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American Muslim Minorities: The New Human Rights Struggle

Ashley Moore

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Abstract

The ramifications of the attacks of September 11, 2001 are felt throughout the United States. However, no minority community is as deeply affected as the American-Muslim minority. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, Muslims residing in the United States have experienced violations of economic and political liberties, as well as ongoing social discrimination. Media stereotypes and government legislation continually exacerbate these human rights abuses and entrench institutional, social, and economic discrimination deeper in American society. At the heart of this discrimination are clear misunderstandings about Islam and those who practice the faith. In an effort to combat these challenges, Islamic organizations are fighting to protect the community's civil liberties. Is America turning a corner in the treatment and understanding of Muslim minorities?

Keywords

Human rights, Muslims, Islam, United States, War on Terror, September 11 2001, Discrimination

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Publication Statement

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By Ashley Moore

"Muslims have their work cut out. Just like African-Americans during the Civil Rights Era had to join together to address the issues of discrimination and hatred toward them, so too will Muslims and it will not be without challenges."

--Constance Rice, civil rights activist

The ramifications of the attacks of September 11, 2001 are felt throughout the United States. However, no minority community is as deeply affected as the American-Muslim minority. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, Muslims residing in the United States have experienced violations of economic and political liberties, as well as ongoing social discrimination. Media stereotypes and government legislation continually exacerbate these human rights abuses and entrench institutional, social, and economic discrimination deeper in American society. At the heart of this discrimination are clear misunderstandings about Islam and those who practice the faith. In an effort to combat these challenges, Islamic organizations are fighting to protect the community's civil liberties. Is America turning a corner in the treatment and understanding of Muslim minorities?

American and Islam: An Uneasy Relationship

As of 2010, six million Muslims live among an American population of about 300 million. This small minority is the subject of deep social anxiety towards Islam, known as *Islamophobia.* Muslim minorities in the United States are seen through the sphere of "otherness," which many Americans relate to stereotypes that are perpetuated through popular media and literature. Many polls conducted between 2001- 2009 echo American misconceptions regarding Islam. A 2003 Pew poll shows that nearly 45 percent of Americans believed that Islam is more likely than other religions "to encourage violence among its believers." In addition, a 2009 survey indicated that 36 percent of Americans could not recall basic facts about Islam. The fear of Islam is so palpable that during the 2010 elections, Oklahoma voted to ban sharia law from being used in judicial matters. Americans continue to see Islam and Muslims as one-dimensional caricatures.

The reasons behind the American misunderstanding of Islam can be traced to media stereotypes that have permeated American pop culture. The two most typical Muslim stereotypes are the images of the Muslim-Arab, terrorist male and the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman. In most media, Muslim men are portrayed in traditional Arab dress indicating fundamentalism. Almost all Muslims are portrayed as Arabs, despite the fact that only about 20 percent of the worldwide Muslim population identify themselves as Arabs. Muslim women are most often portrayed wearing the veil, burqa, or niqab. These images conjure ideas that Islam subjugates and oppresses women.

These stereotypes fail to account for the pluralistic character of the Muslim community. In fact, American Muslims have their own unique nature illustrated by varying origins, ethnic and racial make-up, and political beliefs. Altogether, Muslims from nearly 80 nationalities and cultural backgrounds constitute today's American-Muslim residents. According to a study by CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), three ethnicities make up most of the nation's Muslim population:

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South Asians (33%), Arab (20%), and African-Americans (30%). Other ethnicities include: African, Bosnian/European, and Iranian immigrants. Like the diversity of its practitioners, Islam itself is pluralistic. For example, veiling often comes from a woman's cultural background; it is not necessarily a blanket practice among the faithful. However, despite the pluralism of the Muslim community, Muslims continue to face different prejudices.

Institutional Discrimination

In the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, the U.S. government cracked down on immigration policy and national security measures. In October 2001, the U.S. Patriot Act was signed into law with almost no Congressional debate. The Patriot Act allowed the attorney general to detain non-citizens suspected of terrorism without a warrant, and authorized new surveillance guidelines for U.S. law enforcement agencies. Additionally, in July 2003, the Clear Law Enforcement for Criminal Alien Removal Act (CLEAR) was passed to give local law enforcement the power to enforce federal immigration laws. The combined implementation of the Patriot Act and the CLEAR Act resulted in increased surveillance of Muslims. Muslims (citizens and non-citizens) have been denied council and formal charges while being detained for extended periods of time. According to the Office of Inspector General (OIG), the average time from arrest to clearance was 80 days. Surveillance of Muslims is ongoing in mosques, on the Internet, and through library records, bank accounts, and places of employment.

Nearly a year after the events of 9/11, the Attorney General announced the introduction of the National Security Exit-Entry Registration System (NSEERS). The "special registration" program applied to men ages 16 to 45 who were predominantly from Arab/Muslim countries residing in the United States on temporary visas. The men were required to report to INS offices for multi-phase registration that included fingerprinting, photographing, and questioning. This program failed in two very distinct ways. Firstly, the department failed to put out clear information regarding the requirements of the program, which led to many unnecessary deportations. Secondly, the program reportedly used harsh detention methods on participants. It is clear that this program resulted in mistreatment and rights violations. While this program is no longer active, the U.S. Patriot Act and the CLEAR Act have both been reauthorized and are used by law enforcement.

The results of these policies devastate the relationship between the Muslim community and the U.S. Government. The U.S. Patriot Act and the CLEAR Act negatively impact the civil liberties of Muslim minority groups, particularly Arab minorities and Muslim immigrants. Muslim organizations maintain that these governmental programs and policies create feelings of anxiety, ostracism, and isolation that detach Muslims from the American mainstream. In addition, the government's use of racial profiling encouraged media and organizational stereotyping.

Social Discrimination

In addition to legislative violations of civil liberties, Muslims face physical abuses and social discrimination. The Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice reports that allegations of abuse include: telephone, internet, and face- to- face threats; minor assaults; vandalism; shootings; and bombings of homes, businesses, and places of worship. In 2007, CAIR reported receiving about 1,900 complaints of abuse and noted that anti-Muslim physical violence increased by 52

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percent between 2003 and 2004. These attacks create fear throughout the community as Muslims are targeted in perceived safe places such as mosques and their homes. Additionally, nearly ten years after 9/11, a loud debate has arisen in the mainstream concerning the building of mosques around the nation.

A proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero has caused a culture war that spread across the United States. One side of the debate believes it is disrespectful to the memory of those who died in the WTC attacks to have an Islamic religious center so near the site that Islamic fundamentalists destroyed. Proponents frame their argument as a matter of religious freedom, that any religion in the United States has the right to build places of worship without persecution. The building of mosques has been controversial throughout the United States. Unfortunately, this has led to severe attacks on Islamic centers, including bombings in Texas and Tennessee. The outcry against mosques and Islamic centers continues to fuel religious profiling.

Economic Discrimination

As recently as September 2010, Muslim workers have reported that they have been victims of employment discrimination. Workers report name calling by co-workers, such as "terrorist" or "Osama," and complain that employers bar them from wearing the headscarf or participating in prayer times. Complaints like these in 2010 are up nearly 60 percent from 2005. Mary Jo O'Neill, regional attorney of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, remarked, "There's a level of hatred and animosity that is shocking" (Greenhouse 2010). Astonishingly, while Muslims make up only 2 percent of the U.S. population, they compose nearly one quarter of religious discrimination claims filed by the EEOC in 2010. Economic discrimination in the U.S. against Muslims is predicted to climb as the recession continues.

Islamic Organizations Protect Muslim Civil Liberties

Mirroring the pluralism of the Muslim community, a myriad of Islamic organizations has begun to meet the challenges faced by the community. Some of these organizations focus on education and spiritual awareness, while others are more concerned with human rights and democratic issues. At times, the organizations struggle to agree on ways to reach the greater "mainstream" community. However, these organizations have become leading mediators between the American "mainstream," the government, and the Muslim community.

Leading Islamic and human rights organizations lobby and actively raise awareness about the abuses suffered by Muslims. Organizations like Amnesty International, CAIR, and Muslim American Society (MAS) have provided Muslims with education on civil rights. These organizations have also coordinated with various law enforcement groups in order to encourage conflict resolution. Additionally, many of these organizations have fostered conversations within the Muslim community about the challenges of assimilating into American culture while still remaining a faithful Muslim. Most Islamic organizations in America have reached out to the public in an effort to foster a greater understanding about Islam.

Conclusion

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It is clear that the American-Muslim community faces extreme and difficult challenges from institutional, social, and economic discrimination. They face complex challenges from 'mainstream' America that are hard to combat for the simple reason that these challenges come from stereotypes perpetuated throughout the nation. However, Islamic organizations have begun to combat these issues by reaching outside of their community while still maintaining dialogue with the faithful. It falls now on the leadership of the community to spread real knowledge about Islam, to reach out to the mainstream community in an effort to combat the ongoing cycle of fear and hatred aimed at the Muslim community.

There are clear methods that can help to alleviate some of the hatred and misunderstanding of Islam. Islamic organizations can provide a forum for education on Islam and invite outside participants to Islamic conventions and meetings to develop better relations with the external community. They can also create an American narrative of Islam, similar to the African-American story. While none of these suggestions can completely fix the relationships that developed in America, these can help expand the average American's knowledge of Islam and its basic tenets. With an increase in knowledge, discrimination and abuses are more likely to be alleviated.

Annotated Bibliography

Ayers, John W. 2007. "Changing Sides: 9/11 and the American Muslim Voter." *Review of Religious Research* 49 (2): 187-198.

Annotation: This article focuses mainly on the shifting voting trends of the American- Muslim population following 9/11. The author, John Ayers, uses statistical data to conclude that the majority of American Muslims have shifted away from voting for religious candidates. Ayers writes that 40 percent of American Muslims believe "the U.S. is fighting a war against Islam" and nearly 40 percent have reported anti-Muslim discrimination since 9/11. The data was derived from complex statistical methodology. While containing valuable information, the article is difficult to read.

Berger, Peter, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas. 2008. Religious America, Secular Europe? Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Annotation: The authors of Religious America, Secular Europe? unpack the idea that America is fundamentally a religious country, while Europe is thought to be more secular. The most relevant section for research on Muslim rights is Chapter Three: Contrasting Histories. In this chapter, Berger discusses the pluralism of religion in America and the idea that Americans have a fundamental liberty to practice religion. In particular, the chapter illustrates the strong connection between immigration and religion. This book, though not directly related to Muslim minority rights, endeavors to explain the tradition of American religiosity, which could be useful for anyone researching the diversity of religion in America today.

Dossa, Shiraz. 2008. "Lethal Muslims: White-Trashing Islam and the Arabs." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28 (2): 255.

Annotation: Shiraz Dossa analyses in this article the underlying anti-Muslim currents running through many Western countries post-9/11. The author states that this kind of discrimination is

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often driven by both racial and class conflict, and even goes so far as to maintain that Westerners see Muslims as "poor white trash." The article looks at Western imperialism, and states that the West believes there is something intrinsically superior in Western culture. While well-written, the author fails to account for the pluralistic nature of Islam in the West.

Gottschalk, Peter and Gabriel Greenberg. 2008. <u>Islamophobia</u>. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Annotation: In this book, the authors discuss the rise of the term "Islamophobia" in the years after 9/11. The authors use cartoons, pictures, and other social media to describe the ongoing American stereotyping of Muslims and Muslim Americans. In particular, the authors draw attention to the images of the victimized Muslim woman and the violent Muslim man that are frequently present in media and the social world. The book is well-written and provides visible traces of American-Muslim stereotypes.

Greenhouse, Steven. 2010. "Muslims Say They Face More Discrimination in Workplace." *Honolulu Star* (24 September). Available Online: http://www.staradvertiser.com/news/nyt/20100924_Muslims_say_they_face_more_discrimination_in_workplace.html

Annotation: In this recent article, the author, Steven Greenhouse, aptly details the rising employment discrimination many Muslims face working in the United States. According to Greenhouse, Muslim workers filed nearly 60 percent more discrimination claims this year than in 2005. Common complaints include coworkers calling individuals "terrorist" or "Osama," and employers refusing to allow Muslim women to wear headscarves. The author writes that although Muslims make up less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, they accounted for a quarter of the religious claims last year.

Gurbuz, Mustafa E. and Gulsum Gurbuz-Kucuksari. 2009. "Between Sacred Codes and Secular Consumer Society: The Practice of Headscarf Adoption among American College Girls." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29 (3): 387-399.

Annotation: The article by Mustafa Gurbuz and Gulsum Gurbuz-Kucuksari is a comprehensive study of the trend among American college girls of wearing the hijab. The authors remark that Muslim girls are often caught between mainstream culture and the values of the Islamic faith. The study reflects the trend that the hijab has become a way of expressing this religious identity in a secular world. The article is thoroughly researched and the writing is very clear-- which allows for a wide range of readership.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Jane I. Smith. 2002. <u>Muslim Minorities in the West</u>. Oxford: Altamira Press.

Annotation: In this book, Haddad and Smith describe the various misperceptions and stereotypes Muslims face in mainstream Western culture. As the Muslim community continues to grow throughout America and Western Europe, part of the challenge for the burgeoning community is the struggle between mainstream culture and their Muslim identities. The book is well-researched but expansive.

Halim, Fachrizal. 2006. "Pluralism of American Muslims and the Challenge of Assimilation." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26 (2): 235-244.

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Annotation: This article by Fachrizal Halim reviews the pluralistic nature of the American Muslim community. Halim discusses an ongoing struggle for the Muslim community to interact with American society, which has met the growing population of Muslim immigrants with hostility and a fundamental misunderstanding of Islam. The author goes on to argue that the diversity of the Muslim population will force the community to assimilate not only within broader American society, but also within itself.

Haniff, Ghulam M. "The Muslim Community in America: A Brief Profile." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23 (2): 303-311.

Annotation: This article illustrates the growth of the Muslim community in America over the 20th Century, and outlines the make-up of the Muslim community as of 2003. In addition, the author details the pluralistic features of Islam, such as racial and denominational differences, that have become a challenge in recent years. Haniff outlines specific organizations which,, because of these challenges, seek to represent the Muslim community to the American public in a positive light. The article is relevant to this research because it illustrates the evolution of the community in recent years.

Huda, Qamar-UI. 2006. "Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Efforts by American Muslim Organizations Following September 11." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26 (2): 187-203.

Annotation: Qamar-Ul Huda details the struggles that American Muslims face in the aftermath of 9/11. Some of these issues include racial and religious discrimination, harsher immigration laws, and stereotyping. Additionally, Huda discusses the various national and regional groups that are working, through interfaith dialogue and other forms of outreach to create resolution between the two communities. This article is intended for an academic audience as it includes reliable research and a wide variety of source material.

"Islam, the American Way." 2007. *The Economist* (30 August). Available Online: http://www.economist.com/node/9724266.

Annotation: This article, from *The Economist*, discusses the fact that as Muslim minorities participate more and more in the political arena, inflamed politics can whip-up fears and stereotypes in mainstream Westerners. The author draws a difference between Europe and America, remarking that America offers better protection for those groups building mosques than for those in other Western cultures. However, in almost all Western cases, the legal and constitutional systems take the side of religious freedom. This article is very brief, and would have been more useful with idea expansion and sources.

Jamal, Amaney. 2009. "The Radicalization of Muslim Americans," in Abdulkader H. Sinno (ed.). <u>Muslims in Western Politics. </u>. Bloomington Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Annotation: This chapter clearly addresses the state of civil liberties for Muslim and Arab Americans after 9/11 and the passage of Patriot Acts 1 and 2. Jamal remarks that the new laws have caused high levels of fear and anxiety among Muslim and Arab -American communities. In addition, immediately following the attacks of 9/11 many Americans favored profiling Muslims. The chapter contains data and tests that illustrate the rise in the radicalization of Muslim Americans.

Kahera, Akel Ismail. 2002. "Urban Enclaves, Muslim Identity and the Urban Mosque in America." *Journal of*

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Muslim Minority Affairs 22 (2): 369-380.

> Annotation: Akel Kahera, PhD from Princeton University, discusses the plurality of the Muslim community through the urban mosque. The author notes that the urban mosque has faced many challenges because of the diversity of the Muslim population in large cities. He argues that the urban mosque has become the arena for resolving conflict and promoting cooperation among inner-city residents and organizations. The article has some personal inflection from the author but overall is a well -researched work.

Knickerbocker, Brad. 2010. "Americans Remain Wary of Islam." *The Christian Science Monitor* (26 September). Available Online: http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2010/0926/Americans-remain-wary-of-Islam.

> Annotation: This article details the perceived increase in American fear towards Islam and the Muslim community. The author, Brad Knickerbocker, notes that there has been a substantial rise in documented discrimination against the Muslim community, including land-use and employment discrimination. The author uses reputable sources in his article, such as the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and figures from the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division.

Leonard, Karen Isaksen. 2003. Muslims in the United States: The State of Research. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

> Annotation: Leonard uses in-depth research in this book to illustrate the challenges that the Muslim-American community faces. Many of these issues include the pluralism of the community, the conflicting discourse between Islam and mainstream American culture, and the challenge of assimilation in America. Leonard aptly describes the environment and situations that Muslim Americans have found themselves in since 9/11.

Lugo, Luis and Andrew Kohut. 2009. "Views of Religious Similarities and Differences: Muslims Widely Seen As Facing Discrimination." The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press. Available Online: http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/survey0909.pdf.

> Annotation: This article explains and evaluates the findings of a Pew survey on religious similarities and differences with concern to American Muslims. The results of the survey are based on telephone interviews conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International. The survey consisted of a nationwide sampling of 4,013 adults (18 and over). The survey found that 58 percent of Americans believe Muslims face more discrimination inside the United States than any other major religious group. The survey clearly details the knowledge of the average American about Islam through reliable statistical methodology.

Mahmood, Saleha S. 2009. "A Word about Ourselves." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29 (3): 289-290.

> Annotation: In Saleha Mahmood's brief position piece, she discusses the recent challenges to the Muslim community since 9/11. The article focuses mainly on Muslim communities living in America and Europe, and the author remarks that problems such as nationalism, racism, and Islamophobia are at the heart of issues in the West. In response, several civil rights, human rights, education, and interfaith dialogue groups have organized to combat these challenges. Although her article is an opinion piece, it provides an apt and quick overview of the topic.

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Murphy, Dan. 2010. "Is Ground Zero Mosque Part of Culture War or Symbol of Tolerance?" *The Christian Science Monitor* (20 August). Available Online: http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0820/Is-Ground-Zero-mosque-part-of-culture-war-or-symbol-of-tolerance.

Annotation: This article clearly illustrates the various arguments for and against the "Ground Zero Mosque." According to the author, Dan Murphy, several Americans believe that to build the mosque blocks away from the Twin Towers would be disrespectful, while others hold that the mosque would be a symbol of tolerance and religious freedom. Murphy remarks that the opinions mentioned are extremely polarized and alarmist.

Nacos, Brigitte L. and Oscar Torres-Reyna. 2007. Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Annotation: In this book, the authors present evidence that the media has had a profound effect on American public opinion regarding Muslims. The book illustrates that the media can be a source of both blatant stereotyping and also a voice of protection for Muslim Americans. The authors show that following 9/11, the media drew a link between the Muslim community and terrorism. This created a snowball effect that targeted the minority community. Well- written and researched, this book is an easy read for any audience.

Nisbet, Erik C., Ronald Ostman, and James Shanahan. 2009. "Public Opinion toward Muslim Americans: Civil Liberties and the Role of Religiosity, Ideology, and Media Use," in Abdulkader H. Sinno (ed.). Muslims in Western Politics. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Annotation: In this chapter, the authors illustrate the role of television news outlets and the Christian right in producing anti-Muslim attitudes and reducing tolerance within the United States. Additionally, the authors note that this attitude is mirrored in the accusations made by television outlets in the Muslim world, which foster anti-American attitudes. The authors conclude by remarking that mass intolerance toward a targeted group results in broad constraints on that group's civil and political liberties. This attitude "socially marginalizes" members of the Muslim minority group.

Pena, Aisha. 2007. "Protecting Muslim Civil and Human Rights in America: The Role of Islamic, National, and International Organizations." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27 (3): 387-400.

Annotation: The author, Aisha Pena, writes about Muslim civil rights and human rights movements in the United States. Pena organizes her paper into sections according to challenges the community faces on a daily basis. In her conclusion, she writes about several ways to successfully combat these issues. Pena uses several charts that lay out each organization's focus (*i.e.,* civil rights education, legal outreach, etc.). She also has a detailed bibliography that can be referenced.

_____. 2009. "American Muslims' Civil Liberties and the Challenge to Effectively Avert Xenophobia." *The Muslim World* 99 (1): 202-220.

Annotation: Aisha Pena describes the pluralistic make-up of the American-Muslim community, and attempts to give voice to this diverse group. She discusses the role of Islamophobia in recent

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literature and mainstream media. Additionally, she records the unique challenges facing African-American Muslims, as well as their history. Interestingly, she contrasts the abilities of African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims to assert their rights within the American legal structure. The article was published in a magazine format and is written with a common audience in mind.

Rubin, Trudy. 2010. "Fomenting Hatred of Muslims Hurts U.S." *The Philadelphia Inquirer.* (19 September). Available Online: http://articles.philly.com/2010-09-19/news/24975349_1_american-muslims-islamic-center-mosque

Annotation: Rubin addresses in this article the current debate surrounding the "Ground Zero Mosque," and remarks that the media approach has caused a new wave of discrimination against the Muslim community. Rubin writes that in this new age of the blogosphere, when many Americans are fearful of economic changes, Americans are more likely to be susceptible to demagoguery. Though the article is well- written and accessible, the author fails to back up some of her arguments with written evidence.

Suleiman, Michael W. 1999. "Islam, Muslims and Arabs in America: The Other of the Other of the Other..." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 19 (1):33-48.

Annotation: This article presents a study of the views of the United States towards Islam, Muslims, and Arabs in the country pre-9/11. The study indicates that even before the events of September 11, there was deep-seated discrimination against Arab/Muslim Americans. In addition, the article illustrates the various factors that affect American views towards these minorities. The article presents information in a clear and scientific format.

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