

Interview 56

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 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 24

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

A. In New York City.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Here. I grew up here.

Q. And where were your parents born?

A. Iran.

Q. Both?

A. Yeah, both my parents.

Q. So you would be second generation. And what do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Iran ... Iranian-American.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Muslim.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Twenty-four.

Q. So you are a U.S. citizen. And what is your highest level of education?

A. I'm at-- ... I'm still attending college. I'm in my third year at Hunter College.

Q. Are you just a student or you're doing something on the side?

A. Yeah. I'm a ... I'm a student but I ... I work part-time.

Q. Doing what?

A. It's a ... it's a private business during the weekends.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. And do you have any children?

A. No, no children.

Q. Now I would like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on that day around 9am and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was actually sleeping. I went to bed really late that night and I was sleeping around that time. And I had a lot of phone calls that morning and ... or, yeah. The phone was ringing off the hook. And finally my brother picked it up and he handed it over to me. And I heard my brother shouting on the phone, saying "Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!" And I said what's going on? I got really scared 'cause he never calls me that way. And then I saw. It was all over the news that ... that the World Trade Center ... one of the buildings was on fire.

Q. And so what was your first reaction when you heard about these attacks?

A. It was ... I was surprised. I was really surprised and ... and just surprised. That was my ... that was the ... the ... the most. ...

Q. Did you think in your mind that the attackers might be Muslims?

A. No. No. I thought it was an accident.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything in your mind which you think you will never forget?

A. Yeah, the ... the second plane--the second plane hitting 'cause that's what I actually saw. I didn't see the first one. And definitely when they went down--the way they went down. That'll ... that'll never be erased from my head.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel pain, anger, sadness? Any guilt being a Muslim?

A. Oh no. I felt sad. I felt really sad. It was unbelievable. Just the whole scene was so disturbing. It was sad more than anything else. That's what I remember feeling. I still feel sad about it.

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

A. I was ... I was ... I told them the truth. I told them ...

Q. You were Iranian?

A. Um-hum. Yeah.

Q. And how about immediately afterward?

A. Yeah. I ... I ... I did ... I told them the truth.

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

A. Since 9-11? Yeah, they've changed. They've changed.

Q. How?

A. A lot more things started surfacing about ... ever since ... after the attack. Immediately after, I remember, there was a lot of animosity toward the Middle East which I never was aware of before, but I heard it more with ... with--you know--when the President was

addressing it so I was a little ... that was disappointing to see because everyone was quick to finger--you know--the ... the wrong doing of the Middle East. But that wasn't the entire story so that was new to me. That was really new 'cause I had no idea that everyone would make such a fuss and ... and point ... like I said, point the finger at ... at the

Q. How about your level of political awareness? Did it increase?

A. Um-hum. Absolutely. But I admit ... in the beginning I would watch ... well, the news would always be on and it would always be, of course, regarding the attack of the building. But then afterwards it just became repetitive so I stopped watching.

Q. Were you more attuned towards the foreign policies of America or towards, like, domestic policies?

A. I wasn't too sure about either. Like I said, I ... I never was into ... into the politics. I wasn't ... that was never a thing for me so I'm probably neutral on that.

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

A. You know, that's ... that's an interesting question because it's not that I've been--I don't know--I've had ... I've had, like, prejudices against me but at the same time I've never felt entirely at home 'cause there's always been a ... a level, even the smallest degree, but some level of racism or ... or just ... just things like that. Yeah. It's weird because I grew up here but I never felt ... I never felt at home. I never felt at home.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated?

A. Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, even ... even ... even after, when every ... everyone became more aware of ... of the religion; everyone became more aware of the people that

actually came from the Middle East and it's been said that--you know--there was just stereotypes put upon us and they weren't true. Even after that was clear people still had ... had ... had that ... had that hatred or ... or ... or ignorance. They still had it, even though--you know--our ... our ... our name was cleared. You know? And the go--the United states government isn't ... aren't saintly. You know? We know that from history and until ... still until this day. So I was surprised that that hasn't changed.

Q. Have you personally experience any backlash since 9-11, any ...

A. Personally, no, no.

Q. Any members of your family or your close friends or anything you've heard of?

A. Yeah, some friends, some friends. Not even friends, just some people that I know that...

Q. Can you briefly explain?

A. Yeah. I have ... I used to ... I take some ... I used to go to kick boxing class and my instructor is from Morocco. And he's such a sweetheart--you know?--he's such a nice person. And then I asked him because I was just curious, and I asked him did anyone ever--you know--give you a hard time? He's like, Oh yes and then he told me that they still do till this day of two years later, that they ... they give him dirty looks or sometimes they treat him badly. They think that maybe he's a terrorist. And oh ... oh my goodness, if they only knew that he is just a regular guy that teaches--you know--his martial arts class and he's probably one of the biggest sweetheart that I've ever met.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling this backlash? Do you think they've been able to mobilize and organize the community as a whole?

A. In the beginning they did ... the ... the awareness of it all was ... was ...was getting there: it was there; it was there; I felt it was. Afterwards, like I said, every--everything was just ... it just stopped slowly. There was ... there were fliers being handed out about ...about--you know--Muslims in ... in the Middle East and religion and ... and all that and it ... I think ... I think it definitely if anything, just bought people more aware of the ... of the truth--you now--of what's going on. But after that I think it just stopped. So, no, it hasn't continued. And that ... it should continue because people have to become more aware so they won't-- you know--stereotype each other and ... and have this fear 'cause they don't know what ... what it is and--you know--who they're dealing with.

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

A. I've become more politically involved. I won't say more because I never have been because right now there's a war going on with Iraq and there's not much ... I mean, there's more that I could definitely do. But for right now I've just gone to the protests. So I think that. ... And oh my God! So many other college students have gone to protest--you know--against the war so I think that's wonderful! Even if they're not sure, it's good to support--you know--non-violence.

Q. Right. 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 believe that they're more strained and oppositional or they're more tolerant and harmonious towards each other?

A. Yeah.

Q. Such as the Iranians and, let's say, the Iraqis or the Muslims and the Hindus. How do you think the relationships are?

A. I think there's always, even till ... even after all this has happened there's always going to be a division. It's always going to be there, 'cause even people within their own country are divided. It's ... I don't think it's going to change. I don't think it'll ever change because people are always going to stand strong with their ... with their opinion and their opinion's always going to be ... have--you know--a counter--a counter opinion. So there's never going to be unity. And if there is, it's for a little while. And then, of course, when interests come up and they're ... they're opposite interests everyone's for ... on their own, every man for himself.

Q. So what do you think that members of your community can do to improve these relations?

A. I think that the ... the community can unite with maybe having something that they all can share in common. And I'm not sure what that would be, maybe having ...'cause, oh, there is ... maybe one thing they have in common, that's the religion, so they could all be strong in ... in ... in that kind of unification of the religion, 'cause that's only one and they ... they can't alter that, between the people who. ... But they should keep that strong, as long as they have that strong they'll have something that they all can share and they form a bond. I think that would be important.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the Middle Easterners and the South Asians here in the United States after September 11th, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United states?

A. Oh man. I love my country. It's not perfect. But if there's one thing that ... that I stand by. ...

Q. My country? You mean Iran or America?

A. Yeah. I grew up here so I'm going to go ahead and say the country that I'm living in now and that I grew up in, so it would be, yeah, the United States. What I ... if there's one thing that I'm completely ... if I ... I support or I'm really passionate about is about the freedom that we have here, even though there's always a limitation in freedom. And being a woman for--you know--number one: there's a lot of limitations and we feel inhibited in other countries. And over here at least, at the very least, we ... we don't get stoned for speaking our mind or we won't be jailed or ... or whatever it is. Other things may happen but in our country I ... if ... if there's anything people should come here for it's for the freedom. And that's probably the best thing, better life and, yeah, that comes with being able to do and say what ... what you like without being persecuted for it.

Q. We've spoken a bit about the negative consequences of September 11th? Do you think there was anything positive?

A. On the positive ... on the positive plain is that people became extremely aware.

Q. Of what?

A. Of ... of ... of other people out there, other cultures, other ... other ... also that people in the United States think that in the United States they have it bad, but they have no idea what's going on in the other countries. And finally they do. I think they have an idea now. They don't have the whole picture. They may not have the whole pictures because even though ... it's even limited in the news what they're ... what they show. But at least people, like, are aware of what's going on--what's really going on in other countries, so that's a definitely ... that's a definite plus because people are getting involved. They're starting to ... to be open ... open minded, at least ... at least a lot. And that's a whole lot more than before which was, like, almost none.

Q. How about more visibility of the Muslims and the Arabs or Islam?

A. Yeah, definitely. They're ... I don't know what the percentage is but that's, like, one of the highest populations in ... in the world. So definitely make it more visible and more known, more ... more educated upon--you know--to the rest of the world.

Q. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you believe that the ... or the Middle Easterners hate America, maybe that's why?

A. No. I don't think it's anything personal, I mean, not personally against anyone else. You know? It's whatever ... it's self interest. It's always about self-interest. If it was us attacking other countries it's always because of something that the individual wants over the other. It's always over power. I don't think it's anything personal about America.

Q. What do you think that the United States can do to resolve this issue of terrorism which is directly against it?

A. I don't know. I don't know because it's ... it's ... it's a universal ... Hate is a universal thing. It doesn't begin with other people. It begins as ...within the self. So whatever we can do to make ourselves stronger as our nation, we ... we.... As soon as ... you know, when a person works within their selves they can finally try to ... try to figure out what it is with the next person. You know? But we have to figure ourselves out first. That's a tough question because that ... that's gone on since the beginning of--you know--time.

Q. Right. Have you traveled internationally or within the United States after September 11th?

A. Um-hum. Yeah.

Q. How do you feel towards the security measures which are applied after September 11th?

A. It was interesting because they ... I ... I thought that they ... it was definitely different--definitely different! They were more stricter with what was being carried on. The search meth--methods also. But the search methods were ... were even random. It wasn't with every single passenger which that was weird.

Q. Do you believe that if these security measures were put in place before September 11th the events could have been prevented or the attacks might have been ... the impact might have been lessened?

A. Maybe. Maybe. It's possible because ... it's possible but I don't know.

Q. Did you feel any discrimination on the airports or did you see people being discriminated against?

A. In airports?

Q. Yeah.

A. Actually, no because the random people that were being checked were ... were various ethnicities so that was as ... that was ... that was a plus. Other wise, if it were just "all ethnic people"--you know?--ethnic, from other counties, not, like, white America, then ... then I would be, like, wow! There's something going wrong here. But ... but even ... even "typical" white American was being searched to.

Q. Are there any other points or comments you'd like to mention that we haven't covered in this survey?

A. I think that's ... that's ... that's ... it was I think it was pretty good. Yeah.

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

A. Well, thank you.

Q. Thank you.