

## Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the Muslim Advocates' Annual Dinner

San Francisco, California ~ Friday, December 10, 2010

Thank you, Farhana Khera. It is a pleasure to be here.

I want to recognize, and salute, the work that everyone here – as leaders, supporters, and partners of Muslim Advocates – is doing to help fulfill our nation's promise of equal justice and opportunity.

On behalf of our nation's Justice Department, I am grateful to count you as partners in our work to promote tolerance, to ensure public safety, and to protect civil rights. Your engagement – and your commitment to the principles and goals that we share – has been critical, especially throughout this year.

In September, Farhana participated in a meeting I held with national leaders from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh communities. We met to discuss shared concerns about rising levels of religious intolerance – and, in particular, incidents and reports of intimidation and violence against American Muslims and their religious institutions.

Farhana helped lead that important, and productive, conversation. This evening, it is a privilege to continue that discussion – and to help advance the crucial dialogue that is underway between those in Muslim and Arab-American communities and law enforcement. Strengthening this dialogue – and expanding it – is important to me, to our nation's Justice Department, and to the Obama administration.

Speaking in Cairo, less than six months after taking office, President Obama described the values and hopes that unify all of us as Americans.

“America,” he said, “holds within her the truth that regardless of race, religion, or station in life, all of us share common aspirations - to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God.”

But, he added, “so long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, and who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. This cycle of suspicion and discord must end.”

President Obama may have been addressing another region of the world, but his words are as much a guide for America's diverse communities as they are for others around the globe.

Since becoming Attorney General last February, I have heard from Arab Americans and Muslims who say they feel uneasy about their relationship with the United States government.

Some feel that they have not been afforded the full rights of citizenship. Others are worried about the safety of their families, communities, and places of worship. And, too often, Muslims and Arab Americans have told me that they feel as though they are treated by their fellow citizens, by their government, and especially by those of us in law enforcement as though it were, quote, “us versus them.”

That is unacceptable. And it is inconsistent with what America is all about. Muslims and Arab Americans have helped to build and strengthen our nation. They have served as police officers, teachers, civic leaders and soldiers – strengthening their local communities and safeguarding their country. And the cooperation of Muslim and Arab-American communities has been absolutely essential in identifying, and preventing, terrorist threats. We must never lose sight of this. And, as we work to create a brighter and more prosperous future, we must not fail to heed the lessons of our past.

Ours is a nation of immigrants. I am the son of immigrants. And the American people have proven, time and again, that our progress is rooted in partnership - and that this country's greatest successes begin with a willingness to reach across lines of division and exclusion. If we are going to realize our nation's promise – and if we want to heal persistent wounds and overcome new threats - then we must work together.

Regardless of color or creed, we are all Americans. And, to the extent that relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans are defined by differences, those who sow hatred rather than peace will – no doubt – prevail. But we cannot – and we must not – allow that to happen.

There can be no “us” or “them” among Americans. And I believe that law enforcement has an obligation to ensure that members of every religious community enjoy the ability to worship and to practice their faith in peace, free from intimidation, violence or suspicion. That is the right of all Americans. And it must be a reality for every citizen.

In this nation, our many faiths, origins, and appearances must bind us together – not break us apart. Our justice system must be used to empower, not to exclude or target. And security and liberty must be guideposts – not opposing forces – in ensuring safety and opportunity for all.

At every level of the Justice Department, we are committed to the impartial and aggressive enforcement of our nation's laws. I recognize that actions speak louder than assurances. And I know that the communities we serve must see – and more fully understand – that we are defending civil rights with the same vigor that we are protecting public safety.

Tonight, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss some of the ways that the Justice Department is working to advance both of these priorities – and to strengthen cooperation between law enforcement and Muslim and Arab-American communities.

Over the last 22 months, the Justice Department – and our U.S. Attorneys' Offices – have reinvigorated our civil rights enforcement activities.

First and foremost, we have restored the Department's Civil Rights Division to its rightful place as our country's preeminent civil rights enforcement agency. The Department's commitment to civil rights has never been stronger. And the prosecution of violence motivated by religious intolerance has been – and will continue to be – a priority.

We also are working to ensure fair housing and lending, land use rights, and educational opportunities – and to make certain that Americans are not forced to choose between their faith and their jobs.

In October, the Department filed an amicus brief supporting the construction of a mosque in Murfreesboro, Tennessee – and argued that Islam is a religion entitled to protection under the First Amendment. The Department has brought suit against the New York City MTA over its refusal to permit Muslims and Sikhs who work as bus and subway drivers to wear religious head coverings on the job. And we recently reached settlements in Delaware and Texas resolving discrimination complaints against Muslim students.

We have also strengthened efforts to prevent and combat hate crimes – and to protect American Muslims from acts of violence and discrimination.

More than ever before, all 94 U.S. Attorneys Offices are partnering with the Department's Civil Rights Division to act as force multipliers in helping to deliver our nation's most vital protections to their communities. Just this past Tuesday, nearly a third of the nation's United States Attorneys gathered in Washington for an unprecedented meeting to work on this issue – and to identify additional ways to strengthen outreach to Muslim and Arab-American communities.

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the Justice Department has investigated hundreds of incidents involving violence, threats, vandalism, and arson against Muslims and Arab Americans. In the last fiscal year, the Department indicted more hate crime defendants than any year since 1996, and convicted more hate crime defendants than any year since 2000.

When it comes to combating these heinous crimes, our message is simple: If you engage in violence fueled by bigotry – no matter the object or nature of your hate – we will bring you to justice.

As we continue utilizing the new tools afforded by the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, the work of organizations like Muslim Advocates will be critical. Often, you learn of incidents before law enforcement. And I encourage you to report these incidents to the Justice Department. I assure you: each and every report of a potential hate crime is taken seriously - and, as our record of recent activity makes clear, we will investigate and prosecute violations of federal law whenever we can.

Last year, two Tennessee men were sentenced to more than 14 years in prison after pleading guilty to spray painting swastikas and the words “white power” on a mosque - and then starting a fire that destroyed the mosque. And last month, an Illinois man was sentenced to one year in prison after he pleaded guilty to sending a threatening e-mail to a mosque.

But our work extends beyond prosecutions. Community outreach is a critical component of the Justice Department's hate crimes prevention strategy. The Civil Rights Division holds regular meetings that bring together Muslim, Arab, Sikh, and South Asian community leaders with various federal agencies and Department leaders. These conversations are not always easy. But they are essential. Last year, I established an Arab-American and Muslim Engagement Advisory Group to help identify more effective ways for the Justice Department to foster greater communication and collaboration - as well as a new level of respect and understanding - between law enforcement and Muslim and Arab-American communities.

These relationships are critical to ensuring both public safety and civil rights. And, in many communities, I'm pleased that our engagement efforts are producing results.

For instance, just last week in San Diego, law enforcement officers met with Somali residents to discuss the arrests of four members of their community, to address potential tensions, and to share information.

But in other parts of the country, we know that we have more work to do to strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and those in Muslim and Arab-American communities.

Some have expressed concerns about the recent charges brought against Mohamed Osman Mohamud in Portland, Oregon, for his alleged involvement in planning – and attempting to execute – a terror attack during a Christmas Tree-lighting celebration.

Mr. Mohamud's arrest was the result of a successful undercover operation – a critical and frequently used law enforcement tool that has helped identify and defuse public safety threats such as those posed by potential terrorists, drug dealers and child pornographers for decades.

These types of operations have proven to be an essential law enforcement tool in uncovering and preventing potential terror attacks.

Since 2001, more than 400 individuals have been convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related violations in federal courts. And in those terrorism cases where undercover sting operations have been used, there is a lengthy record of convictions.

Our nation's law enforcement professionals have consistently demonstrated not just their effectiveness, but also their commitment to the highest standards of professional conduct, integrity, and fairness.

I make no apologies for the how the FBI agents handled their work in executing the operation that led to Mr. Mohamud's arrest. Their efforts helped to identify a person who repeatedly expressed his desire and intention to kill innocent Americans. As you may have read – and as the affidavit alleges – Mr. Mohamud chose the target location months in advance; provided FBI operatives with bomb components and detailed operational instructions; and repeatedly refused to change course when he was reminded that a large crowd – including children – would be in harm's way.

Because of law enforcement's outstanding work, Mr. Mohamud is no longer plotting attacks. He is now behind bars. And he will be brought to justice. But you also have my word that the Justice Department will – just as vigorously – continue to pursue anyone who would target Muslims, or their houses of worship.

Those who characterize the FBI's activities in this case as “entrapment” simply do not have their facts straight - or do not have a full understanding of the law.

Our nation's law enforcement officials deserve our gratitude – and respect. Without their work – and their willingness to place public safety above personal security – government simply could not meet its most critical responsibility of protecting American lives.

Meeting this responsibility has never been more difficult. Our nation faces a determined and sophisticated enemy. As I've said repeatedly, I am committed to using every available tool to protect the American people. But I will not sacrifice or compromise our civil liberties. And I will not support activities that jeopardize our nation's ability

to serve as a beacon of hope for all the world – and as a model of strict adherence to the rule of law. Neither will I allow Muslim and Arab-American communities – or any community of Americans – to be persecuted because of their faith or national origin.

There is no question or doubt that threats to our national security are real. Together, we have mourned the loss of our fellow Americans in New York City, Virginia, and Pennsylvania; in Fort Hood, Texas; and in Mumbai, Yemen, and Uganda. Each of these attacks was a reprehensible act of cowardice, inspired by a radical and corrupt ideology – one that systematically denies human rights, devalues women and girls, and perverts the peaceful traditions and teachings of Islam.

But as you and I know, the vulgar actions of a misguided few do not reflect the values of an entire faith or people. And while violence, and the loss of innocent lives, can be cause for anger and grief – we must not let it result in widespread bias and bigotry – or in acts of vengeance.

It is our responsibility to discourage and condemn such acts – and to help change misguided perceptions. This work begins by meeting fear with reason; by meeting ignorance with information; and by meeting suspicious gazes with an outstretched hand.

I realize that this is easier said than done. This requires great courage – and uncommon grace.

And yet, your organization – and so many hopeful and committed individuals – are finding ways to bridge divides. The public education efforts that you have launched – and the steps that you are taking to unite law enforcement and Muslim communities – are critical. You are paving new paths for cooperation. You are leading the way toward peace and healing. You are making a difference.

You must keep at it. Too much is at stake. Too much is at risk.

With your continued support, continued guidance, and continued partnership – I am confident that, together, we can confront and overcome threats to our fellow citizens, and to all innocent people. I am also certain that we can ensure that all components of our government can be as sensitive and respectful as they are effective. There is not a tension in that last declaration.

Together, I am sure that we can help to build a future that honors America's enduring creed - E pluribus unum. "Out of many, one."

Thank you, again, for inviting me to join you this evening. I look forward to our continued collaboration in the pursuit of a more perfect union and a more peaceful existence for all Americans.