



U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights  
Hearing on “Protecting the Civil Rights of American Muslims”  
*March 29, 2011*

**Prepared Remarks by Farhana Khera, Executive Director, Muslim Advocates**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, good morning. On behalf of Muslim Advocates, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the civil rights of American Muslims today. Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership in holding this hearing and bringing much-needed congressional attention to rising anti-Muslim bigotry. We’re hearing from Americans, from all faith backgrounds and walks of life, who recognize that it is a growing menace to the safety and social fabric of our nation.

I was born and raised in Painted Post, a small town in rural upstate New York. At the start of every school day, like schoolchildren across America, I stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. The last line of the Pledge affirms that we are “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” There is no qualifier. It’s simply we are one nation with liberty and justice for all.

As this Subcommittee knows well, our nation has a unique, long-cherished commitment to freedom, particularly religious freedom. Muslims have been a part of America for centuries, since the first slave ships arrived at its shores. Today, American Muslims reflect every race and ethnicity that comprise our nation’s rich heritage.

That’s why recent rhetoric demonizing Islam and Muslims, brutal attacks, harassment and discrimination, and in some cases, even threatening to kill Americans, including children, based on their faith, is so vile. It is not who we are as Americans. And it has no place in the schoolhouse, in the workplace or in our communities.

Nearly ten years after 9/11, hate crimes motivated by anti-Muslim bias targeting Muslim, Arab, Sikh and South Asian Americans remain higher than levels before 9/11. Some are deadly. Late last summer, a New York taxi driver was stabbed and almost died after a passenger asked him whether he was Muslim. Earlier this year, two elderly Sikh men were gunned down while taking an afternoon walk in their neighborhood in Northern California, killing one and critically injuring the other. Employment discrimination complaints are at an all-time high, with Muslim bias-based complaints comprising 25% of complaints received by the EEOC from 2008-2009, while Muslims comprise only 1-2% of the entire population. Opposition to mosque construction is also on the rise and getting uglier.

And Muslim, Arab, Sikh and South Asian parents are more concerned than ever about their children in school. In one especially egregious case, a Muslim high school student

in Staten Island was subjected to a harrowing ordeal in which he was frequently labeled a “terrorist,” punched in the groin, and spat on by fellow teenagers.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes his mother would catch him rocking back and forth, saying “why me? What did I ever do to them?” One day, he was beaten so severely that his mother took him to a doctor. There was blood in his urine, and he suffered from headaches and memory loss.<sup>2</sup> His assailants were later arrested and charged with a hate crime.

This is just one vile example of how anti-Muslim bigotry is playing out ferociously across America today. Parents worry, “will my child be next?” And they worry about the future: Will America be hospitable to minority faiths? Will its better angels prevail? Or will the values of freedom and respect become a relic of the past?

Anti-Muslim bigotry has been simmering and growing since the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, a terrorist attack that was an attack on *all* Americans, Muslims included. But in the last several months, anti-Muslim rhetoric has reached a disturbing new level. Prominent religious, military and even political leaders have joined the fray, feeding fear and hysteria, with some going so far as to say Islam is a cult, not a religion. Now, one just might want to dismiss these statements as silly and absurd, if not for the fact that the vitriol has real life and death consequences for Muslim, Arab, Sikh and South Asian Americans and their families. The message is clear: you are “not welcome” – words that were graffiti’d last year on a sign for a mosque in Murfreesboro, TN.

But what gives me hope is that more and more Americans, from all walks of life, are coming together to reject fear and divisiveness because they recognize that it’s not American. As former Secretary of State Colin Powell poignantly asked, “Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer is no. That’s not America.”

I commend the stepped up enforcement of the nation’s civil rights laws under the Attorney General’s leadership, but challenges remain and more must be done. I refer the Subcommittee to my written testimony for specific recommendations of steps Congress and the administration should take and ask that my full written testimony be entered for the record. I would be happy to discuss those recommendations later in the hearing.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> John Del Signore, “Four Staten Island Teens Arrested for Anti-Muslim Hate Crime,” *Gothamist*, October 10, 2010, available at [http://gothamist.com/2010/10/11/four\\_staten\\_island\\_teen\\_arrested\\_f.php](http://gothamist.com/2010/10/11/four_staten_island_teen_arrested_f.php).

<sup>2</sup> Amy Padnani, “Staten Island student endures the torment of violence and 'terrorist' taunts,” *Staten Island Advance*, October 10, 2010, available at [http://www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/10/young\\_student\\_endures\\_the\\_torm.html](http://www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/10/young_student_endures_the_torm.html).