



Islamic Speakers Bureau Fact Sheet

What Happened to Students of Middle Eastern and Muslim Background During the Gulf War in 1990?

Beginning with the onset of the Gulf War in 1990 when Iraq attacked Kuwait and the U.S. became involved, several incidences took place in public schools around our nation that were directly connected to the war. Some of those events included the following:

1. School aged youth of all ages were confused about who they should hate. Some children considered any child or their parents of Middle Eastern (M.E.) background as “the enemy.”
2. Teachers who encouraged support for American troops exhibited little or no regard or sensitivity to students of M.E. background whose extended families were being bombed. Children who did not bring yellow ribbons or canned goods to school for donation to American troops were ostracized.
3. Many school officials, superintendents, and teachers never expressed sympathy for all the families and the value of all human life. The unspoken message was that only American lives were important.
4. In many schools or classrooms, only discussions that voiced full support of U.S. bombing and war objectives were officially allowed.
5. Altercations between students took place on and off campus, usually as a result of name calling that took place on campus.
6. Racially and religiously motivated teasing occurred in many schools, often unaddressed by teachers or school officials.
7. Children were harassed on school buses, in hallways, bathrooms, school parking lots, cafeterias, school locker rooms, and school libraries with all kinds of degrading comments being made. In many instances, no responsible adult stopped the harassment.
8. School secretaries and part-time staff were rarely instructed in any type of sensitivity, and often exhibited very negative behavior to children and parents of M.E./Muslim background such as ignoring them when they entered the school office, or taking care of others although they entered the school office after them. In most cases, even when teaching staff was instructed about respectful behavior towards all students and parents at that difficult time, these instructions were usually not extended to secretaries and part-time staff. Very often they are the first and only person a parent or child may see for a problem.
9. Muslim children fasting during Ramadan during school hours were sometimes seen as “foreigners” assumed to be exhibiting “un-American” social habits. Many Muslim children were forced to remain in the cafeteria watching other children eating while they were fasting, rather than allowed to go to an alternate location such as the library.
10. Many Muslim schoolgirls who covered their hair with a scarf for religious reasons were particularly harassed and called “scarf head” or “rag head.” Many classmates pulled the scarves off the heads of these girls, hit them in the head, poked them in the head, or threw tissue paper at them as they passed them in the halls. (It was said the Saudi government would not give toilet paper to the American troops in Saudi Arabia).
11. Almost all adults and children demonstrated their belief that all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arab even though the largest Muslim country in the world is non-Arab Indonesia.
12. Some teachers encouraged group hatred of all Arabs and all Muslims. For example, at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax, Virginia, a teacher permanently hung in his classroom a small poster showing a man in Arab headdress at the end of gun sight.
13. Many physically brown students were mistaken for Arab Muslims. Muslim Pakistanis and Christian Arab-Americans were harassed and sometimes beaten up.
14. The school lunches of some students of M.E./Muslim background were stolen, insulting notes were put in their lunch boxes, or bad smelling items were put in their lunch boxes.
15. Some students’ cars were smeared with egg, paint, or thick soap.
16. Many teachers unwittingly ostracized students of M.E./Muslim background by forcing them to comment on the situation, take sides, or express their personal opinion in class. This made them feel like “the other” and made their classmates view them as “foreigners.”
17. Many teachers were genuinely afraid to discuss any religious issues in the classroom because they were unaware that the law allows it and because they feared parental responses. This stifled open responsible discussion in a balanced way that does not demonize any one’s particular religion.
18. Some Muslim teachers experienced other teachers becoming quiet whenever they approached them to join in a conversation.
19. Some schools attended by a substantial number of students of M.E./Muslim background became the targeted scene of school gangs before and after school.
20. Some students, during school hours, were handed pictures of mutilated or dead bodies.
21. Most students of M.E./Muslim background were called “camel jockeys” or “sand niggers” by fellow students. These names persist and are widely used up to the present time.