



U.S. Congressman
Nick Rahall
 WORKING FOR WEST VIRGINIANS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JANUARY 23, 1991

CONTACT: STEVE SPINA

PHONE: (202) 225-3452

RAHALL REACTS TO ANTI-ARAB BACKLASH

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV) last week reacted to what he called "Arab backlash" caused by the situation in the Persian Gulf. The following are remarks by Rep. Rahall concerning recent reports that the FBI was investigating Arab-Americans without probable cause:

PERSIAN GULF CRISIS IS CAUSING UNWARRANTED ANTI-ARAB BACKLASH IN OFFICIAL WASHINGTON AND BEYOND

HON. NICK JOE RAHALL II

OF WEST VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, January 17, 1991

Mr. RAHALL. Mr. Speaker, the news media, both print and broadcast, have made much of the recent discovery that FBI agents were interviewing Arab-American business and community leaders in an attempt to gather information about possible terrorist activity in the United States. While the measure was portrayed by the FBI as precautionary only, it was greeted with protests from Arab-American organizations.

Of course, we are reasonable men and women in a time of crisis involving Arab nations, and I believe that if the FBI has even one scintilla of evidence to the effect that Arab groups or individual members of such

groups are likely to be involved in terrorist activities, then the FBI most assuredly should follow up suspicious interviews with full investigations.

I am very much afraid, Mr. Speaker, that the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] has fallen prey to the misguided notion, held usually by people who are very ignorant, or very prejudiced, or both, that only Arabs, and all Arabs, are terrorists.

If I could point to one single factor as the primary obstacle to peace in the Middle East, it would be those people, individuals and groups, official and nonofficial, who take a whole ethnic group and, because of their ancestry, intimidate them by conducting investigations that are mostly unwarranted. It smacks of the mindset that prevailed when the United States Government incarcerated Japanese-Americans during World War II, which we have since deplored as a policy that was both inappropriate and immoral.

I am more than pleased to note that committees of Congress with oversight responsibility for the FBI have warned that the agency is treading on sensitive ground, and each such committee intends to make certain the FBI does not step beyond the bounds of propriety or otherwise get heavy handed in their interviews with Arab-Americans.

Mr. Speaker, there is discrimination against Arab-Americans going on in other sectors of our society. Witness the recent and numerous reports of harassment and discriminatory treatment of Arab-Americans, including the strip-searching of innocent women, while traveling on a U.S. Airline—a direct, obvious, and seemingly intentional violation of their civil liberties. It couldn't happen in America? It did happen, and it continues to happen in America.

Arabs are often portrayed in the media, and particularly in films in ways that do not present an objective and understanding of their culture, but are rife with bias and misinformation about the Arab world in general, and Arabs in particular. Some journalistic sectors, I am pleased to note, are making concerted efforts to deal with the issues fairly, and I hope to see an increase in this thoughtful, informed approach in the future.

In Michigan recently, an individual was sentenced to 6 months custody and 3 years' probation, after pleading in Federal court that he was guilty of charges that he mailed threatening letters to Arab Americans in the Flint, Michigan area, including the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Regional Office in Detroit. Ironically, Mr. Speaker, in this case it was the FBI that was largely responsible for bringing this man to justice, which goes to show you that the system against hate crimes does work and well, when handled sensitively.

I am proud to be an American of Arab ancestry. Every Member of this body and every American has the right to be proud of his or her ancestry. My grandparents were born in Lebanon. But what must be kept firmly in mind, Mr. Speaker, is that my grandparents became American citizens. My parents were born here, as was I, and we are all proud Americans and proud of our Arab ancestry. We should all, regardless of ethnic origin, be concerned for America's best interests, and to put them first.

Mr. Speaker, it is incumbent upon me to express my concern here and elsewhere on

behalf of Arab Americans. Because of the Persian Gulf crisis which appears to be causing a growing outbreak of violence against Americans of Arab descent, it is even more important that we speak out today. For that reason, I commend my friend and colleague DON EDWARDS for his concern and foresight in arranging this special order on behalf of

Arab Americans. Many other of my colleagues have expressed similar concerns to me, including my friend NORM MINETA of California, who has met with the FBI on the matter of their on-going interviews with Americans of Arab ancestry in the United States.

These are emotional times, and I fear that if the United States does launch an attack against Iraqi emplacements in Kuwait, as a means of freeing that country from Saddam Hussein, and thousands of casualties occur as a result of that war, it is going to get a lot more emotional.

For that reason, I call upon the FBI, the State Department, the Defense Department, and the Immigration Service, to weigh their actions and their words carefully. During what may very well be appropriate and timely efforts by our Government to keep down terrorism, and to protect Arab Americans rather than harm them, and I applaud those efforts, every possible precaution must be taken to guard against the inadvertent fuelling of the ugly fires of discrimination and bigotry.

Should an already volatile situation worsen, both in the gulf region and among policy makers of various Government agencies, including the FBI and Immigration as a result of the present crisis, and should unwarranted and overzealous interviews and investigations of Arab Americans become "heavy handed," I shall raise my voice in stronger protest.

My friend and colleague DON EDWARDS, who chairs the House Oversight Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional rights, has already pledged to conduct intensive hearings should FBI and other agency anti-terrorist activities get out of hand, and I thank him for his foresight in issuing a strong warning to the FBI about the sensitivity of their investigations and or interviews with Arab Americans.

Mr. Speaker, I must reiterate that Arab Americans are American citizens, but we retain our pride in our heritage. It is time for America to stop creating, through innocence, or through ignorance, or deliberate bigotry, a suspect class of people who are, except for their country of origin, just like everyone else . . . people who would like to go about their lives in peace, without fear and intimidation, and with their civil rights as Americans intact.