

## Islam in America: Separate but Unequal

Less than one month after the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush hosted a meeting with Islamic leaders at the White House. In the past, some of these same leaders had unleashed enraged words against the U.S. government for its repressive policies toward the Islamic world. On this September day, however, they were on their best behavior. There were signs of hope for the administration's relationship with Muslim Americans. Sheikh Hamza Yusef, one of the United States' most influential imams with a vast following among Muslim youth, told members of the gathering that "Islam was hijacked on September 11, 2001, on that plane as an innocent victim."<sup>1</sup> Bush also extended an olive branch, referring to Islam as a religion of peace. He made a point to distinguish between Islam and the militants who carried out the attacks, saying, "Al Qaeda is not an organization of good, an organization of peace, it's an organization based upon hate and evil."<sup>2</sup> Weeks later during Ramadan, Bush hosted Muslim American leaders for his administration's first *iftar*, the daily feast at sunset to break the fast.

Yet, like many courtships, this one ended as abruptly as it had begun. Nearly at the same time that Yusef was at the White House, FBI agents visited his wife at their home near San Francisco to discuss the stinging words Yusef had spoken on September 9, when he said the United States "stands condemned" and has "a great, great tribulation coming to it."<sup>3</sup> Yusef made the speech in Irving, California, at a gathering to support a Muslim cleric, a former black radical leader, who was facing criminal charges.

The relationship deteriorated further with the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the Iraq war, the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, the revelation of Koran desecration by U.S. military person-

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nel, and the Bush administration's stated aim to maintain a presence in the Islamic world. U.S. domestic policies, from the U.S.A. Patriot Act to the denial of visas for Muslims with "suspected terrorist ties" also contributed to Muslim anger. Offensive statements about Islam made by U.S. leaders did not improve relations. Lieutenant General William Boykin, for example, said in October 2003 while speaking at Christian evangelical churches that Muslims worshiped a god who is an "idol." Rather than issue an apology for the remarks, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld praised Boykin's credentials in media reports. Christian fundamentalist preachers close to Bush have also alienated Muslim Americans. Even those Muslim Americans who agreed to more photo opportunities with the president did not publicly defend the administration's policies.

As the U.S. relationship with the Islamic world has reached unprecedented levels of hostility since the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration has focused its attention on winning the hearts and minds of Muslims abroad. Yet, what about the six to seven million Muslims in the United States whose lives were dramatically altered by the September 11 attacks? Feelings of deep alienation have caused them to join the global protest movement against the United States, but instead of holding flag-burning rallies, Muslim Americans are taking a different course. Muslims are becoming more organized and vocal in their demands, petitioning school boards to establish prayer rooms in public schools for their children, taking time off during the workday for prayers, and turning to the courts when they believe their constitutional rights to practice their religion have been violated. In this way, they are exercising their rights as Americans to enhance their identity as Muslims.

## **Redefining Muslim American Identity**

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Muslim Americans have been working to create a more pronounced Islamic identity since the September 11 attacks, separate from but equal to mainstream society. In an attempt to distance their faith from Western notions that Islam is inherently violent, that *shari'a* (Islamic law) oppresses women, and that Islam is responsible for the antidemocratic tendencies of governments in the Islamic world, Muslims feel compelled to educate themselves and the outside world about the true tenets of Islam. Part of this drive is fueled by what U.S. imams call a "rejectionist" movement. Much like Muslim populations in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, Muslim Americans, particularly the younger generation of believers, are taking advantage of economic prosperity as members of the U.S. workforce. Yet, in increasing numbers they are seeking comfort in their own religious and social institutions from the hostility they feel from the general population.

Young Muslims born or raised in the United States are often more observant of conservative Islamic practice than their parents. More and more young women are wearing headscarves even if their mothers did not cover themselves. Islamic matchmaking agencies now advertise in many Muslim newspapers and magazines as arranged marriages become more common. Hundreds of Muslim students' associations linked nationwide through the Internet encourage lifestyles free of alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex. They sponsor campus activities that include lessons in the Koran and the *hadiths* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and host communal iftars during Ramadan.

Although this shift toward a more authentic Islamic lifestyle was underway well before September 11, 2001, the attacks in New York and Washington sharply accelerated the process. Even secular Muslims, who only used to pray in mosques on rare occasions, now look to the weekly *khutba*, the Friday sermon, as a way to reconnect with their co-religionists. Islamic schools designed to serve as an alternative to deficient public education are also being established. The desire for a more visible Islamic identity in the United States stems from two main causes. One is the need to seek refuge from the growing hostility within U.S. society toward Muslims. This negative attitude has increased steadily since the September 11 attacks. The most startling survey revealing this rise in antipathy to date was released in December 2004 by Cornell University, which found that 44 percent of Americans surveyed believed that the U.S. government should restrict the civil liberties of Muslim Americans.<sup>4</sup>

The second reason for the resurgence in the United States is a desire to be part of the worldwide Islamic revival. For many, to be a Muslim in a visible way is to protest the global movement that has condemned Islam. Muslims in the United States, particularly the younger generation, feel they must make a choice between becoming integrated into U.S. society, which requires accepting social norms they find anathema to their faith, or joining the global Islamic revival now gaining momentum in the United States. More and more, they are choosing the latter.

The most conclusive studies to date illustrate these trends. One study, conducted in 2004 by Professor Ihsan Bagby of the University of Kentucky, showed a tremendous expansion of mosques due to an increase in mosque attendance. Bagby found that more than 85 percent of mosques in Detroit experienced some growth over the previous five years and 67 percent grew

**Young Muslim Americans often observe conservative Islamic practice more than their parents.**

by 10 percent.<sup>5</sup> There has also been an increase in the construction of new mosques, particularly in suburban areas. Muslims increasingly are settling in the suburbs of major cities, such as Chicago; Washington, D.C.; and San Francisco. During the 1960s and 1970s, when Muslim immigration to the United States was on the rise, they often lived in urban communities. As the Muslim population became more upwardly mobile, they, like many Americans, fled to the more affluent suburbs. Their migration to the suburbs has

**There is no evidence to suggest a widespread rise of Wahabbism in the United States.**

put them in direct conflict with non-Muslims who flee urban life to escape exposure to religious and ethnic minorities.

Although Bagby's study was restricted to 12 mosques in Detroit and conducted primarily before and after Friday prayers, he told me he believes his findings reflect trends across the United States. (My own research in mosques during the last two years coincides with Bagby's findings in Detroit.) Based on questionnaires answered by 1,298 people,

the average mosque participant is a 34-year-old immigrant, married with children, college educated, and relatively well-off. About one-fifth are second-generation immigrants. Unlike Muslims in the Islamic world who view the mosque primarily as a house of worship, Bagby found that, although 58 percent of those he surveyed viewed the mosque in this way, 42 percent regarded the mosque primarily as a center of activities and learning; most surveyed considered the mosque's main purpose to be providing an Islamic education for youth.<sup>6</sup> The role of the mosque has indeed changed for many Muslim Americans, who now seem to view it as a setting to bond with other believers and as a place for education and social gathering.

When asked how they practice their faith, those surveyed were split between those (38 percent) favoring a flexible approach to interpreting the holy texts and those (28 percent) following a traditional reading as prescribed by one of the classical legal schools (*madhhab*). Bagby also found that 85 percent of those surveyed in Detroit disapprove of Bush's performance in office, a figure well above his disapproval ratings among the broader electorate.

To craft a new Muslim identity, youth are returning to the basic teachings of Islam through studying the Koran and the Sunna, the two major sources of Islamic jurisprudence. This process has led to another new development: sheikhs who have founded the Zaytuna Institute in California and others from the Islamic world who are allowed into the United States on a regular basis have inspired a large following among Muslim youth. Muslim organiza-

tions sponsor what they call *deen* intensives, derived from the Arabic word for religion. Hundreds of young Muslims attend these sessions, held across the country, where sheikhs from the United States team up with imams from abroad who are intellectualizing the faith and teaching youth how to be devout Muslims in a non-Muslim state.

Yusef, who founded the Zaytuna Institute in California and has developed a large following in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, is an excellent example of this trend. He has made a particular effort since the September 11 attacks to discourage Muslims from absolutist interpretations of the holy texts. At a recent conference in California, Yusef told young Muslims that the problem with the state of Islamic thought in the United States is that sheikhs often declare behavior among Muslims *haram*, or forbidden, when there is no basis for such an opinion in the Koran. For example, a sheikh once told a Muslim in Chicago that watching fireworks on July 4 is forbidden in Islam. At another session in May that I attended in Chicago, Yusef told his students,

We have a crisis in the faith. I have sat in *khutbas* that violate all four schools of thought. Now we suffer from fire and brimstone. We have Muslims where we haven't seen their teeth because they haven't smiled in years. ... I'd like to see an indigenous Islam rooted in tradition but not an ossified religion in this country. We have to support the mosque but if you go to a mosque and it is impossible to be there, you need to find another mosque. If you feel depressed after the *khutba*, you need to find another one. ... I cringe when I think about the things I said 10 years ago.<sup>7</sup>

Yusef's teachings are examples of how Muslims Americans are choosing to practice their faith. They are searching for ways to apply the holy texts to the modern conditions in which they live in the West. Contrary to false claims reported in some surveys that Wahabbism, which is the traditional brand of Islam that requires a literal interpretation of the holy texts, is on the rise in the United States, there is no evidence to suggest such a widespread trend. The older imams, who generally preached a form of Islam based on traditions in their countries of origin, are being replaced by modern sheikhs, such as Yusef.

## **The Patriot Act: A Policy of Alienation**

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As Muslim Americans work to create a new identity, U.S. domestic policies are intensifying their feelings of alienation. The Patriot Act, for example, is a great source of growing anger among Muslims toward the Bush administration. They oppose U.S. policies but also object to American public percep-

**The Patriot Act is a source of growing anger among Muslims toward the Bush administration.**

tions of Islam. The act, written in response to the September 11 attacks, in theory applies to all citizens, but it was written with Muslims in mind and in practice denies them their civil liberties by empowering law enforcement authorities to raid their homes, offices, and mosques in the name of the war on terrorism. Congress has until the end of the year to decide whether to reau-

thorize some provisions of the act that are then due to expire. Yet, some of the worst provisions in the act are not being reexamined. In fact, Senate Republican leaders and the Bush administration are promoting a plan that would significantly expand the FBI's power to demand business records in "terror" investigations without receiving approval from a judge. One provision in the act that Congress blocked in June would have even allowed federal investigators to review

records at libraries and bookstores in their hunt for terrorist suspects. Fierce backing by the Bush administration, however, which claims that library and bookstore records could be key to tracking terrorists, may yet revive this provision.

The Patriot Act has also been used to deny visas to foreigners and to deport permanent residents. One of the most publicized cases, and one that sparked great dismay within the Muslim community, was that of the Islamic scholar and Swiss citizen Tariq Ramadan. The University of Notre Dame had offered Ramadan a teaching position starting in August 2004, and the Department of State had already issued him a visa. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), however, revoked the decision in the summer of 2004. The DHS never revealed the specific charges against Ramadan, instead merely stating that the Patriot Act allowed the U.S. government to deny his visa on suspicion of "terrorist connections." One DHS spokesperson, frustrated that it was obvious the charges were specious at best, told me Ramadan had been banned because of accusations published against him on certain Web sites. That the Patriot Act allowed the DHS to hide behind their verdict was clear.

This Bush administration tendency to make no distinction between the peaceful worshiper and the Islamic militant has also been a factor in cases brought by the Department of Justice in which mosques or individuals are accused of raising money for Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Group, or other radical Islamic organizations. It is no secret that many Muslim Americans believe the Bush administration's support for Israel has led to more oppression for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip living under Israeli occupation. It is also well known that some imams criticize this policy and

raise money at their mosques for impoverished Muslim populations, including that of Palestine, but also those in Bosnia and parts of Africa. Their fundraising is intended to ease the pain of poverty, not to support militant activity. Such criticisms of U.S. policies are protected by their constitutional right to freedom of expression and, therefore, should not be vulnerable to prosecution.

Of the many cases the Justice Department has brought against Muslims on suspicion of raising money for radical Islamic groups, nearly all of them have evaporated in the course of prolonged trials. One case that has particularly riled the Muslim community is that against Sami al-Arian, a former professor at the University of Florida. The Justice Department had investigated Arian for nearly a decade before it was able to indict him with new powers under the Patriot Act in 2003. Arian, an impassioned supporter of the intifada, is charged not only with raising money for the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad but is also accused of funneling this money from the United States to the Palestinian territories where, prosecutors charge, it was used to carry out suicide attacks against Israelis. In effect, prosecutors have charged Arian with acting as a proxy for Islamic Jihad in the United States. The government boasts that the case against Arian, who went on trial in June, could be the most significant since the September 11 attacks. The written indictment that was responsible for landing Arian in solitary confinement in a Florida jail, however, provides no concrete evidence of a link between the money raised for Islamic Jihad and the money used to carry out suicide attacks in Israel. In fact, the very link between Islamic Jihad and Arian is weak. For many Muslim Americans, the truth behind the Arian case seems clear: the Patriot Act allowed the U.S. government finally to indict Arian based on little more than guilt by association. Because of his outspoken views of the Israeli occupation, the Patriot Act sanctioned the government to charge him as a terrorist.

In the debate over expanding the government's powers under the Patriot Act, Bush and members of his administration argue that they are fighting to protect U.S. citizens from terrorism, even if it means compromising on individual freedom. In reality, however, no evidence suggests that members of the Muslim American population sympathize with radical groups abroad, nor is there evidence that Muslim Americans are becoming home-grown extremists, as appears to be the case in several European countries, including Spain, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. As a result, new government policies since the September 11 attacks have imposed collective punishment on Muslim Americans.

These policies and the alarmist environment they have created are undoubtedly affecting public opinion. The Cornell University study released in December 2004 also revealed that 27 percent of 1,000 respondents sup-

ported requiring all Muslim Americans to register their home addresses with the federal government and 29 percent believed undercover agents should infiltrate Muslim civic organizations.<sup>8</sup> This data reflects the increase in hate crimes against Muslims since the September 11 attacks. Mosques have been vandalized, children have been the targets of racist remarks in public schools, Muslims have faced discrimination in their jobs, petitions for building mosques in Muslim communities have faced campaigns of opposition by non-Muslim homeowners, and Muslims have been singled out for searches at airports and other public places.

### **To Separate or to Integrate?**

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Increasingly, the Bush administration's strategy to prevent attacks inside the United States is destroying the U.S. relationship with its Muslim population. Some Americans worry that a lack of integration among Muslims will eventually lead to the radicalization of Muslims on U.S. soil. So far, however, there is scant evidence to suggest this leap will be made anytime in the foreseeable future. Instead, what is at stake for the United States is that a part of the population whose ideals and values are fundamentally different than those associated with the American identity is going its own way. This could challenge the very idea of the United States as a collective guardian of shared values that transcends ethnic, racial, and sectarian loyalties.

A new U.S. strategy should emerge that would at least minimize the distrust and alienation Muslims feel in the wake of the September 11 attacks. To develop and implement such a strategy, the U.S. government and body politic must ultimately become far more educated about Islam and Muslim culture. Universities have responded quickly to this need by establishing more Islamic studies faculties in recent years. Widespread ignorance among the general population, however, fueled by a misinformed and biased media, is a fundamental problem that has led to racism and counterproductive government policies.

In the short term, the U.S. government could take several measures to improve its relationship with Muslim Americans. The first step should be to begin a regular dialogue with Muslim Americans of influence in their communities. European states have been successful at establishing parallel campaigns: one that deals with the terrorist threat and another that ensures the government's antiterrorism policies are not alienating indigenous Muslim communities. The German Foreign Ministry, for example, has created a task force to encourage dialogue with the Islamic world inside and outside of Germany. In the official description of this task force, emphasis is placed on dialogue with non-elites, in other words, with Muslims who have political



and social influence in their communities. Too often, the few outreach attempts the United States has made have been toward Western-educated and secular Muslims who have little weight within the community of believers. Establishing a dialogue could also serve as an educational experience to benefit U.S. policymakers, many of whom completely misunderstand Islamic culture.

Second, the government should make federal funding in the form of grants available to the few existing Islamic organizations and institutions. Currently, it is difficult for Islamic organizations to know where to turn for funding, if any exists, to help their communities. The first daily radio station run by Muslims, for example, made its debut in Chicago in September 2004. Nearly a year later, "Radio Islam" may have to go off the air due to a lack of funding. The station aims to attract a Muslim audience to discuss pressing issues of the day but also explains Muslim views to the American public. Again, the key is to distinguish Islamic groups that represent the majority of Muslims' views from those that merely reflect the opinions of the pro-Western elite.

Some Islamic organizations have been reluctant to accept U.S. government funding, such as those earmarked in the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), because they consider it "dirty money." The MEPI fund is tainted in the eyes of some Muslims because this initiative is intended to reform the Middle East along U.S.-backed lines, a policy Muslims and Arabs consider a form of colonialism. Islamic community-based organizations, such as Chicago's Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), would greatly benefit from government funding. IMAN, the word for "faith" in Arabic, offers medical care and computer lessons and runs a food pantry for residents of its community. Headed by Rami Nashashibi, a charismatic Palestinian Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago, IMAN also teaches youth about Islam and has attracted many Latinos and African Americans to the faith since Nashashibi founded it a decade ago. Generating goodwill toward the U.S. government in this community, historically settled by Palestinians who support the intifada and believe that U.S. support for Israel has led to greater oppression of their relatives living under the occupation, could be one important step toward reversing the current negative trend in the U.S. government's relations with Muslim Americans.

Short of completely shifting U.S. foreign policy—the greatest source of anger and frustration for Muslim Americans—toward the Islamic world,

**No evidence suggests that Muslim Americans sympathize with radical groups abroad.**

these small measures could help improve relations with the U.S. government. They might also encourage more Muslims to participate in the political process. In both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, Muslims became engaged in politics through campaigning and holding voter registration drives at mosques. In the 2000 campaign, some Islamic organizations

**The U.S. must ultimately become far more educated about Islam and Muslim culture.**

even endorsed Bush, a reflection of the community's sense that Republicans were historically less tied to pro-Israeli policies. By 2004, however, after relations had soured, many groups encouraged Muslims to vote to defeat the incumbent president. Particularly after Bush won the 2004 election, opinion among Muslim Americans is divided over whether deeper involvement in politics could actually result in changes to the policies Muslims oppose.

Since 2000, Muslims have been candidates in congressional races and have run for local office. Yet, in some cases, U.S. voters' racism and ignorance has made campaigning a painful process, forcing some Muslims to question whether political activism is really worthwhile. In 2003, Maad Abu Ghazala, a light-skinned lawyer of Palestinian descent, ran for a seat in the 12th Congressional District in San Francisco. His opponent was Democratic incumbent Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor who is a strong supporter of Israel. Campaigning door to door with Abu Ghazala revealed the striking bias among voters. After glancing at his literature and learning his name, many declared they would never vote for a Muslim.

### **The Dangers of Marginalization**

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The United States can no longer narrowly focus its campaign to win hearts and minds on Muslims abroad, a campaign that thus far has failed. Pressing issues will soon challenge the United States at home. What will the U.S. response be when more and more schoolgirls begin demanding the right to wear headscarves in public schools? Where will the U.S. courts' sympathies lie when more Muslims begin to challenge provisions in laws such as the Patriot Act that restrict their civil liberties? What will ensue, greater understanding of Islam or further polarization of American society, when Muslims determine how to air their views in the mainstream media more effectively? In other words, will the United States go the way of an increasingly polarized France or the Netherlands, where sizeable and restive Muslim populations threaten social and political cohesion; or will it successfully meet the

greatest challenge to its melting-pot myth and make room for this potent cultural and religious force within the broader American identity?

U.S. government policies have resulted both in a rise of anti-U.S. sentiment across the Islamic world and in the growing alienation of Muslim Americans inside the United States itself. The movement toward a new Muslim American identity will likely challenge not only U.S. foreign policies but also the Bush administration's domestic agenda. Over the coming decade, Muslims will likely carve out a distinct identity that is decisively based on a perception of the "other." In doing so, they will develop a third way, one that allows them to embrace their religion while integrating when necessary into American society.

## Notes

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1. Hanna Rosin and John Mintz, "Muslim Leaders Struggle With Mixed Messages," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2001, p. A16.
2. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Meets With Muslim Leaders," September 26, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010926-8.html>.
3. Rosin and Mintz, "Muslim Leaders Struggle With Mixed Messages."
4. Erik C. Nisbet and James Shanahan, "MSRG Special Report: Restrictions on Civil Liberties, Views of Islam, and Muslim Americans," December 2004, <http://www.comm.cornell.edu/msrg/report1a.pdf> (based on a study of 715 completed telephone interviews with respondents across the United States) (hereinafter Cornell study).
5. Ishan Bagby, *A Portrait of Detroit Mosques: Muslim Views on Policy, Politics and Religion* (Clinton Township, Mich.: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 2004), [http://www.ispu.us/reports/the\\_detroit\\_mosque\\_study.html](http://www.ispu.us/reports/the_detroit_mosque_study.html).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Hamza Yusef, remarks at the conference "Connecting to God in Today's World," Nawawi Foundation, Chicago, May 7–8, 2005.
8. Cornell study.

