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**March 1, 2022**

**“Discrimination and the Civil Rights of the Muslim, Arab, and South Asian American  
Communities”**

**Testimony of Amrith Kaur Aakre  
before the**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties**

**Committee on the Judiciary**

**on**

**“Discrimination and the Civil Rights of the Muslim, Arab,  
and South Asian American Communities”**

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Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and distinguished members of the subcommittee: Thank you for welcoming me here to testify.

My name is Amrith Kaur Aakre. I am a dedicated public servant and former prosecutor, and today, I join you in my capacity as the Legal Director for the Sikh Coalition. When 9/11 happened, however, I was a college student, serving as the President of the George Washington University’s Sikh Students’ Association.

I’ll never forget the fear, anger, and disbelief I felt while watching the Pentagon burn from my rooftop. But as soon as I realized the hijackers’ pictures depicted them with brown skin, turbans, and beards--just like my father and so many other relatives--I felt something else too: an immediate recognition that the Sikh American community would be targeted with backlash. As a minority religious group, Sikhs understand the intersection of violence, trauma, and discrimination; its impact is great and paralyzing, and I knew that we didn’t have a voice to combat it.

From September to October of 2001, the Sikh Coalition tracked more than 300 incidents of bias and bigotry impacting Sikhs across the nation. In fact, the first person killed in a post-9/11 hate crime was a turbaned Sikh man, shot to death in Arizona on September 15. And while we can never stop focusing on the urgent threat of hate crimes, they are only part of the story. Since 9/11, our country has seen discrimination continue to permeate every aspect of our society.

Workplace discrimination harms Sikhs in a range of public and private sector jobs--including transportation, entertainment, healthcare, the military, and law enforcement--by allowing for the biased interpretation and application of government policies and laws. We have seen Sikhs willing to put their lives on the line in defense of their cities and country, only to be told that uniform and grooming policies prohibit their articles of faith. We have seen Sikhs ordered to cut their hair for work-related drug testing, even when alternative means are readily available. And we have seen Sikh first responders in the fight against COVID-19 pressured to shave their religiously-mandated beards instead of being given appropriate, safe personal protective equipment that doesn’t interfere with their faith. Regardless of the details, time and again, these

policies are interpreted in a way which disproportionately impacts minority communities, and our system allows it to keep happening.

We also receive Sikh travelers' reports of inappropriate demands to remove articles of faith, discriminatory comments by TSA agents, and other profiling in our airports. This is a humiliating hindrance for Sikhs and other religious and racial minorities, members of the transgender community, and others--and additional discriminatory practices like no-fly lists and the lingering effects of the previous administration's Muslim Ban continue to perpetuate profiling against too many people.

Sadly, even our children are not exempt. Per a 2014 Sikh Coalition study, Sikh students who maintain turbans, other head coverings, or unshorn hair are bullied at a rate twice the national average. Students have been called slurs like "terrorist" by their peers and teachers alike, and many are subject to physical violence. Worse, families are often left without recourse when administrators refuse to respond. School discrimination can take others forms as well, including keeping Sikh students from participating in sports or going on field trips because of their articles of faith.

I want to be clear: anti-Sikh bias and discrimination existed before 9/11. But the events of that day, the way that our politics and culture changed in response, and the manner in which our government policies and regulations continue to be interpreted have all institutionalized that discrimination. And Congress must take action.

First, you can fight workplace discrimination by equalizing the Title VII legal standard that currently allows employers to discriminate against workers who require religious accommodations if their request poses more than a "de minimis cost." Second, you can pass the End Racial and Religious Profiling Act and the NO BAN Act--both of which will reduce profiling against Sikhs and other marginalized groups. And third, you can Amend Title VI to ensure that the Department of Education prevents religious based bullying.

Additionally, we must continue to bring new perspectives into the halls of power--including elected office, agency appointments, and the judiciary, which all lack Sikh voices--to affect the creation, implementation, and fair interpretation of our laws. Finally, we must continue to confidently assert the value of diversity and inclusion in our society despite controversy and backlash.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.