

**Backlash Mitigation Plan:  
Protecting Ethnic and Religious Minorities Following a Terrorist Attack**

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**Abstract:** This document examines how communities can better prepare to protect ethnic and religious minorities in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Following the events of September 11, 2001, there was a drastic increase in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States. Given the possibility of future terrorist attacks, and the historical legacy of backlash violence against minorities following such events, local communities must be prepared to respond proactively and effectively to the likelihood of a hostile post-disaster response directed toward at-risk minority groups. It is recommended that communities: a) identify vulnerable populations; b) conduct pre-disaster outreach to at-risk communities; c) improve cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural understanding; and d) develop a Backlash Mitigation Plan. Specific suggestions for creating and implementing a Backlash Mitigation Plan are also included. Taking these actions in advance of potential outbreaks of bias-motivated crimes can help diminish potential harm to individuals and property, while also building community solidarity.

## **Backlash Mitigation Plan: Protecting Ethnic and Religious Minorities Following a Terrorist Attack<sup>1</sup>**

Not all disasters provoke the same social responses. Social science research has shown that the type of disaster – natural, technological, or human-initiated – may directly affect whether community consensus or conflict follows the event (Quarantelli 1993). Specifically, crises that involve actual or perceived human culpability are more likely to lead to a lack of post-disaster social solidarity (Bucher 1957; Couch and Kroll-Smith 1991; Cuthbertson and Nigg 1987). For example, civil disturbances, technological disasters, and terrorist attacks may result in conflict, blame attribution, and other forms of socially disruptive behavior. Of specific interest here are terrorist attacks and their resultant impacts on individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

Terrorist acts are human-conceived, violent, and purposely designed to create widespread fear, psychological and social trauma, and physical destruction. Terrorism elicits feelings of revulsion in most who experience or witness it, and the ensuing shock and anger may take many forms, as happened following the events of September 11, 2001. While there was a tremendous increase in volunteerism, charitable giving, and other forms of altruistic behavior immediately following the September 11 attacks (Lowe and Fothergill 2003; Turkel 2002; Webb 2002), a general need to focus blame also emerged. The call to find those who were responsible was understandable, given the intentional, violent, and criminal nature of the attacks. However, the attribution of blame and subsequent scapegoating that followed the disaster has resulted in some ethnic and religious minority groups in the United States feeling isolated and fearful as members of their community have suffered from acts of discrimination and violence (Peek 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger, longitudinal study of the impact of the events and aftermath of September 11 on a group of young Muslim Americans living in New York City and Colorado. Ninety-one in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with 127 Muslim Americans (including first and second-generation Muslim Americans, Muslim immigrants, and converts to Islam), from September 2001 through October 2003

The United States has a long history of intolerance toward racial, ethnic, national, and religious minorities during times of war, crisis, and national insecurity. Indeed, those individuals and groups perceived as different or foreign have all too often been characterized as the enemy or as a threat to national security (Dower 1986; Gray 1959; Grossman 1995). For example, Native Americans from over 100 different cultures were collectively labeled as a menace and barrier to Western civilization, and were almost completely exterminated by colonizers of the Western Hemisphere (Deloria 1999). German Americans were harassed and discriminated against during World War I, and over 110,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated in internment camps during World War II (Saunders and Daniels 2000). This trend to blame and stigmatize minority groups during times of social, economic, and political crisis has been an enduring feature of United States – and world – history. The intent of this document is to encourage readers to consider what individuals, communities, and government officials can do to better prepare for and respond to the possibility of hate-related violence in the aftermath of another terrorist attack.

### **Post-September 11 Backlash**

In the days, weeks, and months after September 11, thousands of Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, Sikhs, and others who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent were victims of harassment, racial and religious profiling, workplace discrimination, verbal and physical assault, and even murder (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002; U.S. Department of Justice 2002). Overall, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim violence in the United States increased by 1700 percent in 2001. Additionally, minority advocacy groups documented numerous instances of illegal and discriminatory removal of passengers from aircraft based on the passenger's perceived ethnicity,

denial of service, discriminatory service, and housing discrimination against Arab Americans and Muslims (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2003; Arab American Institute 2002; Council on American Islamic Relations 2002a, 2002b).

It should be noted that even though these statistics are alarming, given the drastic increase in hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims following September 11, the numbers do not tell the entire story. Hate crime statistics only document: a) acts defined as criminal under hate crimes legislation, which varies from state to state; b) acts that have actually been reported and recorded as such; and c) in most cases, the most heinous of crimes. Hate crime statistics obviously do not reflect the true number of incidents committed against any given minority population; nor do these numbers capture the full psychological and social impact of more common forms of harassment and discrimination. For a more complete understanding of this problem, we must scrutinize victim advocacy reports, employment records, racial profiling reports, and hate crimes statistics. Only after documenting and analyzing this data, can we fully comprehend how to prevent, ameliorate, and respond to post-event acts of intolerance and violence.

### **Developing Proactive Community Response Strategies**

Arabs and Muslims living in the United States have endured stereotyping, discrimination, and backlash violence for several decades, largely triggered by conflict in the Middle East and acts of terrorism associated with Arabs or Muslims (Human Rights Watch 2002; Said 1997; Shaheen 2002). However, the magnitude and severity of the backlash following September 11 was unique. The rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes after September 11 was the most dramatic to date, and many advocates for minority communities strongly fear that if another terrorist attack occurs, the backlash will be even worse (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination

Committee 2003; Arab American Institute 2002; Council on American-Islamic Relations 2002a, 2002b; Human Rights Watch 2002).

Given the possibility of future terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, and the historical legacy of backlash violence against ethnic and religious minority groups following such events, local communities must be prepared to respond effectively and proactively to the likelihood of a hostile post-disaster response directed toward vulnerable populations. Initiating and following through on backlash violence planning is a challenge. It does not easily fit within the traditional organizational structures of many agencies, and entails a significant allocation of time and staff resources, that, to be effective, must be drawn from the grassroots, planning, law enforcement, victims advocate, and disaster response communities. In addition, its benefits are not always readily apparent. However, it can be crucial to stemming the tide of ethnically and religiously motivated post-disaster discrimination and violence. In communities such as Dearborn, Michigan, where well established good-faith relationships exist between various ethnic groups, government representatives were able to quickly join Arab Americans and Muslims in preparing and acting in a coordinated way that spanned emergency response, law enforcement deployment, and message dissemination (Human Rights Watch 2002). The sustained efforts of community stakeholders significantly deterred the backlash that occurred in Dearborn – the largest community of Arab Americans in the United States – following the events of September 11.

### **Recommendations**

Similar to emergency management planning, building and fostering good-faith community relationships prior to a crisis is crucial to creating an environment of post-disaster social solidarity. Included below is a set of recommendations to help communities prepare for

and mitigate backlash violence. Taking these actions in advance of potential outbreaks of bias-motivated crimes can help diminish potential harm to individuals and property.

### **Identify Vulnerable Populations**

Law enforcement officials, emergency managers, and local leaders should work together to identify segments of the community that might be at risk to backlash violence. Arabs, South Asians, Muslims, and Sikhs were targeted in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and hence particular attention should be given to these groups. However, it also should be recognized that other events might endanger different populations.

Grassroots organizations and advocacy groups for minority communities are useful starting points to identify those most at-risk of discrimination and hate crimes. Within the local community, minority groups often sponsor associations, businesses, student groups, places of worship, educational centers, and other organizations. The mission of these organizations typically includes outreach to the broader community through conferences and seminars, public education, and media relations efforts.

### **Conduct Pre-Disaster Outreach to At-Risk Communities**

Local law enforcement officials and community leaders must forge strong ties and trusting relationships with members of at-risk minority communities before disaster strikes. Building a disaster resistant community from the social and human relations viewpoint necessitates an enduring commitment and personalized approach, given the central role that relationship building and mutual trust plays in this effort.

Becoming acquainted with leaders from vulnerable communities, collaborating on projects of mutual concern, and holding public meetings are proactive ways to establish open channels of communication. Law enforcement agencies and political leaders must also institute

programs to reach out to minority community members. Just as minority advocacy groups undertake efforts to inform the more general public about their cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, law enforcement officers must also attempt to educate the community about the rationale for their programs and the efforts that they are undertaking to protect all individuals and groups. Indeed, initiatives between grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, law enforcement agencies, and political leaders must be reciprocal and multidirectional. This will increase the commitment of stakeholders from various groups within the community.

### **Improve Cultural Sensitivity**

Emergency managers, police officers, public health officials, and others who may respond to disasters need to be educated regarding the beliefs, traditions, cultural norms (including acceptable and unacceptable behaviors), religious concerns, and other perspectives of vulnerable populations. This sort of information will help disaster response professionals work more effectively in cross-cultural situations. Moreover, increased knowledge and sensitivity will help increase trust and further build community.

### **Develop a Backlash Mitigation Plan**

Communities with vulnerable populations should consider the importance of developing a Backlash Mitigation Plan. Such a plan, in conjunction with existing emergency management planning, provides a framework for meeting specific community needs as well as documents efforts that have been taken to build relationships and engage various groups within the community. Integrating a Backlash Mitigation Plan with existing emergency response efforts directs responders to be aware and mindful of relevant cultural issues as well as provides situationally appropriate actions, messages, and a roster of trained and specific contacts. Local officials, first responders, and law enforcement authorities should work in cooperation with at-

risk groups to develop a Backlash Mitigation Plan in advance of another act of terrorism. Planning ahead to have a coordinated message of tolerance that can be espoused by community members, government officials, public information officers, and religious community leaders alike is essential to diffusing tensions and presenting a coordinated front in the face of discrimination and violence.

**Educational Materials:** Local leaders and members from vulnerable communities should be prepared to inform the general public and to promote tolerance. Comprehensive educational materials – from printed brochures, to media feature articles, to web sites – should be developed in collaboration with members of at-risk communities. These materials may be designed and adapted for different segments of the population, including, for example, children, teenagers, and adults. Educational materials may be distributed as a means of educating the general public and used to create a climate of increased religious, ethnic, and cultural awareness. In addition to general educational materials, pre-recorded public service announcements calling for tolerance may be developed in anticipation of the possibility of an event that could provoke bias-motivated crimes.

**Law Enforcement:** Following September 11, the rapid deployment of law enforcement officials to minority communities proved vital in protecting those populations and their property (homes, automobiles, businesses, mosques, community centers, and schools). Police officers should be trained to handle the possibility of backlash violence and be ready to patrol vulnerable areas in case of an emergency. Police officers also need to be educated in the proper ways to identify, classify, and report hate crimes.

The heightened presence of police officers in at-risk communities may be necessary for days, weeks, or even months after a terrorist attack. Law enforcement officials must be willing



and able to commit the time and resources – both human and financial – to efforts to stop backlash violence. Conversely, those communities must be aware that law enforcement is there to protect their welfare. In short, again, a sense of trust must be built between law enforcement and at-risk groups.

**Translation Services:** Not surprisingly, given the considerable cultural and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population, language barriers can present serious issues during the emergency response phase of a disaster. Hence, volunteers should be identified well before disaster strikes and be available to offer translation services for various social service agencies that respond in times of crisis.

**Post-Disaster Public Outreach:** Following any event that might trigger backlash violence, police officials and community leaders (political, religious, educational, and business) should make explicit statements that any type of bias-motivated crime will not be tolerated. Pre-recorded public service announcements calling for tolerance may also be broadcast at this time. This is also an important time for members of various community stakeholder groups to be seen together in public – standing in solidarity – discussing the issues faced in the aftermath of the disaster. Physical proximity and open communication will help demonstrate trust and promote tolerance among community members.

**Post-Disaster Outreach to At-Risk Communities:** Local leaders and law enforcement officials should work with members of at-risk populations to inform individuals of various agencies that combat hate crimes and other available resources. Members of the community should be aware of whom to contact in case they are the victim of a bias-motivated incident or hate crime.

## **Implementation of the Backlash Mitigation Plan**

Community leaders must be prepared to implement the Backlash Mitigation Plan immediately following any future disaster event that might trigger bias-motivated violence. This means that the plan must be clearly defined, and those responsible for carrying out the plan should be well trained. The plan should be included in all disaster response scenario training and updated hard-copy versions should be sent to all relevant responders, including religious and community institutions. Representatives of vulnerable communities should be invited to participate in Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) and, similar to the Red Cross and private voluntary organizations such as the Salvation Army or faith-based organizations, function as liaisons between the EOC and their communities.

## **Long-Term Support and Resource Allocation**

Bias-motivated crimes, such as those that occurred in the aftermath of September 11, are socially disruptive to the larger community and may be emotionally devastating to minority communities (Cogan 2002). Hence, long-term social support should be part of any Backlash Mitigation Plan and made available for victimized populations. Mental health practitioners and spiritual care providers need to be accessible and aware of the enduring impacts to a community that has suffered hate related violence.

## **Conclusion**

The backlash that followed the September 11 attacks was severe and may have been even worse had it not been for the quick response of community leaders and the deployment of law enforcement officers to at-risk communities across the United States. However, most towns and cities are still not prepared for another terrorist attack and the potential backlash. The prevention of bias-motivated incidents and hate crimes must begin well before disaster strikes and will

require the ongoing and unwavering commitment of various stakeholders in communities across the United States. The long-term benefits of pre-event planning and community alliance building will result in less diversion of political, law enforcement, and emergency management agency efforts in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and hence a better outcome for all involved.

Strong communities have agreed at many levels to accept and honor cultural and ethnic diversity, and hence these communities have the opportunity to become truly disaster resistant. We can build stronger buildings, create new warning systems, and develop better security systems, but these technological efforts will not make a community truly disaster resistant. Local leaders must consider the importance of social integration and community collaboration as they are planning for the next disaster. The events of September 11 have had a profound impact on U.S. citizens, as well as the world. During this time of reflection and consideration of policies and programs that do and do not work, we must seize this opportunity to develop initiatives that will further protect and integrate our society as a whole.

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## Suggested Resources

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. URL: <http://www.adc.org/>.

American Red Cross. *Facing Fear: Helping Young People Deal With Terrorism and Tragic Events*. URL: <http://www.redcross.org/disaster/masters/facingfear/>.

Arab American Institute. URL: <http://www.arabamericaninstitute.org/>.

Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. URL: <http://cmcu.georgetown.edu/>.

Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters. URL: <http://www.firstvictims.org/>.

Council on American-Islamic Relations. URL: <http://www.cair-net.org/>.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Uniform Crime Reports: Hate Crime Statistics*. URL: <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>.

Human Rights Watch. URL: <http://www.hrw.org/>.

Islamic Society of North America. URL: <http://www.isna.net/>.

National Council of Pakistani Americans. URL: <http://www.ncpa.info/>.

Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force. URL: <http://www.sikhmediawatch.org/>.

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