

Interview 36

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: 26

Q. I'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself first. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Albania, June 11, 1976.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I was growing up in Albania and I came USA when I was twenty-one years old.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. All my parents were born in Albania.

Q. So you're foreign born, you would be first generation. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Albanian.

Q. Your religious affiliation?

A. I mean, if I go with my background I'd say Muslim, but ... I'm not now a religious guy, to tell the truth. I don't even practice the religion.

Q. Is there any other religion that you practice?

A. No. I don't practice none ... no religions. ... I just believe in God just--you know. My name is Muslim, but it's not because I'm [religious or practice] you know, the Muslim religion or any other one.

Q. How old are you now, if you don't mind?

A. I'm twenty-six.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident or ...

A. I'm a U.S. citizen now.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. High school.

Q. In what country did you obtain your education?

A. In Albania.

Q. What is your main occupation, like the title of your job and what is it exactly that you do?

A. My main occupation right now is a bus boy. My job is a server, help serve in that sense.

Q. Are you right now full-time or part-time?

A. I'm full-time.

Q. For whom are you working? I mean [is it a] private company?

A. I'm working for.... It's [name] Corporation, company it's called. ...

Q. And your marital status? ... Single? And you don't have children, I guess.

A. [Yes].

Q. Now I'll go ahead and ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you around 9 a.m. on that day, on September 11th?

A. I was working here, actually, on that day and I had to work, like, breakfast, lunch and dinner. When I first heard of it, I hear from [name]. She came right from outside we were working

Q. [Name] is the cashier?

A. Yeah. She was the cashier. You know, she heard something ... maybe she saw the people screaming outside or something, I don't know what, because we have a big screen TV out there ... out of the restaurant in front of the [name] Hotel. She came inside and she said ... a plane crashed the World Trade Center. I thought maybe it was only a small accident and I still continued to work. And she started to explain. And later on ... she heard something and she went right outside, and she came back and she said there's another plane crashed into the other World Trade...the other tower. We all got shocked because how it couldn't be both, both planes together crashed by accidentally.

And she said maybe it might be a terrorist attack. But all of us were, like, kind of shocked how this can.... It never happened in this country. And then I went ... I just got out because I had to have, like, an hour break. I got out of the restaurant and I was watching it on TV and I saw a lot of people, water, and some people screaming. Then I had to come back in the restaurant. I wanted to go home because I had my break hour, but I didn't go home in that time 'cause everything was dark. So I came back into the restaurant to sleep because I had to work in the evening back again. And my manager told me that please can I work because everybody started, actually, in that time to call that we cannot make it; that all everything is blocked, which ... was true. The manager told us wherever we were working that time for breakfast, to stay. And we stayed to work all day. I mean, I lost something really terrible what had happened.

Q. When you said that the cashier went out, she heard something you guys actually heard the planes?

A. No. We didn't hear at all. We didn't hear anything.

Q. So was there a lot of commotion out on the street since you're right here in the area?

A. Actually, no. When ... the cashier, she came the second time, everybody was kind of shocked. We didn't have many other people, but all of them that got shocked [sic] wanted to get out to see anything from out of the door.

Q. What was your first reaction when the

A. I was, like, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't even have thought that something like that could ever

happen in this country. I mean, we ... might think that a small terrorist like I said, somebody put a bomb here can happen. Like [it] can happen in any other country, but such big terrorist acts I couldn't even think of it.

Q. Did ... a thought cross your mind, like, if this is a terrorist attack it's probably Middle Eastern? Did this cross your mind?

A. Not really. I mean you have terrorist groups from all over the world which have different points of them, which they might want to show up....

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th that you think you will never forget and which will always stand out in your mind?

A. I mean, at that time I remember ... as soon as I went home I heard there were messages getting to my family 'cause all of them they were worried, friends and family there. My sister ... she's a citizen here she's living here, but at that time she was on vacation in Europe and she was worried. So the first thing I had to do, I had to call them. Then I was staying for all day [sic] watching TV, I mean, for all night because I had to work all day. ... I can never forget, it's the most terrible thing I ever seen in my life, especially when I was watching on the TV the people jumping from the windows. It's something ... that no matter who did or what kind of religion, that's something which does not have any excuse, to kill the people.

Q. So what were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel anger, guilt, sadness

A. First I was very sadness [sic], but at the same time I was very angered. And my first reaction, I was, like, now is the time wherever did that to get back paid [sic].

Q. When you heard that the terrorists who were involved were Muslims did you feel any type of guilt that you call yourself Muslim, even though you don't practice the religion, but did you feel any guilt?

A. Yeah. I mean, yeah. I feel guilty most of the time because it's not because of the name of ... but it's because of some bad things that has happened in name of God or in name of religion, which for me doesn't even should exist [sic]. Too many times I even feel guilt when the customers or anyone else asks me what kind of religion do you have? To tell the truth, I tell them straight, I am a Muslim but I don't practice. Nobody in my family practice[s]. Nobody in Albania practice[s]. All of them they drink, they drink alcohol, they eat pork It's not such a big thing in Albania because we ... had the Communism system back then so it's almost disappeared the religious [practices]. ... I believe in God, but it's not any kind of excuse. ...

Q. Have your feelings ever since September 11th changed: the guilt that you felt, the sadness, the anger that you had, have those feelings changed in any way since then? It's been a year almost.

A. Yeah. It's been a year. ... [In the] beginning I was very, like I told you, I was very angered for this after it happened. And I'm still. You know? What they did in Afghanistan I think was the right

thing to do. But I think this must be only the beginning. They must go to all those countries who harbor terrorism. I don't want to mention the countries. I just want to mention jut two or three of them which they must ... should change the regime in those countries. It's not only for the world, but it's in their own good of those countries, which is Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Sudan. All those countries which everybody already knows the they're harboring terrorism that are supporting any kind ...[of] financial, material. ... It doesn't matter. For as long as you support the terrorism you have to be punished for that.

Q. You agree with what's going on with Iraq nowadays? You agree with their going [to] this [war]?

A. Yeah. I completely agree with that. And I think they should not stop only there. They should go further.

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

A. I always been telling them I'm a Muslim. I've never been afraid or ashamed of [that]. You know? I mean to believe in God or in a religion it's nothing wrong with that. But to do ... bad things in the name of God and the name of religion, you are just [unclear] with those things.

Q. How about immediately afterwards, after September 11th? What did you say to them, since you know there were cases of harassmt and discrimination. There were cases [of discrimination]. So you still, told them

A. I don't have anything against anybody, against his religion, color or anything. I cannot persecute anybody because of his religion or his. ... But he should not persecute somebody else. ...I cannot say that the Arab, the one who has to feel persecuted [has a right to retaliate]. ...

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9/11?

A. I don't see anything changed, to tell the truth.

Q. You mentioned before that what they did in Afghanistan and what they're doing in Iraq you agree with it. So do you feel ... [that] what [American is] doing [is] right? Or do you feel ... they shouldn't go to that extent?

A. My opinion is this ... in the beginning I was all, to tell the truth, I was, liking The Bush. You know? But I saw that he wasn't kind of [in] touch. I think America needs a little tougher President in those moments. I agree with what they are doing, but I think they must do much more against ... those things. They must be much more tougher with or without help of Europe or any other country.

Q. After September 11th, has your level of political awareness increased or has it changed in any way?

A. Not really. I mean I ... don't really go to much ... [to] political parties. But it seems when it happened in this country then we start really thinking about the politics, what should happen and what should they do.

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging here in the United States, meaning do you feel at home here?

A. I don't feel at home. I mean, I feel much better back there in Albania, but also at the same time, I feel ... very good here because. ...

Q. Knowing ... that a lot of people have changed the way they look at Muslims after September 11th ... you do agree with that ... many people.

A. To tell you the truth, I haven't had too much contact with ... people outside or [my job] ... because most of them don't even look at me as a Muslim because they don't even think that I'm a Muslim. ... I might look a little different of color. ... They think always that I'm Catholic. When I tell them I am Muslim they are kind of shocked. ... [When you] tell them that you are Muslim, they ... right away they think you're a kind of fanatic, something like jokes, a few [say], oh, you have to keep ... four wives. You know? You don't need four wives? I tell them no, I eat pork, I drink, I don't really believe in religion, but I say I'm Muslim because my background was Muslim. ... It ... can be called kind of harassment. But it's not only against Muslims. It's against any other one. Like, everybody has got to say something to somebody else. Let's say you're a Jew ... if protestant ... or Catholic ... no. It's mostly kind of [a] joke. ...

Q. So ever since September 11th, do you think that there has been a change in the way the United States is treating the Middle Eastern and the South Asian – meaning the Pakistanis and Indians – you know, Pakistanis have been at the front line state throughout this whole thing. So do you think that ever since September 11th there has been a change in the way

the United States looks at these people or treats them?

A. To tell the truth, I don't see much change from this administration that we have right now. I think Clinton was doing a little bit more belonging to South Asian or to Middle East. He was doing more progress between Israel and Middle East. And I think Bush, he hasn't done too much between those two parts. ... As for Pakistan and for South Asians ... I see Pakistan--the President of Pakistan, Musha ... Musha. ...

Q. Pervez Musharraf.

A. Musharraf, yeah ... in the beginning when everybody thought he was a kind of dictator the way he took ... the power in Pakistan. But what does it look right now? It looks that he's cooperating with America and with the rest of coalition, and he's doing everything against terrorism. It looks like he's doing the right thing. Now, if you want to talk about the people in Pakistan and Afghanistan, there you have a lot of terrorism ... which you can justify of them because they had for a long time dealing with this problem, especially Afghanistan was warring for 22 years, basically war between each other. So it's not going to be that easy that ... for those countries to go forward to democracy. ... But I don't think America is doing ... much to change. ...

Q. Hearing from friends or watching TV or something do you think that the ... Middle Eastern Arabs are being treated in a more negative way or a bit more towards the positive side? How do you feel about that?

A. Now this is completely different point. ... I think everyone knows that Israel is ... the biggest

ally of U.S.A. and everybody knows that even if America does believe those two parts, [wants] to negotiate, ... [it will be] a little on Israeli side. Everybody knows that that's ... a fact. ...

Q. So have you experienced anything personally, like any harassment or any discrimination because of September 11th?

A. No, I haven't ... because I told you since the beginning that most of the people don't even recognize that I'm Muslim. But I see it when they ask me what kind of religion [I follow], then they are kind of shocked that I am Muslim. ...

Q. How about here at work? Anything?

A. No. Here nobody cares about that. I mean when we joke about religious this, that ... we don't harass each other because of religion.

Q. So has any member of your family experienced anything?

A. Not actually, to tell the truth.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and the South Asian organizations have been effective in handling the backlash of September 11th? Like we've heard many stories ...

A. I heard many stories in beginning like two people were killed somewhere ... in Las Vegas. ...

Q. A lot of the Sikhs were ...

A. Some were injured because of that.

Q. Right. They were killed because ... they thought that they were Muslims. And in Texas mosques were being fired on.

A. Texas, yeah.

Q. So do you think that these organizations, like the Sikh organizations or the Middle Eastern organizations, do you think they have been effective in handling what's going on with their community?

A. To tell the truth ... I haven't heard much of that. I don't see any different anything else. I mean, I ... understood in the beginning where the people were angry ... you cannot survive because something happened you have to blame all the people. You have to blame the rest of them, like, you have let's say ... Palestinian terrorists, like, IRA or the Basque in Spain, it's not because of religion. But I don't see those kinds of – what is it called? – Islamic Centers to do anything to protect the Muslims. ... [Not] unless I have heard something on TV, protecting them. But I haven't see really big actions.

Q. Have you, ever since September 11th, joined any ethnic or religious organization?

A. No, I have not.

Q. In your opinion, what do you think is the nature of the relationship between the Muslim groups and ... other groups here in the United states, like the Muslims and the Hindus or the Muslims and the Christians?

A. In what point?

Q. Do you think ... that ever since September 11th they're more tolerant of each other-- they've become closer, or do you think they're more strained from each other?

A. All right. Even here at the workplace I haven't seen a thing because everybody's been like this since before it happened and after it happened we've been friendly with each other. I haven't seen anything different.

Q. ... I'm pretty sure you ... guys carry conversations maybe here and there about what goes on. Do you?

A. Oh yeah. We carry [conversations]. ... We are not agree [sic] with each other, still we discuss about those things.

Q. So from those conversations ... do you feel that the relationship is more tolerant and harmonious towards each other or. ...

A. I've been in this country for about five years. All right? Even if the people don't like each other, at least they don't show that. Right, especially according religion, color or this, that, they don't show it because they don't want to be in trouble. But I haven't seen, especially in this place I haven't seen the people hating each other because of color or because of religion. ... I know ... let's say, the Muslim like to marry with Muslims, or the Catholics they like to marry with the Catholics. I don't know how you can call that, if you can call that [discrimination]. They don't like each other or it's because of their tradition.

Q. You mentioned that you haven't seen or heard anything ... with the different Muslim communities and organizations. You said they don't do anything. ...

A. No. I mean it's such big difference.

Q. So what do you think? In your opinion, these organizations can [they] ... improve the relationships amongst other communities? What do you think that the Muslim community, let's say, can improve relations with the Hindus, to improve relations with the Catholic community?

A. Yeah. I wouldn't [know] with other religions, Catholics or whatever it is. First, I think it's not the peoples' fault from my opinion. I believe it's the cleric's fault.

Q. What fault? Sorry?

A. You know, like the priest's faults. ... They have to be more tolerant 'cause what I see, I see they are kind of tough. ... We used to have an expression in Albania. It was a kind of joke. Like, they used ... the priests used to say don't do what I do but do what I say. All right?

Q. Meaning he never practiced what he preached?

A. Which is true. But what I see ... like I saw the Catholic priests abuse children, right? At the same time I see that kind of [abuse with] the Muslim priests.

Q. Mullahs.

A. Mullahs, whatever they are called now. Drinking, I've seen here ... I saw in Albania them in a club drinking. Or I saw the Foreign Minister of Egypt, which was like three days, four days ago, drinking a bottle of wine, \$600. Those who harbor the religions ... the biggest thing in their life, and they are the ones who [are] drinking it. But they are the ones who teach the people not to drink and to be more fanatic after the religion. When it comes for them to practice it, either fanatic, don't do that. So I think the first thing they has [sic] to do is they have to be more flexible ... flexible with the Bible, Koran, whatever. They has [sic] to be much more flexible. They have to change.

Q. You say the same thing for the people over here. Right?

A. Over here the same thing. ... I mean, with what I see, ... mostly that kind of religious people than Catholics, let's say. Like the Jewish, they are very religious people also. I think they have to change something in their opinion. Otherwise this is like kind of a war between the religions. It's not because of the people. They don't hate each other. Let's say Jewish and Palestinians, they don't hate each other because of the color. They hate each other because of religion. It's all because of religion. I think they have to be a little more flexible on religion because, I'm sorry, that's the reason why they ... are doing those ... how can somebody do a suicide. ...

Q. Suicide bomber. ...

A. Suicide bomber ... to become a suicide bomber. I don't think any kind of religion or any ... holy book can say that. But are those people, those kinds of priests, who add up those things in those holy books, they are the one who makes up those things.

Q. They misinterpret what's written in the book?

A. Is okay.

Q. Given your understanding of the Middle Easterner and the South Asians and what's been going on after September 11th, would you still encourage these countries and these groups to migrate to the United States? ...

A. Absolutely. Absolutely. America is made by the immigrants! Everybody has ... the right to come to this country ... to join this country. ... First we are immigrants. It doesn't matter. We can be the first, second, third generation but we still were immigrants. I mean if you take America as a name it is immigrants. It doesn't matter because of religion or because some people, they did a terrorist act, [it] can be any other terrorist group, like ETA or Basque or even Colombian. It doesn't matter. I mean, [you] cannot persecute all of people because of some people.

Q. So far we've spoken about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you think that in your viewpoint there has been any positive consequence that has stemmed from September 11th?

A. The only thing ... the only positive thing that I see right now is what they are doing against, for instance, Afghanistan which is to change the regime [and] put the other party, political party [in power], which is first in their own good, all those people who are over there because they ... had miserable life. And second, [the terrorists] ... what they're attacking, ... because in ... those buildings there were Muslims also. ... The ones they attacked were Albanians, Pakistanis, from all over the world. ... In Iraq I'm going to be happy if they [change the] regime over there. ... It's going

to be less threatening for the rest of the world and for their own people, because I do understand what kind of situation they ... are, because Albania used to be the same kind of dictatorship ... used to be in Communism dictatorship. They are in fanatical dictatorship.

Q. Do you think that there has been more visibility and an improved understanding of the Muslim religion or of Muslims because of September 11th? Do you think that people understand the Muslims more or the religion itself?

A. I cannot answer it because ... I don't know. ...

Q. No problem. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon took place?

A. Why? First, Pentagon is very simple.

Q. Why do you think that the attacks happened? ... Do you think that the Middle Eastern or the Arab Muslims ... hate America, that's why?

A. Oh yeah. I mean, those kinds of people who attacked those buildings they hate ... America. They are blind.

Q. Why do you think they hate

A. They hate it because of what's going on in in Israel and the Middle East. It's ... because America supports always Israel, gives aid to Israel, or because if any other support America gives to Israel [is] more than Middle Eastern countries. But still they shouldn't find any kind of excuse to

attack the civilian or military.

Q. What do you think that the United States can do to improve the relationship between. ...

A. The United states must ... first must attack those countries, in my opinion. Afghanistan they already did. Now things are going to be stable. ... We don't know if it's stable right now. And I hope it's going to get [stable] because they have had very bad experience starting from Soviets. ... It looks that they're going to attack Iraq and change the regime. ... I hope they're going to change the regimes in those countries. I don't like to be [at] war. It's much better to change it without war, those regimes in those countries like Iran, Vietnam, Iraq, Sudan. Even in Saudi Arabia, I don't like that kind of regime. It's very ... fanatic.

Q. What do you think that the United States can do to resolve the issue of terrorists directed against it? ...

A. The first thing they have to do is to give the real aid to those countries over there. And what I mean by that is they have to solve the problem between Israelis ... and the Palestinians, which is a very big issue and has been for a long time. ... The problems start getting bigger and bigger and it's why did it happen[ed]. But they have to really solve this kind of problem. You don't solve this kind of problems you can attack those countries, but you see in time maybe we're going to get more terrorist attacks.

Q. Okay. A question on the security issue: Do you feel more secure now or do you think ... the United States could have stopped these attacks if its security was a bit tighter? ...

A. I don't know how did it happpn[ed] ... for me I found like they found America sleeping, the intelligence sleeping, CIA, FBI, whoever is in charge of it, it couldn't prevent this kind of terrorist act. ... I don't know what they were doing, how did they [were] so unprepared. ... It was a really big organization where twenty of those guys planning a big terrorist attack and nobody knew it. ... And then we heard that FBI knew it already. One of the guys already told the FBI that either was terrorists already prepared something. ... I think America was kind of sleeping a little bit after the Cold War. ... You know, after the cold war was done with Eastern Europe or Soviet economies.

Q. If you were to travel now would you feel more secure than before?

A. I don't ... never felt kind of afraid to travel ... If it's going to happen, it's going to happen. They're still going to find a way ... because you can never make the security 100%, especially in the [unclear]. But what they did in New York to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon there's no excuse. ...

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

A. I think we already spoke about everything. ... I'd like to specify that I hope that things are going to get better in those countries. I hope those brutal kinds of regimes are going to change over there. Also, America has to be a little more flexible, a correlation [sic] between Israel and Palestine. ... They have to really give aid to those countries to negotiate.

Q. Well, thank you so much for your time and cooperation.

A. No problem. Any time.