An Arab American Voice Against Terror

September 27, 2001 -- I am an Arab American. I am also a New Yorker, who was born in America of a Moroccan-Muslim father and raised as such.

Last Tuesday I stood terrified at my office window above Madison Square Garden, as I watched in horror and disbelief the destruction of the World Trade Center -- one of the quintessential landmarks of this city that I love.

In the distance, down the soundless stretch of Seventh Avenue hung the ghostly cloud of what moments before had been the living mirror of the Statue of Liberty: the thriving workplace of thousands of people heralding from all over the planet, each side by side enacting their portion of the American dream.

Read the list of names on the Wall of Prayers outside St. Vincent's Hospital today, they will tell you better than I how the blow dealt on New York this September 11th truly hit the world, for the names are not only Mark, Peter, and Kevin, but Imran, Mohammed, and Kumar.

The terrorists who committed this heinous act, if indeed they were Muslim, as it appears they might have been, are no more "my people" than Timothy McVieigh was "the people" of Christians.

Before the haunting dust from this demonic act settles on Manhattan, as a liberal Arab and Muslim, I must speak out with the clearest and loudest of voices and no longer let fanatics and extremist define me and my community. For we do exist we are even in the majority -- Muslims and Arabs who condemn the killing of another human being, who believe that Allah, is compassionate, and good, and forgiving. Who know that the Koran forbids suicide, who see life as a gift that must not be squandered.

My father taught me his favorite sourate from the Koran, where God is described as a "Light within Light, emanating from a source found neither in the East nor in the West." My father also taught me that every pious Muslim who prays five times a day, as prescribed by the Koran, will recite the name of Abraham and the Tribe of Abraham twenty times a day, praying for them as well as for the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, and for the Muslim people.

The terrorists who carried with them death and destruction as they crashed into the World Trade Center towers, shared neither my vision of Allah, nor my vision of the world. They were individuals devoured by hate and stood only for themselves.

I don't know if we will ever have a real sense of how much was lost at the World Trade Center on September 11th, but I think I can ever really stop hearing the bells from the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on Amsterdam Avenue that tolled to the dead all day that Tuesday. I heard them as I walked out of Central Park coughing from the soot and ash, my feet blistered from the long trek into Harlem, away from the horror.

I feared so much was dying. I feared not just for my college friends, graduate school buddies, and building neighbors who worked in those iconic towers, but for my visions of peace and of a better world. I feared for my dream of an end to the conflict in the Middle East -- most likely that vision had gone up in a cloud of smoke.

What of my hopes of cultural understanding, of erasing of stereotypes, of validating identity and difference? That too come tumbling down. The terrorists had set off the death knell to my vision of a better day to come.

But I will not let them do that. In memory of all those who died on September 11, 2001, I will speak up loudly and not let the terrorists write the epitaph of our future. I will not let a handful of hate-mongers, who twisted the minds of desperate souls, convince many more people that there is no other way out of despair than through destruction.

The differences that divide the Arab-Muslim world and the West are not a chasm that nobody can bridge; I will not let extremists on either side tell me otherwise. I refuse to let hate draw the blueprints for our tomorrow.