

Islam in America Post 9/11

Summary: Muslim individuals continue to respond to Islamophobia and seek out open dialogue with broad non-Muslim communities. Some choose political activism, working with organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) or the Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). Some choose public and interfaith dialogues, opening up their homes to non-Muslims, inviting others to introductory classes on Islam, or co-hosting events with people from other religious traditions.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 brought Islam into the national and international spotlight with a new intensity. Its impact on the Muslim community cannot be overstated. When Al Qaeda, an Islamist militant network founded and formerly overseen by Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility for the attacks, many feared Muslims in America would be targeted for retribution. As people of many faiths and none came together in the wake of the attacks, many sought to stand by the Muslim community, offering protection and support. President George W. Bush visited a mosque in Washington, DC a few days after the attack. There he spoke of Islam as a peaceful religion, noting that “[t]hese acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith, and it’s important for my fellow Americans to understand that.”

Despite efforts by the White House and others to discourage Americans from targeting blame at the Muslim community after 9/11, the number of attacks against those who “looked Muslim” rose exponentially. Just days after September 11th, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh, was shot outside of his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. The turban he was wearing as a tenet of his faith was mistaken for a Muslim garment, and the murderer was seeking revenge for the terrorist attacks. In the weeks and years that followed, many people who were mistaken as Muslim, particularly South Asians and Arabs of any religion, became the targets of discrimination, hate crimes, and murder.

Muslim organizations and individuals suddenly came under scrutiny. Several prominent and trusted American Muslim charities such as the Holy Land Foundation and the Global Relief Foundation were shut down by the American government, charged with having ties to terrorists. Muslim Student Associations on college campuses across the country came under secret surveillance by American police. Muslims continue to be singled out by federal security. The FBI continues to closely monitor Muslim communities at mosques. While the federal agents often work collaboratively with Muslim

community members, investigations are not always transparent. Many Muslims are eager to work with local and federal agents, while others are frustrated by the lack of privacy they are able to maintain.

Politicians have also added fuel to the fire of anti-Islam sentiments in the United States. Former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich identified *sharia* as “a moral threat to the survival of freedom in the United States.” U.S. Congressional Representative Joe Walsh from Illinois said that there were “radical” Muslims in American neighborhoods that “try to kill Americans every week.” Within less than two weeks after Walsh made that statement at a town hall meeting in suburban Chicago, eight incidents of hate crime, primarily mosque defacements, were reported within the area. Representative Peter King of New Jersey chaired a series of congressional hearings beginning in 2011 to investigate the radicalization of American Muslims. The tone of the hearings coupled with the scrutiny King received for convening them underscores the tension that still exists in how Americans understand Islam and the Muslim community in the United States.

As public attention focused on Muslims in America after 9/11, many American Muslims asked themselves how their identities as Muslim individuals and communities living and participating in a western democracy fit into the American religious landscape. Muslim leaders and communities across the nation realized a need to educate their non-Muslim neighbors about Islam. Many Muslim communities opened their doors to the public, inviting non-Muslims to introductory lectures on Islam, and encouraging questions from non-Muslims. Even so, immediately post-9/11 many American Muslim women who had been veiling decided no longer to do so in order to look “less Muslim.” The *hijab* has seen resurgence in popularity more recently, as these women seek to reassert themselves as American Muslim women. Scholars like Islamic Studies professor Omid Safi of Duke University are becoming increasingly vocal in expressing the compatibility of Islam with American democracy. The years following 9/11 have also seen Muslim communities become more active in interfaith dialogue, co-hosting events with Christian, Jewish, or Hindu groups, and creating comfortable environments in which to converse and “break bread” together.

Today, many American Muslims continue to be victims of Islamophobia, the fear of Muslims. Mosques and Muslim community centers around the country have faced and continue to face vocal and legal opposition. In recent years these have included Park51 in lower Manhattan (dubbed in the media as “the

Ground Zero Mosque”) and a planned Muslim community center and mosque complex in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Nearly a decade after September 11th, a taxi driver in New York was slashed by a passenger when the latter learned that the driver was Muslim. Mosques in places like Escondido, California and New Haven, Connecticut were the targets of arson attacks in 2019.

Within this post-9/11 context many Muslim public interest groups were founded and those already in existence became more vocal. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), an umbrella group for many Muslim organizations that seeks to address many of the broader issues facing American Muslims, has maintained a proactive and important voice in shaping the discourse of Islam in America. The Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is also focused on political activism, specifically countering anti-Islam prejudice through lobbying. For example, CAIR has been involved in trying to stop anti-sharia legislation from passing in several states. Organizations like ISNA and CAIR, although not necessarily supported by all American Muslims, have been critical in framing the public discourse surrounding Islam in America after September 11th.