

## Western Muslim Minorities: Integration And Disenfranchisement

CAIR Policy Bulletin is dedicated to offering constructive ideas to advance public discourse at all levels of American society.

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### INTRODUCTION

For over a thousand years now, the discourse primarily in Europe and subsequently in America has been to view Muslims as outsiders and Islam as the “other.” Despite 700 years of civilizing presence in Andalusia or Spain, and despite Islamic Spain being “multi-cultural” even before the word “multi-cultural” was invented, and despite an exemplary *convivencia* of Muslims, Christians, and Jews managing to not only get along with each other but to actually benefit from the presence of each other and despite Muslim contributions playing a significant part in creating a civilization in Europe that matched the heights of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance, Islam and Muslims remain in Europe and America embedded in stereotypical assumptions and misguided pronouncements regarding beliefs, attitudes and customs.

Contemporary reality suggests that Islam and Muslims can no longer be viewed as “outsiders.” A substantial Muslim presence in the West combined with the unstoppable forces of globalization, require a new paradigm of engagement – we can no longer speak about “Islam versus the West” but rather use a new frame of reference such as “Islam in the West.”<sup>1</sup> Islam is no longer a “foreign” presence in the West. It is integral to the West just as any other religion.

Rather than be viewed as cultural outsiders, the Muslim presence needs to be embraced as culturally enriching and economically benefiting. Samuel Huntington’s premise of an intrinsic clash between Islam and West and Islam’s so called “bloody boundaries” are errant readings of the realities. “Islam as a faith is not on a collision course with the West,” contend Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser in their book *A Sense of Seige*. The authors go on to observe that “The issue is not between Christianity and Islam.” “We use ‘Islam’ . . . in quotation marks,” they note, “because there is no Islam that can be treated as a single, cohesive, coherent, comprehensive, monolithic entity . . . Islam will never constitute a single entity. . . . The concept of the West is at least as diverse.”<sup>2</sup>

Muslims from the very dawn Islam have adapted to live in harmony in large multi-cultural societies. Muslim minorities living in harmony whether in the West or East are in theological congruence with the Qur’an, “To God belongs the East and the West. Wherever you turn there is the presence of God (2:115).” Moreover, the Quran makes it explicit for Muslims that honoring their treaties and covenants is righteous in the sights of God (9:4). For example as a citizen of America, a Muslim implicitly and explicitly has entered into a covenant to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution and abide by its laws.

For Muslim minorities their life keeps reliving the birth of Islam. For the first 13 years of his Prophethood, the Prophet Muhammad preached and lived as a “minority.” The historical lessons from this era of Islam, referred in Islamic history as the Meccan period, continue to inform and guide Muslim attitudes towards their majority fellow citizens. This is not to say that the Quranic verses that were revealed while the Prophet Muhammad lived in Madinah or Prophetic teachings while he lived in Madinah are any less important. But the Meccan period provides a lot of lessons about “minority” living to the Muslims.

Muslims living as minorities have also endeavored to develop Islamic jurisprudence that applies to minority living, *fiqh al-aqalliyyat*. Fiqh Council of North America, one of the pre-eminent Islamic jurisprudence body in America opined, “The needs of Muslims living in a non-Muslim country, as well as their conditions and circumstances, may differ from other countries where Muslims live as a majority. In this case, the rules of *Shariah* that are not decisive can be adjusted in a way that suits them and never puts hardship on them. ... Globalization has played an important role in bridging the gap between people and has facilitated the means of communication. However, the daily conditions of Muslims differ from one country to another. That is why Muslims in non-Muslim countries need this kind of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).”

It is worthy of note that Muslims in the West represents a very small portion of the Muslim and the Muslim minority population worldwide. In India Muslims make-up about 15 percent of the overall population and yet form the second largest Muslim population in the world at nearly 150 million. The Muslim minority population in China is also far larger than the Muslim population in America and Europe combined.

Muslim minority experiences span the gamut from being just rulers to oppressive tyrants, from being celebrated citizens to being despised, ridiculed and hounded. With this rich backdrop in history and carrying this cultural baggage Muslims presence in the West today presents challenges and opportunities hitherto unimaginable even a few decades ago.

## MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

The American Muslim community has seen remarkable growth - from one congregation in the mid-1920s to more than 2,000 organizations of all functional types by the end of the twentieth century. American Muslims today are experiencing life as part of an increasingly globalized system. All indications suggest a growing momentum among Muslims in favor of integration into America’s civic and political life.<sup>3</sup>

Mainstream Muslims consider core American values to be consistent with normative Islam. Chief among these are the norms of hard work, entrepreneurship and liberty; civilian control of the military; the clear institutionalization of political power; a diffused process of making public decisions; and a functioning civil society that gives voice to competing interests within a country.

The American Muslim community is unique in its diversity. Thirty-six percent of American Muslims were born in the United States, while 64 percent were born in 80 different countries around the world. No other country has such a rich diversity of Muslims. The American Muslim community is thus a microcosm of the Muslim world. It includes all religious schools of thought, intellectual trends, political ideologies and Islamic movements.<sup>4</sup>

The three major ethnic groups in the Muslim community are South Asians (32 percent), Arabs (26 percent) and African Americans (20 percent). Muslims from various African countries constitute seven percent of the community. More Muslims (17 percent) came from Pakistan than from any other country.

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An April 2001 study showed the ethnic origins of regular participants in U.S. mosques.<sup>5</sup> According to this study, South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Afghani) represent 33 percent of mosque goers, African-Americans 30 percent, Arabs 25 percent, Sub-Saharan African 3.4 percent, European (Bosnian, Tartar, Kosovar, etc.) 2.1 percent, White American 1.6 percent, Southeast Asian (Malaysian, Indonesian, Filipino) 1.3 percent, Caribbean 1.2 percent, Turkish 1.1 percent, Iranian 0.7 percent, Hispanic/Latino 0.6 percent.

The American Muslim Poll by Project MAPS shows that the American Muslim community is younger, better educated, and better off financially than average Americans. Three-fourths (74 percent) of adult American Muslims are less than 50 years old. The percentage of Muslim college graduates is more than double the national percentage (58 percent versus 25 percent). Half of American Muslims (50 percent) have an annual family income of more than \$50,000, and 44 percent describe their occupation as professional/technical, medical or managerial.

Over three-quarters (77 percent) reported that they had been involved with organizations to help the poor, sick, homeless, or elderly. Seventy-one percent had been involved with a religious organization or a mosque, and over two-thirds (69 percent) had been involved with school and youth programs. A little over half of those surveyed (51 percent) also stated that they had called or written to the media or to a politician on a given issue or had signed a petition.

A majority (58 percent) believed that individuals, businesses or religious organizations in their community had experienced discrimination since September 11. An overwhelming majority (93 percent) nonetheless favored participation in the American political process. Almost the same number also supported contributing financially to non-Muslim candidates and social service programs.

Despite such integrative attitudes, the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. creates tensions and hinders quicker integration of Muslims.

- The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Poll in 2004 states<sup>6</sup>:
  - Almost 4 in 10 Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam, about the same number that have a favorable view.
  - A plurality of Americans (46 percent) believes that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers
- ABC News March, 2005 Poll<sup>7</sup>:
  - Four months Sept. 11, 2001, 14 percent believed mainstream Islam encourages violence; today it's 34 percent.
  - Today 43 percent think Islam does not teach respect for the beliefs of non-Muslims — up sharply from 22 percent.
  - People who feel they do understand Islam are much more likely to view it positively. Among Americans who feel they do understand the religion, 59 percent call it peaceful and 46 percent think it teaches respect for the beliefs of others.
- CAIR 2004 Civil Rights Report<sup>8</sup>:
  - Reports of harassment, violence and discriminatory treatment increased nearly 70 percent over 2002 (the year after the 9/11 terror attacks). This represents a three-fold increase since the reporting year preceding the terrorist attacks.
- CAIR 2004 Poll<sup>9</sup>:
  - More than one-fourth of survey respondents agreed with stereotypes such as "Muslims teach their children to hate" and "Muslims value life less than other people."
  - When asked what comes to mind when they hear "Muslim," 32 percent of respondents made negative comments. Only two percent had a positive

- Cornell University Study<sup>10</sup>:
  - In all, about 44 percent said they believe that some curtailment of civil liberties is necessary for Muslim Americans.
  - Twenty-six percent said they think that mosques should be closely monitored by U.S. law enforcement agencies.
  - Twenty-nine percent agreed that undercover law enforcement agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations, in order to keep tabs on their activities and fund raising.

Sixty-five percent of self-described highly religious people queried said they view Islam as encouraging violence more than other religions do; in comparison, 42 percent of the respondents who said they were not highly religious saw Islam as encouraging violence.

Muslims in America have enjoyed an uninterrupted presence for over a century now. Yet they remain conspicuous by their absence in many spheres of American public life. Despite being about 2 percent of the population, Muslim representation in policy making part of the U.S.

government is negligible even when such policies directly affect Muslims here or abroad. American Muslims are by and large absent from representation in major policy making circles of the three national branches of the U.S. government.

### MUSLIM INTEGRATION IN AMERICA

Political scientist David Easton posits integration to be a feedback loop with political and social inputs creating specific policy outputs that in turn shape the inputs. The inputs and outcomes can be measured in terms of political activity, social activism, policy responses, civil and citizenship rights and cultural acceptance.

For most Americans and thus for most American-Muslims, identity, which is often quite nebulous rests on a dynamic tension between ethnic identity, religious identity and citizenship or American identity. The tension between these three "circles" of influence is often very creative leading to interesting and evolving alliances and common cause actions.

Muslims in America, like their counterparts abroad, are today faced with the challenge of trying to reconcile their understanding of Islam with the tidal wave of democratization, gender equality, minority rights, religious tolerance, free thought, and social justice. Normative Islam provides basic principles that can embrace each of these ideas in positive ways. However, Muslim societies in the past have often mired in the malaise of dogma and a failure to contextualize teachings of the Quran and the Prophetic traditions. Around the 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim clerics declared that the "gates of ijtihad" were closed.<sup>11</sup> Scholars and jurists from then on gave up the exercise of independent inquiry and started to rely only on the textual meanings of the Quran, and teaching of Prophet Muhammad. Islam closed ranks and decline began.

Today more and more Muslims are reviving critical inquiry (ijtihad) into both the Quran and the Sunnah (the traditions of Prophet Muhammad). New Muslim thinkers are provoking debate and counter arguments, often leading to renewed understanding of Islam's congruence with modernity. More and more Muslims in America are thus being better able balance between the demands of their faith and the challenges of modernity.

Since September 11, 2001 there has been a concerted effort on part of immigrant Muslims to discover and learn the people's history of America. This has allowed an emergence of coalition building between socio-political groups jointly undertaking a diverse set of activities from voter registration to feeding the homeless. Perhaps the most impressive progress is seen today in the keen awareness of Muslims towards their civil

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Rapid increases in anti-Muslim discrimination complaints are partly attributable to this increased awareness. Also unmistakable is the new found confidence among the Muslim community to seek help from public advocacy groups. An increasing convergence of ideas is also being played out in the numerous interfaith dialogues and interfaith activities.

Other forms of Muslim integration are evidenced by increased numbers of "open houses" organized by Islamic centers. A leading advocacy group, CAIR even put out an action alert providing guidelines on how best to conduct such open houses. The "open house" model reflects an innovative way to use faith-based traditions to deflect anticipated negative reactions towards the Muslim community following the terrorist attacks of September 11. Other ways of constructive engagement were the many meetings (both public and private) held by community based organizations and advocacy groups like CAIR and Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) with law-enforcement officers. MPAC presented a 10-point plan suggesting enhanced partnership between law-enforcement and the Muslim community. The idea behind this suggestion was to dispel the notion that Muslims presented a threat to America. This way the onus was on the law enforcement agencies that they embrace the reasonable suggestions made by the community that found themselves in the cross-hairs of investigations and profiling.

Rather than be cowed by the anti-Muslim rhetoric that permeates American society, the American-Muslim community has taken unprecedented steps to combat this negativity. It remains to be seen whether the American-Muslim community, especially after 9-11, are to move the community from being the target of suspicion and profiling to becoming accepted and even celebrated. The steps towards integration have met with rare successes on some fronts and elsewhere have been thwarted by others. However, one trend is clear, that the American-Muslim community is beginning to institutionalize their efforts to integrate hoping that such integration leads to greater acceptance.

## **MUSLIMS IN EUROPE**

Muslims migration to Europe has a direct relationship to the colonial period. In UK most Muslim immigrants tend to be from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, all areas that were former British colonies. Moroccans and Algerians drifted to France (they are about six to 10 million Muslims now in France). Turks went to Germany (most of Germany's one and a half million Muslims are Turks). The Netherlands has about half a million Muslims who are mostly from Surinam. In Portugal most Muslims are from the former colonies in India or southern France; in Spain they are from Morocco or Algeria. In Italy, where there are estimated to be about 200,000 Muslims, they are mostly from Libya.

In contrast, Muslims immigration to America is rooted in the cold war competition for the best minds from around the world. It also has a relationship with the political turmoil in many countries of the Muslim world that has occasioned increased emigration (exodus of Palestinians, revolution in Iran, the military coup in Afghanistan, the Lebanese civil war...) and consequently contributed to the Muslim presence in America. However, the largest block of Muslims in America are African-Americans, most of whom have renounced the ways of Nation of Islam and moved towards mainstream Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad.

There are some interesting differences between the USA and Europe which help us to better understand the phenomenon of Islam in the West. In America the Muslim community is largely composed of middle class doctors, engineers, academics. This gives the community a greater social confidence and a positive sense of belonging.

In Europe, by and large, the community is largely working class or even the under-class. Many live in ghetto-like neighborhoods where feelings of alienation run very high.

It is in such neighborhoods that the recent riots in France began. Contrary to Islamophobic insinuations, the rage of street violence carried no religious imprints. The rioters included Muslim and non-Muslim youths as well as immigrant and indigenous elements.

Another difference is that in the USA there is a greater geographical spread. Muslims are not concentrated in one state or city. In Europe there is a tendency to concentrate.

Muslims in the U.S. are conscious that they are here by choice. They have opted to be American. America is, after all, the land of immigrants, where everyone is ideally "equal". This contrasts with Muslims in Europe. Many feel that they are in Europe simply because their parents migrated or were forced by dire economic necessity to migrate. This makes for disenchanted and alienated citizens.

Currently there are in total about 23 million Muslims in Europe as a whole—just over 3.5 per cent of its total population. Among these are over 7 million Muslims who live in Western Europe - some 2 per cent of the latter region's total population.

### **MUSLIM RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS MEANINGFUL INTEGRATION**

European-Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan in his book *Western Muslims: Isolation or Integration?* notes that Western Muslims are likely to play a decisive role in the evolution of Islam worldwide. By reflecting on their faith, their principles and their identity within industrialized, secularized societies Western Muslims can lead Muslims worldwide in reconciling their relationship with the modern world.

Ramadan goes on to assert that if Muslims believe the message of Islam to be truly universal then one has to be able to find solutions appropriate for every time and society. Muslims must accept their responsibilities and put forward viable alternatives for interaction.

The cultural environment, inevitably touch the hearts and minds of those who live in Europe or the United States. The answer lies not in cultural isolation but more in learning to manage this impact than in denying or rejecting it. The indications are that more and more Western Muslims have understood the meaning of these factors and are looking for new approaches. These initiatives are still few and isolated, but there is a good chance that with time the movement will grow and make it possible to reform our way of dealing with questions of culture and entertainment.

Among the greatest asset the Muslim community posses in the West is its breathtaking diversity. Visit any Islamic center for a Friday prayers and one can spot people from a dozen nations speaking a dozen of different languages all learning to get along with each other. At a time when racial tensions remain quite high in West, the Muslim experience can lead to better harmonizing the greater society.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Given the current misunderstanding both in the West and in the Muslim world about each other, the Muslim presence in the West can be an effective instrument for developing mutual understanding. But governments in Europe or America have not moved to take advantage of this large Muslim presence. This can be partly attributed to a lack of meaningful contact between Muslims and policy makers in the West. As posited in this paper, Muslims in America are well integrated economically, but this integration has not lead to acceptance of Muslims as important partners in shaping public policy. In Europe, however, Muslims are somewhat less integrated in society and yet because of their increasing numbers and concentrated living tendencies more Muslim are being

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The freedom offered in the West has to be appropriately harnessed by Muslims. Muslims must use this freedom to explore new ideas and effectively respond to the vigorous challenges to their deeply held beliefs. While speaking out against perceived affront to their religion they must uphold the right of others to offend even as they seek innovative ways to uphold their right to defend. This, of course, entails an unequivocal commitment to the rule of law. Citizens have the right to protest unfair treatment; and when they believe the law is unjust, they should work to change such the law. Thus the promising engagement lies in civic participation and political mobilization. Random violence can never be justified. From an analytical standpoint, violence is an indication of social tensions reaching a crisis level. Dialogue and civic engagement can prevent any such tipping points. Those who seek positive change must focus their diplomatic energies at inducing informed changes in perceptions and policies.

Today's Muslim youth in the West have grown up being preached ideas of plurality, equality and freedom. When such ideas are not applied towards their own empowerment it can lead to disillusionment and in the worst cases irrational violence. If the aspiration of today's Muslim youth are to be harnessed properly it can lead to immense symbiosis between the West and the Muslim world promoting a new era of enlightenment and irreversibly steering the world away from an apocalyptic clash of civilizations.

1. Akbar Ahmed, "Living Islam: From Samarkand to Stornway," New York : Facts on File, March 1994
2. Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser, "A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West," Westview Press, December 1994
3. Mohamed Nimer, "The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada," Routledge, September 2002.
4. American Muslim poll at <http://www.projectmaps.com>.
5. From "Mosque a National Portrait," coordinated by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religious Research in Connecticut. Muslim organizations cosponsoring the survey are the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Islamic Society of North America, the Ministry of Imam W. Deen Muhammed, and the Islamic Circle of North America.
6. <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/islam.pdf>
7. [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/World/sept11\\_islampoll\\_030911.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/World/sept11_islampoll_030911.html)
8. [www.cair-net.org/asp/2005CivilRightsReport.pdf](http://www.cair-net.org/asp/2005CivilRightsReport.pdf)
9. <http://cair-net.org/downloads/pollresults.ppt>.
10. <http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Dec04/Muslim.Poll.bpf.html>.
11. "ijtihad" is an Arabic word meaning is the process of Islamic idea of independent thought. Its root word is "jihad" which means to struggle or strive.

## Publications Available from CAIR

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CAIR Research Center publishes educational pamphlets, reports, and papers on the Muslim experience in America. Dr. Mohamed Nimer is the director of research.

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2. CAIR is committed to protecting the civil rights of all Americans, regardless of faith.
3. CAIR supports domestic policies that promote civil rights, diversity and freedom of religion.
4. CAIR opposes domestic policies that limit civil rights, permit racial, ethnic or religious profiling, infringe on due process, or that prevent Muslims and others from participating fully in American civic life.
5. CAIR is a natural ally of groups, religious or secular, that advocate justice and human rights in America and around the world.
6. CAIR supports foreign policies that help create free and equitable trade, encourage human rights and promote representative government based on socioeconomic justice.
7. CAIR believes the active practice of Islam strengthens the social and religious fabric of our nation.
8. CAIR condemns all acts of violence against civilians by any individual, group or state.
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