

A DECADE LATER

# 9/11 Faith concern of Muslim survivor

By **REBECCA HOFFNER**  
Staff Writer

Irfan Ehsan was beginning his day at the office early on Sept. 11, 2001. He was an intern with Morgan Stanley and decided to get in some study time to prepare for his Certified Public Accountant exam.

He arrived at the 46th floor of the second World Trade Center tower at 7:30 a.m.

Ehsan has worked in Tyler as an accountant since 2003 and worships at the East Texas Islamic Society. He was one of the Muslims in the towers that day. More than 30 Muslim Americans were killed in the combined attacks that day, CAIR Communications Director Ibrahim Hooper said.

At 8:46 a.m., the first plane crashed into the first tower. Ehsan and another co-worker who had arrived early heard the crash from their office in the second tower.

"What was that?" he recalled asking his coworker, and they raced to the floor-to-ceiling window. The first crash hit the floors 93 to 99, so they couldn't see the real damage from their window on the 46th, Ehsan said.

"We could see debris falling," he said. "Desks, telephones. We ran to take the elevator."

When the two men reached the elevator, though, a security guard told them to take the stairs.

"We thought, 'Is he out of his mind? We're on the 46th floor!' I didn't know how lucky we were to take the stairs," Ehsan said. "We were all going down the stairs, and I started to feel anxiety. I asked the guard what was going on, and he said, 'Don't worry.'"

At 9:03 a.m., the second plane hit the building, taking out floors 77 to 85. Ehsan felt the tower move beneath his feet as it absorbed the impact. They were in the stairwell on the 25th floor.

"I had heard the phrase 'legs started shaking,' but I never knew what it meant," Ehsan said. "I did then. Then we knew something terrible had happened. Some people started rushing then."

Ehsan reached the ground floor and made it outside to a gruesome sight.

"There were bodies in the courtyard between the towers," he said. "I saw people with nice suits on but with no heads. Others didn't have arms and legs."

"We could see debris falling. Desks, telephones. We ran to take the elevator."

**IRFAN EHSAN**  
IN SECOND WORLD TRADE CENTER TOWER

Ehsan looked up and saw the two holes filling the sky with smoke.

"It was like something out of 'Godzilla,'" he said. "It didn't seem real. You look up and see this immeasurable hole. I just kept walking away from the building. Some people stayed and watched people jump. I didn't want to see."

Ehsan found a payphone and called his uncle, with whom he was staying with at the time. His brother already had gone out looking for him. Once he assured his family he was safe, he had to walk several miles to have a friend pick him up.

"There were people running toward the building, and there were no cars anywhere; it's hard to believe New York City with no cars," Ehsan said. "That was the longest walk I've ever had."

Although many in the Tyler Muslim community were born and raised in America and grieve over the loss of lives on that day 10 years ago, Sept. 11 was a day that drastically changed how their faith is viewed by the general population.

Anwar Khalifa has lived in Tyler for several years and represented the Muslim community in Tyler, working to bridge gaps caused by misunderstanding.

"I was part of the ministerial alliance when Sept. 11 happened," he said. "I actually spoke at the 9/11 service."

Although he said he didn't personally experience any discrimination in the weeks and months after 9/11, he knows several members of the mosque who have.

"Many of the store owners say they would have people coming in and yelling at them," he said.

But Khalifa still is concerned about the national view of the faith.

"The rhetoric is worse now, the painting everyone with one paintbrush," Khalifa said. "But people are getting more educated too."

Anti-Sharia bills have been proposed in more than 20 states across the country, including one proposed by Leo Berman that outlaw the use of any religious law altogether. Many Islamic law experts, including Imam Faisal Ahmad of the East

Texas Islamic Society, said there's not a danger of Sharia subverting the American legal system.

And many mosques, like the one in Murfreesboro, Tenn., are getting national attention for hate-filled vandalism.

There is an effort to spread education about the religion, as well. The Pew Research Center, a non-profit, nonpartisan research institute, released the results of a survey of American Muslims last month. The research shows that American Muslims have more in common than the general public might realize, such as the fact that 48 percent of American Muslims watch pro or college sports, like 47 percent of the general public.

And American Muslims are, in general, happy with their lives in the United States.

"While a majority of U.S. Muslims say that it is more difficult to be a Muslim in the U.S. since 9/11, most think the American people are generally friendly or neutral toward Muslim Americans," the survey found.

While only 47 percent of all immigrants to the U.S. obtain their citizenship, the percentage is nearly double for American Muslims; "81

percent of Muslim Americans are citizens of the U.S., including 70 percent of those born outside the U.S.," the Pew survey found.

The majority of American Muslims reject extremism, the survey found, and by much larger numbers than Muslim publics worldwide reject extremism.

"Still, 21 percent of Muslim Americans say there is at least a fair amount of support for extremism among U.S. Muslims," the report read. "Among the general public, far more (40 percent) say there is a great deal or fair amount of support

for extremism in the Muslim American community." The Pew Center conducted the same survey in 2007, and while many of the attitudes of the Muslim community, like the majority rejection of extremism, are the same, there are some differences.

"Compared with four years ago, more Muslim Americans now believe that U.S. efforts to reduce international terrorism are sincere," the report read.

In 2004, the Muslim community in

See MUSLIMS, Page 20G

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A DECADE LATER

# 9/11 MUSLIMS

Continued From 7G

Tyler began holding annual open house events at their mosque for the public to come and ask questions about the faith.

Some were hostile and tense at the

beginning, Khalifa said. "You want those people to come, though, and ask questions," he said.

"If you don't know me, it's easy to hate me."



— AP FILE PHOTO

A second plane hits the second tower of the World Trade Center and explodes on Sept. 11, 2001.

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