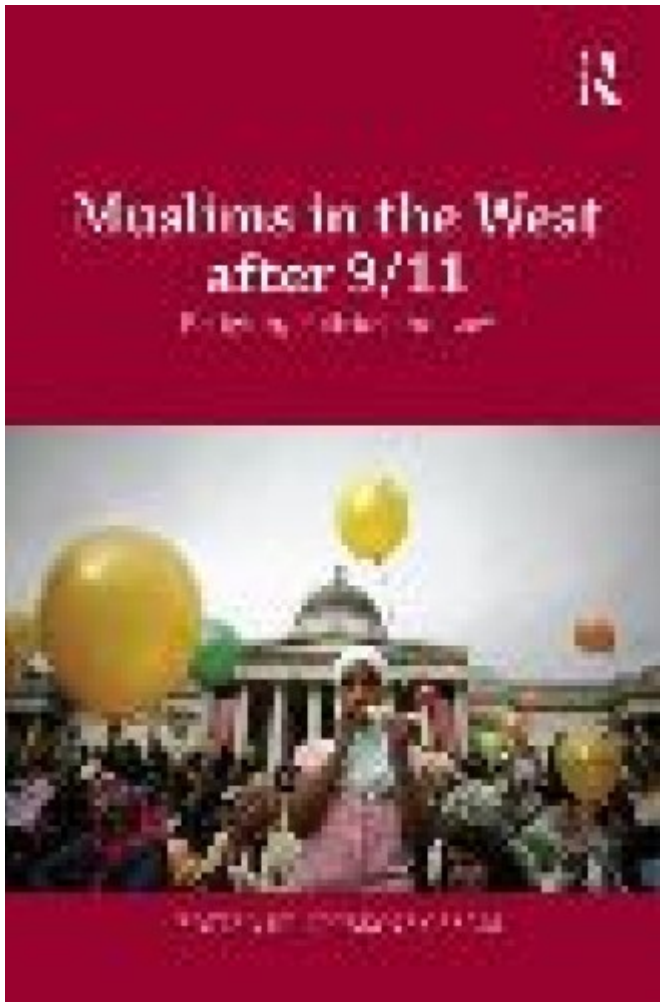


Muslim in America

By [Rhys H Williams](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law

Jocelyne Cesari, ed.

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The attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath have caused great pain to U.S. Muslims. They have experienced formal and informal discrimination and large and small forms

of public humiliation. In November 2009 a white woman in a suburban Chicago grocery store pulled a Muslim woman's *hijab* (headscarf) and muttered something about the shootings at Fort Hood in Texas. In December 2009 a Muslim woman was harassed by a security guard in an Illinois CitiBank branch. Muslims continue to receive special screening at airport security gates. And the persistent concern expressed by many Americans in the 2008 presidential campaign that Barack Obama might be Muslim was a sign of how much prejudice—intertwining race and religion—exists.

But what hasn't happened since 9/11 is also important. There has not been the level of communal violence as in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in countries like India, Nigeria or even Northern Ireland. There hasn't been the street violence such as that between Protestants and Catholics that rocked U.S. cities in the 1850s. There has not been anything close to the detention policies that incarcerated thousands of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Instead, calls for tolerance, understanding and pluralism from political leaders in both parties have been common (though government agencies often pursue policies that undermine those sentiments). While immigration is a hot political issue, there has not been a blanket crackdown on Muslims or on Middle Eastern immigrants.

Indeed, my own assessment, supported by the overall conclusions of these three books, is that 9/11 and the backlash against Muslims that followed will be a historical bump-in-the-road toward the incorporation of Muslims—like Catholics and Jews before them—into the American religious and social mosaic.

Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, professors at the City University of New York, began their study shortly after 9/11 and from the outset wanted to focus on the backlash against Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans. Their first expectation, entirely reasonable, was that there would be individual and group-level lashing out at people seen as "guilty by association" with the hijackers. Hate crimes and instances of discrimination were their initial focus.

Such instances were not hard to find. A Sikh man (neither Arab nor Muslim nor Middle Eastern, but wearing the traditional Sikh turban) was murdered near Phoenix. A young man wearing a T-shirt with Arabic writing on it was denied boarding on a commercial airplane flight and was told that wearing a T-shirt with Arabic in an airport was like walking into a bank with a shirt saying "I'm a robber." (The phrase on the shirt actually said, in Arabic and in English, "We will not be silent.") Another

family was removed from a plane after other passengers became nervous—they were changing seats and talking loudly in Arabic.

These types of stories spread quickly and have become part of the conventional wisdom among Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans. Indeed, FWM—“Flying while Muslim”—is a common phrase calling ironic but bitter attention to the profiling.

Louise Cainkar’s interviews and oral histories with Chicago-area Muslims and Arabs reveal numerous stories with similar themes. Women in *hijab* and men with big beards or easily identified Muslim names are the most obvious targets.

Also telling has been the reaction from many white Americans. Cainkar points out that many non-Muslim Americans approved of heightened monitoring and profiling of Muslims and Middle Eastern Americans in the first days after 9/11. While those approval numbers dropped considerably as some of the shock wore off, they have not disappeared. Many white Americans don’t exactly approve of targeting and profiling and feel bad that their fellow citizens are subject to such treatment, but they aren’t sure what to do about it or are uncertain enough as to whether it is justified that they don’t object. The phrases used by many white Americans, when they themselves are subjected to heightened scrutiny or too much inconvenience, can be unintentionally revealing. A newspaper reported one woman stopped by TSA workers at an airport who wondered why an “80-year-old red-haired grandmother would be searched” (indicating that hair color was a relevant factor in who might be a security threat). The parents of an eight-year-old boy whose name was mistakenly on the TSA’s no-fly list thought it absurd that their son, “in his Boy Scout uniform,” would be a suspect (perhaps expecting the Boy Scouts to do the initial security screenings before issuing uniforms). The implication that racial and ethnic categories can be used both to identify potential terrorists and to exonerate others suggests that people’s views of “American” identity have racial and ethnic assumptions behind them.

But while such stories are disappointing—even shocking—they are not accompanied by widespread statistical evidence of hate crimes and bias incidents. Indeed, Bakalian and Bozorg mehr began their research project with the intention of focusing on backlash and hate crimes perpetrated by ordinary non-Muslim Americans against Muslim Americans, but they didn’t find that to be a big story. They shifted their attention to the myriad governmental policies—some authorized by law but most done through executive order and with little fanfare—that have had

a much longer-term impact on Muslim and Middle Eastern American communities. Detentions, deportations, interrogation by law enforcement, wiretapping and other actions permitted by the Patriot Act, and investigations by agencies such as the IRS, have all undermined Muslim Americans' confidence in their place in the U.S. and produced more resentment among Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans. In Cainkar's clever double-edged phrase, this effort has produced a "homeland insecurity" among Muslims. Many believe that this is their homeland and want it to be their homeland but feel a profound sense of uncertainty about whether that is possible. At the same time, the feelings of insecurity among non-Muslims have led them to view many minority groups as threats to the "homeland."

While Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, on one hand, and Cainkar on the other, provide essentially the same narrative arc, these books have distinct contributions to make. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr are primarily concerned with organizations—the central characters in their study are the leaders of voluntary organizations that represent Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans' interests in this country. Groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) and the American Muslim Council (AMC) are organizations with national memberships and paid staff, and they see themselves as responsible for promoting the images and interests of the entire community. They play a mediating role between ordinary Muslims and the wider American society. Not surprisingly, these groups found themselves in the middle of a maelstrom after 9/11, and in the authors' perspective they were mostly unprepared for it.

The post-9/11 challenges forced these agencies to learn in a hurry, and most did. Their reaction was to mobilize rather than retreat and to seek greater public visibility. In addition, a number of emerging organizations arose, such as the National Council of American Muslim Nonprofits (in response to the shutdown of some established Islamic charitable organizations). The organizations did outreach work, expanded their advocacy staffs and entered into coalitions with other non profits—both Muslim and non-Muslim. Further, many of the organizations helped sponsor lawsuits to combat instances of discrimination. This mobilization in the face of attempts at exclusion has had the ironic effect of increasing both the desire and the means of American Muslims to become more integrated into American civil society. As Bakalian and Bozorgmehr conclude, the organizations they studied used the very American tools of lawsuits, publicity and civic associations to press for inclusion and respect in U.S. society.

Cainkar focused her study on “ordinary” Arab Americans rather than organizational leaders and kept her focus on the greater Chicago area rather than using a national lens. Cainkar, a sociologist at Marquette University in Milwaukee, has been researching and writing about the Arab and Arab-American community around Chicago for years. As a result, she refers to the Arab, and especially the Arab-Muslim, experience more specifically than the other authors.

Cainkar roots much of the post-9/11 response to Muslims in a long history of American bias toward Arabs. Dark skin, differing forms of dress and “foreign” names, and a cultural “orientalism” that pictures the Middle East as simultaneously exotic, alluring and threatening produced a worldview in which Americans already saw Muslims and Arabs as “other.” As Cainkar adroitly notes, these images served to hide some of the very real diversity among the many different types of Muslims—differing by faith tradition, national origin, ethnicity, race and socioeconomic class—who represent the reality of the recent waves of Muslim immigrants.

Like Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, Cainkar finds clear evidence for the paradox that the post-9/11 crisis for Muslim and Arab Americans also pushed them toward more inclusion in the American mainstream. Many of her respondents compared their struggles to those of earlier racial and ethnic minorities. Not only do Arab and Muslim Americans use the language of civil rights and citizenship easily, but they also draw upon laws such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, and they draw on sympathetic non-Muslim organizations such as the ACLU to assist them. Thus, American Muslims make a case for their right to be both fully American and faithfully Muslim by drawing on the nation’s language of religious freedom. It is a path that Catholics and Jews took before them, and ultimately it is one that Muslims will take as well, according to Bakalian, Bozorgmehr and Cainkar.

Optimism about the U.S. situation is reinforced by comparison to other Western nations. Jocelyne Cesari, an associate at Harvard University’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies who also teaches at Harvard Divinity School, assembled an international group of scholars (including Cainkar) to examine the intersections of religion, politics and law in Western democracies and the post-9/11 situation. Organized on a thematic basis rather than country by country, the book nevertheless shows some striking differences between Western Europe and the U.S. that have direct implications for the political and civic incorporation of Muslims. (By the way, Jane I. Smith, a noted scholar of American Islam, has a chapter in this

collection that is the single best overview of Islam in America I have read.) While the chapters explore a number of distinctions, such as the national origins and class base of differing immigrant communities, two things consistently jump out. First is the acceptance in the U.S. of an important role for religion in American civil and political society. Americans think religion should matter and that it actually complements rather than threatens the separation of church and state. Second, Americans conceive of legal and civil rights as fundamentally *individual* liberties and entitlements.

The notion of “collective rights”—rights that a group has as a communal entity rather than as an aggregation of individuals—is a much harder sell in the United States than in other places. These two factors together—the importance of religion and the emphasis on individual liberties—open up more paths to incorporation for members of different minority groups, and they make religious organizations useful vehicles for those working toward assimilation.

But what Cainkar calls “persistent voices of exclusion” remain in a society in which racial division and hierarchy are deeply ingrained. For all the progress in race relations in the past half century, one need only conduct the most modest Internet search to reveal deep, classic expressions of racist hatred. Full inclusion for Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans will involve struggle. But many of these immigrants are coming here highly educated with employable skills and entrepreneurial expertise. They emphasize education for their children. They are deeply committed to family, work and community—values that resonate with most Americans. Jews were once seen by many as unassimilable in American society; now many Jews themselves worry about being assimilated to the point of disappearing. Catholics were once imagined by many to be fundamentally non-American; now they form the single largest religious denomination in the country. The path to pluralism in the U.S. has often been our general tolerance for and approval of religious diversity—even if we often honor such tolerance more often than practice it. The events of 9/11 presented a huge challenge to this process for Islam in the U.S. But as these books show, even that tragedy has helped set the groundwork for further inclusion.

All these books offer important caveats to my hopeful assessment. We should not forget that inordinate fear of “terrorism” makes some citizens targets of state surveillance and hate crimes. We should not ignore the detentions, the deportations, the discrimination, the feelings of being under constant surveillance and suspicion. These actions violate our national values of individualism, civil liberty and religious

freedom. Big challenges remain: the “racialization” of some groups of Muslims, based on skin color, the scarceness of economic resources and Muslims’ *perceived* distance from the American mainstream. Nevertheless, the signs point to Muslims being incorporated into American society and adding to the ongoing story of diversity.