

Muslim American College Youth: Attitudes and Responses Five Years After 9/11

Fait Muedini

*University at Buffalo, SUNY
Buffalo, New York*

It is striking to note that [like Europe] [,] no such fears about Muslim youth are on the minds of Americans. Instead, we are preoccupied with the possible connections between Muslims here and terrorist activities. But such concerns also, inevitably, come back to Muslim youth — particularly to the sons and even daughters of immigrants, the so-called second generation. Such concerns are not totally misplaced: with more immigrant groups, the biggest problems arise not with the first generation of newcomers, but with their children, whose heightened expectations are not always easily met by the host society.¹

The sentiments of Muslim American youth are important in the discussion of the emotional and political reaction by Muslim Americans to the post September 11, 2001 security policies. Although some suggest that American non-Muslims have paid little attention to the attitudes of Muslim American youth, others show that non-Muslim citizens in the U.S. are beginning to pay more attention to Muslim American college youth.^{2,3} This article specifically examines attitudes and responses of Muslim American youth who are attending college in the United States.

While the Muslim youth issue is a major concern for Europeans, the issue has not held the same urgency for Americans. Although Muslim population figures are similar in both the U.S. and Europe (at about three percent), several major factors exist that suggest possible reasons for greater dissatisfaction of Muslims in Europe than in the United States. Muslims who entered Europe “as guestworkers” have remained “working class,” and are less economically well

off than American Muslims who are for the most part considered “well educated profession and business people, far more affluent than their co-religionists in Europe.”⁴ Peter Skerry argues that low socio-economic status is the reason why we find “Muslim depressed economic zones” in Europe, which “makes Muslims in the cities of Europe much more visibly ‘a problem population’ than in the United States.”⁵ But regardless of the factors that differentiate the Muslims in Europe and the United States, Peter Skerry argues that a major concern for both populations is the path of action that Muslim youth can take in handling their questions of alienation and identity. Skerry argues that “[i]n Europe the most pressing political reality is the threat of disorder and violence by alienated Muslim youth.” Examples include the rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes by Muslim youth in France.⁶

Highlighting the importance of examining the feelings of the “second generation,” Skerry distinguishes between two particular routes that American Muslim youth can follow with regard to their place in American society. The first category is what he calls “bummed out in Buffalo.” This term refers to a group of U.S. born Yemeni-Americans who were “raised in the depressed industrial belt around Buffalo who were . . . convicted of involvement in terrorist related activities.” Now while this situation is more likely to be a problem in Europe than in the United States considering the socio-economic conditions of Europe, it nonetheless is still a potential road that troubled youth may follow. The second and more likely situation for American Muslim youth is what Skerry calls “Born again in Berkeley,” which emphasizes the learning experience of Muslim American youth upon entering the college environment. Skerry defines “Born again in Berkeley” as:

. . . the familiar pattern whereby members of various immigrant groups born and raised in this country are readily absorbed into the mainstream and consequently lose identification with their ethnic, cultural, or religious origins. When such upwardly mobile youth find themselves in college, they begin to question what has happened to them and often go to some lengths to recapture the cultural identity they feel they have lost. This has now become a pattern with many Muslim youth.⁷

Skerry explains that although communal unity has been one of the key challenges for Muslims in the United States, U.S. anti-terrorism policy has allowed Muslims to come together and help this unifying identity among different Muslims. He gives an example of Iranian-Americans and their efforts to work with other Muslim Americans, explaining that Iranian-Americans before September 11th, 2001 were often “downplay[ing] their Islam. But following the U.S. officials’ classification of Iranians as Muslims, Iranian Americans have begun to cooperate with Muslim groups on Islamic issues.”⁸ Other events, such as the ethnic profiling of Muslims, have also been factors in furthering the cooperation between Muslim Americans of different ethnic backgrounds.⁹

Muslim Youth and Media

Interviews conducted by Emily Liu with Muslim American youth reveal that a majority of these youth believe that Islam's image has been misrepresented by the media. Furthermore, the students feel that the media strongly affects the way Americans view Islam, although not all students suggested that the media is specifically against Islam. The media, focused on dramatic images, airs more stories on war, and thus may show Islam in a negative manner. One student interviewed explained her concern about the media and its images of war by saying,

I understand the media has to cover the war and the immediate events, but that's just dangerous because it's not comprehensive and Americans are getting the short-stick. They're not getting the whole story.¹⁰

In Liu's interviews, she found that several Muslim students interviewed believe that President Bush's PATRIOT Act is "a key factor" in the way Muslims have been viewed in American society. The students feel that the PATRIOT Act is the reason why most of them experience discrimination. The students cited the incident in December 2004 in which Muslim students were stopped and searched before entering the United States from Canada after an Islamic revival conference. In this particular incident, border officials would not allow the students to leave without fingerprinting them, and were quoted as telling the student that "they [had] no rights." The report also suggested that customs officials had stopped and searched every car whose participants said that said they had attended the conference, because they feared that it could have been used for "terrorists to promote their cause." Other incidents, such as raids on Muslim families in Colorado and Seattle, were mentioned by the Muslim students as well.¹¹

In her examination of the situation of Muslim American youth in the United States and their attitudes towards Islam following the attacks on September 11th, 2001, Marcia Hermansen argues that contrary to the common belief that American Muslim youth would be interested in the "progressive" movement (which Hermansen explains is an "outlook as one based on informed understanding of the tradition in its historical and multicultural context as evolving to address the needs and issues of the time in a way that is both spiritually and politically empowering"), American Muslim youth are turning to a conservative Islam. In addition, they are becoming more critical of those who do not practice this form of "internationalist . . . Islam."¹²

Hermansen argues that Muslim youth activities in the United States emerged from concern with identity (i.e., how the young see themselves within a Western environment). Several factors have helped shape identity for Muslim American youths in America: First, a large number of Muslim youth are

the sons and daughters of recent immigrants. This has left Muslim American youth to find themselves within a Western society that has (in the last thirty years) portrayed Islam and Muslims as “the enemy or threat” to America. Hermansen continues to suggest that while the “West” has carried this negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, an “internationalist Islamic ideology” was being formed. This “internationalist Islamic ideology” was covering political as well as religious aspects, which led to an Islamic “revivalism.” Hermansen argues that this Islamic ideology taught Muslim children to turn their backs to the culture of the U.S. to embrace another culture, although they were never able to adopt in full another homeland. Hermansen says of the issues facing American Muslim youth:

One can well imagine the identity dilemma of a Muslim teenager brought up largely in the American environment who has been encouraged by parents, Islamic groups, and extended family to dis-identify with American cultural and political contexts and to imagine himself or herself as being from somewhere else (Pakistan or Palestine, for example) as a critical or opposition stance. At the same time, this young person is probably never going to make it as an authentic citizen of the imagined homeland, since he or she faces substantial inadequacies in language competency, historical knowledge, and even cultural and social assumptions about the idealized place of origin.¹³

Such an “alienation” from both the Western culture and that of their parents, according to Hermansen, leads many Muslim youth to embrace a “culture-free, global Islamic militancy.”¹⁴

Karen Leonard, in her study focusing on American Muslim youth, states that the direction that American Muslim youth will take with regard to leadership roles of Islamic organizations is unclear. Leonard notices several changes among Muslim American youth (both with immigrant Muslims and American-born Muslim youth). For example, many Muslim American youth are losing their ethnic languages. Furthermore, differences are arising between Muslim parents and their children over assimilation into American society. Moreover, Muslim American women have a much larger public presence than women in most traditional Muslim countries. With these factors combined, Leonard believes that while such “changes may cause tensions within Muslim immigrant families, . . . [it will] probably augur well for the future of American Islam, since the youngsters are converging, forming American Muslim identities more alike than different.”¹⁵

In addressing whether or not American Muslim youth are becoming more interested in Islam, Leonard found mixed opinions, explaining that,

Some will be lost to Islam, and some are ‘returning’ to mainstream Arabic Islam through their study of the Qurʾān and the Hadith. Certainly,

many are moving from ethnic or national origin identities to a religious identity, and their formulations of Islam may be ‘grassroots,’ rather than guided by ISNA or the MSA. Islam is taught to the young people in the United States not through everyday immersion in Arab or South Asian contexts but primarily through texts and texts taught in an American societal context. On one hand, this can result in greater standardization and ‘orthodoxy’ as the non-Muslim majority societal context reduces diversity among American Muslims, especially among young people. Yet, many of the ‘texts’ are new ones, as young American Muslims rely heavily on books, cassettes, videos, and Internet materials produced in the United States.¹⁶

The use of the Internet, in addition to other “mediums not necessarily deemed orthodox by [Muslim] elders,” continues to be a popular reference for American Muslim youth learning to become further connected with Islam.¹⁷

Muslim Student Solidarity Immediately Following September 11th

In Lori Peek’s interviews with Muslim American students immediately following the attacks of September 11th, 2001, Peek found that Muslim students tended to more closely interact with other Muslim students following the attacks of September 11th, 2001. In her research, Peek found that this was due to a feeling of “isolation” from the rest of the country.¹⁸ Peek, citing sociologist Erving Goffman, explains that those in a “stigmatized” group often “come together into small social groups whose membership derives from the stigmatization.” Furthermore, because they feel “excluded” from the U.S. community, the Muslim students turned to other Muslims.¹⁹

After 9/11, Muslim students felt as though they were not included within the overall American community, and were being portrayed as ‘the enemy’ or the ‘other.’ As American non-Muslims blamed American Muslims for the attacks, this “led Muslims to feel disconnected from others.” Muslim students interviewed felt further alienated when expressing their discomfort when trying to grieve with their fellow Americans following the attacks on September 11th, 2001. The Muslim students felt that they could not act as “normal” Americans, as they were being identified by others not as Americans, but as a “Muslim.” Such isolation led Muslim American students to fear for their lives. Many told others to stay at home, as they feared a severe backlash. Other students became sick and missed weeks of school because of the fear and stress.²⁰

Because of the decreased level of comfort within American society, American Muslims began to turn to one another for support. This “group solidarity among Muslims” is not new to groups who have experienced

discrimination. Scholars explain that groups tend to turn to each other within the group during an outside threat. In the Muslim American situation, Peek found a “therapeutic community” arose composed of Muslim Americans. Fellow Muslims turned to one another for support. Although a sense of closeness and unity within the Muslim youth community was already present, the feeling of rejection by the rest of American society caused Muslim American youths to become even closer with fellow Muslim youths; they were able to “share similar fears and uncertainties [,]” in an environment where they felt safe to share their emotions.²¹

While the fears of the American Muslims students “decreased over time [,]” many were unsure if “things would ever “return to normal.” Peek concludes by suggesting that Muslims, while affected by the attacks as much as non-Muslim Americans, were further affected by the negative sentiments of some non-American Muslims. Peek therefore argues that allowing minority communities an environment to “enhance public dialogue — before disaster strikes” thus “decreas[ing] social isolation . . . particularly in light of the unprecedented severity of the backlash that followed the September 11th attacks is of the utmost importance.”²²

Muslim American College Student Responses

Research Methodology

Beginning in January 2006 until the end of March 2006, I interviewed twenty Muslim students studying in the United States. Although one can argue that the limited number of interviews limits the applicability of the interviewees to speak for a wide range of Muslim students in the United States, these interviews shed important light on the perspectives of students in the United States. I used the *convenience sampling* method of choosing my study participants. In particular, I went on list-serves to ask for willing participants. I also contacted several Muslim Student Association group executive board members around the United States via email, sending them my project description and interview request form. Many then posted my request on their respective list-servers.

The research method used was individual interviews. The interviewees were essentially asked the same questions. The interviews were conducted and recorded in a variety of ways. Some of my interviews were done in person, recorded by handwritten notes and on my computer (with the permission of the interviewee). Other interviews were conducted over the telephone, since some of the interviewees were in distant locations. A third group of interviewees wished to see the questions, answering them on their own time, and then returning their responses. They offered to discuss any

questions or clarifications by email. A last method I used to conduct the interviews was through an online Instant Message system. The interview lasted anywhere from fifteen minutes to two and a half hours. Many of the participants decided to disclose their names during the interview; others decided to remain anonymous. If the interview was conducted online, I took out any personal information (such as their screen name) and kept the interview in document form. In this article, many of the names (of those who wished to remain anonymous) will be changed to grant their request for anonymity.

Interview Responses: Post 9/11 U.S. Domestic Security Laws

I asked the students about post 9/11 domestic security laws in the United States four years after the attacks of September 11th, 2001. The overwhelming majority of the students interviewed, when asked about which post September 11th domestic security polices they were familiar with, cited the PATRIOT Act, while only one specifically mentioned PATRIOT Act II. A large number of students mentioned overall surveillance, wiretapping, and airport security, with one student even mentioning “mandatory fingerprinting and picture[s] for all entering foreign nationals.” The Muslim students interviewed described the problems they had with the PATRIOT Act. Students felt “shocked” that the laws were passed through Congress without much thought. One student studying at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor explained that he felt the passing of the PATRIOT Act was “controversial” since “[t]here wasn’t enough time for all the Congress . . . to have read the whole [PATRIOT Act].” Another student, Amina, who attends university at a large school in the Midwest, compared the laws and the implementation of the laws with “Big Brother.” She expressed her feelings when she said that,

. . . the PATRIOT act [caused] an increase in observing/spying on Muslims in America . . . The airport security changes . . . were needed to begin with, but they are selective about whom they search which does not make me feel safer. I remember thinking how Big Brother like it was with the other things being implemented, . . . about being able to track down the books people would check out from libraries was a little over the top . . . I still think the laws are too selected and target Muslims — rather than any possible person who could be a threat.

Another student, Dania, aged 25, who is a student at the School of International Service at the American University in Washington D.C., explained her dissatisfaction with the PATRIOT Act when she said that she is,

. . . completely against everything the PATRIOT Act stands for. It really is an act that has managed to rid many Americans, especially Arab and Muslim Americans . . . of their basic civil rights. The government,

especially the Bush Administration, has used the fight against 'terrorism' to stretch the boundaries of government surveillance in order to, as they claim, protect Americans. In reality it is only further perpetuating the anti-American sentiments that many people hold, not just Arabs and Americans, because this Act has shown that no one's civil liberties are guaranteed. It's also created an 'us against them' attitude inside and outside the US.

Discrimination

Several Muslim students interviewed shared stories of when they had been discriminated against because of being Muslim following the attacks of September 11th, 2001. While not all Muslim students who were asked if they were discriminated against personally responded affirmatively, many of the respondents knew someone who had experienced some sort of discrimination. Christopher, a senior at George Mason University, told what happened to him when returning to the United States from Israel:

At the end of July 2003, when I was returning from a month of study at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's summer academic program with a Jewish friend of mine, [I was with a] . . . single suitcase, which contained a *Qur'ān* and a prayer rug. When we were leaving Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, my bags (suitcase and my carry-on backpack) were thoroughly searched after I said I had been to the Palestinian Territories. While the Israeli security officials were checking my suitcase, they saw the *Qur'ān* and the prayer rug, as well as some academic (not religious/sectarian) books on Islam, including Amal Saad-Ghorayeb's *Hizbu'llah: Politics & Religion*. In fact, one of the Israelis asked me specifically about why I had Saad-Ghorayeb's book, to which I replied that I had taken courses on political Islam and the Middle East peace process at Hebrew University. I cannot say for sure that the Israelis recognized the prayer rug, but frankly, I don't know what else someone could think it was. When my friend and I arrived in New York City (we flew straight from Tel Aviv to JFK on El Al Israel Airlines), his bags came through and mine were missing . . . [I]t took one month for me to get my suitcase. While it was missing, I checked with the 2 airlines I flew on (El Al & Delta) and received a confusing amalgamation of reasons as to what happened to it. From the pieces of information (or misinformation) I received over this period of time, my suitcase went to Britain, though I have no idea why, since I have never set foot in the U.K. When I finally received my suitcase back, everything in it was jumbled, though from what I could tell nothing was missing. My prayer rug, however, smelled awful, like urine, which made me feel that someone had defiled it. I wrote formal letters of complaint to my U.S. senators, congressman, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, President George W. Bush, Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Daniel Ayalon, El Al, Delta, and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon . . . I received responses from a U.S. congressman (Tom Davis of

Virginia, who is not my representative but who received my letter in error), Delta, and El Al. The Delta and El Al letters apologized, and the El Al letter said that they would ‘investigate’ the matter. That is the last I heard from El Al.

Another Muslim student described an incident where he was out late on a Friday night in Albany, New York. He was visiting his friend who owned a store when another friend whom he described as calm came running into the store asking for a bat because somebody called him a terrorist. When he went out with his friend to confront the person who called him a terrorist, twenty people attacked him and his friend. In addition to being hit, he was spit on by the group. While he explained that he was physically hurt, it was the physiological pain that he remembers that was “most damaging on . . . [his] mind and body.”

Safety and Security

The vast majority of Muslim students interviewed felt their experiences, in addition to the post 9/11 security laws such as the PATRIOT Act, made them feel less safe. Many students explained that such policies *have helped create* an “atmosphere of fear,” and, using the “fear atmosphere,” “the government seems to have taken advantage of the situation and has allowed itself to take liberties and powers at the expense of civil liberties.” Shazi, age 25, explained that,

. . . many of the new laws that have been put in place after September 11 are hardly effective in making us citizens safe. On the contrary, I believe that infringements on the rights of US citizens and the freedoms previously granted to visa holders who respect the laws of this country only helps perpetuate this atmosphere of fear that is in actuality counterproductive in allowing the US to be well informed and in control of its future. The government seems to have taken advantage of the situation and has allowed itself to take liberties and powers at the expense of civil liberties. And the fear atmosphere legitimizes the administration’s right to do so.

Other students expressed feeling less safe because, as Azam Khan, aged 25 explained, a young Muslim man “may fit the profile of those profiled.” Asking if Muslim students could ever feel safe, an anonymous student from the Washington DC area (here given the name Rabia), responded that she could “not really [feel safe since] . . . something like this is not a containable issue.” She added that “[One] . . . can’t control something like [this]. [T]he factor of feeling unsafe will always be present.” Students explained that their stress levels have increased following September 11th, 2001. Sekeena, a master’s degree candidate at the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences

(GSISS), explained that the matter has affected her stress level in addition to the overall psychological damage it has caused the American Muslim community. As a Muslim woman who wears *hijab*, her experience has been difficult. Because she classifies herself as a practicing Muslim among those who do not know anything about Islam, there is a level of stress because she feels that she is a representative of the faith. Being a Muslim wearing *hijab*, she has to “deal with the stereotypes post 9/11” to non-Muslims who have little knowledge of Islam.

Other Muslims expressed fear because of having a Muslim name. Dania, when asked if she feels safe as a Muslim in America, explained that she felt safe only,

... sometimes, depending on where I am. There are certain times when I worry that getting my name called out loud may have repercussions. Or if I travel to a town in the middle of nowhere and people find out I am a Muslim, if they will react negatively. I try to give people the benefit of the doubt, but at the same time I realize the current situation and that many my judge me because I'm Muslim.

Msyara, age 32, a Ph.D. student in anthropology at The American University in Washington, D.C., total of the impact it has had on him and the Muslim community. He explained that the discrimination has affected Muslims in “every manner, socially, economically, spiritually.” He explained that he has met people who are afraid to admit their faith, saying that they are not Muslim. Or when they respond to questions of religion, they quickly explain that they are “not practicing Muslims.” There is a “tendency [by some] to disassociate [one's self] from Islam,” he explained.

American and Muslim Identity

The impact of such laws have Muslim students thinking about their identities and roles in American society. When I asked Muslim students if the Muslims in America feel or consider themselves American, a large majority of those interviewed believed that Muslims do in fact consider themselves Americans, and that “most Muslims are proud to be Americans and really just want people to see them as Americans and nothing else.” I continued by asking, “What should be done for Muslims to feel more American,” since many Muslims want to be considered American. One student responded by explaining that “Muslims need to be involved in civic life. PTA, public schools, showing their faces in every activity that affects the community . . . [Muslims] live in an isolated place and [are] isolated in society. [They need to] go out, show their names and religion.”

When discussing Muslim American identity in the United States, it must be noted that several students commented on the different identities of Islam

within the United States itself. The students saw differences between African-American Muslims, Arab Muslims, South Asian Muslims, and “white” Muslims, both from European ancestry, and “white” converts. While students believed that these different groups of Muslims “ha[ve] [their] own Muslim culture,” they also highlighted the importance of a unified Muslim ummah that embraces the differences. Amina explained a unified Muslim identity is difficult when

... we are constantly trying to prove which one of us is right and who is wrong [,] and what is the ‘correct’ way to follow Islam . . . We have a long way to go as Muslims to accept and embrace each other for who we are, and to recognize that our diversity is our strength.

Several students interviewed expressed that they did not believe they were viewed as Americans. Rabia, a student in the DC area, explained that “the PATRIOT Act has divided America into two groups [,] the “real Americans” and then the other group that probably has more patriotic people to this country but [that] the only difference is [that] they originate from other countries but are . . . US citizens.” Similar to Peek (2002), some Muslim students interviewed commented that the alienation and discrimination Muslims in America faced following September 11th, 2001 both by non-Muslims and by the U.S. government actually brought “solidarity” amongst Muslims. Azam Khan, age 25, explained that Muslims all face the same hostilities, which brings them together. In addition, different Muslim communities pull their resources to help one another. While they may not have had much interaction with one another prior to the attacks, they began to work together following the laws passed in response to September 11th, 2001, since they were/are faced with similar situations, whether it is an imam being arrested, or some other incident. He explains that “before [Muslims] didn’t care about their brother. But now we want to be there for them.”

Peter Van Der Veer explains how migrant groups become more religious within the “pressures of assimilation.” He explains that migrants,

... since they are often challenged in a multicultural environment to explain their beliefs and practices, they tend to become more aware of them. Such awareness can lead to receptivity towards ideological reifications that take cultural and religious elements out of the daily flow of life and make them into markers of identity in a plural society.²³

He adds that,

... [t]he observation that migrant groups have to become more aware of their religion and culture due to their constant interpellation by ‘established’ communities is undoubtedly correct. It is also valid to assume that an ideological apologetics, based on a conscious awareness of one’s ‘culture’ in order to be able to defend one’s practices, may follow from this.²⁴

Students often expressed the role of the university setting in allowing them to not only become closer to others of similar faith, as well as a place to learn about Islam. Ludmila, a PhD Candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania explained her experience of becoming closer to Islam:

[Identity] was actually a big issue . . . After meeting a student for the first time as a freshman at Penn, I felt compelled to figure out how to explain my background. Saying I was from Kansas City was not good enough for some people, who would then ask, 'No, where are you *really* from?' Well, I was born in Ottawa and spent four years of my childhood in Toronto, so maybe I was really from Canada. Apparently that answer was not good enough either . . . I later learned that when someone asks me where I am from, I need to be prepared to give any or all of the following information: 'I am from Kansas City, and so is my accent, but I was born in Ottawa, lived in Houston and Toronto . . . At some point, these ethno-cultural definitions made me disillusioned, and I sought to define myself in a way that transcended these labels. Islam filled this need in philosophy, and the Muslim Students Association at Penn did so in practice.'

She added,

Although my family is Muslim, I was not raised with Islam or a religious community as my focus in my life. As a college student, I did not even know the prayer times or the basic tenets of fasting. I started there in my search for religious knowledge and continued with classes on creed at a local mosque in Philadelphia . . . I only started learning about Islam seriously in college. I started taking Arabic my freshman year just because I wanted a language other than French, and I haven't stopped studying Arabic since then. Still learning the language and the religion — a never-ending process.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Muslim students interviewed expressed great distain for the U.S. foreign policy towards Muslims and Muslim nations. Students believe that the Bush administration has not legitimately considered diplomacy in the handling of U.S. foreign policy. One student said of the United States' foreign policy that "American foreign policy is bullying and we have lost the art of diplomacy [;] . . . diplomacy is not there."

Students also felt that the Bush administration was "antagonistic" while "bullying" other nations, citing North Korea and the "axis of evil," suggesting that these countries would not adhere to the requests of the United States, particularly if "Bush [was] telling them in an arrogant way." Another student, Ludmila, stated that the United States

. . . acts as if it is the best place on Earth and as if it owns the world and [thus] should have access to its resources at a low price. I'm not advocating an absolute isolationist policy, just less selfishness.

Similar to Falk's explain of a "double standard,"²⁵ students also expressed what they felt was a double standard in U.S. foreign policy. Chris, a senior at George Mason University, explains that

U.S. foreign policy is seriously flawed. On the one hand, successive presidential administrations say that the U.S. supports freedom and democracy while still supporting repressive regimes all over the world, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia to Russia and Pakistan. I feel that the U.S. government sends contradictory and mixed, or even two-faced, messages as to its true intentions with foreign nations. I feel that the U.S. is slanted toward supporting Israel, though not to the extent that many Muslims in the U.S. and abroad feel. I believe that the U.S. government is more concerned with Israeli desires than with Palestinian ones . . . I feel that this is apparent when one looks at U.S. policy toward the expansion of Israeli settlements, the construction of the barrier-wall, and debate about an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of pre-June 4, 1967.

Another student, Nadia, age 25, also mentions the "double standard" by the Bush administration in its foreign policy. She says, for example, that

. . . [t]he U.S. is for democracy, but support[s] authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Pakistan . . . [The U.S.] won't tilt the wagon when it serves their agenda (like in Pakistan). [The] U.S. isn't saying much because they have interests that are carried out by Musharraf.

She goes on to add that "People are questioning why they aren't standing up for democracy."

Media

The majority of Muslim students interviewed who were asked about the media said that it negatively portrayed Muslims and Islam. One student felt that the media portrays Muslims as "animals." Shazi, age 25, argued that U.S. foreign policy and the Western media were two prime factors that were causing fears within Muslims in America. When I asked "Do you think there is anything that can be done to address these fears that Muslims in America have?" he responded,

I think these fears are legitimate. The only way to address them is to address the way this administration portrays Muslims and the way the media tends to depict them.

When I followed with the question, "Do you think that is possible?" he argued:

Ideally, it's possible. However, I hardly think that anything is going to happen soon. If the administration gives Muslims more acknowledgment of their freedoms and wants and does not play this [W]est vs. Islam cowboy international diplomacy perhaps society would not see Muslims in such a bad light. This probably sounds a little paranoid but I do believe that the administration has put a blackout on some topics for the media. This censorship displays certain hotspots are places of Muslim unrest and reactionary actions. Chechnya is rarely depicted as it truly is. Russia is seen as a victim, rather than an oppressor by focusing only on a few horrible terrorist acts. The same goes for Israel and India/Pakistan.

Students felt that the media's impact has hindered Muslims being included in American society. Dania, 25 explained that many non-Muslims in the United States do view Muslims as American. But she added that while this may be true,

... what's scary is that middle America, who watch Fox News and were the ones to re-elect Bush, probably think that we aren't Americans and that we should 'go back home' as one man yelled at me once.

Furthermore, when specifically asked about the media, she said that it

... definitely [has had] a negative impact. Just as Muslim extremists have distorted Islam, U.S. media had done just as much damage, if not more. The media here seems to feed off of the negative images that the extremists perpetrate, either through flag burning, the beheadings in Iraq, the violence in Palestine, or the discrimination of women across the Muslim world — Afghanistan is a great example of this. They never show the positive aspects of Islam and all the good and moderate Muslims that live peacefully beside Jews, Christians, Hindus and all other religions. We're always portrayed as the angry bearded men who fire guns in the air and burn the U.S. flag. That all Americans know about us and that's why so many Americans have such a wrong impression about us and our religion.

A 21 year old Pakistani-American student who wished to remain anonymous suggested that Muslims will always be portrayed negatively in Western media, as they are often associated with words with a negative connotation. He stated that Muslims are

most definitely [portrayed] in a negative light. The word 'terrorism' and 'radical' are always attached to Muslims. No matter if the terrorist acts were performed out of political or religious motives, the word Muslim will be attached. Images of the Middle East are always portraying violence, conflict, and unruly people. [Furthermore, US] ... groups as the CBN will outright say that Islam teaches terrorism.

The media has controlled and manipulated the emotions of American citizens by portraying Muslims and reporting stories in a certain manner. Groups whose agenda is to continue to view Muslims in this light will use what the media says for their own gain. Sekeena, age 25, explains that “the media portraying Muslims does not bring a holistic view; it does not show both sides of the story. [The media portrays Muslims as] villains and bad guys . . . Propaganda and psychology is in the media.” She added if people wake up here [in the United States] to [media reports of] 50 here, 100 here,” and they see experience this sort of reporting, they begin to lose focus on the importance and value of a life. The media “keep[s] people under [this] certain mentality throughout the year.” This “psychology keeps people angry” which may lead to people voting a particular way. She feels that the media has a “control over people.”

Overall Muslim Community/Ummah

One student, age 21, who wished to remain anonymous, believed that the word *ummah* is more than just a word to describe the world of Muslims. He explains that,

The word ummah means community to me, not just [a] group of believers. A community is something that you are a part of, and contribute to. The feeling of community gives a sense of strength and security. The ideal ummah would be a community that supports its fellow members and equal support in return. Community is also something that needs to be invested in, in order to continue to prosper. Helping the community assures that your own offspring will likely prosper and continue the process. The sense of ummah or community is very important to me, because the ummah played a large role in my life. When I sensed the disassembly of ummah within my community, it was like a piece of me was starting to weaken and crumble. I feel like that is one of our most crucial issues facing Muslims in America, and one that we need to establish.

The issue of Muslim transnational identity was particularly discussed in relation to military participation for a non-Muslim nation fighting a Muslim country.

Muslim Participation in the U.S. Military

Immediately following September 11th, 2001, Muslim leaders addressed “the permissibility of the participation of Muslim military personnel in the US armed forces in the war operations and its related efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere in other Muslim countries’.”²⁶ This issue was important to discuss for the Muslim community because the number of Muslims in the United States military is said to range from 4,100–15,000 thousand people. Such inquiry by

American Muslim leaders on whether Muslims could, under Islam, fight for the United States military resulted in a *fatwa* ruling. This *fatwa* began by stating that “[the] question presents a very complicated issue and a highly sensitive situation for our Muslim brothers and sisters serving in the American army as well as other armies that face similar situations.” The *fatwa* states that Islam condemns all killing, and that “[a]ll Muslims should be united against all those who terrorize innocents, and those who permit the killing of non-combatants without a justifiable reason.” Furthermore, the authors of the *fatwa* “[state] it necessary to apprehend the true perpetrators of [the] crimes, as well as those who aid and abet them through incitement, financing or other support.” Those who have committed the attacks of September 11th, 2001 “must be brought to justice.” The *fatwa* urged that this Islamic position be made clear to military officials by the Muslims soldiers.²⁷

The authors of the *fatwa* acknowledged the difficulties and “uneasiness” confronting the Muslim soldiers in non-Muslim armies, but stated that the intention to fight for a just cause must guide the acts of the soldier. The scholars went on to state that, if Muslim soldiers choose to, and have the option of “serving in the back lines[,]” if it does not bring about suspicion, or asking to work in the back lines does not “[raise] doubts about their allegiance or loyalty, . . . harms their future careers, raises misgivings about their patriotism,” then they should ask for this.²⁸

The result of this *fatwa* is significant because, it “addresses a new development in the field of international relations, the position of Muslim minorities living in the modern state, and the nature of the relationship between the Muslim individual and the non-Islamic state.” With the scholars issuing a *fatwa* that permits Muslims to fight in non-Muslim armies against Muslims, it indirectly addresses whether one’s “loyalty [should be] . . . to the Muslim *ummah* as a whole or to his country.” With this ruling, the Muslim scholars “. . . responding positively to this question, the issuers of the *fatwa* suggest that the allegiance of the American Muslim soldier in a time of war is to his country, even if the war being fought between the United States and a Muslim country. The issuers of this *fatwa* thus recognize the sovereignty of the nation-state as fully legitimate and, in principle, deserving of allegiance.”²⁹

Nafi argues that while the decision favored fighting, it was made because those that caused the attacks of September 11th, 2001 needed to be caught; the use of military strength was therefore justified. A different result would have arisen “if the American cause were not justified . . . the American Muslim’s participation in a war launched by the US government would not be permitted.” While the *fatwa* recognizes the importance of the nation-state, “it is not the sovereignty of the state or the obligation of allegiance that justifies

a Muslim's participation in his country's war but rather the justness of the war itself."³⁰

The Muslim *ummah* was not in uniform acceptance of this ruling; several Muslims "expressed opposition to the fatwa." Some scholars argued that a Muslim should always side with another Muslim. Opponents of the *fatwa*, referring specifically to the war in Afghanistan, viewed military action in Afghanistan "as a more harmful outcome than the possible deterioration of the position of the American Muslim community."³¹ It must be noted that the four scholars who ruled on this issue, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad Salim al-*ʿ*Awa, Tariq al-Bishri, and Fahmi Huwaidi, have been classified by some as "representatives of variant trends of liberal Islamic thought."³² Nafi argues that this discussion about the correctness of the *fatwa* ". . . was not only about politics, but also about intellectual diversity within Salafi Islam[,] [since] both the issuers of the fatwas and its opponents share Salafi backgrounds."³³

I was interested in seeing how the Muslim students' new evaluation of identity would affect whether these students believed that Muslims should serve in the United States military, and, in particular, if the United States was fighting a war against a Muslim nation. (I did not mention this *fatwa* to the students). Upon asking this question, several of the Muslim students pointed out that Muslims already are a part of the United States army. The response to whether Muslims would join the army if called upon was mixed. Some students understood and believed that some Muslims would "gladly aid the U.S. as they see themselves part of this country [;]" they would join because they would "believe it's their duty."

But many of the students did not think that Muslims, especially the older generations of Muslims, would fight against a Muslim nation. As one student, Dania, 25, put it, "How do you fight your brother?" Others argued that it would be "difficult for a lot of people to accept fighting a Muslim nation." Furthermore, as one student Robert added, "American Muslims have a very bad taste in their mouth because of Afghanistan plus the Iraq wars. Those . . . [wars] will detract from American Muslim involvement in the military."

Asked if there is anything the government can do to change this mentality, students again expressed that Muslims will not be keen to fight for the United States military when they do not trust the administration or when an administration does not act in the interests of Muslims. This is true unless Muslims notice a change in the foreign policy of the United States, instead of the U.S. government saying one thing and acting in the opposite matter (e.g. the U.S. relationship with Israel, in addition to its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and its double-standard towards Iran). Robert explained Muslims in America may wonder:

What is the point of fighting and putting your life on the line for a government that is not telling the truth? People just don't believe [the Bush administration]. They don't trust him. They think he has these other intentions . . .

Other students felt that Muslims would be more likely to fight in the military if the U.S. government presented the Muslim nation it was fighting as “an aggressor and [that it was] killing innocent people, . . . if it was presented [this] way, then there is a possibility that Muslims would fight, although the government would need to have influential Muslims who called for the legitimacy of the war.”

Some believed that the younger generations of Muslims — as opposed to the older generations — are more likely to participate in the U.S. military when it is fighting a Muslim nation. Dania, 25, stated,

Many Muslim-Americans of the younger generations aren't really practicing Muslims or know anything about Islam or the politics involved with Muslim countries.

Others believed that the government would be able to influence young Muslims with the use of propaganda. The youth may not share the same values as their parents, and because of their assimilation in American society, they may not have the “proper knowledge of Islam to see what's right and wrong.” Still others thought, however, that the youth were knowledgeable and it is the youth who are working to fight discrimination, “speaking out about discriminatory policies and acts, and working to educate others.”

Steps to Make Muslim Americans feel Safer

When I asked the follow-up question, “What can be done to grant rights to Muslims in America?” I received various responses. I found two distinct approaches to this topic: first, what the U.S. government can do to make Muslims in America feel safer, second what actions Muslims themselves can take to feel included in the United States, and thus make them safer. When I asked “what can the U.S. government do to make Muslims feel safer,” many interviewed believed that the government can do things to help the situation, although Muslims in America will not be convinced until they see a different approach to foreign policy, particularly of Muslim immigrants who “have sympathy with these [Muslim] places.” Nadia, age 25, felt that

. . . the government is trying, but foreign policy is negating [the effort].
Their foreign policy is speaking louder than anything else.

Students who expressed hope that specific actions by the government would change the feelings of Muslims in America — moving them from alienation to a part of the society — explained that the government could begin by

“initiat[ing] conversations, invit[ing] their Muslim neighbors to their homes or to join their organizations. The government can easily seek out members of different ethnic and religious communities and seek their input.” Furthermore, the government should hire religion experts who understand the intricacies of religion (Islam), and who can understand both the mentality of extremists, and those of the majority of Muslims who call for peace and who condemn the terrorists. In addition, the government should work with different Muslim and “civil liberties” organizations.

When discussing what Muslims in America themselves can do, Amina, aged 26, a student at a large Midwestern university explained that in order to gain more rights, Muslims must

. . . keep open lines of communication with the American community at large, to keep participating in interfaith dialogues, and being active in their community whether that be by volunteering [,] etc . . . [Blut by participating in all walks of life rather than separating themselves and hanging out only with Muslims. I think this helps others see that Muslims are people also, and are involved with similar causes. Plus it gives Muslims a chance to teach others about Islam, not formally but by example and modeling.

I found a call by Muslim American students for Muslims to “break down the stereotype [of] what makes one American.” Students explained that a standard for what it means to be American should be applied equally to everyone, and that “[i]f a person covers these areas . . . they should be American, regardless.”

One way to do this is through interfaith dialogue. Dialogue was very important to the students interviewed. The students called dialogue an effort to show that Muslims are “not too much different than” non-Muslim Americans (Muedini, 2006). As one 43 year old student I met and interviewed from a Jumu’ah I attended (who chose to remain anonymous) explained, “If we as Muslims interact with people, there will be a lot of change. Americans are even more open than Europeans. Muslims must [make] more effort.” He added that “American people are genuine people. When you get to know them, they are open. Their mind and behavior will change.” These dialogue meetings must differentiate and set the “distinction between the terrorists and Muslims. Just because those terrorists happened to be Muslims, there should be no reason as to why they should be associated with everyone else . . .”

In addition to dialogue, students also proposed Muslims continue to become educated through secular as well as religious avenues. This sort of education allows a “person [to become] more open minded, [and thus] have an ability to decipher and analyze [issues].” And with an increase in education, negative “attitudes [will] vanish.” By Muslims reading various sources on a

particular issue, they begin to understand the debate more clearly. This can be applied to working with government officials or non-Muslim Americans alike. Furthermore, Muslims should utilize their individual talents, working in their own individual ways to make a difference. For some people, as a student, Nadia, explained, this can mean writing articles, while others can work directly in the government to make a difference, and she believes that the “[m]ost profound differences are small.” Ultimately, as one student, Sekeena states,

... no one will change until Muslims *and* other people get involved in the system, bridging the gap between the secular and non-Muslim society. We [Muslims] are part of this country as well. [It is] our responsibility to get in the system and let them know where they [non-Muslims] are wrong. People do want to work, [to] establish dialogue.

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