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## **An Era of Islamophobia: The Muslim Immigrant Experience in America**

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### **Introduction**

As the world is becoming increasingly globalized, cultures and religions collide on the international arena. One eminent cultural clash is between Eastern-Muslim and Western-Christian people groups. Ranging from a commoner's pursuit of better education and life to a refugee seeking to escape from a war-torn society, many Muslims are immigrating to foreign Western countries, particularly to the United States.

As a country that prides itself on being an inclusive land of diversity that stands for equal opportunity, the United States is a major destination for immigration. However, due to the differing beliefs and values that Muslim immigrants and American Christians hold, Muslim immigration proves to be an issue. With a history of Islamic extremism across Western countries, as shown by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslim immigrants have been heavily stigmatized and discriminated against by many Americans. Thus, Muslim immigrants face many obstacles as they try to integrate into American society.

This issue has been exacerbated by President Trump's administration. With Trump's ultimate goal for America to have a Muslim ban from seven predominantly Muslim countries, the country is divided on this issue (Yuhas & Sidahmed, 2017). Thus, as a prevalent, ever-changing, and controversial issue, this conflict between Muslim immigrants and Americans is worthy of study. Conservative White Christian American perspectives generally agree with President Trump in seeing Muslim Americans as threats to American society that we need to keep out of America (Yuhas & Sidahmed, 2017)

This case study will examine both Muslim American and conservative White Christian American attitudes to identify the issues that prevent Muslim immigrants from integrating into American society. Additionally, it will investigate the various similarities and differences between conservative White Christian Americans and Muslim Americans in order to capitalize on what unifies the two groups rather than what separates them. To better analyze this conflict, the acculturation model will be used as a lens to understand this issue.

### **History and Identification of Issues**

Muslim Americans, especially recently, have had difficulties properly integrating into American society. A pervasive reason for this is due to what Americans refer to as "Islamophobia", or the irrational fear of Muslim Americans being terrorists.

Islamophobia has stemmed from the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks. With the fear inflicted on Americans on September 11, mainstream American media has skewed the Muslim American identity to be perceived by the general public as a threat to the American way of life. Hollywood along with general American media outlets have created a vivid picture of the terrorists that Muslim Americans can hypothetically be. This cycle of Americans perceiving Muslim immigrant terrorism has thus far been perpetuated.

Muslim Americans have faced increased struggles in the United States since President Donald Trump proposed an executive order banning Muslim immigrants from entering the United States (Yuhas & Sidahmed, 2017). Many have praised the ban for its anti-Muslim sentiments, but it is important to understand Muslim Americans and what is preventing them from successfully integrating into American society.

In large part, Muslim Americans have been ostracized and demonized as "the terrorist waiting to strike", and because of this prejudice they have not been given any chance to be fully incorporated as American citizens in the United States. One must investigate and understand the current climate of America and how Muslim

immigrants are factored into American society today to understand how to better integrate them into American culture.

### **Context of Immigration**

Immigration is not something that is specific to just Muslim Americans as many groups of people have immigrated to America. For example, Jewish Americans are a group similar to Muslim Americans in that both of them have distinct religious viewpoints that characterize their culture. The difference, however, between these two groups is that Jewish Americans have successfully integrated into American society and no longer have a negative stigma attached to their name. On the other hand, many Muslim Americans have still not yet been able to fully integrate into American society and fail to rid themselves of the negative viewpoints American citizens hold of them.

Muslim immigrants have yet to achieve the same level of success as their Jewish counterparts. The first wave of Muslim immigrants can be traced from the arrival of African slaves in the 1700s. However, they were denied religious freedom and many were forced to convert to Christianity. The next significant wave of Muslim immigrants arrived in the 19th -20th century. This group of immigrants was mostly from Arab countries. Last, following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, large numbers of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia arrived in the US for employment opportunities. This is because the Act of 1965 abolished the quota system based on national origins. Instead, it focused primarily on skillset and family connections to US citizens (“The Truth About Muslim-Americans,” n.d.).

However, as the Muslim-Arab culture is alien to many conservative White Christian Americans, Muslim immigrants face resistance and discrimination while adopting American culture. In addition, September 11 sparked a large divide between Muslims and the American public. Following September 11, Muslims were portrayed negatively through mainstream American media as Islamophobia grew. Thus, with the prevalence of Anti-Muslim sentiments, Muslim immigrants fail to escape the stereotype of being Anti-American extremists. Thus, they struggle to assimilate or integrate into American society.

### **Communication Theory: Acculturation Model**

As immigrants experience a new culture in the host country, they undergo the process of acculturation. This is a cultural and psychological change that results from a meeting of two cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry (1997) proposes four patterns of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. The process of assimilation occurs when the host culture is absorbed while the home culture is rejected. Second, integration is a healthy balance of both host and home culture is achieved. Third, separation occurs as the the host culture is as the home culture is maintained. Fourth, marginalization takes place when both host and home culture are rejected. Out of the four, integration proves to be the most preferable. This is because integration enables individuals to maintain some degree of cultural integrity while fitting into the local host culture.

On the other hand, assimilation is an acculturation trend used by immigrants in America. This strategy is used when immigrants have no intent of maintaining their home cultural identity. Instead, they fully adopt the cultural norms, values, and traditions of the new host culture. Lastly, separation and marginalization are negative acculturation strategies as they involve excluding themselves from the host culture (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Additionally, as immigrants enter an unfamiliar cultural environment, they commonly undergo three stages of transition—stress-adaptation-growth (Tian & Lowe, 2014). The first stage of stress is commonly known as culture shock. As immigrants go through countless shifts in lifestyle and habits, they experience stress arising from the structure of the foreign environment (Tian & Lowe, 2014). Following the first stage, immigrants will gradually adapt to the host culture and will exhibit signs of personal growth.

### **Muslim American Immigrant Stakeholder Perspective**

Following September 11, Muslim immigrants in the US have faced greater struggles as they acculturate to American society. With the long history of US involvement in the Middle East and the catastrophic attacks on

September 11, mainstream American media has painted a negative picture of Muslims. Portrayed as foreign threats, Muslims have faced greater hostility after September 11 (Rauf, 2016). This is a prominent social issue as Americans have dismissed Muslim immigrants as un-American. Yet, their treatment of Muslim immigrants proves to be counter-productive as they inhibit Muslim immigrants from successfully integrating (Rauf, 2016). This section aims to uncover the narratives of Muslim immigrants in the US through the acculturation model as well as the stress-adaptation-growth model. It will explore the cultural experiences of Muslim youth and emerging adults. Individuals in this age range enter a developmental period in which they form their identity (Erikson, 1980). Thus, it will ultimately reflect the difficulties and obstacles that Muslim immigrants face to negotiate a new identity. Sirin and Fine (2007) also assert that the acculturation process of youths and emerging adults exemplify the political, psychological, and social issues of American society.

The first major struggle that inhibits integration is the presence of discrimination (Sirin & Fine, 2007). September 11 was a major turning point for Muslim immigrants, as they began to face more discrimination and stereotyping (Rauf, 2016). From schools to playgrounds to shopping centers, youths reported facing daily discrimination in the public arena (Sirin & Fine, 2007). Muslim youths recounted instances during which they were called terrorists and were told to return to their home country. An 18-year-old male stated that he was shocked to be called Palestinian when he was in fact Syrian. This incident occurred after he and his family moved to a predominantly White neighborhood. This boy said that he preferred his old integrated community which had more diversity. He contended that he felt embraced by men of color and that they related well to one another (Sirin & Fine, 2007). Other youths expressed the need to bite their tongues in classroom discussions to avoid being sent to the principal. Thus, there is not only discrimination, but also a lack of openness to foreign thinking and ideals. (Sirin & Fine, 2007).

Additionally, the researchers found that the older the youths were and the longer they lived in the US, the more they would perceive discrimination. This shows how there is a systemic issue in American society that inhibits the acceptance of Muslims, even after they acculturate (Said, 2004). Furthermore, it reflects upon the fact that the perception of discrimination is dependent on age. As individuals mature and grow, they grow more self-aware and start to perceive discrimination around them (Erikson, 1980).

Second, the next major issue is a product of discrimination. Sirin and Fine (2007) assert that the identities of Muslim American youth are forms of 'hyphenated-selves.' This concept embodies the separate identities that Muslim immigrants hold due to history, socio-political climate, biography, longings, and losses (Fine, 1994). Additionally, Sirin and Fine (2007) also contend that these groups of individuals take on the fault of global conflicts. When an Islamic terrorist attack occurs in the US, Muslim immigrants are concerned for their own safety. However, the host culture (American) ironically marks them as the suspect. Thus, the 'hyphenated-selves' reflects the diaspora of Muslim immigrants. They are transnational and religiously grounded, yet they are also nationally rootless and homeless (Bhabha, 2005). With this discrimination against Muslims immigrants, they simply cannot integrate to the host culture.

This is further exemplified by a study conducted by Britto and Amer, which researched the cultural identity patterns of Arab-Muslim emerging adults through the acculturation model (2001). Prior to their research, Britto and Amer hypothesized a predominantly American identity (assimilation) to emerge. However, this was not found. Instead, only two types of Muslim cultural identities were discovered: high and moderate bicultural identities (integration) and high Arab cultural identities (separation). The absence of a high American cultural identity shows that Arab-Muslims are unable to forgo their Arab identities. This might be due to resistance and discrimination from the American society (Abraham, 1994). Moreover, it could also be associated with the need to preserve culture due to the interwoven relationship between the Muslim faith and Arab culture (Abudabbeh, 1997).

Out of the three groups, the moderate bicultural Arab-Muslims experienced the most acculturative stress and also lacked family support. These two outcomes correlate with one another as both the Muslim faith and Arab culture uphold the value of family (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Thus, the lack of family support will affect the identity development of emerging adults. In turn, this can hinder the process of integration, which

requires the individual to negotiate a balanced cultural identity. As such, this stresses on the need for Muslim emerging adults to be highly bicultural. This calls for a strong well-functioning and supportive family to positively influence the identity development and formation in the host culture (Castillo, Conoley & Brossart, 2004). This also reflects upon the need to be accepted by the home culture as well. If emerging adults fail to surpass the acculturative stress, they will be unable to adapt and grow.

### **Conservative Christian American Stakeholder Perspective**

This section will investigate the tensions between Muslim immigrants and conservative White Christian Americans. As America was founded upon Christian ideals and the majority of America are White people who identify as Christians, this study will use this demographic sample to represent the average American citizen. Some conservative White Christian Americans also view Islam as a religion that goes against their Christian ideals, and so their conflict with Muslim American immigrants is valid and worthy of study. Clearly there is a divide and a lack of understanding between conservative White Christian Americans and Muslim Americans regarding their religious beliefs and their ways of life. To better understand the conservative White Christian American perspective, research has been conducted in regards to their viewpoints of Muslim Americans.

A recent YouGov poll discovered that 55% of surveyed Americans hold an unfavorable opinion of Islam (Chalabi, 2017). These Islamophobic sentiments were generally more common among White Republican Americans who are 45 and older. Furthermore, hostility towards Muslims in America exists alongside a lack of familiarity with Muslim Americans. Out of those who held unfavorable views of Islam, 74 percent said they do not work with anyone who is Muslim while 68 percent stated that they do not happen to have any friends who are Muslim. Another 87 percent said that they have never been inside of a mosque. Across all religions, there is a correlation between the percentage of respondents who say they personally know members of a particular faith and the percentage of those who say they hold favorable attitudes towards members of that faith. Thus a lack of familiarity with Muslims could be a possible reason why Americans view Muslims unfavorably.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, Americans were asked to rate members of eight religious groups on a "feeling thermometer" from 0 to 100, where 0 reflects the coldest, most negative rating and 100 the warmest, most positive rating (Lipka, 2017). The respondents rated Muslims the coldest at an average of 40. In comparison, they rated atheists an average of 41. Americans viewed the six other groups (Jews, Catholics, evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons) much more warmly. Republicans were found to rate Muslims even colder with an average rating of 33 while the average among Democrats was 47. 58 percent of American respondents labeled Muslims as "fanatical," and 50 percent stated that Muslims are "violent". These statistics reveal the anti-Muslim sentiments that pervade America.

Sixty-five percent of Republicans surveyed also said that they are very concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism in the United States and sixty-eight percent believe Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers. Forty-nine percent believe that Muslims should be subject to more scrutiny than people of other religions.

According to a study by the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute, Americans strongly affirm the principles of religious freedom and religious tolerance (Cox et al., 2017). Eighty-eight percent of the Americans surveyed agree that America was founded on the idea of religious freedom for all people, including religious groups that are unpopular. Ninety-five percent of Americans surveyed agree that all religious texts should be treated with respect even if they do not share the religious beliefs of those who use such texts. However, 47 percent state that the values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life, an opinion shared by approximately two-thirds of Republicans surveyed. Nearly six out of ten white evangelical Protestants believe the values of Islam are at odds with American values.

Furthermore, nearly six out of ten Republicans believe that American Muslims are trying to establish Sharia law in the United States. This means that many conservative White Christian Americans believe that Muslim Americans have an agenda to establish their religious law in the United States when they immigrate to America. This further divides conservative White Christian Americans and Muslim Americans.

Americans are found to hold different standards when evaluating violence committed by self-identified Christians and Muslims. Eighty-three percent of Americans surveyed contend that self-proclaimed Christians who commit acts of violence in the name of Christianity are not really Christians while only 48 percent say that self-proclaimed Muslims who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam are not really Muslims.

Johnston (2016) mentions that for evangelical Christians, there is a correlation often drawn between Islam and the Anti-Christ in which Mohammed the prophet is depicted as the false prophet of revelation. This remains problematic for conservative White Christian Americans trying to accept Muslim Americans as citizens of the United States. However, Christianity and Islam also share a number of common ideals, such as peace, justice, and serving the poor. Thus, members of these faiths should feel a common moral responsibility to all since their core beliefs share liberty, equality, comradery, and social justice. Johnston (2016) also mentions that many conservative White Christian Americans fail to recognize the double standard they impose on Muslim Americans when they complain about the persecution their co-believers undergo overseas, yet turn a blind eye to the Islamophobia they exhibit at home (Johnston, 2016).

These statistics about conservative White Christian Americans and how they perceive Muslim American immigrants reveal the division between the two groups that pervades today's American society. It is clear that an action must be set in place to alleviate the tensions between these two groups to allow for a process of unification and mutual understanding.

### **Analysis and Evaluation**

In terms of the Muslim immigrant experience in America, many immigrants do not seek to impose their ideology onto Americans. Instead, they seek to integrate to American society by practicing aspects of their home culture while adopting new values from the host culture. Unfortunately, after the attacks on September 11, it is evident that Muslim immigrants have faced increased amounts of discrimination from the majority of Americans. They are stereotyped into groups and are viewed upon as potential threats to American society.

Thus, as Sirin and Fine (2007) propose, they are 'hyphenated-selves' who live on the "fault lines of global conflict." This group of people feels a certain sense of belonging to their new culture, yet when Muslim or Arab related attacks occur, they are condemned as threats by people of their host culture. Thus, this reveals a flawed double standard Americans hold Muslim immigrants accountable to, one that needs to be abolished. Americans cannot dismiss Muslim immigrants as foreign threats if they desire for them to become more integrated to American standards of society. Conservative White Christian Americans view Muslim Americans as those who go against the American lifestyle and way of life, but these viewpoints stem from a perpetually vicious cycle of American mainstream media portraying Muslim individuals as threats to American society.

To better integrate Muslims into the larger American community, steps must be taken from both sides in order to successfully incorporate Muslim culture into American culture. The conservative White Christian American perspective of Muslims, although compelling, does not have substantial evidence to back their views up and is only a sentiment held by the majority. As shown through the acculturation model, there are certain dangers should Muslims fail to properly adopt the host culture. If Americans fail to accept Muslim immigrants, they will simply hold onto their Arab identities (separation), which is contrary to what Americans expect of immigrants.

Moreover, as many immigrants come to the United States when they are young, the lack of an accepting society will cause them to be disengaged from both home and host culture. This is dangerous as this hyphenated yet detached cultural identity makes them susceptible to radicalization. If no action is implemented to address this problem, Muslim Americans are more likely to further separate themselves from American values and are prone to radicalize and become more alienated from the culture they must integrate into. Thus, it is crucial that Muslim Americans and conservative White Christian Americans work together to create solutions that will allow for Muslim immigrants to comfortably integrate themselves into American society.

## Action Plan

As Muslim American immigrants have faced many difficulties adopting the host culture of America (Assimilation and Integration), many have resorted to returning completely back to their home culture of Islam (Separation), or even disengaging themselves from both cultures (Marginalization). Because of these difficulties, Muslim Americans require a system in which they can successfully integrate into American culture, so that they are well accepted by their host culture and develop a strong sense of association and belonging.

There are many courses of action Americans can take to help better integrate Muslim Americans into the country, but they all require cooperation and effort. According to Seldman's (n.d.) research of integration policies and programs in the US and Germany, she stated that the American approach to integration has been informal, short-term, and quiet. Thus, this stresses on the need for a newly revised integration program that is structured, formal, and organized as it would make sure no immigrants are left behind. Moreover, a cultural and religious education system that educates students about Islam can also be put into place. This will ensure that future generations are more aware of Islam.

In addition, a campaign such as the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign involving a coalition of thirty-two religious denominations and organizations in partnership with the Islamic Society of North America can also create places of solidarity and open discussion on how Muslim Americans can better be integrated into American society (Orsborn, 2016). Seldman (n.d.) also introduces the importance of external integration. This relates to America's foreign policy toward Muslim countries. Should America be more friendly toward such countries, such as through Obama's commitment to establish a long-term partnership with Muslim countries, Muslims will feel more connected and accepted (Seldman, n.d.). Last, positive media portrayal is a prominent factor that can encourage integration. Seldman (n.d.) asserts that young Muslims have the need to view positive images of Islam to successfully integrate to their new host cultures.

There are some short-term solutions that can play a part in integrating Muslim Americans into American society. Although they are short-term, they are just as important and integral in helping Muslim Americans find their place in America. Johnston (2016) states that a Pew Research poll revealed that Americans who know Muslim Americans have twice as favorable an attitude towards them than among those who do not. So a course of action would be that Americans meet and become acquaintances with Muslim Americans in their communities. Being more accepting of Muslim immigrants and being mindful of their struggles can help too. Being proactive and willing to educate oneself on Islam is also beneficial in the long run.

Rauf (2016) states that Americans have already accepted certain Muslim cuisine, such as "halal" in the form of pita, hummus, and falafel, which means that Muslim culture have started to slowly integrate into American society. It is now a matter of including other parts of Muslim culture into American society such as music, architecture, and clothing and to allow these cultural aspects to become normalized in American culture. To allow Muslim culture to become a part of American culture is ultimately the goal of integrating cultural elements of Islam into American society.

## Conclusion

Muslim American immigrants in recent history have faced many difficulties acculturating to American society, specifically integrating both host and home culture. This problem stems from the negative media portrayals of Muslim Americans, which in large part are due to the September 11 attacks by Muslim terrorists on American soil. By researching both sides of the conflict, one is able to identify a clearer picture of the tensions that exist between Muslim Americans and Christian Americans. Muslim Americans face discrimination that shapes their worldview of America as well as their outlook on life. White conservative Christian Americans perpetuate this discrimination by perceiving Muslim American immigrants as threats to American society and way of life.

Despite this vicious cycle, there are solutions that can help integrate Muslim Americans into American society through various means such as a more formal and structured integration process, education, encouraging Americans to make more Muslim friends and acquaintances, and being more willing to accept Muslim culture.

These solutions provide us with possibilities on how to improve the status quo to help better integrate Muslim individuals into American society. This case study provides insight into how to create a more inviting atmosphere for Muslim American immigrants who have thus far felt isolated and detached from the rest of American society and hopefully will bring about positive change in the American community.

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