

Struggling Against Stereotypes

Summary: *The American media, including television programs, films, and newspapers, propagated negative portrayals of Islam and presented anti-Muslim rhetoric uncritically even before 9/11, though the issue intensified after the U.S. declared its “Global War on Terror.” Muslim individuals—and non-Muslims mistaken for Muslims—experience discrimination, harassment, and physical attacks, while mosques and Islamic centers are often vandalized. In the wake of hate attacks, Muslim organizations like the Islamic Circle of North America, the Council of American-Islamic Relations, the American Muslim Council, various mosque and Muslim media often utilize different outlets (open houses, pamphlets, call centers, TV series) to address stereotypes.*

One of the most widely discussed issues in the U.S. Muslim community is the negative image of Islam in the American media, an issue that was cause for concern even before 9/11. While appeals to the media for accuracy and fairness continue, newspaper headlines regularly print the words “Islam” and “Muslim” next to words like “fanatic,” “fundamentalist,” “militant,” “terrorist,” and “violence.” Uses of the term “*jihad*” in television programs and films are also illustrative. As a pamphlet for the media published by the American Muslim Council explains, the word *jihad* “is more accurately translated as ‘exertion of effort,’ not ‘holy war.’ The Prophet Muhammad said that the highest form of *jihad* is the personal struggle to make oneself a better Muslim.” Events such as the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent hostage crisis, the Gulf War, and, most significantly, 9/11 and the “Global War on Terror” that followed, have received enormous press coverage as evidence of “Islamic fundamentalism.” American Muslims often ask why a small group of extremists, whose terrorist actions violate the central principles of Islam, should determine the public image of the entire Muslim community. As Edward Said, author of *Covering Islam*, noted, prejudice against Muslims is “the last sanctioned racism.”

Muslims in the United States experience the impact of these stereotypes in myriad forms. Individuals have experienced discrimination in housing and employment, or even harassment and attacks from strangers on the street; mosques and Islamic centers across the country frequently report vandalism. During the 1990s the attacks on people and places of worship received little attention from the mainstream press, despite the fact that a number of mosques were destroyed by arson across the United States in places like Yuba City, California, Springfield, Illinois, and Greenville, South Carolina. Such incidents have only increased in recent years, adding to the list mosques in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Joplin, Missouri and Toledo, Ohio. Many Muslim communities experience difficulties with neighbors

and zoning boards even before establishing places of worship, and the connection between stereotypes and harassment is often explicit: at a city council meeting in California, one neighbor opposing the establishment of a local Islamic center exclaimed, “It only takes five people to make a group of terrorists.”

A 2011 report entitled “Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America,” published by the Center for American Progress, traces the voices and sources of funding of the anti-Islamic rhetoric that has stimulated a fear of Muslims. These include organizations like ACT! for America, Jihad Watch, American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), and Stop Islamization of America (SIOA). SIOA, founded in 2010, had a prominent role in creating public opposition to the Muslim community center, Park51, mistakenly dubbed as the “Ground Zero Mosque,” which was to be constructed in Lower Manhattan. SIOA was identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group in 2011. The Center for Security Policy (CSP) was identified by the “Fear, Inc.” report as being at the hub of the anti-Islam movement, as it is highly influential with right-wing politicians, and a “central hub of the anti-Muslim network and an active promoter of anti-Sharia messaging and anti-Muslim rhetoric.” In 2012, the American Freedom Defense Initiative sponsored advertisements on public transportation in the New York area that declared: “It’s not Islamophobia, it’s Islamorealism.” While many supported the organization’s right to freedom of speech, many, including the Anti-Defamation League, also criticized the SIOA and AFDI for condemning an entire religion and its members. Rabbis for Human Rights as well as Christian groups such as Sojourners and the United Methodist Women responded in support of Muslims, placing counter ads in support of Muslims.

Even before 9/11, the effects of stereotyping against Muslims were apparent. For example, in the immediate wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, early news accounts included reports of people of “Middle Eastern heritage” fleeing the scene; many journalists, so-called experts, and even former Representative Dave McCurdy linked the bombing to “fundamentalist Islamic terrorist groups.” The response was fast and furious: over 200 incidents of bias against the Muslim community followed in the next few days, including attacks on private homes and mosques. Muslims were not involved in the bombing, but many were active in the rescue efforts.

The American Muslim community has mobilized to fight against these dangerous stereotypes and their damaging effects. A growing number of Muslim organizations are offering resources to educate the

media and the general public about Islam, and to encourage Muslims in their local communities to speak out against discrimination. In the 1990s, the American Muslim Council in Washington, D.C. published a pamphlet to teach Muslims how to write op-ed pieces and letters to the editor of local newspapers as well as how to organize meetings with media and public officials in response to a crisis. The Islamic Circle of North America has set up a toll-free number to report bias and hate incidents; the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which began in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, has continued to track hate crimes against American Muslims. Muslims are also active in interfaith groups and outreach programs across the country.

Many Muslim individuals and communities in America are finding ways to be innovative and transparent in their efforts to dispel some of the stereotypes that are perpetuated about Islam. Mosques across the country hold open houses and invite non-Muslims to lectures about Islam or to attend Friday prayers. Advertisements for “Islam 101” classes are posted in subway cars and buses in Boston. Muslim student groups are hosting “Islam Awareness Weeks” on their college campuses. Individuals, too, are attempting to educate non-Muslims about various traditions of Islam. For example, Imam Khalid Latif, a Muslim chaplain at New York University, wrote a “Ramadan Reflection” article in the Huffington Post for each day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in 2011 and 2012, in which he addressed a range of topics from his own 9/11 story to the challenges and rewards of keeping the fast.

Television has also been a venue for “rebranding” Islam. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-2012) was a comedy series on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). *All-American Muslim* (2011) aired for one season on The Learning Channel (TLC). Following the daily lives of Lebanese-American Shi’a Muslim families living in Dearborn, Michigan, *All-American Muslim* received attention in the news when some companies such as the home-improvement store Lowe’s requested their advertisements be removed during the show’s airing. One loud voice in the controversy was the Florida Family Foundation whose founder claimed airing the show was “dangerous” because it presented Muslims as ordinary Americans.

While there are many strong voices, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, that denounce militant *jihad* and Islamic fundamentalism, there remain a number of media outlets and individuals who seem committed to promoting fear-inducing, monolithic, and extremist understandings of Islam. As Muslim communities

and their allies continue to find ways to counter these negative stereotypes, there may yet be a day when “Islamophobia” is an idea of the past and no longer a living reality.