

**Testimony of Mohammad Abu-Salha, M.D.**  
**Before the**  
**United States House Judiciary Committee**  
**April 9, 2019**

February 10, 2015. That was the day our lives changed forever when the lights in our life – my two daughters Yusor and Razan, and my son-in-law Deah – were shot to death, execution style in Yusor and Deah’s home in Chapel Hill.

I still remember the last patient I saw that day, and that I filed papers in my briefcase as I ended the workday. I know it was about six o’clock when I left for home. I remember the frantic call from Layla Barakat, my son-in-law’s mother – I could hardly understand her, she was too upset, but she was able to explain that there had been a shooting in Chapel Hill and that someone texted her that Deah might have been hurt. Layla, my wife Amira and I all drove to our children’s home, into the abyss.

While driving to the scene, aware of the anguish that my wife and Deah’s mother were feeling, I kept telling them that maybe the police had turned off phones in the area as part of their investigation and that’s why our children were not responding. Nevertheless, inside of me, I had this gutwrenching feeling that the unthinkable had happened.

When we arrived at the apartment complex, the scene of yellow tape and flashing lights squeezed our hearts, freezing the blood in our veins. Crisis workers talking to us and soothing us did not know what I knew – that in my line of work, a crisis worker talking to you usually means only one thing. Nevertheless, they kept us waiting for so long that messages of condolences began flooding in to members of my family and the Barakat family before we had any official confirmation of what happened. Those hours of waiting felt like an eternity, but we waited and waited, while others were surrounding us, weeping and wailing under the massive burden of loss. It was at least five or six hours before the police officers summoned the energy to confirm that Deah, Yusor, and Razan had all been shot to death. In a desperate attempt to make it bearable, an officer whispered: “They didn’t suffer, it was swift, one shot to the back of the head.” His statement did not make it more bearable; nothing did.

Even before we made it home that night, the local news aired a statement made by the Chapel Hill Police Chief stating that the murder was believed to be over a parking dispute. That statement by the police chief, we feared, quickly set the stage for how the nation, and the world, would be talking about this tragedy for years to come. But if you knew our children, you would know that they were not the kind to dispute over anything, let alone a parking spot in their neighborhood. I even remember that one FBI agent was in tears after examining their phones and seeing how Yusor was so loving and gentle towards Deah in her text messages to him. And later, as we had suspected, the FBI confirmed that none of their cars were parked in any of the killer’s parking spots.

News about their deaths spread quickly as it was all over the media. But, we weren’t hearing enough in the media reports about the fact that the man who murdered our children, someone whose name I struggle to say, hated them. Though Deah lived near this man uneventfully for a

year and a half, trouble began for all of them when the man observed my two daughters appearing on the scene, adorned with their hijabs. I remember my Yusor telling me that this condescending man told her he hated how she looked and dressed. We also didn't hear enough about who this man was – he was someone who posted on his Facebook page that “If you have a religion, then you have started it.” He kept twelve fire arms, one of which was a semi-automatic rifle, in his home. And he made it very clear to my children that they were not welcome there, in their neighborhood, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Over the course of the next few days, weeks and months, the whole world mourned with us as we tried to honor the legacy of our children. We also began to learn more about how their lives were taken.

I must be one of a few physicians, if not the only one, to read his own children's murder autopsy reports. They are seared into my memory. Bullets macerated through the top of Yusor's and Razan's heads into their brain stems with the gun nozzle leaving a mark on their hijbas and skin. Deah took many bullets to his arms and chest before he fell down to the ground. After shooting Yusor and Razan through their brains, the murderer saw that Deah was breathing and shot him again in the mouth. The last time we saw them in their coffins, Yusor's forehead was bulging and her hazel eyes had turned grey and lifeless. What was once Razan's warm and smiling face filled with life was now a lifeless stonecold and pasty deadly pale. Deah's face lacked expression and he had a broken tooth from that final shot to the mouth; while taking his last breath, he raised his index finger which is what we consider a sign of prayer.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify before your committee. But, I want you to remember more than their deaths. You need to know who they were and what we have all lost.

My older daughter, Yusor, was a vibrant 21-year old woman who always found ways to give to others in every aspect of her life; from volunteering at a dental clinic for Syrian refugees in Turkey to feeding the hungry and homeless in downtown Raleigh and building houses for Habitat for Humanity. She graduated from North Carolina State University and was accepted into UNC's school of dentistry. In the words of one of her close friends, Rana Odeh, Yusor “loved and was loved; she cared for others and was cared for by them; she had dreams and ambitions and a laugh that changed things for the better.” She loved this country tremendously and found great beauty in the diversity this country offered – in her own words to StoryCorps: “There's so many different people from so many different places, of different backgrounds and religions – but here we're all one.” Yusor was elegant, radiant, selfless, philanthropic, light-spirited, unassuming, athletic and all-giving.

My youngest, Razan was 19-years old and was so full of life. She was a gentle soul, generous giver, a talented artist and photographer. Razan was a freshman at North Carolina State University's School of Design and aspired to be an architect. During her freshman year, she mentored and taught youth and she led Project Downtown, feeding the homeless and hungry in Raleigh and Durham, NC. When she gave out meals she delivered them with personalized and inspirational notes. She expressed her passion for reading by framing a portrait of herself reading that was captioned: “Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing” which was a quote Razan cherished from Harper Lee's “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

My wife and I raised them to be Muslims, and as Americans who were proud of their country and their community – they were as American as apple pie.

In 2013, Yusor was engaged to be married to Deah Barakat, a smart and kind young man. Deah was an avid basketball fan – but not of Duke – and he had great pride in his hometown. Anyone who encountered Deah could see that he was a compassionate and caring individual who spent much of his free time giving back to those in need including getting free dental supplies to the homeless. Deah was in his second-year at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Dentistry where Yusor planned to join him soon. Deah once tweeted: “I have a dream one day to have a unified and structured community, have a voice in our society and support the youth with their projects.”

Yusor and Deah got married in December of 2014. In a matter of a short six weeks, our family and Deah’s family experienced some of the happiest days of our lives celebrating their love and their new life together, followed by one of the most painful days filled with the greatest heartache we have ever experienced, when they and our youngest daughter, Razan, were murdered. My wife Amira and I visited them the Saturday before they died; we shared a meal and many laughs – we always laughed together – and we watched the movie *Selma*.

Today, we are still awaiting their killer’s trial – but when it does eventually take place, we believe that all of the evidence in the case will reveal the gruesome details of how he brutally murdered our three children. Ladies and gentlemen – what happened to our children was a home invasion and an execution. Three beautiful young Americans were brutally murdered and there is no question in our minds that this tragedy was born of bigotry and hate. And people all over the world joined us in calling it what it was: a hate crime. And the laws and institutions that should protect all Americans, including my family, have failed us.

Although the local police chief has apologized for initially characterizing the crime as being over a parking dispute, the response from the government to the murders has been muted. We were told that North Carolina’s ethnic intimidation law does not apply to the crime that their killer is currently charged with: first degree murder. In addition, we were eventually told that the FBI and the United States Department of Justice would not pursue this as a hate crime because of the “high bar” for proving such a crime. Why is that the case?

Even worse, we saw that individuals used the internet to praise the killer for his actions. The day after the murders, someone tweeted that the person who slaughtered our children in cold blood deserved a medal of honor and a purple heart, and that he should be released immediately. Another tweeted, “Three down and 1.6 billion to go.” Some media outlets ridiculed the idea that a hate crime could be committed. One commentator showed my picture and said of my statement about the murders being a hate crime, “This is just vile,” exposing my family to further pain and the potential for more violence.

This has happened on too many occasions. Families like mine – regular Americans living regular lives – are left without hope that justice will truly be served. Our families were fortunate to have lawyers, including at the Muslim Advocates, supporting us every step of the way, but these volunteers cannot be everywhere. It should not be so difficult to navigate the system to

seek justice. And because the climate of bigotry is getting worse, I am gravely worried that more tragedies will happen if action is not taken at all levels of government.

As I sit before you now, over four years since our children were brutally murdered, I fear for all Muslim Americans. In just the last two years, the President of our country has called for a “complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering this country”, declared that “Islam hates us” on television, and praised an American general for having killed alleged Muslim “terrorists” in the Philippines with bullets dipped in pigs’ blood. Other public officials and politicians have called Islam a cancer and continue to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes of Muslims as extremists incompatible with America. Americans take cues from their public officials, and those officials have created an environment filled with dangerous, hateful rhetoric that dehumanizes Muslim Americans and fuels violence towards my community. It’s been four years since my children were murdered, and yet bigots continue to kill innocent people in our country. Just weeks ago, a young man in Indiana was shot multiple times in the back of the head by a man shouting anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim slurs.

Our mosques and community institutions also continue to be targeted by hate violence. A white supremacist filled with religious hatred murdered 50 people in their places of worship last month in Christchurch, New Zealand. While we mourned with New Zealand and the rest of the world in the aftermath of that shooting, we were traumatized knowing that mosques and other houses of worship are targeted for hate violence and vandalism far too often here at home. According to data collected by Muslim Advocates, there have been nearly 200 threatened, planned, or actual attacks against Muslim communities and houses of worship in the United States since 2015. In 2016, the FBI reported a 67% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes followed by a 19% increase in 2017.

Hate violence against members of my community cannot be ignored any longer. For far too long our public officials have turned a blind eye to the extremist violence that is killing our children – that killed my children. In 2012, a white supremacist murdered six and injured four at a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. In 2015, a white nationalist filled with racial hatred entered the predominantly African American Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine individuals. In 2018, a white nationalist burst into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and shouted anti-Semitic slurs, killing 11 worshippers.

How much longer will we allow this to continue? How many have to die until our government unequivocally stands up against bigotry in all forms, including white supremacist and white nationalist violence, and takes action to ensure that no other family has to experience what our families had to endure. We need to hold accountable public figures who spew hate speech and encourage hate violence. We need strong hate crimes laws in every state. We need social media companies to stop providing platforms and safe haven for hate speech and organizing by hate groups. Facebook, for example, continues to enable hate groups to use their event pages to organize protests in front of mosques. Finally, we need our FBI and other law enforcement agencies to track and disrupt extremist groups engaging in violence.

Immediately after our children were killed, our families were mostly in shock, disbelief, and attempting to cope with trauma. It was hard to go on. But, on the day after the murders,

something else started to happen. The friends, coworkers, and neighbors who knew Deah, Yusor, and Razan began sharing their memories of them, describing our children as role models and people that others admired. While nothing can take away the pain of their loss, we and others who knew them try always to honor their legacies of caring for others.

North Carolina State University has allocated 6 annual scholarships in their names. The University of North Carolina School of Dentistry designated an annual Deah Day, a day in their honor that students observe as a community service day. Also, one of their colleagues has established a clinic in their name “DYOR” for those who cannot afford dental care. In addition, the “Feed Their Legacy” campaign in their honor has been filling food banks annually throughout North Carolina and across the country. The Our Three Winners Endowment, named for these three amazing people, raises funds to provide dental care to refugees whom Deah and Yusor visited and with whom they shared laughs and smiles as Deah helped traumatized children gladly and trustingly open their mouths for dental care. The Endowment is also dedicated to fighting bias, giving charity, and is now well over a million dollars. And Deah’s House in downtown Raleigh nestles Project Lighthouse where people of all faiths and ethnicities come together for community service.

And even with all of those amazing projects that will touch so many lives, it will never equal the good works and service that we know our children would have contributed to the world had they not been violently murdered for being Muslim. And we miss them so much. At times, the pain we feel now is no different from what we felt in the immediate aftermath of their deaths. And I ask you, truly plead with you, to not let another American family go through this because our government would not act to protect all Americans.

Please remember them. Yusor. Razan. Deah. They are my children. And they are gone.