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## **Poll and new report show frustration of young Muslims in the U.S.**

**By Eric Gorski**  
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A show of sympathy for suicide bombers among some young, American Muslims has raised new concerns about homegrown extremism, but also is highlighting calls to engage the nation's growing Muslim population.

A Pew Research Center poll released late last month found that, while U.S. Muslims are largely the picture of assimilation, about a quarter of Muslims ages 18 to 29 said the use of suicide bombing against civilian targets to defend Islam could be justified, at least on rare occasions.

The finding was described by some as a trouble spot, and even a hair-raising statistic, but many Muslim scholars had another reaction to the Pew report: What did you expect?

“Given what's happened in Iraq and Palestine, I would be shocked if there wasn't discontent,” said Omid Safi, professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“The issue is how the discontent is going to be expressed, and whether it's a juvenile romanticization of suicide bombing or whether it's going to be done by participation and transformation of the structures.”

From the American Muslim perspective, the nearly six years since the Sept. 11 attacks have been a time of dealing with widespread mistrust of all the Islamic faithful, particularly the young. A report on Muslim youth released Thursday by the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council cites prejudice and discrimination against Muslims as a “root cause” of radicalization.

The report urges “fighting bad theology with good theology” and proposes solutions from forming a U.S. government advisory board of young Muslims to placing Muslim chaplains on every American college campus.

A closer look at the Pew report, meantime, shows that of the 26 percent of young Muslims who expressed sympathy for suicide bombers, nearly half of them said it is justified only in rare circumstances.

Muqtadar Khan, an assistant professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware, said it's important to consider how the question was framed: whether suicide bombing could be justified “in defense of Islam,” a powerful phrase for a community that believes the West is waging a war against Islam.

“When you ask people these questions, people are not just answering, they're answering to suit their politics,” Khan said. “They do not want to extend any legitimacy to the U.S. war on terror.”

Khan also blames the Internet for fueling younger Muslims' empathy for radicalism, and a report to Congress last month backs up that concern. Prepared by a panel of experts, it found extremist Islamic groups are exploiting the Internet for communications, propaganda – even recruitment and training.

The Pew survey also found young adult Muslims are more likely to attend mosque services and identify themselves as Muslims first before Americans, begging the question of whether a correlation exists between greater religiosity and tolerance for terrorism.

Amaney Jamal, an assistant professor of political science at Princeton University and an adviser on the Pew survey, doesn't see a connection. On questions of religious practice, the poll found young Muslims are less likely to pray, fast and give to charity. To young Muslims, the mosque is not just a worship hall but a community center, a place to hang out, he said.

So what the poll exposed, he said, was a subtle but important difference: stronger religious identity among young Muslims, but not greater religious observance.

"The youth by and large also have felt the effects of 9/11 more so than any other segment of the population," Jamal said. "This youth has grown up where all things Muslims are treated suspect, that Muslims are the enemy within. They've experienced it at public schools, campuses, places of employment. Maybe they're trying to broadcast to a mainstream audience that we're proud to be Muslims."

The suicide bomber finding, he said, should not be viewed as an endorsement of attacks on the United States, but in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the tactic is common.

Eboo Patel, the 31-year-old founder and executive director of Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, which promotes pluralism by teaming people of different faiths on service projects, sees building trust as a major issue for young Muslims.

"We don't need more FBI agents poking around in the youth sections of mosques," he said.

"Do we need to spend a whole lot more time involving young Muslims in positive ways to build a better world? Absolutely yes, a hundred times over."

Those who take a darker view of Islam, seized on the Pew findings as evidence of a legitimate threat, pointing out that it takes only a few disgruntled souls to exact horrific damage.

"That it's younger people indicates there has been a tremendous tendency toward a recovery of more radical aspects of the faith," said Robert Spencer, director of Jihad Watch, a project of the David Horowitz Freedom Center. "In the past, immigrants were encouraged and inclined to assimilate."

Others point out that Americans as a whole, not just Muslims, have shown a willingness to sacrifice civilians' lives under certain circumstances.

A December 2006 survey by the University of Maryland's Program on International Attitudes found 24 percent of Americans believe "bombings and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians" are often or sometimes justified. The poll found no significant variance based on age.


Asma Gull Hasan looks at the Pew findings and sees the impact of experiences shared by young Americans across the spectrum, including exposure to violence through entertainment.

The 32-year-old Muslim author and speaker from Denver said young, immigrant Muslims feel more alienated and exposed to prejudice than their parents are. Because most U.S. Muslims are raised conservatively – and won't consider rebelling through sex or drugs – many experiment with their faith, she said.

"To express my teen and 20s desire to be different, to rebel, I explored my religion," Hasan said. "Christian children ride motorcycles. A percentage of Muslim youth say suicide bombings are justified. Chalk it up to youthful rebellion and telephone survey bravado."

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