

# SPECIAL REPORT



## An Introduction to Muslim America

---

### INTRODUCTION

In the recent weeks and months, an intense national conversation has taken place surrounding the Park51 Islamic Center in Manhattan and the attempted Quran burning incident by a pastor in Florida. These incidents have once again shined a national spotlight on Islam and the Muslim American community. Although Islam and Muslims have been a part of American history since its founding, there still exists much misunderstanding and misinformation about the nature of the religion and its followers, both domestically and internationally.

This special report provides a brief background on the Muslim American community, its demographics, history, culture and contributions in various segments of civic and political life in America. This is not an exhaustive study, yet with the amount of misinformation on this subject flooding the public square, we believe this will serve as a useful resource to policy makers, community members, civil society advocates and the public at large.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM IN AMERICA & CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The Quran and Islam are remarkably indigenous to American history. Muslims and their faith entered the American story in the 18th century through two disparate strands. On one hand, they personified the extreme “other” for the founding fathers, the tolerance of whom was a touchstone for American freedom. In fact, **John Adams and Thomas Jefferson owned copies of the Quran in their libraries and referenced Muslims in their work on America’s founding documents.**<sup>i</sup> Similarly, other social leaders expounded the need to fully include Muslims in American life.

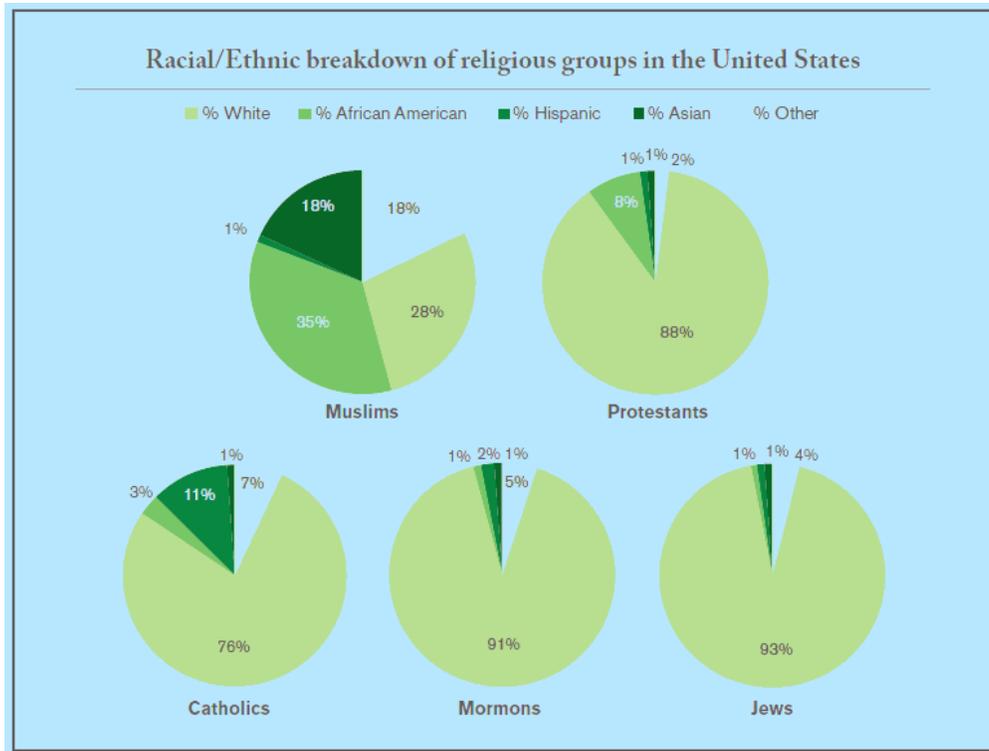
Concurrently, American society was experiencing an increasing Muslim population through the import of African slaves. While slave owners remained largely ignorant of the faith of their slaves, the captives kept their belief alive through personal observance of ritual. Notably, the prayer and fasting practices of slaves – such as Job Ben Solomon and Bilali Ben Ali Muhammed – gave Islamic habits a public presence in the new land.

A century later, converts such as the famous American writer and former Ambassador to the Philippines, Alexander Russell Webb, represented Islam at the Chicago Parliament of Religion in 1893, gaining new prominence in American society.

During the 1930s, a social movement emerged among African Americans to socially, civically and spiritually empower themselves, known as the Nation of Islam. This movement grew in the 1940s and 1950s and hit its peak in the 1960s. **During this time, various national figures appeared and advanced the civil rights movement, including Malik Shabazz, also known as Malcolm X.**<sup>ii</sup>

During the 1960s, the Nation of Islam experienced leadership changes. Amid these changes, Elijah Muhammad’s son, the late Warith Deen Mohammed, emerged as the new head of the movement in 1975. It was under his vision and direction that subsequently moved the majority of the followers toward embracing mainstream Islamic teachings.<sup>iii</sup> During the same era, America’s immigration laws opened up in 1965. This brought thousands of students and their families to the U.S. mainly from the Middle East and South Asia, in search of higher education and economic opportunity.<sup>iv</sup>

The result of these historical dynamics has had a significant impact on the current make up of the Muslim American community. A 2009 Gallup study, *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*, found 35% are African American, 28% “White” (mostly Middle Easterners, with some converts and Eastern Europeans) and 18% “Asian” (mostly South Asians, with some Indonesians and Malaysians). The same study found 36% were between ages 18-29, and 37% between ages 30-44. In short, as a young and rising religious community in the United States, it is the most ethnically and racially diverse.<sup>v</sup>



Source: *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*, P. 21.

## **SOCIAL, CIVIC & POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICA**

Muslim Americans have made rich and vibrant cultural and social contributions to the American landscape, contributing their talents in the areas of science and medicine, law, sports, politics, arts and religion. Accomplished Muslim Americans are known around the world, including legendary boxer Muhammad Ali, Noble Laureate Ahmed Zewail, news commentator Fareed Zakaria and U.S. Congressmen Keith Ellison from Minnesota and Andre Carson from Indiana.

Muslim Americans are doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, artists and laborers. Muslim Americans are especially well-represented within the medical profession: **approximately 1 out of every 25 U.S. doctors is a Muslim.**<sup>a</sup> They range from highly skilled specialists, to community clinic workers, such as the UMMA Clinic, which serves more than 10,000 of the most impoverished and vulnerable segments in the Los Angeles area.<sup>vi</sup>

A quick look into the development of American civic and political life shows many examples of the respect and understanding shown toward Muslim Americans throughout our nation's history. The influence of Muslim leaders and historical figures are evident in places such as the Capitol Building,<sup>vii</sup> Library of Congress<sup>viii</sup> and the Supreme Court.<sup>ix</sup>

Today, Muslim Americans not only contribute to the social and cultural well-being of America but also its economic stability. As a result of the Muslim American community's success in higher education and income levels, it has given them a strong presence in the American economy. **A 2007 study by marketing firm JWT, shows Muslim Americans have a purchasing power of more than \$170 billion,<sup>x</sup> whose economic and entrepreneurial activities have created and sustained thousands of jobs for all Americans.**

Muslim Americans overwhelmingly support our nation's right to self-defense; however, they continue to be falsely associated with the despicable acts of a tiny minority of extremists. In fact, Muslim Americans are both overwhelmingly against extremism (see next section) and significantly helped law enforcement bring terrorists to justice. According to MPAC's Post-9/11 Terrorism Incident Database, **nearly 1 out of every 3 Al-Qaeda plots threatening America since September 11, 2001 has been foiled with the assistance of Muslim communities.**<sup>xi</sup>

However, this is nothing new; Muslim Americans have a proud tradition of patriotism that includes have fighting and dying for our nation since its very birth. **One example was Peter Salem (Saleem), a freed slave who fought at Lexington and Bunker Hill during the Revolutionary War.** Salem was awarded for his bravery.<sup>xii</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> Calculations based on figures taken from: "Muslim American Market." *Allied Media Corp*, (2002). <http://www.allied-media.com/AM/>; Suzanne Staline and Shirley S. Wang, "Medical Schools Can't Keep Up." *Wall Street Journal*, (April 12, 2010). Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304506904575180331528424238.html>;

When the tragic attacks happened on 9/11, Muslims were among the victims. **Among the 3,000 lost were at least 60 Muslims,<sup>xiii</sup> and the rubble of the Twin Towers included the ruins of a Muslim prayer room on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of the South Tower which was used every Friday.<sup>xiv</sup>** On that fateful day, Al-Qaeda did not distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims – they only sought to create as much death and destruction as possible.

Muslim Americans were also among the first responders who rushed to help evacuate people from the burning buildings. Among those who laid down their lives was Mohammed Hamdani, an EMT and NYPD cadet who rushed into the towers as a part of the rescue efforts.<sup>xv</sup> Sadly, when he went missing, some speculated he may have been one of the attackers. His name was cleared several months later when his body was found alongside the EMT bag he used to save people's lives.<sup>xvi</sup>

Today, almost 15,000 Muslim Americans proudly and honorably serve in our military<sup>xvii</sup> as analysts, linguists and soldiers. They help gather and analyze information that is used to track down terrorists and bring them to justice. They include individuals such as Capt. Humayun Khan, Maj. James “Jimmy” Ahern, and Kareem Khan<sup>xviii</sup> (who was cited by Ret. Gen. Colin Powell in 2008), who all died fighting to protect our nation.

They also include members of our law enforcement. Perhaps the most prominent example is Ali Soufan.<sup>xix</sup> **Mr. Soufan is a Lebanese American Muslim and a highly decorated former FBI agent who tracked down and apprehended the USS Cole bombers in 2000.** Interestingly, national security reporter and author of *The Looming Tower*, Robert Wright, asserts Soufan may have prevented the 9/11 attacks if the CIA shared its information with the FBI on the hijackers' movements and intentions.<sup>xx</sup>

## **MUSLIM AMERICANS' VIEWS ON NATIONAL SECURITY**

Immediately after 9/11, thousands of Muslim religious scholars, politicians and activists at home and abroad, condemned terrorism as fundamentally anti-Islamic. In July 2005, the Fiqh Council of North America, a prominent U.S. Muslim scholarly body, issued a ruling (*fatwa*) against all forms of terrorism. **The online publication, *The American Muslim*, has documented reports and statements from over 10,000 Muslim religious scholars and leaders denouncing terrorism since 9/11.<sup>xxi</sup>**

Despite the constant condemnation and actions from Muslim leaders and institutions, the myth of Muslims' silence on terrorism persists. Some elected officials today have gone so far as to openly question the loyalty of all Muslim Americans, characterizing them as a domestic security threat.

In May 2007, the Pew Research Center released the first-ever nationwide survey of Muslim Americans, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, which gauged their attitudes on a wide range of social, political and economic issues. Overall, the report found:<sup>xxii</sup>

- **Muslims have an overall positive view of the larger American society**
- **Most Muslim Americans believe hard work will lead to economic prosperity**

- **Overall, Muslims appear to be highly socially integrated into American society**

Pew also found that 98%<sup>b</sup> of Muslim American youth reject the traits of Al-Qaeda's violent and extremist ideology.<sup>c</sup> This number increases further to 99% when the overall community is examined.<sup>d</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Muslims have been an integral part of the American historical and cultural mosaic since our nation's founding. In 2010, Muslim Americans are more politically and civically engaged than ever before. They are represented at all levels of city, state and federal government. They are business leaders, parents, and active members of their local communities. One of the most unifying sentiments in the American Muslim community today is a firm belief in the importance of Muslim Americans' defining themselves and their faith on their own terms – rather than allowing for others to speak for them.

We at MPAC hope this special report is a helpful tool for communities, elected officials, religious leaders and civic activists to understand the Muslim American community. As we face challenges both at home and abroad, let us remember that our nation's diversity has been, and continues to be, our greatest strength.

---

<sup>b</sup> “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.” *Pew Research Center*, (May 22, 2007), P. 53.

<sup>c</sup> On Al-Qaeda's ideology and justification for killing innocents, see: Scott Atran, “The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism.” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Spring 2006). Available at: [http://www.twq.com/06spring/docs/06spring\\_atran.pdf](http://www.twq.com/06spring/docs/06spring_atran.pdf), P.136-9; Jack Barclay, “Al-Tatarrus: al-Qaeda's Justification for Killing Muslim Civilians.” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, (September 9, 2010). Available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM\\_008\\_87.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_008_87.pdf), P. 6-9.

<sup>d</sup> “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.” P. 53.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Ted Widmer, "People of the Book." *Boston Globe*, (September 12, 2010). Available at: [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/09/12/the\\_true\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_koran\\_in\\_america/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/09/12/the_true_history_of_the_koran_in_america/).
- <sup>ii</sup> Amir Muhammad, "The 1900s." *Collections and Stories of American Muslims*, (2005). Available at: [http://www.muslimsinamerica.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=28](http://www.muslimsinamerica.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=28).
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> "Civil Rights Concerns in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Area in the Aftermath of the September 11, 2001, Tragedies." *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, (June 2003). Available at: <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/sac/dc0603/dc0603.pdf>, P. 7.
- <sup>v</sup> "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait." *Gallup Foundation and Coexist Foundation*, (January 2009). Available at: <http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/File/116074/AmericanMuslimReport.pdf>, P. 21-22.
- <sup>vi</sup> See: <http://www.ummaclinic.org/>.
- <sup>vii</sup> "Islamic Prayer Inside the U.S. Capitol?" *ABC News*, (September 14, 2010). Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/video/playerIndex?id=11640698&affil=blog>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Neil Hrab, "Washington, DC's Hidden Tribute to Islam." *San Francisco Examiner*, (August 26, 2010). Available at: <http://www.sfoxaminer.com/opinion/blogs/Examiner-Opinion-Zone/Washington-DCs-hidden-tribute-to-Islam-101599843.html>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Joan Biskupic, "Great Figures Gaze Upon the Court." *Washington Post*, (March 11, 1998). Available at: [http://www.dailyrepublican.com/sup\\_crt\\_frieze.html](http://www.dailyrepublican.com/sup_crt_frieze.html).
- <sup>x</sup> Louise Story, "Rewriting the Ad Rules for Muslim-Americans." *New York Times*, (April 28, 2007). Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/28/business/28muslim.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/28/business/28muslim.html?_r=1).
- <sup>xi</sup> Alejandro J. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States." *Muslim Public Affairs Council*, (August 2010). Available at: <http://mpac.org/publications/policy-papers/post-911-terrorism-database.php>.
- <sup>xii</sup> Amir Muhammad, "The 1700s." *Collections and Stories of American Muslims*, (2005). Available at: [http://www.muslimsinamerica.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=28](http://www.muslimsinamerica.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=28).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Sam Dolnick, "Visiting Ground Zero, Asking Allah for Comfort." *New York Times*, (September 9, 2010). Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/10/nyregion/10muslim.html>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Samuel G. Freeman, "Muslims and Islam Were Part of Twin Towers' Life." *New York Times*, (September 10, 2010). Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/11/nyregion/11religion.html?\\_r=1&src=tw&tw=nytimes](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/11/nyregion/11religion.html?_r=1&src=tw&tw=nytimes).
- <sup>xv</sup> Rick Hampson, "For Families of 9/11 Victims, A New Pain." *USA Today*, (September 9, 2010). Available at: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-09-03-1Amuslims911\\_CV\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-09-03-1Amuslims911_CV_N.htm).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Austin Fenner, "Muslim Cop Cadet Mourned." *NY Daily News*, (April 6, 2002). Available at: [http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/2002/04/06/2002-04-06\\_muslim\\_cop\\_cadet\\_mourned.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/2002/04/06/2002-04-06_muslim_cop_cadet_mourned.html).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Linda D. Kozayn, "U.S. Air Force Capt. Muhammad: A Muslim American." *Armed Forces Press Service*, (December 11, 2002). Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=42398>.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Salmah Y. Rizvi, "The Defense Department's Muslim Counterterrorists." *The Daily Beast*, (August 30, 2010). Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-08-30/muslim-americans-are-also-dying-for-america>.
- <sup>xix</sup> Lawrence Wright, "The Agent." *The New Yorker*, (July 10, 2006). Available at: [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/10/060710fa\\_fact\\_wright](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/10/060710fa_fact_wright).
- <sup>xx</sup> Q&A with *Looming Tower* author Robert Wright. See: Amy Davidson, "Missed Opportunities." *The New Yorker*, (July 10, 2006). Available at: [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/10/060710on\\_onlineonly01](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/10/060710on_onlineonly01).
- <sup>xxi</sup> The American Muslim's compilation began in July 2007 and continues to grow each month. See: Sheila Musaji, "Muslim Voices Against Terrorism and Extremism." *The American Muslim*, (July 1, 2007). Available at: [http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/american\\_muslim\\_resources\\_collections\\_of\\_articles\\_and\\_references/](http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/american_muslim_resources_collections_of_articles_and_references/).
- <sup>xxii</sup> "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream." *Pew Research Center*, (May 22, 2007). Available at: <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.