

Interview 64

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: 22

Q. Okay. I'd initially like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

Where were you born?

A. I was born in Barbican, Ohio.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. In Kent, Ohio.

Q. Okay. Where were your parents born?

A. My parents were born in Syria, in Aleppo.

Q. Both your mother and your father?

A. Yeah, both of them.

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

A. My ethnic what? Sorry.

Q. Background.

A. I'm Arab-American. You know? If I had to be specific, Syrian-American.

Q. Okay. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. And how old are you?

A. Twenty-two.

Q. Okay. You had to think about that one. You're a U.S. citizen?

A. Correct.

Q. What's that? A U.S.-citizen?

A. Yeah. Yes. The quality of my phone is ... I'm, like, I might not hear some words.

Q. Okay, no problem. I'll ... it doesn't matter. Whenever you don't hear something, just ask me to repeat it. No ... no problem.

A. Okay.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I'm about to graduate from ... with a Bachelor's degree in one month.

Q. Wow. Great. In what? What are you studying?

A. Biopsychology and science, and I'm getting a minor in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

Q. Oh, wow, very interesting. And you're going to college in which university?

A. University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Q. Okay. And what is your main occupation? You're a full time...

A. Student.

Q. Okay a full time student.

A. Yep.

Q. All right. Are you married?

A. Nope.

Q. Okay. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on that day around 9am?

A. 9am I was in my Arabic class. I remember I had woken up and I had gone to class and I was ... we were going about our business as usual. We had no idea what was happening in the outside world. And I got out of class. ... Well, at nine--I'll just answer your question--at nine I was in class.

Q. And how did you hear of the attacks?

A. Well, it wasn't until I left class to go get lunch. I was waiting in the student lounge and then some students kind of ran by --you know--in a frenzy, screaming: Oh my God, we're under attack! And we ran into another lounge with a TV ... where there was a television and we got up and went into there and that's where I first heard of the attacks.

Q. Do you remember what time that was around?

A. This must have been around ten or ten-thirty.

Q. So it was after both Towers had been hit.

A. Yes. It must have been, except I remember seeing the second one get hit so I'm not sure if they were replaying it. ... It seemed live though because they were, like: Oh my God, there's a second plane coming in. So I'm not sure exactly what time the second attack took place.

Q. Okay. What was your first reaction to that?

A. Shock, horror. I didn't know. You know, what was happening was very surreal and really I was just speechless. I didn't know what to do. My first instinct was to call my family.

Q. Did you have any reaction to the possibility that this could be a terrorist attack and the terrorists could be Middle Eastern or Muslim?

A. Most definitely. My first ... one of my first thoughts was also please, God, don't let it be Arabs or Muslims that have ... that have done this. We're already in bad enough shape and we don't need ... we don't need this--you know--on our shoulders as well. So that was a real fear.

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

A. I mean, I was scared and--you know--I was devastated by the human tragedy that anybody would do something like that--you know?--regardless of where they're from or what their motives are. I couldn't believe someone would actually do that.

Q. What were you scared from or of?

A. The backlash to come. You know? I already knew Arabs and Muslims are stereotyped in this country and not thought of very highly. And if ... if they ended up being Arabs or Muslims it wasn't going to help us at all. And I -- you know -- I really feared what was going to happen to the people, maybe not me personally but, like, Arabs and Muslims in this country.

Q. Did you feel any anger or sadness?

A. I definitely felt sadness because--you know -- I can understand ... being Arab myself I can ... I don't justify it, of course, but I can understand how ... what would drive somebody to commit an act like that. I mean, if you put yourself in the mentality of those people. It's a sick, twisted one, but they're.... Of course, nobody really knows why they did it, but given all the political tensions and everything that's been going on between Muslims and the West through the years now--you know-- It's very sad to see that it would drive people to something of this extreme and that the West continues to not ... not care and not address those concerns and not change any kind of foreign policy.

Q. Um-hum. Was guilt involved because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attacks?

A. Did I feel guilty?

Q. Um-hum.

A. Is that your question?

Q. Yes.

A. You know, I did. I did only because those people are giving a false impression of what Islam stands for. You know? I was really ashamed, really, more of those people that they would sacrifice the image of something so beautiful for their own--you know--for their own selfish cause. And even though they were trying to improve the ... the status of Muslims the world over I think all they did was hurt it.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events, the feelings ... you said you were scared of the backlash and the devastation, the sadness, that would drive these people to commit such an act or guilt, have these feelings changed?

A. Well, over the past--you know--year and a half been a lot of time to think and kind of observe what happened in the world. And it's been interesting 'cause one positive thing that's come out of it is a lot more people actually became more interested in Islam and they wanted to learn and they came to the mosque and they came to our events and they wanted to know more of what was going on. And--you know--the sales of the Koran skyrocketed so there were some positives about it. I did see some backlash and we heard about different events in Cleveland and Detroit, and my family would tell me things that they've heard, and so--you know--I expected that. But at the same time I guess it wasn't as bad as I expected. I expected it to be a lot worse. So. ...

Q. But what about your ... your feelings, the feelings that you had ... the guilt? Is the guilt and the shame ... have they changed since that time?

A. Yeah. I mean, that didn't really last that long, feeling guilt ... guilty or ashamed because I know .. I know I didn't do anything wrong and I know that Arabs and Muslims around here are fighting very hard to educate people about what we really stand for. So

as far as it being a burden on my shoulders that I carry around with me all the time, not so much. I mean, I don't feel like I should ... I don't feel responsible for what took place and I actually took it upon me to actually try to ... and show people why those--you know--the people who committed that act were wrong.

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

A. I would definitely have to say just the images of those planes flying into the building, something like out of a movie. I mean, unreal. No one could have ever imagined something like that taking place. That's ... that's what sticks out in my mind.

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

A. I would tell them that I was Arab-American.

Q. What about immediately after 9-11?

A. Arab-American.

Q. And you continue to say the same thing now?

A. Yeah. I'm not going to compromise who I am because of the climate around me.

Q. Okay.

A. I mean, I don't think I should be ashamed of who I am. I haven't done anything wrong, and instead I can just fight to show people their stereotypes and their misconceptions of us.

Q. Did you ever, like, after 9-11 or around that time, did you feel any change in your identity--your ethnic or religious identification?

A. I'm sorry. Can you say that again?

Q. Like, after 9-11 till ... till now or immediately afterwards did you ever feel somewhat of a hesitation if somebody asked you or did you yourself feel a change in your own identity?

A. No, I didn't. You know? If anybody asked me: Hey, where are you from? I wouldn't hesitate at all to tell them I'm Arab-American. I was born and raised here and my friends are from Syria. And I don't think my. ... If my identity, if anything, has maybe grown stronger since September 11th.

Q. Oh, really?

A. Yeah.

Q. Why would you say that has happened?

A. Because it really makes you really take a step back and ask yourself are you willing to compromise who you are--who you've been your entire life--because something happened like that that's going to change the perception of ... of everyone around you. Is that going to change who you are? Are you going to let it do that to you? And I decided that I'm not. I ... I know who I am, I'm confident of who I am, and I wasn't going to compromise that.

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

A. I don't really ... well, in certain respects. I mean, I was always critical before 9-11 of ... of the way that they handled foreign policy ... a problem, and the allocation of funds we don't even have--you know--going overseas and creating trouble. And so after 9-11 it really highlighted that we have a problem with foreign policy.

Q. Okay.

A. And it's more frustration that the United States just doesn't care. And then with the passing of the Patriot Act and--you know--shelving civil liberties in the name of ... of national security whenever they find it convenient, I think I've grown more wary of being an Arab or Muslim in this country since 9-11. I feel like I don't necessary --I'm not awarded the same rights or equality as everybody else.

Q. Really! So do you feel a sense of belonging to the U.S.? Do you feel at home here or. ...

A. It's funny. I've heard a lot of people say that they don't feel, like, at home here anymore. I think I. ...

Q. Arabs, you mean?

A. Yeah, Arabs and Muslims. And I've actually heard--you know--a lot of people considering moving to Canada, moving out of the country. And for me, I still feel like--you know--this is my home. I was born and raised here, I've been educated here, I've contributed to the society, I'm going to continue contributing to this society, so yeah, I do feel like it's home. And I feel like it's my job to improve upon the mess that is today. But I also feel threatened at the same time.

Q. Can you tell me ... talk a little about that, your feeling being threatened or you being wary of being here?

A. Sure. I feel like--you know--the climate of the government today is very hostile towards Arabs and Muslims and it ... it's only getting worse--you know--until people stand up and say no, this is wrong. And there's only so much we can do before we have to--you know? The general public has to see that the singling out of a minority is wrong. We did it with the Japanese in World War II, we've done it with African-Americans, and

now it just seems like it's our turn. And I hope they ... it's a short-lived role that we have to play. But--you know--there's been talks of a new bill being passed that would allow ... give the government power to strip your citizenship if they just make some sort of allegation towards you and that's very scary. You know? If someone born and raised here can have their citizenship stripped away because [of] some allegation made towards them--some accusation--so of course I think it's threatening when you see people being arrested with maybe no evident or Secret Evidence, detained for a year or more, so I think I have good reason [to feel guarded]... I don't know. I don't have reason to be threatened personally because I haven't done anything, but just as an Arab or Muslim in this country I think I could see how it ... it's threatening.

Q. That brings me to my next question. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East or ... or Muslims in the U.S. have been treated since 9-11?

A. Well, I think ... yeah, definitely.

Q. How so?

A. I've traveled several times since then and you see it in the airports. You know? I've been checked most ... almost every time that I have traveled. Maybe once they didn't check me but--you know--I was always picked out for the random check and they went through my travel kit and took out every--you know--anything that One time I had these little, like, toenail clippers and they took those. And I don't know--I just ..I felt like they were just focusing in on anybody wearing, like, a cover or women wearing hijab ... stuck out especially.

Q. So you were ... you were singled out? You were picked out of. ...

A. Oh they would ... if I was traveling with my family --my mom ... my mom doesn't wear hijab and she--unless ... unless she talks you can't really tell she's Arab.

Q. Okay.

A. But--you know--I was standing next to her and I have darker skin and I look Arab and, I mean, I felt ... they came and took me out of mine and did a full search, which, I mean, I ... I just kind of found it, like, humorous. I didn't ... I think I expected it going there.

Q. Have you experienced any other kind of backlash since 9-11, such as, like, harassment or other racial profiling or discrimination?

A. I mean, personally I don't think ... haven't been physically threatened. I haven't really been harassed. I go to a university where there's a lot of tension here anyway between the Muslims and the Jewish students, like, as far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts go.

Q. Okay.

A. Sometimes with these values--you know--people say things, but that's not really out of the ordinary and, like, it's not a direct consequence of September 11th.

Q. Okay. So other than travel or ... or profiling in the airports you haven't experienced anything?

A. No, not me personally.

Q. Okay. Has a member of your family experienced any kind of backlash? By backlash, anything direct or indirect. I don't mean that ... it doesn't have to be physical or it doesn't have to be something that's noteworthy for the newspaper. It's just any kind of indirect or direct backlash.

A. Right. Well, my father mentioned to me a few times ... he's a physician and in the hospital he would get ...--you know--some people would make remarks towards him or,

like, dirty looks. He, like, especially looks Arab and ... so he would tell me ... he would come home and tell me about certain instances.

Q. Do, like, these incidents at the hospital with him, would they come from people he knows, people he's been working with, or is it, like, new patients or new people?

A. Most of the ... were from patients that he was ... that would be in the hospital.

Q. So new, new patients.

A. Yeah, new. But there was actually, like, there was an incident or two with people he had known for years who all of a sudden started treating him coldly and ... and just, like, being rude to him so that was ... I could tell he was a little hurt by it when someone he thought was his friend for years started treating him differently.

Q. How did he deal with that or he. ...

A. He said that if they're going to be that ... if that's how they want to live their lives and they want to be naive and--you know--treat me differently because of something I had nothing to do with, that's fine. I mean, he just ... my Dad, he was just a bigger man than that and he just didn't let it really get to him.

Q. Do you think Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against Arabs or Muslims after 9-11?

A. I think they've done ... I think they've made an honest effort to be ... I know there have been organizations here, like the ADC and CAIR, who try to issue statements everytime that something happened or they try to document and keep records of backlash ... so I think they, within their power, I think they did do an effective job. They obviously can't prevent everything.

Q. Of course.

A. But as far as keeping records of it and reporting it to the government I think they did the best that they could.

Q. Do you think that they've managed to organize or mobilize the Arab-American community politically?

A. I think so, but not as much as I would have liked to see. You know? I think it's ironic that the Arab and Muslim community had a big part to do with--you know--with Bush getting into office and--you know--and then he turns around and stabs us in the back. And so you'd think everyone would be fired up and being out there making a difference. But not as much as I would have liked to see. I mean, I think people are generally more awake now than they have been.

Q. Now or since 9-11?

A. I mean, post-9-11 people are more are ... more aware.

Q. Alright.

A. You know--reading the news ... I think keeping up on different political figures than they were before 9-11.

Q. What do you think these organizations can do to organize us or mobilize us politically?

A. I think we need to have some people actually get involved in politics and that's ... I mean, if we had a figure to rally behind--you know--try to get someone into office that would rally, I think, the community because we would finally have a prominent voice speaking for us in the government.

Q. Okay.

A. Other than that I think they could maybe start programs at schools; try to educate children about the importance of being involved in politics and. ... I mean, that's one of the things about living in this country is that if you have the lobbying power you really can make a difference.

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

A. Yeah. I have joined an organization called SAFE, Students Allied for Freedom and Equality, which is here. We started it up maybe about, yeah, a little over a year ago.

Q. This is at your university in Michigan. Right?

A. Yeah. And we've done a lot of work, mostly on centered around the Palestine issue. But we also do work with ADC and ... if there's anything infringing on Arab rights or even ... even we've done some stuff against the war ... protests.

Q. What do you do in the organization, you yourself?

A. I am a member and I just try to help out ... wherever they need help I'm willing ... You know? I just ... I don't have a formal position, but I just help when and where they need it.

Q. Okay. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between Muslims or Arab-Americans and others in the United States at this time?

A. I think there's an "us versus them" mentality.

Q. On whose part?

A. I think if you take the general American public ... I mean, obviously if you're in a city where there's great diversity like, say, New York or even, like, university towns it's not as bad. But if you go out into the rural areas of the United States and let's just take the general public, everybody, I think there is an "us versus them" mentality where they feel

... I mean, within their own country and if they see ...--you know--their first response to an Arab is that you can't trust them, or that they hate America or that they're out to hurt you. I mean, a sense of distrust, like an animosity between the two. And then you have the Arabs and Muslims who, on the other hand, feel threatened by this government who claims to represent them ... then ... then turns around and takes away their rights. And--you know--a lot of people are wise enough to realize that it's ... it's government doing that, but they still will project some of their maybe frustration towards the American public.

Q. Well, what do you think members of the Arab-American or Muslim community can do to improve the relations between the ethnic groups?

A. I think they should just not be ashamed of who they are and what they stand for, rather than try and deny your ethnicity or your heritage and ... like maybe ... you know, a lot of women took off their hijab so that people couldn't tell they were Muslims. I mean, people should just remain steadfast in what they've always believed and strengthen your character and go out there and educate people. If people want to come up to you and ask a question--you know--answer ... talk to them, talk to them. Don't be afraid to interact. That's what I feel like we need to do. Maybe even start up programs where we go around to community centers and speak [at] events. I know a lot of that happened after September 11th. There were people traveling around speaking, but that died off pretty quick. I think we should keep it up.

Q. What do you think organizations can do, Middle Eastern organizations, to improve the relations between the ethnic groups?

A. I think a lot of time when you foster dialogue or you have educational events that always serves the purpose of kind of fostering interaction between people, and so maybe having culture... cultural shows, having dinners--I don't know--trying to get the outside community involved, attract them to our culture and show them--you know--what we're about. I think outreach is important.

Q. Well, given your understanding of the status of Middle Eastern immigrant groups in the United States after 9-11, would you encourage people from these countries to emigrate to the United States?

A. Right now if I had, like, a relative interested in coming here I might tell them to just hold on for a while till we see what's going to happen, maybe another year or two; until we see kind of what's going to happen with the world, what's going to happen with civil liberties, because obviously they're doing whatever they want to do. And if you come here as an immigrant you have even less rights than--you know--than a citizen. ... I don't know if it would be the wise ... I don't know if I would advocate it.

Q. Okay, basically because of the political climate here?

A. Yes, definitely because of the political climate, not ... not because of the social climate. Because if it was just the social aspect--you know--I would tell people to come. That's not a problem really. That ... that can be dealt with. But the political climate is what's threatening.

Q. We've talked about a lot of the negative consequences of 9-11 and we men--you mentioned earlier a positive consequence of 9-11 in terms of the Koran being almost like a best seller and somewhat of a visibility of Middle Easterners or Muslims in the U.S. Do you think there have been other positive consequences? Let me rephrase ...

Is this visibility positive and has there been more of a visibility and an improved understanding of Middle Easterners and Muslims or Islam in the U.S.?

A. I think by some people. I think there's been ... there's been an effort on the part of certain organizations to bring to light--you know--the true nature of Muslims and Arabs in the United States and they did There were some specials, like, on CBS or 20/20 on Muslims in America. But I .. overall I still think there's a skeptical attitude, a distrust. I mean, definitely it brought to light--you know--Islam and people tried to go learn more. Yeah. I don't think it was all negative. I mean, a lot of people went out and ... and learned something that I don't think they ever would have taken the time to learn and so, yeah, I think there's a balance, I think, between maybe the negative and the positive.

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

A. Why do I think they happened? I ... well, I don't think anyone really knows. But if I had to ... my best guess would just be frustration at American ... the way the United States has dealt with the Middle East and, like, Muslim countries over the least fifty years; I would say --you know--more so since ... probably since the end of World War II until the present. It's been a very, kind of the establishment of Israel and the plight of the Palestinian people and the War on Iraq and just a bunch of different things that have happened in the past fifty, sixty years. I think people ... everybody's frustrated. But then there is those people who decide they want to take it to the next step and ... and do something about it. So I think it was more just political frustration more so than anything else.

Q. Do you think Arabs or Muslims in the Middle East hate America?

A. No, I don't think so. I mean, when you generalize and say Arabs and Muslims that means everybody, and no, definitely not. Do I think that some Arabs and some Muslims do, yeah. Do I think most Arabs and Muslims have negative views of America? Yes--you know-- in light of the way that they're dealt with by the United States government, sure. But I don't think they hate America. They don't hate Americans. They don't hate. ... One thing you hear all the time is that they hate democracy. I think that's ridiculous. But I think a lot of them just disagree with United States policy.

Q. Well, what do you think the United States can do to resolve the problem of terrorism directed against it?

A. Well, I think they could stop ... I mean, it's so complicated when you ... when the government is formulating its policy--you know--it's always in the self interest of the country. But I think if they really want to quell terrorism and stop making people--you know--so frustrated and so angry they could really try to address these peoples' concern. You know? One of the main things that comes to light would just be the ... the way they're handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict--you know?--this war on Iraq, all kinds of different things. They could take a step back and really reassess the way they're dealing with the entire Middle East. Get more people involved from those countries--you know?—discuss with them their specific problems with the policies. I mean, I think policy change is the only way that's going to quell terrorism. I don't think this war on terrorism is going to do it. If anything, it's going to alienate and anger more people, I think.

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

A. I don't think so.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation in this.