

## **Handout #1(Lesson 3): Hate Crimes, Discrimination and Government Action**

In the 1980s, Congress established a hate crimes law making certain behaviors motivated by the offender's bias toward the victim criminal, thus punishable by the courts.

Examples of hate crimes include physical or verbal violence, **vandalism, assault, arson and battery**. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "hate crimes are intended to hurt and intimidate individuals, because they are perceived to be different with respect to their race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender or disability." Hate crimes often create great fear in the community to which the victim belongs. In the years following 9/11, there was a marked increase in hate crimes against people of Middle Eastern descent.

What leads people to commit hate crimes? Hate crimes flourish when **prejudice and discrimination** are not kept under control. Prejudice is the attitude that occurs when people believe in a set of negative qualities about a particular group that are distorted and not based on reality. Discrimination is unfair action taken by biased persons against people believe to be different based on how they look or what they believe, or where they come from. Sometimes it is hard to tell if one has been discriminated against. If a woman with a headscarf goes to rent an apartment that she saw advertised in the newspaper, and the landlord says to her that it is already rented, she might be a victim of subtle discrimination. If the woman in search of an apartment sends a female friend without a headscarf, but of the same race and ethnic group, to see the apartment and the landlord says the apartment is available, then there is proof of anti-Muslim discrimination.

Often during a crisis such as the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, people look for someone to blame. They strike back with anger and hatred. Generally, the ethnic or ethno-religious groups who share their background with the perpetrators become targets of **backlash**. Middle Eastern Americans were victimized as **scapegoats** after 9/11. Since the attackers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were from the Middle East, persons of Middle Eastern descent in the United States became the targets of hate crimes. **Stereotyping** is a type of prejudice. An example would be a claim that a certain group of people are all lazy or cheat in business. Stereotypes are complicated and are created for a variety of reasons. In particular, the Hollywood movie industry has created a stereotypical image of people from the Middle East. They are portrayed as violent, terrorists, womanizers and billionaires. Such false notions, often based on fear and ignorance, have impacted Middle Eastern Americans, especially Americans of Arab and Iranian ancestry. After 9/11, prejudiced persons have spread the idea that Islam is a violent religion. The Qu'ran makes it clear that this is a falsehood.

Hate crime laws exist at the local, state and national levels. The first backlash victim after 9/11 took place in Mesa, Arizona. The owner of a gas station was murdered because his turban was mistakenly identified as Middle Eastern and Muslim. He was an American citizen who happened to be Sikh. The FBI is responsible to collect statistics on all hate-motivated crimes including anti-Muslim crimes. There were only 33 anti-Islamic offenses in 2000, but 546 offenses in 2001 amounting to a jump from 2.1 percent to 27.2 percent. Some Middle Eastern Americans were refused employment, some were subject to hostile remarks at school, and fearful passengers forced them off planes. Between September 11, 2001 and May 15, 2006, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice

investigated over 700 cases of crimes against Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, and South Asians—citizens, residents, immigrants, and visitors alike. All the victims were presumed by their attackers to be from the Middle East, even though many were not. People who feel they are victims of workplace discrimination can file complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

Some say that since the 9/11 terrorists were Arab and Muslim, the government needs to **profile** all Arab or Muslim men. In fall 2001, a troop of Arab American Boy Scouts from Dearborn, Michigan, was on a field trip and stopped by the police for two hours for taking photos near a bridge. The only reason they were stopped was that they were of Arab descent. Critics of the practice of profiling say it not only violates individual rights but also is an unreliable way to combat terrorism. Time is spent searching without just cause, mostly on the basis of appearance or ethnic affiliation, instead of being used on investigating people who have given authorities reasons to be suspected of planning an attack.

In public, people have shown their **bias** against Middle Eastern Americans by making negative comments about their dress or what they are reading. An Egyptian American who came to the United States when she was four-years-old was reading the Qur'an on the subway in New York City. A fellow rider told her she was making the other passengers uncomfortable. Women are openly criticized for wearing the *hijab* or headscarf. High school students in Michigan assaulted a fellow student, pulled off her scarf and called her a terrorist. In a survey of Arab and Muslim taxi drivers in New York City, the drivers said they noticed a change in how customers treated them. They observed that customers would look at the driver's name on the license in the taxi, and seeing a Middle Eastern name, would become unfriendly.

Stereotyping of Middle Easterners is commonplace. Movies, television shows, video games and comics often portray Middle Easterners as villains. After 9/11, the media increased its exaggerated picture of Arabs and Muslims as the enemies of America. In many cases, commentators, politicians, even religious leaders, used the media to blame all Muslims for the terrorist attacks. They created a fear of Americans who follow the Islamic faith. This fear is called **Islamophobia**. Middle Eastern and Muslim American organizations have been the target of Islamophobia. Politicians have become scared of any association with groups that represent Muslims. Often these groups have been created to bring about better relations between Muslims and Non-Muslims. Politicians are worried that working with these groups will lead them to be branded as “pro-terrorist.” When Keith Ellison, an African American and the first Muslim elected to Congress, decided to take his oath of office on a Qur'an he was strongly criticized by other office holders. He was accused of being anti-American. In a show of patriotism he elected to take the oath “to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States of America” on a Qur'an that belonged to Thomas Jefferson!

The period after 9/11 saw an increase in discrimination, stereotyping and hate crimes. Often fueled by the media, such biases against people of Middle Eastern descent continue. Many Americans have come to the defense of their Arab American neighbors and colleagues at work. The more courageous and upstanding politicians and commentators have spoken out against Islamophobia.

Source: Ancy Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. 2009. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Chapters 5 and 6)