

**Will I Ever Belong? Muslim Diaspora and Discrimination in the Aftermath
of Al-Qaeda's 9/11 Attacks.**

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While the events of September 11th, 2001, are widely discussed among historians, many agree that 9/11 remains one of the most defining moments of the early 21st century. The attack on the World Trade Centre in New York caused mass devastation to lives, homes, families, and buildings. Though it was carried out by the Islamic extremist group Al-Qaeda, countless innocent Muslims became targets of discrimination in its aftermath. Many within the Muslim community began questioning their sense of belonging as prejudice and suspicion deepened in their daily lives. The actions of Al-Qaeda not only destroyed morale but also fractured the Islamic faith, which millions practice peacefully every day.

It is important to recognise that Islamophobia has existed for centuries across many nations. Yet, the rise of terrorist activity in the late 20th century, particularly after the Soviet Afghan War (1979–1989), heightened global prejudice toward Muslim nations and communities. Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, used Islam as justification for terror: distorting the faith's teachings for his own agenda. This manipulation led many to associate Islam itself with extremism - a false and damaging perception that fuelled widespread prejudice after 9/11. Consequently, Muslims across the world felt an even greater sense of exclusion and alienation. The shared Muslim American experience is captured, highlighting how “in a single day they went from being and feeling just like every other American citizen to suspects whose patriotism, faith and even place of birth were thrown into question” (Gillum, 2018). This stark shift in national behaviour highlights just how deeply discrimination took hold after 9/11. News coverage and political rhetoric further embedded phrases like “Islamic terrorism” into public discourse, suggesting a dangerous link between Islam and terrorism.

This bias within the media has played a crucial role in shaping public perception, often fuelling prejudice against Islamic communities. It is noted that “after 9/11, anti-Muslim hate crimes are increasing in the West and Europe speedily, where brown skin, beard, hijab, scarves and Asian articles of wearing and food requirements are perceived as a threat” (Sadia, 2021). This was particularly evident in the United States, where Muslim-owned shops were vandalised, and hate crimes soared. This discrimination soon spread across borders and was specifically intensified after the 2004 Madrid bombings and the 2005 London bombings. Fear and misunderstanding blurred the line between Islam and terrorism, and many nations began to isolate Muslim communities as a result.

The impact of Al-Qaeda's actions also deepened divisions within Arabic-speaking nations. During the ‘war on terror’ period, U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq led to the deaths of

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countless innocent civilians. Although these military campaigns were directed at the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, they triggered widespread displacement, forcing hundreds of thousands into diaspora. While Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan bore the brunt of the conflict, the repercussions of 9/11 reverberated across the globe; it affected various communities, such as Egypt, the UAE and more. This reinforced the marginalisation of Muslims – they were now framed as outsiders, both in their native countries and internationally.

This climate of fear and prejudice spread rapidly, extending even beyond Muslims, and started to include South Asian and Middle Eastern communities. Sikhs, for example, were attacked for wearing religious head coverings much like those wearing the Hijab: some attacks even ended in murder. According to FBI reports, hate crimes targeting marginalised brown communities in the U.S. rose seventeen times. Acts of arson and vandalism became common in Western nations, while countless travellers with brown skin were subjected to racial profiling and invasive scrutiny at airports - a pattern that persists today (Sadia, 2021). Those perceived to be of Arab descent continue to face racial slurs, suspicion, and systemic bias constantly in contemporary society.

While heightened security measures in airports and public spaces were intended to protect citizens, they often disproportionately target people of colour, particularly those who are brown-skinned or appearing as if they be Muslim. This reflects how the government's response to 9/11 mirrored and reinforced pre-existing racial and religious discrimination. Even in popular media, this imbalance persists. For example, in the documentary *The Women of 9/11*, Muslim voices remain largely absent, as do many other documented shows regarding the attacks. This not only raises questions about bias to this day, but it also signifies the consistent lack of acknowledgement for people of colour in modern-day media.

The question of belonging remains synonymous in discussion with Al-Qaeda's terrorist actions. For more than two decades, innocent Muslims have endured scrutiny and suspicion because of the distorted image of Islam that was perpetuated. Muslims and those of Southwest Asian or Middle Eastern heritage have faced ongoing systemic prejudice, often regardless of their individual innocence or identity. However, amidst this struggle, many have found solidarity and strength in shared experience.

At the 9/11 Memorial, the inscription from Virgil, '*No Day Shall Erase You from the Memory of Time*', serves as a poignant reminder that the memory of those lost, and those oppressed

because of 9/11, will be remembered. For many decades, the Islamic faith has been scrutinised and judged falsely, yet some sense of acknowledgement must be a consequence of the actions of Al-Qaeda. Ultimately, these collective experiences show that, together, we can find belonging through division, loss, and resilience.