

Interview 68

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: 38

Q. I'd like to start by asking you quick questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. Beirut, Lebanon.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Beirut, Lebanon.

Q. How old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. Thirty-one or two--thirty-two maybe.

Q. Okay. Okay. And where were your parents born?

A. Beirut, Lebanon.

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

A. Lebanese-Arab.

Q. Okay. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. None right now.

Q. How old are you?

A. Thirty-eight.

Q. Okay. And are you a U.S. citizen?

A. I applied for naturalization three days ago.

Q. Okay. You're a Green Card ... Green Cardholder then? Yes. What is your highest level of education?

A. Master's.

Q. And where did you receive your degree?

A. [Name removed].

Q. In Washington. Okay. And what is your main occupation?

A. [Removed].

Q. Is this private work? Is it a private company you're working for or....

A. Independent.

Q. It's independent. And what is your marital status?

A. Married.

Q. Okay. Do you have any children?

A. No.

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

A. I was getting ready to head off out ... out of the house and go to work and I needed to get a videotape out of the machine. So I had to turn on the television to get my tape out, which I don't ... I don't basically turn on the television. And it just ... and I just saw the building, the Twin Towers ... the Pentagon had not happened yet 'cause it was just right around nine o'clock and people were still not understanding what they were saying. Actually, I think, when ... as I was watching it the first building was hit and the television anchor was saying we're not sure if it's an ... if it's an accident or blah, blah, blah. And as they were talking the second building was hit. So I watched it like that and I was so shocked. And I knew I had to run because they had called me from the office saying we need you to come early. There ... there was something they needed to get out. So I just took my tape, turned off the television and ... and ... and left going to work. And I was ...

and I just realized by then that they ... they had started saying something about terrorism, blah, blah, blah. So I took the Metro and I was kind of under the shock and looking around and trying to listen to the people. I was, like--you know--what is this? And first it didn't hit me how curious it was because I thought--you know--this is New York and we are here in D.C.. It's okay. But then I was thinking: Oh, I'm in the Metro. This is dangerous. Something's going to happen. What if there's something here in the Metro or if I'm stuck, or if we're going to die? It was, like, really crazy. Then I got off the Metro and went to the office and everybody was just going crazy and they told me ... and I told them: Do you know what's going on be-- ... and they said: Yes. And then they said: Do you know what's going on? It turns out that by the time ... when I was in the Metro the Pentagon was hit and I didn't know about that. And everybody was going crazy and people were ... because the Pentagon was hit. It wasn't New York any more. It was here and it was downtown D.C. People were just leaving and rushing out of their offices and basically going home. How much do you want me to go?

Q. No, no. What was your first reaction to all this? I mean, you had mentioned that you were shocked initially.

A. This is difficult 'cause I...and some of it is ... I don't know how much I want to talk ... tell you, you, and how much ... to go because this is very tricky for me because of where I'm from and because of what I grew up in. So I don't know how ... how PC I should be here and not because I'm talking to you now. You know? Feed back. You know?

Q. Yeah. Yeah. I understand. Yeah.

A. Like, because this is going to get tricky kind of like. You know? How much can you be ... how honest can you be and how PC can you be? What ... I don't know where you ... where you want me to go and how, like. ...

Q. Whatever you're feeling, basically. It doesn't have to be PC at all. Like I mentioned to you, this is completely anonymous and any personal information, anything you don't want on, it ... we can ... we can take out.

A. I'll ... I'll ... I'll just tell you then. Ba-- ... My initial ... initial ... initial reaction, before-- and that's like, just before the Pentagon had hit, before I realized the whole deal, there was a feeling of kind of like gosh! At least now they understand what we ... we've been going through [the Lebanese during the Civil War]. I had that. And just to be frank, I don't tell people usually that. But to be frank, this is ... there was a little bit of that kind of like. We've lived this for years and years and years. Finally now maybe we want ... it's kind of like feeling the slap for a second. And then after that my feelings changed when I walked out in the street and started seeing the screens on stores on Connecticut Avenue and people were ... flocks of people were just walking, walking, walking, walking. The whole street was filled because the Metros were not. ... It was just completely crazy. So flocks of people in the street and people were, like, kind of walking, trying to understand and ... the shock. Then I completely changed and I was, like, no, this is horrible. This is ... this is terrible. This is tragic. This is disgusting. You know? Why do they need to do that. And then, when I realized the building actually collapsed, then ... then I was completely very, very angry that it happened. I felt that it's very inhumane. It's a tr-- ... It's a tragedy. And so there was this mixture. And then ... then the whole ... then a few minutes after, then this is now what? ten ... ten o'clock or something--you know--like one

or two hours down the road, then now you're hearing the stories about, oh, it's Palestinians. Oh, it's Bin Laddin. And then ... then kind of ... so it's going through the shock of, like, being ... feeling a little bit of the revenge, and then feeling angry and disappointed and--you know--the tragedy, and then turning into this whole political discrimination kind of like: Oh, why do they always have to blame Arabs. You know? We have no proof who did it. Why? You know? And this is like, just like one or two hours after the fact.

Q. What was your reaction to that, to the possibility that it. ...

A. I was just feeling that it's ... it's discriminatory, it's unfair, it's racist it's ... because they had no proof and that' the first group they blame. And I was very angry because they were ... they started running this short clip of Palestinians dancing and we had no idea where this footage was coming from. They kept playing that tiny, tiny clip over and over, over and over again the first day. And that was really very enraging and I just felt kind of like it's so unfair; it's so wrong. So that ... that's how it was.

Q. Immediately afterwards was guilt involved at all because Arabs or Muslims were involved in the attack?

A. Yes. You mean ... for ... for a long time I was in denial. I was not able to accept that it's true. I kept thinking: No, it's like ... it's a conspiracy. It's a Jewish conspiracy. It's an American conspiracy. Bush made it happen, all of that kind of like. I was not able ... and I kept saying: there's no proof. We have no idea who did it. And that was ... that went on actually for months. I mean, even today how ... how ... how ... do we really know who did it? I mean, where's Bin Laddin? But ... so, yeah. There was a ... a huge denial kind of like, not wanting to believe that--you know--Arabs and Muslims were involved.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. Of course -- I mean, it's now almost a year so you ... you felt a ... a range of things from complete--you know--horror at the tragedy ... tragedy and ... like--you know--disgusting. I used to say ... very, very, very often I used to say: if they wanted to do ... to bring, say, the message through that kind of ... and I understand that because I understand the political perspective and all of that--and I ... there was a tiny feeling of--you said guilt?

Q. Um-hum.

A. Shame, yes. But there is a tiny feeling of pride, pride kind of like--you know--you ... you're a big American empire, not as big and strong as you think you are. Here we are, a stupid little group, slapping you in the face. So there is a little bit of that. But what ... because I was ... I am non-violent--I'm completely against any violence and I think it's completely horrible that they had to kill--you know--innocent people who were just going to their jobs from all nationalities and ... and backgrounds who--you know--it just happened to be at their job, that's horrible. I would have preferred if they did that to the Washington Monument. I kept saying that. I used to say that a lot at the beginning that--you know--why don't they ... they ... don't they go hit the nation--the Washington Monument? It is a huge symbol of American pride and--you know--in the heart of Washington D.C. It's been a monument, a symbol. It's a tall building so it would have a huge effect and you're not killing anybody. You're just getting some ... some maybe guards or--you know--ten people. At nine in the morning there is nobody over there. That was my ... my reaction.

Q. What would you consider to be your most vivid memory of September 11th?

A. Hard to find one. It's all of it. Like, it replays in my head. Walking on the street with a flock ... I think that maybe, it was so unusual because there was ... there is no other day like that day, walking up Connecticut Avenue with a hu--like people flo--you know--just you can barely walk. People, people, people, people, people walking, walking, walking, walking, walking and people crying and trying to stop at pay phones. People trying to call ... I think that day was ... was a huge un--un--that will never happen again.

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

A. Because I used to say Lebanese.

Q. And what about immediately after?

A. I ... I think I still say Lebanese, but I'm more reluctant. I have to figure out who they are and why and when and how.

Q. Um-hum. And ...

A. And then ... at the very beginning, but then overtime I started gaining more confidence back and saying: Yeah, I'm Lebanese. I'm Arab-American. So it took time. But right after, for maybe six months, I don't know how many months, a few months after, yeah, I was afraid to say.

Q. Um-hum. Have your feelings towards the United States changed at all since 9-11?

A. Um-hum.

Q. How?

A. There were many times where I was wondering ...you know? I came here for a better life, escaping the war and all the shit over there, and there it is coming. ... And there were

many, many times where I wondered--you know--this is not the country I want to live in. Why do I ... maybe I shouldn't apply for citizenship. And where else can I go? And I tried to think of other places to go to. And I've been very, very angry at all ... what the government has done since. So, yeah, I've been very, very angry at ... at the government and the right wing and all that.

Q. Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. I probably got more involved. I was always involved. I just got more ...--you know--followed up more, got more awareness, more information; just heightened.

Q. Okay.

A. I was always kind of. ...

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

A. I think I ... over time I do. That's sort of what ... what you were just asking before. I was torn very often, but I think I do. And perhaps the strongest reason is because my husband is American in New York and ... for, like, hundreds. ... His family's one of the families who've been here for hundreds of years. And I know that that's where he is and that's probably where I'm going to spend the rest of my life so there is a sense of, like, yeah, this is my country. And I'm becoming a citizen. I'm going to spend the rest of my life.

Q. If you didn't have your husband would you still feel this way?

A. Probably much less. I don't know. It's hard to say.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East have been treated in the United States since 9-11?

A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. In what way?

A. They're discriminated against much more. There've been a lot of hate crimes. A lot of invasion of privacy, scrutiny, all of ... the Patriot Act. Supposedly ... like now maybe somebody's listening. You know? Like the feeling ... Middle Easterners have feelings of paranoia now that your phone is bugged. Some ... there's ... you have a file in the FBI. People are following you and people are pointing at you. The students have been mistreated. Many stud-- ... many Arab students on campus have left, actually, and did not come back. I've heard stories of women who used to cover their hair who stopped doing it or stopped going out 'cause they were afraid. There is this whole range. ... And I've heard Americans who used to be supportive of, let's say, Palestinians and they've turned more anti-Palestinian after all ... after this happened or became even more racist. So, yeah, there's much discrimination.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9-11?

A. No. And part of the reason is I've--you know--and I think that actually proves how racist some people are--is because I don't look Arab. I don't look ... I don't have a dark skin, I don't have a thick accent and so I don't fit the stereotype. And I think that's a huge reason why no one. ... People who know me know me, and people who don't, they think I'm American.

Q. Has any member of your family experienced backlash?

A. I don't have any family here.

Q. Okay. Do you think Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling some of the backlash against Arabs after 911?

A. Yeah, think they've done a huge amount of effort. I think, yeah. I ... I give them a lot of credit. I think they've done amazing work. Even as much as I don't like Bush, at the beginning go to mosques and talk on national television, his national speeches address the issue and saying--you know--this is not a war against Muslims, although ... I think if it weren't for the activity of the organizations this would not have happened. They've done a huge amount of awareness, going ... organizing public events, organizing protest, demonstrations, vigils, handing out brochures, posters, fund-raisers, spots on TV, things like that. I think that they're doing a huge amount of work.

Q. Do you think that they've been able to organize our community politically?

A. On their way. There is a lot to be done. But I think over the last couple of years more people have ... more people in the community, more Arab-Americans who are not political who were not political, who were not active, became more active. So that's kind of ... maybe ... maybe those events did bring people together to some extent. And the community used to be more divided on nation, religious, political lines and I think now that kind of brought them altogether to say, it doesn't matter, we're all Arab-American or we're all Muslim. And so maybe that was the positive outcome of. ...

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

A. Because I was already, I just. ... Yeah. I was already a member of certain things and I just stuck with where I was. I ... I think I became more active among Amer-- ... I felt that my role was more important to work with ... with non-Arab-Americans and I've been more active in that them, kind of just reaching out to Americans and talking to them and [name removed]. So I have been active kind of outside the organizations.

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

A. The new coalitions were created with Southeast Asians, like the ... and the Vietnamese and ... and all of the others that are not Arab and not Muslim because of that so that brought people together. It brought Muslims together from whatever--you know--ethnic and nationality background they were. And I think it brought probably African-Americans closer to the others. So there has been a more extended reaching out and creating coalitions across communities.

Q. Do you think relations are more tolerant right now or are they more strained and/or oppositional?

A. I think between these kind of sister communities with ... with ... with which we have ties. Like I said, if we share con--you know--like Southeast Asians. They're not Arab. We don't share ethnicity or religion but we share--I don't know--maybe skin color or ... and then, if there is either skin color or religion or continent--like, kind of regional part of the world in common then it became stronger. But I think it became much more strained and ... and separate with the typical conservative right wing, white American neo-conservative.

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

A. Between each other or. ...

Q. Between the Arab community, for example, and others?

A. I think it's ... some of what I'm trying to do is to actually reach out and become friends and ... and go talk to people outside the community and intermingle and show the other communities that Arab-Americans are not separate and different and other, but they're

just part of the whole--this whole country and society and that they can share a lot of the different things on a human social level. So I think--you know--becoming friends, being involved in. Like, if their parents going to--you know--PTA's, if they're in their ... in their company, going out on happy hours or meetings or social events to ... just ... just integrating on all level with regular non-Arab-Americans or non-Muslim-Americans.

Q. What do you think organizations can do, Middle Eastern organizations?

A. Continuing to do what they have been doing: reaching out to the media, doing bigger media ... being much more visible in media; talking on either national networks, national newspapers-- things like that. I think the media has a huge impact and we don't see enough about Arabs or positive images. And then continuing to ...--you know--have outreach in schools and cross community centers, community centers, colleges, churches, mosques--well, not mosques, but--you know--any ... synagogues, all ... just going ... going and reaching out to the non-Arab, non-Muslim communities and so that there is more integration. And then they'll see that ... these people, they're not terrorists; they're not ... they're just regular people.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the Middle Eastern immigration, like, immigrant groups in the United States after 9-11 would you encourage people from the Middle East to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. Probably not.

Q. Why not?

A. Because there is a lot more discrimination and it's much harder ... with the immigration laws, through the profiling, through airports, the whole ... getting visas and all of these ... this whole process of immigration has become much more difficult, so I

think they're ... they're going to have a much harder time. Maybe students I would contin—encourage, but I'm not sure. It's very tricky for new immigrants, I think.

Q. Okay. We've talked about some negative consequences. Do you think there were any positive consequences of 9-11?

A. I said, I think one of them is that it brought all of the ... advantaged or--what should we call them?--the different communities that were ... the minority communities, brought them together to stick together so that made them stronger. It helped get the community, we get more organized and become more active; more visible; more. ... Maybe they even fund-raised more so that's probably: ... And ... and the other positive aspect that I think ... Americans ... I've heard a lot of people who ... who now have become experts on the Middle East that have wanted ... come to learn more about ... as far as Arab and different cultures and geography. And I think many people who have never even, now have traveled to Iraq or Afghanistan, etc. So there is that positive aspect that ... that it has brought more Americans to understand that part of the world better or wanted to inquire--at least want to learn more about it.

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

A. I think it's that feeling in the Middle East that the U.S. has been acting, over the last fifty whatever years as an empire, an occupier, the big, bad boy in the world. I think the Palestinian [situation] is a huge thing behind that, the fact that American troops are in the Gulf, whether ... I mean, some of them are excuses, but whether--you know--you know--Islam religious land or they're using the oil and taking over the resources and the money and the ... all of that. So there is a feeling of America taking advantage of the resources

and on a ... on a materialistic level and power and there is the Palestinian and Islamic aspect. And then there is the aspect that--you know--because of all the different problems in the Middle East that's happened over the last several years, life over there is not stable. There is no economic prospect for young people and ... and there ... there is more fanaticism that has been created by American foreign policies. So generally many, many people have many ... they're angry at the policies and they feel that every American citizen--because supposedly there is democracy and they vote--and they're not doing anything against their ... their government. That means every American in their eye is ... is the enemy.

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

A. That's very complex. There are many levels. I think they cannot ignore but ... and they have to address the ... the issues at the bottom, that many people are, even those that are not terrorists and who don't support ... have ... are angry at in terms of ... are hostile towards the U.S. for ... which is ... I think the Palestinian issue has to be really addressed. That's a huge one. I think the ... the situation in Iraq ... basically, a more human, more tolerant, more constructive action towards the Middle East area and the way ... the involvement in those countries had to change to alleviate and do not appear like they're occupiers and they're the imperialists and they're going there like a Christian missionary. They have to change their involvement in those countries, make laws or--you know--national laws more ... different so that people in those countries are able to economically grow and prosper and that the young people can have employment and ... and improve their quality of life. And on another level continue--which they've been trying to do--

continue to improve their image in ... in the Middle East and just kind of explain that-- you know--. ... I think Middle Easterners have also stereotypes--strong stereotypes--about Americans. We have to continue to address that through educational campaigns, media, etc.; exchange ... perhaps send kind of like ... of kids ... of kids project, send American kids to Arab countries and bring Arab kids to American ... to America to know more about each other, learn more about the other country's cultures and religions and exchange so that they are not separate but they're more viewed as just human. I think the educational aspect is a very important one, and then addressing the problems in the Middle East is another one. I think they've been focusing too much on security which is. ... Yeah. I mean, that's fine, but they're not going to the root of the problem. They have to ... to address kind of what ... what makes people want to take acts of terrorism instead of stirring it up but then trying to hide and protect themselves, addressing the roots of the ... of the problem and building tie and friendships with ... with the people in the countries; respecting their religion and their culture, the traditions, the values. I think that's much more effective than heightening security and adding privacy violations ... FBI monitoring.

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

A. I guess, in general I ... I just hope non-Arab and non-Muslim Americans would make a better, smarter effort to learn about the other cultures. I've noticed one problem might have been is that some Americans, they think that over the past couple of years they've learned more about, say, Islam or Arabs or Middle Easterners and they ... or they've had heard some disturbing things about the religion or the culture--like they read the Koran

and they read one sentence of it and they take it out of context and blow it up and then ... like this word *jihad* and they've been going on and on about that and without understanding the context or what it actually means for the people who believe in that practice or who ... just kind of distorting everything. And I think that's the most dangerous thing for Americans who think they understand, who are making ... maybe making an attempt to learn but they're learning the wrong things or they are learning correct things but distorting them and putting them out of contact and out understanding how these things fit, and ... and picking up only a few items that are foreign and exotic to them, like the veil and the *burqa* and these things that are ... that seem obnoxious to them and not ... and switching them or twisting them, turning them around and not understanding what the context or, like, why people in ... in that ... who have ... these items for them seem negative, but for people in the culture it's just not as negative and they're just part of the culture and what people do and that people actually like the way they are, or like the way they dress or behave in their communities or in their marriages or in their country. And I think there is this huge misunderstanding and lack of depth of understanding where many Americans, they just take the first quick impression and are becoming more and more imperialistic, more and more kind of in their occupier arrogant, we're against them, we're better than them. We're white, we're superior ... our religion is superior to them or. ... I think this is a huge problem that's been increasing and it's going in the wrong direction. And I see it happening and that's actually going to cause more terrorism, not lessen it.

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