August 2018 *Solidarity Is This* Podcast
Episode 15: 17 Years Later

Guests: **Aber Kawas & Arjun Singh Sethi**
Host: **Deepa Iyer**

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**DEEPA:** Hello everyone, and welcome to *Solidarity Is This!* I’m your host, Deepa Iyer. In *Solidarity Is This*, we explore how we talk about and engage in multiracial solidarity, especially in a time of tremendous demographic changes, rising inequities, and a political climate that is increasingly divisive and polarized. In past podcasts, I’ve been in conversation with activists and organizers, with artists and writers, who are thinking about how to build solidarity, how to express it in various movements, whether it’s the environmental justice movement, the #MeToo movement, the food sovereignty movement or the immigrant rights movement.

You can catch *Solidarity Is This* on iTunes or anywhere else you get your podcasts. And I encourage you to look at the Solidarity Syllabus, which is available at [www.solidarityis.org](http://www.solidarityis.org), which accompanies every single one of these podcasts and provides greater information and resources so you can take action in your local communities.

So this month, in September, we are talking about and marking the 17-year anniversary of September 11th. It is hard to believe that 17 years have passed since 9/11, and yet, 9/11 is not a historic event. It’s not something that happened in the past that we can just put away. For many communities, 9/11 and its aftermath really have living consequences in our lives. So this podcast is in honor of the families of the victims who lost their lives on 9/11 and in remembrance of the communities who have been subjected to the War on Terror since then for 17 years. So my questions today with the podcast are: What has changed over the past 17 years? How does the current political climate affect Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Sikh American communities? And what can we learn from community building and solidarity over the past 17 years?

So to unpack those questions, I’m delighted to be in conversation with two movement comrades. First is Aber Kawas. She’s from Brooklyn, New York, of Palestinian descent. She graduated in 2014 from the City College of New York’s International Studies program with a concentration in Latin American Studies. Aber has been organizing with the Arab and Muslim community in New York City since 2010 with several organizations such as CAIR-New York, the Urban Justice Center and the Arab American Association of New York, which is where I met her. Aber currently serves as the New York City Advocacy Specialist with the campaign to Take on Hate, an effort of the National Network of Arab American Communities.

*Aber, welcome to Solidarity Is This.*
ABER: Thank you, thanks for having me.

DEEPA: I’m also in conversation with Arjun Singh Sethi, who’s a community activist, civil rights lawyer, writer and law professor based in Washington, DC. Arjun works closely with Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Sikh communities and advocates in various capacities, and his writing has appeared in CNN, the Guardian, and the Washington Post, among others. He teaches at Georgetown University Law Center and Vanderbilt University Law School. And most importantly, he currently has a critically-acclaimed book out called *American Hate: Survivors Speak Out* published by the New Press, which we’ll be talking about today as well. Welcome, Arjun.

ARJUN: Thank you so much for having me.

DEEPA: So I want to actually start out and talk to both of you about the fact that it is the 17-year anniversary of 9/11 this month, and I want to go back to the months and years right after 9/11. And I know that, for many of us, 9/11 was a turning point. It certainly was for me, I was a 28-year-old civil rights lawyer working at the Department of Justice on September 11, 2001, in DC. And within hours, within days, I had immediately started to focus on what was happening to South Asian American, Muslim, Arab and Sikh communities around the country when it came to hate violence and interrogations and profiling at the airports. And I went on to help create and build an organization called SAALT, South Asian Americans Leading Together, and wrote a whole book about post-9/11 America, so it’s definitely something that’s very magnified in my life as a historic event.

And so I want to ask both of you how your lives changed after 9/11, and I want to start with you Aber — if you could talk a bit about how your life, your family’s life were affected by 9/11, and if you could also talk about the communities you lived in in Brooklyn and how their lives were changed as well.

ABER: I live in South Brooklyn and have been organizing there and specifically work in the neighborhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, which is the largest Arab-populated neighborhood in New York City. And so one of the really interesting things about Bay Ridge, besides the fact that it has this huge Arab ethnic community, is that it was one of the communities that was also hit the hardest with death tolls after 9/11. Many of the firefighters, the police officers, and actually many of the workers who were in the building who passed away during 9/11 tragically, were living in Bay Ridge. And so right away there was this immediate divisiveness and tension within the community that was a historic white, Italian, Irish, Greek community that had this surging population of Arab immigrants. And there had already been tensions there, but they were exacerbated by 9/11 happening, the tragedy, the death and the misunderstanding of the Muslim community and the Arab community and all the propaganda. So one of the things that was happening in Bay Ridge was there was an increase in incidents of hate, many people were being cursed at, hit sometimes, sometimes they were being kicked off the bus or denied access to buying things in stores. There was just this increased hatred that was happening and hate
incidents that were happening to our community. But, besides that, there were also a lot of policy changes that we know that happened after 9/11. There was the NSEERS program, that many people in our community had to choose if they were going to be part of — the NSEERS program was asking people from 25 countries of origin, that were Muslim-related countries of origin, who were undocumented to register with the government. And so we know that about 82,000 and maybe above people registered for that program, and so people like my father, who was undocumented, had to make a choice of, do I register with the US government even though I’m undocumented and this puts me at a risk for deportation, or do I stay under the radar knowing that there’s kind of like a witch hunt for terrorists at the moment? People were being accused of terrorism, and a lot of people understood that the implication of not registering with the government is kind of saying to the government that, I’m a suspicious person, I’m somebody who is trying to hide. And so that was a choice that a lot of people made and one of the ramifications of that choice was deportation, and we know that about 30,000 people who registered for NSEERS were put in the process of deportation. And deportation hit our community in a huge way, thousands of people were being deported. And one of those people was my own father [who], when I was in seventh grade was picked up by ICE, incarcerated for three and a half years, and eventually deported. So the effects of 9/11, there are some things that affected our whole community but they were also very personal things to me and my family.

**DEEPA:** Thanks for sharing that, Aber, and I’ve heard you share that before and I can’t imagine how devastating that was for your family, and you being in seventh grade, and I can imagine that it also sparked your career in activism and really raising a voice for your communities. And I think it’s also really important how you started off, because I think there are people, people think that there weren’t folks from these communities who were impacted directly by 9/11 in terms of being victims in the towers, and there were. It wasn’t as though it happened to some people, and Muslim and Arab, South Asian communities weren’t actually part of that. So I think it’s important to also raise that through the lens of Bay Ridge.

So I want to ask you, Arjun, if you can share a little bit as someone who’s a Sikh American and how the early days after 9/11 affected the Sikh community.

**ARJUN:** So 9/11 was definitely a demarcation point for Sikhs in America. There was an uptick in bullying, employment discrimination, everyday hate, hate violence. One of the first people that comes to mind is Balbir Singh Sodhi. He was a Sikh American who was murdered outside his gas station just days after 9/11, on account of being Sikh, on account of being perceived as different. And really, there were lots of documented incidents of Sikhs being targeted. I remember my dad coming home one day, just a few days after 9/11, really upset because someone at McDonald’s didn’t want to sell him a cheeseburger because of the way he looked. On September 13, at Georgetown University, somebody jumped in front of my car as I was driving on campus and said, “Go home.” So it was undoubtedly a very difficult time.

In terms of the national security policies that we saw being unrolled at that time, as Aber mentioned, there was the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, which required boys
and men from Muslim-majority countries to register with the government and to submit to invasive interrogations, check-ins, fingerprinting, and many were put in this terrible dilemma, especially those who were undocumented: Should they register? And if they do register, do they risk deportation? We saw an intensification of watchlists. We know that under the Watchlisting Guidance, the United States Government can brand you a terrorist on the basis of a single social media post. We also know that Dearborn, Michigan, a city, of course, that is known for its large Arab and Muslim community, but a city that has a population of less than 100,000 residents, has more people on the watchlist than any other city in the country except for New York. And it has real consequences. If you’re on the watchlist, that means that, in some cases, you can’t fly. It means, in some cases, you’re subjected to invasive interrogation by the TSA. In some cases, it’s shared with employers and it can prevent you from holding a job. We saw intensification of the Suspicious Activity Reporting program. One of the perceived intelligence failures leading to 9/11 was the inability of local law enforcement to report suspicious activity to federal law enforcement, and so the United States government encouraged local law enforcement to report suspicious activity, namely what they call ‘pre-terrorism planning,’ to the federal government. The problem is, is what exactly is pre-terrorism planning? Well, it’s things like Muslim Americans taking photos of bridges, taking photos of monuments, Arab Americans going to the store and buying home computers for their home business. So really we just saw intensification of surveillance, profiling and policing of these communities.

DEEPA: And I think both of you talked about NSEERS, and that’s something we’ll have some more information in the Solidarity Syllabus, but I want to also point out that through a lot of community organizing, the NSEERS program was finally ended in December 2016, a few months after the election of Donald Trump and before his inauguration. But again, while that was an important moment when it came to community organizing, we also, of course, saw the Muslim Ban, which many say NSEERS was an antecedent for. So we’ll get into that in a little bit, but the entire national security infrastructure of this country changed, right, in the wake of 9/11, and we had the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, as well. So I wonder if both of you can talk a little bit about how immigration and national security policies reinforced the public narrative that Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Sikh communities were — or are — ‘communities of interest’ who should be targeted in hate violence or discrimination and the like. So how does the policy and state violence actually reinforce what’s happening on the day-to-day?

So Aber, I wanted to see if you could start by talking a little bit about that in terms of your experiences organizing in New York City.

ABER: Arjun was just talking about the surveillance that was happening to communities across the country, and in New York City we had a very specific surveillance experience because we found out that our New York City Police Department had created what we call a Demographics Unit that was meant to specifically surveil and spy on Muslim Communities. So the Associated Press has released a bunch of reports and documents that expose this Demographics Unit and showed that there was a mass of mosques and restaurants and community centers across New
York City that were being surveilled by the NYPD, as well as Muslim Students Associations, different clubs on campus. This was a really scary experience for us because what it meant was that every single person’s lives had touched surveillance. Every single Muslim person in New York City, in some way or another, had entered a space that was surveilled, had maybe been at a community event that was recorded, had interacted with a community member or leader who was mentioned in the surveillance report. It was very chilling and difficult, actually at some times just emotionally and mentally difficult to deal with the fact that there was this massive surveillance that was happening to our community. And I think that what that message sends to our community is that we’re just really dehumanized, that we don’t have the right to our own privacy, we don’t have the right to have our freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and we would be limited in so many ways. So some examples of this is that we had a Muslim Student Association who put a sign on their door for the students coming in, you know, no one talk about politics in this prayer space. And that was something that was put out of fear and censorship. You know, somebody might hear you and something might happen. Things like, people didn’t know how to write essays that were political essays, they would be afraid to do research on anything related to the Middle East or Islam or things like that. I think that it was really pervasive on a personal level to so many people in our community, but also what it said was that our police department dehumanized us.

DEEPA: You know, you brought up a couple of points that I want to really amplify before I turn to you, Arjun, which, the chilling effect that these policies have had on the lives of people and communities in terms of every aspect of the lives of people — when to travel, how to travel, what to speak about, what to write about, when to pray — is something that a lot of people might not think about, but it has affected the daily lives of individuals going about daily activities. And then the other part is the emotional and psychological trauma on our community members, which I think we don’t still have a full grasp of because of this, as you said Aber, this constant pattern of dehumanization by the local police department all the way to media narratives. I think that is something that we need to pay more attention to as well.

But Arjun, Aber talked about the local police departments in New York City, particularly, and lot of times, I think, people think that the federal government is the one responsible for the surveillance state, and I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about how local and federal governments really work together in terms of creating the state of surveillance, particularly perhaps through the lens of the Countering Violent Extremism program.

ARJUN: Countering Violent Extremism programs try to, or purport to, identify Muslim American, Arab American youth who are at risk of becoming violent extremists. But what we have found is that these programs are based on junk science, because there’s really no way of identifying who will one day in the future become an extremist. Two, because of the junk science, the US Government has invented these indicators, so we’ve seen Muslim Americans who decide to wear a hijab, attend a protest, not stand for the National Anthem, all of a sudden be construed as future terrorists for just engaging in legitimate political expression. And in the same way that Aber talked about, they have a stigmatizing effect because these programs target Muslim Americans, they target Arab Americans, treat them as collectively suspicious.
And they really drive a wedge also between Muslim American elders and young people, because they basically turn Muslim American elders into informants and ask them to share the names of kids, et cetera, with law enforcement. But we’ve seen some extraordinary resilience on this issue. There are Muslim American organizers who, across the country, are pushing back against these programs because they don’t work and they stigmatize our communities and have a chilling effect. Just in the last week or so, the LA’s mayor’s office, in the wake of advocacy by lots of local organizers, decided to reject a grant for hundreds of thousands of dollars for CVE programming in LA because they finally understand that these programs don’t work and really chill and violate civil rights.

DEEPA: And I’m so glad you mentioned that because we’ve been talking about 17 years of dehumanization and surveillance and hate, but at the same time, I think it’s really important to say that there has been a lot of organizing and advocacy and narrative-shifting and community-building happening with Muslim, Arab and South Asian and Sikh communities as well as other communities of color. So I want to pivot to that a little bit, and Aber, if you can talk a little bit about how communities have been doing that in terms of organizing and building power in New York City, I know the passage of the Community Safety Act, for example, was a big win in New York City and it’s been a model for other communities around the country. So can you talk a little bit about how communities came together? What were the reasons and what were some of the characteristics of community building in the years after 9/11?

ABER: Actually, I also want to mention, I was in Los Angeles last week, and I was with a bunch of activists and organizers who won that big win on CVE and we just hugged each other and celebrated together. I’m still really happy about that.

So, in New York City, I mentioned this NYPD surveillance program and Demographics Unit, and we didn’t just take that lying down. Our community was completely outraged finding out about this program, and one of the really beautiful things that did happen that came out of it was the passing of the Community Safety Act. So the Community Safety Act was a set of bills that a coalition of organizations worked around in New York City — and it wasn’t just about the surveillance that was happening to Muslim communities in New York City, but it was about stop-and-frisk, it was about the harassment of homeless people and sex workers on the street, it was a bill that included a multitude of communities who were affected by discriminatory policing in New York City — and so a coalition of these organizations came together and helped pass this bill, and also actually just started to build solidarity with one another. So I remember, at the same time that we were having protests and rallies outside of the police commissioner’s office talking about the NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities, then we would go and we would walk down to Occupy Wall Street, which was also having a rally on, like, stop-and-frisk, and then we’d join our rallies together. I remember that there was a huge march that was to raise awareness around stop-and-frisking of Black and Latino communities in New York City after reports came out of discriminatory amounts of Black and Latinos who are affected by stop-and-frisk, and there was a huge Muslim contingent at this march that was coming in solidarity because of how we were feeling the effects of NYPD discrimination. So I think that was really the most important win, and, of course, as we passed the bills, one of the things that
we got was an inspector general, somebody who was able to have independent oversight of the NYPD, and we’ve also passed some bills around stop-and-frisk, around police being able to identify themselves, and searching people. And then one of the other things that happened besides passing the CSA was that a coalition of groups came together and organized a group of plaintiffs to essentially sue the NYPD. So this was a legal action that we took against the NYPD and one of the things that came out of that was, we settled the case actually just about a year ago, is that we have a civilian representative who is now placed to actually oversee all of the cases of surveillance that the NYPD engages in and then lets them know if this is legal or not legal, if this is overstepping, if this is essentially falling into surveillance and discrimination against communities. And so we have some big wins, and some important things that we have put in place and infrastructure that we have put in place to deal with the policies and surveillance in New York City, but there’s so much more to do. I think one of the lessons we’ve learned about solidarity is that, you know, continuing on, whatever policies we’re gonna work on, we’re gonna do that in tandem with communities that are affected by policing, that are affected by horrific policies, and we’re gonna do that together.

DEEPA: But I actually now want to turn to you, Arjun, because I want to ask you about this question that I posed at the beginning of the podcast: Have things gotten worse since the Trump Administration took office? And if so, how? And your new book, American Hate: Survivors Speak Out provides a window into how people of all different backgrounds have been affected by the climate of hate in our country today, and in your book, you include testimonials from people who are Black Muslims, who are Sikhs, who are Arabs and South Asians. And so I was wondering if you could talk through some of those stories and really kind of tell us, how have the experiences of the people you interview and you documented their stories, how have their experiences been exacerbated by the post-9/11 backlash that was already in place?

ARJUN: So the survivors I met all described being fearful and nervous after 9/11 and described an uptick in bullying and hate violence targeting their communities, whether it was the Muslim community, the Arab community, the Sikh community, but in many ways, they all feel that today is worse. They feel like 9/11 was a terrorist event and the backlash that ensued was the result of a terrorist event. This feels different because Donald Trump won in a democratic election, and as a consequence, they feel that the American people, in many ways, are so much more responsible for the hate they’re experiencing, because it’s part of this backlash of having really a white supremacist as president. So some of the people in the book include the spokesperson for the Victoria Mosque – so for folks who don’t think rhetoric matters, I’m happy to share why political rhetoric matters. In December 2015, Donald Trump said he was going to ban Muslims from entering the United States. On that day, somebody left a pig’s head outside the Al-Aqsa Islamic Society Mosque in Philadelphia. Fast-forward, in January 2017, Donald Trump signed the first executive order banning Muslims. On that night, a mosque in Victoria, Texas, was burned to the ground. And both of the spokespeople for those mosques, Shahid Hashmi and Marwan Kreidie, both say that now is a more difficult time than it was post-9/11. Destinee Mangum and Walia Mohamed, they were the two young women who were aboard the Max Train in Portland, Oregon, when three upstanders intervened and two of them gave their lives protecting them last summer in Portland, Oregon. Destinee Mangum is a Black
woman and Walia Mohamed is Black Muslim. And in Walia’s own words, things are different under the Trump Administration because people feel like they can get away with being cruel, being hateful, and committing acts of hate violence with impunity. And so that’s, in general, the sentiment that I’ve found, there’s no question that this country has a dark and ugly history of racism going back to really its origins but that hate has spiked, in this moment, because of the rhetoric and policies of this administration.

DEEPA: And clearly, we know from reports from SAALT and the Arab American Institute and CAIR that hate has spiked in the wake of this administration. I’m curious from both of you — Arjun if you want to respond to this first and then I’ll come to you, Aber — do you think that this political climate also provides an opening for more people to understand what the unique experiences have been for Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Sikh communities in this country? Because I feel like, finally, people are looking at our communities and listening to our communities because of the Muslim Ban. And I’m curious to know if you both feel in your advocacy or in your writing and documentation, Arjun, if there is an opening now that maybe we didn’t have before to get more of these stories out there through a historical lens.

ARJUN: I do, and I do think there are examples of communities stepping up, either in the wake of hate or in anticipation of hate striking their town. So we’ve seen community organizations host town halls across the country where survivors of hate can come forward and tell their stories, and that we’ve seen in these town halls, other survivors come forward. People who were afraid to tell their stories, when provided a platform, are more comfortable sharing. I think we’ve also just seen an increase in folks having difficult conversations with people who are different from them, not just having interfaith conversations but having anti-racism trainings. You know, and really, one thing that I feel really strongly about is that I think we should be having legislative hearings in every state in this country where survivors can tell their stories. It’s already happening, in many cases, at sort of the local, really local community level, and I think there should be a space at every state legislature for survivors and communities to really come forward.

DEEPA: Aber, what do you think? I know that currently you’re with the National Network on Arab American Communities doing fieldwork and organizing in New York and with the campaign to Take on Hate and have been working on issues like the Muslim Ban. And there was this really transformative event that you all organized called ‘Stomp the Ban,’ and I’m curious to know if you feel that this political climate has opened up conversations that we weren’t able to have in the years after 9/11.

ABER: One of the things we did after the Muslim Ban came into effect was that I participated with an organization called the Arab Family Support Center and several other organizations in doing this event called ‘Stomp the Ban.’ And Stomp the Ban was a community cultural event and it used the form of dabke music, which is a Palestinian folk dance where you stomp a lot, and people came and danced dabke and talked about the effect of the Muslim Ban on their communities. And I think the event really showed celebration and it showed strength in our community and it showed that we still had our cultural resistance, and I think that’s a really
important thing that has been happening within this political climate is that, now I feel like even though there’s more cards stacked against us, that there’s a lot more solidarity that we’re feeling. And when it was once taboo to support Muslims, when Islam was completely synonymous with terrorism, and even people who were ‘progressive,’ even people who were open-minded really couldn’t see through the propaganda, whereas this moment where people are really seeing, like, no, this is really horrific. This is really unjust. I think, in the mainstream, it’s becoming more acceptable and popular now to express support with Muslim communities, and I think for our own communities, or communities that are affected by Islamophobic policies, there’s also more strength and less intimidation. Because once it’s so overt in that kind of way where, it’s not silent now. Before, I felt it was always very silent and it was quiet and it was hush-hush, and everybody was experiencing all of these things but people really weren’t able to talk about it. Now, because it’s so overt, we as a community are also responding in an overt way. Like, no, we’re going to speak out and we’re going to be loud and we have people who are supporting us. And, in fact, we’re not going to be victims, we’re gonna tap into our strength and the strength that we have as collective communities.

DEEPA: I completely agree with you. It’s sort of as though the common enemy of Trump has made it possible for us to have conversations and receive allyship in ways that we didn’t before. And in that vein, I’m curious to know, Arjun about when you wrote the book and you were having these conversations with people, did folks talk about solidarity as a practice, as a way to not just have the difficult conversations that you talked about, but to actually create change in their communities, to better understand each other, to move towards a common vision? How important was that as a tactic and a strategy?

ARJUN: I mean, it was critical and essential. I think every survivor I spoke with emphasized solidarity in some form or another. So the family of Khalid Jabara — the Jabaras fled the Lebanese Civil War and made a home for themselves in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and all was well until a white supremacist family moved next door who terrorized the family, called them things like “dirty Arabs, dirty Muslims, ISIS.” And then the white supremacists ran over Haifa Jabara, this is the mother of the family. She was hospitalized with major injuries, and the white supremacist was originally not allowed to post bond because of the prior history of terrorizing the family and because of the violent attack committed against the mother. But a new prosecutor was appointed to the case who didn’t know the case history, and when a renewed motion for bond was made, he was allowed to post it and was allowed to return home next door to the family he had terrorized, and then months later murdered Khalid Jabara on his own doorstep. And Victoria Jabara told me how, in the wake of—

DEEPA: Victoria Jabara is Khalid Jabara’s sister.

ARJUN: Khalid Jabara’s sister — told me how, you know, in the wake of Khalid’s murder, everyone just assumed they were Muslim, and they came out and said, We are Arab Christians. But even if we were Muslim, it doesn’t matter — they weren’t going to throw anyone under the bus. And she talked about and I attended the dedication of a new library in Khalid Jabara’s name, and I saw Jewish Americans there, I saw Christians, I saw people of every faith you can
imagine gathering there and talking about how they were going to teach inclusivity, racial justice and even organizing tactics to young people. In Victoria, Texas, the spokesperson for the mosque told me that it was an age-old tradition for them, going back many, many years, they would have potluck dinners at the mosque where people could just come and learn about the mosque, kind of like an open house. And he said that when the new mosque goes up—which is gonna be actually probably a month from today, it looks like it’s gonna be September 30, September 31st, somewhere around that time—they’re gonna sort of begin that tradition again, because they want to have sort of that ‘open house.’

Marwan Kreidie talked about how there is a group he runs called United Voices in Philadelphia, which centers people from the undocumented community and the Latinx community, and basically takes them to City Hall in Philadelphia so they can tell their stories, so legislators can hear directly from different communities who are impacted.

DEEPA: That’s a really important point, that it’s not just with other communities of color but it’s within our communities as well. Because I think a lot of people might not know that Arab, Muslim, South Asian and Sikh communities didn’t really work together, we weren’t really forming coalitions prior to 9/11 even though we were all experiencing some form of discrimination before 9/11. But it was really this government construction of, you’re a community of interest, you’re on this special registration list, that forced us to look at ourselves and be like, we need to do a better job about being in community with each other because we’re being targeted. I will say that there are some gaps, though, in our work, and I think one in particular is about building community with Black Muslims and understanding the unique experience that folks who are Black and Muslim have when it comes to, say, the intersection of state violence or government violence, that it can get accentuated because of being Black and, of course, being Muslim. So there’s still, of course, work that needs to be done, like you said Aber with our solidarity practices, but we have, over the last 17 years, I think demonstrated that it is possible in a variety of different ways.

So the last question I want to ask both of you is: a call to action. And it doesn’t have to be one call to action. So as you look ahead, as you think of what your calls to action might be for communities over the next 2-3 months, can you share some of that with us.

ABER: I wanted to mention one of the campaigns that we’re currently working on with Take on Hate, one of my organizations, which is in itself kind of a call to action. We started this campaign very much because of the climate that we’re in and it’s called Aman Zones. And aman is the Arabic word that means security. We wanted to choose neighborhoods across the country where we can build a sense of aman, a sense of safety with our community. And we specifically use this Arabic word because we wanted to empower our communities’ voices and their experiences. And what we’re doing is we’re actually spending six months to a year serving our community and asking them about the issues that are affecting them and holding community town halls so that we can figure out how to fight discriminatory policies in our community but also how to empower our communities. And I would say the call to action that comes from this, you know, if you can’t participate in our campaign, is that we should really
uplift the voices of the victims and the people who have been affected by these policies and allow them to lead in creating the solutions. I think one of the things that has happened and how we can build in the future is that we’ve only, as you said, started to build these coalitions. We’ve only just really started to find ways to build solidarity and there’s a lot of gaps, there’s a lot of things that we are learning as we go along. And I think one of the things that is the most important is to center the voices of affected communities and have them come up with solutions and not just the person who gets a full-time salary in a non-profit, not just the person who has been working in government policy or is a lawyer, but the people who—you know, all of these stories that we mentioned, whether it’s the pig in front of the mosque or people being put on watchlists. These are getting sent to people by calls and texts and they’re telling each other and they’re afraid, and you know, a lot of times our own communities don’t have the outlets to express their fear and also to express their solutions. I think the call to action is to really center that.

DEEPA: Arjun, what about you in terms of a few calls to action?

ARJUN: Well I completely agree with Aber about centering survivors and centering those who are most impacted. We have to be proximate, and I really do think that’s important. I said earlier, I think we should have state hearings in every state in this country where survivors and impacted communities can tell their stories and talk about the everyday hate, Islamophobia, misogyny, sexism they experience in Donald Trump’s America. I think understanding that, you know, state and hate violence doesn’t just have an impact on individuals, it has an impact on communities at large through vicarious trauma. And one of the consequences of that means that we need to be treating racism and hate as public health issues and really fund it as such. And finally, just reiterating a call I made before — I think interfaith conversations are important, but I think we also need to have anti-racism trainings, and we need allies to step up and talk about white supremacy, and we need the media to talk about white supremacy and lawmakers to talk about white supremacy, because as we’ve seen with the election and campaign of Donald Trump, it’s a cancer that’s really affecting all of our communities in really destructive ways.

DEEPA: You know, one of the things that I have seen that has been so hopeful, and I would say—if I can add my own call to action—is more people from our communities stepping up to talk about what’s happening, to document, to join movements, campaigns, organizations, and it’s been amazing to see people like you, Aber, as well as young women like Ramla Sahid at PANA-San Diego, Darakshan Raja at Justice for Muslims in DC, and so many others who are taking leadership and really making sure that there is community-building happening as well as community support and community defense. So we’ll highlight some of those organizations in the Solidarity Syllabus as well, but with that, I want to thank both of you for being here. It was a really, I think, hopeful conversation. Even though it was heavy at times, I feel hopeful about what is ahead and what is possible and I want to thank you both for your work. Aber, as I mentioned, is an organizer in New York City with the National Network on Arab American Communities. Arjun is an attorney, an activist, and has a new book out called American Hate: Survivors Speak Out. The website where you can find more information about Arjun’s book is
www.survivorsspeakout.org, and Arjun is actually on a book tour right now and is in
collection with people around the country on these issues and the themes in his book, so I
really encourage you, if you are able to, to attend one of those conversations or to invite him
out to your town or your college campus.

Thank you again to both of you for joining me on this episode of Solidarity Is This.

ARJUN: Thank you so much for having me.

ABER: Thank you, very happy to be here.

DEEPA: Again, I wanted to mention that you can download and subscribe to this podcast on
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