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## For U.S. Muslims, it's the American way

**By Katrin Bennhold**  
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Amid copies of the Koran and Arabic calligraphy, a small American flag sits on a table in a corner of Ahmed Rehab's office at the Council on American-Islamic Relations here.

"I am proud to be American, and I really mean that," said Rehab, who as executive director of the council's Chicago branch spends his days handling civil rights complaints from fellow Muslims. "I'd rather be a Muslim in America than anywhere else."

At first glance, such patriotism appears paradoxical. The United States led the invasion of Iraq and passed the Patriot Act. It was here that the war on terror was dubbed a war on "Islamofascists." But, for now at least, the violent backlash is in Europe, not America.



Indeed, the Sept. 11 attacks of five years ago have galvanized efforts by a small but growing elite of Islamic intellectuals and young activists to find their voice and carve out an identity that is as American as it is Muslim.

"It's one of the ironies of the post-9/11 world: the pioneers of a Western Muslim identity are here, in America," said Eboo Patel, 30, executive director of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core and an adjunct professor at the Chicago Theological Seminary. The attacks, he said, "forced the community to stand up for itself and to think hard about what it means to be a Muslim in America in the 21st century."

There is surely no shortage of tension in Muslim America. Some experts say the United States is becoming more like Europe, with the arrival of poorer, less educated Muslims in recent years and a rise in feelings of suspicion toward religious Muslims. Others warn that a future generation of homegrown terrorists might arise from radicalization within the prison system or " sleeper cells" implanted by Al Qaeda.

But for now, the fears and frustrations in the community are being channeled in ways that are strikingly different from those that have made headlines across the Atlantic: suicide bomb attacks in London in July 2005, and rioting across France a year ago.

Muslim Americans are doing what minorities here have done before them: turning their grievances into political capital and staking out territory in the nation's vast landscape of interest groups.

Over the past five years, advocacy groups and interfaith initiatives like Rehab and Patel's have gained momentum. The children of Pakistani doctors, Palestinian businessmen and Iranian engineers are going into law, public policy and public administration, said Zahid Bukhari, director of the American Muslim Studies Program at Georgetown University in Washington.

"You have to get into the political institutions," said Umar Abd-Allah, resident scholar at the Nawawi Foundation, an educational charity in Chicago. "It's always worked like that in America. When a minority becomes identified with the enemy, they fight back and become assimilated."

Meanwhile, within the Islamic community, second-generation Muslims have begun asking tough questions on subjects from women's rights to homosexuality, challenging immigrant imams who see Islam through the cultural prism of their countries of origin - and who still control most mosques.

Humaira Basith, 32, a second-generation Indian Muslim, and her husband, Edmund Arroyo, 31, a Mexican-American who converted to Islam, stopped going to the neighborhood mosque in their western Chicago suburb three years ago because they were fed up with politicized sermons and rules that made women and men pray separately.

Along with five like-minded friends, they set up a Muslim foundation to sponsor American-style social events, like movie night and father-daughter camping trips. With a monthly income stream of \$3,500, the Webb Foundation, named after a 19th-century American convert, is now seeking to rent a space that can house a secular library and coed prayer room. Eventually, the group hopes to build an "American mosque."

"We want to be able to worship and socialize as a family unit," Basith said. "We want our children to grow up to identify as Americans as well as Muslims."

Basith is a real estate broker and founding host of Chicago's Radio Islam; her husband is a counselor at a local school. Their friends are lawyers, computer scientists and teachers; they include a second-generation Syrian, a Pakistani-Filipino and an American convert to Islam. All hold college degrees and live in middle-class suburbs.

Unlike European Muslims, many of whom are stuck in poor neighborhoods with chronic unemployment, U.S. Muslims are both wealthier and more educated than many Americans, research has shown. They graduate from college at more than twice the average national rate, with half earning an annual household income of at least \$50,000, a survey by Georgetown University showed in 2004 - about \$3,000 more than the median household income nationwide suggested by the 2004 U.S. Census. They are also more ethnically diverse than Muslims in Europe.

More important, perhaps, this country's estimated six million Muslims blend into the religious and ethnic landscape more easily than their 15 million European counterparts, and not just because there are fewer of them.

"Being an immigrant and organizing around faith is part of the American experience - it's part of our national identity," Rehab said. "It's much harder to fit into a more homogeneous and secular bloc, like Europe."

European concerns - about mass immigration and national identity, about the colonial past, about secular values - are focused on Muslims. While America has similar concerns, they are spread out over various groups: Mexicans are associated with illegal immigration, blacks with the struggle against slavery. Religious conservatism poses little problem in a country that is itself deeply religious; the debate in Europe over the Muslim head scarf, for example, has not crossed the Atlantic.

"The unease with Islam is fundamentally different in the United States and Europe," said Olivier Roy, a French expert on Islam. "In the U.S., it's essentially a security issue. In Europe, it's deeper: There is the idea that Islam itself represents a threat to Europe's identity."

The United States does not share Europe's long history of clashes with Islam, beginning with the Crusades. Instead, it has a form of indigenous Islam that is unique in the West: African-American Muslims who trace their line of belief back to the arrival of the first West African slaves in the 16th century.

Increasing numbers of white converts also help bridge the gap with non-Muslim Americans. Abd-Allah grew up a Protestant in Nebraska. The Islamic Society of North America recently chose Ingrid

Mattson, 43, a former Catholic from Canada, as its head.

Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is a white, Christian-born Californian with a neatly trimmed goatee. He wears a smart shirt and flannel trousers and jokingly refers to Bob Dylan as "Imam Bob."

Shaykh Hamza is a prominent proponent of an American Islam free of politics and anachronistic culture. He likes to tell how, when he converted as a student, he had to choose which Islam to embrace - Sudanese, North African, Pakistani - and to change his name accordingly. This is no longer necessary.

"We have an indigenous leadership that has emerged in the last 10 years, and that helps develop an indigenous culture of Islam," he said. Next year, his Zaytuna Institute in Hayward, California, will launch a master of arts program in Islamic Studies with an option to qualify as an imam, the country's first such program run by nonimmigrants, he said.

With scholars like Hamza, Abd-Allah and Mattson shaping the debate and training future leaders, said Patel of the Interfaith Youth Core, the United States could become a model for Muslims elsewhere, especially in Europe.

Others are less optimistic. Congress has already issued warnings about radical imams in prisons and "Future Jihad," a book by Walid Phares, a professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University, argues that Al Qaeda is working hard to establish sleeper cells in the United States.

Meanwhile, cases of hate crimes and discrimination surged almost 30 percent in the United States last year, Rehab said. A survey by the University of Illinois, published in August, shows that the income of Muslims and Arab non-Muslims has fallen since 9/11.

American Muslims worry about anti-Islamic rhetoric used by some on the Christian right, and see the younger generation growing up in the post-9/11 climate.

Perhaps the biggest wild card is another terrorist attack. "Things could still go wrong for America," said Bukhari of Georgetown. "If another 9/11 happened, things could get very bad."

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