

Essay: Citizenship and Islamophobia After 9/11

By The Asian American Education Project

Background:

On the morning of September 11, 2001, nineteen militants associated with the extremist group Al-Qaeda hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks in the United States. Two planes were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a third plane hit the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia outside Washington, D.C., and a fourth plane crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. A total of 2,996 people were killed during the attacks and another 10,000 were injured. The events of 9/11 reshaped the global response to terrorism and raised new questions about security, privacy, and the treatment of prisoners. It also impacted U.S. immigration policies, led the U.S. into its longest war operations overseas, and caused a surge in discrimination, racial profiling, and hate crimes domestically.

Vocabulary:

- **Al-Qaeda:** a multinational militant Islamic-extremist network; it was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and several other Arab volunteers during the Soviet–Afghan War
- **Deportation:** the expulsion of a person or group of people from a place or country
- **Gurdwara:** a Sikh shrine or place of worship
- **Hate Crime:** a crime is committed on the basis of a race, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability
- **Hijab:** head coverings worn by Muslim women, often specifically referring to a cloth wrapped around the head and neck, covering the hair but leaving the face visible
- **Hijacked:** unlawfully seize (an aircraft, ship, or vehicle) in transit and force it to go to a different destination or use it for one's own purposes
- **Islamophobia:** a fear, hatred, or prejudice toward Islam and Muslims that results in a pattern of discrimination, oppression and violence
- **Mosque:** a building used for public worship by Muslims
- **Muslims:** people who adhere to the religion of Islam
- **Racial Profiling:** the use of race or ethnicity as grounds for suspecting someone of having committed an offense
- **Scapegoated:** when a person or group is singled out for unmerited blame and consequent negative treatment
- **Surveillance:** monitoring of behavior, activities, or information for the purpose of intelligence gathering, influencing, managing or directing
- **Terrorism:** unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of a political aim
- **Turban:** type of headwear based on cloth winding and is worn as customary headwear by people from various cultures
- **Undocumented:** not having the appropriate legal documents

Read the text. Underline or highlight important ideas.

In this space, write down notes and questions:

On September 11, 2001 (referred to as 9/11), the United States was attacked through the use of hijacked airplanes to strike designated targets, including the World Trade



Center in New York City. These attacks were coordinated by Al-Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist group. While the group recruited from a number of countries and regions, the terrorists in this attack, including their leader Osama Bin Laden, were from Saudi Arabia.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, many South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern Americans reported racial profiling, hate crimes, and other discriminatory acts stemming from fears generated by the attacks because they were scapegoated for 9/11.

The citizenship and loyalty of Muslims and South Asian Americans in the United States was questioned. According to comedian and activist Hari Kondabolu, South Asian Americans were “victimized twice” in the wake of the attacks. They too feared terrorism like their fellow Americans, but the country they lived in and loved, hated them because of the attacks.

Many Americans began to view South Asian Americans as “un-American” because of their skin color, ethnic clothing, language, religion, and other visible and invisible markers of cultural and ancestral identity. The prevailing ideology was: If you weren’t white, or more specifically, if you looked like one of the terrorists who attacked the U.S., you were likely a terrorist, a terrorist sympathizer, or simply not American. These acts of prejudice and hostility against anyone who appeared to be Muslim came to be referred to as Islamophobia.

Dark-skinned South Asian Americans who wore a turban, spoke other languages besides English in public, identified as Muslim, frequented mosques and gurdwaras, and/or worked in gas stations and other small businesses were often the targets of retaliation for 9/11. On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American, was killed in the first 9/11-related hate crime at a gas station he owned in Mesa, Arizona by a white airplane mechanic who reportedly told friends he was going to “shoot some towel-heads.” According to a report by Asian Americans Advancing Justice, over 500 hate crimes were reported during this period.

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent irrational fear towards immigrants had severe implications for American security and immigration policies. In October 2001, Congress under the Bush Administration passed the USA PATRIOT Act to stop and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, and allowed for the legal surveillance of certain communities. The DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act,

which would have provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country as children, failed to pass in Congress. The government instead concentrated its efforts toward deportations and surveillance.

One example of the surveillance that was widespread post-9/11 was the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) implemented in June 2002 to screen foreign visitors who might pose a risk to national security. It required male noncitizens, sixteen and older, from twenty-five predesignated countries - all but one being Muslim-majority - to go through stringent registration requirements with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including fingerprinting, reporting for questioning with immigration officials, screening on arrival, tracking of residence and movement, and more. Those who failed to comply with the requirements faced several criminal and immigration penalties, including deportation and being barred from receiving future visas or gaining permanent residency. According to DHS, between September 2002 and September 2003 (the length of NSEERS's shorter, special registration component), 83,519 individuals participated in special registration interviews nationwide. As a result of these interviews, 13,799 individuals were placed in removal proceedings for violations of their immigration status, and not for ties to terrorism, the supposed focus of the program.

Post-9/11 programs and surveillance – which included Muslim informants for the FBI or local police departments spying on communities in mosques, community organizations, and other community spaces – were dedicated to collecting information about U.S. citizens that would illuminate any suspicious activity or potentially reveal domestic terrorist plots. It is difficult to calculate how many people were impacted by these programs, as they were often kept secret, but being surveilled by the government has left a generation of Muslim Americans with feelings of distrust and fear. As recently as 2017, the Trump Administration attempted to administer a "Muslim ban" to deny the entry of individuals from a variety of predominantly Muslim countries – most of which were on the NSEERS list – to the United States.

To highlight their patriotism, some South Asians and Muslims would hang the American flag outside their homes or businesses, stop wearing turbans or hijabs, stop speaking their native language in public, or stop visiting houses of worship so often. Some non-Muslim South Asians also distanced themselves from Muslims, dividing

the South Asian American community. In essence, some South Asian Americans felt they had to make extreme efforts to assimilate into white American culture by willingly risking the loss of their own cultural, ancestral, hybrid identity or, at the very least, risk losing the ability to openly share their cultural and religious identity with the nation.

Since 2001, South Asian Americans have actively resisted and countered the harmful stereotypes and assumptions of their "un-Americanness." Dozens of grassroots organizations aimed at supporting South Asians and educating the American public have grown across the country, such as The Sikh Coalition and South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT). Additionally, South Asian representation has significantly increased in various government offices, most recently with the election of Kamala Harris as Vice President of the United States in November 2020.

In this space, write a summary of the text in 2-3 sentences:

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