

Interview 35

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: 27

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

A. Afghanistan, Kabul.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Kabul, Afghanistan up to age ten, two years in Pakistan and about seventeen years in New York.

Q. Oh, okay. And how old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. I was exactly ten years old.

Q. And where were your parents born?

A. They were also born in Afghanistan.

Q. So you would be first generation. Right?

A. Yeah.

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

A. Middle Eastern, Persian.

Q. Afghani?

A. Afghani.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

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

A. Twenty-seven.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a Green Card holder?

A. U.S. citizen.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. College, Bachelor's degree.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. Queens College, City University of New York.

Q. What is your main occupation, like, your job title, and can you briefly explain what is it exactly that you do?

A. Financial service representative is my title. Basically what we do is financial planning, show people how to budget their money, how to basically defer and transfer risk if they can and kind of make a financial picture for people.

Q. For whom are you working? Is it a private company or a government agency?

A. A private company, Metropolitan.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. Married.

Q. Do you have any children?

A. Yeah. We have one little girl.

Q. Ah, that's cute. Okay. Now I'll go ahead and ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you around 9am on September 11th and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. Well, the first plane I saw it on the news and I thought it was, like, joking or I thought it was maybe a small little airplane. So I went for work. I was actually in my car when I heard the second plane hit. And it was ... it was scary because I thought, like, it was, like, war. It wasn't just that it was a second airplane hitting the building but it was more like this is the beginning of a war.

Q. So you heard it on the radio?

A. Yeah. I heard it on the radio.

Q. What was your first reaction? Did you think anywhere in your head that if this is a terrorist attack it's the Middle Easterners or it's the Muslims? What was going on in your head when you heard this in the beginning?

A. No idea. I mean, I ... I didn't ... I really didn't have, like, any... . I know that the last time the World Trade Center was attacked and I was working in that area when that attack happened. But I didn't have any idea. It just ... it was shock more than anything else.

Q. What do you think is the most vivid memory in your mind of September 11th, something that will always stand out in your head that you will never forget of that day?

A. Actually the smoke was blowing towards us at one point in the day, and I think, like, the stench of, like, human ... human burned or skins, this was horrible. I almost, like, threw up. And--you know--it was shocking not to see the two buildings up there.

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

A. I think it was, like, shock because I was shocked because I suffered loss in a way and I felt ... like, I didn't ... I had never patriotic about the United States until that day when I ...

when that happened. I felt patriotic about United States and I definitely felt a feeling of loss, something that was there before that isn't there any more. And I guess, in addition, I did suffer a family member so it was dramatic also and shocking. So...

Q. Did you feel any guilt being a Muslim or knowing the fact that the terrorists who were involved are Muslim? Did you feel any type of guilt?

A. Not really. I mean, a little bit but not really. I felt more like, here we go again. They're just ... the United States is going to look down on Muslims, another reason to basically kind of stereotype Muslims. The first thing that comes to everybody's mind when violence occurs en masse that it's a Muslim. And so it was very disappointing feeling, maybe.

Q. Have your feelings changed ever since the events?

A. Yeah. I think I did ... I was kind of shocked that ... that the President of the United States reacted the way he did, where-- you know--he just didn't jump--you know--to the first stroke of violence. He kind of took an objective role towards the politics, and that ... that was kind of surprising to me. Although what wasn't surprising to me is when I saw a lot of politicians who would basically take sides, specifically because they want to gain the support of certain ethnic groups so they just jump sides. And I was disappointed in a lot of ways. Some politicians that I voted for, like, Guiliani or Pataki--and I had a lot of respect for these people until September 11th when I saw them just basically take sides. And I feel that they basically, in front of me they put themselves down by taking sides of—you know—certain ethnic groups for their clearly political reasons, not for anything else but to gain the political support of groups which... . I'm definitely not going to vote for them or hear any of their speeches or support them in any way.

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

A. I had always told them I was from Afghanistan-Persian, and after September 11th it was the same way. I mean, it was ... I mean, I'm not afraid or I'm not afraid of anybody nor am I embarrassed of my culture or my religion. So I just tell people as it is. And I'm in the sales business so it's a little difficult at times because people are very racist. It's ... you know?...it's very clear that people are racist. But to me, I really don't give a damn what people think. It's how I feel. And I'm proud to be from that region. I'm proud to be an Afghan; proud to be a Muslim so I'm not afraid to tell people. And it shocks people when I tell them sometimes but I'm not afraid ... I'm not embarrassed of it. I'm proud of it.

Q. Knowing that Afghanistan was the leading country in all this you ... I mean, you had no sense of fear?

A. Not at all. Not at all. I mean, I work around the general public so I ... if anything I would see it first hand; most of the stuff but ... and I work in sales so it's even ... with a name like mine you definitely know where I'm from. And I thought that it would affect [me], but it hasn't affected me in any way because it's who I am, the way I present myself.

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

A. Not at all. I think if anything I feel more patriotic. I feel more supportive of the President of the United States, although now I see a lot more politics that he's involved in. But I don't think my feelings have changed in any way.

Q. Has your level of, like, political awareness increased or decreased in any way for domestic policies, or foreign policies? How do you feel towards politics now?

A. Well, definitely before foreign policy was I mean, it was on the agenda and I used to pay attention to it a lot, but not as much as now. I think my ... my foreign ... foreign politics, basically, my awareness is a lot more. I'm a lot more aware of what's going on in which countries and in his--history almost, the history of Palestine has become very much more lucid to me.

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

A. Yes and no. In a sense I don't think this can ever be Afghanistan to me because my heart will always be in Afghanistan. But in a sense I do feel a sense of belonging because I've been accepted by political organizations, by--you know--groups that are primarily 100% Anglo-Saxon, which I'm not. So in a way I feel that I have been accepted, I ... almost at home, but I always have a feeling that my real home is Afghanistan.

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

A. My own personal experience has been that it ... I haven't been mistreated or my immediate family members haven't. But I have heard of cases. And I guess people that don't have education that go around saying things that they have no idea what they're talking about. I have heard of cases such as that. But my personal ... myself and my close family I don't see them have been affected in any way.

Q. So you haven't experienced any backlash after 9-11, such as harassment, racial profiling or any type of discrimination at the work place, in a public place or anywhere around you?

A. No, not at all, not towards me in any way. Like I said, I don't think it's ... it's me and the way I carry myself. I think every person it's the way they carry themselves, what they experience. But I am who I am and I just ... I haven't felt any ... any kind of backlash.

Q. Something that you've heard in your family maybe?

A. Not really, aside from the general--you know--a little more heavier when it comes to borders and crossing borders and etc. Because of our names, perhaps--you know--they check us a little bit more. But my personal experience has been... maybe because I'm an American citizen, but my personal experience has ... I haven't had any problems. I thought I would but I didn't.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling the backlash after 9-11? Do you think that organizations such as the Pakistani or the Afghan organizations, have been effective in handling these situations?

A. You hear about them now more than ever, but overall I think they're far from where they should be because as political as united organizations, to me, they don't represent anyone of interest to me, in a way, or to politics in America. And I think that's where they need to be as effective in terms of public interest. And they're really ineffective when it comes to public interest. They ... I guess you hear about them more nowadays than ever, and I find myself visiting peoples' web sites. But I personally think they're far from where they should be.

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

A. I actually, to be honest with you yesterday I was looking at two different organizations that ... that's ethnic, actually. Aside from joining my neighborhood organization, the

Kiwanis, which is an international organization which is ... has nothing to do with my ethnicity, I .. I'm looking at joining and perhaps supporting some of these different organizations. Well, the Kiwanis are basically...they're an international organization geared towards public service, public interest, politics, but it's ... I mean... .

Q. It's not for a specific group? It's just for the general public?

A. No, no. It's general public. But that's the only organization I've joined since.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious group and others in the United States at this time? Do you think that they are more harmonious towards each other or they're more strained ever since 9-11?

A. I think generally New York is like a melting pot. So speaking from a New Yorker's point of view, I think they ... they're more harmonious and understanding. But ... but I did see specifically that there is strain also at the same time. For instance, Washington, there was rallies and I saw a lot of political groups or political people supporting only the Israeli point of view and I didn't see any politicians supporting the Palestinian point of view. And in addition I didn't see any press conference of the Palestinian ... the Palestinian side when they had their speech in ... in Washington. I feel almost a ... that there ... there is a little bit more strain perhaps overall. But being in New York I haven't felt it as much.

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

A. I think our job is mainly to provide awareness, and I don't think we're doing enough of it. We got to... .

Q. How do you think that's possible?

A. I think through joining organizations, being active in our communities, becoming part of politics, showing politicians that we vote too, registering to vote. I think there's a lot of ways. That we need to unite as ... as a community, as a group, as an organization, so that we basically have the public interest, which I think at this time it's very weak considering that we have a very large community and not enough organization.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the Middle Eastern and the South Asian community here in America at the moment, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States after what's happened?

A. I think as long as the borders are open I think that everybody should take advantage of everything that's available. But I think definitely they should take advantage of what ... what's here if they don't have the same opportunities, just like the rest of the world, to go wherever--you know--you want to go.

Q. So far we've spoken a bit about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you think that in your view there were any positive consequences that stemmed from that event?

A. Definitely. I think that, I mean, as negative as September 11th was I think--you know—whatever the plans or whoever was behind the plans of September 11th, and as much as I've suffered loss and seen basically chaos where I once lived, I think that to a certain extent it basically gained a lot of interest as to what really is happening in the middle East because people are far from being aware of what's really happening. I think it's a one-sided press, one-sided politics, and it's just not fair. And I mean, as negative as this is and I think there ... there is a lot more awareness of the Middle East right now.

Q. Why do you think that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think that the Arabs or Muslims in the Middle East hate America?

A. No. I don't think they hate America, but the bottom line is that for a fact that for each is--person that lives in Israel is ... people in the United States are paying approximately five thousand dollars a person per year in whether it's relief or support, whatever you want to call it. By us supporting a nation that is basically oppressing another nation I think we're playing with fire. And the bottom line is when you play with fire you're ... you're bound to get burnt every now and then. And we got burnt. That's it. I think we need to wake up and smell the coffee because it's just ... it's something serious. You're playing with fire. When people are oppressed they do ... they do whatever comes ... when you see your family die in front of you, you will do whatever it takes to avenge that. So we're playing with fire. I mean, we have to be careful what our foreign policies are because it effects a lot of lives.

Q. Do you think that the people who did this were taking vengeance?

A. I think in a way it's because we're so--us, the United States as a nation, we're supporting a nation that's oppressing another nation and I don't know if that's ... I don't think it's right what happened on September 11th, but at the same time as negative as it was, I think that it provided ... it woke us up a little that maybe we should reconsider our foreign policy.

Q. What do you think that the U.S. can do to resolve this issue of terrorism which is directed against it?

A. I think that you don't always fight fire with fire, and it seems to me that the United States still thinks that--to a certain extent, that perhaps we should go clean out the world. That's not what this is about. You don't provide a problem with the type of resolution where you go and find terrorists. You have to find a re--resolution to the problem. That's not how you resolve a problem, by providing violence with violence. I don't think that works. You know? Play. Do whatever you can, but overall for long-term plan you need to find a solution to the problem in the Middle East. Otherwise you keep supporting sides, this is what comes out of something like this.

Q. What do you think is the one thing the U.S. can do?

A. I think the one thing that U.S. can do is to basically review their foreign policy, bottom line, review it and take it serious. Don't say you're going to review it, don't [believe it] and don't take sides. If you're going to be a nation and rule the whole world the way the United States has achieved and planned to do in the future, you have to be ... basically you cannot be biased. You cannot take sides. You have to be a true leader. And a true leadership you don't take sides basically. You see what's right and wrong and you take ... You have to be fair, fair to the rest of the world. You cannot go oppress any nation. It doesn't matter how big or small the other nation is or support a nation that's oppressing another nation.

Q. Do you think that these attacks could have been prevented? How do you feel about the security issue now? Do you feel more secure now or do you think that the security could have been placed before September 11th?

A. Well, to me there is no such thing as a hundred percent security. And if you ask anyone who's in law enforcement or any type of security, which I have a background of

there's no such thing as a hundred percent security. So basically it comes back to the fact that you have to provide a resolution to the problems. You cannot fight fire with fire. You cannot put security ... there's no such thing as a hundred percent security. I don't think, anyone in their right mind could have thought about what ... what happened on September 11th, or anyone could have anticipated it. And at the same time, I feel a little bit more secure but I don't think ... there's no such thing ... I know for a fact that there's no such thing as a hundred percent security so anything can happen at any time. Now, we have to be smart and we have to basically make people aware of what's going on around the world so that if we're oppressing a certain group or ethnicity it should be on the news. It shouldn't be that we only break the news of that we want to... . We only see what we want to see. And security, there's no such thing. Anything can happen at any time.

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

A. Not really, I mean, aside from being from Afghanistan I-- you know--believe it or not, I feel tremendous loss of September 11th. I ... till that day I had...

Q. Do you feel a loss for America or for Afghanistan?

A. I feel loss for America, actually. I feel loss for New York. I feel loss for ... for I guess where I'm from almost. I feel like I'm from here. And until that day I didn't feel like any kin of, basically, patriotism towards the United States. I always ... I'm a very patriot person when it comes to my ... where I come from. I'm very proud of where I come from. And I never thought that I would feel patriotic towards America, which that's the only thing that came out of this to me.

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

A. Thank you.

Q. This was a great interview. Thank you. Okay. You wanted to mention something? You can go ahead.

A. Yeah. I'm sorry I forgot to mention. One of the things that, really, I mean, like, shocked me was--and ... and told me how uneducated people were--was when right down ... half a block away from my job they beat up a Sikh ... a Sikh person with a chair nearly to death. Now, it tells you how people are so unaware of their surroundings, so unaware of the groups that live in New York, that a Sikh has nothing ... they're not even Muslim. They have nothing to do with anything. But it shows you the level of peoples' understanding and education of who they think they know. They go and beat up a Sikh. Imagine me walking in there! I mean, they would never even suspect me being a Muslim the way I look, or I'm from Afghanistan. But they go beat up a Sikh, a guy that had nothing to do with anything, nor did his culture, ethnicity or any-- I mean, not that we know, but... .

Q. Yeah, but the Sikhs were one of the groups that got really affected by this because they wear those turbans on their heads and have beards. They really got misunderstood for being Muslim.

A. Yeah. And that's ... that's basically ... I mean, but it shows you the level of peoples' education and understanding towards other ethnicities. While me, coming from the region, or anyone coming from that region, you would know that ... how idiotic it is for something to beat up a Sikh for something that they had nothing to do with. But it actually happened.

Q. Right. Well, thank you for sharing your experience.

