

Civil rights again teeter as in WWII, speakers say

By [Sandi Doughton](#)

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The stories told by the elderly Japanese Americans and the young Syrian woman were remarkably similar: the shock of suddenly being viewed with suspicion by friends and neighbors, the bewilderment of being torn from homes and locked up, the anger with a government that promised to protect freedoms.

It happened to people of Japanese descent after Pearl Harbor. It's happening to Arab Americans and other Muslims since Sept. 11, 2001. But this time, Americans of many races are speaking out against the erosion of liberty in the name of security, said participants at a forum yesterday sponsored by Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project.

"We will not let history repeat itself," said Dale Minami, lead attorney in a lawsuit in the early 1980s that successfully challenged the federal government's claim that incarceration of 110,000 Japanese Americans was justified during wartime.

Densho chronicles the experiences of people imprisoned in camps across the Western U.S. in the 1940s, and yesterday's program began with films of several local residents relating a sense of loss and disillusionment still fresh after five decades.

They were followed by Nadin Hamoui, 21, a Syrian college student from Seattle. She tearfully recounted how 15 federal agents stormed her family's Lynnwood home last February as part of a post-Sept. 11 crackdown on Arab nationals living illegally in the U.S. In the chaos of the raid, Hamoui ran in to one of the agents in the hallway. "He pulled his gun and put it right in the middle of my forehead," she told the crowd of nearly 500 people.

Hamoui and her mother were detained for nine months in a tiny room with cardboard taped over the only window. They were released by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in November. Her father, who ran a small market in Edmonds specializing in Middle Eastern foods, was released in December.

But the family still is fighting deportation under a new policy directing authorities to seize more than 300,000 people who previously had been ordered to leave the United States, with first priority given to Arab nationals. The INS contends the family has no legal right to stay in the country.

"We've never been illegal," said Hamoui, who was 10 when she and her family entered the U.S. in 1992. They sought political asylum and have petitioned various courts to let them stay. "We've always followed the law."

Even before her family was imprisoned, Hamoui said, she always empathized with the wartime experiences of Japanese Americans. Now, she said, she more fully understands the sting of injustice. "We need to all stand together — Japanese, Chinese, Asian, African American, Arabs — because it keeps happening," she said.

In 1941, few spoke up for the rights of the Japanese Americans, being herded into camps, said Minami. When three men defied the order, the Supreme Court ruled that the threat of subversion by some Japanese Americans justified locking up thousands.

"The conclusion was ethnic affiliation in time of war determines loyalty."

It wasn't until secret documents were declassified in 1980 that it became clear the government's case was built on lies, he said. Federal law-enforcement and intelligence agencies already had concluded that the country's Japanese-American communities posed no real security risk.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the nation needs to be more vigilant and more aware of possible security risks, Minami said. But enacting laws that suspend civil rights and targeting people based solely on their race or religious affiliation merely repeat the mistakes of the past, he believes.

Unlike what happened during World War II, though, many Americans already have shown solidarity with Arab and Muslim communities, and many political leaders have urged restraint and tolerance, Minami noted. But unless citizens keep speaking up, he said, abuses can grow.

"We should not be fighting the war against terrorism abroad only to lose the battle for civil rights at home."

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