

Remembering the Aftermath of 9/11

By [James J. Zogby](#)

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I often write an article on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks reflecting on the impact that tragedy had on my country and my community. I believe that it is important we never forget how we felt on that day and the days that followed.

In a piece I wrote within days of the attack in 2001, I noted how Arab Americans were overcome by a flood of conflicting emotions. We were horrified by the devastation and enormous loss of life. We were shaken by stories of the innocents who lost their lives. We were angry at the murderers who had committed these heinous acts. But within hours after the attacks, we were forced to experience fear and isolation when the backlash began — fear because we received threats, and isolation because we were pulled away from the collective grief we were sharing as Americans and forced to look over our shoulders to protect ourselves and families. We also ultimately came to feel gratitude as so many of our fellow citizens came to our defence and protected us. I don't ever want us to forget all of these emotions. They not only define those days, they also tell an important story about America.

This year, I didn't write a column about 9/11. Instead, I made do with a few tweets recalling the events and emotions of the day. I am now compelled to write because of the brazenly insensitive and cavalier comments about 9/11 posted by Paul Krugman, a respected Nobel prize-winning New York Times opinion columnist. In a series of tweets, Krugman wrote the following:

“Overall, Americans took 9/11 pretty calmly. Notably, there wasn't a mass outbreak of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence, which all too easily happened. And while GW Bush was a terrible president, to his credit he tried to calm prejudice, not feed it.”

“Daily behaviour wasn't drastically affected. True, for a while people were afraid to fly: My wife and I took a lovely trip to the US Virgin Islands a couple of months later, because air fares and hotel rooms were so cheap. But life returned to normal fairly fast.”

Krugman's brazen dismissal of the painful aftermath of the attacks on the Arab and Muslim communities was so hurtful and offensive that I, and many others, felt obliged to respond. Instead of being chastened, the next day Krugman doubled down in yet another series of tweets still trying to make his case that the backlash wasn't as severe as it might have been. He cherry-picked statistics in an effort to show how anti-Muslim hate crimes paled in comparison with anti-Black hate crimes.

Because of who he is and the potential impact of what he writes, I cannot let Krugman's

whitewashing of the post-9/11 period go unchallenged. Because we must never forget the damage done to my community and to our nation's institutions by Bush administration policies, I need to set the record straight.

In the aftermath of the attacks, acts of hatred and death threats were frequent and frightening. My office logged 800 pieces of hate mail and phone messages in just the first few days following 9/11. Only a few hours after the planes hit the World Trade Centre, I received my first death threat. A caller to our office left a message stating, "Jim, you towel head, all Arabs must die. We will slit your throat and kill your children." It was the first of many. My daughter and a nephew also received threats, as did my brother John, whose office received two bomb threats. This was just what happened to my family.

My office began to receive reports from Arab Americans across the country of threats, harassment, and acts of discrimination. We researched, verified and documented each case. In testimony before the US Commission on Civil Rights, delivered one month after 9/11, I reported the threats of violence and actual acts of violence and harassment committed against my community and those who were perceived to be Arab or Muslim.

There were acts of violence against churches, mosques and Arab-owned businesses. Students were harassed, as were cab drivers and even Arab-looking shoppers. In fact, Arab and south Asian cab drivers in DC stopped working for weeks after several cases of harassment and violence by police and passengers. In all, we logged and reported hundreds of cases in just the first 30 days.

Equally serious were the hundreds of employment and housing discrimination cases that were reported to us. In numbers of instances people were fired and told that their fellow employees didn't want "an Arab in the workplace". We had to hire a specialist to assist these victims.

And when airline travel resumed, while the Krugmans were able to enjoy cheap flights to the Virgin Islands, Arab Americans were being subjected to cruel and indiscriminate subjective profiling. They were ordered off planes and denied the right to fly because other passengers claimed the presence of an Arab-looking person made them uncomfortable. Some cases were bizarre. An Arab American congressman was denied a seat on a flight, as was an Arab American secret service agent flying to Texas to join the president's security detail.

But these cases tell only part of the story. While Krugman was correct to observe that president George W. Bush cautioned Americans against singling out Arabs and Muslims for blame, he fails to note the extent to which Bush's Department of Justice (DOJ) implemented policies which did exactly that. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the DOJ launched a massive round-up of recent Arab and Muslim immigrants, many of whom were summarily deported. The tallies of those deported played out daily on the news creating fear in the community and arousing the suspicion in the general public that "they must be the problem".

This was followed by two publicised "call-ins" in which thousands of Arabs and Muslims were contacted by mail and ordered to report for interviews with immigration officials. As a result, there was a very real fear that Arab and Muslim immigrants might be interned as Japanese Americans were during World War II.

We were, of course, spared from this fate because so many of our fellow citizens came to

our defence, among the first being members of the Japanese American community. The Ad Council of America worked with us to produce newspaper and television ads warning against a backlash. The Senate and House of Representatives passed resolutions defending us. Dozens of civil rights and ethnic organisations, Christian, Jewish, Sikh and Buddhist religious leaders, and unions spoke out on our behalf. And law enforcement agencies offered us protection.

But as gratified as we were by this response, nothing can erase the lasting reminders of the fear and the hatred we experienced and the thousands of our fellow Arabs and Muslims whose lives were ruined or forever changed by violence, threats, discrimination, deportation, or just being made to feel alien in their own country.

As for Krugman’s statistics showing that the increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes was real was still significantly less than those against Blacks, all I can say is “nonsense”. In the first place, the FBI statistics he cited don’t include anti-Arab hate crimes. At the time, the government didn’t report them. Second, the firings, denial of housing, etc. aren’t considered hate crimes. Third, since the Black community is more than ten times larger than Arab Americans, using this comparison to minimise our pain is both ludicrous and hurtful. Fourth, statistics, of course, don’t include harassment by law enforcement, deportations, and other fear-inducing behaviours by government officials. And finally, since hate crimes needed to be reported to the very agencies that were causing wide-spread fear among the community, Arabs were often hesitant to report them.

So, Paul Krugman, before you write about this period, speak to us first. Maybe you don’t remember what it was like for us, we, on the other hand, can’t ever forget.

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