about this. And he's going to get in touch with all these people. He has a good tradition with them and he will put it ... he will put my story and what happened, to them.

Q. So you feel they're doing enough to...

A. Well, the way he met me I think he will do something, yes.

Q. Given your understanding of the way people ... the way Arabs are being treated here now would you encourage people from overseas to emigrate here?

A. Right now, no, because there's a lot of people from here now be leaving back.

Q. Leaving back because they want to or because they're being deported?

A. It's ... No. They are citizens, and because of the way they're being treated. Believe it or not, the doctor who treated me in Luther King Hospital, he told me he's leaving his family and he's leaving because of the way he's been treated in the hospital too.

Q. We talked about all these negative things that came about. Do you see any positive consequences from September 11th? Like, from all the stuff that's happened do you think that there's a bigger understanding of Islam and Arab culture?

A. Well, you see, what happened on September 11th, that has nothing to do with Islam. It has nothing, believe me, to do with Islam because Islam did not tell us to do that. And if somebody's doing that this means he's going against Islam who cannot say he is a Muslim.

Q. You think there's more understanding between Americans and Arabs? Do you think people are trying to be educated about...

A. I'll tell you something. I meet a lot of Americans and they know we're going to have nothing to do with this. But some ... some Americans, I don't know why they're thinking we have something to do with this; to make people understanding and people not understanding. Okay? I know for a fact, and it was when my incident. This last incident happened to me, I was talking with American lady, which she's married to an Egyptian guy who is here in the cafe and she's an American and a flight attendant in American

Airlines. And she told me since September 11th, because her name, her last name is Arab, is Muslim, they put her not ... not ... they put her as not aboard ... And she's working for the airline. She tells me they take them at least half an hour until they put me on the plane and I'm working with them because her last name is Arab. Come on. This is America, all intelligent people, all the civilization ... You know? We cannot think that way. We should think differently: Where is the freedom? Yes. You see, some people they abuse the freedom but not us. Why are you taking it out on me? Why? That's how we feel.

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

A. I really ... I don't know what it happened. And nobody can think something like that it could happen. Okay. Did you see something in the ... in the twenty dollar.

Q. Yes.

A. Did you ever see that?

Q. Yes. You fold the twenty dollars and you see the...

A. That does not tell us something? Then you see you've got the shelves. You see? It does not tell us something. People know it's what's been happening. People they said enough things. We are pieces, only pieces. Another people knew. They want to ask me if I understand things. It doesn't matter how is your life or what's...

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

A. You know, to leave everybody live in peace; not to get involved in everybody's business.

Q. Meaning foreign policy?

A. Yes. That's what's ringing us the problems here. They take care of our people first and make them have enough. And after that they take care of other countries. It should be that way.

Q. Okay. Are there any other issues or comments that you'd like to make?

A. My last comment in this ... I hope everything goes back like we used to have it and what we say about Egyptians. Everybody liked us. And I see the stuff in the street. I used to see, you know, the Egyptian statues and all the items from Egypt and people ... they used to love us. They used to come tell us histories thought. And today they saw us to get away. I hope that changes again. That's it.

Q. I really appreciate you giving me your answers.

A. You're welcome.

Q. You helped a lot.

A. You're welcome.

Q. Thank you.