

In Sh'allah

By John Zogby

Meet America's Muslim community



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“Ameriky fer de Imerikans, bejabers,” bellowed Denis Kearney of the American Workingmen’s Party to his fellow dockworkers in San Francisco in the late 1870s. A recent immigrant himself, Kearney and his group were fighting the influx of Chinese immigrants to California. They ultimately succeeded when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed a few years later.

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The United States is a great country, but it has had its xenophobic moments. The anti-Catholic hysteria of the 1840s and '50s and the hostile reception accorded the “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were followed by severe limits placed on immigration in the 1920s. Anti-German sentiment led to both legal and extralegal actions during World War II. A liberal Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the internment of Japanese-American citizens.

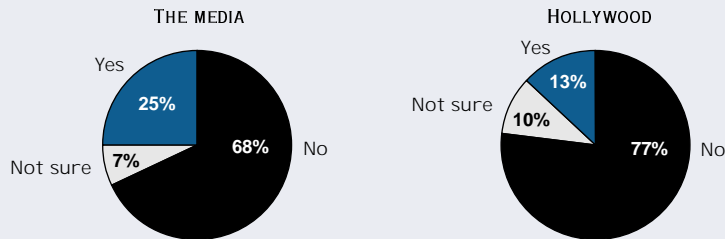
After the horrific events of September 11, America’s Muslim community was introduced publicly for the first time. Not a new group at all, American Muslims built their first mosque in 1934 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And many of us became more and more aware of Islam in the African American community through figures like Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan. Today, there are perhaps as many seven million American Muslims (actual figures are hard to come by), and they are an increasingly visible presence in

Figure 1

Fairness of Muslim Media Portrayal

Questions:

Do you think [the media/Hollywood] is fair in its portrayal of Muslims and Islam?



Note: Asked of Muslims.

Source: Survey by Zogby International, November 8-19, 2001.

major US cities and at local and national ecumenical services.

In those first days after the terrorist attacks, hundreds of cases of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab harassment, violence, and discrimination were reported to the FBI, local police agencies, and other governmental bodies. To their credit, President George W. Bush and others such as New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called upon their fellow citizens to remember this nation's highest principles and to remind all Americans that we were not at war against Islam or all Arabs.

As part of an effort to avoid another wave of xenophobia following the tragedy, Zogby International was commissioned by the Muslims in the American Public Square (MAPS) at Georgetown University to conduct a detailed national survey of American Muslims. Our mandate in the November 8-19 survey of 1,781 respondents was to probe more deeply into the attitudes, behavior, demographics and lifestyles of this little-known group in an effort to shed some light on these fellow Americans.

This was not an easy survey to execute. Although we had polled American Muslims

several times before, earlier problems of low response rate and suspicion were exacerbated in the immediate aftermath of September 11.

In the mid-1990s, working with national Islamic organizations, we developed a comprehensive list of Muslim surnames in the United States. We then matched those surnames against all listed telephone numbers nationwide. Over the years we have conducted random tests of the validity of the list and found it to be quite accurate. There are, however, some holes:

- Many American Muslims, particularly African American and other American-born converts, do not have Muslim surnames.

- African American Muslims are particularly reluctant to respond to surveys (including the US Census). Following our telephone survey, we sent employees to New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, and Washington, DC, to conduct face-to-face interviews at African American

mosques and Islamic centers. Even when we made contributions to the mosques and paid participants, our researchers did not reach their quotas.

- Most immigrant Muslims do not come from democratic nations. Thus, someone calling on the telephone or standing in their doorways with a clipboard and a lot of personal questions does not represent a good thing in their minds.

Despite these difficulties and others, this survey has proven to be very useful to academics, government agencies, civic leaders and other Americans interested in learning more about people who may very well represent the fastest-growing religious group in the country today. The results demonstrate an eagerness on the part of American Muslims to participate fully in American public life.

However, that eagerness is tempered by the widespread experience of discrimination since September 11, negative portrayals of Muslims in the media (see Figure 1), and Muslims' ambivalence over the morality of American society as a whole.

Who are American Muslims? They are mainly a young group, with three-quarters (74%) of those surveyed under 50. They also tend to be highly educated,

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with nearly three-fifths (58%) telling us they were college graduates.

American Muslims change the face of this country. Eighty-seven percent of

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the sample were Arab, African, African American or South Asian. Respondents included people born in 80 countries, including the US. Sixty-one percent of those not born in the US arrived here after 1980, 36% between 1980 and 1989, and 24% from 1990 to the present. Two-fifths (39%) said they lived in the eastern United States, half (50%) said they earned more than \$50,000 annually, and seven in ten (69%) were married.

Ethnic politics are a tradition in United States politics and a fixture in many of our cities. What makes American Muslims potentially very interesting is that they seem to represent a swing group, not particularly wed to either political party. Forty percent of survey respondents were Democrats, 23% Republicans, and 28% independents.

What also promises to offer a change in politics is that American Muslims tend to vote. Seventy-nine percent of respondents were registered to vote, and of those, 85% said they were very likely to. Most not registered said it was because they were not citizens (53%), but 71% said they intended to become voters.

It is not surprising to see both political parties beginning to reach out to Muslims. The majority (55%) of African American respondents voted for Al Gore in November 2000, while the majority of Arabs (54%) and 49% of South Asians voted for George W. Bush.

Muslims in America cannot be classified by any one political ideology. Over a third (36%) described themselves as moderate, over one-quarter (27%) said they were liberal to very liberal, and one-fifth (21%) were conservative to very conservative.

However, as my company has found concerning other ethnic groups in

Figure 2

Involvement in Community Activities

Questions:

...[P]lease tell me if you have ever donated time, money, or been an officer of any of the following.

PERCENT RESPONDING THEY DONATED TIME, MONEY, SERVED AS AN OFFICER OR ENGAGED IN A COMBINATION OF THESE.



Note: Asked of Muslims.
Source: Survey by Zogby International, November 8-19, 2001.

America (see *What Ethnic Americans Really Think*, Zogby International, 2001), Muslims tend to be fiscally liberal but conservative on many social issues. They favor big-government approaches to some problems; 93% in the survey said they favored universal health care, and 93% supported more generous government assistance to the poor.

But respondents also supported the death penalty (68%), making abortions more difficult to obtain (57%), banning the sale and display of pornography (65%), allowing prayer (53%) and the display of the Ten Commandments (59%) in public schools, and vouchers to send their children to private schools (68%). They opposed gay marriages (71%) and physician-assisted suicide (61%).

For years, American Muslims seemed to be invisible. That no longer appears to be the case, as respondents to the survey reported high levels of participation in American political and civic life as a whole. They seemed interested in the political system, with one-third reporting they had visited political websites (34%) or donated time or money to candidates (33%). Forty-five percent said they had changed their lifestyles in support of a cause, such as the environment. Forty-three percent said it was very important to participate in politics, and 54% of African American Muslims agreed.

Muslims almost unanimously supported donations to non-Muslim social service programs, such as aid to the homeless (96%), efforts to become

more involved in civic organizations (96%), and participation in the American political process (93%). Substantial numbers mentioned involvement in a wide variety of community activities (see Figure 2).

But even as they took part in American life, respondents had some reservations about the country in which they live. The majority (54%, including 70% of immigrant Muslims) did not consider America an immoral society, but a significant proportion—49% of US-born Muslims and 57% of African Americans—agreed that it was.

In the area of religion, respondents seemed like many of the rest of us: professing to be loyal to God and our religious beliefs while falling short in attendance to our places of worship. Half attended their mosque in the preceding week (49%), and half (50%) did not.

Younger respondents, ages 18 to 24 (62%), and African Americans (69%) were more likely to be involved in activities at their mosques than American Muslims as a whole (48%). Nearly half (47%) said they prayed all five *salah* daily. Eight in ten said the role of Islam and the importance of spirituality in their daily lives were very important (79%, respectively). The majority (57%) thought mosques should express their views on social and political questions.

In their reactions to the terrible events of September 11, American Muslims tended to be both alike and unlike Americans in general, as measured by various national polls.

Among our survey respondents, for example, President Bush earned an overall 58% approval rating on his

handling of the attacks, compared with the 85% rating offered by a national adult sample interviewed by CBS News at about the same time. Two-thirds (66%) of Muslims agreed with the Bush administration's assertion that the war was being fought against terrorism, not Islam, while a similar proportion of Americans (63%) in an October 15-21 poll by the Pew

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Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations viewed the war as a conflict with a small, radical group, rather than a major conflict between the people of Europe and America and the people of Islam.

Despite their approval of the way the president was handling the crisis, 61% of American Muslims felt the attacks could have been prevented; 65% of national adults in an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll conducted September 13 agreed the government could have done more to prevent them. Almost two-thirds of Muslims (64%) thought the military effort could lead to further attacks, compared with 55% of Americans in an October 7 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll who said air strikes against Afghanistan would make attacks more likely.

Seventy-eight percent of Muslims believed American foreign policy in the Middle East led to the attacks, as opposed to 58% of adults in a September 13-14 *Los Angeles Times* poll who said they were a direct result of US policy. And 67% of Muslims suggested that the best way to wage the war against terrorism was to change

America's policy in the Middle East, while 64% of registered voters in a Zogby International poll conducted November 3-5, 64% said changing the policy would be effective.

Of course, aside from their views about the impact of the attacks on the country as a whole, Muslim respondents also had

to be concerned about how they would be affected as a group. A majority (57%) said the attitude of Americans toward Muslims and Arabs since September 11 had been unfavorable. Fifty-two percent said individuals, businesses or religious organizations in their community had experienced discrimination since September 11. The kind most commonly reported was verbal abuse, cited by 25%.

In short, many issues American Muslims had had to face prior to September 11 were both added to and magnified by the tragedy. Like the Irish, Polish, Jews, and Africans before them, this growing population has struggled for acceptance, and it now faces new challenges.

But we should remember, as Denis Kearney seemed to have forgotten, that almost all of us came here from somewhere else and were new to these shores at one time. Hopefully, we will avoid an even worse xenophobic moment as we learn more about Muslims in America.

In Sh'allah.