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Muslims in America: A Profile

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BELFER CENTER
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THE DEBATE: AN INTRODUCTION

The perception of Muslims living in the United States has deteriorated dramatically since the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. U.S.-Muslims, a group that had already faced discrimination prior to the attacks, became even more visible to the public.¹ Non-Muslim Americans began questioning American Muslim loyalties to the United States as well as their commitment to being “good” citizens. Such doubt extended to the political arena as well, prompting intrusive inquiries into Muslim-affiliated civic and political organizations and their members. Even non-Muslims with Muslim affiliations or Muslim-sounding names or appearances have been subject to public scrutiny. For example, despite identifying as a Christian, President Barack Obama’s religious affiliation has been continually doubted by some due to his Kenyan Muslim heritage and his middle name, Hussein. Though a decade has passed since the events of September 11th, the role of American Muslims, and whether they can at all be trusted, remains a popular concern and a topic of household conversation.

Despite the seemingly pervasive fear of Muslims in America, the question remains: How different are Muslims than non-Muslims in the U.S.? Do Muslims have values that are drastically different than other Americans?

It is important to consider how Islam was addressed prior to September 11th, 2001 in order to fully understand the context and trajectory of events that followed. For one, it is important to take note of certain anti-Islamic attitudes that existed in the U.S., even within the academic community. In recent years, the most exemplary academic work that set the stage for a renewed wave of conflict is *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993, 1996) by Samuel Huntington. “Other” cultures and civilizations will be a source of conflict with “our” civilization. Negative attitudes toward non-Western civilizations emerged as the “new world order” was being framed. In his thesis, Huntington argued that in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union the world would no longer witness conflicts as a result of ideological and economically-based differences, but rather around cultural “fault lines.” In the years following Huntington’s work, the teachings of Islam and Western traditions of modernity have increasingly been perceived to be at odds with one another.

Islam and Muslims were also often seen in the context of the works of Bernard Lewis, a well-known Middle East historian from Princeton University. His work provided a vision of Islam and Muslims that constituted a theoretical framework for Samuel Huntington’s post-Soviet, Cold War-era vision of the world. Lewis was in fact one of the first to use the term “Clash of Civilizations” to address what he called “The Roots of Muslim Rage” in 1990.² In his book *What Went Wrong?* (2002), Lewis argues that Muslims as individuals and communities are incapable of modernization, and that modern, pluralistic societies

are inherently based on Western values and will always be non-Islamic. Huntington and Lewis have popularized a view that says all Muslims, regardless of where they live, are incapable of living in non-Muslim societies due to their religious identity and significant cultural differences that are incompatible with the Western way of life.

Huntington and Lewis' views have become widely accepted and internalized, and are thus indispensable in providing a context to our study of Islam and Muslims in Western societies. Despite the high amount of subjectivity in their analysis, many take their views as fact. This has further isolated and alienated Muslims in the West by branding them as potential terrorists, all while disregarding the generations of Muslims who have lived peacefully in America and Europe. Muslim-American communities are perceived to hold un-American values and traditions despite their long history in this country, and it is very likely that this belief will persevere for quite some time.

This paper provides insight into the question of whether the political and social values of Muslims and non-Muslims living in the U.S. differ significantly. To this end, we present data on civic and political attitudes from the Muslim American Public Opinion Survey, which will be described in detail in the following sections.

Muslims as un-American:

It is predictable that Muslims would be seen in a negative light in Western societies given that terrorists claiming to be Muslim were responsible for the tragic events of September 11th. Skepticism and denunciation of U.S. Muslims has gained traction, however, because of voices that were heard before September 11th from scholars like Bernard Lewis, whose opinions were sought to explain the terrorist attacks. The following example of his writings shows the typical Bernard Lewis argument about Islam and the West. Lewis writes: "For misbelievers [non-Muslims] to rule over true believers [Muslims] is blasphemous and unnatural, since it leads to the corruption of religion and morality in society, and to the flouting or even abrogation of God's law."³ While this view is clearly not shared by all scholars of Islam in the Western context, the voice of Bernard Lewis (and of those who share his view) have been highly publicized in recent years. These views suggest that a Muslim's mere existence in America directly contradicts his or her religious beliefs. The fact that these views come from a leading Middle East and Islamic historian bolsters the perception among the public that what is in fact one person's subjective view may indeed be a reality. Though there is no question that some individuals and groups (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) would like to inflict harm on Americans and American interests, this fact should be addressed in a way that avoids demonizing all Muslims and instead analyzes the root of extremists' discontent.

The earliest accounts of Muslims in the Americas relate back to the famous voyage of Christopher Columbus, who used Muslim navigators for the journey.⁴ Immigrant Muslims lived in the U.S. as early as the 1850s, with Hajj Ali's (also known as Hi Jolly) arrival to help the U.S. government start a camel attaché to the U.S. Army.⁵ Alexander Russell Webb was also one of the well-documented converts to Islam in the late 1800s (and in fact served as the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines).⁶ Another well-documented historical case of Muslims in the U.S. is that of the Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori, who was a prince enslaved and sold into slavery in the late 1700s.⁷

Muslim immigration to the U.S. peaked in the years following World War II, due to various social and political conflicts in the Middle East.⁸ It is important to recognize that Muslims, like other immigrant communities, migrated to the U.S. mainly for economic opportunity and to escape political repression. Hopes of enjoying the freedoms the U.S. had to offer were a core part of the Muslim immigrant story, consistent with other immigrant groups. Remembering this is especially important given that Muslims have been increasingly perceived as not only different than Americans, but actually un-American. Despite their long history as a community integral to the American fabric, Muslims continue to be seen as foreign.

Islam, Modernity and the West:

Bernard Lewis's ideas represent the view that Islam and modernity are incompatible. However, other scholars have argued that Islam and modernity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Muslim thinker and a global philanthropist, has been one of the more prominent figures to address the relationship between Islamic traditions and modernity. His philosophy of a "middle way" between these two concepts, tradition and modernity, is unique and has been influential in thinking about Islam and modernity. Gülen suggests that a true Muslim is one who is able to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting systems of beliefs, and chooses the "middle way."⁹

Gülen was inspired by Said Nursi who wrote a book called *Risale-i-Nur* (The Letters of Light). In this book, Nursi employed the scientific method to find religious signs in nature and in the universe. John Voll writes: "in [Nursi's] writings and teachings, there is repetition of the term that Islam is a middle way, a path of moderation, rather than extremism...Nursi frequently would discuss two opposing positions and then define the truly Islamic way as the Middle way between the two."¹⁰

More contemporary scholars like Feisal Abdul Rauf (2004), a noted Imam and an advocate of Muslim advancement in the United States, argue that America is an ideal place to practice Islam.¹¹ Further, through the study of Islamic legal doctrine, scholar An-

drew March suggests that although it is less than ideal for Muslims to live in non-Muslim societies, it is still (based on *Shariah* Law) legally permissible for them to do so and comply with these societies' rules.¹² This view, represented by March and others, suggests that Islamic teachings are compatible with social contracts (as the device through which relationships between individuals and states are governed as described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others) in non-Muslim societies, a quantitative study is still necessary to address unanswered questions.

To build their arguments, all of these scholars (Lewis, March, Abdul Rauf) rely on qualitative argumentation and content analysis. What is missing from their work are quantitative analyses of these phenomena to determine whether Muslims are capable of integrating into Western societies given that their political views and conservative values are perceived as irreconcilable with these societies' values. This paper addresses whether Muslims support core American values by analyzing quantitative data that measures Muslim political attitudes and by comparing this information to other minority groups in the U.S.

The Muslim American Public Opinion Survey (MAPOS):

Very little empirical data exists regarding Muslims in America.¹³ The Muslim American Public Opinion Survey (MAPOS), implemented from December 2006-December 2008, is one of the largest surveys of Muslims living in the U.S. with a sample size of 1,410 individuals.¹⁴ This survey was specifically designed to explore the issue of compatibility between Islam and political participation in America. An original survey of Muslim Americans across twelve cities was conducted: Seattle, WA, Dearborn, MI, San Diego, CA, Irvine, CA, Riverside, CA, Los Angeles, CA, Raleigh-Durham, NC, Chicago, IL, Oklahoma City, OK, Washington, DC, Houston, TX, and Dallas, TX.

These twelve metropolitan areas were selected for several reasons. First, the Dearborn area has the single largest concentration of Arab and Muslims in America, and represents a predominantly Arab immigrant population. Southern California has the third largest number of Muslim Americans (behind Dearborn and New York), and a population that is mixed across generational lines, including a significant number of U.S.-born Muslims. Seattle also has a considerable Muslim population (the 10th largest in the United States), and its population is quite diverse with large communities from South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. Finally, the Research Triangle Park community in North Carolina includes a predominantly Pakistani and Indian Muslim immigrant population, adding to the overall diversity of our sample. In addition, a sizable U.S.-born African-American Muslim population is represented in our study. The Oklahoma City area has a large Shi'a population, which was also well represented in the sample.

Drawing a sample of Muslims in the United States is not easy given their relatively small population size. To address this concern, the survey was implemented at randomly selected mosques and Islamic centers in the specified cities. We were able to gather a large number of interviews outside the prayer services during Eid al Adha and Eid al Fitr, the two most important Islamic holidays.¹⁵ Given the geographic diversity of the study, and the locations where the survey was conducted, it is more-or-less a representative sample of Muslims in the U.S. as the Eid prayer services are special occasions and are thus attended by Muslims who vary in their degree of religiosity. In total, 1,410 surveys were completed. The survey was administered in an “exit poll style” where research assistants handed out clipboards to participants who completed the survey on their own.¹⁶ Participants were selected using a traditional skip pattern (every fourth person was asked to participate) to randomize recruitment, and they could choose to answer the survey in English, Arabic, or Farsi.

Given that the sample is drawn from religious centers and places of worship, the reader may be concerned about a religiosity bias, as some Muslim Americans may never go to the mosque or attend Eid prayers. However, we believe the sample includes participants with a range of religious beliefs and behavioral patterns for two specific reasons. First, descriptive statistics suggest that “non-mosque” populations as well as “mosque-involved” populations are among the sample. Among the full sample, around 64% state that they are at least *somewhat* involved in activities at their mosque, almost 36% are *not too involved*, and *not at all involved*. Further, while almost 52% of the sample say they follow the *Qur’an* and *Hadith* *very much* in their daily life, 39% follow *just somewhat*, and 9% adhere *only a little* and *not at all*. In particular, the respondents that we selected at the two *Eid* prayers are expectedly quite diverse on the religious spectrum. Just as the Catholic Church goes from half-full to standing room only on Christmas and Easter Mass, the Islamic Eid prayers attract religious and secular Muslims to its part-religious, part-cultural, part-family prayer service, including those who otherwise never go to Friday prayers (Ba-Yunus 2006).

With a total of 1,410 surveys completed, MAPOS is one of the largest and most reliable surveys of Muslim-Americans to date, especially when comparing its demographics to those of the Pew survey of Muslim Americans (Table 1)¹⁷.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Muslim American Survey

	MAPOS	Pew Study
U.S. Born	42%	35%
Foreign Born	55%	65%
Non-citizen	18%	23%
Arab	44%	40%
Asian	17%	20%
Black	15%	26%
White	6%	11%
Sunni	76%	50%
Shi'a	13%	16%
Total N	1,410	1,050

The 40-question survey measured basic demographic tendencies including education, income, residency status, country of origin, and years living in their community. The survey was analyzed to assess participants' attitudes toward specific political, social and religious issues. In addition, questions measuring the extent to which Muslims participate in their own community were assessed, including whether the participants perceived the idea of blending into the larger society, as in the idea of the "melting pot," to be important or not. Finally, a number of questions were aimed at understanding whether or not the participants felt some form of group consciousness or linked fate and whether they felt that Islamic teachings conflicted with the American political system. The survey was conducted over a period of two years extending from December 2006-December 2009.

Are Muslims in the U.S. a community?

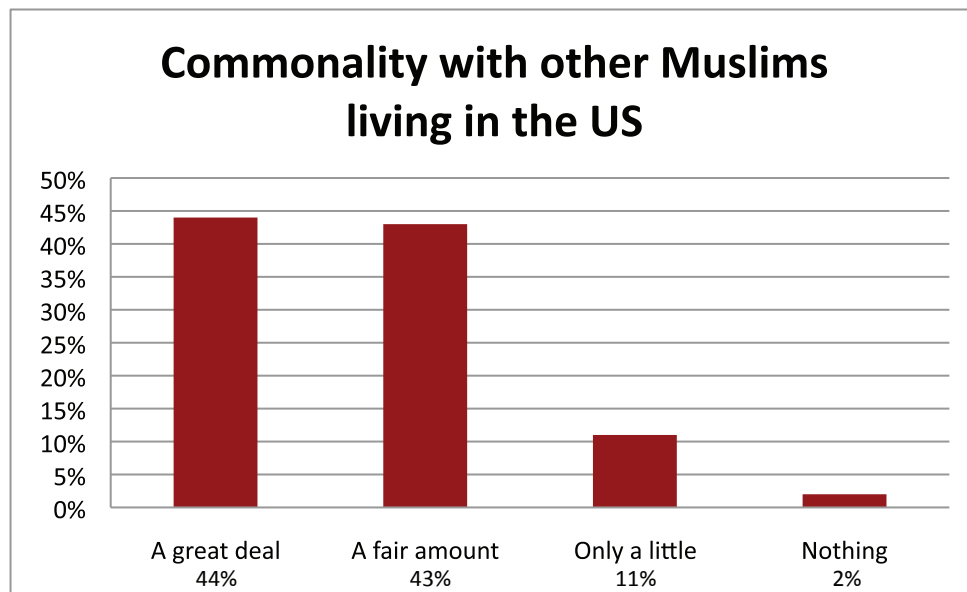
In the most basic sense, what makes a community are the various connections that exist among its individuals. We can measure an individual's sense of community by asking how strongly they feel a sense of linked-fate with others in their group, and to what extent what happens to these other individuals affects their own life.

Commonality and Linked-Fate among Muslims in America:

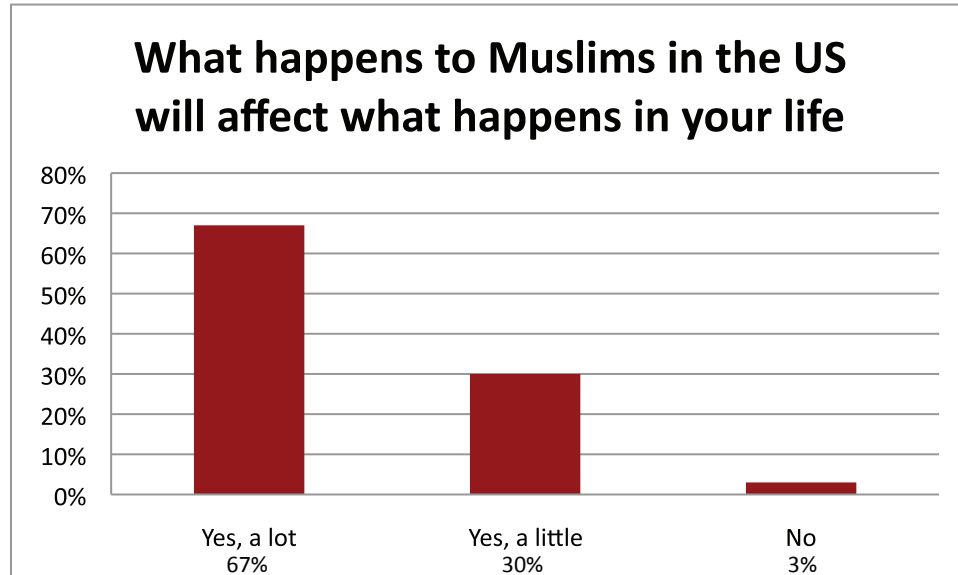
The Muslim community in the U.S. is not only ethnically and linguistically diverse, it is also diverse with regards to the level of religiosity among its members. Despite this fact, Muslims have a strong sense of common identity, as is illustrated by Figure 1. Individuals in this community have a sense of commonality with one another that cannot be measured by statistics of *Qur'an* memorization nor mosque attendance. Muslims are

more complex than what Bernard Lewis suggests; their behavior cannot be predicted by Islamic text. If a majority of Muslims believe that they follow the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* in their daily lives, then under Lewis' thinking, more Muslim Americans would prescribe to extreme interpretations of Islam, and would therefore not believe that there is a compatibility between the teachings of Islam and the American political system; this does not seem to be the case.

Figure 1. Commonality with other Muslims in the U.S.



This finding is especially interesting in light of the fact that Muslims also feel that their fate is linked to what happens to other Muslims in the United States (Figure 2). A pertinent question for further research is whether the feeling of having linked fate originates from the religious identity of Muslims or if it is a collective reaction to perceived discrimination by non-Muslims?

Figure 2. What happens to other Muslims affects your own life?

The results presented in Figures 1 and 2 for group commonality and linked fate are relatively high compared to other religious and ethnic groups in America. Research on African-Americans (Dawson 1994) and on Latinos and Asian-Americans (Sanchez 2006; Masuoka 2006) has not demonstrated such high rates of linked fate or group consciousness. The shared experiences of Muslims in the United States seem to provide a clear basis for high rates of group consciousness. This could be due to the higher level of both *actual* and *perceived* discrimination, as well as the nature of the discrimination felt by Muslims in the U.S., but further exploration is still needed.

Can Muslims be American?

To examine the question of whether being both Muslim and American is paradoxical, we analyzed questions about the role of mosques and cultural centers in American politics, the role of Islamic teachings (The Qur'an and Hadith) in American politics, and the basic characteristics of the Muslim American community. This examination provides frequencies of Muslim responses to provide a clearer picture of the Muslim community.

Muslims in America: a community unlike any other

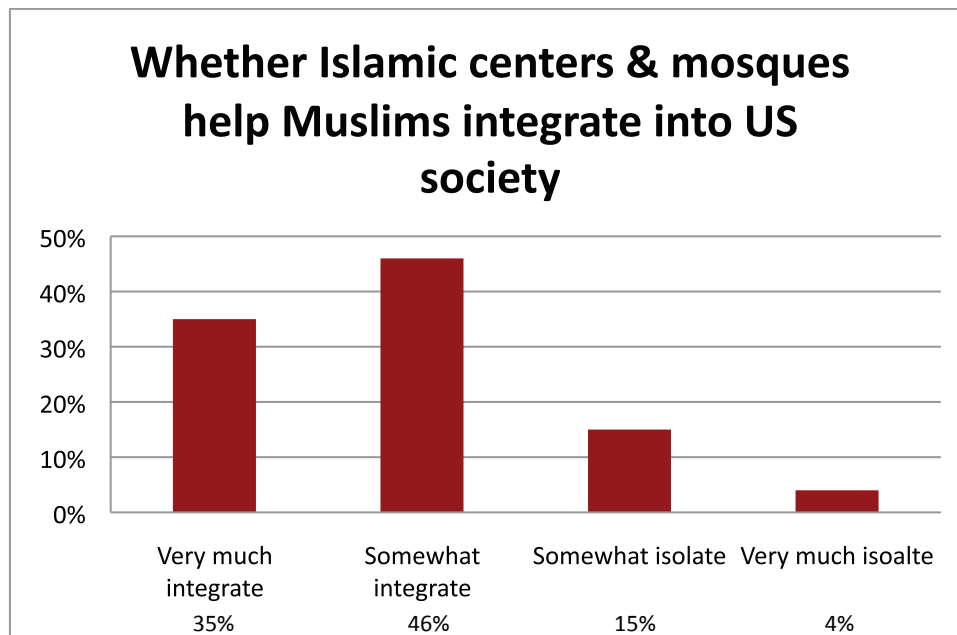
An often misreported or entirely omitted fact about Islam is that the religion is not associated with a particular race, ethnicity, or language. Instead, Muslims belong to different racial and ethnic groups and speak different languages. Though the first Muslims were indeed Arab, Islam soon spread to include non-Arabs; today, the Muslim world is

quite diverse. The United States reflects this diversity as it is made up of immigrants from a wide range of Muslim countries in addition to Muslim converts and black Muslims who have been here for generations. This diversity is exemplified in the MAPOS survey: 39% of respondents were Arab, 22% were Asian, 15% were Black, and 7% were White. Muslims in America trace their ancestry to more than 40 nations and speak more than 20 different languages. Since Islam transcends regional boundaries and ethnicities, it is difficult to say that all Muslims share the same pattern of political behavior, especially without data to support such an assertion.

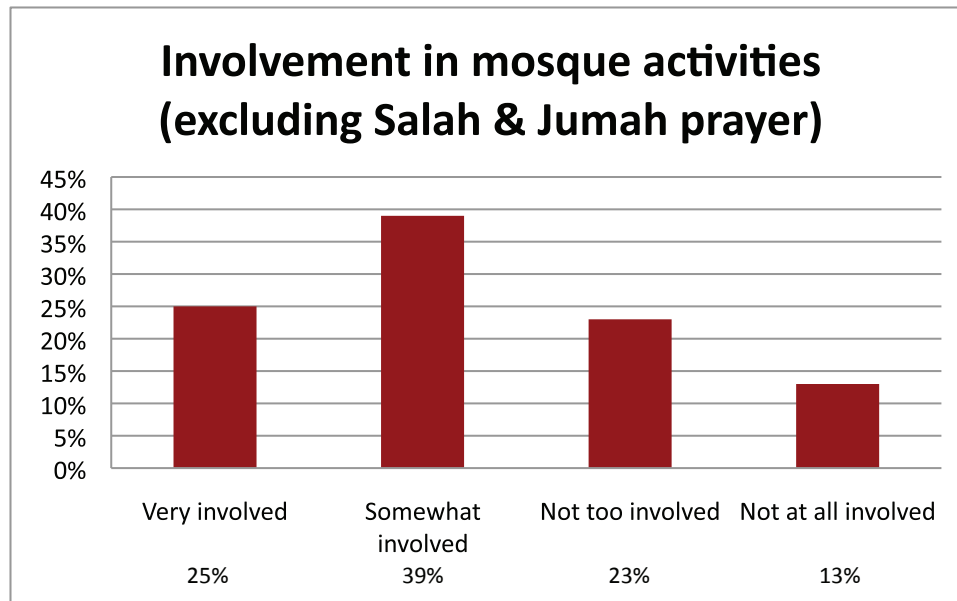
Mosques and Cultural Centers:

Mosques are often feared to be a breeding ground for terrorists in the United States; however, when asked about mosques and their role in integrating Muslims into the larger American society, the vast majority of Muslims see these institutions as having an integrative role in their community, as shown in the graph below.

Figure 3. Role of Mosques and Islamic centers in integrating Muslims into U.S. society



This finding is inconsistent with the popular media's perception of mosques in the United States. If Muslims themselves believe that mosques and Islamic centers have an important role in integrating Muslims into larger society, then policymakers and journalists need to pay attention to this fact.¹⁸ While Muslim-American opinion on this matter does not tell the entire story, the perception itself is important enough to start thinking beyond what media outlets suggest.

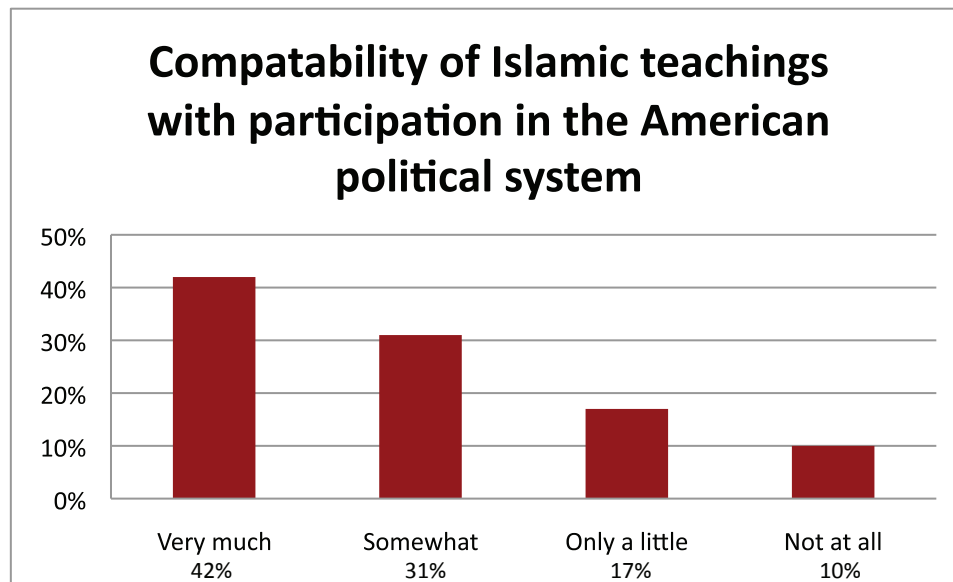
Figure 4. Involvement in Mosque-related activities, excluding prayers.

To better understand the role of mosques and their role in American politics, it is important to know how many Muslims attend mosque-related activities. Figure 4 shows that close to 65% of Muslims who participated in the survey are at least “somewhat” involved in mosque-related activities, excluding the prayer services, as we wanted to capture the level of involvement in ways other than religious observations that Muslims are required to carry out. This shows that mosques are even more important than they have been perceived to be, but yet consistent with other literature on religious institutions in other faiths.¹⁹

The Teachings of Islam and Participation in American Politics:

Religiosity, as a multi-faceted concept that cannot be measured simply by mosque attendance, is yet another crucial factor to consider when attempting to explore the Muslim community in the United States. When the sample was asked about whether the teachings of Islam (*Qur’an* and *Hadith*) are compatible with participation in the American political system, a large portion of the sample felt that there is a great deal of compatibility, as shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Compatibility of Islamic Teachings with participation in U.S. political system.



This data is especially pertinent given that many who internalize the views of Lewis and Huntington consider the teachings of Islam to have radicalizing effects on Muslims, encouraging them to abandon the political process and adopt violent methods to address political and social differences.

While Islam may guide the lives of Muslims, the Muslim community cannot, in contrast to Lewis' argument, be understood as based solely on the principles of Islam. Islamic texts are interpreted in many different ways and are debated by the specialized *Ulama* (The learned Muslim Clergy of different schools of thought). Thus, the task of interpretation in Islam does not come in one package; it is a process that changes and is often refuted.

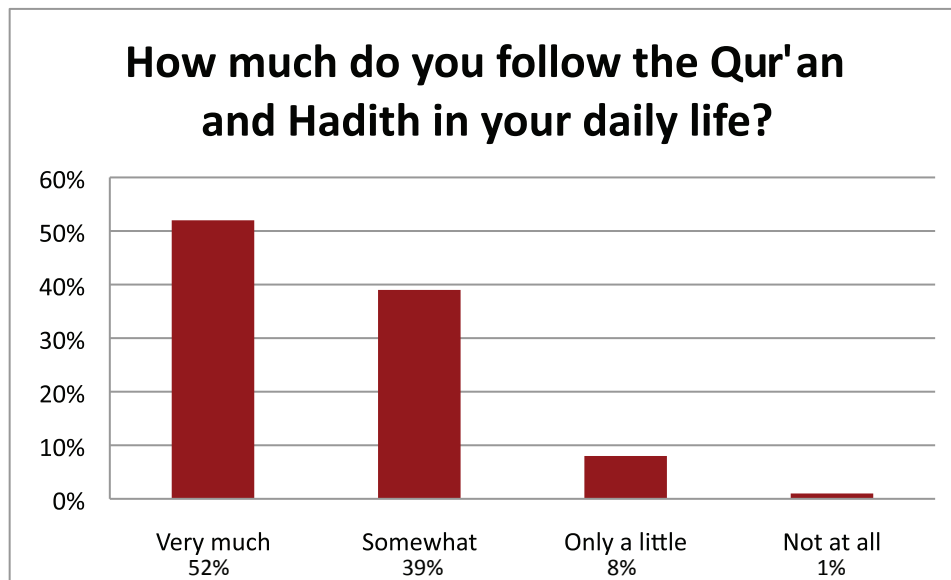
In an attempt to understand the political behavior of Muslims, MAPOS asks whether the respondents voted in the most recent election, participated in a rally or protest, wrote a letter to a public official, donated to a political candidate or campaign, and whether attended a community meeting.

Contrary to the widely held belief that the teachings of Islam are incompatible with the American political system, Figure 5 shows that only 10% of the sample believe that the two are indeed irreconcilable, as opposed to 90% of the sample who agree that the opposite is true, that the teachings of Islam and the American political system are in fact compatible (to varying degrees). This finding becomes even more important when seen in the context of the results presented in Figure 6, which shows the percentage of individuals who say whether and to what degree they follow the teachings of Islam in daily life.



American Muslims are civically active within their communities around the United States.

Figure 6. Frequencies of Following Islamic Teachings in Daily life.



A little over half of the sample (about 52%) self-reported that they either followed the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* *very much* and 9% followed it *only a little* or *not at all*. These results are contrary to popular beliefs that all Muslims are more religious than other religious groups in the U.S, as explained by Bernard Lewis. Further, the findings show that the teachings of Islam are not necessarily followed precisely by all Muslims in their daily

lives, but rather that there is a great deal of variation in the level that the teachings of Islam are followed. A relevant point in this discussion is that the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* are complex texts that require a relatively high level of knowledge to decipher. When thinking about this in the context of how Muslims view the teachings of Islam as compatible with participation in the American political system we see that the teachings of Islam (*Qur'an* and *Hadith*) have a much smaller effect on radicalizing Muslims. Thus, relatively high adherence to Islamic principles does not preclude political participation in the American process; contrary to popular opinion, it seems that religious and political engagement are not mutually exclusive for American Muslims.

Implications:

The idea that there are inherent Islamic tendencies that make Muslims unable to live in non-Muslim societies is constantly being challenged, especially given that there has been no empirical data to support these claims. The MAPOS data specifically raises doubts about this claim since a majority of American Muslims surveyed viewed mosques and Islamic centers as vehicles of integration into American political life.

Most Muslims in the U.S. follow the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* in their daily lives, but also close to 65% of the sample believes that these Islamic Teachings do not conflict with participation in the American political system. These findings are of crucial importance, especially since the popular media perpetuates exactly the opposite belief. In fact, and as has been shown in other analyses of the MAPOS project, those who follow the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* more in their daily lives are more likely to believe that these teachings and the participation in the American political system are very compatible.²⁰

It is incorrect to assume that the *ummah* (the global community of Muslims that transcends geographic boundaries) is homogenous; in fact, the *ummah* is made up of individuals and groups with myriad beliefs and practices. American Muslims make up a cross section of the global *ummah*, and therefore represent a multiplicity of views and practices. The community of Muslims in America cannot be pigeonholed to represent a specific understanding of Islam, as Bernard Lewis argues so forcefully.

Islam is a religion that extends beyond race, ethnicity, and language; nevertheless, there seems to be a high level of group consciousness that exists as a result of discrimination against the community, even among those who are less religious. This is an area in the research that still needs to be explored. What can be concluded, however, is that the incompatibility of Islam and democracy is an antiquated and Orientalist fallacy. When tested empirically, as we have done with the MAPOS survey, the evidence supports the opposite.

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- 12 March, Andrew. *Islamic Foundations for a Social Contract in non-Muslim Liberal Democracies* *American Political Science Review* Vol. 101, No. 2 May 2007. Also, March, Andrew. 2006. *Liberal Citizenship and the Search for an Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. 34 (4):373-421.
- 13 One of the earliest empirical arguments made was that of Amaney Jamal (2005).
- 14 The Co-Principal Investigators of MAPOS, 2006-2008, are Matt Barreto and Karam Dana.
- 15 MAPOS was in the field from December 2006 (Eid al Adha) to December 2008 during Five Eids (Three *Eid Adha* and Two *Eid al-Fitr* festivities).
- 16 Research assistants were themselves Muslim, predominantly second generation Muslim immigrants, fluent in a second language (Arabic or Urdu) and were balanced between men and women. All research assistants attending two training sessions, and participated in a pilot survey to ensure consistency and professionalism in polling.
- 17 The Pew survey was conducted by telephone, and went into the field at roughly the same time as the MAPOS study.
- 18 Dana, Karam; Barreto, Matt A.; Oskooii, Kassra A.R. 2011. "Mosques as American Institutions: Mosque Attendance, Religiosity and Integration into the Political System among American Muslims." *Religions* 2, no. 4: 504-524.
- 19 Putnam, R.; Campbell, D. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*; Simon Schuster: New York, NY, USA, 2010., McDaniel, E.L. *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches*; University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 2008.
- 20 Barreto, Matt and Karam Dana. 2008. <http://www.muslimamericansurvey.org>.

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