

Usra Ghazi
Witness Testimony

Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker, distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to speak today. The issue of hate crimes in the U.S., and specifically those targeting religious minorities, is one of growing national concern. At America Indivisible, we are primarily focused on the issue of racialized anti-Muslim bigotry and the ways that it impacts Muslim communities and those perceived to be Muslim, which may include Arab, Black, Sikh, and South Asian Americans. As a coalition-based organization, we partner across communities to identify solutions that strengthen relationships between bigotry-impacted communities and their neighbors and local government representatives.

One very critical way that religious actors are responding to hate crimes and discrimination is to build more effective ways to monitor and report on these events. Federal hate crimes statistics consistently under report hate crime incidents for many reasons, including the lack of a standardized reporting process for all states, and also due to strained relationships between bigotry-impacted communities and law enforcement entities. In my conversations with Muslim, Arab, and Sikh communities impacted by anti-Muslim vandalism, bias, and hate, many have expressed a desire to keep their heads down rather than reporting these events to law enforcement agencies. Despite this challenge, Sikh, Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and religious communities of color are increasingly coordinating “Know Your Rights” workshops and meetings with law enforcement officials within their houses of worship and community centers. Religious and civic leaders do this work with great risk to their community reputations. Those who choose to engage with such agencies risk being attacked for cooperating with a government whose chief executive antagonizes Muslims and other minorities in his rhetoric and policies.

This takes me to my second point, about the proactive ways that religious actors are responding to hate. Due to the rise of hate crimes and hate speech against Muslim and Sikh Americans, these communities by necessity have had to organize outreach efforts to humanize themselves while raising cultural and religious literacy among their neighbors and governments. These range from “Meet a Muslim” or “Wear a Turban” days to working with media and entertainment industry officials about misrepresentation of these groups in their media content. These communities are also building their civic health, getting more involved in elections, and running for office at record rates. We now have Muslim and Sikh mayors as well as officials from these faiths in a range of other governmental positions. These efforts help to ensure that our cities, counties, and states are truly representative of the rich diversity of American communities.

At America Indivisible, we work with officials in city, state, and county-level government to help grow their cultural and religious literacy, while building the civic health of bigotry impacted communities. Developing effective ways to track and report on hate crimes is absolutely critical, but it is also one step too late. Social science research proves that when diverse communities have strong associational ties, like working together on community projects, they are much more resilient in times of conflict. Our hope for the future is that more mayors, governors, and county officials will recognize the many ways that religious actors are contributing to the civic health of their neighborhoods. We would like to see more of these officials visiting their local mosques or temples. Our communities have been shaping the American social fabric as small business owners and professionals, as educators or officers in the armed forces for decades, and in some cases, generations. One sure fire way to prevent hate and build inclusion is to recognize these contributions and invest in these communities’ civic health.