

Interview 66

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. I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself first.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you born?

A. Damascus.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I lived there till I was about sixteen and then I came here.

Q. So you came here when you were sixteen?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Okay. And where were your ... where was your father born?

A. My father?

Q. Yeah.

A. In Syria.

Q. And your mother?

A. Same.

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

A. Arab--I mean, Syrian, Arab, Muslim, whatever.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. My what?--religious ... I'm Muslim.

Q. Okay. How old are you now?

A. I'm twenty-two.

Q. Twenty-two. And are you ... are you a U.S. citizen?

A. I'm a permanent resident.

Q. Permanent ... Okay. What is your highest level of education?

A. Well, I just finished my ... I just graduated from college and I'm in a Master's program now, so I completed a BA.

Q. You had a BA? In what?

A. In International Relations.

Q. And at which university?

A. At Wellesley College.

Q. And what are you currently doing? You have your ... are you working on your MA?

A. Yeah. I'm working at my Master's at Harvard.

Q. Okay. In what?

A. In Middle Eastern Studies.

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. What do you mean?

Q. What is your ... like, what kind of work do you do? Are you employed or you're ... you're a full time student?

A. No.

Q. You're a full time student?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Okay. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

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

A. Well, I know exactly where I was. I was at home. I had just ... I was logged on my computer and I was actually chatting with a friend of mine when--you know--the TV was on and all of a sudden I heard about it. So I was, like--you know--talking with my friend and I'm, like, Oh my God!--you know?--I just heard this and this happened. So I went over to see what was happening.

Q. On the TV?

A. Um-hum, TV, CNN, whatever or--don't know. Like, there was some program and they cut ... I guess it was The Today Show and they cut it so they just started showing us what was happening.

Q. And where ... this is in Massachusetts?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Okay. What was your first reaction to ... to what you heard or what you saw?

A. I was, like, Oh my God--you know?--is this reality? And I didn't think it was real at first. Then I thought, Oh well, that's like ... I thought it was an accident or something 'cause--you know--we really didn't know anything. We just saw, like, this image of--you know--this thing going into the Towers. You know? I just thought, like, it was somebody ... the pilot screwed up.

Q. What about when the second plane hit?

A. The second one ... well, I'm trying to remember. Actually, at that point I had actually ... I didn't realize--you know--it was something serious and I was on my way to go to school. So I found out when I arrived there and I realized ... that's when the impact hit me

of what was happening 'cause, like, I found that all the classes were canceled and basically everyone was just standing around the TV and trying to ... you know? Nobody knew what was going on. I knew then, as soon as I heard about that, my knee-jerk reaction was to try and call my boyfriend who lives in New Jersey. So--you know--I wanted to see, like, 'cause I heard what was happening in New York so I wanted to make sure everything was okay. And none of the lines were going through so I started to freak out. You know? I didn't know what was going on.

Q. Did you ever have a reaction to the possibility that it could be a terrorist act and that this terrorist act could be Middle Eastern or Muslim in nature?

A. Yeah. I mean, immediately, as soon as, like, I started hearing that--you know--the second one was down, then I realized, okay, obviously there was more to it than just an accident. And my immediate worry was that ... not necessarily that it was, but that ... that we would be ... like, Middle ... Arabs would be blamed for it. You know?

Q. How did that make you feel?

A. I was just, like, really scared basically about ... that that would happen and just upset and--I don't know. I didn't really have time to think about it, but I was just really worried about how it'd be perceived.

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

A. I just ... the first image I had of just the thing going down. I mean, I saw--you know--things like, it looked just like a movie, like, I didn't believe it was real. But at the same time I realized--you know--this was really happening. So that sort of image just stayed in

my mind of the planes going through and like, the whole impact of it really stuck with me.

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

A. Well, I mean--you know--I was worried and scared and I really, anybody who was actually there so I didn't have so much of a personal reaction. But--you know--as soon as I realized the ... the impact of what was happening and--you know--I went around campus and I saw a lot of people were crying and upset and I realized that--you know--this is obviously affecting them on a personal level. And it just made me--you know--feel ... I was really numb, sort of. Like, I didn't believe what was happening and it took me a while to process what was going on and how it was going to affect people.

Q. Did you feel any anger?

A. Anger? No, I didn't feel any anger because--you know--as I said, it didn't affect me on a very personal level so I didn't have that sense of--you know--something had happened to someone I cared about. So, no, definitely not anger.

Q. Was guilt involve somehow because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack?

A. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, of course at the beginning I ... I just kept hoping that--you know--that they would find that it was just--you know--pure speculation and they were jumping to conclusions, like what happened with the Oklahoma thing. So--you know--until even, like, up till a week afterward, like, part of my brain just did not want to accept that. So there wasn't any sense of guilt because I didn't have that sense of believing that it was real. You know? I wanted to believe that--you know--it couldn't ... it wasn't possible. It was something--an accident--something else; that there was some other explanation.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. I mean, yeah. I think, as I look back on it now, I just ... I'm obviously very ... I mean, I'm still upset. Like, just ... just the loss of life was just uncalled for and just ... you know? And, I mean, I think from my background being Arab it's more ... it's easier for me to not just feel sympathy, but sort of understand where it was coming from. But I still can't accept the fact ... the way innocent people were used in this way. And so it's made me angry with them. You know? And obviously....

Q. Who ... who is them?

A. With the ... with the ... with the terrorists, 'cause, I mean, in so many ways it made our lives so much worse--you know--living here as Arab-Americans and stuff like that. So

Q. How so?

A. Well--you know--it's affected me on so many ways--you know? Like, people who were close to me--you know--are having problems with just--you know--getting ... things like that. You know? On a very personal level, my own fiancé wasn't able to get back into the country because he wasn't able to get a visa. And--you know--so many people I know who are obviously have nothing to do with anything have been harassed. You know? They've had the FBI come and just knock on their door and just--you know--try and, because of very loose connections of theirs, associating them with this thing. It's just very ... I mean, the consequences, I mean, of everything that's happening it's just ... I ... I don't think that there's any justification for what happens. It's like nothing in my mind could ever justify it, given the consequences.

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

A. I'd be up front about it--you know--depending on the [situation]. Usually I would be--you know?--not for any ... I would have any reason ... 'cause I'm very proud of it. It's not anything I would ever try to hide.

Q. What about immediately after 9-11?

A. Oh, immediately after? Well, I mean, around campus I felt pretty safe because most people knew of my background. But after that, no, I definitely wouldn't advertise it. And I mean, especially given that, like ... I mean, of course I remember, like, within a couple of weeks [removed] so that made it very, very tense and uncomfortable and I didn't want to draw any attention that I didn't need to.

Q. What do you say now?

A. If people ask?

Q. Um-hum.

A. Usually I tell them, usually.

Q. Okay. So there's no hesi-- you ... you don't hesitate about it?

A. I mean, I guess it depends. I mean, if it's somebody I know, like, from school or whatever ... but if it's somebody ... not that anybody on the street would randomly ask me, but I've become more circumspect about who I ... like, if it's somebody--you know—whatever. Like, you're at the hairdresser or something and they ask you where are you from, I'll just say Boston--you know?--just to make it easier just because I don't want to draw undo attention, yeah, until I know someone.

Q. What do you think would happen? What are you worried about would happen if you mentioned

A. Well, I'm not worried, like, someone's going to get, like, violent and try to beat me up or something, but I just don't like the way people sort of react. And--you know--they ... they don't say anything, but they sort of give you, like, a look or it just changes their demeanor towards you in a very subtle way. But I could feel it and it makes me feel, like they're trying to make me feel ashamed of what I am. You know? I don't want to be ... It's much less--you know--much less complicated just not to say anything.

Q. Have your feelings changed towards the U.S. since 9-11?

A. Yeah. I mean, in some ways. Like--you know--for me I think of, like, people and I think of the government as two different entities. And--you know--the people that I know have actually been very supportive and actually more so than I would expect. Like, I remember even, like, less than a week after it happened--you know--my professors ... faculty were very suppor[tive]-- and I was almost, like, no--you know--you don't need to be like, ... are you okay? Has anyone bothered you?--things like that. And I almost felt bad that--you know--they were being so nice. You know what I mean?

Q. Yeah.

A. So it's like ... those are, like, the individuals. As a country, as a government, as policies, I'm very sort of ... I mean, I've always known that--you know--it's very difficult in terms of American foreign policy and the way--you know--Arabs are treated here. But now I'm just even more just upset by the way a lot of innocent people I know are just--you know--suffering so much because of what's happening. I guess that makes me pretty angry.

Q. Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. Well, I've always been sort of--you know--aware of what's going on. I think in some ways after that happened immediately I was--you know--like, hooked to the news--you know--watching everything and being more aware. But I think in general, I've always had a high level of it just because of--you know--my background I think.

Q. What do you think of media coverage of this issue?

A. It's a joke. I mean, it's been so biased to the point of I don't even watch, like, certain news stations anymore or certain papers I just totally avoid because--you know--it just makes me feel really upset and angry and so I try to avoid--you know--contact with certain media. I mean, I just think that the reaction has just been really just completely, completely ridiculous. It was bad before but now it's just intolerable, as far as I'm concerned, and the coverage couldn't be more biased or disfavorable of people, like, Arabs and stuff.

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

A. Not really, I mean, but I think a lot of it is--you know--I'm not even a citizen and I only came here after--you know--I was sixteen, seventeen so I never had that sense of belonging here. So I don't have that same issue of--you know--being torn between loyalties because I know that--you know--I'm here. I don't think I'm going to be here, like, for the rest of my life so it's not something that I think about. Like, it would never occur to me to say ... to think of myself as American.

Q. Okay. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the U.S. have been treated since 9-11?

A. Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. It's just--you know--I mean, just that the profiling is going on. People are being subjected to all sort of ... just even going to the airport and things like that. I mean, it's always been ... --you know--we've always been sort of like wary and things like that, but now it's much worse. And--you know--just in terms of becoming more difficult for people to get jobs and things like that, and--you know--especially people who look more--you know-- Middle Eastern than...

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9-11 such as harassment or racial profiling?

A. No. No. But, I mean, again--you know--I'm a woman, first of all. I don't look ... you know? I don't have, like, sort of the stereotypical look. You know? I'm not veiled. I don't have ... I don't display myself outwardly. But, like, for example, like ... it's like, I wear a kafia sometimes and--you know--people give me funny looks. But in general I haven't really had any problems. And--you know--I'm not worried about, like, my legal status in this country so I haven't had that to worry about. But none of it has really affected me on a personal level. So I'm not ... that way.

Q. Has a member ... I'm sorry. You've been lucky in that sense.

A. Yes. Yes.

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

A. Oh yeah de-- ... I mean, backlash you mean in terms of, like, just. ...

Q. Whether it's ... it could be subtle. It could be direct or indirect, any kind of backlash?

A. Oh, I mean, yeah. Like, even my brother, for example, had problems with, like, the INS just because of ... 'cause he's not, like, a legal resident. He's just--you know--here on a visa so he had issues with his visa and stuff like that. So it's difficult. Some members of my family, for example--you know--trying to get visas to come here just for vacations and stuff, they haven't been able to get them--things like that. But not so much outward harassment I don't think.

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

A. You mean like the ADC and stuff like that or. ...

Q. Yeah, ADC or even if it's just like local organizations that aren't as popular.

A. I think so.

Q. Yeah?

A. I think so. I mean, I know that, like, when I ... when it first happened, I mean, the organization that I was with at school was very supportive and--you know--a lot of information was brought out. And I think they've done a good job of sort of reflecting ... of, like, bringing more positive images and letting people know what's going on: how the liberties are being--you know--completely violated. So I think they've done a good job in trying to do that. I mean, I know right after watching TV and, like, NPR and stuff, but representative would be doing as much damage control as possible and I think they did a pretty good job considering the enormity of what they were trying to deal with.

Q. Do you ... do you think they've been able to manage to organize or mobilize the Arab community politically?

A. Well, I mean, the problem with the Arab community ... do you mean in this country?

Q. Yeah.

A. It's very difficult, I think, in general to get a lot of them to be politically motivated just because a lot of them are very scared, with good reason, not to want to be seen. You know? They don't want to make themselves too sort of prominent just because they're worried about what's going to happen. So, I mean ... and I think it's gotten even worse since 9-11 because a lot of people just don't want to draw--you know--undo attention to themselves. So that's the problem with it. You know? And the ones who are--and these are the ones I'm talking about, for example who are students here who maybe don't have they have a sort of precarious situation here in terms of legally--you know?--they're not citizens or whatever. I think the ones who are citizens are less likely to--you know--self identify with this ...with--you know--as Middle Eastern Arab and they're tending to be more ... draw attention to themselves. So I think it's a very difficult position to be in for both sides.

Q. What do you think can motivate them? What ... what can motivate Arab-Americans to decide to organize politically?

A. Well, I think--you know--they have to realize how ... it's important just--you know--to be involved; to realize that--you know--the more people that support, the more likely you're going to change. I mean, and it's not something that's going to happen overnight or even within the next ten years, but--you know--the more they get involved, the more they just ... just portray positive images, try to counteract what's going on, the more likely ... And--you know--we're not even talking about the level of foreign policy, but just the way that we're depicted, for example, in movies and things like that. Like, I think it's very important for them to show that--you know--not all of them are like, whatever--terrorist

hijacker types, I mean, but there are people who have lived here who've had no problem--you know--who are put in the system and who are able to make a success of themselves and coexist. So that's what I think is the most important thing.

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

A. Well, yeah. I mean, they're usually ones that I've been part of, but since--you know--I went to my new university I've been involved with--you know--Arab student organizations besides that.

Q. Okay. In what capacity?

A. I mean, as a member. You know? I do whatever needs to be done.

Q. Okay.

A. For instance, I volunteer for, like, individual events.

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

A. Well, I guess that's a really big question. I mean, it's just very difficult, I think, for them to sort of ... I mean, I guess in some areas it's worse than others, like, I mean ... 'cause I think the community is one that's been here for a while --you know--and so they generally have a good relationship with people. And I think other Americans here are just more ... within this region are more politically aware, culturally aware, so it's not ... and I know people who live--you know--in my campus and things, it's been very difficult with them just to deal with people who just don't understand them and who just see them as the enemy--whatever.

Q. What do you think can be done to improve the relationship? Like. ...

A. I think the problem is ... representation of people. Like, the only Arabs they ever hear about are the ones who are doing these horrible things. They never hear so much about the ones who are just--you know--ordinary citizens--you know--who respect the law and live--you know--just like them. And the problem is--you know-- in a lot of ways a lot of Arab-Americans really blend in here. You know? Like, some of them aren't as obviously Arab I think, as--you know--other minority groups are and so it's usually the bad ones that are sort of made to be representative of the whole group. And so I think what needs to be done is we need to show that--you know--there are a lot of them here and that we're just like other Americans, basically.

Q. Do you think organizations can do anything?

A. You mean like political, student organizations--whatever?-- ethnic organizations?

Q. Yeah.

A. Yeah. I mean, I think they could just ... I mean, I know at my university when it happened we tried to do a lot of events basically showing--you know--our reactions and how this affected us and how, for example, there were people who were actually killed in the events who were Arab and who were Muslim and--you know--who were just as innocent, just to show that there are always two sides to every conflict; that we're human beings as well. So, yeah, I do think they have an important role in that.

Q. 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 U.S.?

A. Quite honestly ... I mean, it's ... in a lot of ways it's a lot more trouble than it's worth and, I mean, I know personally that a lot of people are just giving up on this idea which ...

I mean, I don't blame them because it's very difficult and it's just--you know ... forget. ... Even if you're able to--you know--get the proper visas and get here, just living here, I think, is much more difficult now than it used to be. So ... I mean, I don't want to be negative and say I don't think they should come, but I totally understand that if the numbers drop in the number of people trying to come here. ...

Q. We've talked about some of the negative consequences. Do you see any positive consequences of 9-11?

A. Well, in terms of just bringing people together I think ... like, right afterwards there was a sense of--you know--I mean, patriotism in a good way, not like sort of excessive -- you know?--people are willing to put aside sort of petty things. And, I mean, there was this very ... like, my college was very supportive afterwards. We all ... it brought us all together, I think, in a lot of ways. And I think in the after ... like, the right ... the few months right afterwards, that was a good thing.

Q. Do you think that there has been more visibility and improved understanding of Middle Easterners or Muslims in the United States?

A. Well, in some places, yes, I think that there has been. I mean, it's very ... I think there are a lot of people who just--you know--it's very hard for them to change their perceptions and so even if they do see a lot of positive images they're not likely to ... they'll be, like, Oh,--you know?--well, those are just exceptions. I mean? There has been attempts. I can't really say how well that's--you know--gone over with people because obviously you don't know what people are--you know--they're reacting to these things, so....

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

A. Well, I think there's a lot of reasons for that. I mean-- you know--given just the whole status of the way things are in a lot of the Middle East and the developing ... and the Muslim world, I mean--you know--aside from everything, these are areas with, for example ... I mean, many of them are developing nations. You know? A lot of people, it's very easy for them to sort of blame the U.S. for a lot of things and some things which are responsible ... which I believe they are responsible for; other which may be--you know--more indirectly. So I mean, I think if you put together all of these frustrations--you know--economic problems--whatever--you get people who are very desperate and--you know--because even within their own nations they don't have the ability to--you know-- affect change and affect policy. And so you get these people--you know--combining with religious fanaticism which--you know--as its extreme and you end up with people who are willing to do such things. So. ...

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

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. I say that unequivocally 'cause I've been back there and I know they don't hate Americans. I think that they ... they're very able to distinguish between--you know--Americans as a people and American foreign policy which most of them won't ... won't agree with. But I mean, I've seen--you know--how Americans are accepted there as ... as people--as individuals--and I don't think they hate Americans. And most of them--you know. ... I mean, as much as they agree with, like, things that they don't like American

foreign policy, they think that what happened was just uncalled for and that--you know--the loss of innocent life--and it doesn't matter who they are--that's just completely uncalled for. But, no. I ... I don't ... I think they're very able to distinguish between the two and they don't necessarily believe that--you know--what happened was justified. They've got issues but--you know--the way America treats their nations, which I agree with.

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

A. Well, I think what they need to do is they need to ... I mean, I don't think that one should say that, Oh, okay, well ... that happens and you--you know--you look at what you look at their reasons for it, that means that you're giving into them. I think you should understand where it's coming from. Isn't something ... it's not like a nation--you know--or something that you can just go fight a war and stop because it comes from within and it comes from--you know--years of just complete frustrations and. ... And it's usually, like, the last resort that ... that comes out of a population that really has no other means available. So I think what they need to do is--you know--understand the problems; try to resolve what's going on--you know?--try to realize that their own policies are making people very angry with what's happening--you know--and try to resolve some of the problems. Don't just go in and attack Iraq because a lot of them feel that that's completely unjustified. Don't--you know--take such a--you know--a biased hand in dealing with the Israel/Palestine crisis. I mean, there are a lot of ways. ... I mean, if you look at the difference between Europe and America, I mean, [the] European public tends to be much more--you know--sympathetic. And so I don't think ... I mean, yeah, you do have attacks

there but you don't have the same level of hatred that you see in this case. I think it's fairly evident.

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

A. Let me see. Well, I mean, I think we basically talked about all the major relevant things. I'm just ... you know, I think that the problem is, there is ... it's very easy for most Americans to ... not to realize that--you know--people from the Middle East don't necessarily hate them and that--you know--there's. ... It's hard for them to really see them as human beings because, I think, a lot of what they do see is very biased, is a very small, select group of people, and they don't really understand. I think what they need is, like, there really isn't an understanding either of the political situation--'cause you know--most people I know don't know anything, like, about history, about politics, like, extensively about the Middle East. They don't know much about culture and I think ... as much as they might about other cultures of the world and I think that's a big issue and that's one of the things fueling a lot of--you know--the misunderstandings and what's happening. And it goes both ways. I mean, I think that there isn't that sense of--you know--positive things that Americans have done that's reflected in the Middle East and it's much easier to focus on the negative aspects of what's happening. So--you know--I mean, I think misunder--like, lack of awareness and understanding of both cultures is one of the biggest problems and it goes both ways.

Q. Well, thank you very much for your cooperation with this interview.