

Center for Constitutional Rights

Discrimination, Detention, and Deportation: Immigration & Refugees

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/ccr-news/my-post-911-american-nightmare>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Fifteen years ago, after the Sept. 11 attacks, I was swept up with lots of other Muslim, Arab and South Asian men, held in immigration detention for months in isolation, beaten and harassed. I later learned that these sweeps, and the targeting of men like me, were ordered by officials at the highest levels of the Bush administration.

I have been waiting a decade and a half for justice. Wednesday, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear my case.

I have so many positive memories of my life in the United States. I arrived in 1993, seeking asylum from my native Pakistan. I worked as a taxi driver in New York City, and life was beautiful. Swimming in the pool at a downtown gym after long hours at work always made me feel happy and relaxed. My favorite thing to do on weekends was to go to the movies with friends.

Eventually, I saved up enough money to buy a grocery store. I completed my GED in April 2001 and planned to earn some certifications in information technology. I was living the life of an average American and enjoyed freedoms I did not have at home.

Then, two weeks after the 9/11 attacks, I was arrested by the FBI and thrown in jail at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. I wasn't told why.

The months I spent behind bars not so far from the gym where I used to swim were the worst of my life. I was completely unaware of any charges against me. I had no communication with lawyers, the Pakistani Consulate or my family, who had no idea where I was, or with anyone else in the outside world.

All I knew was what officers told me: that I was suspected of involvement in the attacks. I kept asking myself what was wrong with these people, what could possibly make them think I had been involved in terrorism?

In the end, I was charged with committing crimes to be able to stay in this country, but nothing close to terrorism.

The truth was, I was arrested, imprisoned, isolated and abused because officials, including former Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller, thought I was suspicious and dangerous based on nothing more than my race and my faith.

In fact, I learned that my whole case started because my houseguest had presented a fake Social Security card at a New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission office and gave them my address. The commission called the FBI to report that a male, possibly Arab was acting suspiciously. All the other men I was held with had similar stories: They were arrested after neighbors called the FBI about Arabs working long hours, or Middle Eastern men renting post office boxes.

When I first got to the Metropolitan Detention Center, I was beaten and thrown into solitary confinement. Every time the guards took me out of my cell they put me in handcuffs, chains and shackles. They were so tight I would lose feeling in my fingers. I was strip-searched again and again, sometimes when I hadn't even left my cell. The lights were on all the time, and I couldn't sleep. The guards called us f---ing Muslims and terrorists.

At times, I thought this treatment must be normal, that this was life inside a U.S. prison. I realized I was wrong when, after more than four months in solitary confinement, I was moved into the general prisoner population. Life was still harsh, but it was totally different. In general population, I could get food and toilet paper, soap and pens. The guards didn't beat us or scream out insults while we prayed. Solitary confinement had been like a grave.

I know I made some mistakes during my life in the U.S., like remaining in the country after my application for asylum was denied but nothing could justify the way I and so many other men were treated, solely because we were male, possibly Arab.

Now, I have been seeking justice in the U.S. legal system for more than 14 years. In 2002, the Center for Constitutional Rights filed *Turkmen vs. Ashcroft* against prison administrators and the high-level Bush officials who ordered my profiling and abuse. The defendants have fought the case, now called *Ziglar vs. Abbasi*, including asking the Supreme Court to rule that I do not even have the right to sue them for what they did arguing that even if they ordered blatantly unconstitutional racial and religious profiling, they should not be held accountable.

If the Supreme Court agrees with them, it will be the end of the America I remember from before Sept. 11, 2001. At a time when the incoming President has promised to profile Muslim immigrants like me, the idea that government officials should be able to do what they did to me and so many others without consequences is terrifying.

I pray the court will agree with me that no one is above the law. And I hope that, someday, life for Muslims in the U.S. will be free of

fear once again.

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