

Poll: American Muslims hopeful about life in the U.S.

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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(RNS) Ten years after the 9/11 attacks, an extensive new survey of Muslims finds them as optimistic as other Americans, even as large minorities of Christian Americans question Muslims' loyalty to the United States.

The survey, released Tuesday (Aug. 2) by the Gallup organization's center in the Middle East, presented a community less than fully assured of its place in the United States, but generally confident in President Obama and the American economy.

American Muslims' perceptions of their own well-being increased more in the past three years than those of any other religious group, according to the report, which also surveyed Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, atheists and agnostics. Muslims' expectations for their own happiness in five years similarly topped all other faiths'.

Mohamed Younis, of the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, which is affiliated with the United Arab Emirates' constitutional monarchy, said the report showed optimistic American Muslims share certain traits.

"Muslims who tend to be thriving seem to be more fully engaged in their religious life, but also strongly identify with the United States as a place to live," Younis said. "They show a picture of someone with less cognitive dissonance about being 100 percent Muslim and about being 100 percent American."

The optimism of American Muslims is particularly noteworthy, said the report's authors, considering that much press about them focuses on terrorism and controversy, including the proposed mosque near Ground

Zero in New York and congressional hearings on the "radicalization" of their faith community.

Though majorities across all groups surveyed said that Muslims are loyal to their country, large minorities of many religious groups doubted it. Ninety-three percent of Muslims believe Muslims are loyal to their country, compared to 56 percent of Protestants, 56 percent of Mormons, 59 percent of Catholics and 80 percent of Jews.

In other instances Jewish Americans showed a trust of Muslims less apparent among other groups, and held opinions that most closely correlated with Muslims,' a phenomenon the report's authors called "The Children of Abraham." They invited Rabbi David Saperstein, of the Religious Action Center of Reformed Judaism, to the survey's rollout to help explain the affinity of views.

"Jews view themselves as the quintessential victims of religious persecution in the history of the world over the last 3,000 years and therefore often identify with those who are subject to persecution and discrimination," Saperstein said.

More Jews (66 percent) than Muslims (60 percent) said that Muslims are discriminated against in the United States, according to the report.

Among other findings of the report, a compilation of Gallup surveys of Americans' life satisfaction and polls of Muslim Americans in particular:

- On average, Muslims rate their expected life satisfaction in five years at 8.4 on a 10-point scale -- higher than any other religious group.

- A small fraction of Muslims believe there is a national Muslim organization that represents them, with about 12 percent naming the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which was named more frequently than any other group.

- Sixty-nine percent of Muslims said they "extremely strongly" or "very strongly" identify with the U.S., as compared to 91 percent of

Protestants, 81 percent of Catholics and 86 percent of Jews.

-- Eight of 10 Muslims expressed support for President Obama, more than any other religious group. More than any other group surveyed, they are confident that economic conditions are improving.

-- Muslims (57 percent) are more confident in the honesty of American elections than Protestants (44 percent), Catholics (46 percent) or any other religious group.

-- Muslim Americans (70 percent) have less confidence in the military than Protestants (95 percent), Catholics (94 percent) or any other religious group.

-- Muslims Americans (83 percent) are more likely to see the Iraq war as a mistake than Jews (74 percent), Protestants (45 percent) or any other religious group.

-- Muslim Americans (65 percent) are less likely to be registered to vote than Protestants (91 percent), Jews (91 percent) or any other religious group, a statistic the survey's authors say correlates with the relative youth of the Muslim-American community.

The report was hailed by Muslim leaders and the White House as a tool for those who want to dispel myths about Muslim Americans and plot a course for their increased participation in American political life.

"It confirms for us that as we reach out to Muslims, the community will reach back," said D. Paul Montiero, associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, and part of a panel invited to comment on the report at its Washington unveiling.

Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America, said the survey shows how far Muslims have to go to until they are fully accepted members of society, and that 9/11 was a setback for those who follow Islam in America.

"But the process has started," he said. "And I think it will bear fruit."