

Muslims hope bias ends with bin Laden's death

by [Alexi Friedman](#)

May 9, 2011

PATERSON, N.J. (RNS) Hours after Osama bin Laden's death was announced, the American Arab Forum received a phone call. The person on the line was looking for Aref Assaf, the Paterson, N.J.-based organization's Ivy League-educated president.

"`Tell your boss that we got his friend and we're going to get him,'" the man said, according to Assaf, who dismissed the threat as kids pulling a prank. While the call represented a kind of hostility Assaf said many Arabs commonly endure in the United States, he believed bin Laden's death might create an opportunity "to open a new chapter."

"We have been paying the price for bin Laden for the last 10 years," Assaf said. "Enough castigating our community. We hope this will serve as a reminder to America that the real source of terror was not in Paterson or Dearborn, Michigan, but in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

In the mosques of Jersey City and Arab-owned shops along Main Street in Paterson, opinions differed about whether the death of the world's most notorious terrorist would alter perceptions that have persisted for nearly a decade.

Across the country, there are already signs that anti-Islamic sentiment has not yet ebbed.

In Portland, Maine, the message: "Osama Today, Islam Tomorrow" was spray-painted on a mosque. A Texas teacher was suspended after allegedly telling a 9-year-old Muslim girl in his algebra class, "I bet that you're grieving." And in Anaheim, Calif., eggs were thrown at a nightclub, hitting its owner, Mohammed El Khatib.

It will take more than bin Laden's death to dispel ignorance, said James Yee, executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations, a Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. "It is disheartening, and tells me our work is not going to stop," he said. Bin Laden's death "is not going to change much regarding Muslims being accepted."

But it may end an era, one in which bin Laden stood as a convenient excuse for bias, said Salaheddin Mustafa, who heads the state chapter of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He compared "the picture of evil that was bin Laden" with the recent pro-democracy movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Libya. "There is the sea change that people will recognize," he said.

Mustafa, a Palestinian born in Jersey City, said more Americans will separate bin Laden "and his cronies" from "people like me and the vast majority, who had nothing to do with" the terror attacks.

Mohamad Hamamou, an Egyptian native who lives in Secaucus, remembers feeling doubly wounded on Sept. 11. He grieved for the thousands killed -- which included scores of Muslims -- and despaired at what the attacks meant for his community.

"Uneducated people just look at it from a perspective of, 'What a Muslim person does is to try and hurt people,'" Hamamou said.

His concerns were realized. He has been cursed at on the road, threatened by strangers, and glanced at suspiciously in malls.

Bin Laden's death, while welcomed, will do little to sway those who already have negative perceptions of Muslims, he said. Those views, he added, "have been in their brains for a long time."

When his wife was worried about raising children in an environment that was at times hostile to their religion, he reminded her it would be their children who would lead by example.

Al Ghazaly, the Jersey City elementary school where he sends his children, has a sign greeting visitors written in Arabic calligraphy:

"Everyone smiles in the same language."

"If we teach our kids love and respect, we know this is going to fade away," he said later that night.

Yursil Kidwai, a 33-year-old American-born Muslim who lives in Basking Ridge, N.J., isn't so sure. Pointing to anti-Islamic rhetoric prevalent in portions of American discourse, Kidwai said bin Laden, and the mistrust he engendered, remain an albatross around the neck of American Muslims.

"I can't imagine his death would change anything," he said. Kidwai has dealt with the common stereotypes for years. His mother still asks him to shave his beard, fearing it is too conspicuous and will draw needless attention to his religious beliefs. He was friends with Amir Celoski, the Haledon native whose burial in an Islamic cemetery in upstate New York received national attention when the town administrator wanted the body disinterred.

"The whole thing was just about bias and hatred," Kidwai said.

Whether bin Laden's death will change those feelings, Mustafa couldn't say for certain.

"But I'm optimistic," he said. "My hope is this is a cycle we're going through, and that in 10 or 15 years, people, like those in Bridgewater, will realize that they were wrong. And that what they did and said violated everything good that America represents."