

Interview 1

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: 31

Q. Good afternoon. How are you doing?

A. I'm not too bad. Thank you very much.

Q. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your experience with September 11th.

A. Of course. Please.

Q. Initially I'd like to start asking you questions about yourself.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Cairo.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I grew up mostly in Cairo but ... but a little bit in Kuwait as well.

Q. And when did you come to live in the United States?

A. It must have been mid-2000.

Q. And what is your ethnic background?

A. I am Middle Eastern, born and raised in Egypt.

Q. So you are Egyptian.

A. I am Egyptian, both parents.

Q. And both parents Egyptian.

A. Um-hum.

Q. And so you are first generation American?

A. Pretty much.

Q. And what is your religion?

A. I am Muslim.

Q. And how old are you?

A. I am thirty-one years old.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen, permanent resident or....

A. Permanent resident. I'd say I'm about a year and a half way from being a U.S. citizen.

Q. Okay. So you're a Green Card holder.

A. Yes I am.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. I have a college degree, a BA in business administration.

Q. From ... And where did you obtain your education?

A. The American University in Cairo.

Q. What year did you graduate?

A. 1992.

Q. What is your main occupation at the moment?

A. I work in advertising, specifically in direct mail.

Q. And what is your job title?

A. I'm an account executive.

Q. What is it that you exactly do?

A. I coordinate with a specific client, in this case, Citibank, find out what their advertising needs are and coordinate with a number of departments within the agency to provide them with an advertising solution to their marketing problems.

Q. Okay. What is your marital status?

A. I am single, unfortunately. No one wants me.

Q. That's not true.

A. Okay.

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

A. Well, I was just coming out of the subway. I was going to work. I was groggy as

usual. I hadn't had my ... my morning coffee and I was walking to work. I get off on ... on Park Avenue and I was walking to Sixth Avenue. And there were a lot of people in the street looking up and people were saying there was some kind of accident. A plane had hit the World Trade Center. And my first assumption was that it was a police huh; you know, one of those helicopters or whatever, okay. On a small scale, tragic, but nothing to ...you know, nothing you don't see in New York, just a lot of commotion. I wasn't going to stand around. I was ... I heard about it and I was going to go off to work after that. Didn't think much of it.

Q. How did you happen to hear of the attacks then?

A. Well, people were saying that it was a commercial airliner that crashed into the ... into the World Trade Center and I was like, yeah, right, you know? Commercial.

Q. Was this the first plane that hit or the second one?

A. I actually got out of the subway right after the first plane hit and while I was standing there the second plane hit.

Q. And when did you figure out or learn that it was an attack, not an accident?

A. Well, when the second ... When people said it was a commercial airliner and I believed that, we were like, how could this happen in New York. It must be, like, some kind of mistake. Nobody ever thought terrorism. You don't associate that kind of thing with living in the U.S. It's always something that happened somewhere else in the world. So when the second plane hit it was like a mass wave of realization that hit everyone at the same time that this was some kind of attack. And, of course, the way rumors work it's like, people were saying there ... there are more planes that are missing. People were saying that all at the same time. Or they said that before the second plane hit. And nobody believed it until the second plane hit and then it was, like, sheer panic.

Q. Was it a possibility in your mind that terrorists could be Middle Eastern?

A. I don't know. I think it was the first thing that ... that came to my mind. It was ... I mean, it pretty much was. I ... I don't think that anyone else ... Unfortunately, in ...in the media in this country you always associate terrorism with Middle Easterners.

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

A. My most vivid memory? Probably the ... the image of the newscaster on CBS or actually, I don't know if it was NBC, watching the footage and unable to talk. And that's

the first time I've seen someone on TV at a loss for words.

Q. This is after you went home from work?

A. Well, I went upstairs to ... to my work and everyone was in the main meeting room and we had the big TV on and it was there. And it was staggering.

Q. How long were you at work for before you left?

A. I was there from 9 o'clock in the morning until about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. And then I had to take the train to Connecticut, which is where I lived at the time.

Q. And by then the trains were working?

A. Pretty much. We weren't sure.... I wasn't sure when I set off for Grand Central, but when I got there they were working and everyone was taking the first train out of the City. I lived in Stanford and I took the train to New Haven and got off in, I think it was Old Greenwich and then hitchhiked the rest of the way.

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

A. Shock, disbelief, kind of ... I want to say a twisted kind of intrigue. It's like...

Q. What do you mean by that?

A. Sensationalism. It's like two planes hit the World Trade Center. This is the stuff of... of movies, Schwarzenager movies, cheap airport novels, no pun intended, airport novels or whatever, and an overwhelming feeling of guilt; the fact that they are Middle Eastern. And also sort of hint of impending persecution. It's like, "Oh. Well, you're Middle Eastern, you're Arabic or whatever. Okay. You must know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows these people since we're all related, apparently."

Q. How did that guilt make you feel?

A. I'm kind of used to it. You know? In the twentieth century most of the world's problems have been blamed on the Middle East so in a sense I've ... I'm kind of used to it. Except this time it was compounded into one tragic day.

Q. Since the events, have your feelings changed, this feeling of guilt that you were talking about?

A. I think it was there before the events. It was intensified during the events and a little

bit after. There was also a great deal of sadness, I mean, watching TV. I don't know anyone who was able to watch TV and not be moved by ... by everything that was going on. I don't think the ...the guilt's gone away. No. I think it's...

Q. You still have the guilt?

A. Pretty much. You feel the need to apologize in some way, or at least I do.

Q. Do you do that?

A. Well, first off, I always start by saying, ... It's like it's not everyone is.... not all Middle Easterners are guilty of this. It's a small sect. And as hard as that ... that is to sell to people who are pretty much conditioned by the ... by the local media, it's a fact. And I won't have a discussion unless that fact is established and recognized. So I would say that I would apologize for the tragedy but I wouldn't apologize for the ... for the travesty.

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

A. I told them I was Egyptian and I was proud to be Egyptian.

Q. And what about immediately after 9-11?

A. Immediately after, as a joke, not really a joke because it probably wasn't very appropriate, but my friends started referring to me as Jose to sort of deflect....

Q. Really!

A. Yeah. It was kind of a joke but also there was a hint of seriousness. They were concerned about me.

Q. What about you if somebody asked you?

A. I told them I was Egyptian. I actually had a confrontation with a girl that day.

Q. Did you?

A. Yeah. She was like...

Q. On September 11th?

A. On September 11th, we were watching it [TV] in the ... in the company and she was, like, they shouldn't allow people from the Middle East in here.

Q. And what ... where was she from?

A. She was Italian. She was Italian, Italian-American.

Q. And what did you do when she said that?

A. I told her: Listen. I ...I know this is a ... a crazy day but not everyone from the Middle East is ... is guilty. I mean I'm from the Middle East. And a lot of things were going through my mind that I didn't say, like the Japanese being kept in the ...in the camps during World War II. It's like.... It's human history. It's never ... It's never a peoples' fault. It's always individuals' faults. But unfortunately, their people pay for it.

Q. Why didn't you say that?

A. It wasn't the venue for it, for ... You have to take into account there's a lot of sadness, a lot of ... There's bound to be a lot of extreme reactions to it. And I'm a firm believer in not arguing in the heat of the moment.

Q. If somebody asks you now where are you from, or what's your ethnic background, what do you say?

A. Egyptian.

Q. How do you feel about that?

A. I feel great. I've always been proud to be Egyptian. I'm ...I'm very proud to be American as well. I feel it's a combination of the best of both worlds. But I'm Egyptian first, American second, and that doesn't ... that has nothing to do with politics. It has to do with what I... what I'm familiar with and what I relate to.

Q. Have your feelings for...

A. That's why I'm Egyptian-American, not American-Egyptian?

Q. American-Egyptian. So you identify yourself as...

A. Egyptian-American.

Q. Have your feelings toward the U.S. Changed since 9-11?

A. No. There's good and bad in every place and it's definitely not as safe as people perceived it to be. But I come from a background where it's not a safe world. And I guess just more people recognize that now.

Q. What about politically? Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. No. I've always been fairly politically aware. I would say I'm more sensitive to media bias now than I was before. Before that it was basically Democrat or Republican, you

know. Is the media leering towards the right or the left? Now, is it leering towards killing the Arabs or understanding them?

Q. What do you think of U.S. domestic policy?

A. Domestic policy? Like internal govern -- governing and so on and so forth?

Q. Yeah.

A. I think it's pretty efficient. I think it's ... they do a good job.

Q. And what about its foreign policy?

A. I think it's very ethnocentric, no real understanding ... I have yet to see a talk show host ... Well, maybe.... that's the media. That's not really government. Even in government you have yet to see someone who's familiar with international politics the way the Europeans are, for instance.

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

A. Definitely.

Q. Have you always felt like this?

A. Even before I moved here.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah.

Q. Do you think there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East in the U.S. are treated since 9-11?

A. Not really. I think there's ... I think they're blamed for a lot of stuff as ... as part of the course. Now there's a reason to blame them.

Q. ... There's a reason to blame...

A. Yeah, global terrorism. Now there's a ... there's like, a.... a reason or something that can be directly attributed to them. And I'm not saying they don't contribute to that. Typically, like, Middle Eastern immigrants tend ... to thrive on their own minority, or ...or they ...they sort of contribute by being more secretive, not as open, a strong refusal to integrate.

Q. Why do you think they're like that?

A. I think part of it is religious. It's a need to stick to the values that they hold. It's kind

of like the Amish and the Quakers. It's ... a desire not to be corrupted by a new world or a changing world. But at the same time ... there are two sides to every coin ... and there's a lot of good stuff that you miss out on. And one of which is getting along with your neighbors, which I believe is ... one of the Commandments in ... in the three major religions.

Q. But since ... do you believe they have been like this before 9-11 or since 9-11?

A. I think they were like that before 9-11. I think it was compounded after 9-11. But I think there's a... a spark of recognition that needs to change. It's a seed.

Q. Within this community?

A. Within the leaders of the community, the thinkers of the community.

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

A. No.

Q. Why?

A. Why haven't I ... I mean, would ... would that be a question you want to ask?

Q. Sure if you'd like to answer.

A. Yeah. I think I'm more integrated than ... the average Middle Eastern immigrant.

Q. Within society?

A. Yeah, within ... within my ... my sub-societal group and society at large.

Q. Do you know any member of your family...

A. Always hearsay for me at least. But I'm ... Yeah. But I'm ... I'm on my own here. I don't have family here so that might be a bit skewed.

Q. Do you think Middle Eastern or Arab organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against certain groups since 9-11?

A. No.

Q. Why do you think so?

A. I think they suffer from an equal amount of ethnocentrism and resentment.

Q. These organizations or the community?

A. These organizations. These organizations. I mean you can understand that from the community because it's basically individuals reacting. But you expect a bit more from...from organizations whose prime objective is to defend and put forward their point of view or represent the people so it is kind of disappointing. Very weak propaganda tools, not propaganda but means of ... of having their voice heard.

Q. What do you think these organizations can do better in order to either counter the backlash or help the Arab community?

A. Keep forcing the issue. It's a lie. The voice needs to be heard. Don't skirt the issue. Don't get into a harangue ... a harangue type ...or getting angry on national TV. That's the stereotypes that people have [of Arabs]. The calm, composed, intelligent Arab response is yet to be seen, and that's ...what we should thrive for. It's easy to get riled and that's what they associate ... that's what people associate with Arabs. And it's ... so important not to ... not to do that.

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

A. No.

Q. Why?

A. I wasn't like that before and I'm not going to be like that again, you know, after. I mean, the event is tragic but it's not ... I mean, it's a personal thing. I ... I feel I have nothing to offer, or not a lot to offer, on ... on a, like, a media point of view or a mass communications point of view. I'll do my bit as an individual as I've always done, but I can't see anything more that I can do.

Q. In your opinion, what do you believe is the nature of the relationship between the Arabs, Arab-American group and others in the United States at this time?

A. Strained. On a ...large scale, strained. On an individual scale I'd ...I'd say it hasn't changed. It hasn't changed that much. It's funny. For ... the amount of discord there is between people on an individual level, at the end they're just people. And when you meet them in the street you're going to greet them and say hey the same way.

Q. So after 9-11 would you say the relations are...

A. I would say it's strained on a ... on a ...on an overall level. It's like, the Arabs ... the Arab-Americans against ... all the others. But on ... an individual level I would say it's

...it's ...it's gone back to what it was before. It's just distant but...

Q. Since 9-11 ... And how is that?

A. You know, distant but pleasant.

Q. What do you think members of the Arab-American community can do to improve these relations now?

A. On an individual level the importance of integration has never been ... more pronounced. So on an individual level the importance of integration or getting closer to your neighbors has never been more important. I think we could be better organized and more professional on ... the level of community leaders and Arab-American organizations, and so on and so forth. We need to have some kind of lobby, and by lobby I don't mean a political lobby. I mean a social voice driven lobby, some--something that can express what the Arab-American wants to say. So it needs to be a little more professional.

Q. How do you think this can be accomplished?

A. Getting serious about it. You know? There's no magic trick. Just ... We go to the same schools as everybody else. Apply what you learn and be serious about ... setting something up. I know it's kind of hypocritical that I'm not doing anything about it, but...

Q. Why aren't you doing anything about...

A. Is that a question or is that a not sure?

Q. No. It's a question.

A. Okay. I'm not going to make any excuses. I probably should be doing something about it but I'm not.... I haven't been here that long. I ... I don't think I have the confidence for it. I think that's ...that's partly the reason. I don't know my way around here well enough, or the way things work here enough ... In a lot of ...in a lot of ways it's like I'm learning everything all over again. So it's ...it's a very personal issue why I'm not involved in ...in stuff like that. I don't feel I have the confidence to ...to pull it off.

Q. Would you want to be involved in something like this?

A. In some capacity, yeah. I'm not comfortable in the spotlight. But in some capacity, definitely ... maybe in a writing capacity or a consultancy capacity.

Q. What do you think the status of Arab-American immigrant groups in the United States is now?

A. Define immigrant groups.

Q. Arab-Americans in general. Would you, for example, encourage people from these countries in the Middle East to emigrate to the United States?

A. I think it's always a good thing. I think it's an individual [thing]. ... I don't see that as a mass ... a mass thing. I think it's an individual case. Some people are right for immigration. Some people aren't.

Q. How do you think immigrants would be treated if they emigrated here?

A. Suspicion, doubt, mild hatred I would say, stuff like that.

Q. Would you still encourage them to come?

A. I definitely would. It's ...it's an adjustment. It's ...it's ... Immigration was never an easy package to begin with and it's all about adjusting to a new situation. And it really is what they make of it.

Q. Why would you encourage them to come?

A. Well, first of all, I didn't say I ... would encourage them to come. I said it was an individual case. If I were to encourage them to come I would say the opportunity here is excellent and I don't mean in terms of financial or career [opportunities]. That's like one side of the coin. I mean I took a pay cut to come here. I would say that if you're interested in the democratic way of life and a way of life where opportunity and ... and perseverance, and hard work and ... vision and ... all the good qualities that humans are capable of are rewarded. I would say the U.S. is probably the ... the best place in the world for it. So that's why I would encourage them. There are no handouts, but it's fair. You're not going to get shafted if you ... I think this is the alcohol talking but ... It's what you ... you put in is what you're going to get out. So it's fair.

Q. What do you think are some of the negative consequences off 9-11?

A. Well, not least of which the ... the human loss. You know? It fuels ignorance and hatred. But it can also fuel learning and ... and understanding so maybe those two cancel each other. Maybe those two cancel each other out. The negative consequences ... reactionaryism, if there's a word called reactionaryism, the urge to destroy which is a

very human impulse. It's like, if we don't understand it, let's destroy it and ...

Q. On the part of whom, the terrorists or the Americans?

A. I think on the Americans as a ... as a reaction. Okay? I think the terrorists ... I mean, there's nothing ... Everything they've done is negative so...

Q. What would you say are the positive consequences of 9-11, if there are any?

A. The U.S might realize it's ... obligation to be a part of the world, to understand the world, to partner with the world, to move forward with the world and the importance of not playing global politics. American money ... Money is a motivator, or the biggest motivator in the world. If you throw money somewhere, if you finance a revolution, if you pay for arms in ... Africa, it will come back to haunt you. There are repercussions for everything the U.S. does because it is the big brother. It's like the ... It's like the parent. Okay? And there's just got to be more responsibility for that. Another positive might be a greater understanding of ... of what goes on in the world: how people think. The American point of view isn't the only point of view. Just because America's fighting a war doesn't make it righteous. In this case it is fighting a righteous war but I would say only in terms of the fact that it was provoked into ... You know. It ... was attacked. But the American point of view definitely isn't ... the only right way. There are people in the world who take their point of views equally seriously. And I would say that as long as, you know, they're nonviolent in nature every point of view has to be respected and understood and dealt with on ... its own terms. Otherwise it's al--America's always going to be perceived as a bully, resentments can pile up and ... it's just going to be a bad situation.

Q. What about visibility of Arabs in the United States? Do you think that there's been a kind of improved understanding?

A. I vaguely remember an ad of, like some Hollywood type actresses, and I remember Shannon Elizabeth was one of them ...It's like we're Arab-American or we're originally Arab-Americans. I think that's commendable but it's also a joke because they ... definitely don't epitomize whatever an Arab-American is. So I would say its on the right track but it needs to be more ... I would like to see what the Latino community and what the black community has carved for itself in the U.S., a similar thing to be done for the Arab community. It's, like, their own subculture, their own ... a healthy respect for everybody else but at the same time there's got to be a compatible subculture, a subculture that's

compatible with the rest of America.

Q. Do you think since 9-11 Americans understand the Middle East more?

A. Yeah. But that's ... its kind of like being at zero percent and going to one percent. There's still a long way to go. I mean I wouldn't pat anyone on the back.

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

A. That's such an open-ended question. Why did they happen?

Q. Why do you think they happened? Do you think that Arabs or Muslims in general in the Middle East hate America?

A. ... In general they don't. I can see why we would be perceived as a big brother of sorts. It's ... it's kind of like blaming the most powerful thing in an equation for whatever went wrong with that ...with that equation. It's like something's wrong with the world ... Or let me put on an Arab point of view for a while. Okay? There's a lot that's going on that's wrong in Israel. Okay? I'm not saying the Israeli's are right and the Palestinians are wrong or the Palestinians are right and the Israelis are wrong. It's a thorny issue. There's a lot that's ... that both sides are guilty of. I think Ted Turner said it best when he ... before he was lamb--lambasted about it. He was, like, both sides are terrorizing each other. And he was made to apologize for that and I think it's ridiculous ... it's ... that he was made to apologize for it. Both sides are terrorizing each other. The Arabs...

Q. He was mentioning it in terms of the Palestinian/Israeli...

A. ... He was saying that both sides were terrorizing each other, which is true. And I don't know why the ... the pro-Israeli lobby got offended by that. I think there's a ... a general feeling of the Arabs is being persecuted. They ... It isn't a level playing ground. Arabs have less money. And you know what is more serious than having less money? They have fewer avenues for expression

Q. In the Middle East?

A. In the Middle East. We don't live in democratic societies. There's always a double standard. You have ... You believe one thing and you say something else because you're ... you fear retribution. Okay? And that's, like, a breeding ground for ... for extreme reactions. So it's like ... I would say the reason 9-11 happened is frustration.

Q. Frustration towards...

A. At the world at large. And America represents everything that the world can be but that the Arabs don't have. I would say it's frustration attached to a whole lot of issues, including poverty, including uneven political lobbying in the U.S. towards Israel, including, you know, a lack of expression in the Arab world both socially and culturally. I mean we Arabs have a stagnant culture. They had a thriving culture a thousand years ago and they ... in a lot of ways, we're still living on that. But ... it's a lack of expression. The Arab individual doesn't have a lot of avenues to express himself and that breeds a certain element that is extreme and we'll make the world pay somehow. If it's not the U.S. it's going to be London or Germany or somewhere. But 9-11 is, even though it was an American phenomenon happening, it really wasn't. It was a global ... It was a global event.

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

A. First up, self-preservation. Improve immigration, improve border control; stuff like that. I mean, if you have to profile Arabs, do that. But also profile everybody else. Jose Padilla wasn't Arab. Timothy McVeigh wasn't Arab. The Japanese Red Army isn't Arab. Terrorism is a global phenomenon. ... Take the measures that everyone else in the world is taking. Extremism and terrorism is not an Arab phenomenon. It's a global phenomenon. It's a human phenomenon. It's been going on for ... for ages, for years. Okay? In the Middle Ages they used to ... there [would] be plague warfare. They used to throw ... catapult rags filled with disease from the people who had died of the plague or whatever onto cities. So take normal precautions or ... upgrade your precautionary level to become on par with the rest of the world. That's one thing. The second thing is join ... join the world. Find out what the world's discussing. Take more interest in ... in global policies. Shun the whole unilateralist approach to global politics and stuff like that. Understand that everything that you do economically, socially, politically is being viewed by the world, judged by the world and ultimately reacted to by the world. So that's a second thing. I would say maybe the third thing is just take more care to project the fairness that America supposedly stands for, ultimately doesn't, but not out of any malicious intent. I would say it's generally out of ignorance that Americans support one cause and not the other.

Q. Can you give an example?

A. Well, I mean, the glaring one is the Israeli conflict. Again, I'm not saying the Israelis are right. The Palestinians have done a lot of wrong things, a lot of things that are not acceptable. The Israelis have too. But it just ...it's just not ... highlighted or not showcased. It's not a level playing ground in terms of media. And the American media is one thing ... It's like an indicator for everything that's American. It needs to be improved. It needs to be regulated. This just isn't going to work.

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

A. I don't think so. I think it's been pretty comprehensive.

Q. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

A. No problem.

Q. This has been a great interview.

A. I just want to say go Mets.