



## **MPAC Special Report: Religion & Identity of Muslim American Youth Post-London Attacks**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Muslim Americans are at a critical juncture in the road towards full engagement with their religion and their nation. Since the London bombings of July 7, 2005, which were carried out by young “homegrown” British Muslim men, much attention has been paid to answering the question: Could it happen here?

While the topic of extremism among Muslims has saturated the mainstream media airwaves, the voice of American Muslims has been largely absent from the public discourse. Conversely, the minds and personalities of young American Muslims who supposedly “fit the profile” have not been given a platform to represent themselves and their views to the American public.

Muslims account for 6-8 million among the U.S. population. Nearly 40% of American Muslims are under the age of 29, according to an April 2002 Cornell University study. Within these parameters, it is projected that there are 2.4-3.2 million American Muslims below the age of 29.

Central to the mission statement of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), a public policy institution which aims to make American Muslims a vital and

contributing element of their nation’s pluralism, is to develop a future generation of leaders from among the young American Muslims. Among these initiatives, MPAC has worked with a core group of University student leaders from across the country to launch the Muslim American Project (MAP). MAP is an effort to engage the Muslim student on the college campus on the issues of (1) Islamic education, (2) identity, and (3) civic participation. This survey is a first step in ascertaining the needs, interests and perspectives of Muslim American youth across our nation.

As we plan our curriculum and strategy for engaging with and empowering university students, we believe that it is important for us to target for survey representative groups of Muslim students where we find them. In surveying youth under 25 who publicly identify as Muslim, the Muslim Public Affairs Council seeks to contribute to the public discourse on the future of our nation.

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### **PARTICIPANTS**

This survey of young Muslims was conducted at the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual Islamic Society of North America Convention held in Chicago, IL, from September 2-4, 2005. Of the nearly 40,000 American Muslims who attended the national event,

200 people between the ages of 15-25 completed surveys. Participants, who were randomly selected, had an average age of 20.3 years of age (a standard deviation of 5.1), and a male-female ratio of 3:2. All respondents (100%) are Muslim and reside in the United States.

The sample is drawn from individuals who hold a strong enough affiliation to Islam and Muslims to attend what is considered the largest annual gathering of American Muslims in the country. In other words, individuals who do not attend mosques or regularly participate in community events or hide their Muslim faith are less likely to attend such a gathering. It follows, then, that an overwhelming majority (89%) of respondents reported that they grew up “attending a mosque regularly with frequent interaction among Muslims.” More than one-third (34%) reported attending Islamic events at least twice each week; however, this does not necessarily indicate whether they consider themselves “religious” or “practicing”.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

Surveys were distributed anonymously to young people attending the largest gathering of Muslims in the United States over Labor Day weekend.

Exactly 200 surveys were completed by individuals who fulfilled the age bracket identified for study (14-25 years). The 32-item survey included three items that requested demographic information: age, gender, and birth location. Two-thirds of respondents (n=120) were male, and one-third (n=80) were female.

The remaining 29 items on the survey addressed three areas: (1) Islamic

educational background, (2) Identity, and (3) Civic participation.

### **Islamic Education**

Eleven items addressed the respondents’ sources of Islamic knowledge and perspective on various sources of Islamic knowledge. These items ask respondents to identify the following: primary source of Islamic education, frequency of attendance to Islamic events, whether they frequently attended a mosque as they grew up, the ability of their mosque to attract young people through good programming, and whether women held leadership positions within their mosque. In addition to determining the degree of influence of mosques on young Muslims’ knowledge of Islam, these items further sought to identify the degree of acknowledgement and respect for domestic vs. international Muslim scholars and leaders. Topics addressed in these items included: the relative legitimacy of jurisprudence developed in America by Muslim scholars vs. jurisprudence developed in the Muslim world, relative reliance on domestic vs. international American Muslim writers (general and specific), and adherence to an Islamic “school of thought”.

### **Identity**

Eight items tackled the “identity” of American Muslim youth, and the role of 9/11 in altering their perception of themselves and American society. Within this set, respondents were asked to consider the factors that led to their self-perception, including: who they identified as having an influence on them, who their friends were, and how they spent their leisure time. Items further considered the impact of 9/11 on Americans’ perceptions

of Islam and Muslims, the role of Muslims as an American minority group, and the role of American Muslims as a minority group within the international Muslim population. The final item asked the seminal question to this study: “Do you feel conflict between your Muslim identity and your American identity?”

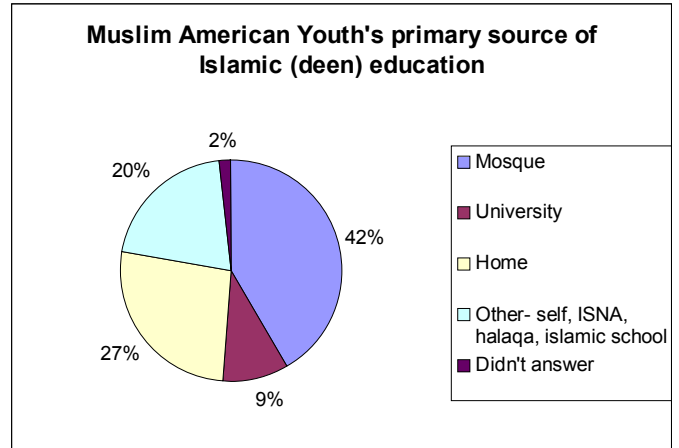
### Civic Participation

The final group of nine items dealt with the perceived degree of importance and engagement in civic participation by American Muslims. Three items asked for their degree to which they believed that national Muslim organizations should “engage in dialogue with government and the general American public to get our rights”, and whether they held this opinion before a) the London bombings and b) the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Three additional items considered the portrayal of Muslims in mainstream American media, and the need for increased Muslim outreach efforts to impact media and government officials. The final three items on this issue dealt with the relationship between views on American foreign policy, sense of “American-ness” and support for US troops in Iraq.

## RESULTS

### Islamic Education

On the topic of “Islamic educational” sources and priorities, 42% of respondents reported that their primary source of Islamic education was a mosque, while 27% identified their home as their primary source of Islamic education. Similarly, 56% rely primarily on the Qur’an and hadith (traditions of Prophet Muhammad) for their Islamic knowledge, while 26% rely on a well-known spiritual head for



their Islamic knowledge, and 14% rely on a local religious spiritual head.

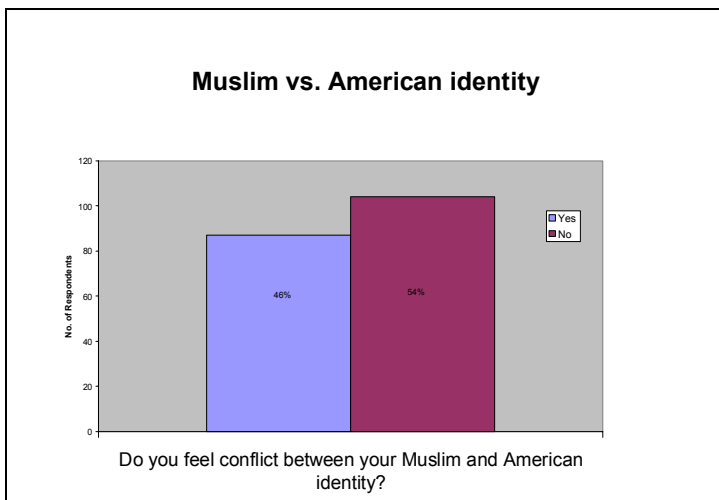
Roughly one-third (34%) of respondents reported attending Islamic classes and/or events at least twice each week. An overwhelming majority (89%) grew up attending a mosque and had frequent interaction with Muslims. The respondents also agreed that their mosque is able to attract high-school aged (61%) and college-aged (59%) Muslims through programming that accommodates their interests. More than half of respondents (57%) also reported that women held leadership positions in their mosques.

Over two-thirds (68%) of respondents agreed that the jurisprudence developed in America by Muslim scholars is as legitimate as the jurisprudence developed in the Muslim world, while one-third (32%) felt that jurisprudence developed in the United States does not have the same legitimacy as jurisprudence developed in the Muslim world. Conversely, 60% study the religious opinions of Muslim American writers more than “scholars abroad”. However, 40% reported following the opinions of a specific scholar upon whom they rely. Just over 70% do not believe that following an Islamic “school of thought” is required.

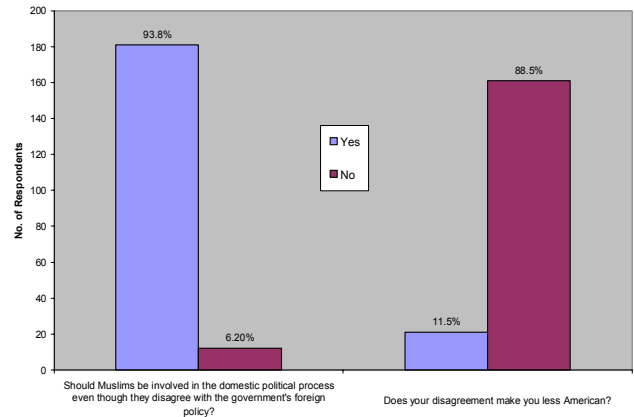
## Identity

Respondents overwhelmingly identified the primary source of influence on their “Muslim identity” as other Muslims. More than half of respondents (53%) said most of their friends and acquaintances were also Muslim, while one-quarter (26%) said academic interests are the common denominator of their friends and acquaintances.

Since 9/11, 70% of respondents report that they notice “significant hostility toward Muslims in the general American public”. While only 38% believe that the general American public recognizes this hostility, just over half of respondents (53%) agreed that the general American public sees Muslim Americans as a legitimate part of the country’s pluralism. Conversely, 60% of respondents believe that the international Muslim population sees the Muslim American experience as a legitimate part of the international community that cares for their concerns. Finally, 46% of respondents said they felt conflict between their Muslim identity and their American identity, while 54% did not feel a conflict.



## Muslim involvement in domestic politics



## Civic Participation

Finally, respondents assigned a high degree of importance to “civic participation” in their vision for the nation’s future. Respondents were nearly unanimous (99%) in their belief that national Muslim organizations should “engage in dialogue with government and the general American public to get our rights”.

Twenty-eight percent of respondents said their opinion had changed after 9/11, while 14% reported their opinion changed after the London bombings. Only 5% of respondents felt that Muslims get a “fair shake” in domestic US media, while 95% did not.

They disagreed in equal proportion (91%) with the statement “Muslims are reaching out enough to the domestic US media with their issues”, and 96% believe that “communicating with the government is a “necessary part of getting our constitutional rights as Muslim Americans”.

Nearly all respondents (94%) said that Muslims should be involved in the American political process “even though

they may disagree with the government's foreign policy". However, most (89%) disagreed with the proposition that "such disagreement makes you less American than others". Finally, 40% said they were able to "support American troops even though you disagree with their missions".

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## **ANALYSIS**

Young American Muslims have complex understandings of their (1) Islamic education, (2) identity, and (3) the role and relative importance of civic engagement.

### **Islamic Education**

On the issue of "Islamic education" and perspective, nearly half (42%) of young Muslims said their mosque was their primary source of information, while 27% said their home was their primary source. Thus, 69% of Islamic education comes from the mosque and the home of a young American Muslim. This can perhaps be attributed to the quality of programs being offered from an American Muslim perspective.

More than half (60%) do not study the religious opinions of scholars abroad as a preference to American Muslim scholars and writers. For these individuals, American Muslim scholarship and opinions are at least equally legitimate as a source of religious education. Rather, they develop attitudes and influences from their immediate surroundings.

This underscores the need for homegrown Muslim American institutions that are developed by and for Muslim communities across the country. It also illustrates the need for sustainable growth of community institutions. In this sector, these American Muslim youth will act as

the next generation of Muslim leaders will have a formidable role to play in the development of those institutions most vital to the interest of the community. For this reason, it is crucial that young American Muslim be supported by mosque leadership.

### **Identity**

On the question of "Identity", more than half (52%) of respondents reported that religion is what they have in common with most of their friends and acquaintances. Only 14% said that ethnicity or race is something they have in common with friends and acquaintances. In light of recent assessments of the European Muslim community experiencing psychological isolation and "ghettoization" along racial or ethnic lines, it appears that American Muslim youth do not isolate themselves with others who share their race or ethnicity.

Just more than half (54%) report experiencing no conflict between their American identity and their Muslim identity. Given the post-9/11 increase in hostility toward Islam and Muslims, the fact that more than half of respondents felt equally American and Muslim demonstrates the high rate of integration among this primarily first-generation American population. This appears as a stark contrast to the reality of British Muslims, who have not laid claim to a collective "British Muslim identity". The reasons for this may have something to do with educational opportunities. American Muslims are far more educated than their British counterparts. More than 42% are college-educated, according to an April 2002 Cornell University study.

The fact that 46% of respondents said they experienced a conflict between their

American and Muslim identities even though over 90% agreed that American Muslim engagement in the domestic political process was important and necessary could be a harbinger for increased psychological ghettoization among young American Muslims. Further studies are needed in this area to determine the specific factors that impede young Muslim Americans from comfortably claiming a congruent Muslim American identity.

Despite agreeing that young American Muslims should be civically engaged, 70% also report experiencing hostility from the general American public. Such hostility, whether real or perceived, could contribute to the sense of isolation that would create a psychological conflict between their American identity and Muslim identity. The work of anti-Muslim hatemongers to marginalize and demonize the faith and identity of American Muslims is an obstacle to realizing the full integration of young American Muslims. If negative information and characterizations of Islam did not dominate media and public discourse, far greater numbers of young American Muslims could proudly claim their Muslim American identity without facing hostility, discrimination or misunderstanding.

### **Civic Participation**

American Muslim youth express support for not only “Civic engagement,” but also a desire for full social and political inclusion as American citizens. Respondents dispel the widely held suspicion that American Muslims negate their American identity as a result of their disagreement with American foreign policy. An overwhelming 93% said Muslims should be involved in the

domestic political process even though they disagree with the government’s foreign policy. Survey participants appeared aware of the pluralism they enjoy, and are not disinclined to voice their opinion even when they disagree with the majority. Three-fourths (75%) of those surveyed said that for Muslims in America to be fully equal and free, national American Muslim institutions must engage in dialogue with government and the American public. These findings confirm a 2001 study conducted by the Hartford Seminary, in which 70% of American Muslims “strongly agreed” that they should participate in American institutions and the political process.

While sources of religious education are mostly domestic for Muslim American youth, they simultaneously feel hostility from their non-Muslim fellow Americans and misrepresented by the mainstream media. While they strongly agree that Muslim Americans should enhance their political and civic participation, they most closely ally themselves with people who share their faith. They also overwhelmingly agree that Muslim American institutions should do more to outreach to government and media officials. They seek a voice in mainstream America to share their experiences and positively impact the future of their nation. Young American Muslims are confronting their seemingly competing identities, which could potentially benefit from the existence of tools to be able to confront the challenges ahead.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Islamic Education**

(1) Since American Muslim youth learn about Islam primarily from their parents

and in the mosque, educational and interactive discussions and forums are important avenues through which to deliver accurate and relevant information on Islam.

(2) Home grown Muslim American institutions that are developed by and for local Muslim communities are critical in order to preserve the ability of American mosques to respond to the unique challenges of their youth population. Such institutions require financial resources to provide such necessary and relevant programming and materials. These mosques and institutions should also engage in dialogue with local political officials as well as non-Muslim non-governmental organizations to make their mosques a vibrant part of their broader community.

(3) American Muslim youth should be supported for their leadership within schools, mosques, and institutions. Furthermore, their perspectives and advice should be sought directly to address current challenges.

### **Identity**

(1) American Muslim youth need forums in which to comfortably explore and discuss the meaning, dimensions, and uncertainties they experience. Such programs should be a priority for the Muslim American community, which seeks a contributing role within America's pluralism.

(2) National Muslim youth empowerment programs, with mentorship between young professional and high school/college students, should be developed. The Muslim American Project (MAP), which seeks to empower young Muslim Americans to become leaders for

their future, is MPAC's effort to meet the challenge.

### **Civic Participation**

(1) While young American Muslims view political and civic engagement as important, American Muslims are under-represented in occupations that make public policy and influence public opinion. Internship programs, such as the Muslim Student Network (MSN), should be developed as an initial remedy in order to expand access and career opportunities for young American Muslims in media, government and policy institutions.

(2) Media and governmental institutions should provide more internship opportunities for Muslim students.

(3) Media and governmental institutions should engage in dialogue with young Muslim Americans to solicit first-hand information about the needs, challenges and desires of this largely ignored population.

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### **CONCLUSION**

This survey is the first known attempt since 9/11 to solicit the perspectives of young American Muslims on themselves and their role in their community and their nation. For far too long, the motivations and desires of young Muslims has been discussed. However, young Muslims have not been included in these important conversations. They deserve the right to speak for themselves, free of any bias.

While the sample in this study cannot be considered representative of the national young American Muslim population, the findings outlined here are significant because they represent the sentiments of those whose identification with Islam is

strong enough to compel them to attend the largest annual gathering of Muslims in the United States.

These are young people who feel both the pressures of culture, national identity, and religious misconceptions. How they view themselves and their role in determining the future of their nation, community, and faith are a vital contribution the American public discourse on Islam and Muslims.

Since this study is an initial attempt to diagnose the identity and perceptions of young American Muslims, it is hoped that the data will focus more attention on this significant population.

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## SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. For Muslims in America to be fully equal and free, our national organizations need to engage in dialogue with govt. and the general American public to get our rights.
  - A. Strongly Agree (75%)
  - B. Agree (25%)
  - C. Disagree (1%)
  - D. Strongly Disagree (1%)
2. Did your answer to the previous question change after 9/11?
  - A. Yes (28%)
  - B. No (72%)
3. Did your answer to the previous question change after the London bombings?
  - A. Yes (14%)
  - B. No (80%)
4. Do you think that Muslims get a 'fair shake' in domestic US media?
  - A. Yes (5%)
  - B. No (95%)
5. Do you think that Muslims are reaching out enough to the domestic US media with their issues?
  - A. Yes (9%)
  - B. No (91%)
6. Do you believe that communicating with the government is a necessary part of getting our constitutional rights as Muslim Americans?
  - A. Yes (96%)
  - B. No (3.6%)
7. Do you believe that Muslims should be involved in the domestic political process even though they may disagree with the government's foreign policy?
  - A. Yes (94%)
  - B. No (6%)
8. If yes, do you feel that such disagreement makes you less American than others?
  - A. Yes (11.5%)
  - B. No (88.5%)
9. Do you feel conflict between your Muslim identity and your American identity?
  - A. Yes (46%)
  - B. No (54%)
10. Have you noticed significant hostility toward Muslims in the general American public?
  - A. Yes (38%)
  - B. No (62%)
11. If so, do you believe that the general American public recognizes this hostility?
  - A. Yes (70%)
  - B. No (30%)
12. What is your primary activity during leisure time?
13. Are you able to support American troops even though you disagree with their missions?
  - A. Yes (40%)
  - B. No (60%)
14. The general American public sees the Muslim American communities as a legitimate part of the country's pluralism?
  - A. Strongly Agree (7.4%)
  - B. Agree (46%)
  - C. Disagree (38%)
  - D. Strongly Disagree (8%)
  - E. No answer (4%)
15. The international Muslim community sees the Muslim American experience as a legitimate part of that international community (*ummah*) that cares for their concerns.
  - A. Strongly Agree (12%)
  - B. Agree (48%)

- C. Disagree (36%)  
D. Strongly Disagree (4%)  
E. No answer (4%)
16. Do you believe that the jurisprudence developed in America by Muslim scholars is as legitimate as the fiqh of the Muslim world?  
A. Yes (68%)  
B. No (31%)
17. Which of the following is your primary source of Islamic education?  
A. Mosque (42%)  
B. University (9%)  
C. Home (27%)  
D. Other (20%)
18. Which of the following represents the number of times you engage in class/event related to Islam or the Muslim community?  
A. Rarely (19%)  
B. Once per week (47%)  
C. Twice per week (16%)  
D. Three or more times per week (18%)
19. Did you grow up attending a mosque regularly with frequent interaction among Muslims?  
A. Yes (89%)  
B. No (11%)
20. My mosque is able to attract high-school age Muslims through good programming.  
A. Strongly Agree (17%)  
B. Agree (44%)  
C. Disagree (31%)  
D. Strongly Disagree (8%)
21. My mosque is able to attract college age Muslims through good programming.  
A. Strongly Agree (11%)  
B. Agree (48%)  
C. Disagree (32%)  
D. Strongly Disagree (8.6%)
22. There are women in leadership positions in my mosque.  
A. Yes (57%)  
B. No (43%)
23. Do you study the religious opinions of scholars abroad more than Muslim American writers?  
A. Yes (40%)  
B. No (60%)
24. Do you follow the opinions and rulings of a specific scholar upon whom you rely?  
A. Yes (34%)  
B. No (66%)
25. Do you believe that following a specific “school of thought” is required?  
A. Yes (28%)  
B. No (72%)
26. Which of the following is a characteristic that you have in common with most of your friends and acquaintances?  
A. Religion (56%)  
B. Ethnicity/Race (14%)  
C. Academic interests (26%)  
D. Parents are friends (4.1%)
27. Rank in order your biggest influencers:  
A. Religious leader  
B. Peer  
C. Family head  
D. Organization  
E. Colleague
28. Rank in order your primary source of news:  
A. Online  
B. TV  
C. Newspaper  
D. Radio  
E. Community newsletter  
F. Word of mouth
29. What is your primary source of religious knowledge?  
A. Textual/Quran/Hadith  
B. Local religious spiritual head  
C. Well-known religious spiritual head  
D. Family  
E. Online  
F. Peers  
G. Other

### WHAT IS MPAC?

The Muslim Public Affairs Council is a public service agency working for the civil rights of American Muslims, for the integration of Islam into American pluralism, and for a positive, constructive relationship between American Muslims and their representatives. Since 1988, MPAC has worked diligently to promote a vibrant American Muslim community and enrich American society through exemplifying the Islamic values of Mercy, Justice, Peace, Human Dignity, Freedom, and Equality for all. Over the years, MPAC has built a reputation as a consistent and reliable resource for government and media, and is trusted by American Muslims as an authentic, experienced voice.