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MARWAN KREIDIE AND SHAHID HASHMI

In December 2015, Trump announced his intention to ban Muslims from entering the United States. He made true on this promise in January 2017, when he signed the first iteration of the Muslim and refugee ban, banning nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries and refugees from entering the United States.

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Marwan Kreidie: On the morning of Monday, December 7, 2015, I went to the Al-Aqsa Islamic Society mosque in Philadelphia, and the caretaker ran up to me and said, “You won’t

believe what happened—someone threw a pig’s head at the mosque.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Yes! Someone threw a pig’s head at the mosque.”

It was the heart of primary season, and Muslims and Arabs were being scapegoated everywhere I turned. Two weeks earlier, then candidate Trump had publicly advocated for a federal database to track Muslims—a Muslim registry. We then heard rumblings on Sunday, the day before, that Trump was going to propose banning Muslims from the U.S. The very next day he did just that, calling for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”¹ He later made true on that promise with different versions of the Muslim and refugee ban.

The community believed we were targeted because of Trump’s comments and policies about Muslims, including the proposed ban. The mosque was my place of work and a religious and community center. I was really concerned. I called the police, FBI, and media. This time it was a pig’s head. What would it be next time?

The police weren’t able to apprehend the suspect because our security cameras were not sophisticated enough to capture important details. We don’t think it was anyone from the neighborhood. There were reports of a red pickup truck driving around town that night, and police think the passengers may have attended a private, racist hard-rock concert. There’s a circuit of these bands around the country, and their membership swells with neo-Nazis and white supremacists. They were probably having a pig roast and thought it would be nice to terrorize the local Muslim and Arab community.

Pork is considered non-halal, or food that is forbidden in Islam. A lot of people think it’s kryptonite to Muslims, but it’s not. The pig’s head was meant to intimidate us.

The police are investigating the case. I think they desperately want to find the suspect because it would be a feather in their cap. The mosque leadership said they had forgiven the suspect

just hours after the incident, but not me. There have been dozens of cases of mosques being vandalized and Korans being desecrated in recent years. Law enforcement needs to set an example. I don't think the suspect necessarily has to go to jail for a long time, but there should be a public trial and he should pay for his crimes, including perhaps community service and serving the community he harmed.

The response from elected officials was strong. Mayor-elect Jim Kenney called on the city residents to condemn the act of hate violence and support the Muslim and Arab community. Outgoing mayor Michael Nutter famously remarked after Trump pledged to ban Muslims that Philadelphia should ban Trump. These were important statements of support and they gave the community comfort during this difficult time.

The Al-Aqsa Islamic Society was formed in 1989. It was originally an offshoot of an older Albanian mosque located a few blocks away that had become overcrowded. The local community got a warehouse, secured a permit, and expanded it into what you see today. I now serve as the spokesperson for the mosque, a position I've held since 2000.

A few months before the incident, I remember talking to community members and saying it was worse than after 9/11. That was a very difficult time for the Muslim and Arab community because we feared a backlash. I thought people would throw rocks or break the windows of the mosque.

Instead, the reaction was one of support. People came to us and asked how they could help. They knew our pain, and that we had nothing to do with 9/11. I remember interfaith allies from a local synagogue and church coming to the mosque after the first Friday prayer after 9/11 and offering to take the women with hijabs shopping if they felt uncomfortable leaving their homes. I was really grateful; it was reassuring to have their support.

Fast-forward to today and, though we were worried something might happen given the political environment, we somehow thought we were immune. I think most community members

saw the pig's head incident as an aberration, but many are still afraid and wonder what could happen next time.

We worry. We have to worry. We all agree that the Trump era has empowered people to embrace bigotry and commit acts of hate violence. Most people, including myself, believe we should prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I remember how upset my family was after the incident. I have three children: two teenage daughters and one teenage son. Just prior to the incident, we had discussed how racism and bigotry were on the rise. Then this happened. We agreed that it was an attack on us all.

The phrase "words have consequences" comes to mind. So many candidates were peddling xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric at the time, including Trump, that I think the rhetoric spurred people to act out. The rhetoric reinforces preexisting bigotry and bias. It's really damaging. We've worked hard to fight hate in America, and now racists and bigots feel emboldened.

It's not just Trump's words; it's his policies, too. He promised to create a registry of Muslims living in America, vowed to ban Muslims from entering the U.S., and proposed to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thereby erasing any Palestinian claim to Jerusalem. Registering Americans and banning foreign nationals on account of faith? That's un-American.

I remember the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System that was created immediately after 9/11. It required persons residing temporarily in the U.S. from twenty-five predominantly Muslim- or Arab-majority countries to register with the U.S. government. They faced invasive questioning, fingerprinting, and check-ins. They were targeted solely on account of their faith and national origin. I worry that Trump may create a similar system or perhaps a more expansive one.

He may also try to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization as a way to target Muslim and Arab charities and public-interest organizations in the U.S. One of the favorite

smear tactics of anti-Muslim advocacy groups and hate mongers is to accuse Muslim and Arab activists, organizations, and their allies of supporting the Brotherhood. The accusation alone can destroy a reputation. It could be a witch hunt, just like the McCarthy era.

What Trump says about Mexicans and our Latinx brothers and sisters is just as bad. Philadelphia is a sanctuary city. We prohibit police officers from asking about the immigration status of people they encounter.

Immigrants come to this country seeking a better life and sometimes just want to reunite with their families. More undocumented immigrants live in Philadelphia than in any northeastern American city, except New York. Plus, many of our families are mixed, meaning some family members are documented, but others are not.

Now Trump wants to withhold federal funding to sanctuary cities. He also rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals order, which allowed undocumented immigrants who entered the country as minors to receive two-year periods of deferred action from deportation. Waging war on the undocumented community hurts the social, cultural, and economic fabric of our society. I want the mosque to become a sanctuary for undocumented persons. I think that's the obligation of every religious institution right now.

Some of us see and feel hate every day. I talked to a Christian Syrian who has a shop in the Reading Terminal Market and he told me that customers often avoid him now and give him bad looks. It's impacting his business. The Reading Terminal Market is a Philadelphia institution, and tourists go there from all over the state. If this is happening in a tolerant city like Philadelphia, imagine what's happening elsewhere.

I'm worried that some in our community will go back into the shadows because they fear for their safety. But we can't do that. Now is the time to talk, educate, engage, and organize. We need

to partner with allies and step outside our comfort zone. That's what I plan to do.

I've been an organizer and activist for as long as I can remember. In the early 1980s, after college, I was very active on Palestinian issues. I did volunteer work to help Arab Americans, and in the late 1990s, I learned of the Al-Aqsa mosque and started a secular Arab American organization, called the Arab American Community Development Corporation (AACDC). We housed the organization in the mosque because the mosque is the largest Arab institution in Philadelphia. Although we're a secular organization, that's where we would have the largest reach and impact.

Mosques in America are like churches and other houses of worship. They're community centers, where we learn, organize, and thrive. This mosque is 90 percent Arab immigrant. The December attack wasn't just an attack on Muslims. It was an attack on Arabs and immigrants as well.

Our initial mandate at AACDC was land acquisition for the mosque. But 9/11 changed everything. We opened a food pantry, and started doing English classes and know-your-rights teach-ins. We focused on the most vulnerable in our community, primarily low-income and first-generation immigrant Arab families.

It's fair to say that I differed from others at the time because I thought Muslims and Arabs had to be vocal and active. Many wanted to stay in the shadows and were concerned about a possible backlash. I thought the backlash would intensify if we remained silent.

So I did my best to make sure our civil rights were protected, while simultaneously condemning the 9/11 attacks. It's a delicate balance as, ever since then, Muslims and Arabs have been asked to condemn acts of terrorism around the world. It's as though we have to prove our innocence day in and day out. No other community shoulders that burden. Nor should we.

Just as I did after 9/11, I will push back against the politics

of today through organizing and coalition-building, especially in the interfaith community and with progressive allies. I co-founded a group called United Voices, which represents vulnerable communities in Philadelphia and, in particular, immigrants. We speak together with one voice.

In connection with that group, and other work, we organize those directly impacted by bigotry and state violence and hold forums and conversations where they share their stories. This allows us to build community and educate others about who we are and what we experience. With their counsel and support, we also advocate on their behalf with local and federal officials and invite them to meet with legislators. We are particularly active on issues relating to hate violence, immigration enforcement, sanctuary cities, the Muslim and refugee bans, and First Amendment protections, including free speech, association, and worship.

I remain particularly sensitive to the needs of low-income community members and recent immigrants. Because of their socio-economic status and limited language skills, they are at heightened risk of harassment, deprivation, and civil rights violations. We often partner with national advocacy groups like the Arab American Institute and the American Civil Liberties Union and hold know-your-rights teach-ins on free speech, expression, and worship, and on best practices when encountering law enforcement.

We are always committed to solidarity. It's not enough that Muslims and Arabs survive this administration. All communities must thrive. If there's a bill that helps interfaith communities but hurts the undocumented community, we must reject it. We must reject all piecemeal advocacy.

Philadelphia's growing diversity is a real opportunity. The city has changed a lot during my time here. It's gone from mostly black and white to a city with large Latinx, Asian, and Arab communities. These communities are now a critical part of the mosaic that is Philadelphia. Philadelphia gives me hope because

it's a progressive city with an organized community. Muslims and Arabs should never feel alone in this city. Everyone I know says that if there is a Muslim registry, they'll register as Muslims.

Yet even so, I still can't wrap my head around what's happened. The anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic sentiments of today are unlike anything I've seen in my lifetime. 9/11 was a scary time and the aftermath was awful. But there's a huge difference between then and now. There was an attack on 9/11, and we knew there would be a backlash. What we've experienced recently, on the other hand, was the lead-up to and aftermath of a legitimate election. We elected Trump as president. We elected his rhetoric, policies, and cabinet. I still struggle with how anyone could have voted for him. Even my home state, Pennsylvania, voted for him.

Sometimes I can't help but think: *Why am I in this country now? Should I move elsewhere? Do I want to raise my kids in this country, where hate is so visible and rampant?* I've been in this fight for decades, but even I struggle. Deep down, though, I know we need to stay the course and continue the fight.

Looking back, what stands out the most about the hate crime wasn't the pig's head. It was the community's response. That same day, neighbors called me and said they wanted to come to the mosque after Friday prayer and hold a demonstration in support of the community. They wanted signs, speakers, speeches, megaphones, and a list of demands.

I said no to a demonstration and suggested a party instead. They agreed, and the following Saturday, we had four to five hundred people at the mosque, including rabbis, pastors, elected officials, and neighbors, and we built community together. The neighbors cared, and they showed it that day. They were just as upset as we were, and did everything they could to rebuild the trust that was shattered. It was an amazing celebration of life.

Food, community, and love is how we condemned hate. It was our way of showing the world that hate wouldn't be tolerated in

the City of Brotherly Love. It was the best of Philadelphia. The pig's head didn't divide us; it brought us together.

Shahid Hashmi: The summer of 2002 was a special time for our family. Arooj, my eldest child, got married at our local mosque. My wife and I watched with pride as she exchanged her vows in the traditional *nikah* ceremony. It's tradition for the father of the bride to give his daughter away, and as the imam made the official declaration and I said good-bye to Arooj, I wished her the best. I always thought that seeing the newlyweds leaving the mosque that day would be the lasting image I'd have of our house of worship.

Never could I have imagined that, almost fifteen years later, I would be weeping and praying across the street while our mosque was engulfed in flames.

My family and I moved to Victoria in 1984. I had three young children then and a small medical practice. We decided to relocate to Victoria because we thought it was a better area to raise our children. We were just the second Muslim family to settle in Victoria at that time. For the next few years, there were only a handful of Muslims living in town. We would sometimes pray together on Fridays and take turns hosting.

Our community began to grow at the turn of the decade. Several new Muslim families moved to town, and there were a few Muslim-owned businesses too. We came together regularly for prayers and meals. This encouraged more Muslims to settle in Victoria. A local Muslim physician then gifted us a house, and we had our daily prayers there.

A lot of Muslim families have come and gone from the city. Victoria's population is roughly seventy thousand, and like many midsize cities in America, we have several factories and plants. Many Muslim engineers and workers rotated in and out of them. It's wonderful when new members join the community and sad when they say good-bye.

We nevertheless continued to grow. Today there are forty to forty-five Muslim families in town, roughly 160 to 170 community members in total. We are a diverse community. We are engineers, primary caregivers, business people, and physicians, and we represent more than a dozen nationalities. My wife and I are from Pakistan.

Ours is the only Muslim family that has been here since the 1980s. We raised our children in Victoria, and they graduated from high school and college here. Arooj recently moved back to Victoria with her husband. We're so happy she came home.

The Islamic Center of Victoria had its grand opening in May 2000. Thirty Muslim families lived in town then, and they all attended the celebration. It was a beautiful sunny day. The grand opening was open to the public and hundreds of local community members joined us. Even the media came.

We were joined by numerous distinguished guests. Yusuf Islam, the singer formerly known as Cat Stevens, attended and spoke about his conversion to Islam. Hakeem "The Dream" Olajuwon, the former center for the Houston Rockets and an NBA Hall of Fame inductee, attended as well. The children were thrilled to meet him! He was one of the biggest celebrities in Texas. He's also a devout Muslim.

Our community felt safe and welcome in Victoria. We mingled with everyone. Not even the events of 9/11 changed that. Despite the terrible shock, on the day after 9/11 the local interfaith community, police, town officials, and mayor gathered in front of the mosque and proclaimed unity and support for our Muslim community. We didn't ask for this gesture of support; they offered it. It meant the world to us because the mosque was only one year old and we didn't know what to expect. We came together as one community.

It was business as usual for many years after that. We lived in peace and solidarity with the broader Victoria community. We contributed to fundraisers and charitable organizations. We participated in social and interfaith activities. We delivered pre-

sentations on Islam at other houses of worship. Local churches and schools sent their students to the mosque to learn about our religious traditions. The mosque became a community center. Our children played there, and we held potluck dinners there every Friday. Non-Muslims and interfaith friends sometimes joined.

Then, in 2015, a few teenagers painted some graffiti on the front of the mosque. We couldn't decipher the writing. A local newspaper read it as "H8," or shorthand for "hate." There was a positive outcome, though. The boys who committed the vandalism confessed to their parents, the parents brought their children to the mosque, and the boys apologized to our congregation. They were teenagers who attended one of the local high schools. The community quickly forgave them and welcomed the boys into our community. They later joined us for prayer, and their families came to a potluck dinner at the mosque.

Although we opposed prosecution, the district attorney's office brought criminal charges, and the boys were given community service. They helped us with yard work at the mosque one weekend and completed their service.

We opposed prosecution because we thought it would increase animosity and misunderstanding. The children had accepted responsibility, looked us in the eye, and apologized. We had reached an acceptable resolution based on forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is fundamental to our faith. In that moment, we weren't just reflecting our beliefs. We were reflecting the practices and traditions of Islam.

The most basic tenet of Islam is to be a true believer and obey the commands of God, the one and only god who created the universe. We are all created equal before God, and we must be respectful and live in service to others. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We also believe that we are responsible for our deeds. We will all be resurrected one day to stand before God and account for our time in this world. If we worship only him, and live responsibly and faithfully alongside

our family, community, and country, then we will be blessed and go to heaven.

As a devout Muslim, I have conservative values and generally lean Republican. But the 2016 Presidential election was different. I couldn't support Donald Trump for president of the United States. The values he advocated, including discrimination on the basis of faith, ethnicity, and national origin, aren't conservative values.

Many say that mullahs and other religious leaders exploit Islam and create terrorists. I don't think a leader alone can make a person do something. But a leader can exploit a person's inner fears and beliefs and make it more likely for that person to act on those fears and beliefs. Many terrorists today, for example, harbor ill will against the West, sentiments that religious leaders often channel and abuse.

Trump is no different. He exploited widespread misunderstanding and fear of Muslims. When Trump said he would ban Muslims or require them to register, he cultivated this inner fear. Just as there are mullahs who capitalize on bitterness towards non-Muslims, Trump channeled and exploited anti-Muslim sentiment. That's in part why Islamophobia and incidents of anti-Muslim hate have spiked since his campaign and election. Those who felt inhibited were empowered to act out.

Much of this hate originates with the media. The majority of the 1.8 billion Muslims in this world are peace-loving, true followers of Islam. Only a tiny fraction of so-called Muslims support terrorism. Our faith unequivocally condemns terrorism. But if you listen to the media, you would think that most Muslims are terrorists, and that only Muslims are capable of terrorist acts. Our entire faith is put on trial every time a Muslim commits a terrible act of violence. No other community bears this burden.

Still, life in Victoria remained the same during the campaign and election. We didn't encounter any animosity. That soon changed, though. In mid-January of this year, the mosque

was burglarized. One morning, we saw that the back door had been broken into. As we walked through the facility, we noticed that several computers and phones were missing. We called the police, and they boarded the doors and launched an investigation.

Then, just one week later, my phone rang in the middle of the night. It was the imam of the mosque. He was frantic and said, “The mosque is on fire!” He was in shock.

I jumped out of bed and started running. I didn’t even wake up my wife. I just ran. As I drove on the highway and approached the mosque, I could see the smoke coming from the top of the building.

When I saw the mosque in flames, I cried. I watched from across the street as the fire fighters worked hard to put out the fire. The gas station at the corner of the street had spotted it first and called 911.

We alerted our families and the community. Some of them came right away. There were fifteen to twenty of us, and we stood there in the middle of the night watching the mosque burn to the ground. Many of us were in our nightclothes. Then it began to rain. At 5 a.m., we performed morning prayer in the rain, watching our house of worship burn.

We wouldn’t be able to get onto the mosque grounds for another three days. The police had to cordon it off, investigate the fire, and collect evidence. Later that morning, the entire community came to my house. There were dozens of people there, including friends from the neighboring city of Corpus Christi. We were heartbroken. Many of us were inconsolable because the pain and shock were so great. I get emotional talking about it even today. We sat, cried, and decided how to move forward.

We agreed to hold a prayer service across the street from the mosque the following day. It would be open to the public. More than four hundred people joined us that Sunday. The police closed the street on both sides. I remember it vividly. People poured in from every direction. Interfaith leaders spoke.

Community members spoke. Friends from Dallas, Houston, and Corpus Christi joined as well.

In the subsequent days, weeks, and months, there was an outpouring of support from the local Victoria community and the world. We heard from former community members, friends, elected officials, and Muslim leaders. Churches and synagogues offered us a place to worship. We received hundreds of messages and cards. Schoolchildren hand drew notes for us; church members knitted for us. A GoFundMe campaign raised \$1.1 million in funds for mosque reconstruction. We received donations from over ninety countries. I still have patients who come in, hug me, and offer their condolences. Some even come with a check, even though we're no longer collecting donations.

But it was still a very difficult time for the community. The conversations with our children were tough. Many of them had grown up at the mosque. They had played there when they were little. They had learned about the Islamic faith there, and celebrated holidays and birthdays there. It was the only mosque some of them had ever known. Nothing could bring back those cherished memories.

We told our younger ones that we lost our prayer space, but didn't show them the shocking photos. Our imam used his religious teachings to counsel them, and we had a psychologist sit down with them, too. Even Arooj was devastated. She got married in that mosque. A part of her history had been lost forever. But we had to remain strong because the children were watching. We want them to always love their faith.

Today we use a portable building that was previously used for school activities as our community center. That building is adjacent to the mosque and escaped the fire. We cleaned it up, decorated it, laid out carpets, and made it our new home. This is where we pray and meet. The mosque is in the process of being rebuilt, but full reconstruction will take several years.

Our community remains fearful. Many worry that we could be targeted again, especially living in Texas, where guns are so

commonplace. After the hate crime, the community decided to hire a private security firm to guard our makeshift community center. They are on guard outside whenever we gather or the children play inside. It's sad that we need security to feel safe and that we worry about the safety of our little ones.

In June, federal prosecutors filed hate crime charges against the same man recently arrested for burglarizing the mosque in early January. In this case, we favored prosecution because of the gravity of the crime and his lack of remorse. We also thought hate crime charges were appropriate. He didn't target a random commercial building. He targeted a mosque. The law and prosecution must reflect that. While his arrest comforted some in the community, others still believe we have to be vigilant. If it happened before, why can't it happen again?

I don't know why this man targeted our community when he did. Was the attack brewing in his mind for a long time? Was his hatred long-standing and emboldened by the political climate and Trump? It's true that he set fire to the mosque just days after President Trump was inaugurated and the very same day that President Trump signed the first version of the Muslim ban. But I don't think he could have hatched his plan in just a few hours.

I do know, though, that he hated Islam. He hated Muslims. He burglarized our mosque. He set it on fire. He terrorized our community. We later learned from the police that he expressed hate against Muslims on Facebook and that he believed mosque members were colluding with ISIS and maybe stockpiling weapons. It's always the same story, and one that Trump keeps promoting. People think innocent, peace-loving Muslims are terrorists. Islamophobia is real, and it's growing, and it struck our peace-loving community in Victoria.

We must all work to combat misunderstanding and hate. Muslims must continue to educate the world about their faith and lead honorable lives. We must show the world that we live in love and harmony with different communities worldwide.

Non-Muslims must be willing to listen to us and challenge

their inner fears. They should invite their Muslim neighbors to their houses of worship to explain their faith. They must be mindful of the media as well and differentiate fact from fiction. Just as Muslims have a duty to educate the world about our traditions, non-Muslims have a reciprocal duty to understand the real teachings of Islam before casting judgment.

We've done that work in Victoria for decades, and will do it for as long as we can.