

## TESTIMONY BY ZAINAB AL-SUWAIJ

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The Committee on Education and Labor  
Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee

February 12, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify to you today on this important topic. As someone who is an American citizen by choice – not by birth – it is a special honor to be invited to speak before you today. I was drawn to become an American citizen because of our country's sincere and unique commitment to religious freedom and individual rights. I am here today to share with you my perspective on respecting these rights in workplaces across the country.

I appear before you as a Muslim-American who has experienced discrimination in the workplace, as well as in my capacity as executive director of the American Islamic Congress, a civil rights organization promoting tolerance and the exchange of ideas among Muslims and between other peoples.

As a native of Basra, Iraq, I did not grow up experiencing individual liberty. Instead, my childhood was spent under a repressive dictatorship, in an environment where classmates could disappear simply for discussing politics in school. Rather than encourage respect for diversity and religious difference, teachers often taught hatred. I recall one elementary school teacher telling our class that Hitler was a great man because he burned Jews alive.

Even as a child, I stood out. I challenged teachers who praised Hitler, I refused to join the Ba'ath party... and I wore hijab. It may seem hard to believe, but in the early 1980s, Basra was a largely secular city and I was the only student in my third-grade class to wear the hijab. I come from an established family of Iraqi clerics; wearing hijab is part of my family tradition. For that decision, I was criticized by my teachers in the classroom – but I stayed true to my beliefs.

In 1991, I participated in the failed uprising against Saddam Hussein, which initially succeeded in liberating most Iraqi provinces but was then crushed when the US broke its promise to help. I fled Iraq with nothing, met my husband, and moved to the US. For the first time in my life, I experienced real freedom. I could say what I wanted, be who I wanted, and be comfortable in my own identity. It was a dream come true.

Of course, life is never so simple. I remember going for a job interview some years ago. The woman interviewing me was clearly uncomfortable because of my hijab. At one point, she asked me: "Do you wear that thing on your head at night only, or also during

the day?” The implication was clear: Wearing hijab on the job was a no-no. I calmly explained to her that I wear the hijab whenever I am in public, but I realized that the interview was effectively over.

Later, I worked at Interfaith Refugee Ministry, the refugee resettlement arm of Episcopal Social Service. Many of my clients were individuals fleeing repression in the Muslim world who had come to the US seeking a better life. Some of my clients experienced discrimination in the workplace because of their religious practices. One woman was asked to change the way she covered her hair at work so it would be less “troublesome” to customers. One man requested five minutes at noon for midday prayer, but was denied by his employer. I did my best to assist them, but typically found there was little I could do.

After the terrible terror attacks of September 11, 2001, I decided to take action. The terror I thought I had left behind had suddenly followed me here, targeting the country I loved and me and my family. With a group of concerned Muslim-Americans, I co-founded the American Islamic Congress.

We are a non-religious civic initiative challenging increasingly negative perceptions of Muslims by advocating responsible leadership and ‘two-way’ interfaith understanding. As Muslim-Americans, thriving amidst America's multicultural society and civil liberties, we promote these same values for the global Muslim community. We are not afraid to advocate unequivocally for women's equality, free expression, and nonviolence - making no apologies for terrorism, which primarily claims Muslim lives.

We are “passionate about moderation” and led by a group of young activists in their 20s and 30s. We are advancing a new responsible Muslim civic leadership. In fact, every month we host a Capitol Hill Distinguished Speakers Series on Muslim affairs, co-sponsored here on the Hill by the Religious Freedom and Anti-Terrorism caucuses.

As the executive director of the American Islamic Congress, I appeal to you today to take action to protect religious liberty and individual rights in the workplace. We Muslim-Americans, passionate about moderation, share the values this country has been built on. Many of us have come to the United States fleeing religious persecution and political repression. Muslim-Americans deserve the same equal treatment as all other Americans, and we do not want to see our religion used to discriminate against us.

To be specific, Muslim-American women who choose to wear hijab have the right to work with their headscarf on and should not fear repercussions from employers. Muslim-American workers who choose to pray five times a day have the right to conduct prayers during work hours. Muslim-Americans who choose to have the right to abstain from handling alcohol or pork. All of these personal freedoms do not need to disrupt American workplaces and should be able to be integrated in a decent way that respects workers of all backgrounds.

Respecting workplace diversity, I should add, extends to Muslim employers as well. As part of our “two-way” understanding, we in the Muslim community need to take practical steps to address discrimination from within our own community. Muslim employers should similarly not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, or religion.

Indeed, there is an enormous religious diversity within the Muslim community, which must be recognized. We Muslim-Americans are a remarkable diverse community: Sunnis of diverse religious traditions, Shi’a of diverse religious traditions, numerous minority sects, and of course people of Muslim heritage who are not religious. There is not one way to practice Islam, and the diversity within our community needs to be respected.

The American Islamic Congress is proud to celebrate the diversity of the Muslim community and its contribution to the diversity of American society. We are proud to speak out on behalf of protecting religious diversity in the workplace, and we believe resolution 1431 will protect individual rights and enhance interfaith understanding.

As someone who grew up under hard repression and religious intolerance, I recognize how precious American freedoms are. As someone who has witnessed some examples of anti-Muslim sentiments in American workplaces, I want to ensure that both employees and employers work together in an environment of mutual respect. By coming together to promote religious diversity here in the US, we will offer a shining example to countries and societies around the world of how people of diverse religious outlooks can work together to advance a tolerant and free society.