# Sikhism Post-9/11

***Summary:*** *Following 9/11, there was an increase in hate crimes and discrimination against Sikhs across the United States, which led to the formation of national Sikh advocacy groups and organizations. More local initiatives seeking to educate the public about Sikhism and build relationships with non-Sikh community members also emerged.*

On September 15th, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot and killed in broad daylight while arranging American flags outside his Mesa, AZ gas station. Sodhi, a turbaned Sikh, was shot by Frank Roque, a self-proclaimed "patriot" looking for "ragheads," who claimed the shooting was in retaliation for the terrorist attacks on 9/11. As images of the turbaned and bearded individuals allegedly responsible for the September 11th attacks made it to the nightly news, many who "looked like terrorists" became the targets of varying degrees of hate crimes. South Asians and Arabs in particular experienced discrimination for having qualities that were perceived as "similar" to those who claimed responsibility for carrying out the attacks on America.

Balbir Singh Sodhi's murder was not an isolated incident. Members of the Sikh community were harassed, assaulted, and discriminated against in the street and in the workplace. On the morning of 9/11 Kevin Harrington, a Sikh employee of the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), reversed his train before it reached its intended stop at the World Trade Center, saving the lives of all on board. Harrington was recognized as a 9/11 hero. Three years later, the MTA informed him, along with other Sikh employees, that turbans worn during work would require an MTA logo to comply with the MTA's uniform policy. Noncompliance would result in work assignments in the rail yards outside of public view. Harrington and others found the policy discriminatory toward their religious practices; the uniform policy was enforced only selectively, targeting in particular Muslim and Sikh employees wearing religious head coverings. Other companies have taken similar stances as the MTA, sometimes threatening to demote turban-wearing employees for not following uniform policies—policies that were not in place before 9/11. Sikhs have also been targeted by airport security: many have been forced to take off their turban or subjected to extensive pat downs. In November 2010, an Indian minister called on President Obama to end the "turban frisking" policy undergone by Sikhs since the United States

implemented post-9/11 airport security measures. While the issue is gradually being addressed by the government, Sikh advocacy groups have also called upon the TSA to clarify its "additional screening" policies in light of the fact that the screenings, in practice, are more often a given rather than a possibility for turban-wearing Sikh passengers.

While discrimination was an issue for America's Sikhs prior to 9/11, it was not widespread. Schoolchildren, for instance, might be marginalized for having uncut and or covered hair or for carrying a *kirpan* but these incidences were scattered and limited in scope. After 9/11, however, the entire Sikh community felt under attack. Suddenly, several generations after first being established in the United States, Sikhs—a small, peaceful, and largely insular community—were faced with the urgent and daunting need to educate a fearful and defensive public about their faith. Largely comprised of localized groups and very few formal networks, American Sikhs began to organize more formally, both internally and externally. Confronted with the need to correct misunderstandings about their religion, they continue to make concerted efforts to reach out to non-Sikh Americans to introduce them to their peaceful, service-based tradition.

The Sikh Coalition is one organization that formed in direct response to the "reprisal" attacks against Sikhs after September 11, 2001. With offices in New York City, Fremont, California, and Washington, D.C., the Sikh Coalition "works towards the realization of civil and human rights for all people" and seeks to strengthen relations between Sikhs and their local community. The Sikh Coalition provides individual, civil rights, and community outreach resources such as its hugely successful FlyRights mobile application launched in Spring 2012 and the Khalsa Kids youth program. In January 2011, the Sikh Coalition made a formal request that the FBI track anti-Sikh hate crimes, receiving strong support subsequently from members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. This request was granted in June 2013 when the FBI agreed to begin tracking hate crimes perpetuated against Sikhs, Hindus, and Arabs.

Young adults who came of age in a post-9/11 world have sought out opportunities that would enable them to better serve their community at this critical junction in its history within the United States. Sikhs who were high school- and college-aged in 2001 are now engaging in various forms of activism: as civil

rights lawyers seeking justice in discrimination cases against Sikhs and other minorities or as journalists, filmmakers, and educators documenting and analyzing issues of interest to the Sikh community.

Affected by the 2001 murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a family friend, Valarie Kaur travelled across the country with her cousin to document the 9/11 backlash of hate crimes that targeted religious and ethnic minorities. The result of their journey was the award-winning film *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath* (2008), the "first feature documentary on post-9/11 racism." Since its release, the filmmakers have been invited to over 200 cities across the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and India. Now a lawyer, Kaur leads the Revolutionary Love Project to encourage social action and work towards justice. Dawinder "Dave" Sidhu is a national security and civil rights lawyer and academic. Co-author of the 2009 *Civil Rights in Wartime: The Post-9/11 Sikh Experience*, Sidhu has dedicated his career to activism in the legal sphere. A new generation of American Sikhs is taking the lead in re-shaping Sikhism in America to address head on the pressing challenges faced by their community and by the nation as a whole.

On August 5th, 2012 an act of violence shook the Sikh community yet again. Headlines around the world broke the news that a gunman had opened fire inside a *gurdwara* in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six members and wounding several others before shooting himself. The Oak Creek tragedy renewed the call for increased outreach and educational efforts by Sikhs to their local communities. Yet the loud condemnation of the attack and demonstrations of public support for the Sikh community in the aftermath were markedly different from the public response to Muslim, Sikh, and others victimized by post-9/11 retaliation. Within days after the shooting in Oak Creek, Americans came together to stand in solidarity with the Sikh community. Interfaith events, organized visits to *gurdwaras*, and vigils of solidarity took place across the country, on college campuses and in cities. Public officials and religious leaders denounced the attacks and called on everyone to stand with the Sikh community to combat violence and hate crimes. Leaders within the Sikh community were also vocal. Dave Sidhu called for "each and every Sikh to be proactively engaged" in their neighborhoods as "visible ambassadors of the Sikh faith and their identity." After September 11th, many Muslim communities opened the doors of their mosques to educate and welcome the public. After Oak Creek, many Sikhs followed suit, hosting events and inviting their non-Sikh neighbors to attend services at the *gurdwara* and to share in *langar*, thus enabling fellow Americans to learn about Sikhism through direct and personal experience. Many

accepted the invitation, showing hope for an America that no longer marginalizes a perceived "other" because they "looks like a terrorist."

Despite the challenges that arose in the beginning of the 21st century, American Sikhs are continuing to flourish and become increasingly integrated into the nation's religious landscape. In the decade after 9/11, new *gurdwaras* were established across the country, from Medford, MA to Colorado Springs, CO to Wheaton, IL. The efforts to familiarize non-Sikh Americans with Sikhism have made remarkable progress over the years, accomplishing many victories both large and small for the entire community.