

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF HUSEIN YATABARRY

TUESDAY, JULY 9, 2024 HEARING ON THE 9/11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM ACT, H.R. 5401 HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony regarding HR 5401, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum Act. My name is Husein Yatabarry, and I am the Executive Director of the Muslim Community Network.

As a Black Muslim of West African descent, my roots in New York run deep. My father immigrated to the US in 1987 and my mother followed in 1991. On September 11, 2001, I was just 9 years old. That day remains vividly etched in my memory. I was in my 4th grade classroom at PS53 in The Bronx, confused as teachers urgently gathered in the hallway. My mother's sudden appearance, her face lined with worry, only added to my confusion. "The twin towers have been struck by planes," she told me. Those towers held a personal connection for us; we had photos from family visits, and my father had worked at a restaurant there in the late 90s. As we watched the tragedy unfold on television, the gravity of the situation and the identities of the perpetrators became starkly clear.

In the immediate aftermath, the nation's focus was not on understanding the intricate dynamics of global politics and the rise of extremist groups. Instead, a wave of fear and suspicion engulfed communities, particularly targeting Muslims and Islam. The Muslim community in the US faced swift and severe backlash, marked by public hostility and undue scrutiny from government entities. My world, once familiar and secure, was suddenly filled with anxiety and uncertainty about our place in this country. The US, my birthplace and home, felt increasingly alien and hostile. The media and institutions often silenced our diverse perspectives, favoring oversimplified narratives of "us versus them." This oversimplification denied the American public the opportunity to engage with and understand the rich, complex narratives of Muslims and Islam.

While I understand the noble intent behind HR 5401, which seeks to ensure federal support for the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, I must express deep concerns that need to be addressed before additional funding is granted.

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum, despite its status as a non-profit institution, has repeatedly ignored public input and allowed anti-Muslim rhetoric to persist within its exhibits. This is deeply troubling and must be rectified. There have been significant issues with the Museum's financial transparency and adherence to the high standards expected of public institutions.

For years, the Board has resisted incorporating the rich and powerful legacy of inter-religious solidarity, recovery efforts, and reconciliation work that followed the 9/11 attacks. To address these serious concerns, I propose the following actions:

First, the Museum must reinstate a multifaith advisory committee. This committee should review exhibit content to ensure that diverse perspectives are represented and meet with the board and leadership quarterly to provide ongoing input and guidance.

Second, the Museum must commit to transparent governance. This means adhering to budget targets and aligning development strategies with philanthropic standards. Transparent governance is critical to building trust and ensuring responsible management of public funds.

Third, an academic review process must be implemented. Forming an academic advisory council will ensure scholarly rigor and prevent the conflation of Islam with Al-Qaeda in exhibits. This council can offer expert oversight to ensure that content is accurate and balanced.

Fourth, the Museum should explicitly recognize the diverse contributions of Americans of all faiths and backgrounds in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Highlighting these contributions will foster a more inclusive narrative that reflects the unity and resilience that emerged in the wake of the attacks.

Fifth, enhancing public engagement is essential. The Museum should create multiple platforms for community participation, including directly impacted families. Institutionalizing public-facing processes and community engagement will ensure that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and valued.

Additionally, we recommend that the operation of the Memorial be considered for transfer to the National Park Service, with the museum and its archive managed by the Smithsonian Institution. This would leverage the expertise and resources of these respected organizations to benefit the Memorial and Museum.

I strongly oppose the passage of HR 5401 to provide more funding for the Museum until these critical recommendations are implemented. The Museum must engage in constructive dialogue with a diverse range of groups, including those who lost loved ones during 9/11, historians, clergy, and civil society leaders. Addressing public concerns regarding the content shared with visitors daily is vital.

Implementing these steps will help the Museum operate inclusively, transparently, and reflect the diverse fabric of our nation. I urge the Subcommittee to withhold additional funding until these necessary changes are made.