

Interview 44

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

Gender of Respondent: Female

Age: 22

Q. Okay. I'm going to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. In New York.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. In ... in Queens and Manhattan.

Q. Okay. And where was your father born?

A. In Turkey.

Q. How about your mother?

A. She was born in Turkey.

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

A. Turkish-American.

Q. Okay. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Muslim.

Q. How old are you now?

A. I'm twenty-two.

Q. And I assume you are a U.S. citizen?

A. Yeah.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. I'm in college right now. I go to Baruch College and I'm looking forward to--you know--doing something in physical therapy.

Q. Okay. Okay. So you are in Manhattan. Right?

A. Um-hum.

Q. You haven't completed your bachelors yet?

A. No, I haven't.

Q. You are a student as well as do you work?

A. Not really, no. I don't work.

Q. Okay. No problem. And what is your marital status?

A. I'm engaged.

Q. Okay. Do you have any children?

A. No, I don't.

Q. Okay. Now I'm going to go ahead and ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th?

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m. and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was at school during the time of September 11th during the attack, and I heard it during ... like, while I was in class and I was in ... I was in shock. I didn't ... I didn't really believe it. I thought that my--you know--my friends were just playing a joke or just--you know--just saying something that ... I ... I really could not believe it, literally. I thought that it was fake. And then I left the ... the school--I left the building--and everybody was just on the phone. People were on pay phones. People were crying. A lot of people that I ... that--you know--that are in my school--you know?--I saw them and they were just--you know--going crazy. A lot of their parents or their relatives,

cousins, friends, were in the World Trade Center. They worked there. They were just crying. And I was also scared myself. I didn't really know what to do.

Q. Oh, okay. And what was your first reaction when you heard of the attack?

A. My first reaction was just fear. I was scared. I thought that ... You know, whenever I would see a plane pass by or--you know--a helicopter I was ... I was just fearing the fact that maybe they can just throw a bomb anywhere or ... You know. I was ... I was really scared. I really ... All I really thought about was ... all I was thinking was just fear, fear, fear, fear ... that was the only thing that was on my mind.

Q. So did anything cross your mind about the possibility of the Muslims being the terrorists?

Did you even think that it was a terrorist attack or. ...

A. Not at all. At first I did not ... I just ... I mean, at that moment ... I think everybody went through this; and nobody really thought about, okay, who did it? Who was it? What was their religion? This and that. Nobody really thought about that. Everybody was just thinking: Okay. Everybody was just in fear. So I didn't really think about the fact that maybe it could be Muslims until I came home. And I went to--you know--pick up my sister from school--my brother was there with me--and we were just saying-- you know ... they were watching Turkish TV and on Turkish TV they were saying that it was possible ... it being--you know--Japanese people.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. And all ... all these things. And ... and then ... then it really started sinking in. And then, when I started watching CNN and they were just ... the one name that was just popping on the screen, Osama Bin Laddin, then I was just really thinking I hope it was the Japanese who did it because when I went to pick up my sister from school people were just making comments on the street, like they should get out of this country. They don't dress like us. They don't talk like us. They don't eat

the same foods. They ... they're just so different they should just leave this country. And I started getting scared, like, four or five hours after the attack then I started really thinking, wow, it might be Muslims who did this.

Q. So what do you consider your most vivid memory of September 11th, something you think that will always stand out in your mind; something you think you will never forget about September 11th?

A. Something that I know I will never forget is walking down the street back home, just everybody in chaos, like, everybody scared. Like, cars--you know--people in their cars bumping their horns--you know?--just everybody in fear. And then coming to my house and looking out the window, since we do have a view of Manhattan, and seeing the World Trade Center; seeing a building which I saw--you know--two, three days ago. Sitting on my couch, just looking outside the window, seeing it there and for the fact that now it's not there and it's in smoke and flames. And another vivid memory would be just going to pick up my sister from school and having ... and hearing those little voices, like, all around.

Q. Wow! So what were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel ... I mean, you mentioned you ... you did feel a lot of fear?

A. Yeah.

Q. But did you also feel sadness, anger, grief?

A. Yeah. I felt ... I felt a lot ... Like, I felt sadness. I mean, I thought about all those people that were in the building and, like, hearing my mother explain that she was talking to her friend on the phone and--you know--she ... my mother, she actually witnessed from the window she saw it fall down. I saw it on TV so I didn't really see it fall down from my window. Just, like, I felt ... I

grieved. I felt sadness. I ... I thought about those families and the people that still might be under the ... I mean, underneath the rubble and--you know-- might be in pain and everything.

Q. Did you ... did you feel any type of guilt knowing ... I mean, as the news and the media was saying that Osama Bin Laddin or the Muslims are involved, did you feel any guilt being a Muslim or knowing that the Muslims were involved?

A. I felt more than guilt. I felt kind of shame in a way knowing the fact that--you know--I'm .. I'm a Muslim myself and knowing that the people who ... everybody's whose watching their TVs--you know--they know that, okay, Osama Bin Laddin says he's Muslim and the people that did it say they're Muslim. I mean, it's kind of odd to categorize yourself in that same thing where you know that--you know--the people who did this, they claim to be Muslims. The people that ... that killed so many people, they say they're Muslims.

Q. So ...

A. Yeah. You know?

Q. So have your feelings ever since September 11th changed?

A. About?

Q. This feeling of fear and sadness and being ashamed?

A. My ... the ... my feelings of fear ... I mean, I don't think that will ever go away, but, I mean, 'cause--you know--I always fear--you know--especially being a Muslim and everything, just going to the mosque and stuff and fearing the fact that somebody can just open the door and do something 'cause they ... they ... they think that you're a terrorist also. The fear really never changes. I think that it will ... that will never go away.

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

A. I told them I'm ... I'm Turkish-American and I'm--you know-- I'm Muslim.

Q. And how about immediately after September 11th?

A. I still said--you know--I'm--you know--my parents were born in Turkey. And I'm Turkish, I'm American and I'm Muslim.

Q. And how about now? The same thing?

A. Now, the same thing.

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

A. Yeah.

Q. How so?

A. I be--before September 11th I remember that one of my ... like, somebody had told me--you know--that the U.S.---you know--they ... they do a lot of things in secret and they do ... You know ... the U.S. makes it seem as though they're all innocent and everything but they're really not. But before September 11th I never really believed that. I was just, like, No. You know? I came to the ... You know? I've been living here for such a long time. You know? I never really thought anything negative about the U.S. 'cause I never ... really couldn't. You know? But now, after September 11th, I think that the curtains have been pulled down and--you know--all the truth is being is really being shown--you know?--the ... the things that the--you know--the government has done behind our backs. The fact that they knew Osama Bin Laddin was planning to attack us and not telling us, it just shows ... it just really ... September 11th cleared up a lot of things. It showed that the U.S. was ... is also guilty. It's not the perfect--you know--it's not the perfect country that it makes itself seem as.

Q. So has your level of political awareness increased or decreased in any way?

A. Yeah. I ... I think that now I watch the news with more--you know ... I ... I try to listen to every little word, every little detail, because it's just ... Now that ... when I watch the news, I mean, after September 11th, you even feel that ... that the news anchor is ... the ... the way they say--you know--the word Muslim or Islam, they have some type of hatred towards it. That's the way you feel when you watch the news. So, of course, now when I watch the news I sit up a little bit or I cringe when they say Islam. You know?

Q. Are you more keen towards domestic policies of America or foreign policies?

A. Foreign policies because now I now that any decision that the United States might make with foreign--you know--countries can affect the people who are living here, including myself, because obviously some decisions that the United States made with ... or just the way they acted--you know?--it affected Osama Bin Laddin maybe to do this. You know? So ...

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

A. Yes, but not as much as I used to because I feel that after ... after September 11th, like, just Muslims in general, they .. they were kind of like, in a way, like, we don't belong here somehow. That's ... that's the kind of idea ... like I said, the woman who was ... when I was walking to pick up my sister, the people were saying: Oh, they don't belong here. That's the type of feeling that we ... we get sometimes--you know?--even when--you know--people are discussing about things about September 11th--you know--people are grieving, it's like as if we feel that--you know--we don't ... since we're Muslims that we shouldn't grieve. You know? Like, we feel out of place. So ...

Q. How did you feel before September 11th?

A. I felt proud to ... I mean, I ... when I ... before September 11th I--you know--I was always proud to be an American and everything like that. And in a way I ... I still am. But before September 11th there wasn't ... the world just was a lot more different. I mean, people were just more open to

different cultures. When .. when you told them that you were Muslim they just ... they didn't have this negative--you know--thought in their minds. But now it's just so much different.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated?

A. Most definitely, yes. There's ... I mean, just ... you could just be riding in your car and you could have a ... a scarf on or a veil or you can be of male and you could have a long beard and. And--you know--you can just be in your car and the police can stop you just for the fact that--you know--you ... you have that appearance; you look Arab. So, yeah. The way people are treated, it definitely is different now, in the work ... work force, in the ... in the school environment ... I mean, it's a lot different, I think.

Q. I see. Have you personally experienced any backlash since September 11th, apart from what you mentioned? You went to pick up your sister and you heard all these comments. Anything else, like, in school or in public areas?

A. Yeah. I have ex--experienced things like that in school and also just with friends and people who I thought--you know--they weren't--you know--like, racist or anything like that or they weren't ... they didn't have views like that. I .. it's .. it's changed. I'm just like--you know--wow! They do think of me as ... like, somebody who believes in a religion who's like a terrorist religion. And

Q. You mentioned friends. What have your friends said?

A. My friends, they just ... when they ... let's just say they ask me something about Islam and I ... I try to explain things to them, they ... I can tell that they still think that it's, like, a terrorist religion and it's such a--you know--it's not a peaceful religion. And also, like, when I'm walking down the street and everything, I've had comments made at me. I've had people say Taliban. I've had people say terrorist.

Q. You cover. Right?

A. Yeah. So I've had experiences where ... this one man ... I was standing by a library and he just looked at me and he said: "Muslims." He said, "You guys are evil people; terrorists." and I said ... I just I was so shocked I was like, "No. No. Don't say that. Why are you saying that for ... like, that's not true. Take back what you said please." And I couldn't .. Like, at that moment I thought .. I wanted to say more but I was just in such shock because the expression that this man had on his face was as though I was Osama Bin Laddin standing right in front of him. He just looked like he. ... If he had a gun, he looked like the type of person that he would just shoot me right there. His face had just so much anger in it. He just said: "Muslims! You guys are terrorists."

Q. Have any members of your family experienced any backlash, any discrimination or

A. Not that I ... Not that I know of. Oh well, yes. Actually, my ... my sister-in law. She was just walking down the street getting looks. You know? People were just looking and giving dirty looks and saying ...

Q. She wears the hijab as well?

A. Yeah.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling such backlashes against these communities?

A. Yes. I think that basically they've held conferences. They welcomed who are--you know--who are ... they ... they can be Jewish, Christian, whatever religion--it does not have to be ... they don't have to be Muslim. I think that it's been handled pretty well. Like, web sites on line. I've heard of--you know--question and answer type things. And I think it has been handled really well, like conferences in mosques ... I think it's been handled ... You know?

Q. You think they've been effective in mobilizing the community?

A. Yeah. I think it has.

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

A. I ... I try to ... I go to the mosque--you know--as much as I can and on ... on Fridays I attend gathering and meetings. And this was before September 11th. But I still continued after September--you know--I continued to go to these.

Q. Has it, like, increased your going there, I mean, more frequently now or it's just the same?

A. It's ... it's been the same, but in a way, I guess--you know--it makes you feel--you know--comforted, in a way, when you have Muslims and people who've been through the same experiences as you altogether and just discussing things.

Q. Right. In your opinion, what do you believe is the nature of the relationship amongst your ethnic and religious group with those other groups living here in the United States at the moment? How do you think the relationship is amongst the Muslims and the Jews, the Muslims and the Hindus, or the Turkish and the Israelis or the Turkish and like that? Do you think the relationship amongst them now, after September 11th, is more strained and oppositional or it's more harmonious and tolerant of each other?

A. I think it's both 'cause everyone ... there's so many people out there in this world that have their separate opinions and everything like that. I think it ... I think it's both. I mean, there's some ... You can ... you can be ... you can have a Jewish friend or somebody who's... who's Hindu and you can really bond with that person. I mean, I think it's ... I think it's different. It depends on that particular person, and I think it's al--it changes.

Q. What do you think that members of your community can do to improve these relations?

A. I think that just be careful ... like, maybe with the things that we say just ... I mean, just because we feel that now-- you know--when we watch the news we see... we feel, I mean, that there's hatred

out there, I mean, just remember the fact that it's always best to be peaceful. We're here to set an example. So if people do actually see that we're not, like, what the media makes us seem as or look as; that we're not that ... we don't have hatred and we don't believe in those kind of things; we're peaceful people--if people do actually see that and if we do actually set that example, I think that's what our community can do to--our Muslim community, that's what we can do to make things better.

Q. Okay. Given your understanding of the status of the Middle Easterners and the South Asians here after September 11th, would you still encourage these people to emigrate to the United States?

A. Yes. I .. I still would encourage because ... I would encourage them to emigrate here because we can't let something like this stop us. Because if we ... if we say that--you know--let's ... let's stop everything. You know? Let's not--God forbid--let's not be Muslims any more because ... if the image of us and the image of our religion is so bad, that's just showing them that ... that we get effected by the things they say, because we shouldn't. We should try to help, like, change their views and ... and make them more open minded and make them understand that ... that we're not like that. So I think that I would encourage anybody from any other country, any Muslim country, to come here and just live their lives the way they would in their homeland--you know?--and just try to bring out the image that we are peaceful people.

Q. Okay. So far we've spoken about the negative consequences. Do you think there were any positive consequences that stemmed from September 11th?

A. Yes. I think there have been a lot of--you know--people who have converted to Islam after September 11th. They've actually ... Everything happens for a reason. I mean, it's sad that all those people--you know--lost their lives, but things do happen for a reason. And I think that September

11th, it's made ... in a way it's made Muslims stronger because after September 11th we wanted to raise all our Muslim brothers and sisters and we wanted to come together and make people change their views. I think it has ... has had a positive effect in .. in some way.

Q. So do you believe that there is more visibility of Muslims and Islam after?

A. Yes. Now Is--Islam is ... is like the central religion of the world, if you think about it. It always has been but people just never really focused on it as much. So now that people who see Islam as negative ... as a negative religion, they read more, they read verses from the Koran and they understand that it's not ... it's not a negative religion.

Q. I see. Why do you think that the attacks happened? Why do you think that the World Trade Center was attacked, the Pentagon was attacked? Do you believe the Arabs or the Muslims ... do you believe that they were ... that they hate America? Why do you think the attacks happened?

A. I think there ... there are two explanations to this. One of the explanations, I think, is because the Palestinian/Israeli situation. A lot of Muslims have been killed by--you know--the government in the U.S. and everything like that, Army, the U.S. Army, and this was just ... I think that Osama Bin Laddin, like, a reason why he did this was to show America that--you know--there were a lot of Muslim casualties in Iraq, in Palestine ... in Palestine, and this was just a way. From what I think, Osama Bin Laddin was just trying to show that--you know--if you kill our people, we kill ... we're going to kill your people. You know? It's not going to go ... Justice. You know? We have to show justice. That's what I think. And another reason I think, he did this was ... was because he was just trying to get back at America for his own ... for his own personal reasons, because he ... America was one of the reasons why his Saudi-Arabian citizenship was taken away so he ... it could be

possibly that--you know--he 's just trying to get back at them for his own--you know--hate beliefs.
You know?

Q. I see. What do you think that the United States can do to resolve this issue of terrorism which is directed against it?

A. Basically what they can do is just sto--it also lies in the Palestinian/Israeli situation. Just let justice be shown. You know? Let the Palestinians have the land which is theirs. Stop the casualties. Stop the killings of all the Muslims in Iraq and in Palestine and stop taking the sides of Israelis and ... and Jews. I mean, it's just ... If that stops, I think; if equality is shown, then terrorism might stop.

Q. Have you traveled after September 11th?

A. Yes, I've traveled.

Q. Have you ... have you experienced anything while you were traveling?

A. While I was traveling? In the airport, I mean, you see ... I didn't wear hijab then so--you know--nobody really would know if I was Muslim or not. But I really didn't experience anything like that. I just ... What I did notice that--you know--the luggages are being checked a little bit more and that's pretty much it, I believe.

Q. Do you feel more secure with the security measures now or ...

A. No. It's ... I ... I don't think ... I don't think it's changed at all. Personally, I don't think that it's changed at all 'cause they don't really. ... What I think that they do more, hire security on. ... Let's just say I'm in Florida and I'm going to New York, like, traveling inside the U.S. because that is the way. ... You know? The plane was from Boston to New York. But for me going to Turkey, I mean, there was a little bit more ... they did check my luggage and everything like that but not ... they should do a lot more, I think.

Q. So do you think that if these security measures that they have right now, do you think that these attacks could have been prevented if these security measures were taken before? Like you mentioned that you believe the United States government new before hand that the attacks were going to take place. Do you think that these attacks could have been prevented?

A. Yes. I do think that the attacks could have been prevented. I mean, with the way that they checked the luggage and just background checks on those ... all the people that come--you know--I think it ... it could have been changed. You know? It could have been stopped.

Q. Are there any other points or issues that you'd like to mention which we haven't covered in this survey?

A. Basically, I just ... I just hope that the views that people have on Islam, on Muslims, will really change and people will understand that--you know--Islam is a peaceful religion and it's not the way--you know--we see it on CNN or--you know--on Channel Seven news. It's totally different. You know? You have to really read and understand in order to know.

Q. Well, thank you very much for your time

A. You're welcome.

Q. And your cooperation. This was great.