

Interview 22

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: 26

Q. I'm going to introduce the project first. This is the September 11th Digital Archives that we're working on. I'm going to ask you a bunch of questions about yourself and how you experienced September 11th. There are no right or wrong answers. I just ask that you be completely honest. And if there's anything you don't want to answer, you can just tell me.

A. Okay?

Q. So where were you born?

A. Egypt.

Q. Where in Egypt?

A. Alexandria.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Egypt.

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

A. In 1996.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. Egypt.

Q. And your mother?

A. Egypt.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Muslim.

Q. And how old are you?

A. Twenty-six.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I'm an engineer.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. Egypt also, Alexandria University.

Q. Okay., What year?

A. 1996.

Q. So you're an engineer. What company do you work for?

A. [Name removed]. No, I don't work as an engineer right now I work in an office. It's a celebrity management company called [name removed].

Q. Okay.

A. We mainly take ... take care of transportation, whatever the need is, flight reservation, hotel reservation. We have our own fleet from limousine cars. And we do schedules and we take care of producers, actors, singers ... anything that has to do with the record companies.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm married still. Separated, actually.

Q. Do you have kids?

A. No.

Q. Now I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on that day around nine o'clock?

A. Here.

Q. Here where?

A. In the cafe. I was actually moving from Jersey to the City and I had my ... my car and I was waiting for somebody to help me. But then everything got closed. Like, everything got shut down after that so I got stuck here.

Q. How did you hear about the attacks?

A. TV. Actually, it started like a joke. Somebody came in and he was, like, a plane hit the World Trade Center. And I was like: Oh. I must be blind or something then. He turned on the TV and it was just the horror thing. It was really horrible then.

Q. So what was your first reaction when you heard about that?

A. Shocked.

Q. Did you consider the possibility that they were Muslims behind the attacks?

A. Actually no. I hoped not. But there was a big chance that it was really, like. And I really thought that it might be but I was always rejecting the idea cause this was not what I was raised to do.

Q. So what made you think that it might be? What made ... what put that idea in your head?

A. Well, the World Trade Center attack of 1993. The main idea that I lived with since I came here to the United States that whenever I tell somebody my name, they totally go through that: Oh, and they start talking about terrorists and whatever. I mean, I grow my beard one day and one of my fellow workers was like, "Listen. Don't grow your beard because they're going to think that you're a terrorist."

Q. So how do you feel about that, when people react to you like that?

A. I mainly don't talk 'cause I don't think that those people are smart enough to know what's going on. 'Cause I always say I'm not going to sink to their level and, like, talk about it. 'Cause one day one of the African-American workers told me something like that and I was like, "You are telling me that?" I mean.

Q. Telling you what, that you're a terrorist?

A. Yeah, like telling me: if you grow your beard they're going to take you for a terrorist. So I was like, "Listen. So it's ... because if you're black I'm supposed to assume that you're a thug or you're going to steel me or something?"

Q. Right. Do a lot of people ask you about Islam and Arabic culture?

A. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. How do you feel about them asking you?

A. Well, actually, I feel good 'cause I have a chance to explain it the right way. Unfortunately, not a lot of educated people come to the United States from my country or my culture so it's a good chance sometimes to talk to a lot of people about it, to tell them the ... the right picture. And sometimes I even give them movies and, like, recent movies from my countries and documentary movies about it to tell them what's going on, books and whatever, 'cause I remember the second year I came here a guy asked me how many camels do I have and it really shocked me. I mean, I didn't think that it ... it can go down to that level. I thought people would be really smart and know what's going on. But if you watch TV it's all about camels. So...

Q. Okay. What's your most vivid memory from September 11th? Is there any ... Is there anything that you're never going to forget?

A. Well, when I saw it I was really shocked and I really didn't believe it. I thought it was ... You know? How ... It looked like a movie to me. But then I had a chance--excuse me--I had a chance to go to the site days after the ... the ... the event and I went with the Baseball Hall of Fame and I got into the World Trade Center site. And I ... I couldn't help myself crying. It was really shocking. I couldn't deal with it for a while and I couldn't go downtown for a while 'cause the look in peoples' eyes and how I avoided telling anyone my name or showing anyone my real identity. I never told anyone after that my name is ... the anger was...

Q. So when people ask you your name what do you tell them?

A. Well, I tell them my name.

Q. And when people ask you your nationality what do you tell them?

A. I tell them where am I from.

Q. Even immediately after September 11th?

A. Even immed-- ...

Q. And...

A. Just the same day I was really mad. I was kind of ashamed, especially when they kind of announced it ... announced that it ... it was, like, a Muslim thing. But I always wanted to show people the difference, that we are not all the same.

Q. You said you were ashamed on that day because they announced that they were Muslims. What do you mean by that? Why were you ashamed?

A. First, every ... everybody said, Oh, it's Arabic. It has to be Arabic. So I went with ... with the general assumption, which was a stupid thing to do. I was, like, we cannot do something like that, even if it's up we cannot do something like that. It has to be

somebody has no brain. Has to be somebody that doesn't think. My ... my friend's boss ... I went to pick him up from their work and my ... my friend's boss was like, "Oh, I bet they're Arabs." No. Actually, she ... she said, "I bet they're Muslims."

Q. This was in front of you?

A. Yeah!

Q. So that she's saying it?

A. She was, like, discussing it with me. I was like, "Let's not jump to assumptions. But for now I'm just going to believe you. But let's not jump to assumptions and accuse people of that."

Q. Have your feelings changed since...

A. I'm sorry?

Q. Have your feelings changed since the event happened?

A. No, not really.

Q. So would you say...

A. Towards what?

Q. Just toward the atmosphere that people have toward Arabs?

A. To tell you the truth, everybody has every right to be angry. I mean, if somebody came and killed my brother or my wife or my girlfriend or just a friend of mine, I would be angry with them. But he. It's going to take a while to realize that no everybody's bad. I mean, I've been here for ... for a good while. I used to come in the summer, and then I ... I actually stayed since 1999, like, that was the actual staying. I ... I know a lot of people. I know a lot of people that I never dreamed to know so not. People have the right to be angry but not for long. They have to realize that we're not all bad. There are some bad

people. I mean, I'm not going to accuse the whole United States society by being racist because of the Ku Klux Klan. They ... they hate everybody else that's not white. So I'm not going to take them all: Oh. You are all KKK.

Q. Right. Have your feelings toward the United States changed after September 11th?

A. No. Absolutely not. I came to this country with a lot of dreams. I ... I already went a long way. I ... I have a lot that I ... I'm thankful for ... and whatever passed was just an angry way and it's gone. And even now if I'm ... if I don't say anything to people that criticize my religion or whatever ... there are a lot of people that know me well that defend me which makes me really happy.

Q. Has your level of political awareness increased?

A. I'm sorry. I didn't hear that.

Q. Do you ... are you more aware of political events?

A. Yeah.

Q. Yeah?

A. Yeah, very much so.

Q. So do ... do you tune into media all the time?

A. All the time.

Q. Where do you get your information from?

A. Mainly CNN or the Internet.

Q. Do you look at any Arabic channels, I mean...

A. All the time. All the time. I have to ... to know what other people are saying. You know? You cannot just listen to the ... the criminal and ... You have to listen to both sides, the criminal and the defender.

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

A. Of course. When I came here I ... I made friends. I made a love life. I made ... I met a lot of people and I have family. My [name removed]'s here. My ... all my best friends are here. All the people that I hang out with are here. So the ... the land that you belong to is the one that you have the people that you love. It's not about where you were born or where you were ... or where your roots are. It's where do you live and where you have people that you love and people that love you.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way Arabs and Muslims are being treated her?

A. Definitely.

Q. How so?

A. I'm just going to give you a very small example. I was driving my car on the Garden State Parkway and there was ... there was some kind of police activity over there and they stopped me. And they were looking at everybody's license. So they looked at everybody's license and the they let them go. And then when they saw mine they stopped me and they, like, pull over and they started searching my car and searching me. And they gave me every ticket possible.

Q. Did they say what they were searching for?

A. No.

Q. They didn't give you any reason at all?

A. No. No. Actually, and it was like, "How are you doing, sir?" And I ... I don't have that clear an accent. So, like, as soon as they saw my name he just changed totally. His face got, like, so weird. And I asked him even. I was like, "Sir, why are you taking me for that? Why ... why are you stopping me?" He said, "Quit acting like a fool. You know what you did." So it was immediate.

Q. Do you know what you did? What was he referring to when he said you know what you...

A. I have no idea. He gave me a seat belt ticket, a cell phone ticket--and by that time I didn't have a cell phone--a lot of tickets that I already fight it. And he didn't show up in court so.

Q. Have you experienced anything else like that? Have you experienced any discrimination or racism?

A. Well, not really. But when you talk to somebody and tell them your name and they start asking you about: How do you feel about what happened; What do you think and ... --the .. the accusation look is always there. They look at you like you did it which really bothered me sometimes. But I got over it. I have to go on with my life. I'm not going to let some people that do not know what's going on stop me from going on with my life.

Q. Does that still happen now?

A. Not like before, but it still happens.

Q. Has a member of your family or any of your friends experienced anything like that?

A. No, not really. Well, I only have a [removed] that lives here and [removed] living in [removed] own planet. So [name removed] lives with [significant other] that loves [name removed] really so much, so ... and they live in a very closed planet. They don't have a lot of relationships or whatever. So.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern organizations are doing enough to stop all this backlash that Arabs are getting?

A. I didn't know what to tell people. If I ... if I ... if I were to think to join an organization to say no, stop discriminating us I wouldn't know what to say. I wouldn't ... 'cause the only question I ... why did you guys do that? And I wouldn't have an answer for that. 'Cause they're going to ask, why did you guys do that? I didn't do that and my parents wouldn't do that and my whole family wouldn't do that. It's just some people with crazy ideas. The ... the fact also that people do not know that Egypt is the biggest country that's suffered from terrorists is like. It really hurts 'cause on TV they show that Egyptians are terrorists as well and they show them, like, in caves and on camels or whatever. But they don't see how great the civilization is--I'm sorry--and that we suffered a lot and a lot of families lost a lot of people from terrorists. 'Cause Egypt is a modern country. It doesn't care a lot about religion. Whatever religion you are you can go with it but don't be a ... a fanatic. But then those people wanted the ... the country to be fanatic. That's why we had a lot of strikes in the Egyptian police were really busy for a long time with those people.

Q. So do you think that organizations here have been political enough? Do you think they've been working with the government enough?

A. No.

Q. No?

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. They didn't have somebody to listen to them.

Q. You don't think the government is listening to them or...

A. I haven't seen a lot of clear action. I mean, I haven't seen somebody that came up and would be, like listen. Those people are okay. Those people aren't all terrorists. They didn't show that on TV. They didn't show the real life on TV. They only showed the bad thing on TV. I mean, the media controls a ver--a huge part of the American mentality. And when you watch one of the movies and you listen that. Each and every movie that talks about terrorism, they start mentioning the Middle East and sometimes Egypt as well. So: I have Mohammed on the phone to buy a bomb. The Egyptian guy wants to buy a bomb. They don't ... they don't mention that the guy that ... the youngest scientist that took Nobel prize was Egyptian, recently, Ahmed Zewail. They don't mention that we have the biggest universities on earth. They don't mention a lot of that. They just mention that we're terrorists.

Q. Is anybody from the Arabic community trying to stop that; trying to give a better impression? Is anyone trying to lobby media companies?

A. I didn't sense that. It might be on an individual basis, like I talk to someone, I try to give an impression that we're not bad. But... .

Q. So what do you think is stopping Arabs from uniting; from ... stopping people from perpetrating bad images like that?

A. We don't have a society here.

Q. You don't have a what?

A. We don't have a society here, like, a whole community, an Arab community. We don't have that here, especially in New York. In Jersey I know there are a lot of societies and I know that there are a lot of organizations, especially in Paterson, that different Arabs write and talk of. Even in the newspaper when there is somebody that get ... get elected or whatever, it ... it's always thank you, Arabs, and whatever 'cause they ... they form a huge percentage of the electorate.

Q. So you think that these organization in, like, Paterson, do you think that they're effective?

A. On a local level, yes. I'm telling ... The local sheriff and the local PD that: Guys, we're like you. We are not harmful like ... harmful like you think. But not on the national level.

Q. So have you joined any groups, any religious or ethnic groups?

A. No. No.

Q. So what do you think that these groups can do to make themselves or effective on a national level?

A. Spend a little bit more money and use the media.

Q. Where would they get the money from?

A. There are a lot of rich people in the here, but unfortunately they don't feel secure enough. They always, like pack in the money so if something would happen to them ... we are always in a fear that one day the American government is going to get angry with us and kick us all out.

Q. So given your understanding of the way Arabs are being treated now would you encourage some body from the Middle East to emigrate here?

A. Not right now. Not after what my friends told me how they were treated in the airport.

Q. How were they treated?

A. Searched, humiliated.

Q. How were they humiliated?

A. When you take somebody to the red room and start searching them just because they're coming here as tourists, because of their names, that's humiliation. When one of my friends comes in here and he ... they let anyone ... everybody go and just take him because his name is Ahmed or whatever to the red room and, like, start questioning why you're here; who you're coming for and stuff--all of the people that he's coming for--I mean, I'm sorry. If I'm going to a country for ... for tourism, I'm not going to ... I don't have to have somebody here I can go to a hotel or something. But then they require that you have somebody in here.

Q. Do you think that there'll be a time when you would want to tell someone to come here, or no?

A. There was a time that I ... I brought my brother in here. I told him, "Listen. There are a lot of fascinating things that you can see in here and a lot of fascinating things that you can be around. And you can have a lot of opportunity." He's a very smart guy. He already started his own business and he wouldn't find the same chance back there. But not right now. I mean, I'm sure that there will be a time, especially when the economy goes up and people start forgetting. You know, one of the problems is that the economy's down and people have a lot of anger and a lot of sadness because they don't have enough money to

do whatever they think they can do. But when the economy's going to go up, people are going to start being happier and they're going to forget. And one day I might bring somebody or I might tell somebody: listen. You know what? People are not angry like they were. Come in.

Q. So we've talked about all these negative things the resulted from September 11th. Do you see anything positive coming out of it?

A. For us the Arabs--the Arabs or Muslims? Let's say ... it's not about the Arab community. It's mostly about the Muslim community. Now it became against the religion. It's not against the race. And the guy that was just sitting here, he's Arabic but he's not Muslim. He's Christian. But he gets discriminated also 'cause he's Arab. And then if there is, like, a Muslim-American he also gets discriminated. Maybe it's that from the Muslim-American community are afraid to wear the Islamic, like, *hijab* or whatever. Not all of them wear it and people have, like... . I was going through some magazines, like *Us* and *People Magazine* and whatever. They have all those articles about American--I'm sorry--Muslim women and how ... how bad they are treated. And I frankly haven't seen it in my whole entire life that a woman has been treated bad because ... because... .

Q. What kind of...

A. Yeah. They don't know that, like, some of the ministers and some of the presidents of the biggest companies in Egypt are women. They don't know that. And a lot of bank tellers mostly are women. They think that a woman is just at home with children. She doesn't see outside. They're not educated. It might be like that in Afghanistan but they have to know something. In Afghanistan those people, the war killed them. They have no

resources. They have no money. They have nothing. So somebody has to show them the real picture. I think the media's being very unfair.

Q. Why do you think the media's being unfair?

A. They only show the desert ... the way that people are treated--the bad way that people are treated. But they don't show the educated people. They don't--you know--do the right...

Q. Why ... why do you think they do that?

A. I don't know. I always questioned but I never got an answer. I actually work ... I worked with a lot of people that work in the media: a lot of TV hosts, a lot of actors--a lot of actors that did those roles of like, terrorists and whatever and I used to ask ... I asked Samuel Jackson one day ... I, like, I worked with him a couple of times--I was like. There's that movie that he did in Yemen, or whatever. "Why do you guys do that?" It's always the same answer: It's the money. The guy doesn't believe. It's because of the money. But is it because if ... if he's convinced of the idea. No? And nobody would look at the TV if you started telling them that Arabs are good. It's not going to be... .

Q. Why do you say that?

A. 'Cause if you're going to tell them that, you have the wrong idea.

Q. And why do you think they would not like that?

A. Well, I was reading an article in ... in the *New York Times* a couple of weeks ago about when CNN started showing the right picture in the Middle East, Israel told them that we're going to cut your contract in Israel so he just totally freaked out and he, like, going the opposite way.

Q. So what do you think about that?

A. I think it's unfair, and I think it's all about the money. If you're ... If you ... if you have enough money you can do whatever you want to. You can buy your own station and tell whatever you want.

Q. So why would Israel tell them to stop putting that on the media?

A. Go figure. I have no comment about that. No, not really. I cannot comment about that. This is ... this goes under the, like, the red zones for me. I totally avoided talking about these things 'cause whatever is being said is being said already, and whatever I'm going to say is not going to change anything. I have my own ideas. I have what I think about it but I don't think it's for publishing or talking about it.

Q. Well, you're ... you're anonymous so... .

A. I understand. But just watch it yourself, watch the Arabic channel and watch the pictures over there what they show you. And watch CNN and what they show you. You're going to find both of them are unfair. The ... the Arabic channel shows you the dead children and the Arabs, and the CNN shows you the dead children of the Israelis. So you kind of don't feel that both of them are stupid. The Arab community thinks that the Israelis are stupid and the Israeli community thinks that the Arabs are stupid. Why? 'Cause both of them are showing the ... the extreme picture. Okay. Show me what ... who died from this side and who died from this side and why did he do that and what's the solution. But don't show me that, Oh, Palestinians kill Israelis every day. And then Arab channel goes Israelis kill Palestinians every day. Be fair and show the right picture.

Q. So why do you think that the attacks on the World Trade Center happened?

A. 'Cause they're dumb. I don't know what they were looking for I really tried to find a reason, a reasonable reason, and I thought that it was the stupidest move on earth. I didn't know ... I didn't find a reason, seriously. If I thought about it--if I put myself in their shoes and I was, like, I'm going to harm them, I didn't harm them. I actually harmed myself. 'Cause if I hit a giant like the United States I have to expect that they're going to just wipe me off, especially that I don't have what I can, like, defend myself with. Do you think that they're not going to reach you from over there to ... No.

Q. So you think that these people didn't think of the consequences before hand?

A. No, absolutely not. It was a stupid, suicidal move. That's what it was.

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

A. Well, just ... If one day you have a chance to go to Egypt and look at the lines in front of the American Embassy you would know my answer. You will know how many people can do anything just to come here. I don't think so.

Q. Okay. What do you think that the United States can do to resolve terrorism?

A. Resolve terrorism? Nothing. Terrorism is always going to be there. I mean, terrorism is the red army in Ireland. Terrorism is the Ku Klux Klan. Terrorism is the ... the FARC, the mafia, not only the ... the people that have some idea about religion or whatever. Terrorism is a lot of things. There's nothing anyone can do to stop terrorism.

Q. Okay. So more specifically what ... what do you think it can do to stop suicide bombings, to stop Muslim fanatics attacks?

A. Talk and be fair.

Q. Be fair in what way?

A. Listen to both sides and if you enforce power on one side, you have to enforce the same power on the other side. When the Palestinians say that we need this and the Israelis say we need this, you have to do whatever both sides ... or compromise. Don't just be like, the Israelis want this and nothing else is going to happen. It's wrong. And when the ... the suicide bombers come and so something stupid, and whatever, don't come out and like, these are terrorists ... these are terrorists, and whatever. And when Israel just destroy a whole town with children and ... and the whole world community asks for a trial, don't be, like, they have the right to defend themselves. If ... don't defend yourself against innocent people and innocent children. You're doing the same thing that people did with the World Trade Center. You're just ... You are attacking innocent women and children and old people. That's what the Israelis are doing, the same thing. That's the exact same thing that happened with the World Trade Center. People attacked innocent people. That has nothing to do with the Army. This is the same thing that the Israelis are doing right now.

Q. So are there any other issues or points that you'd like to bring up right now?

Anything else you'd like to say?

A. Not really. I mean, other than the issues of being ... already for almost a year. And we said everything that can be said about it. I don't think there's anything that can be added because for some reason, I think that everyone knows what can be done but we just need somebody to shout and be: this is what needs to be done. But I think what first needs to be done ... like, forget about anything else. Just let's take care of the economy that's going

down in the United States. Let's just give the NASDAQ and ... and any other, like, econ-- economy meter ... just let it ... let us give it a boost and... .

Q. And you think from there everyone will...

A. I think so. I think so. I think people will have more things to think about other than the ... the hatred and the rage and the ... we're not going to have a lot of interest. If the government's good in every ... in any other place in the world people would be comfortable. If people have homes and families and enough money to take their kids out and give them the right education, I think everything will be okay.

Q. Okay. Well, that's the end of the interview. Thank you for answering my questions.

A. Well, thank you.