American Muslims come of age in post-9/11 era

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In face of what they see as bias, discrimination, new leaders assert themselves

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger." It was not Muhammad but the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who said that, but for many Muslims living in the post-9/11 era, it may ring as true as one of the prophet's teachings.

The decade since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has been tough for many Muslim Americans — from the anti-terror surveillance aimed at mosques, schools, organizations and individuals to the wave of hostility fanned by those who see their religion as fomenting hatred and violence.

But the scrutiny and suspicion have also galvanized a new generation of more assertive, confident and politically involved Muslim American leaders, and a more integrated Muslim immigrant population. After 10 years of struggle, the community is better positioned to defend its interests and more willing to reach out to the broader population.

"The national tragedy of Sept. 11 put us — by no choice of our own — on the hot seat," said Imad Hamad, national adviser for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. "For a time people were intimidated and confused by this unprecedented shock. I think we managed to get our act together… define our role (as Americans) and keep moving forward."

Circling the wagons

Long before the dust settled at the fallen Twin Towers in New York, the damaged Pentagon and the vacant Pennsylvania field where United Flight 93 crashed, the backlash against Muslims — and people mistaken for Muslims — was well under way.

Americans were stunned that a group of seemingly ordinary foreign students could carry out the highly coordinated and devastating attacks. In an atmosphere charged with confusion and pain, people wondered what other seemingly benign individuals were secretly harboring extremist anti-U.S. views and plans to commit violence.

U.S. authorities rounded up thousands of young men for questioning, often with little or no grounds. And just weeks after the attacks, Congress adopted the USA Patriot Act of 2001 and other measures that gave law enforcers unprecedented leeway to tap private information and additional discretion to deport non-citizens.

First order of business: legal assistance

For the Muslim American community, that created an immediate need for legal help for scores of people caught in raids and roundups — a need that was met by both new and existing Muslim organizations.

For example, the Council on American Islamic Relations, or CAIR, a Muslim advocacy group that had been mainly handling workplace discrimination cases, abruptly changed gears.

“The existing law is supportive of (equal rights for workers), so we would just go to the workplace and talk to the employer. We didn’t need to sue anybody,” said CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper. “But in the (post-9/11) atmosphere, the public relations initiatives don’t do what you need, so you need to sue.”

Almost overnight, CAIR expanded from eight to 30 chapters and began adding lawyers in every branch. Now, in addition to helping on legal and discrimination cases, CAIR offers “Know Your Rights” classes, which brief Muslim Americans on their rights and obligations when approached by the FBI.

Other organizations — like the Muslim Legal Fund of America, Muslim Advocates and the Asian Law Caucus — likewise ramped up their efforts to defend Muslims caught up in what they considered anti-Islamic hysteria, often in partnerships with non-Muslim faith groups and traditional civil rights organizations.

“There were (law enforcement) raids before 9/11 … as well as demonization, vilification in the media and issues with unwarranted witch hunts,” said John Janney, a spokesman for the Muslim Legal Fund of America. “Then 9/11 happens and the need escalated exponentially, because raids and detentions just went off the charts.”

Legal battles abound

A decade after the attacks, there’s no sign that the pressure is lifting.

These groups are now providing a broad range of legal and advocacy functions — representing individual discrimination cases, appealing terrorism-related convictions and challenging broad security policies that they say come down especially hard on Muslim Americans as unconstitutional and dangerous.

Among them:

Possibly the best-known case is that of Yasir Afifi, 21, a college student who found a tracking device on his car in October when he took it for an oil change. A California native whose father was from Egypt, Afifi has traveled to the Middle East for work, and to visit two younger brothers who are being raised there by an aunt. His late father had been a prominent member of the Santa Clara Muslim community, which braced him for his encounter with the FBI.

“I had been preparing myself mentally and finding out what my rights are,” said Afifi. “It’s become a common practice for federal agents to harass … the Muslim community.”

Though many people were unwilling to publicly discuss their FBI encounters for this story — afraid that doing so might cause them more grief — Afifi took the opposite approach. When he found the device on his car, he photographed it and posted the pictures on the Internet.

Two days later, he says, a contingent of FBI agents showed up at his house, demanding he return the tracker. He did so but declined to answer questions or allow them in the house without a warrant.

Paul Sakuma / AP file

California native Yasir Afifi, 21, is suing the FBI for secretly putting a tracking device on his car. The San Jose resident says he's never done anything that should raise the attention of federal law enforcement.

Now Afifi is suing and seeking damages, alleging that the FBI surveillance left him with a stigma that has affected his personal and professional life.

More broadly, according to Ghadeir Abbas, the CAIR attorney who is representing Afifi, the case is a test of whether tracking devices amount to an unreasonable search and seizure if the authorities lack probable cause.

“The issue is the biggest and most important Fourth Amendment issue in the last decade, whether law enforcement can use tracking devices without a warrant,” said Abbas.

With funding from the Muslim Legal Fund of America, five men convicted of funding terrorist operations through the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development continue to fight for their freedom. At the time the largest Muslim charity in the United States, it was shut down in 2001 and five of its personnel charged with funding the Palestinian militant group Hamas, a U.S.-designated terrorist group.

In the trial, key testimony was provided by anonymous experts from the Israeli Security Agency and the Israeli Defense Forces. Justice Department attorney Joseph Palmer argued that “there was a real threat to the safety of those witnesses,” if their identities were to be disclosed.

In an appeal heard Sept. 1, attorneys for the men asked the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans to overturn the men’s’ convictions and vacate sentences ranging from 15 to 65 years, arguing that the trial was unfair and “riddled with errors.”

“It’s a right to face your accuser,” said Janney, the Muslim Legal Fund of America spokesman, referring to the unnamed witnesses. “If this is allowed to happen now to us, who knows when somebody with politically unpopular views might face it? … This is a significant issue.”

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Muslim Advocates and the American Civil Liberties Union are challenging the constitutionality of the “no-fly” list, a secret roster of about 16,000 people — including 500 U.S. citizens — who

are barred from flying in or out of the United States. Of the 20 people listed in the suit — nearly all of whom are Muslim Americans — some have been marooned overseas, unable to return to their homes in the United States without legal intervention.

Muslim advocacy groups have called attention to experts and materials used for anti-terrorism training of law enforcement officers that they contend are consider bigoted against Muslims. Under pressure from many groups to review the contractors and materials, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recently said it would investigate the matter.

At the end of August, The Associated Press reported that the New York City Police Department, under supervision of a CIA officer, was sending secret police into Muslim neighborhoods to monitor daily life in bookstores, bars, cafes and nightclub, as well as mosques, sometimes with the help of secret informers — all absent any evidence of wrongdoing.

On the day the report was printed — after a months-long investigation by AP reporters — a coalition of civil rights and advocacy organizations called on the Senate Intelligence Committee, the U.S. Marshals Service and the Department of Justice to investigate what it described as a massive covert operation that “blurred the bright line between foreign and domestic spying."

"The responsibility of the NYPD is to protect all New Yorkers equally and to investigate crimes, not communities," said Cyrus McGoldrick, an official with CAIR's New York office. "Programs like this are a violation not only of the civil rights of American Muslims, but are a violation of the trust we place in our law enforcement."

There are multiple legal battles over FBI surveillance of Muslim communities already under way. Among them is the case of Craig Monteilh, who was turned in by congregation members at a Los Angeles mosque when the new convert started implying that he was planning a violent plot. Later Montheil, who had been going by the name Farouk al-Aziz, admitted that he was an FBI informant. The ACLU and the southern California chapter of CAIR are suing the FBI on the strength of the Monteilh case and other information they say show a pattern of widespread surveillance based on religion, not based on evidence of wrongdoing.

In August, the Justice Department invoked the state secrets privilege to get the suit dismissed.

Growing into U.S. society

In addition to aggressively asserting their rights, Muslim Americans also have gained influence in the broader American society.

The population continues to grow. A recent Pew Research Center survey of more than 1,000 Muslim Americans indicated 25 percent had arrived since 2001 and about 45 percent since 1990. (Religion is not tabulated in the Census, but estimates range from 3 million to 6 million Muslim Americans — comparable to estimates of the Jewish population in the United States.)

Rabbi Michael Lerner, a liberal Jewish leader and editor of the magazine Tikkun, compares the relatively recently arrived immigrant Muslim population to the Jews who arrived in the U.S. in

the late 1800s. Many of the latter were cautious about asserting their identity, he says, remaining insular, keeping their heads down, to avoid stirring up trouble.

“It was really only in the 1910s when Jews started to … show ourselves as we are, warts and all, and demanding respect became legitimate,” Lerner said. “For Muslims, there was a similar dynamic (of insularity)... That was where they were at right through the 1990s. But 9/11 made that (old) stance impossible.”

Older, wiser, better represented

It helps that with the passage of a decade the Muslim American population now includes a larger cadre of adults raised and educated in the United States, confident as their status as Americans, well versed in the issues of their community and capable of articulating them in native English.

“Nine-eleven greatly accelerated a process that was already under way,” said John Esposito, a professor of international affairs and Islamic studies at Georgetown University. “One thing that really has to be highlighted is the role of the younger generations. These are Muslims born here, gone to our best schools, grad schools, and working as professionals in the most prestigious companies and institutions.”

Jim Lo Scalzo / EPA file

Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., the first Muslim elected to Congress, tears up during his opening statements at controversial hearings on Islamic radicalization in Washington on March 10.

Muslim Americans have more political representation than they had in 2001. In addition to a smattering of state representatives and local leaders, they are now represented in Congress by Reps. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., who converted to Islam before his election in 2006, and Andre Carson, D-Ind., who was elected in 2007 in a special election, and then re-elected in 2008.

Although Ellison played down his religion while running for office, he has stepped up at key moments to defend members of his faith, including at this year's controversial hearings before the Homeland Security Committee chaired by Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., which focused on Muslim Americans as the primary source of potential terrorism.

"Targeting of the Muslim-American community for the actions of a few is unjust," he said, testifying as a witness for the minority Democrats. "Stoking fears about an entire group for a political agenda is not new in American history."

Public relations tug-of-war

Many Muslim Americans see the King hearings as part of a dramatic pushback from virulent critics of Islam, who believe that some Muslim leaders are pressing an agenda that is un-American, un-democratic and envision turning the United States into an Islamic state.

At the core of this movement are key players who are focused on a radical segment of Muslims whom they call Islamists. Among them are Daniel Pipes, who runs a think tank called the Middle East Forum; Pam Geller, a blogger who was instrumental in generating protest against Park 51, a Muslim community center dubbed the "Ground Zero Mosque"; and Robert Spencer, the author of a site calledJihad Watch and co-founder the organization "Stop Islamization of America."

Others in this camp have helped write legislation and resolutions in at least 20 states that are designed to combat "creeping shariah," which they warn threatens to undermine U.S. law. Shariah is the Islamic code of conduct.

Now, in addition to those worried about Islamists are public figures who speak of the whole of Islam as evil — including talk show hosts Glen Beck and Michael Graham, some ex-Muslims and some Christian evangelists.

'No, my religion is not evil'

"There is now an active anti-Islamic argument that barely existed, or had no public presence 10 years ago," said Pipes. "That's a view that has gained real traction and therefore has put Muslims on the defensive and (forced them to) say, 'No, my religion is not evil.'"

He said that compared to a decade ago, a much more diverse group of Muslims has stepped up to speak about their religion, including anti-Islamist Muslims like Zudhi Jasser, a physician in Arizona who has become a frequent talk show guest.

The critics of Islam may have contributed to a declining number of Americans with a favorable view of the religion since 2007, as shown in the recent Pew survey.

But some experts suggest they may also have kick-started Muslim organizations to take more control of their public image.

“In the last five, six years, (there have been) much more aggressive attempts to challenge the distortions about who Muslims are … that it is not a religion fairly represented by al-Qaida or sections of the Islamic world that call for destruction of the West,” said Rabbi Lerner.

Controversies over the construction of mosques and schools at sites across the country have also prompted some community leaders to explore ways to better approach neighborhoods and city planners to avoid conflict.

Increasingly, mosques have opened their doors to non-Muslims with the idea of creating more transparency.

“Many Muslim Americans came to realize... though some remained in some kind of denial… that it was important for them to engage in more outreach, to be better known in the community,” said Esposito, the Georgetown University professor. “Muslims began a real effort … opening up the mosque, going out of the way to create programs with neighbors, inviting school kids to visit, and see what it is like to pray. I’ve seen this all over the country — from Michigan to New York to California.”

In July, a rising star in Chicago’s Islamic community, Eboo Patel, organized and moderated a panel discussion featuring the Buddhist spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, alongside a rabbi, a pastor and a Muslim scholar.

“Now instead of being reluctant to be in the public sphere, many are trying very hard to be in the public sphere,” said Lerner, the rabbi who participated in the forum. “They are representing not just Muslim causes but causes that are not in the Muslim sphere — poverty, global peace and the environment.”

Optimism endures through hard times

Despite such progress, more than half of Muslim Americans — 55 percent — say that it has become more difficult to be a Muslim in the United States since the Sept. 11 attacks, according to the Pew Research Center survey. Just over half say that anti-terrorism policies single out Muslims.

Negative views about Muslims, discrimination and ignorance about Islam top the list of the problems Muslim Americans say they face, according to the Pew report. The most frequently mentioned problem is people’s negative views about Muslims (29 percent), including stereotyping, being viewed as terrorists and distrust.

And yet, U.S. Muslims, especially immigrants, remain surprisingly optimistic. Some 65 percent to 75 percent believe that the quality of life is better in the United States than in most Muslim countries. About three-quarters believe in “ the American Dream,” making them more optimistic on average than the general public.

“Am I worried about the Islamophobic stuff? Yes I am… Highly rational people can look at things without being rational,” said Rizwan Kadir, a Pakistan-born American active in the Chicago Muslim community.

But, he added, “It’s going to turn out better than OK …. America always ends up on the right side of history. We have stumbled, we have messed up. But we end up on the right side of history, sometimes a bit later than we would like.”

Source: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44430432/ns/us_news-9_11_ten_years_later/

Mr. Huus has written this excellent article from the vantage point of American Muslims. He has drawn some parallels with American Jews in examining anti-Muslim bigotry. But Americans, as a matter of prudence, must take worldwide Muslim violence into account as they assess their own safety. Irrational fear is what drives bigotry; but what if the fear is well-founded? How will Americans learn to preserve liberty and religious tolerance in the face of physical threats? And of course, the question remains as to the direct impact of the religion of Islam on the violence that we’re seeing. Non-Muslims assert that the religion of Islam promotes coercion, violence, and bigotry; Muslims deny it. What’s the truth? – WHG

RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AROUND THE WORLD

Current conflicts and wars: http://www.religioustolerance.org/curr_war.htm
Some of the world’s current “hot spots” which have as their base a significant component of religious intolerance are listed below:

Country and Main religious groups involved

1. Afghanistan Extreme radical Fundamentalist **Muslim** terrorist groups where Osama bin Laden headed a terrorist group called Al Quada (The Source) whose headquarters were in Afghanistan.
2. Bosnia Serbian Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholic, **Muslims**
3. Cote d’Ivoire **Muslims**, Indigenous, Christians
4. Cyprus Christians & **Muslims**
5. East Timor Christians & **Muslims**
6. Indonesia, province of Ambon Christians & **Muslims**
7. Kashmir Hindus and **Muslims**
8. Kosovo Serbian Orthodox Christians, **Muslims**
9. Kurdistan Christians, **Muslims** Assaults on Christians (Protestant, Chaldean Catholic & Assyrian Orthodox). Bombing campaign underway.
10. Macedonia Macedonian Orthodox Christians & **Muslims**
11. Middle East Jews, **Muslims**, &Christians
12. Nigeria Christians, Animists, & **Muslims**
13. Pakistan Suni & Shi’ite **Muslims**
14. Philippines Christians & **Muslims**
15. Russia, Chechnya Russian Orthodox Christians, **Muslims**. The Russian army attacked the breakaway region. Muslims had allegedly blown up buildings in Moscow.
16. Serbia, province of Vojvodina Serbian Orthodox & Roman Catholics
17. Sri Lanka Buddhists & Hindus Tamils

Additional conflicts

18. Thailand: Pattani province: Buddhists and **Muslims**
19. Bangladesh: **Muslim**-Hindu (Bengalis) and Buddhists (Chakmas)
20. Tajikistan: intra-**Islamic** conflict