

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AMERICA

By

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## **Does America have a Muslim Problem?**

I started this paper as a result of reading a Time Magazine article entitled *Is America Islamophobic?* (Ghosh, 2010). The article tried to answer whether America had a Muslim problem focusing on the current discourse regarding mosque building in the US, particularly the controversial Park 51 project in New York City.

The Park 51 controversy illustrates the many misconceptions (addressed later in the paper) about Islam and its adherents that is pervading in American society. It is important that misconceptions are addressed to find potential solutions to the growing Islamophobia in America.

Park 51 is a project that plans to build a Muslim cultural center and mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. In response to the plan, many Americans demonstrated at the site and many more protested the plan throughout the US. Protesters carrying signs like "All I Need to Know About Islam, I Learned on 9/11", "No Memorial to Terrorists", and "Building a Mosque at Ground Zero is Like Building a Memorial to Hitler at Auschwitz" is demonstrative of the American public's growing intolerance of Islam and its adherents (Ghosh, 2010). From one controversy, one can see that many Americans believe that Islam is a violent creed, requiring believers to kill or convert all others, and that Muslims are savage and backwards (Ghosh, 2010). Moreover, this growing intolerance is farther exacerbated by mainstream religious and political leaders who, whether deliberately or not, equates Islam with terrorism and savagery (Ghosh, 2010). One example was a pastor in Florida who announced his plan to burn the Koran because, in his warped view, it is not holy; another, was former House Speaker Newt Gingrich who, according to Times, "seemed to equate Islam with Nazism" (Ghosh, p. 23, 2010). It comes as no surprise that

Islamophobia in America is growing, since even political leaders that should know better are proclaiming the same Islamophobic tendencies as the American public. This type of reaction by the political leaders not only give substance to Islamophobia but drives forward the idea of Islam as something against the American idea. I think the real question is not whether America is afraid of Islam (and its adherents) but whether Muslims should be afraid of the US and Americans especially in this post-9/11 world.

The tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed America and its people. The 9/11 tragedy brought about a new US foreign policy that focused on unilateral action against terrorists specifically and war on terrorism in general. The result of such policy is a rising resentment against the US from the global community but especially from the Middle Eastern region. This result is troubling because the US cannot fight the war on terrorism as an individual state and especially without the help of its allies in the Middle East. In the domestic front, the effects of the terrorist attacks can be felt when one is traveling; the increase focus on national security by the government; and, attention to borders.

Secondly, as a result of the terrorist attacks, the American public's perception of security and superiority was shaken. Standing as the only superpower in the world, the United States of America is supposed to be a country beyond the chaos felt by regions like the Middle East where violence and conflict persists everyday; or countries in Asia in which people are mired in poverty and repression. America additionally is a country unrivaled in its military capabilities. Yet, it was struck by a tragedy that took thousands of American lives. In the American public's standpoint, where is the sense of security that America was supposed to provide to its people? With the attacks came the onset of fear against the unknown: why the attacks, who attacked us, and, when and where are they going to strike

next. It is in this environment that the Muslims in America must contend with; an environment that is suspicious and insecure. Even the international community at one point after the 9/11 attacks empathized with the US for many reasons but especially due to the shared sense of global vulnerability (Telhami, 2002). If the international community was shaken by the attacks, it is understandable that the US and its public would be fearful as well. Unfortunately, this fear is leading to mistrust and even outright discrimination against the Muslim community and those who may "look" Arab in descent.

The European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion (EMISCO) defines Islamophobia as "a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated with fear, mistrust and hatred of Islam and its adherents" (European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion, 2010). This paper will first try to provide some reasoning as to why there is a Muslim problem in America. It will try to answer how Islam is perceived by Americans today, what influences Islamophobia to persist in American society, and why it persists. Secondly, it will address the problems that Muslim-Americans are facing because of the new US policy and the negative response from the American public. Finally, this paper will discuss some possible solutions for this rising tide of Islamophobia.

### **Are Muslims the Problem?**

It is disappointing to find that America is having a Muslim problem, a problem that has since grown in the post—9/11 environment. This response towards the Muslim community is troublesome since Muslims have been in American society since the time of the slave trade; maybe as early as 1501 (Pipes & Duran, 2002). This population has grown due to immigration and a substantial number of converts. From the trickle of Muslim immigrants before the end of World War I to a wave of Muslim migrants between 1945 and

1967, the Muslim community in the US has made its presence known by its creation of community facilities such as mosques, schools, and cultural and community centers (Lapidus, 2002). According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, most of the projected growth of the Muslim population will take place in North America, particularly the US and Canada. If current trends continue the Muslim population in the US is projected to double in the next 20 years, from 2.6 million in 2010 to 6.2 million by 2030 (PewResearchCenter, 2011). Additionally, the rate of growth of the Muslim population is suppose to continue to be higher than the rate of growth of the non-Muslim population, largely due to immigration and higher-than-average fertility among Muslims, which means that America cannot afford to fear or mistrust this large minority. It may not only rival Episcopalians in the future but also the Jews population in the US (PewResearchCenter, 2011). About two-thirds of Muslims in the US today are foreign-born, first generation immigrants, while slightly more than a third was born in the US; according to the Pew Forum research, more than four-in-ten of the Muslims in the US are expected to be native-born by 2030 (PewResearchCenter, 2011).

The Muslim population of the US did not just abruptly increase in number or appear out of thin air after the terrorist attacks. They did not suddenly decide that they conveniently needed to build mosques since the collapse of the twin towers. The population of Muslim immigrants in the US has been steadily increasing since the 1990s; from 50,000 in 1992 to about 115,000 in 2009 and expected to rise to about 130,000 by 2030 (PewResearchCenter, 2011). The focus should not be on America's Muslim problems—if this was the case, the problems should have been evident years before the

attacks. The US and the American public should not focus on America's Muslim problems rather it should direct its attention to the idea of Muslims and their American problem.

Since 9/11, Muslims have faced fear, suspicion, discrimination, and for some, outright violence from the American public. America's problem is not the Muslim community, but the rising tide of Islamophobia in American society. This growth of fear and hatred towards Muslims, Islam, and even those who may just happen to look Middle Eastern should be spotlighted and addressed by the state and especially recognized by the public to prevent hysteria. Something like the McCarthy era or the internment of the Japanese should not be allowed to occur to the Muslim community because fear and hatred are once again tolerated and used as a base for policymaking. Additionally, the more there is polarization (perceived or real) between the American public and the Muslim community the greater the possibility that a number of people from the Muslim community will begin to reach out to extremist and radical groups, whether it's moral or financial support (Masmoudi, 2004). Encouraging these groups will only fuel their cause to affect political change through widespread fear and bloodshed.

#### *In the International Arena*

America's Muslim problem stems from a number of factors largely centering on misconceptions. In the international arena, America's Muslim problems stems from the rising resentment in the Middle Eastern world due to a number of issues including its partnership with Israel and its unilateral approach regarding "war on terrorism" (Telhami, 2002). In the domestic front, America's Muslim problem is due to theologocentrism and Islamophobia (AbuKhalil, 2002). Theologocentrism is an ideology and a practice that group people into a religious monolith (Yapp, 2004). This problem is worsened in the way the

media and some political leaders have portrayed Islam and Muslims in the American public. Theologocentrism and Islamophobia are two factors that work together to further misconceptions of Islam and its adherents. It also provides the necessary "evidence" for those who find Islam and Muslims something that America and Americans have to fear or conquer.

In the international arena, American foreign policy towards the Middle East and its new war on terrorism is fueling America's Muslim problems abroad and domestically. Abroad, the US faces the growing resentment from the Muslim world, but especially from the Middle Eastern region, due to its policies. The growing anti-Americanism from the Muslim world is caused by a number of factors that center on American foreign policy: (1) Arab-Israel conflict; (2) oil; and, (3) continued support to the oppressive regimes in the region (AbuKhalil, 2002). From Telhami's surveys, the Arab and Muslim world's anti-Americanism is not based on American values; rather it is from the double standard that the US applies in the Muslim world especially in the Middle East for the sake of American national interests.

The US continues to support Israel to the detriment of the Arab world when an Arab-Israeli cease fire and/or peace would be more beneficial to the US. A solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would allow the US to achieve its two objectives in the region: maintain the flow of oil to the West at a reasonable price and support the security and well-being of the state of Israel (Telhami, 2002, p. 55). In regards to the oil, the 1973 Oil Crisis is an example of what happens when the US finds itself at odds with the Arab region. The question will either be: How far will US support for Israel go if there is no oil flowing from the Arab world? Or, how long will it take the US to directly intervene in the Arab world if

the oil stops flowing while still supporting Israel? This support for Israel has grown since the US' recognition of the new nation in 1948. Historically, military, economic, and political aid have been given to Israel to the detriment of the Arab world that sees the aids as three things: firstly, as further intervention of the US into the region. Secondly, more aid can be perceived as support for more Israeli building of settlements in the West Bank region which further limits and decrease the ability for Palestinians to have a place to live. Moreover, this aid furthers the economic and military divide between the Israelis and Palestinians, exasperating the inequality between the two populations. Thirdly, I said political aid because the US constantly sides with the Israelis regarding any possible sanctions that the international community and more importantly the Arab world might want to place on Israel. These sanctions are often asked because of the continued violence against the Palestinians and lack of human right protections in the hands of the Israeli state. The result of the oil crisis, that of the Israeli being forced out of gained territories during the 1973 war by the US, is one of the few times the US has intervene. But even this intervention was for American interest purposes (i.e. oil) rather than the protection of the Arab people.

The oil issue creates great resentment from the Arab world because of the fact that Western interests in this case, the US, is once again considered over the interests of the people in the region. This is coupled with the US' continuing support of oppressive regimes that it considers "moderate" and allows for "stability" in the region to the disadvantage of the Arab people. In return for the rulers' subservience, the US provides the leaders of these countries military aid and protection (AbuKhalil, 2002). Additionally, the wealth from the oil benefits only a small number of elite in the country, especially the leaders, while

millions suffer from starvation, economic stagnation, and unemployment. To keep the people from opposing the regime, political rights are suppressed and democratic institutions that could provide a way for discussing issues are non-existent. For a country like the US that epitomizes democracy and liberty, such a situation should be abhorred and discouraged. Yet, for the sake of American interests, these regimes have been allowed to continue to rule despite the fact that the US has to contend with leaders the likes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) and Moammar Gadhafi (Libya). The US double standard, whether in regards to human rights or democratic rights, continues especially when it concerns oil. Any change in price or stability means domestic instability in the US. This often means US political leaders act on behalf of American interests regardless if these policies will negatively impact the economic and political system of the Middle Eastern region. As we have seen over the recent months, it's been Middle Easterners themselves, with little support from the US, who have finally grown tired of these regimes and done something about it.

Why should we address international policy when the paper is about a domestic problem? The 1973 Oil Crisis exemplifies how a foreign policy can affect domestic stability. It is important that America's foreign policy is at least mentioned because the people of the Middle East do not easily forget. The more there is a reason for radicals and extremists group to exist vis-à-vis injustice and violence of the Muslim community, the more the US is threatened or will feel threatened. If the Arab and Muslim community in the Middle East continue to feel like they are being violated and victimized for the sake of Western interests, especially those of the US, the more there will be a reason to continue to fund or support movements from groups whose goals are supposedly for the Middle East region's

freedom from tyranny. The role of the Arab-Israeli conflict for example is a foreign policy issue and yet Osama bin Laden in his address on October 7, 2001 indirectly advises the US to change its policy regarding this issue in the international arena and convey his promise of violence on US soil if the policy does not change. Bin Laden states:

And to America, I say to it and to its people this: I swear by God the Great, America will never dream and those who live in America will never taste security and safety unless we feel security and safety in our land and in Palestine (Telhami, 2002, p. 95).

This kind of support can easily be transferred to the few Muslims from the American-Muslim community who will feel justified in attacking the US from the inside. This threat will grow US insecurity and eventually translate into more discrimination and Islamophobia in the domestic front. Since the tragic events of September 11, there is already growing theologocentrism and Islamophobia in the American public square.

### *Theologocentrism*

In America there is a tendency to attribute all observable phenomena among Muslims to matters of Islamic theology; a tendency that has since grown post-9/11 (AbuKhalil, 2002). While it is true that theologocentrism is practiced by both Muslims and Americans, it differs between Muslims and non-Muslim in application. For Muslims, this theologocentrism is exemplified in the movement that emerged with the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, that attributed erosion of Islamic values and mores to the growing penetration of Western influence in the Arab world (AbuKhalil, 2002). An earlier theologocentric practice was during the late nineteenth century as the Ottoman Empire started its decline vis-à-vis European powers. A response to the debate regarding the empire's decline centered on theologocentrism in which the weakening of the empire was blamed on the empire's abandonment of its original spirit, recovered only

by going back to the original purity of Islam (Teti & Mura, 2009). In contrast, theologocentrism, according to AbuKhalil, in America is born of Islamophobia. He states that while theologocentrism exists among Muslims,

[A]mong many non-Muslims it has been transformed into an ideology of hostility, which is comparable to traditional racism, like anti-Semitism. Thus, to theologocentrists, all Muslims form one monolithic block, and they all possess the same characteristics and exhibit the same modes of behavior and conduct (AbuKhalil, 2002, p. 23).

We see this statement acted out in public when all Muslims are generalized to be violent people who either support or practice terrorism. In the process of writing this paper, I asked some people for their opinions on Islam and Muslim in America. A young man my age said that he is treated well when his religion is not mentioned. However, when he mentions that he is a follower of Islam (a Muslim) the conversation becomes awkward and tense. When asking about his view on where American opinion stands, he believes that Americans automatically associate Muslims and terrorism as truth.

The burden that the Muslim community faces today includes the fear of violence, of bigotry and of hate in such places as the airport, school, and workplace (Koenig, 2011). Muslims especially face opposition when it refers to mosque-building in the community, fearing especially of the radicalization of Muslims in mosques. A Cornell University Study found that twenty-nine percent agreed that undercover law enforcement agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations, in order to keep taps on their activities and fundraising (Johns Hopkins University Center for Transatlantic Relations and the Robert Schuman Foundation, 2005). The effect of the terrorist attacks, that of the American public scrambling to read the Quran and to educate the public on Islam and Muslims, effectively associated Islam and Muslims to terrorism (AbuKhalil, 2002). This association

is worsen when events like the Fort Hood shootings by Major Nidal Malik Hassan and the failed car bombing in New York by Faisal Shahzad occurs. Also, 800 incidents of violence, vandalism and arson against people believed to be Muslim, Arab or South Asian were reported and reported to the Justice Department (Koenig, 2011). The question of "Why do they hate us so much?" becomes the question in the minds of Americans and the misconceptions, like 'Islam is a violent religion,' grow into a truth for many in the US public.

The hatred stems from American policy particularly the US support of Israel in the Middle Eastern region. It becomes a greater problem when misconceptions of Islam and Muslims are approved or accepted by the US government and propagated by the media. A great example is George W. Bush's address on September 20, 2001 when he said,

They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government...They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other...These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life (Telhami, 2002, p. 37).

While the address of this statement was towards the terrorists who attacked the US, the national public discourse increasingly developed from "they" meaning terrorists specifically, to "they" meaning Arabs and Muslims in general (Telhami, 2002). After the 9/11 attacks, President Bush did try to dilute American Islamophobia by declaring that there would be no reprisals against Muslims and that Islam is a religion of peace (Ghosh, 2010). This statement however was blighted with Bush's Iraq policies and the resulting deaths of thousands of Muslims there and the Republican Party's slow disconnect with the White House policy (Ghosh, 2010). Moreover the statement furthers the misconception that Muslims do not want what Americans enjoy today, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Who doesn't want the right to practice their religion freely, to speak

without persecution, to enjoy political and human rights? No one! Even terrorist groups like al-Qaeda commit terror attacks to achieve some sort of political change, whether it's for them or for the people they represent. Of course, the tactics that terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda implements to go about achieving its political goals are something to be abhorred, it is nonetheless incorrect to suppose that the general Muslim community hate political, economic, and humanitarian freedoms. The blatant generalization of a whole community in the US has been detrimental to not only the Muslim community but those who may be perceived as Middle Eastern in descent or who "look" Muslim. This Islamophobia is rising in the US as misconceptions and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims grow. While theologocentrism is a problem and should be addressed, theologocentrism coupled with Islamophobia allows for discrimination, fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims that can and has evolve to violence against the Muslim community.

### *Islamophobia*

Islamophobia is exhibited in combination with religious intolerance, hate speech, violence, and discriminatory practices. It is basically a phobia against those who are Muslims, look Middle Eastern, speak Arabic, wear Middle Eastern dress (e.g. head cover of Muslim women) and have names like Muhammad, Saud, Malik, etc. American Muslims are encountering Islamophobes at their workplace, school, airport, and even in their neighborhood. What constitutes an Islamophobe? John L. Esposito, Professor of Religion and International Affairs, shares a number of characteristics that identifies an Islamophobe:

- Islam, not just a small minority of extremists and terrorists, is the problem and a threat to the West
- The religion of Islam has no common values with the West
- Islam and Muslims are inferior to Judaism and Christianity

- Islam is an inherently violent religion and political ideology rather than a source of faith and spirituality
- Muslims cannot integrate and become loyal citizens
- Most mosques should be monitored for embedded cells
- Islam encourages its followers to launch a global jihad against all non-Muslims but in particular against the West (Esposito, 2010)

Islamophobes thrive in creating an environment of resentment and fear towards Islam. According to Stephen Schwartz, the Islamophobe “feels entitled to ‘test’ the moderate Muslim in an inquisitorial manner by demanding to know if the moderate Muslim accepts or disavows negative aspects of Islamic history” (Schwartz, 2010, p. 21). The more the moderate Muslim disavows the negative aspects of Islam, the more they are labeled as apostates and unauthentic. Islamophobes further the Muslim’s American problem as it creates more fear in the American public towards Islam and Muslims. It moves toward marginalizing the Muslim community by trying to ‘trip’ up Muslims in their beliefs and values and focusing on extracting a confession from the Muslim community that will serve their purposes and claims. This is not only a Muslim problem, but also an American problem as it further isolates the Muslim community—especially moderate Muslims—who oppose radical Muslims.

This Islamophobia is largely due to ignorance on what one of my professors made sure to inform the class: Middle Easterners are not all Muslims; not all Muslims are Middle Easterners; Muslims are not all Arabs; and not all Arabs are Muslims. Another “not” that needs to be included is that the majority of Muslims in the world are not terrorists; they do not support terrorism; and most believe that Islam has actually been hijacked by a few extremists and fundamentalists group to the disadvantage of the Muslim people.

The idea of Islam clashing with the West is not new. It gained momentum partly from the popularity of the works by Samuel Huntington about the impending clash of

civilization between Islam and the West (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2010).

Huntington describes Western and Islamic relationship in the following statement:

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam; a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture...The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture (Huntington, 2009).

On September 11, 2001, this clash of civilization was culminated in the deaths of more than 3,000 Americans in the hands of Islamic extremists, al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda top leader Osama bin Laden's message in 2006 further exemplified the conflict between Islam and the US when he stated:

I tell you [Americans] that the war [on terror] will be either ours or yours. If it is the former, it will mean your loss and your shame forever...But if it is the latter, then read history, for we are a people who do not stand for injustice, and we strive for vengeance all days of our lives. And the days and night will not pass until we avenge ourselves as we did on September 11 (Steger, 2009).

In response to the attacks, the US government changed the policy of a "humbler" and sensitive foreign policy to a policy calling for a war on terror and its allies (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 2009, p. 322). President George W Bush's proclamation that the states of the world are either "with us or against us" regarding the war on terror left no room for any compromise (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, p. 322, 2009). As a result of the 9/11 tragedy, the opinions of numerous Americans regarding Islam and Muslims changed from passive acceptance of the religion and the community, to misunderstanding, fearing, and even hating Islam and Muslims.

Like many phobias, the cause is often just ignorance. It is important that for a person to change their opinions and thus, decrease the fear one must be educated. Certainly there are many Americans who believe that Islam is a peaceful religion. A March 2005 Poll by

ABC News reveal that people who understand Islam are more likely to view Islam positively; among those Americans who understand the religion, 59% call it peaceful and 46% believe it teaches respect for the beliefs of others (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2010).

Islam literally means *submission*, and this submission is to Allah, the God of Peace; therefore indirectly, Islam is a religion of peace. A follower of Islam is called a Muslim meaning *one who submits*—a person who submits to the will of Allah. Unfortunately, there are many views that circulate in the American media that equates Islam with terrorism. A TIME Poll revealed that 46% of Americans believe that Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence against nonbelievers (Ghosh, 2010). But Islam no more deserves such a reputation than does Christianity and Judaism. There are Christian fundamentalists who decide that bombing abortion clinics are acceptable acts. . There are also Jewish fundamentalist groups whose fight for Israel sovereignty means the subversion of Palestinian rights. The Five Pillars of Islam is an example of the rituals in which followers of Islam are obliged and which mention of violence, intolerance, and terror are nonexistent.

The Five Pillars of Islam are: declaration of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), giving of alms (*zakat*), fasting, and pilgrimage (*Hajj*). The *Shahada* is the Muslim's declaration of his or her faith: There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet. This declaration is enough to make a person a follower of Islam. The second pillar of Islam is *salat*, an obligatory prayer that is performed five times a day. It is performed while facing in the direction of the *Kaaba*, the holy shrine in Mecca. Sometimes the prayer is lead by an *imam*, a prayer leader that is chosen by the congregation. A follower of Islam also gives alms in the forms of either *zakat* or *sadaqa*. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam which obligates

the faithful to support the religious community and the unfortunate. Often, the giver has set aside a percentage of his or her income for the *zakat*. In contrast, *sadaqa* is a voluntary contribution in which the person can give as much as he or she pleases. This idea of giving alms is based on the belief that all things belong to God, and by giving alms it encourages growth and purification. According to one Quranic verse, "Fulfill your devotional obligations and pay the *zakat*. /and what you send ahead of good/you will find with God, /for he sees all that you do" (Ali, p. 24, 1993).

In continuing with purifying oneself and growing in one's spiritual life, followers of Islam also observe fasting during the month of Ramadan. It is a method of self-purification and allows the faithful to empathize with those who are less fortunate. In Surah 2:183, the Quran states, "O believers, fasting is enjoined on you/as it was on those before you, /so that you might become righteous" (Ali, p. 33, 1993). Lastly, the obligation on Muslims to travel to Mecca called the *hajj*. This brings honor to the traveler and gives the pilgrim the title of *hajji*. Based on the Five Pillars of Islam alone, one sees the practicality of the religion. For example, the giving of alms and fasting for improving the umma (Muslim community), self-purification and spiritual growth; the exclusion of the sick, elderly, very young, and women pregnant and nursing from the fast; and the obligation of the *hajj* that falls only on those whose health and resources permit them to travel. Furthermore, during the pilgrimage, the participants don on plain white cloak that signifies the equality of every Muslim in the eyes of God. In these fundamental rituals, there is no mention of causing terror and no step-by-step instructions on killing nonbelievers of Islam.

Naturally, if Islam was only based on the above five Islamic fundamentals, there would not be such a debate and distrust of Islam. Roy R. Andersen et al. in *Politics and*

*Change in the Middle East* (2009) reveals five popular misconceptions about Islam that seems to be at the forefront of American Islamophobia. These five misconceptions are: (1) Islam as an exotic religion; (2) Islam as a militant religion; (3) Islam as an intolerant religion; (4) Islam as an ultraconservative religion; and, (5) Islam as a sexist religion (Andersen et al., 2009). These assertions are causing a polarizing effect between Muslims and Americans throughout the US. While these false impressions are still accepted by many around the world, e.g. Britain, France, and Switzerland, Americans today need to address them now before Islamophobia gains a greater foothold in American thought

The first misconception is that Islam is an exotic religion of the desert nomads called the Bedouins. While Islam does take from Bedouin values, such as sharing wealth, concept of community and brotherhood, and caring for the needy, it is a religion that is rational and possesses a universal set of beliefs. It is more similar to Judaism and Christianity in its belief in one God, the same early patriarchs, and most of the same prophets rather than to "primitive" religions centering on nature and family (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 2009). For some scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islam is a culmination of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Islam should be studied along with Judaism and Christianity, because its revelations originates from God "revealed within that very Abrahamic world from which Judaism and Christianity originated" (Nasr, p. 2, 2003). According to Nasr, there is only one religion—Divine Unity (*al-tawhid*)—that constitutes all messages from heaven and Islam is the final form. Roy R. Andersen et al. furthers this idea when it offers that there is more continuity in Islam among the three religions because Muhammad prophecies are believed to be an outgrowth of the traditions that encompasses Jesus and Old Testament prophets (2009). Moreover, the idea that Islam is an exotic

religion ignores the reality that Islam plays a very active role in Muslim communities, in both the Middle East and in America. Islam actively participates in the way it is propagated by Muslims through welfare, charity and education. It is time to put this misconception to rest and instead, place Islam as another religion equal in importance that society put on Judaism and Christianity. Islam has a following of over a billion people around the world; rather than belittling the religion, there should be more tolerance.

A second misconception is that Islam is a militant, intolerant, and ultraconservative religion spread mainly by the sword. This misconception again overlooks the history of Christianity to also spread through the use of force, e.g. the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. This argument can also be applied to Judaism in which the clamor for territory as part of Jewish identity means the use of force against the Palestinians.

One of the debates centers on the idea of *jihad* often incorrectly translated to holy war: an arm struggle against the nonbelievers that can take many forms including terrorist attacks and bombings (Steger, 2009). Holy war, however, does not exist in Islam and the Islam community would not allow its followers to be involved in one (University of South California). To the Westerner, *jihad* implies "ruthless suppression of other religions" (Andersen et al., p.22, 2009). The idea of a holy struggle against unbelievers does not imply that the Muslim community sanctions violence against nonbelievers. The Quran in Surah 2:256 states, "There is no compulsion in matter[s] of faith" (Ali, 1993). Historically, the *djimmī system* allowed protection to religious communities that rejected Islam. These communities were expected to pay a tribute tax and deferred to the Muslims and in exchange, they were free from exploitation, harsh treatments, and attacks from outsiders (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 2009). Additionally, this system, called the *millet* system by

the Ottomans, allowed non-Muslims to continue to live in their own communities governed by their own laws and religious beliefs (Teti & Mura, 2009).

The concept of *jihad* is highly misrepresented in the West, and we see it today in the US. The perception is that *jihad* means holy war and that it is central to Islam. On the contrary, *jihad* actually means to strive or to struggle, not "holy war"; this striving or struggle is for a better way of life for the self. Quranic verses consisting of the word *jihad* appears rarely and exclusively linked to armed conflict, but always to personal effort (Teti & Mura, 2009). There are two types of jihad: Jihad Al-Akbar (major/greater jihad) and Jihad Al-Asghar (minor/lesser jihad). Jihad Al-Akbar is the struggle against one's inner self to subjugate and control one's passions and carnal desires to attain the perfect self, a soul at peace (Rahim). The minor jihad, Jihad Al-Asghar, or 'jihad of the sword' is the struggle for Islam. It is a term that refers to the duty of Muslims to defend their faith, protect its values, and protect the welfare of the *umma* (Muslim community). In Quran Surah 2:190: "Fight those in the way of God who fight you, /but do not be aggressive:/God does not like aggressors" seems to imply merely war but the Quran does not permit aggression against anyone (Ali, p.34, 1993). 'Jihad of the sword', while it permits the use of force against those who oppress the Muslim community and prevents them from practicing their religion, still must be sanctioned by a *fatwa*, a legal opinion issued by the legitimate religious authorities (Teti & Mura, 2009). Greater jihad is a central belief of Muslims for a life of self-purification and piety, while in contrast lesser jihad is much more marginalized and the *fatwa*, an opinion not easily attained. Surah 5:32 explicitly states that killing another person is forbidden,

That is why We decreed for the children of Israel/that whosoever kills a human being, except (as punishment) for murder/or for spreading corruption in the land, it

shall be like killing all humanity;/and whosoever saves a life,/saves the entire human race (Ali, p. 102, 1993).

One can see that the focus of the latter verse is on protecting and treasuring life; if lesser jihad is central to Islam and Muslims as the misconception believe, it would be a deliberate break from what Islam propagates and what Muslims follow pertaining to their Quran, Sunna, and Shari'a. According to Dr. Liyakatali Takim, warfare is only permitted for self-defense and when all attempts for peaceful settlements fail (Takim, 1995). In the Quran, the term for the concept of warfare is *qitaal* meaning "fighting". *Jihad* and *qitaal* differ in that jihad is the general struggle and striving for Islam; in contrast, qitaal is one specific form of jihad, in this case, armed conflict.

The idea of *qitaal* would seem that the Islamophobe's opinion of Islam is true, that it encourages violence. Once again, one must look closer regarding the concept. In Islam, qitaal can only be carried out for the sake of Allah, and according to the Quran and Sunnah (Young Muslim Organization (UK)). In the following verses, the Quran makes it clear that fighting in the way of Allah is only when it is *kutiba* (ordained), not as a default action with the religion (Fatoohi, 2007).

Surah 2:216: Enjoined on you is fighting,/and this you abhor./You may dislike a thing/yet it may be good for you;/or a thing may haply please you/but may be bad for you./Only God has knowledge, and you do not know (Ali, p. 38, 1993)

Surah 4:77: Have you not seen the people who were told: /"Hold back your hands (from attacking), /observe your devotional obligations/and pay the zakat?"/But when they were commanded to fight, /behold, a section among them were filled/with fear of men as though it were the fear of God/and even more, and said: "O Lord, /why did you make war compulsory for us? /Why did you not allow us to live a little more?" /Say to them: /"How short-lived is the commerce of this world; /but that of the next/is best for those who fear God; /and you will not be wronged the breadth of a thread (Ali, pp. 83-84, 1993).

Qitaal is fought to respond to oppression and aggression, and to protect the values of Islam. It is a fighting for the freedom of being able to freely praise Allah. But even

in the face of qitaal, Islam does not encourage ruthless oppression of those who oppose the religion.

Surah 2:191-194: And fight those (who fight you) wheresoever you find/them, /and expel them from the place/they had turned you out from. /Oppression is worse than killing. /...But if they desist, God is forgiving and kind. /Fight them till sedition comes to an end, /and the law of God (prevails)/. If they desist, then cease to be hostile, /except against those who oppress (Ali, pp. 34-35, 1993)

Surah 47:4: So, when you clash with the unbelievers,/smite their necks until you overpower them,/then hold them in bondage./Then either free them graciously/or after taking a ransom,/until war shall have come to end (Ali, p. 435, 1993)

Surah 4:90: ...If they keep aloof and do not fight, and offer peace,/ God has left you no reason to fight them (Ali, p. 85, 1993).

The above verses are actions taken to protect and end oppression against Islam and its followers, but it does not provide for continued oppression in the hands of Muslims. If there is continued oppression, then the Muslims themselves are breaking the Quran regarding God's dislike of aggressors.

Does the US and the other religions not war against their opposition to end oppression of its people or followers? The idea of violence to end oppression was addressed by Franz Fanon (2006) when he wrote that to free themselves from the oppressiveness of their colonizer, the colonized eventually had to take up arms against them. It is natural for any person or group who are oppressed to want to fight for their freedom. The Quran in Surah 22:39-40 explicitly gives permission to take up arms to fight in self-defense and religious freedom against aggression even if one worships in monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques (Ali, 1993; Elmasry, 2002). To think of Islam as a ruthless and militant religion on the basis that they fight their oppressors is the double standard that Islam and its followers should not have to experience.

Still, Islamophobes will continue to argue that Islam is violent and militant because of what occurred in the 9/11 attacks, bombings of American embassies around the world,

terrorist threats such as the car bomb found in New York. While the majority of these incidents have been committed by those organizations who profess their faith as followers of Islam, it is vital that Americans realize that the majority of Muslims are not terrorists and that the greater Muslim community oppose the terroristic tactics of militant groups as much as non-Muslim Americans. Surah 4:74 is one text of the Quran that is taken out of context: Those who barter the life of this world for the next/should fight in the way of God. / And We shall bestow on him/ who fights in the way of God, / whether he is killed or is victorious, a glorious reward (Ali, p. 83, 1993). This implies that Islam advocates war against non-Muslims and rewards them for their actions but it conveniently ignores the next verse which is to fight only for the cause of God and for the vulnerable which are the elderly, men, women, and children (Elmasry, 2002). Islamic belief regarding fighting excludes non-combatant males, women, and children and only involves the soldiers. This is comparable to the international law regarding the protection of civilians in times of war. In the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949, in times of war persons taking no active part in the hostilities must be treated humanely, and the wounded and sick collected and cared for. According to Ram Swarup, in jihad, only arms-bearing males of the enemy were killed but Muhammad disapproved of killing women and children (Swarup, 2002). Wars and attacks by weapons of mass destruction that destroy civilians are not sanctioned by the Quran; therefore, terrorist and militant groups who commit acts of terrorism are not following the beliefs of Islam. These groups merely utilize the idea of Islam for their own agenda.

Unfortunately, this misconception is strengthened by the media. We hear about Islamic fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalist, Islamic terrorists, etc. that stereotypes an entire faith, yet we rarely hear about Jewish extremists, Jewish fundamentalist, Christian

fundamentalist, Christian extremists when followers of these religions destroy a mosque, kill Muslim civilians, or kill non-Muslims who oppose their beliefs (examples are the bombing of abortion clinics and the Oklahoma City bombing. It is important that the distinction is made between Muslims who follow Islam and its ways versus the very few followers who are tarnishing the name of Islam by way of bombings, suicide attacks, kidnappings, etc. The best approach to changing the misconception of Islam in American minds is one stated by Muhamed Elmasry, "to understand that the Qu'ran shows respect toward, acceptance of, and enlightened tolerance to people of different faiths, all the while inviting them to engage in dialogue in the search for truth" (2002). Continued education and dialogue in the American public should be encouraged to achieve enlightenment. This need for education is illustrated in the fact that most Americans (55%) either don't know very much or know nothing at all about the religion; a number largely unchanged from the 2007 statistic of 58% (PewResearchCenter, Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam, 2010). If my experience is anything like most Americans, until taking classes regarding Islam and Muslims, my main source of information about the religion was through the media with images of masked men with guns riding on tanks controlling women with veils. Until Americans actively seek to learn more about the religion and its adherents, these images will be the only base they have of Islam and Muslims. This education and dialogue process cannot only be left to the Muslim community. Policymakers, civic leaders and the media must confront Islamophobia with the Muslim population as a team to legitimize any solutions and policies that will come about as well as create a policy that will be acceptable to all parties.

Another misconception that is rampant in the media is that Islam is an ultraconservative religion, that it is backward in its beliefs and practices; one example of this argument is Islam's position on women's rights. It should be recognized however that Judaism and Christianity have their own social rules that is even older than what the Qu'ran provides. In Judaism and Christianity, like Islam, it is not possible that all the social rules will apply to modern life. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that because it does not apply, these religions are not capable of changing with the times. One of the basis for this misconception that Islam is an ultraconservative religion is Islam's position on women's rights. Once again, Islam is not the only religion with a patriarchal base; this is shared by Judaism and Christianity. In the Qu'ran, the women and men are morally equal in the eyes of God. Surah 35:18 states that "No one who carries a burden bears another's load; / and even if the burdened soul cry out for help/ none will carry the least of its burden,/ however close a relative it may be" (Ali, p. 370, 1993). This contrast to the Christian belief that women corrupted the men (Adam and Eve) and brought sin into the world. One of the most significant changes that came about due to Islam is the woman's right to inherit property, the right of women to receive the dowry previously given to the bride's family, and protecting her rights to property ownership during marriage and even in divorce (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 2009). The ultraconservativeness that is misconstrued is not due to Islam but are results of various interpretations and differing traditional practices. The diverse understandings of Islam is comparable to other religions that face varying degrees of interpretations and practices.

The image of a Muslim woman wearing a veil, burqa, or hijab is one portrayed often in American media to depict the inequality of gender in the Islam religion. However,

nowhere in the Quran does it state that women are required to veil themselves or follow a particular dress code (Amer). In the Quran, Surah 24:30-31, the message for Muslims to lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms are for both sexes, not just the women. The mention of veils were mostly for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad such as in Surah 33:32-33;59. While there are regimes that encourages the oppression of women, like that of the Taliban, this should not be reason enough to assume it is coming from Islamic law. Moreover, like any religions in the world, the practice and interpretations of Islam through the Quran, Sunna, and Shari'a varies across regions/states and over time. For countries with a Muslim population, the veiling of women is not necessary, while others the veil differs in how much it covers the women. For example, in Sudan the women wear loose scarves; *chador* in Iran; and, *burqa* in Afghanistan (Teti & Mura, 2009). There is no Quranic law or verse that specify how women should dress. The veiling of women can be attributed to regional traditions rather than Islamic law. Furthermore, the double standard is that Islam oppresses its women, and yet, gender inequality in other religions are not considered.

Lastly, the misconception that Islam is not compatible with democracy. The combination of the stereotypes that Islam is inherently violent and Islamic politics is in need of a theocratic state to function puts doubts on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Furthermore, cries of Sharia as a body of laws against the US Constitution further discriminates against any type of Islamic laws. The idea proposed is that while a democratic government centers on secularism, openness and the acceptance of non-religious state authority, an Islamic based government would be focused on bringing out the rule of God (Teti & Mura, 2009). This fear took root from the result of the Iranian

Revolution that resulted in the governing of Iran by religious leaders and the implementation of Islamic laws. However, the revolution against the shah was not Islamic or religious in the beginning but secular. The opposition was a response to the oppressive policies of the shah and the support of the US to the regime. The portrayal of the 'Islamist' movement as the cause of the revolution needs to be seen in its political context.

In further research and questioning of people, the concept of shari'a as an oppressive set of rules inflicted on people is another cause of fear towards Islam and Muslims. Stories and images in the media such as women being stoned to death for dishonoring the family or not wearing the veil and men, women and children with limbs cut off after violating the rules are illustrations in which many in the West, especially Americans see as oppressive and inhumane. Shari'a is a body of scholarship on which legal codes can be drawn up—more like 'Islamic legal studies' (Teti & Mura, 2009). For most Muslims, shari'a is based on the Quran and Muslim scholars interpret the laws in each case through *qiyas* (analogy) and *ijma* (consensus) (Teti & Mura, 2009). This process of analogy and consensus to arrive at new interpretations of the laws is similar to what one sees in the US judicial branch. In creating their decisions, most judges look to similar cases and decisions of the past as well as current practices of society when writing their opinions. These opinions are then applied according to the majority opinion. The fear that shari'a is a body of law that is strict and oppressive is another form of theologocentrism in which the practice of a few is blanketed to the whole population. Like the interpretation and practice of Islam, the interpretation and practice of Shari'a varies according to those who implement them. For example, Al-Shabaab in Somalia are facing opposition from the Somali population for its strict and oppressive implementation of Shari'a. In response to

this opposition, a moderate militia Sufi group known as Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa is rising and gaining support from the traditionally Sufi followers of Somalia. While this same Islamic organization aims to implement Shari'a in Somalia, an expectation of moderation is highly likely to come from this organization than the Al-Shabaab implementation of Shari'a.

I believe that Islam and democracy, similar to other religions are complimentary. The role of Islam in most revolutions and political movements is one of symbolism against factors like oppressive authoritarian regimes and intervening foreign powers. The idea that Islam is not compatible with democracy because of the fear of violence and of the Islamic state is one based on ignorance. Like many oppositions against oppressive governments, violence is often the last tactic that is utilized against the ruling regime and its supporters. The violence that opposition groups (whether Islamic, Christian, Judaism based) exert further intensifies as the ruling regime continues to oppress opposition groups and the people (i.e. political, economic, and human rights) while the ruling elite have the wealth and political power. Most mainstream Islamist parties aim to participate in the political process and achieve power peacefully but this is often hindered by the regime who wants to keep the status quo (Teti & Mura, 2009, p. 103). What most people do not realize is that Islamic organizations are supported by Muslims because of its ability to provide welfare for the people who are largely ignored by the ruling elite and provides a way for the grievances of the people to be expressed. Contrary to popular belief, most Islamic organizations are not violent. This misconception is false. In fact, historically, the most deadly terrorists in American history have arguably been American-born radical Christians, e.g. Oklahoma City bombing or the Ku Klux Klan (Love, 2009). While these acts do not stereotype all of

Christianity as violent and undemocratic, neither should Islam and its followers be generalized into a monolith.

The troubling Islamophobia in America does not bode well with Islam and its followers. The effects of 9/11 have reverberated in the minds of Americans and the idea of a violent Islam who supports terrorism is running rampant in newspapers, television, and the internet. As a result, there is a social stigma against Islam and Muslims. Arun Kundnani defines racism as no longer institutional but "as a fear of the unknown" (Kundnani, 2005). Can America's Islamophobia be solved if the misconceptions are addressed? The misconceptions against Islam as a religion: exotic, militant, intolerant, ultraconservative, and sexist have and is being used to create fear and hate against Islam. By lessening the ignorance about Islam, Americans might be more accepting and tolerant of the religion and its adherents.

### **Muslims' American Problem**

Muslims in America are the most diverse in the world from those who come from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and even some from South America. According to the American Muslim Poll by Project MAPS, Muslims in America are also younger (54% are less than 50 years old), better educated (58% versus the national number of 25%), and better off financially than average Americans (50% have an annual income of more than \$50,000) (Johns Hopkins University Center for Transatlantic Relations and the Robert Schuman Foundation, 2005). Unfortunately, this population is facing marginalization and discrimination from the greater American public, instead of allowing them to further integrate in American society.

The problem of Muslims today is that they are living in a society that has been rocked by a horrible attack from those who proclaimed the religion of Islam as the rationale for their violence. Despite the 10 years that passed since September 11, Americans are still fearful and suspicious of Islam and Muslims. For some this has resulted in violence. An example of this violence is the stabbing of cab driver Ahmed H. Sharif by Michael Enright in 2010 after Enright asked Sharif if he was Muslim. The Muslims' American problem is exacerbated by the lack of education regarding the Islamic religion in the American public sphere which means violent and oppressive images disseminated by the media pertaining to Islam and Muslims form the basis of opinion and knowledge for most Americans. Moreover, Muslims' American problem is worsened with the fact that Muslims have not been able to coherently respond to attacks against their faith; there is a lack of organization and communication within the Muslim community to fight off the stereotypes and misconceptions that the media and some US political leaders are propagating.

Today, Muslims in America continue to suffer discrimination and for some individuals have experienced hate crimes. According to the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) of 2000, there were 28 (out of 1,472) incidences of hate crimes motivated by anti-Islamic sentiment, resulting in 36 (out of 1,699) victims of such hate crimes (UnifiedCrimeReport, 2000). In 2001, the UCR reported that anti-Islamic motivated hate crimes rose to 481 (out of 1,828) incidences resulting into 554 (out of 2,118) victims (UnifiedCrimeReport, Unified Crime Reports, 2001). Since 2001, the incidences of hate crimes against the Muslim community has decrease somewhat: out of 1,303 incidences of hate crimes, 107 were

motivated by anti-Islamic sentiment with a resulting number of 132 (out of 1,575) victims (UnifiedCrimeReports, 2009).

Muslims must face the fact that America is racist. Of course, every state in the world has some form of racism against someone or some group. But for a country that consists of numerous varieties of race, ethnicity, and religion in its population, America has historically passed policies that discriminate and sometimes institutionalized policies that marginalized minority groups. Some of these policies include the strict limits on immigration of immigrants from Catholic countries (1854-56), Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), and internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans (1938) (Ghosh, 2010, pp. 24-25). In discussing American Islamophobia, it results from and contributes to the racial ideology of the US, an ideology based on socially constructed categories of phenotypical characteristics, on how individuals physically appear (Love, 2009). In other words, a woman wearing a hijab, a man wearing a turban, a person with a Middle Eastern accent, skin tones, etc. are vulnerabilities to Islamophobia (Love, 2009). Couple this racism with the effects of September 11 and the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability of Americans, Muslims are living in a hostile environment full of suspicion and fear. While groups like Christians, Jews, Asians, etc. have the luxury of time to counter such claims of phobias from the American public square Muslims are expected to respond to the American inquisition now.

In his lecture at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Dr. Zahid Bukhari provided five stages of settlement in the US as applied to the Muslim community. Firstly, the Muslim community must find a place to worship, i.e. mosque. This has been a subject of much debate since 9/11 and especially regarding the Park51 project as stated above. The

mosque is the most apparent and public displaying of the Islam faith, and for some Americans they "don't want it in [their] backyard" or consider it "not America" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 22). Secondly, Muslims' ability to settle in America must also coincide with the community's ability to transfer its ideology and religious education to the second generation. In continuing with the mosque discussion, for some Americans, mosques are places in which the Muslim community is believed to be teaching the new terrorists (Ghosh, 2010). The last three stages are as follows: take care of family back home, take care of their own issues (e.g. in the 80s the Muslim community established public advocacy organizations), and lastly, taking part of society. According to Dr. Bukhari, this last stage will only come when the community is strong, psychologically mature, and economically stable. This last stage is being tested since the tragic events of 9/11. Muslims today are forced to settle and become mainstreamed to not only be considered an American but also answer the inquisitorial manner of Americans. However, Muslims are not yet ready to become mainstreamed, especially not within the coming years. It is extremely unfair and unrealistic to expect this community to prove themselves in the American public square in this century when communities in the past has had 200 years of proving themselves to the American society. Moreover, while American Muslims has yet to attain the level of participation that the Jewish and Christian community enjoys in America, the Muslim community is very much determined to fully engage in the American public life if given the chance.

### **Conclusion**

Islamophobia is a phenomenon that needs to be address by Americans and the American government. Since the 9/11 attacks, Muslims and even those who may "look"

Muslims are experiencing a growing dislike, discrimination, and for some individuals physical violence from those who see Islam and therefore Muslims as violent, undemocratic and anti-American.

For the American public, a solution to this phobia can only come with open dialogues with Muslims, Muslim leaders, Islamic organizations, and to some extent Arabs in general. The election of President Barack Obama and his subsequent speeches (e.g. Ankara address and Cairo Speech) is a sign of a changing American foreign policy which aim to reach out to Muslim communities. America must encourage the policy of educating the public about Islam to curtail fear and ignorance of this religion and its adherents. I believe that the Gallup survey which found that 78% of Americans (compared to other Western countries) are the most likely of all Westerners to say the quality of Muslim-West relations is important to them is a positive sign that policies focusing on education and dialogue will be received well by the Americans public (Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, 2010).

In regards to the media, it must also work to provide both points-of-view rather than focus on the sensationalism of violent news. The media's sensationalistic focus has resulted in reducing all Muslims to stereotypes that negatively impacts the Islamic religion and its community of believers as not only violent but also against the West (especially America). To limit the media's impact on the opinions of the American people, U.S. policy-makers, civic leaders along with the Muslim community (and their leaders) must quickly react to any sensationalism by contextualizing the news. Both the American public and the Muslim community can no longer allow the media to singularly create the opinions of millions of Americans.

For Muslims in America, the solution to their problem is through persistence in having a dialogue with political leaders in the US. They must continue to engage the community and educate them of the religion and its beliefs to keep ignorance at bay. A positive aspect that Muslims in America must recognize is that while Islamophobia may be present in America, they still have a chance to curtail its effects. American Islamophobia is not comparable to the levels of European Islamophobia. In France for example, the government bans the burqa; in Switzerland, there is a law against building minarets (Ghosh, 2010). Muslims in America still have the chance to keep Islamophobia from becoming institutionalized in governmental policies. American Muslims must look towards civic participation and in political mobilization in the American society to not only educate the American public but to affect policy change in the country.

Finally, Muslims in America must face the fact that they are expected to respond to American inquisition about their religion, beliefs, and life-style. While this is unfair to Muslims, it is a truth that must be address. This can only be addressed with a more organized Muslim community. With an organized community, the response to any inquisition can be answered in a manner in which there is a sense of collective support and legitimacy from the Muslim populace. This legitimizes their needs and wants to the government and the political leaders. Moreover, a portrayal of solidarity that speaks against the myriad misconceptions and stereotypes will be more effective in affecting the American public's perception. It is important to note that Islamophobia is not only an Islam and Muslim problem but also a Christian, Sikh, and especially those people who have ancestry in North Africa and in western and southern Asia. These groups of people are affected by the racialized process of discrimination in the American public square.

The US has a lot to lose not only of potential allies against radicals who are willing to hijacked a peaceful religion for a cause, but those people who are willing to assimilate and play a positive role in the American society. The US and the American public must come to terms of this Islamophobia and provide policies to curtail its effects on the Muslim community and those indirectly affected by its discrimination. Islamophobia not only weakens the US ability to affect change in the Muslim countries, but it also delegitimizes its foreign and domestic policies in the eyes of Muslims in the international community and American Muslims. Islamophobia is against what America is all about, i.e. freedom and democracy, and if left unsolved will further US sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The American society will always feel the pain and remember the tragedy of September 11, but it is in this environment of vulnerability that the US must continue its stand for freedom and democracy and go above the low expectations of those who committed the terrorist act.

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