

Interview 41

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: 33

Q. Allow me to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Cairo, Egypt.

Q. Is that where you grew up?

A. Yes, most of the time.

Q. And that's when you moved to the United States?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. And where have you lived in the United States?

A. New York.

Q. Okay. Where was your father born?

A. Cairo.

Q. And your mother as well?

A. Yes.

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

A. I'm Egyptian ethnicity, yes.

Q. Okay.

A. But usually you don't find that in ... in forms so I would put Caucasian if it wasn't there, Middle Eastern.

Q. Okay. You don't consider yourself to be Middle Eastern? I mean, do you usually fill out on the other form...

A. If ... if Middle Eastern is there I would check it off. If it's not I would put Caucasian.

Q. Okay. That's fine. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. None. [Christian]

Q. Okay. And how old are you now?

A. Thirty-three.

Q. So, yes, you are a U.S. citizen and you do reside here. Okay. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have a JD.

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

A. The U.S.

Q. Which University did you go to?

A. New York Law School. That's for the JD. Undergraduate, Hofstra.

Q. Okay. And do you practice law now?

A. No.

Q. What is your occupation?

A. I work in the Internet start up.

Q. Okay. And this is a full time job that you have?

A. Yes.

Q. All right. So you're working for a company or are you a business owner or...

A. It's ... it's sort of a project of me and ... and a friend...

Q. Okay. So you have this business?

A. Something where we started. Not officially, but ... but yeah. I'm supposed to have.

Q. Oh. So I'll consider you to be a business owner.

A. Okay.

Q. All right. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. And do you have any children?

A. No.

Q. All right then. Now that we've covered your background and personal questions about yourself we're going to talk a little about September 11th and the events post-September 11th?

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you on that day around nine o'clock in the morning?

A. I was in Philadelphia.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was actually in my room getting dressed so I can go into a conference and I saw it on the TV.

Q. Okay. So nobody called you? Nobody...

A. No. A few people actually called afterwards. There were a lot of people that were trying to call me but the phones were just out of control basically.

Q. Were they trying to call you to see whether you were all right?

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay. And that's because you work downtown?

A. That's 'cause I live in New York City.

Q. Okay. Oh, so people from abroad were calling you?

A. People from abroad. People from the U.S. I live and work in New York City.

Q. Okay. What was your first reaction when you heard what had happened to...

A. I ... I couldn't believe it...very upset.

Q. Very upset. And what other feelings did you have?

A. Very angry.

Q. Angry at who?

A. I was angry at the terrorists who perpetrated such an act.

Q. Okay. Were there any other feelings involved?

A. Disbelief. I couldn't believe that something like this could happen in America to America.

Q. When you say you were angry at the terrorists that perpetrated this against America and American property what was your reaction to finding out that they were Middle Eastern?

A. Well, when someone says terrorists, I think Middle Eastern. That's where I believe terrorists come from. Whether that's something I believe because it's in the media or because when they announce where they are from it's Saudi Arabia or it's Egypt or it's one of those countries. So yeah. Immediately when someone says terrorists I think of the Middle East.

Q. Okay. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. The planes. The planes just going through the buildings which was shown over and over and over again.

Q. Is there anything else that you can remember that sticks in your mind?

A. Yes, people jumping from the building. People jumping from a hundred stories up, just the sheer desperation and...

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

A. Well, immediately I wanted retaliation. But then when ... when they came out and said well, we're going to plan in order to take some action I kind of cooled down a little bit and figured maybe that was the proper thing to do. So I was kind of a sit and wait, what now scenario.

Q. Okay. Did any of this affect you as a person? Did you feel any guilt?

A. Oh, zero. I had nothing to do with these people.

Q. All right. No sadness, pain...

A. Oh, sadness, of course I'm sad. I'm sad in what happened. I'm saddened for the missing people. It was hard for everyone, for myself. I felt that my city, my home, was under attack, which it was.

Q. Okay. And since September 11th have your feelings changed?

A. No. No. I mean, every now and then, of course, you forget about it, but then you're reminded. You're reminded that these things occurred, whether it's a bombing in Israel or whether it's Israel going into towns. Just a lot... a lot of problems in this world when it comes to military action against civilians and terrorism against civilians.

Q. Okay. When Americans asked you about your ethnicity pre-September 11th what was your reaction?

A. I had ... I had no reaction whatsoever. It wasn't a big deal. I'm from Egypt originally, but I live in the States.

Q. Okay. So you were very blunt about it; didn't try to hide it or ...

A. I never tried to hide my ethnicity.

Q. And immediately after September 11th?

A. I didn't have a problem with it again because I ... I know who I am. I'm not associated with these people. And my friends, the ones that I keep, are also educated to the point that they understand that there's a difference between members of a certain ethnic race and other members. And I guess you have bad seeds in every culture so it really didn't affect me much. I mean, yeah, it's sad to sort of say that these people are Egyptian and I'm Egyptian as well, but a big, big, big, huge part of my identity is American so I feel much more at ... at ... at peace with America that I am with the Middle East.

Q. Okay. Did you try to explain to your friends or to any person that you met that there is a difference between a normal Arab-American and these people?

A. No. My ... my friends never questioned me about these things.

Q. What about strangers that you kind of struck up a conversation with and they found out your ethnic background?

A. No, none at all. They... my ethnic background, we talked normally. No big deal. I actually met women; went out with them, zero problems.

Q. Okay.

A. But then again I think I portray as much more American than most Arab-Americans do.

Q. Okay. And have your feelings towards the U.S. changed since September 11th?

A. Not really no. I still love the U.S.

Q. And politically speaking?

A. Politically speaking there's been on everything so I don't know how to really answer that question.

Q. What about your level of political awareness? Has that changed? Are you more in tune with events now? Do you go out of your way to try to explain?

A. Well, I don't go out of my way. Of course, when the events occurred everyone was glued to CNN afterwards for about two months. Basically when the war kind of wound down, if you will ... I mean, I understand that it's still ongoing, but when the major attacks wound down I stopped looking at CNN so much. So...

Q. What about your feelings towards U.S. domestic policy or foreign policy?

A. Well, domestic policy in terms of ... what are we talking about: welfare ...?

Q. Do you feel that the events of September 11th have changed domestic policy?

A. Well ... Well, sure it's changed domestic policy because we have homeland security now. There's a new office now, which probably never existed before so I'm sure there're going to be some changes. I mean, at airports, when I go to the airports now, there are changes. You most certainly see it. Prior to this, a couple of months after the attack, of course you saw military personnel and that wasn't something we really were used to. As far as the foreign policy, I believe America's foreign policy is biased in certain respects but it's something that doesn't necessarily effect me as such as domestic policy so I don't go out of my way to change it.

Q. Has your perception of domestic or foreign policies changed since September 11th?

A. Yeah. I ... I don't think there was any change.

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

A. Absolutely.

Q. You say you feel at home here. Have your feelings towards New York City in particular and the United States in general changed at all?

A. No.

Q. Okay. Do you think that there's been a change in the way Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian people are treated in the U.S. since September 11th?

A. There could have been. You know? I heard stories of certain people that were shot because of their ethnicity, so I'm sure it occurred. Although I didn't ... I didn't personally become involved in any situation like that. Not ... not to my knowledge. Whether it had been done behind my back that's another story. But, no, I wasn't ... I wasn't involved at all in the stories people tell.

Q. Okay. Have you personally experienced any backlash after September 11th, such as harassment, racial profiling or discrimination?

A. No. I can't say that I have. I mean, I was stopped at the airport twice when I was going to Cairo in December. The first time I was searched and I ... I thought immediately racial profiling. It was a big deal. I kind of let it go. And then I was boarding the plane and there were police officers and they stopped me and asked me how much cash I had. That was the first time that ever happened, so I must admit that at that point I'm, like, well, this ... this is strange. But you know something? If it is racial profiling and if it's true that most terrorists are from the Middle East and if this will save lives, including perhaps my own, being on a flight, then I'm willing to ... to pay that price.

Q. You're willing to pay that price and you're willing to cooperate without that really bothering you?

A. I ... I will because it just, unfortunately, happens to be true. I mean, yes, you could say Timothy McVeigh is a terrorist. How many Timothy McVeighs are there? I don't know. Timothy McVeigh is a horrible person and that was sort of the end of it. You know? There was one big terrorist attack. That's it. But there are terrorist attacks all the time. They've come out very much against the U.S. And I'm not saying that the foreign policy of the U.S. is right, but I'm saying that's not the way to change it because if they're going to change it in that

manner it's going to personally put my life at risk and I say no, the hell with you. No change for them. Don't work civilian casualties. Do whatever you have to do politically. And yes, the foreign policy is biased and we will change that. It will be changed. And take a lesson from Gandhi. Don't go out killing innocent civilians because they lost me. They lost me a long, long time ago when planes were first being hijacked and blown up. And they lost me because it puts my personal life at risk. And why would I care for someone and their cause, as just as it is, if they're putting my life at risk.

Q. Okay. You told me about an incident at the airport while you were traveling. Is there anything else that happened to you?

A. There was ... there was another incident. I was just traveling this weekend, I was going to Las Vegas, and it was Kennedy Airport and great security... I got checked and my bags got checked. They took off my shoes, did the whole thing, no big deal. I didn't have any issues with it, just security. It was federalized. And I go to the gate and I'm sitting at the gate, they call our flight. I'm flying first class. I'm one of the first ones on the plane literally, and again they stopped me, and ... and at that point I was kind of pissed. So I'm standing kind of spread eagled a little bit, hands apart and legs apart, and they're scanning me. And then I see another guy, absolutely white, not a speck of Middle East/terrorist on him, and they did the same thing to him, sat him down spread eagled, checked his bags and they were very respectful to him. And at that point I said, now I don't feel so bad. Like, I mean, I said: "Well, you know, this just happened to me outside and I was searched, the way that I looked." And they said: "No, Sir. It's ... the airport has been federalized. There's no ... you're going to see this every single time that you board. It's for security." And at that point I felt great. I felt great.

Q. Well, so you asked, you asked why they particularly chose you?

A. Well, no. I didn't ...I didn't ... I didn't ask.

Q. You were just offered this information?

A. When ... when ... No. When ... when ... when I saw the other guy come in and they told him to sit down and he sat down, I said, "Oh, now I don't feel so bad," and that's when he asked, "Well, what's going on"? He said, "Well, you know, because I look different..." And, oh, I don't remember exactly ... I know exactly what I said which is, "Now I don't feel so bad." And then the rest of the conversation I'm like, "Oh, because I just checked that side as opposed to the way I look or something ... to that ... to that degree." And they ... they said: "No. That's not the case." And you know what? The first time that I was flying as well they stopped a grandmother and kid; I'm talking grandmother, like an eighty-year-old grandmother and, like, a fifteen-year-old kid and checked their bags, so I didn't feel bad about that either.

Q. Well, did they look of a particular ethnicity?

A. No. They were white.

Q. Oh.

A. Average white.

Q. Right. Have you experienced anything in the work area or school?

A. Not ... not ... not one single case.

Q. Public places?

A. Not one.

Q. Has any member of your family experienced any backlash?

A. No, none.

Q. Do you think the Middle Eastern or South Asian organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against their people here, particularly since September 11th?

A. Well, I really don't know how much backlash there was. The only case that I really remember, I think there was this Hindu gentleman, a Sikh, that was shot, I believe, in New Jersey or something along these lines. And there was a Hindu group that sort of rose up and ... and they... they pictured one guy, Hindu, 'cause of course they wear the turbans. And they got, like, an Afghan gentleman and they were saying this does not equal that, even though it's kind of the same look. But what they were trying to say is, of course, it's not the same thing, just because you wear a turban and you have a beard doesn't mean that you're an Afghan or that you're a terrorist or that you're Islamic or anything like that. But, no. I haven't really heard of an attack, a counterattack, rather, let's say, against the backlash. But also I haven't heard of that big of a backlash. The only thing that I really do recall is, I recall the President and the Governor and the Mayor -I'm talking, of course, about George Pataki and Rudolf Giuliani- when they came out and they said our Arab-American population are outstanding citizens. They don't necessarily represent, you know, the viewpoint of the terrorists. It's not the same thing. Do not take matters into your own hands. These are American citizens. We will prosecute, etc., so I ... I felt that they actually gave protection to these organizations. And not only that, but they brought members of ... of these organizations and they ... they appeared with them publicly and the government made its case very clear that we will not stand for hate crimes against such groups. So I thought that was great.

Q. Do you believe that these organizations have been effective in the way that they've mobilized their own communities, politically speaking?

A. Well, you know, I really don't know too much about that because I'm not really part of the Arab community. I ... I don't live next to a lot of Arabs. My ... my understanding is most of them live in New Jersey, Jersey City I would imagine. You have some, of course, probably

living in Brooklyn, I think, is ... is another big population. I don't think there's a big population in Queens, although that's where I grew up, Queens. But, no. I really don't associate 'cause I don't know a lot of them so I don't know whether they're effective or not. But if they have been effective I haven't heard of it.

Q. Sorry to repeat myself but just to preserve the integrity of this interview I just have to ask you the question: Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since September 11th?

A. No.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between ethnic or religious group and others in the United States at this time?

A. Huh! Well, you know, we're ... we're Christian so our ... I guess, you know, a lot of these terrorists have been sort of co-mingled with Islam. And since we don't fall into that category, I mean, it's mere speculation here, and again, it depends how intelligent the American that may have an attitude towards Middle Easterners or towards Muslims or towards terrorists, how they are in perceiving the difference between the two. But if you're of half intelligence you understand that, I guess, Christians would have nothing to do with it. If you're super-intelligence you might also understand that there are a lot of very, very nice Muslim people that would have absolutely nothing to do with this. So I could only imagine that it would be easier for us. So our particular group, religious group, I think it's probably easier for us to get along with the community than others.

Q. Do you think that people perceive you as a Christian Arab-American or do you think that they just automatically assume Arab-American, therefore ...?

A. I would ... I would say Arab-American. I don't think they perceive me as Christian.

Q. As a Christian Arab-American, do you think that your group is tolerant of Muslim Arab-American or South Asian Muslim groups? Do you think that they feel for them? Do you think that they're against them? Do you feel that they don't want to have an affiliation with Muslim-Americans?

A. Well, that's a really tough question to answer. There's been animosity, I think, in the Middle East between the two religions but I think that has a lot to do also with economic status and education. I have a lot of great, great friends that are Muslim. Yet, at the same time, bad things happened between these two communities, but usually in the less educated parts of Egypt, upper Egypt, things along these lines. So... so there's bad blood. So it really depends, I ... I would think, on where you fit in the community; what... what class you fit in the community; how educated you are; how much money you have that you would shy away from other Muslims; you would shy away from other Christians. It goes both ways. But I think it has to do with economic position in ... in the society.

Q. Okay. What do you think ... Since you are informed about Coptic Egyptian-American, what do you think your group can do to improve its relations with other Muslim Egyptian groups or Arab-American groups in general?

A. You know, I really don't know. I ... religion has never really meant that much to me so as ... as far as I'm concerned, it really doesn't matter. A person is a person. Like I said, I ... I think that religion takes advantage of people because of the state where they're in economically and for me, that's not the category that I fall into. I was educated. I've formed my own opinions about certain things. Religion requires a lot of faith. You have faith, I think, because you lose hope. You lose hope because of the desperation that you live in. So I ... I see a connection there. So for me religion never came into ... into the picture.

Q. Okay. What do you think organizations can do?

A. Well, you know, you first have to unite in your own country and I think there's a division in the Middle East between Christians and Muslims whether you're talking in Syria or you're talking in Lebanon or you're talking in Egypt. Obviously it doesn't exist in Saudi Arabia. And I think that the big problem with that is Islamic rule. You can't have Islamic rule in a country where you have Muslims and Christians living side by side. So you can say, well, it's a Muslim country. We can have Islamic rule. So you could do that, but you're going to create a division, a division between the people. I mean, these aren't people that immigrated there. These are people that ten, twenty, thirty generations down the line ... so that's ... that's the big problem here. Do what you really have to do is come up with a situation like the U.S. where you are a division of church and state. I mean, me ...

Q. Yes, a secular government.

A. I'm sorry?

Q. A secular government.

A. Yeah, a division between church and state. In Egypt, you never had problems between Christians and Muslims back when the king was in power and when or before that. It was paradise. Nobody cared. But then economy played a role when Nasser came into play and all hell broke loose and it just got worse and worse and worse. So I say if you want to be together abroad, why don't you try being together first in your own country. Stop creating that division and unity will come.

Q. That's a very good idea. Would you encourage other Middle Easterners and South Asian immigrant groups to come to the United States after September 11th?

A. You know, I ... I ... I really don't think that the U.S. is created of any one group. I think that if you're motivated and you want something and you properly move yourself as a group you could be very influential. I ... I don't think a group has to play second fiddle to any ... anyone in this country. There's opportunity. So, no. I ... I would encourage anyone with a love for freedom, political, religious, to come to the U.S. and contribute to ... to the society. Absolutely.

Q. Okay. We talked a lot about the negative consequences of September 11th. Is there any positive that came out of it?

A. Well, I ... I ...you know, there's really nothing and I hate to say there's something: that we too are vulnerable; that it kind of woke us up and saying well, something like this could happen. And I'm not sure if that's a positive thing. But no, nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing is positive about that. In fact, it damns ... it damned that entire region and, unfortunately, a religion with it. It did incredible damage.

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

A. Well, because I think there's a real problem in ... in the Middle East between Israel and the rest of the countries and I think it's something that should be resolved. And I think that the U.S. really backs up Israel.

Q. You think it's attributed to hate?

A. Of the U.S.? Absolutely. And the U.S. is supporting Israel. Israel will not be able to survive without the U.S., the military aid and the financial aid. So they're saying: okay. Why go after Israel when we know exactly who's supporting Israel. Let's go right to the U.S. And,

yeah, the question is what ... what ... what do you really want? We didn't get any ransom notes, not that I know of. What else do we want?

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

A. Well, absolutely finding the groups responsible, keeping a strong counterintelligence in terms of whose doing what surveillance is very important so they can preempt these things. And I think fix its foreign policy. But I don't want to fix its foreign policy just to make these people go away because once you bend to terrorism then terrorism is the answer. And terrorism could never be the answer and should never be the answer.

Q. You think U.S. foreign policy should adapt to accommodate other views?

A. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely! I mean, you know, there's a lot of people in this world other than the U.S. Although the U.S. happens to be, of course, the major ... but only one. And it gets its way. And they really have to understand that you ... I ... I mean, I really don't know what this love/hate, I don't know hate/hate, but this love relationship with Israel is where we just back it up, back it up, back it up, back it up to high heavens. But then again, hey, Palestinians are no angels either. There's some bad, bad people there that want to hurt and do hurt innocent civilians. And I think there has to be compromise. I think there has to be new leadership both in Palestine and in Israel. I think a younger generation, a generation that's detached from these wars that have gone on between, you know, the Middle East as a group and Israel, new people, you know, that say, "Wait a minute! We can't let this happen to our children. Let's find some sort of compromise here and let's settle down." But once there's ... Well, unless there's peace in the Middle East there will not be peace anywhere, unfortunately.

Q. You think the Middle East crisis is the root behind the hatred directed towards America and if that's resolved then America will be a safer place?

A. As far as terrorism is concerned?

Q. Yes.

A. I ... I absolutely believe that. Yes. Yes. Another thing ... Well, its not the only thing. I'd say a kind of huge, huge, huge portion of it. These countries are starving and ... and they see America, you know, as the country with all the money. You know? They see all the McDonalds's there and all these franchises and you know? Not really.

Q. I thank you so much for your time.

A. Thank you.

Q. I enjoyed it very much.

A. Likewise.