

The Muslim-American Community Today.

Inside and Outside Factors at Work

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I have been asked to talk about the Muslim community in America, and how the external and internal dynamics interact. For Muslims today, this is the best of times, the worst of times. Muslims are becoming financially and professionally successful; they are being integrated into the political system; and the children are doing even better than their parents.

And yet, no one can deny that they are experiencing an ongoing backlash from September 11. Don't underestimate this. Americans are still afraid. Those attacks were done in the name of Islam, even though American Muslims condemned them. I often show students a list of overseas Islamist groups who renounced those attacks. They are stunned that even the most strongly anti-American groups are on that list. But few people know this, or believe it.

There is also a ferocious spillover from the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Those who support Israel, be they Jewish or Christian, are quick to defend that state against its critics. They are very good at taking any intemperate comment and publicizing it, to show that opponents of Israel are pathologically violent or even genocidal.

The data show how divided Americans are. 35% believe that Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions but in the other direction, 62% think Muslims should be allowed to build a facility near Ground Zero. Clearly there is an anti-Islamic sentiment but there are also those who are friendly and supportive.

We need to distinguish between three threats to the community. Observers often conflate them into a single process (*Islamaphobia*) but when we do this we lose the ability to see the differences or to figure out how to address them.

The first threat involves negative statements or stereotypes by individuals. In a sense, every single person in this country has experienced unfair ethnic or religious comments, but the Muslim experience is different because of the international context. Overseas, there *are* Muslims who hate America; there *are* Muslims who would like to carry out attacks on this country; there *are* Muslim religious leaders who say things that make you cringe. You in this audience can tell the difference between a Muslim bigot or extremist and the rest of the Muslim world. Few Americans are as informed as you are.

The good news is that we know from research that co-equal interaction around a shared task will neutralize stereotyping. It is significant that 2/3 of all Americans do not know a Muslim. This gives you your assignment: Join community or civic groups that are *not* focused on Muslims. Join the Rotary Club or the Rouge Cleanup or your neighborhood association. Let others see you as good neighbors and good citizens. And you will see them the same way. This will pay big dividends all around.

The second danger is from a renegade security official who prosecutes an innocent Muslim. We in Dearborn are familiar with two examples. After September 11 there was the sleeper cell case in which a federal prosecutor charged four Arabs with planning an attack. The evidence was so shallow that a federal judge threw out the case. Moreover, the prosecutor was charged by the Justice Department with professional misconduct and was removed from his post.

The other case is of two local boys who were purchasing cell phones for resale. They had heard that the way to make money was 'buy low, sell high' and they were trying it. A local deputy prosecutor arrested them for terrorism. It was bizarre. Within a day or so, the regular prosecutor returned to town and dismissed the charges.

When my colleagues and I conducted the Detroit Arab American Study, we asked the 1,016 people we interviewed if an Arab or Muslim accused of terrorism could receive a fair trial. Over half said yes. The evidence seems to support their belief that the American judicial process will uphold the law and protect innocent Muslims from abusive security officials.

The third threat is the most disturbing. It involves organized anti-Islamic groups who systematically monitor and attack the Muslim community. Dearborn is familiar with such groups since they describe us as "ground zero" for Islam in America. The visits of Terry Jones and the Bible Believers are examples, but they are small isolated groups with only a few supporters. The more significant case is the Jessica Mokdad Civil Rights Conference. This conference was linked to an extensive, organized structure of groups, books, speakers, and blogs. Even though it was a public relations failure, it was dangerous because it has powerful allies and enormous resources. One good sign is that there is growing resistance. Just this week, Pamela Geller was removed as a speaker by the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. Many people find this kind of anti-Islamic venom distasteful.

Muslims in America suffer major disadvantages in dealing with these issues.

First, they are compromised by the words and actions of individuals overseas. A Muslim leader recently said to me, "There are a few thousand extremists in Iraq and millions of non-extremists. Why do Americans focus upon the extremists?" The answer in our media age is obvious. "If it bleeds, it leads." When someone in Riyadh or Cairo or Tehran or Islamabad

delivers an inflammatory sermon it gets reported. A few years ago when I was in the West Bank, Palestinians would quote to me things that some of our less reflective members of Congress had said. I was not really surprised. We view such people as intemperate exceptions but overseas they see them as representative. Americans do the same thing, in mirror image.

Second, Muslims as a community are relatively new to this country. According to the Detroit Arab American Study, 75% (including Christians) were born overseas. Many have not figured out American discourse. Still, I am very optimistic on this front because Muslim young people are very American and can discuss issues in a way that non-Muslims understand.

A year ago I gave myself a difficult assignment. I set out to read anti-Islamic websites and attend anti-Muslim meetings so as to understand what they were saying. This was informative but not always pleasant.

Overall, their criticisms fall into three general areas.

First, at the heart of anti-Muslim thinking is a belief that Muslim men do not respect Muslim women. Saudi Arabia usually leads the list of examples with its prohibition on female driving. Close behind are matters such as honor killings and forced marriages of young girls. Since I count many happily married Muslim couples among my friends, I know this is not representative, but the perception persists.

Second, there is the matter of satire and commentary about Islam. Two issues really gave Islam a black eye. These were the cases of Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*, and the so-called Mohammed cartoons, published in Denmark. The fatwa to assassinate Rushdie, and the riots and deaths over the Mohammed cartoons, plus the attempts to assassinate the cartoonists and editors, were hard to understand. Americans are passionate about the First Amendment and its guaranteed right to say even offensive things. Just this week the Supreme Court struck down the Stolen Valor Act. This decision guarantees liars the right to claim that they are war heroes.¹ Even more dramatic, the court recently upheld the right of anti-gay militants to protest at any military funeral because gay soldiers have the right to serve. There are few political actions more disgusting than such sacrilegious protests and yet most Americans, myself included, think that decision was correct.

To many Americans, Muslims seem not to share these values. In that regard, I would like to say how impressive it was that many Muslims, in public statements and internet forums, affirmed that the so-called Bible Believers, marching around the Arab Festival with their pig's

¹ Justice Kennedy's majority decision said that "one of the costs of the First Amendment is that it protects the speech we detest as well as the speech we embrace."

head, should be allowed to state their offensive perspectives. This was very American and was a credit to the community.

A third issue raised by the critics of Islam has to do with religious freedom. Americans are passionate about this. Our historic memory has to do with the struggle over freedom to dissent from official religious teachings, to defy religious authorities, and to leave one religion for another. The ability of a religious authority to deliver binding rulings is alien to most Americans, especially those of the Protestant tradition. It is as if one individual can tell another what to think about God and faith. Islam is also seen in its own world as marginalizing, suppressing, or disrespecting other religious groups. The debate in Egypt about whether a Christian could even hypothetically be President of the Republic is one example. The recent statement by a Saudi religious authority that there should be no Christian churches within the kingdom is another. These may be seen by people in this audience as bizarre or even un-Islamic, but to those critics who hear such things, they seem to reflect a religion that does not share their values.

If you want to know what people like Reverend Jones mean when they say they oppose sharia law, these are the kinds of examples they give.

The question at this point is, what can Muslims do? I have three suggestions.

First, don't do anything to offend your allies. A strong plurality of the general public (41%) believes that Islam and Muslims are treated unfairly. Those people are on your side. Watch your rhetoric. Don't make sweeping statements about American bigotry or white racism. Whenever you mention Terry Jones, mention that scores of Christian and Jewish leaders stood outside the Islamic Center of America a year ago in defiant solidarity. Turn the Jones visit into an American victory, not an example of American bigotry.

Second, get out of the mosque. If you want to be a part of the American world, get into that world. Give blood to the Red Cross. Donate to the United Way. Join with your non-Muslim neighbors to produce something good for the city.

Finally, think of Americans in three categories: Friends, enemies, and neutrals. Your friends will support you even if there are Muslims who do or say unacceptable things. Regarding your enemies, nothing you do will change their mind. If you argue with them, your anger will just empower them.

In this sense, your real audience for any action should be those who are neutral. Their instinct is to be fair to you but they don't know you and are not sure you deserve their support. Winning them over should be your goal. You do this by surprising them, and going against stereotypes.

When Reverend Jones comes to town, invite him to dinner. When the Bible Believers come to spew their venom, ignore them. This strategy worked wonderfully when Reverend Jones came here in May. I was there and he spoke to a handful of his followers. A year ago, when Jones came to town, young Arab guys, incited by the militant group BAMN, charged the police lines outside city hall and nearly got their heads smashed in. On the evening news, *they* were the story, and Jones became the victim. He played those boys like a violin, and civil libertarians like me had to defend his right to speak. I was not happy about being put into that position.

I think Muslims are becoming a part of our national fabric. You are going to make a real contribution to this country. And you enjoy considerable religious freedom. Just recently a local mosque had a special event, widely advertised, honoring and celebrating the life of Ayatollah Khomeini. How amazing it was, that Muslims felt confident enough in their religious freedom that they could honor a man who was such an enemy of this country, and who caused us such grief.

Is the glass half full or half empty? I think the future looks good.