

Article

## Post-9/11: Making Islam an American Religion

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**Abstract:** This article explores several key events in the last 12 years that led to periods of heightened suspicion about Islam and Muslims in the United States. It provides a brief overview of the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment known as “Islamophobia”, and it investigates claims that American Muslims cannot be trusted to be loyal to the United States because of their religion. This research examines American Muslim perspectives on national security discourse regarding terrorism and radicalization, both domestic and foreign, after 9/11. The article argues that it is important to highlight developments, both progressive and conservative, in Muslim communities in the United States over the last 12 years that belie suspicions of widespread anti-American sentiment among Muslims or questions about the loyalty of American Muslims. The article concludes with a discussion of important shifts from a Muslim identity politics that disassociated from American identity and ‘American exceptionalism’ to a position of integration and cultural assimilation.

**Keywords:** American Islam; cultural assimilation; homeland security; integration; Islamophobia; Islamophobia industry; Muslim gay rights; pluralism; Sunni-Shi’a; terrorism

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## 1. Overview: Increased Islamophobia

The attacks of 9/11 have been analyzed in various ways as constituting a point of transformation in American history after which “everything had changed”—including perceptions about the world and one’s surroundings, and relation to and awareness of a broader political geography ([1]; [2], p. 180; [3]). A major marker of this post-9/11 paradigm shift was, and for some remains, religion, including levels of religiosity and what it means to hold a particular religious view or identity in the United States. Some American Muslims reported that 9/11 introduced an era of intensified suspicion about Islam and Muslims on the part of non-Muslim neighbors, colleagues, classmates, and friends. Others reported that the initial suspicion of law enforcement officials, elected politicians, and homeland security agents over the last 12 years has developed into systematic, and sometimes extralegal, scrutiny of Muslims and Muslim communities [1,4].<sup>1</sup> The increase in hostility toward Islam and Muslims by security officials appears to have a direct impact on the faith and practice of Islam in the U.S., including the interpretation of the tenets and scriptures of the faith, the formation of Muslim identity in America, and the emphasis on volunteerism and civic engagement. For many Muslims and those who study the religion, Islam in America since 9/11 has undergone significant transformations.

This article explores some of the key events that led to periods of heightened suspicion about Islam and Muslims in the United States in the last 12 years. It provides a brief overview of the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment known as Islamophobia, and it critically examines the claims of those who promote legislation designed to marginalize American Muslims on the basis of their Islamic faith. The article addresses the perspectives of American Muslims who believe they are singled out in the national security discourse on terrorism and radicalization, both domestic and foreign. The authors take seriously the need to evaluate historical realities and shed light on developments, particularly among Muslim communities in the United States in the last 12 years, which might belie allegations of widespread anti-American sentiment among Muslims or questions about the loyalty of American Muslims.

In the last part of the article, we take up the epistemic shifts in relations among American Muslim communities since 9/11. Many American Muslims are embracing an authentically American identity inspired by and infused with modern and recognizably post-9/11 interpretations of mainstream Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. They are increasingly choosing to integrate into American society through participation in and production of American culture in both civic engagement and in new, innovative ways such as art, filmmaking, political involvement, authorship, scholarship, and interfaith engagement. Advancements in Sunni-Shi’a engagement and collaboration are underway. We take note of how major Muslim organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), have stayed at the forefront of Islamic reform. ISNA has maintained its relevance and its membership by capitalizing on and recognizing major trends in American Islam at its annual national convention.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the codification of Islamophobic rules and policies designed to monitor American Muslims, see [5].

We attempt to identify the major trends in American Islam as well as changes in the everyday activities of American Muslims after 9/11.<sup>2</sup> We argue that Islam in America is continuing to change and be transformed in ways that sometimes coincide with the policy objectives of the U.S. government and national security officials.

Islamophobia (coined by the Runnymede Report to describe western proclivity to anti-Muslim sentiment) did not arise in a vacuum. Anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment has a venerable history in Western culture. Since 9/11, a specific set of events helped to perpetuate the claims of the Islamophobia industry in the United States and Europe. While there are relevant contexts that have intensified Islamophobia in the United States, it is clear that they are exploited and exaggerated by individuals who are motivated by political considerations or are seeking self-enrichment and notoriety. The awareness of Islamophobia as a social problem in the United States and Western Europe was heightened in the academy with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* [9]. While Said did not use the term 'Islamophobia', he laid the groundwork for a greater awareness of the phenomenon. This phenomenon has been exacerbated since 9/11 as revealed in the number of new publications on the topic and on Islam in America [10–20].

Although the term 'Islamophobia' is now widely accepted and used in academic as well as legal, political, and social contexts, it remains contested in certain discourses. As such, there are multiple definitions of Islamophobia. Richard Schaefer, writing for the *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, dates the term back to the early 1990s and defines it as a "range of negative feelings toward Muslims and their religion, from generalized bigotry, intolerance, and prejudice on the one hand to a morbid dread and hatred on the other" that might "manifest itself in... discrimination against Muslims, social exclusion, verbal and physical harassment, hate crimes, attacks on mosques, and vilification of Islam in the media" [21,22].

## 2. American Muslims under Scrutiny

While the whole world has heard of the tragic loss of life perpetuated by the 9/11 attacks, relatively few outside of academia have paid attention to the impact of 9/11 on the lives of the thousands of American Arabs and Muslims who were detained without warrant under the auspices of the USA PATRIOT Act. The authors of *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade* describe this context of reinvigorated prejudicial treatment of Arabs and Muslims in the United States. Focusing particularly on the Arabs and Muslims of Detroit, the authors describe the first decade after the attacks of 9/11 as "post-9/11"—a "time/space in which they (American Arabs and Muslims) were linked to enemy Others and were expected to prove their loyalty to the nation-state in ways other Americans were not" ([23], p. 2). The book goes on to define the means by which the concept of a "target of opportunity" was re-appropriated by US national security officials as essentially a PR-friendly framework for engaging in thinly veiled institutional racism toward American Arabs and Muslims. This trope of Muslims as "enemies within" lingers. In September 2013, for example, Sid Roth, the

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<sup>2</sup> There is not space in this short article to discuss the transitions of Muslims in America over generations from being an immigrant society quite separate in some ways from the majority society to, especially after 9/11, integrating into the fabric of American society. For more on this, however, see [6–8].

founder of a Jewish Messianic movement that broadcasts Islamophobic messages, invited Erick Stakelbeck to speak about “stealth Jihad”, which he identified as “the enemy (Muslim) in a business suit”, and expounded the theory that the Muslim Brotherhood is working to destroy America and Europe. In the months after 9/11, FBI officials in Detroit, home to hundreds of thousands of Arabs and Muslims arrested, convicted, detained, and deported thousands of individuals due to their national origin or religion [24]. This narrative has also gained traction in Europe, Canada, and other countries [25–30].

Overwhelmingly, the targets of these national security procedures to gather intelligence have been American Muslims and their communities across the country. The March 2013 report *Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and Its Impact on American Muslims*, produced by the Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition, corroborates the problem of law officials singling out American Muslims as national security threats despite evidence that demonstrates a more serious threat from white supremacists and other far-right groups. According to the report, New York police “marginalized and criminalized a broad segment of American Muslims” based on their religious identity [31,32].<sup>3</sup>

As Arabs and Muslims in America increasingly experience the infringement of their civil rights and direct discrimination, questions of freedom of religion and the value of diversity or multi-culturalism in the United States come into focus. Are Muslims the exception to America’s history of gradual integration of minorities into its social fabric? Do Muslims in America face the options of either change, or as one interviewee in *Mapping Muslims* put it: “decrease your Islam,” or, failing that, treatment as an “enemy of freedom” and threat to national security ([32], p. 56)? If the answer to these questions is “yes”, then it is necessary to define what is meant by “too much Islam” or by “bad Muslim” as opposed to “good Muslim.”

Despite the passage of over 12 years since 9/11, American Muslims continue to face scrutiny and, in some cases, are subject to direct FBI surveillance due to the perceived contradiction between their religious and national identities—more bluntly, many cannot accept that the same person can be simultaneously a practicing Muslim and a good, loyal American. In the national media and many Washington offices, American Arabs and Muslims are still portrayed as “potential threats to American security,” but also, vexingly, as potential assets as seen during the Bush administration ([23], p. 88).<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration has neither reversed nor challenged its predecessor’s policies and has also taken up the “campaign to reshape the Middle East and fight the War on Terror” while enlisting the aid of American Muslims [34,35]. In an October 2012 article for *The Guardian*, Glenn Greenwald argues that the Obama administration has been working to “fully institutionalize—to make officially permanent—the most extremist powers it has exercised in the name of the war on terror” [36].

### 3. How the Killing of bin Laden Increased Islamophobia

Although Islamophobia is partially the result of unquestioned assumptions about Muslims, it is also clear that specific events occurred in the West after 9/11 that helped to reconstitute Americans’ latent fear of Muslims and Islam and likely further intensified anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. and Europe. These include, among others, the 2004 murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands, the 2004 Madrid

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<sup>3</sup> For a comparative analysis, see [24].

<sup>4</sup> For more on Washington’s support of the NYPD’s surveillance of American Muslims, see [33].

train bombing, the 2005 attacks on London's train system, and the release of a DVD titled *Obsession: Radical Islam's War against the West* [37,38]. The effect of these events was exacerbated by the 2006 controversy over the Danish cartoon defaming the Prophet and Pope Benedict's controversial lecture in Germany [39,40]. The 'Ground Zero Mosque' controversy in 2010 again exacerbated fear of Muslims in the West [41,42].

The "Arab Spring" in January 2011 and the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 led some to believe that the Global War on Terror might be coming to an end and that perhaps Islamophobia was seeing its last days.<sup>5</sup> Then two events re-enlivened suspicions across the United States about "homegrown Islamist terrorism," namely the attack on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012, killing U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens [44–48], and the Boston marathon bombing carried out by two brothers of Chechen Muslim origin on April 15, 2013. Many American Muslims believed that the death of bin Laden would usher in the beginning of the end of the Islamophobia they had faced in the prior decade. However, a 2011 survey conducted by the Ohio State University School of Communication, Cornell University's Survey Research Institute, and the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, suggested that many Americans' view of Islam and Muslims counter-intuitively deteriorated further following Obama's dramatic Sunday-night primetime announcement of the al-Qaeda leader's demise.<sup>6</sup> It seemed that the killing of bin Laden, and perhaps the media's handling of the news, served to exacerbate negative attitudes toward and associations with Muslims.

The study found that while half of the participants believed American Muslims were "trustworthy" and "peaceful" before bin Laden was killed, only one-third maintained those attitudes post-bin Laden. Omar Sacirbey surmises that "the most troublesome finding was that these negative shifts had occurred among political liberals and moderates, a constituency that had been seen as the most sympathetic to Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attacks." Specifically, the survey found that the proportion of political liberals who indicated that "Muslims make America more dangerous" increased from 8–24 percent after the media's coverage of bin Laden's death [48].

For non-Muslim Americans, the handling of bin Laden's death by the national media made them more apprehensive about becoming close friends with a Muslim—whereas 9% had expressed hesitance before his death, that figure rose to 20% some days afterward. In Portland, Maine, the day following bin Laden's death, someone vandalized a local mosque and spray-painted the message: "Osama Today, Islam Tomorrow" on one of its walls. In Texas, a schoolteacher was suspended for saying to a 9-year-old Muslim girl in his algebra class, "I bet that you're grieving" [48].

#### **4. The Islamophobia Industry in America: Shaping and Contesting American Islam**

While the demonization of Islam has a long history in America, 9/11 is seen by many to have marked a new phase [3,49]. A veritable Islamophobia industry developed around the demonization of

<sup>5</sup> For an example of enduring Islamophobia, see [43].

<sup>6</sup> See [48] for a poll based on 500 interviews between April 7 and May 1 (when bin Laden was killed) and another 341 interviews between May 2 and May 24, reporting that "the number of respondents who said Muslims living in America 'increased the likelihood of a terrorist attack' rose from 27 percent before May 1 to 34 percent after."

Islam. Publications such as *Fear, Inc.*, a report by the Center for American Progress, the Council on American-Islamic Relations' (CAIR's) annual 2009–2010 and 2011–2012 Islamophobia Reports as well as its briefs and other documents, and *The Islamophobia Industry* by Nathan Lean identified a ring of “pseudo-scholars” and authors supported by a verifiable 40-million-dollar-a-year Islamophobia industry in the United States with an increasingly global reach. CAIR estimates that between 2008 and 2011, the industry made approximately 120 million dollars [50–52]. The industry is driven by neocon stars: Daniel Pipes, Robert Spencer, David Yerushalmi, Glenn Beck, Pamela Gellner, Paul Wolfowitz, David Horowitz, and Frank Gaffney as well as native informers Walid Shoebat, Walid Phares, Wafa Sultan, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ibn Warraq, Brigitte Gabriel, Tawfik Hamid, and Zuhdi Jasser. They have been prolific, producing and re-circulating false or exaggerated information about Islam and Muslims in order to gain lucrative speaking engagements and increase their influence among neocons in government [53].

Their lectures and publications promote the idea that there is a global Muslim conspiracy to take over the United States and impose “medieval Islamic law” on America [54–56]. They also demand that the government of the United States begins “religion building” [57] to help fashion a “moderate” Islam, which would essentially mean an Islam that is devoid of elements of praxis or articles of faith [58,59]. Some people have accused them of scare tactics in that any Muslim who prays and fasts is deemed to be either a terrorist or a potential terrorist who cannot be trusted. The Islamophobia industry promoted the Park 51 attempt to stop New York Muslims from constructing an Islamic community center several blocks from “Ground Zero.” Muslims saw that effort as a direct affront on their right to freedom of religion as American citizens [60].

The Islamophobia industry today is working to outlaw the Islamic ethical code, known as ‘shari`a’, in every state in the country [61]. Since 9/11, some Republican legislators around the U.S. have convened congressional hearings to investigate whether Islam is a religion and have submitted proposals in over 32 states to legally ban shari`a law [62,63]. The 2013 Boston marathon attack re-ignited Islam- and shari`a-phobia. As a result, American Muslims mourned the attack in Boston but also felt increasingly marginalized and targeted.

## 5. The “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” Effect

Mahmood Mamdani may not have coined the phrase “good Muslim, bad Muslim,” but his now-paradigmatic book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* drew on the large body of literature and evidence that gained traction after 9/11 when government offices were actively seeking to define ‘the enemy’ in the Global War on Terror. Muslims were placed under the microscope [64,65]. While Mamdani’s book did not receive as significant a response from the academic world as perhaps it could have, his research forms a definite contribution to the study of the policies that seek to identify two essential Muslim personality tropes in terms of national security: “good” and “bad” [66]. Mamdani’s book ultimately gave rise to a flurry of other published books and articles about the efforts to brand Muslims as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. His conception of the detrimental impact of a worldview—one that is quite common in Washington—that tends to subdivide all people into “moderns” and “premoderns” helps to constitute a fuller genealogy of the Islamophobic policies produced by lawmakers in the aftermath of 9/11.

Mamdani constructs his critique of this dichotomy on the basis of the genocide of the Herero people in South West Africa in 1904 by the Germans and the Holocaust later that century perpetrated by Hitler's Third Reich regime. For Mamdani, the relevance to Islamophobia today is clear: both of these genocides, and indeed all genocides, begin with what he calls "race branding" ([66], p. 7). He notes that "(t)he link between the genocide of the Herero and the Holocaust was race branding, which was used not only to set a group apart as an enemy but also to annihilate it with an easy conscience" ([66], p. 7).

Analyst Peter Danchin, in his multiple installments on *The Imminent Frame*, an online blog featuring researchers of religion, secularism, and nationalism, spotlighted what may be the most conspicuous, and perhaps earliest, use of the "good Muslim, bad Muslim" dichotomy in an official narrative. His posts in the spring of 2010 were a response to the February 23 Chicago Council on Global Affairs Report titled, "Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy" [67]. Drawing on the work of Mamdani, Danchin's 2010 entry expands on the U.S. foreign policy implications of the modern-premodern paradigm that animates the hostility of the Chicago Council Report toward various political forms of Muslim identity. Danchin indicts the conflation of religion with power politics not only for its facile reductionism but also for its potency in legitimating state-sponsored surveillance of American Muslims, as well as violence against Muslims abroad in the name of the Global War on Terror.

In this vein, Saba Mahmood in "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation" has posited that since 9/11 the U.S. government, including politicians on both sides of the aisle, has worked to institutionalize secularism in Muslim societies "both as a political doctrine and as a political ethic" [68]. According to Mahmood, secularism in "contemporary American discourses on Islam" is "deeply shaped by U.S. security and foreign policy concerns in the Muslim world" ([68], p. 323). For Mahmood, "contrary to normative understanding of secularism today," the "force" of what she terms "secularity" in the U.S. government policy of reforming Islam "from within" is not in "neutralizing the space of politics from religion" but is rather in "producing a particular kind of religious subject who is compatible with the rationality and exercise of liberal political rule" ([68], pp. 323, 344).

The work of this policy over the last 12 years has led to constraints on the identity formation of American Muslims. For this small but diverse and largely un-integrated religious minority, Mahmood asserts that having to choose between "religious truth" and secularity "can only elicit an equally singular vision in response, one in which all shades of interpretive, moral, and ethical ambiguity must be leveled so as to salvage the dregs of what might have once constituted a tradition or a life-world" ([68], p. 326). In "Muslims and American Religious Pluralism", Yvonne Haddad similarly argued that post-9/11 government security measures that target American Muslims "have isolated Muslims and placed them in what one Muslim called a 'virtual internment'" where Muslim identity is politicized and regarded as a security threat rather than a religious identity that can co-exist with American identity [69].

The Chicago Report recommends that U.S. foreign policy ought to focus on attacking the premodern Muslims who are anti-Western, while acknowledging that "at the same time, American security crucially depends on more effective engagement with, and support for, the good Muslims, not only to save them from the extremists but also to create stable, peaceful, and cooperative partners in a

strategically and geopolitically vital part of the world.” This pragmatism in foreign policy is lost on American Muslims in the United States who feel marginalized and are frustrated by being treated as a constant ‘enemy within’ who pose a threat to national security at every turn [70].

## 6. The National Security Agenda and its Double Discourse

On June 13, 2007, the anti-Muslim hate group Society of Americans for National Existence (SANE), under the leadership of David Yerushalmi, unveiled the “Mapping Shari’a in America Project” that targeted some 2,300 Islamic institutions in the United States [71]. The project draws on the fear of some Americans that Muslims are attempting to “Islamify” the country by applying “shari`a law” in US courts [72]. Yerushalmi designed the “Mapping Shari`a” project to “collect information about America’s... mosques and associated day schools, provide information to both law enforcement officials and the public, and test the proposition that Shari`a amounts to a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. Government” [73]. SANE publications claim that Islamic centers in the United States have become hotbeds of extremist activity that “promote violence, terrorism and hatred against America, and violent jihad” [74]. In February 2007, SANE issued a policy paper that stated: “Whereas, *adherence to Islam as a Muslim is prima facie evidence of an act in support of the overthrow of the US. Government* through the abrogation, destruction, or violation of the US Constitution and the imposition of Shari`a on the American People. . . It shall be a *felony punishable by 20 years in prison to knowingly act in furtherance of, or to support the, adherence to Islam*” [75]. Yerushalmi has been quoted as saying: “Shari`a is not merely speech, and it is certainly not religion as understood by the West... Rather, it is a political and ideological mandate to destroy the West. We believe that every act to teach, preach, and live according to traditional, historical, and authoritative Shari’a contributes to a criminal conspiracy to overthrow our government.” Yerushalmi has offered a template to legislators in over 20 states that claims to sidestep constitutional objections to singling out Islam by avoiding explicit mention of the religion (not all states have used his template).

By the 1990s, American society could virtually be divided along two paradigmatic lines [76]. One boundary delineated the United States as a Judeo-Christian nation, which by implication excluded and marginalized members of other faith groups. Belonging to this category required serious cultural and religious sacrifices as well as, not accidentally, adopting an unwavering support for the State of Israel. This practically kept Arabs and Muslims on the outer fringes of acceptable American identity. Those outside the bounds of this paradigm operated on the assumptions of a second paradigm that promoted the United States as a nation that honors pluralism and celebrates diversity. This conception of pluralism that created space for Muslims made many Protestant evangelicals and supporters of Israel uncomfortable.

Muslims everywhere, once thought to be natural allies of the United States against the atheist Communists, were re-imagined during the 1990s. They were once again, as they were after the establishment of Israel and in the decades thereafter, depicted by some as enemies of freedom unfit for citizenship in the new American world. This depiction of Muslims as enemies facilitated the use of drones by President Obama [77]. Yasmin Alibhai Brown has pointed out that the drones have become an instrument by which to kill Muslims who in any way may have obstructed US interests abroad [78]. While claims of American exceptionalism have been on the decline, the argument is far from having

been laid to rest. A 2011 article for *Foreign Policy* entitled “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” Stephen Walt advises that “if Americans want to be truly exceptional, they might start by viewing the whole idea of ‘American exceptionalism’ with a much more skeptical eye” [79].

In the 12 years since 9/11, Muslims in Western Europe and the United States have faced unprecedented and rising xenophobia and Islamophobia, at least in part as a consequence of the propaganda for multiple wars in Muslim majority countries. However, scholars such as Jack Shaheen, Tariq Modood, and Michael Suleiman, who focus on depictions of Muslims in the West and their treatment, argue that Islamophobia is an extension and manifestation of a more deeply-seated and visceral resentment that must be recognized as an intense and vitriolic form of racism and bigotry [80].

## 7. Emergent Forms of American Islam

American Muslims have responded to 9/11, Islamophobia, and changing attitudes about American identity within their own communities in many different ways. In 2010, Qasim Rashid, an American Muslim writer, in an article in the Religion section of *The Huffington Post*, responded to an e-mail he had received, which asked, “Are Muslims even allowed to be loyal to the United States?” [81]. Rashid’s reply reflects the latest trend in American Muslim attitudes. “For a Muslim, loyalty to the United States is not simply lip service but a fundamental requirement of faith” because America recognizes “the equality of its citizens regardless of background, and champions a universal freedom of religion.”

Others have also written more extensively about how Islam in America has shifted since 9/11 toward a more deeply integrated relationship with American society and identity [82]. In a 2004 Nawawi Foundation paper, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” Umar Faruq Abd-Allah argues that American Muslims cannot “(safely) retreat from the task” of “(c)reating a sound Muslim American identity” [83]. Abd-Allah’s paper contributes an intentionally Muslim voice to the discourse on Islam in America and to identity formation for American Muslims seeking a safe space in post-9/11 American society. Omid Safi’s 2003 edited volume, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, also stresses the need for Muslims in the West to find ways of better integrating their Muslim identities and interpretations of Islamic doctrines and practices with their societal and cultural settings [84].

The availability of Islamic literacy programs and Islam 101 sessions run by Muslim Student Associations on college campuses has proliferated nationwide in the last 12 years [85]. These events are meant to combat Islamophobia and present accurate information about Islam and Muslims to those most in need of a basic literacy in Islam and Muslim identity. Many of the conferences led by The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Relief, The Next Wave Muslim Initiative (NWMI), The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), The Muslim Political Action Committee (MPAC), and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as well as certain United States government internship programs since 9/11 have focused on Muslim engagement with and participation in mainstream American society, politics, and culture [86].

The 50<sup>th</sup> ISNA annual conference in 2013, entitled “Envisioning a More Perfect Union: Building the Beloved Community,” kicked off with a session on “Our History: The Story of American Muslims Through ISNA’s Eyes” [87]. The organizers dedicated the second session of the conference to Rev.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in honor of the 50th anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech. The speakers included Imam Zaid Shakir and Azizah Al-Hibri, Yasmin Mogahed, Tariq Ramadan, and Yasir Qadhi [87,88]. Mogahed is known for her support of pluralism and pietistic approach to Islamic faith and practice in general [89].

Also at the conference was Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi Al Amreeki, an American Muslim writer and blogger on muslimmatters.org. He is Dean of Academic Affairs at the Al-Maghrib Institute, an Islamic educational institution [90]. Qadhi has written three books on *shirk*, that is, ‘polytheism’ or equating other deities with the one God of Islam, and has spoken publically about Jews and Christians being *mushrikun*, or polytheists, who are “filthy” in the eyes of God and whose lives and property are *halal*, or religiously lawful, for the taking until they testify to their belief in the one God of Islam [91].

The 2006 ISNA convention featured Pakistani speaker Farhat Hashmi, a controversial speaker who, like Qadhi, has a large following in the United States. Hashmi runs a school for girls in Pakistan with branches in Toronto and Houston [92]. The girls at the school must wear *niqab*, or a full-lengthy black garment that covers every part of a woman including eyes and hands. Hashmi is known for supporting the practice of polygyny in Islam and encourages Pakistani women to allow their husbands to marry multiple times [93]. Her following in Pakistan is mainly among middle and upper class women [94]. New Muslim groups may be challenging the previous stature of older, larger organizations like ISNA and ICNA or the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) [95]. The latter organization has responded by funding The Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary. This is an effort to train Muslim chaplains in the United States. IIIT began funding for the creation of a core of American religious leadership who are knowledgeable about American religions and who could engage in interfaith dialogue as well as communicate comfortably with Muslim American youth [96].

## 8. Reform and Gay Rights Muslim American Organizations

What ISNA and ICNA are contending with are indigenous movements within Muslim American communities to create “reform” mosques and communities that reflect their changing values and politics [97]. The Washington, D.C. based Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) group is gaining a following among the growing Muslim population in the D.C. metro area [98]. The group promotes women’s empowerment and a “progressive shariah” guided by their philosophy of progressive Islamic humanism. MPV provides counseling services to same-sex couples and explains that it uses “traditional Islamic formulations of *ijtihad*, to derive clarity from Quran and authentic Sunnah,” following the teachings of Imam Daayiee Abdullah [99]. Abdullah, an African-American and a graduate of Georgetown University, was born Sid Thompson in Detroit, Michigan and is an openly gay Muslim and widely recognized leader for gay rights in Islam. He uses his MPV website and the Al-Fatiha Foundation, as well as his connections with the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity, the LGBT Muslim Retreat, Muslim Gay Men, and the mosque he directs, Masjid Nur Al-Isslaah, to combat Islamophobia and discrimination against homosexuals [100]. His MPV group started as a small group of American Muslims who met in a library and has now grown into a nation-wide movement with 12 chapters including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Atlanta [101]. While ISNA and ICNA organizers have yet to consider broaching the topic of gay rights in Islam or the status of women, MPV mosques have female Imams who lead mixed congregations in prayers

where men and women stand side-by-side, and openly support same-sex marriages between Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims, including situations where a female Muslim marries outside the faith—a practice banned by traditional Muslims.

In a 2007 Huffington Post article about MPV, Mohamed Magid, ISNA president, was asked about the values of the MPV group. He was careful not to condemn the groups, saying “he welcomes a ‘marketplace of ideas’ competing within Islam” and emphasized that he has “no right to strip anyone of Islam who wants to be Muslim” ([101], p. 2). Still, he was firm that in his mosque only men lead prayer and he does not believe Islam “condones homosexuality”. While the MPV group enjoys some popularity, only a very small segment of American Muslims support it and they have struggled in the past to maintain places of worship in the face of challenges and discrimination by more traditional Muslims.

Muslim reform groups in the United States were very marginal in the mainstream until the years following 9/11 [102]. Oftentimes, American Muslim reform movements enjoy some support for a short period and then fall out of favor with the community and shut their doors—defunct websites like *islamicreform.org* are testaments to the lingering resilience of traditional Islam and the hesitation of American Muslims to break from the past. However, reform movements coupled with gay rights advocacy organizations, such as the Al-Fatiha Foundation, established in 1997, and the Safra Project, created in 2001, have managed to stand the test of time [103].

## 9. American Muslims Engaged in Culture Production

In recent history, American Muslims have played an integral part in American sports, often as wildly popular professional athletes.<sup>7</sup> They have engaged pop culture as musicians, actors, and TV personalities [104].<sup>8</sup> American Muslim comics are also gaining recognition and becoming household names.<sup>9</sup> Only recently, however, have American Muslims begun making their stories known through the medium of film. Before 9/11, Muslims were regularly depicted as the stock “bad guys” in mainstream Hollywood movies. In a 2013 article by Philip Giraldi, “Why We Hate Them: Arabs in Western Eyes,” Giraldi explains that in early films, “Arabs were increasingly depicted... as lawless savages who mindlessly opposed the advanced civilizations of Europe, not unlike the American Indians who had stood in the way of manifest destiny” [105]. In line with the “good Muslim, bad Muslim” effect discussed above, Giraldi argues that good Arabs conformed while “the bad Arabs were the ‘disobedient’ who sought to maintain their traditional ways of life.” The exact terms of this dichotomy may have shifted with time, but many American Muslims continued to struggle with the “good Muslim, bad Muslim” paradox throughout the last decade. No longer complacently accepting a subaltern status, American Muslims have begun to enter the movie-making business and are intent on making a positive difference in the way Muslims are characterized.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Mike Tyson, Shaquille O’Neal, Hakeem Olajuwon, and Rasheed Wallace.

<sup>8</sup> Famous American Muslim Musicians: Casey Kasem, Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens, Yusef Lateef, and famous rappers like Ice Cube, Lupe Fiasco, Mos Def, Snoop Dogg, Q-Tip, Immortal Technique, Busta Rhymes, T-Pain. Actors and TV personalities: Mehmet Oz, a.k.a. Dr. Oz, Iffran Khan, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Sayed Badreya, and Said Taghmaoui.

<sup>9</sup> Comedians: Dave Chappelle, Aasif Mandvi, Dean Obeidullah, Azhar Usman, and Ahmed Ahmed.

Movies made by and about Muslims in the United States include the 2009 film, *Amreeka*, by Cherien Dabis and Nisreen Faour, or the 2007 short film, *Arab in America* by Nabil Abou-Harb, and the 2011 movie, *Mooz-Lum*, by Qasim Basir starring Danny Glover. However, aspiring American Muslim filmmakers are seeking innovative ways to fund their creative visions for original motion pictures like *Adeela* by Nicholas Paul Ybarra. *Adeela* is a movie in the making that is struggling to raise funds to move into the production phase. The movie seeks to tell the story of a Muslim girl raised in the United States who falls for a Jewish boy and experiences a “culture clash in America” [106]. It is taking time for American Muslims to make it in Hollywood but it is significant nonetheless that people like the creators of *Adeela* are not giving up.

In the meantime, filmmakers who are sympathetic to the plight of Muslims in America, like Evangelical Reverend Steven D. Martin of Tennessee, are using their resources to produce short documentaries such the 2012 film *Islam in America: The Christian Truth* [107]. The film features American Muslim leaders who are known for their positive messaging about American Muslim identity and Islam in America. Most prominently among them is Islamic Society of North America President Imam Mohamed Magid, and the first Muslim university chaplain in the United States, Imam Yahya Hendi. Islamic scholar John Esposito is also interviewed. These individuals helped portray the struggles of American Muslims in the face of rising Islamophobia after 9/11. Along these lines, the 2010 American Congregations report, *A Decade of Change 2000–2010*, documents efforts by various Christian denominations to reach out to members of other faiths, including Muslims [108].

As American Muslims moved toward greater engagement in local, state, and federal government after 9/11, they re-examined many of their previously held social conservative stances [109]. While a majority of Muslims voted Republican before 9/11 out of support for the domestic policies of the party that reflected “traditional values,” the processes of integration post-9/11 served as an opportunity for American Muslims to re-evaluate their own positions on issues of national importance, such as religious freedom and, as we have seen, gay rights [110].

## 10. American Muslims Engaging in New Ways

American Muslims have responded to Islamophobia and shari‘aphobia in variegated and creative ways [111]. They have assumed a redemptive posture in combatting misinformation about Islam and American Muslim identity while reclaiming each by supporting, participating in, and initiating community and civic engagement projects as well as contributing to U.S. politics, popular culture, and an ongoing national interfaith dialogue. American Muslims today emphasize what they see as shared American and Islamic values of honoring and celebrating difference. They also envision their efforts to integrate Islam into the tapestry of American society as a way of protecting themselves from the phobias that adversely affect and threaten their communities.

In 2006, the first Muslim congressman in the U.S., Keith Ellison of Minnesota, was sworn into office on a copy of Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an from 1734, after much consternation over whether or not an oath is valid on any scripture other than the Bible [112]. His experience paved the way in 2008 for Andre Carson, democrat from Indiana, the second Muslim elected to Congress whose campaign and election were much quieter and drew fewer questions about his religion [113].

American Muslims today understand newfound forms of cultural engagement and civic activism to be important avenues for securing the right of religious freedom in the name of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights for American Muslims. U.S.-based partnerships like the 501(c)(3) Clergy Beyond Borders (CBB), founded jointly by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian American clerics, further illustrate this larger trend among forward-looking Muslim Americans and their counterparts in other faiths to integrate Islam into America's cultural and religious fabric. The CBB website emphasizes the organization's vision that "all religions contain a message of commitment to improving the world" [114]. CBB advocates "mutual recognition among religious communities, seeking not to remove meaningful borders between them, but rather to build bridges of understanding and cooperation" [114]. Like American Muslim youth organizations, part of the goal of CBB is to educate non-Muslims and Muslims about the uniquely democratic, pluralistic, and modern nature of Islam, or at least American Islam [114,115]. Muslim American youth have set out to integrate Islam into the American popular conception of religious pluralism and diversity through the modern avenues of networking, blogging, events on college campuses, and conferences and seminars open to the public that cater to non-Muslims around the country [116].

Other Muslim-based organizations, including the United Muslims of America (UMA), the American Muslim Alliance (AMA), the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Ummah of North America (MUNA), and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), began increasingly to support interfaith engagement across the United States after 9/11 [117]. Appropriating "One God We Trust," UMA's website features a full section devoted to interfaith activism. The description of the section explains that UMA sees "America as one nation, endeavoring to create one family through interfaith understanding. We promote racial and religious harmony through religious institutions, projecting an image of America as a world leader who stands up for the human rights for all communities." Eboo Patel, well-known for his work in interfaith around the world, drew a lot of attention with the establishment of the Interfaith Youth Core that some people likened to a "Muslim Peace Corps" interfaith organization [117].

American Muslims have found a kind of special kinship with American Jews in working toward greater interfaith cooperation [118]. Not to be left in the dust of the rapid advancements in post-9/11 Muslim interfaith engagement, ISNA president Mohamed Magid and a delegation of imams from around the world, along with Congressman Keith Ellison, traveled with the U.S. State Department to the Wall of Death in Auschwitz, Germany to offer prayers where many thousands of Jewish prisoners were killed during the Nazi Holocaust [119].

Muslim-Christian alliances in the 12 years after 9/11 have also expanded widely and, along with improving Muslim-Jewish relations, may help to create a more accepting space for American Muslims in U.S. society in the long term [120]. American Muslim communities, particularly mosques, which may not be directly affiliated with interfaith organizations, have also opened their doors to Americans of other faiths to join in worship services as well as holiday celebrations. American Muslims have also led prayer services and vigils at times of national mourning in the last 12 years, whether or not the assailant was allegedly Muslim [121]. Ramadan, the holy Muslim month of fasting, provides an opportune venue for interfaith engagement at meals where Muslims are encouraged to break the day's fast with their neighbors [122].

An important feature of American Islam in the last 12 years has also been intra-faith dialogue and engagement—“intra-faith” in this case refers to work by American Muslims on improving Sunni-Shi‘a relations. The website The American Muslim (TAM), run by Sheila Musaji, a leader in developing frameworks of understanding American Islam, quotes a 1959 fatwa, or religious treatise, by Shaikh Mahmood Shaloot of Al-Azhar University: “Islam does not require a Muslim to follow a particular Madh’hab (school of thought). Rather, we say: every Muslim has the right to follow one of the schools of thought which has been correctly narrated and its verdicts have been compiled in its books” [123]. The excerpt goes on to specify that the Shi‘ite school of thought is “religiously correct to follow in worship as are other Sunni schools of thought.” Musaji’s piece includes a nearly exhaustive list of articles and links to websites dedicated to Sunni-Shi‘a, or “SuShi”, reconciliation, mutual understanding, and intra-faith engagement [124]. This too marks a significant shift in American Muslim attitudes since 9/11. Whereas before 9/11, American Muslims either ignored Sunni-Shi‘a issues or assumed sectarianism was not a problem in the United States, post-9/11, American Muslims are acknowledging that this is an important area with increasingly profound consequences for the world community of Muslims [125]. In fact, the sphere of Sunni-Shi‘a intra-faith activism may be one field in which American Muslims are leading the way forward internationally.

Amid rising tensions between Sunni and Shi‘a Muslims in Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria and other countries where sectarian violence has spilled over into civil war and attempts at genocide, a group of American Muslim scholars and Imams were convened by ISNA in September 2013 to sign the “Washington Declaration Uniting Shi‘ah and Sunni Scholars of North America” [126]. According to one of the signatories, “this declaration rejects all forms of sectarian violence between schools of thought within Islam... It calls for the respect of religious symbols of all sects of Islam... (and) for dialogue between the schools of thought and calls for imams to carry this message of mutual respect to their communities” [127]. ISNA president Mohamed Magid asserted that “ISNA is a platform for the unity of Muslims—whatever brings Muslim together strengthens all of them.”

Among some of the most active groups of American Muslims in the pre- and post-9/11 efforts to integrate Islam into the mainstream of American psyches and culture have been activist youth programs [128]. The February 2010 Purple Hijab Day was promoted as an annual event where women don purple headscarves to end domestic violence “in our ummah,” a reference to the Muslim community [129]. Green Muslims in the District, based in Washington D.C., have evolved from an online blog to a full website where events are coordinated, such as Zero Trash Parties and networking mixers for Muslim green activists to meet and pool efforts [130]. The nationwide Ramadan Fast-a-Thon has quickly developed a positive legacy on campuses across the country. Muslim Student Associations typically organize a day of fasting where non-Muslims are invited to join their Muslim classmates in abstaining from food and water from sunup to sundown and are then welcomed to partake in a special meal to break the fast (*iftar*) and accompanying prayers. They donate the funds they gather to a charity. Students spend the day in communication and many participants have explained that Fast-a-Thon helped them better relate to Muslims in America and at their universities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There is no official website for Ramadan Fast-a-Thon at this time but Vanderbilt University’s description is helpful. Available: < <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/leadership/signature-events/ramadan-fast-a-thon-by-msa> >.

Other programs established by American Muslims are run by professionals but targeted toward American Muslim youth, such as IMAN's Takin' it to the Streets, Patel's above-mentioned Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), and the Muslim Public Service Network (MPSN) [131].

More and more Muslim college students are finding creative ways to reach out to their local communities beyond their campuses as well. Georgetown University's Muslim Chaplaincy, one of only 13 such programs in the United States, offered a "Muslim Alternative Spring Break" for the first time in March 2012. After a competitive selection process, 12 Muslim undergraduate students led by their campus Imam traveled to Parkersburg, West Virginia to work with Habitat for Humanity building homes for a family in need. Students spent their entire Spring Break in service working side-by-side in the community. Parkersburg is a city with likely very little to no direct exposure to Islam or Muslims in the recent past. The Georgetown group attended church services in solidarity with the local community and baked cookies for the congregation after the service. The church community broke bread with the Muslim students before the week's end, and they are working to maintain strong ties and possibly return to Parkersburg the following year. Their service was noted by local newspapers and television news media who pointed out that these students willingly came to snowy Parkersburg rather than enjoy a more "traditional" Spring Break [132].

As American Muslims come to define Islam in America, they are also poised to contribute to Islamic scholarship and the training of Imams. In 2008, the Zaytuna Institute, founded in 1996 in Berkeley, California by Muslim "rock stars" Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, and Hatem Bejian, became Zaytuna College. The college follows an integrated curriculum of Islamic studies, Arabic language, and liberal arts including U.S. history and literature. Its motto is "Where America meets Islam," and its goal is to be accredited by the University of California system—it compares itself to private religiously-based universities founded by American Jews and Christians [133].

## **11. Conclusions: Re-telling the Story of Islam in America**

The question of the future of Islam in America is tethered to our understanding of the history of Muslims in America before and after 9/11, as it always has been. However, in this study we have attempted to demonstrate the utter complexity and irreducible polyvocality of this large and diverse community of Americans. There are no easy answers as to whether Islamophobia will ever loosen its grasp on the psyches of millions of Americans who lived through 9/11 and witnessed 12 years of sporadic 'homegrown' attacks on American soil and cannot help but associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism and violence. However, there have been and continue to be transformations in Muslim identity in the United States and paradigm shifts in what Islam means in American contexts as well as what constitutes Islamic values and practices for American Muslims.

American Muslims are leaving behind the familiar grievance narratives about Islamophobia and instead are responding to fear, ignorance, hate, and even violence in creative, positive, and culturally substantive ways through art, media, film, writing, scholarship, partnerships, and institution-building. To be sure, the everyday lives of Muslims in America who struggle to reconcile their identities require further analysis. This whirlwind glance at the status of Muslims and Islam in the U.S. in the last 12 years has revealed some of the polygonal and quixotic ways individuals and communities are re-negotiating their identities in relation to their changing interpretations of and attitudes about Islam

and religiosity. While this article extrapolates upon several types of trends in American Islam, no one major trend *per se* has arisen that can capture the multifaceted nature of “an American Muslim community.” Instead, we are left with a greater appreciation of liberal- and less- or even anti-liberal leanings and trends in a vast plurality of American Muslim communities. These individuals and collectivities are not shaped by 9/11 or Islamophobia, nor do they occupy a penumbral space in the shadow of the specter of terrorism. American Muslim identities and emergent forms of American Islam were never circumscribed by terrorism narratives and today they continue to defy and subvert assumptions about Islam and Muslim identity.

American Muslim communities, and individuals, make decisions on a regular basis that challenge prototypical idealizations and stereotypes of Islam—they choose to reform, or not, and American Muslims perceived as “conservative” or “traditional” are increasingly engaged in American society and aware of their decisions. They operate on informed rationalities, as do their counterparts who have chosen different paths of practice, spirituality, and epistemology. What these tides in American Islam share is a common hope and struggle for acceptance and integration into the broader American tapestry of culture, religion, politics, and sociality. In many senses, the proverbial ball is now in the court of non-Muslim Americans who must decide how they will choose to perceive, categorize, interact with, interpret, and respond to American Muslims and American Islam as well as Muslims and Islam in America—the two are not always the same, particularly among communities of Muslims who may be more recent immigrants to the United States. In its relatively short history, the United States has already undergone major societal transformations to accommodate groups of people who were previously marginalized, demonized, or otherwise subjugated and discriminated against. Will the next sea change in American society be to end the “othering” of Islam and Muslims? Will the nearly 50% of Americans who believe Muslims pose a threat to national security re-examine their assumptions about nationalism, patriotism, American exceptionalism, and of course Islam or ‘Islamism’ to create a safe space for American Muslims? [19,134].

Not long ago, Muslims in the United States prided themselves on their Islamic exceptionalism and isolated themselves from American society. In 2007, 47% of American Muslims surveyed identified Islam as their primary allegiance above that of nation and citizenship [135]. Islam maintained a special dispensation and was a source of security that allowed America’s Muslims to stand outside while simultaneously living within American society. Muslims in America seemed content to live on the edges of the mainstream until 9/11. Ten years later, America’s Muslims are engaged and struggling to enter the mainstream of American society.

In the months and years after 9/11 under the Bush and Obama administrations, both American Muslims and the U.S. government have worked toward integrating American Muslims into American society [136]. However, persistent fear, widespread prior misconceptions, and an ongoing lack of cultural literacy about Islam and Muslims after 9/11 resulted in the rise of anti-Muslim, or Islamophobic, sentiment among many conservatives and, undoubtedly, opportunists in the United States. Today, American Muslims have a long way to go to secure either a safe or at least a less-contested space in American society. Yet, through their continued and ever-more diverse efforts, the prospect of Islam becoming widely accepted as an American religion is becoming increasingly real.

There are encouraging signs of a more defined and recognizable narrative of Islam as part of the family of American religions. Keeping with the tradition of annual White House Ramadan dinners

started by his predecessor, George W. Bush, Barack Obama attended the 2011 Ramadan breaking fast dinner at the White House. In his speech to the audience, Obama stated, “Islam has always been part of America,” and “America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings” [137]. This type of acknowledgement coming from the President may help to advance the efforts of American Muslims working to gain broad, cultural acceptance of Islam as an American religion, but, for many of the individuals involved in Islamic literacy work, speeches are not sufficient on their own.

Our research has found that there has been a notable shift from a Muslim identity politics based on disassociating from American identity, or ‘American exceptionalism’ and its cultural trappings, to a stance of integration and cultural assimilation. That is not to say that Muslims have abandoned their customs to conform to an Anglo-American imaginary, but that many American Muslims have redoubled efforts to retell the story of Islam in America—sometimes claiming origins that date back to the 12th century [138]. American Muslims in the last 12 years have also sought to substantiate their claims about a copacetic identity that is both American and Muslim by writing about Islam as an authentically American religion; indeed, since 9/11 there has been a plethora of publications both online and in print dedicated to the notion that Islam is an American religion and that Muslims are every bit as American as their Jewish and Christian counterparts [8]. These works are another piece of the intricate tapestry of projects and movements American Muslims have initiated since 9/11.

Combined, these undertakings illustrate a certain set of social shifts taking place in American Muslim communities and intellectual circles. These changes reflect the evolving realities of a more deeply rooted immigrant population as well as the complex and lasting impact of 9/11 on America’s most diverse and vulnerable religious community as it struggles to gain acceptance into mainstream American society through the practice of different but integrated forms of American Islam [139].

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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