

**Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal (WA-07)**  
**Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties**  
**Hearing on “Discrimination and Civil Rights Issues of**  
**the Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Community”**  
**Tuesday, March 1, 2022**

**Testimony**

Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. I sit before you as the first South Asian woman in the House of Representatives and the only one currently serving in Congress.

9/11 forever changed what it means to be Muslim, Arab, or South Asian in America. On September 11, a friend on the East Coast woke me up at 5 in the morning, calling to ask if I’d heard what had happened. I had just moved into a new home and had to unpack my tiny television. I sat amidst boxes watching in horror as the first images of the Twin Towers played on repeat and I knew that life would never be the same again for people who looked like us sitting at this table.

In the days and weeks after, I received fearful calls from individuals in the Sikh, Muslim, and Arab-American community who were being attacked for wearing turbans or hijabs. I heard from moms and dads who were afraid to send their kids to school; a fear I shared for my own child. For the first time since I came to America at age 16, I had to think about whether to wear my Indian clothes outside, and I didn’t want to let my child leave the house. When I left home, I could feel the tension in my body; like I was constantly being watched and I worried that I would be attacked or that someone would yell hateful things at me simply for being who I am.

Others had it far worse. On September 13, a man armed with a gun and a tank of gasoline went to a mosque in North Seattle trying to attack people as they left evening prayers. A few days later, the first Sikh American—Balbir Singh Sodhi— was murdered in Mesa, Arizona, simply because his attacker thought he looked like Osama bin Laden and should be held responsible for the attacks. Every day, I received calls about Muslim women who had been harassed on the streets, women having their hijabs torn off, taxi drivers who were beaten, Muslim families who withdrew their children from school because they were too afraid to get on the bus or go out in public.

It didn’t help when days after the attacks, President George W. Bush proclaimed, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” For many Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities, this stark language seemed directed at us. These words cemented division and I cannot overstate the psychological impact it had on our communities.

This us versus them rhetoric sparked terrible policy decisions that continue to impact the civil rights and civil liberties of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities as well as other communities. Cloaked in national security, the President and Congress advanced policies and laws intentionally designed to criminalize, surveil, police, and deny immigration benefits to these communities. Just 10 days after 9/11, Congress passed the PATRIOT Act with little regard for

the enormous problems it created for civil liberties and privacy protections for all Americans, but in particular those most likely to be targeted—many provisions of which still remain and have been used against MASA communities.

Amidst all of this, I founded a nonprofit civil rights organization named OneAmerica to fight the backlash targeting Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian communities and to organize immigrants across the board for justice. In the months and years that followed, we successfully defeated government efforts to deport about 5,000 Somalis, fought back against Special Registration of Arab and Muslim men, and defended Muslim and Somali businesses from unjust attempts by the government to put them out of business. We held hearings to tell our stories, including a 2003 Senate hearing held at the request of the late senator Ted Kennedy. I am proud that out of tremendous crisis came the courage and resilience of our communities but I am also aware of how much work there is still to do.

Twenty years later, here in Congress, I was proud to introduce a resolution on the anniversary of 9/11 with my colleagues, Representatives Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Judy Chu. Our resolution, H. Res. 629, recognizes the climate of hate that Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Sikh communities have experienced since September 11 and calls for action to address the lasting impacts of 9/11. I hope this hearing becomes one step of many to examine and ultimately dismantle 9/11-era policies that have perpetuated and exacerbated discrimination against these communities.