

Briefing on Civil Rights Issues Facing Muslims and Arab Americans in Indiana Post-September 11

Before the Indiana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

May 30, 2002

Executive Summary

Americans of all backgrounds reacted with shock and grief to the events of September 11, 2001. For people of Islamic faith and those of Middle Eastern ethnicity, the day also ushered in fear of reprisal. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights responded to mounting reports of retaliation by asking its state advisory committees to examine local civil rights conditions in the weeks and months after the attacks. Through briefings and community forums, the committees documented widespread backlash against Muslims and Arab Americans, and those perceived to be. For simply sharing a similar appearance or a cultural or religious background with the 19 hijackers, many people became victims of harassment and intimidation; some were physically assaulted, even murdered. Their homes, businesses, and mosques were vandalized; and they faced increased discrimination in workplaces, schools, and other areas of public life. As complaints of retaliation and discrimination subsided, civil liberties concerns grew as the government implemented antiterrorism legislation that seemed to affect people of Arab ancestry more than any other group.

On May 30, 2002, the Commission's Indiana Advisory Committee held a briefing to collect information on the civil rights implications of September 11, with an emphasis on assessing the status of Islam. Six panelists spoke before the Committee: Kevin Jaques, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington; David Shaheed, a judge with Marion County Superior Courts; Michael Saahir, imam of the Nur-Allah Islamic Center; Rafia Syeed, founder of the faith-based initiative Bridging the Gap; Syeed Mohammed Ali, a longtime resident of Indianapolis; and Dr. Shahid Athar, president of the Islamic Medical Association and past president of the Islamic Society of Greater Indianapolis. Panelists discussed the tenets of Islam, retaliatory acts against Muslims and Arab Americans in Indiana and ways to curb backlash through education, civil liberties concerns stemming from the war on terror, and acts of support Muslims received from the Indiana community. The full transcript of the briefing follows this summary.

Islam 101

September 11 highlighted how little most Americans know about Islam, provoking a flurry of public discussion on the rapidly growing religion. When knowledge of Islam is limited, assertions that it is an inherently violent religion are sometimes accepted as fact. And when all Muslims are viewed as a threat or somehow responsible for September 11, civil rights abuses against them become more likely. Illuminating the differences between the views of extremists and mainstream Muslims has been a goal of many since the attacks.

Kevin Jaques, a professor of Islamic studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, opened up the Advisory Committee briefing with an overview of the history and central ideas of Islam. He began by defining basic terms essential to any discussion on the religion and describing the Quran, the 6,000-versed Islamic holy book. He traced the evolution of the different schools of Islam and discussed the roots and principles of Islamic fundamentalism.

Worldwide there are between 1.2 billion and 1.5 billion Muslims, about one in five people. Although Islam is often associated almost exclusively with the Middle East, in reality Arabs make up fewer than 20 percent of all Muslims. Indonesia has the largest Muslim community (160 million). And African countries and South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are home to nearly half the world's Muslim population. Muslims also constitute a sizable minority in the United States and many Western European countries. Professor Jaques estimated that there are between 6 million and 8 million Muslims living in the United States. About half are African Americans, many who converted to Islam since the 1970s.

Post-9/11 Backlash and Expressions of Support

The September 11 backlash in Indiana has taken many forms. One of the most publicized incidents occurred three days after the attacks, when a 28-year-old man repeatedly rammed his car into an Evansville Islamic Center. He reportedly told police that he was “getting the Muslims back” for “what they did.” A Hindu man in Bloomington was beaten up, presumably because he was mistaken for a Muslim, and at a bus stop a Muslim woman wearing a traditional headscarf was punched by a man who asked, “Where are you going? To mosque, bombing classes?” Other incidents the panelists described were less overtly violent, but nonetheless threatening. For example, Professor Jaques said many students in his Islamic studies class had received hate mail. One student, a member of the Muslim Students Association, received so many death threats via e-mail that he disregarded them, deleting the e-mails without providing copies to officials. Professor Jaques lamented that the student had concluded, “It’s common life. I’ve come to realize that if you want to be publicly active as a Muslim in America, you’re just going to have to expect that.” The scope of the backlash may be wider than acknowledged. Because Muslims and Arab Americans—especially recent immigrants—are often reluctant to file complaints, Professor Jaques estimated that at least five times more backlash incidents have occurred than have been reported.

Some panelists experienced the backlash firsthand. One Friday, in the parking lot of Imam Saahir’s mosque, tires were slashed on about 10 cars, forcing the mosque to hire security. Judge Shaheed said someone had called him “Taliban” at a gathering after the attacks, while Dr.

Athar's medical practice received a call asking, "Is this bin Laden's office?" and another threatening to bomb the building. He also received several hate-filled e-mails, copies of which he provided to the Advisory Committee. Most were to the point: "We do not want you in our country. Your religion is full of hate and violence." "Are my children safe having you in American [sic]? NO! Leave and go back to your great [I]slamic society." Professor Jaques received an e-mail that read, "All Muslims are killers, and you're going to get what you deserve."

Despite these events, panelists emphasized the support they received from the Indiana community. Judge Shaheed told the Committee, "These [hate] incidents were limited and merely a trifling annoyance compared to the outpouring of concern by leaders of government and the faith communities to see that Muslims and people of Middle-Eastern appearance were not unjustly targeted for abuse and attack." After September 11, figures from all over the political spectrum denounced the scapegoating of Muslims and Arab Americans. Judge Shaheed noted that Indiana's senators, representatives, and local officials held press conferences urging residents not to retaliate and met with Muslims to convey a commitment to protecting their rights. Members of Christian congregations visited mosques to show their concern about places of worship being vandalized. Christian and Jewish women accompanied Muslim women to stores so they could shop without feeling threatened. Although Dr. Athar received five or six hateful e-mails after the attacks, he received 60 e-mails and letters of support.

Civil Liberties Concerns

Bias-motivated attacks against Muslims started to taper off eight weeks after September 11, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations. But concerns that the government was compromising civil liberties in its war on terror persisted. Panelists feared that Muslims and Arab Americans would be the primary groups forced to sacrifice their rights. Judge Shaheed said, "As the FBI, CIA, and other federal and state agencies direct their energies to the war on terror, the concern of many Muslims and Arab Americans is: 'What is the face of this enemy?' Just as the 'war on drugs' raised concerns about profiling, this 'war on terrorism' has the same potential."

To counter further terrorist attacks, the government has implemented legislation such as the USA Patriot Act and refocused law enforcement efforts. At Indiana University, Bloomington, some students were hesitant to use e-mail or the Internet because one provision of the Patriot Act gives the federal government greater authority to track and intercept communications. "It's just assumed that, for many of the students that I've talked to, that their e-mails are being read, and so they're very, very careful and paranoid about going to Islamic sites in general," Professor Jaques said. He also related the case of a Pakistani student who was questioned by the FBI several times after September 11—one of the thousands of Muslim men the agency interviewed.

Dispelling Misconceptions About Islam

Educating people about Muslims and Islam is a key to stemming post-September 11 backlash and ensuring that Muslims are accepted into American communities. The panelists at the Advisory Committee's briefing had spoken at dozens of similar events since the attacks. One

panelist, Dr. Athar, had already made more than 40 presentations on Islam-related issues. Several noted that their job of educating the public is made more difficult by media outlets that perpetuate the myth that Islam is a violent religion.

Only weeks before the terrorist attacks, Rafia Syeed created the nonprofit, faith-based initiative Bridging the Gap to help diminish misunderstanding about Islam. Her first interfaith forum was held a week after September 11. Since then, the organization has hosted three forums with Christian and Jewish leaders, providing a platform for interfaith dialogue. Ms. Syeed has also visited numerous schools and churches, fielding questions about Islam from non-Muslims and sharing passages from the Quran that promote peace. Ms. Syeed aims to educate people on such issues as the tenets of Islam, similarities among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the status of women in Muslim societies, and how terrorism contradicts the religion's peaceful foundations.

There is concern, however, that interest in learning about Islam may be waning. Immediately after September 11, enrollment in Professor Jaques' Islamic studies classes spiked as students scrambled to discover more about the religion. In the ensuing months, however, enrollment dropped off significantly. "One of the theories is that people are just tired of hearing about Islam, but the other view is that people have made up their mind about what Islam is, and there's really no reason to take classes on it now. They've got a fixed view, which unfortunately tends to be a negative view," he said.

Public forums on Islam and the status of Muslims in America continue a year after the attacks. As the Council on American-Islamic Relations noted in its September 11 anniversary report, "Interfaith communication has now become part and parcel of ordinary Muslim activity, even in communities where such functions had not even been considered in the past." And as Dr. Athar concluded, "If something good can come out of September 11 it is that now we are talking." Many are realizing that September 11 was also an attack on Muslims and Arab Americans, who have paid a high price for the actions of a few.