Islam in America: A Special Report

Muslim Americans are one of this country's greatest strengths. But they're vulnerable as never before.

By Lisa Miller
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July 30, 2007 issue - Fareed Siddiq is a successful businessman and a father of two. He lives in Chagrin Falls, Ohio—a 19th-century mill town built on a river and known for its scenic waterfalls and dams—in a five-bedroom house he recently paid for, in cash, with his savings. Prominent in local civic and religious organizations, including the Red Cross and the chamber of commerce, Siddiq was invited to the InterContinental Hotel in downtown Cleveland earlier this month along with about 400 other business leaders to hear President George W. Bush speak.

He was moved to ask his president a question: "What," he asked, hauling his 6-foot-5, 245-pound frame to the microphone, "are we doing with public diplomacy to change the hearts and minds of a billion and a half Muslims around the world?" What should he tell his friends and relatives in Pakistan about why he continues to live in the United States?

"Great question," answered the president. "I'm confident your answer is, 'I love living in America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, the country where you can come and ask the president a question and a country where—' Are you a Muslim?"

"Yes," answered Siddiq.

"Where you can worship your religion freely. It's a great country where you can do that."

It was a good answer, says Siddiq, but not enough for him—not when he, a financial adviser at a major investment bank, is afraid to use the bathroom on flights because he doesn't want to frighten his fellow passengers as he walks down the aisle. He thinks anti-Muslim sentiment in the country is getting worse, not better. "I'm not so much worried about myself," he adds. "It's the young people I'm concerned with. Those are the people we need to try—not only as Muslims but as Americans—to make them feel part of America. If you alienate the Muslim young people from America, that is dangerous."

Nearly six years after 9/11, the story of Muslims in America is one of overwhelming success. The National Intelligence Estimate released last week warned that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda continue to have their sights set on an attack within the United States. The report also notes a growing radicalism among Muslims in the West. But at a press briefing, intelligence officials were particularly concerned about the threat of homegrown terror cells within Europe's Muslim communities. America, the officials said, has so far provided relatively infertile ground for the growing and grooming of Muslim extremists. "Most Muslims in America think of themselves as Americans," says Charlie Allen, intelligence chief at the Homeland Security Department.

In fact, Muslim Americans represent the most affluent, integrated, politically engaged Muslim community in the Western world. According to a major survey done by the Pew Research Center and released last spring, Muslims in America earn about the same as their neighbors, and their educational levels are about the same. An overwhelming number—71 percent—agree that in America, you can "get ahead with hard work." In stark contrast, Muslims in France, Germany and England are about 20 percent more likely to live in poverty.

The alleged terror plots uncovered since 9/11 are a sign that this success cannot be taken for granted. Ire among Muslim Americans at U.S. policies in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories is at a peak, and thanks to satellite news channels like Al-Jazeera and the Internet, that dissatisfaction can spread like fire. As the Muslim community expands and becomes more established, tensions within the community are also growing—between young and old, immigrant and native-born. Across the country, second- and third-generation Muslims are visibly grappling with how to be Muslim and American at once, while their parents look on with pride—and, like Siddiq, concern.

There are 2.35 million Muslims in America according to Pew, though many estimates put that number much higher, and 65 percent of them are foreign-born. These Muslims began coming here in large waves after 1965, when U.S. law changed to allow increased immigration from countries beyond Western Europe. Over the past four decades they have come from South Asia (Pakistan, India and most recently Bangladesh), the Arab world (the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Egypt, Iran), as well as Europe and Africa. They came for education and advancement, but also to follow family, and—as in the case of the 35,000 Somalis who began arriving in the 1990s—to flee war and oppression in their home countries. The pull of the American dream remains strong. "The U.S. is founded on the

idea that we're all connected to a set of ideas, not a set of histories," says Keith Ellison, the Democrat from Minnesota who is Congress's first Muslim. "For all our criticisms, the idea of America is an amazing thing—a society organized around a set of principles instead of around racial or cultural identity."

Most of the Muslims who were born here are African-American converts and descendants of converts. But a fast-growing number are the children of immigrants, and this last group is extremely young; nearly half are between 18 and 29. In this melting pot, no one group is significantly bigger or more powerful than any of the others—it is, Muslim Americans like to say, the most diverse group of Muslims anywhere except in Mecca during the annual pilgrimage, or hajj.

This profound diversity and relative affluence sets the Muslim community here dramatically apart from those in Europe, where Muslims came from their native countries as many as four generations ago largely as factory workers or laborers. "The Moroccans, the Turks, they were recruited for their illiteracy, for their strong hands and good teeth," says the provocative Dutch singer Raja el-Mouhandiz, whose parents were from North Africa. When the factory jobs went away, Europe's Muslims continued to live in ethnic ghettos, isolated from the larger society—a society that tended to be white, homogenous and, on some basic level, impenetrable. In most European countries, Muslim employment is 15 to 40 percent below the population at large.

Significantly, one of the more notable cases in America—the young men from upstate New York, dubbed the Lackawanna Six, who were arrested in 2002 and pleaded guilty to having trained with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan—grew up in an environment somewhat analogous to that of Europe. Yemenites migrated to Lackawanna in the 1930s for jobs in the steel mills. Those jobs disappeared, but the Yemenite population, now fully American, grew and stayed, and the young people there continue to struggle with drugs, crime and unemployment. In the Yemenite neighborhoods of Lackawanna, about a third live below the poverty line.

An equally critical but perhaps less obvious benefit to U.S. Muslims is the religiosity of the American people. Even if a religious practice is regarded with suspicion in America, it is generally treated with respect. In a NEWSWEEK Poll, 69 percent of Americans said they thought Muslim American students should be allowed to wear headscarves in class. (The devout prime minister of Turkey, a Muslim country with a tradition of militant secularism, actually sent his daughters to America for college so they could continue wearing their scarves.) "When I say to an evangelical Christian, 'It's prayer time,' they might question the way I pray, but they understand viscerally the importance of prayer," says Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago. "When I lived in England"—which Patel did from 1998 to 2001—"and I said, 'It's prayer time,' people looked at me as if I was an alien."

It wouldn't be too much of an exaggeration to say that on September 10, 2001, the Muslim American universe was largely invisible. The only Muslims most people here knew by name were Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan and Muhammad Ali. If their doctor or accountant was Muslim, the average American probably didn't give it much thought.

The Muslim community itself was partially responsible for this isolation—like the Italian, Irish and Jewish immigrants before them, many hunkered down in ethnic enclaves. They strove to fit in, but quietly. For decades, the Islamic Center of New England, in Quincy, Mass., was home to a growing group of Lebanese immigrants who came to America for work in the shipyards. It was a cozy place, where people with similar backgrounds came to meet, pray and gossip. The imam, a Lebanese man named Talal Eid, was a perfect fit—he understood the community's values and he shared their interest in becoming American. "I have a woman with a head cover and a Muslim woman without a head cover," he says of his congregation at the time. "I'm not here to judge which is good and which is bad. I am here to serve them all equally." (In the past decade, however, his congregation changed as new immigrants arrived from Algeria, Morocco, Egypt and Pakistan; Eid was ousted in favor of a more conservative imam in 2005.)

The relative peace that came with invisibility disappeared after 9/11. When Muslims became objects of fear, "people who had never recognized and seen themselves as Muslims had no choice but to see themselves as Muslim," says Muzaffar Chisti, director of the Migration Policy Institute at the New York University School of Law. Young women who had never before worn the traditional Islamic head covering—and whose mothers saw it as a symbol of the backwardness they had left at home—put on the veil. According to a 2002 study from Hamilton College, more than a third of Muslim American women now wear the veil every day.

The first thing Razi Mohiuddin and his wife, Tahseen, did after 9/11 was to host an open house for the larger community at their mosque, the Muslim Community Association in Silicon Valley. More than a thousand non-Muslims showed up. The next thing they did was take their children out of their elite private school and install them in the school at the mosque. Before the attacks, the Mohiuddins lived the lives of busy, successful professionals: he launched start-ups; she was a pre-K teacher. Their own religious observance, the backbone of their family life, was private.

After the attacks "our responsibilities changed," says Mohiuddin, who emigrated from India when he was 17. "It forced people to say, 'Where do I stand? Either I walk away from the faith or I become more involved in defending the faith, which [is] under assault'." His children, he thought, needed to know they were Muslim and feel proud.

Hindsight has given Mohiuddin more reason to feel glad of this decision; the boys are teenagers now, and Mohiuddin is thankful that they have more than a passing knowledge of the restraint required of an observant Muslim.

To combat the discrimination many were feeling, many Muslim Americans turned, in classic American fashion, to the courts. The Council on American Islamic Relations, an advocacy group, counted nearly 2,500 civil-rights complaints by Muslim Americans in 2006, a dramatic increase over the previous year. These are the kinds of stories that make news—women who sue for the right to wear the *hijab* in their driver's license photo—and Muslim Americans say they show how invested they are in the American system. This is important: history suggests that thriving civil societies tend to smooth the sharper edges of faith. Religious convictions are no less firm or real, but they are less likely to fuel the kind of extremism that can lead to violence. The six imams who were pulled off a US Airways flight last fall after praying openly at a Minneapolis airport gate have sued the airline and the airport commission for civil-rights violations. "I believe in justice in the United States, and that's why we've taken this case to court," says Didmar Faja, one of the imams.

For younger Muslims the attention of the world means they have to grapple in a very conscious way with what they call their hyphenated identity. The result has been an open embrace of their religion, but in a manner suited to the community's diversity. According to Pew, 60 percent of Muslims age 18 to 29 think of themselves as "Muslim first," compared with 40 percent of people older than 30, and they are much more likely than their parents to go to mosque every week. At the same time, they tend to be blind to ethnic and racial differences, and they dismiss Islamic customs about gender roles as so much cultural baggage. Sakina Al-Amin, a student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor who is active in the Muslim Students' Association there, says that sometimes "parents are too into culture, and then the child tries to find ways out of it." When a parent objects, for example, to an inter-ethnic marriage, Al-Amin says the children may argue that Islam does not prevent such a union. Idil Jama Farah, a 21-year-old Somali student at the University of Minnesota, is a case in point. She recently married a white Muslim convert from Boston, in spite of her mother's initial disapproval. "I don't think culture is very important. I think religion is important," she says.

In Muslim intellectual circles, imagining ways to accommodate these young people is topic A, but the reality is somewhat grimmer. There are so few homegrown Muslim clerics in America today—and almost no institutions for training them—that prayer in most mosques is led by a scholar fresh off the plane from Lebanon, say, or Saudi Arabia, someone with no connection to America and no affinity for its culture. The foreign-born imams "are at a disconnect with our new generation," says Maher Hathout, an Egyptian-born cardiologist and senior adviser to the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles. "If you get the best scholar in Islamics, but he cannot connect with my child or my grandchild, it's a waste. It's the opposite of what we want."

More unsettling is the question of what these foreign-born imams preach. According to unofficial estimates by government investigators, at least 50 percent of American mosques may receive some funding from foreign governments or institutions, mostly Saudi Arabia. The danger is obvious: if Saudi Arabia is exporting its Wahhabi Islam to this country via imams, pamphlets, Qur'ans and buildings, how long before a warped version of this extremist ideology intersects with a vulnerable group of teenagers? So far, connections between Saudi influence and the handful of suspected terror plots hatched here since 9/11 have been tenuous, according to the public record. However, Hathout deems such gifts risky enough that the bylaws of his mosque mandate against them. Foreign money, he says, is "problematic to the point of being dangerous. It creates a dependence."

Whatever its source, fundamentalist Islamic ideology is readily available on the Internet as well as in U.S. mosques. In one poor neighborhood in Trenton, N.J., at the Masjid As-Saffat, which for more than 20 years had served a mixed community of Muslims from Afghanistan, Egypt, Somalia and the Palestinian territories, the presiding imam several years ago suddenly and inexplicably had an ideological change of heart. Whereas once people worshiped together in a communal, almost relaxed way, imam Sabur Abdul Hakim began applying rigid standards to prayer and worship. Last year he closed the mosque school, saying it wasn't sufficiently Islamic, congregants say. He began to preach a Salafi ideology, invoking the purity of the earliest Muslims and disapproving of any variation. In a perfectly American response, a group of Hakim's opponents sued him, demanding that he and his supporters be removed from the board of directors, that they turn over the mosque's accounting books and records and that elections be held to instate new trustees. The case is in mediation; Hakim and his lawyer declined to comment.

While the schism within the mosque is on the surface ideological, it is also at least partly racial and ethnic. The majority of the congregation is foreign-born. Hakim and most of his supporters are African-American. And while the community lived and worshiped together peacefully for almost two decades, Hakim's new stance elicited powerful, dormant feelings about whose Islam is authentic. Gulgai Masuod, a 62-year-old immigrant from Afghanistan, had been close to Hakim for years, but strongly disapproves of his changes. Hakim and his cohorts, says Masuod, "have no knowledge of Islam ... My father and great-grandfathers have been Muslim for 1,400 years. You are not telling me how to practice Islam."

African-American Muslims say such reactions are common. Growing up African-American and Muslim in Chicago, Ismail Mitchel says he never fit in. Black Muslims are in a "no man's land," says Mitchel, a 21-year-old student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "We get flak from Arabs and we get flak from other black people."

Neither group, he says, wants to embrace him. "It's like we're the black sheep of the whole community, literally."

Muslim American advocates have critiqued the press coverage of the Pew study, saying it focused too much on the bad news and not enough on the good. The bad news, however, bears repeating: 26 percent of Muslims age 18 to 29 believe that suicide bombing can be justified. Thirty-eight percent of that group believe that Arabs did not carry out the 9/11 attacks. These data, combined with the rising religious conservatism of young Muslim Americans, have led some experts to argue that differences between Europe and America have been overblown, that affluence and education do not inoculate a society against radicalization. "This idea that all those who are middle class are exempted from extremism has always been false," says Geneive Abdo, author of "Mecca and Main Street." "The leadership of the extremist movements have always been highly educated Muslims."

It's impossible to underestimate the emotional nature of anti-Israel sentiment among Arab-American youth, argues Ismael Ahmed, executive director of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services in Detroit. "I think the poll miscaptures what's being said," he says. "There is such a thing as legitimate resistance to oppression, and there is terrorism on both sides. It's wrong, but there's also the right to resist." The poll numbers, in his view, don't point to a threat of homegrown suicide bombers, but to a passionate defense of a resistance movement—the way, 30 years ago, an Irish-American teenager would have supported the IRA.

The deeper problem is a growing sense of alienation among young Muslims, a sense that they don't feel part of the American story. According to Pew, 39 percent of Muslim Americans age 18 to 29 believe that newly arrived Muslims should remain distinct from society at large, compared with 17 percent of Muslims older than 55. Ferdous Sajedeen arrived here from Bangladesh in 1975 and built a successful pharmacy business in Queens. For years, Sajedeen imagined that he would eventually return to Bangladesh, but after visiting Dhaka several years ago, he realized how impossible that was; he didn't understand the jokes anymore, he didn't feel part of the culture. "I don't deny my roots," he says. "I am proud to be a Bangladeshi, but at the same time the reality is I am a Bangladeshi-American." September 11, he says, was "one of the saddest stories anywhere in the world."

His son Autri, who at 21 is in his fourth year of pharmacy school and lives at home with his parents, does not feel his father's patriotism. "When we grew up, nobody ever looked at us like we were Americans," he says. On 9/11, "it sounds bad to say, but I remember thinking that I didn't care that it happened. A lot of my friends didn't care. I think it's because we're Muslim." For him, the bombing of Afghanistan that followed was much more tragic and painful. Fundamentalists are "crazy," he adds emphatically. He would never condone terrorism.

This sense of alienation can be seen most clearly in places like Lackawanna, home of the six convicted young men. Earlier this year the Lackawanna varsity and junior-varsity soccer teams were suspended from the local league for rough play. The varsity team, which is predominantly Yemenite, accuses some of the referees and fans of being racist. (Fans called them "terrorists" and "camel jockeys" during games, players say.) At the same time, the players broke the rules of good behavior: after losing a critical game, 3-2, they swore at and allegedly spit on the other players, and in one case allegedly shoved a referee. In a town with high unemployment and the constant risk of losing kids to drugs and crime, soccer was a wholesome, if occasionally rough, way to pass the time. The team played "all night, all day," says star varsity forward Hamud Alasri, 17. Alasri was hoping to get a soccer scholarship to the University of Buffalo, but with the team's suspension, that opportunity has passed.

Kathy Ahmed, 37, refused to let her son, Jamil, now 20, join the soccer team; she didn't like the racist environment of the public high school or the league play. Asked if she's worried that the young men in her community are at risk of becoming terrorists, Ahmed says no: the Lackawanna Six were vulnerable boys seduced by a charismatic radical. "I'm not worried about [boys in Lackawanna] becoming terrorists. I worry that they'll lose their spirituality. There are so many things calling them. I see them as lost." Losing Jamil Ahmed and Autri Sajedeen would be the worst thing in the world—not just for them, but for all of us.

With Roya Wolverson in Lackawanna, Sanhita Sen in Queens, Karen Breslau and Robina Riccitiello in Silicon Valley, Julie Scelfo in Trenton, Arian Campo-Flores in Boston, Hilary Shenfeld in Chicago, Roqaya Ashmawey in Ann Arbor, Aisha Eady in Minneapolis, Christopher Dickey in Paris, Mark Hosenball, Daren Briscoe and Abby Dalton in Washington and Owen Matthews in Istanbul

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