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The Shaping of Muslim Identity in the United States

Field Report

Background: The research topic focuses on the complex issue of Islam in the United States, offering a thorough and comprehensive study of Islamic identity, participation and civic engagement of the American Islamic community.

As one of the fastest growing minority groups in the nation's largest cities, Muslims today comprise a vibrant mosaic of ethnic, sectarian, and socioeconomic diversity. Representing an array of origins, the Muslim population hales from more than eighty different countries and multiple sectarian orientations and socioeconomic backgrounds. Muslim Americans represent every philosophical, theological, and political strain in Islam.¹

American Muslims comprise the most diverse Islamic community that has ever existed anywhere in the World. They are immigrants and American born, with African Americans making up an estimated thirty to forty percent of their population. Most are Sunni, though the number of Shi'ites has grown to nearly twenty percent. Many Muslims prefer not to identify themselves by using the category "immigrant," but rather use the labels "American born" and "foreign born," the latter including students and other sojourners in the United States. Some American Muslims are conservative in their outlook, hoping to keep customs from their country of origin alive in their religious practices, while others are looking for ways to formulate an American brand of Islam that

¹ Kathleen M. Moore, "Muslims in the United States: Pluralism under Exceptional Circumstances", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2007.

is at home and comfortable in the West. Most of the Muslims whom other Americans are likely to encounter and adhere to an orthodox understanding of Islam, which assumes the structure of beliefs and practices generally common to Sunnis and Shi'ites. Moreover, America fosters a wide range of heterodox movements that often claim the label Muslim.²

It's noteworthy that the Arab presence in the Americas dates back to the tenth century. Voyages made by Arab sailors may well have inspired Christopher Columbus. A recent Italian display of Columbus's belongings included an Arabic book containing an account of eight sailors from Arab Spain who had landed in the Americas.³

The influx of Islam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stemming from trans-Atlantic the slave trade, has been more substantially documented as many American contemporaries recorded the experiences of enslaved Muslims. In the period following the Civil War up through World War II, immigrants from a wide range of ethnic and national groups came to the United States, bringing with them not only their economic aspirations but their cultural distinctiveness. During this period, many newcomers from the Middle East were Arab Christians, but much of what was written about their community provided little detail about the fledgling Muslim minority in their midst. It was not until the 1950s and the advent of the Cold War that the Muslim presence in the United States became discernible. From the mid-twentieth century, on the United States opened its doors to immigrants from so-called "Third World" countries and, in unprecedented numbers, to foreign students from Africa and Asia received financial support to study in American universities. Muslim peoples from around the world became the beneficiaries of this turn of events and, especially since the 1960s, have come to call the United States home. This has significantly altered the Muslim experience in the United States. Today, Muslim inhabitants of the United States are foreign-born at a ratio of two to one. Although numbers are provisional, a consensus of researchers studying the ethnic diversity of the Muslim American population holds that the largest

² Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2007.

³ Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women. Crafting a North American Identity*, University Press of Florida, 2000 .

three groups of Muslims in the United States are Arab, South Asian, and African American, followed by several smaller ethnic groups—Turks, Iranians, Bosnians, Malays, Indonesians, Africans, and so on. Especially if one includes both recent immigrants and a substantial number of “indigenous” African Americans, the Muslim population in the United States defies easy categorization. In general, the vast majority of Muslim Americans of every generation want to be integrated at some level and are most successfully integrated into the American mainstream economically.

Muslim Americans are often employed in the professions and enjoy relatively high standards of living, although a recent study indicates a downturn in Muslim professionals’ salaries, which, in turn, negatively impacts philanthropy.⁴

Like all religious ethnic minorities in America, the question of how to deal with the question of integration or assimilation is integral to the experience of Muslims. The majority of Americans have yet to realize that Muslims are one of “us”, but at the same time, they themselves have not resolved the question of the relationship between their faith and their national identity either: will they remain Muslims in America or become American Muslims?⁵ Identity is always fluid and multivalent, and in the current case of Muslim Americans, the intersection of identity and religiosity suggests a particular framework for understanding based on common values as the entry point for political integration. The substance of Muslim identity—who “counts” as a Muslim, and what Islam stands for—is something that has to be worked out internally, in the press and conversations of Muslims in the United States.

At the same time, to some degree certain convictions and behaviors, which are ascribed to Muslims from the outside—however inaccurate—also shape how that identity becomes regarded in the political sphere. Indeed, non-Muslims’ perceptions of Muslims

4 Kathleen M. Moore, “Muslims in the United States: Pluralism under Exceptional Circumstances”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2007, 612: 116.

5 Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

has an impact on Muslim American engagement and capacity for institutional building, which frustrates Muslim Americans' efforts to be civically engaged.⁶

Despite the fact that Islam is the third largest religion in the United States and that by now, most American Muslims are born and raised in the United States, the American media continue to view Islam through the prism of the Iranian revolution, regarding it as a reactionary religion given to extremism and terrorism. Greak Noakes, in "Muslims and the American Press", analyzes the quality of media coverage and the reasons for the tendency of misunderstand and distort the nature and function of Islam.

The failures of limitations of American media reporting on Islam and Muslims have had an important impact on the sensibilities and sensitivities of American Muslims.

The complexity and uniqueness of the American experience, commonly referred to as the "melting pot," has endowed the United States with a social structure that is made of up and fed by a steady stream of immigrants. Each community of immigrants has brought their own unique customs, traditions, and even languages. Yet each community was in turn absorbed into the mainstream of American society and each with an impressive rate of assimilation and "Americanization".

The traditional diasporan communities in the United States have generally followed two trajectories. The first trajectory is one of rapid and full integration, or assimilation, into mainstream society often at the expenses of native language and customs. The diasporan groups on this first path are comprised of those with little incentive for maintaining a strong identity, such as the case with the wave of European immigrants that found opportunity and economic prosperity within a generation or two. The second trajectory is characterized by a more determined and stronger hold on diasporan identity and feeling. With the notable examples of the Palestinian, Kurdish, Armenian and Jewish diasporan communities, collective identity and reluctance for full integration or assimilation is often found among those whose homelands are under threat or who yearn for a territorial

⁶ Kathleen M. Moore, "Muslims in the United States: Pluralism under Exceptional Circumstances", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2007, 612: 116.

nation-state. Unlike the first group, these diasporan communities tend to be highly politicized.

In the American context, the contribution of a number of diverse immigrant communities has tended to reveal the positive aspects of ethnicity and identity politics. In terms of security, the diasporan communities never posed any real threat to the United States.

In terms of the United States' "great power" national security strategy, the diaspora that is of greatest concern is the 7 million-strong American Muslim community (30 percent of whom came from South Asia). Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and the role of American-born Muslims and converts has been identified as a key element in al Qaeda's recruiting and operational strategy. But it is the depth and diversity of this Muslim diaspora that demonstrate the opportunity and challenge for U.S. national security strategy.

Almost immediately, the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were proclaimed to have "changed America forever." Whether or not such hyperbole is justified, there can be little doubt the event reverberates in all spheres of American life, particularly for Muslims and Arabs living in the United States. How Arab Muslims will adapt to and become incorporated into American society will be determined by a number of factors—not only their history as immigrants and their ongoing ties and identification with Middle East and Islam, but also their reception by American society and US foreign policy towards the Arab region and its Islamic peoples.⁷

Although the notion of a diasporan people is traditionally seen as tied to "*ethno-nationalism*," there is an obvious added religious element in the case of the Muslim community. For such Muslim diasporan communities, a much broader and more diverse identity emerges, one that crosses strict ethnic or nationalist lines and shares a collective

⁷ Richard Alba, Albert J. Raboteau and Josh DeWind, *Immigration and Religion in America. Comparative and Historical Perspectives*, New York, 2008

identity, which is rooted in the beliefs and practices of Islam. Stemming in large part from the universal nature of Islam and its “brotherhood of belief,” the Islamic diaspora is also endowed with a deep network of social, economic and even political ties vital to bridging the differences between a global Islamic community (Umma) of 1.2 billion adherents. The Muslim diaspora within the United States is also tied to this global network of belief and holds a participatory role in the broader Islamic community on several levels.

An obvious outcome of the attacks of 9/11 and the emergence of the al Qaeda threat was the immediate focus on Islamic groups and communities. The presence of a threat so far beyond the traditional parameters of U.S. national security spurred newfound attention on a little understood and seriously underestimated enemy. And although the overwhelming majority of Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism, the overwhelming majority of today’s terrorists happen to be radical Islamists. But the United States’ security strategy aims at an even wider group encompassing pan-national and multi-national networks of Islam.

One of the important, yet understated, aspects of the American Muslim diaspora is the fact that many American Muslims live in a state of fear. As a result of stricter law enforcement and expanded surveillance since 9/11, the majority of American Muslims are living in a profound state of fear. Homeland security policies have tended to discourage rather than promote cooperation from within the American Muslim community. And it is the Muslim diaspora that has played a key role in the war on terrorism and, more specifically, on the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy and world standing. But the current attitude that it comprises a challenge to, not an opportunity for, better relations, seems to be one of the more fundamental flaws in U.S. strategy. The American Muslim diaspora presents an excellent opportunity for overcoming the mischaracterization of U.S. policy as a war on Islam rather than on terrorism.

Through its assessment and evaluation measures, this research project studies several relatively underexamined elements and factors, which may prove essential for

reformulating national policies on immigration, economic integration, assimilation, national security, and so on, which could help meet the challenges posed by the current “threat environment.” This is especially timely considering how identity politics have influenced the security strategies of the “great powers” as well as garnered a significant amount of attention. More and more, questions of ethnicity and ethnic networks are being recognized as having great strategic importance.

Ethnicity and the “identity politics” of diasporan communities each play an undeniably critical role in U.S. national security strategy. Although the traditional diasporan communities of the U.S. have also been factors in the foreign policy process, it is the Muslim diaspora that is key to the course of the current U.S.-led war on terrorism and, more specifically, on the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy and world standing. As I have mentioned, the current approach of treating the American Muslim diaspora only as a challenge and not as an opportunity is one of the more fundamental flaws in U.S. strategy. And this one-sided approach weakens the merits of an ambitious U.S. campaign that seeks to foster democratization and forge stabilization in the more neglected and conflict-prone regions of the world.