

NATIONAL



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DO WE LOOK LIKE TERRORISTS TO YOU?

Attitudes toward Muslims in the U.S. are often negative. But American Muslims say that people's perceptions of them couldn't be further from reality. Here's what they want you to know.

BY BRYAN BROWN



IT WAS A PERFECTLY NORMAL DAY in Plano, Texas.

Standing in a checkout line at Walmart, 18-year-old Irum Ali heard a woman behind her speaking to a friend. Irum, who is Muslim, experienced a familiar sinking feeling. The woman was talking about her. "At first I heard kind of snickering," says Irum. "Then she started talking about how I should leave the country."

Irum has heard it all before. *Those people don't belong here. Why don't they go home?* For most of her life, Irum says, she has never felt out of place in Plano, a city of more than 270,000 with a diverse population. But a few years ago, she decided to start wearing the **hijab** to "get closer to my religion," she explains. (It's a personal choice, Irum says. Her sister and her mother, who was born in Pakistan, don't wear it.) Suddenly, people started treating Irum differently. In public places, they would sometimes look away, not return her smile, or glance crossly at her. Or even act with hostility, like that time at Walmart.

"When I realized it was about me, I tried to pretend that I wasn't listening," Irum says. "But she was talking about me *a lot*." Finally, Irum turned around to defend herself: "This is my home," she said. "I was born and raised here. Where am I supposed to go?"

For Muslims living in the U.S., situations like this are not uncommon. Once invisible in most areas of the country, Muslims are now a fast-growing group. According to estimates by the Pew Forum on Religious Life, there were about 1.3

million Muslim adults in the U.S. in 2010, almost 1 percent of the population. By 2020, that figure may more than double, to 3.9 million.

Yet despite their increasing presence, Muslim-Americans are deeply concerned by a sense that other

Americans view them negatively due to stereotypes and suspicions. One poll released last year by the Arab American Institute found that just 27 percent of Americans view Muslim-Americans favorably.

Indeed, "for many Americans, Islam is only a religion of violence," says Islamic scholar Haroon Moghul of Columbia University in New York City. This perception is fueled by daily media reports of attacks by ISIS, the civil war in Syria, and other Middle East horrors—as well as the memory of the September 11, 2001, attacks by **Al Qaeda**, which killed nearly 3,000 people in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

Anti-Muslim sentiment can take many forms. Muslim-Americans might be stopped at airports on suspicion of being connected with Middle Eastern terrorists. More often, they may be denied common courtesy in public. In the most extreme cases, their lives are threatened. In February, for example, a North Carolina man murdered three promising Muslim-American college students. Their offense was nothing more than their —→

dress and faith—their differentness.

Changing the negative perception of Islam in America is no easy task, but it's certainly not impossible. According to the authors of the Arab American Institute report, "Education about and greater exposure to . . . American Muslims are the keys both to greater understanding of these growing communities of American citizens

and to ensuring that their rights are secured."

Snap Judgments

For Muslim-Americans, it can be hard just getting past appearances. Simply looking "Arab" can be enough to trigger people's negative stereotypes. (A majority of Arab-Americans are actually Christian, and less than a quarter of American

Muslims are Arab.) And as Irum Ali can tell you, people are often unsettled by the sight of a woman with her head covered. (See "Dress Codes," *opposite*.)

Soumaya Khalifa of Atlanta, Georgia, is also used to the stares. She knows people see her head scarf and immediately make assumptions about her. "They think that I'm not American," she says. "They assume I'm not educated—and that I'm oppressed."

Muslims—and Muslim women in particular—are often stereotyped in this way. (See "Is Islam Biased Against Women?," *opposite*.) But in fact, Khalifa, like Irum, chose to wear the head scarf. A lifelong Muslim, she was already in her 30s when she made the decision as "part of a spiritual journey." She insists that, far from feeling that it's oppressive, many women find the hijab to be liberating.

Moreover, Khalifa—who was born in Egypt and grew up in Texas—has two college degrees and is a successful consultant to major corporations. She's hardly alone in her achievements. According to a 2009 study, Muslim-American women are better educated than the average American—and U.S. Muslims as a group also have a higher median income than Americans as a whole.

We're Not Terrorists

Perhaps the myth that's hardest to dispel is that Islam promotes terrorism. In the U.S., while acts of homegrown extremists like the Boston Marathon bombers generate widespread outrage, terrorist violence by Muslims is extremely rare. Muslim-Americans are confused and hurt when they are



CONTINUED ON P. 10



WHAT DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE?

The word *Islam* is Arabic for "surrender," meaning surrender to God. A *Muslim* is "one who submits to God's will."

➔ Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was born in 570 A.D. in Mecca, in what today is Saudi Arabia. In 610, Muslims believe, the angel Gabriel (who is in both the Old and the New Testaments) appeared to

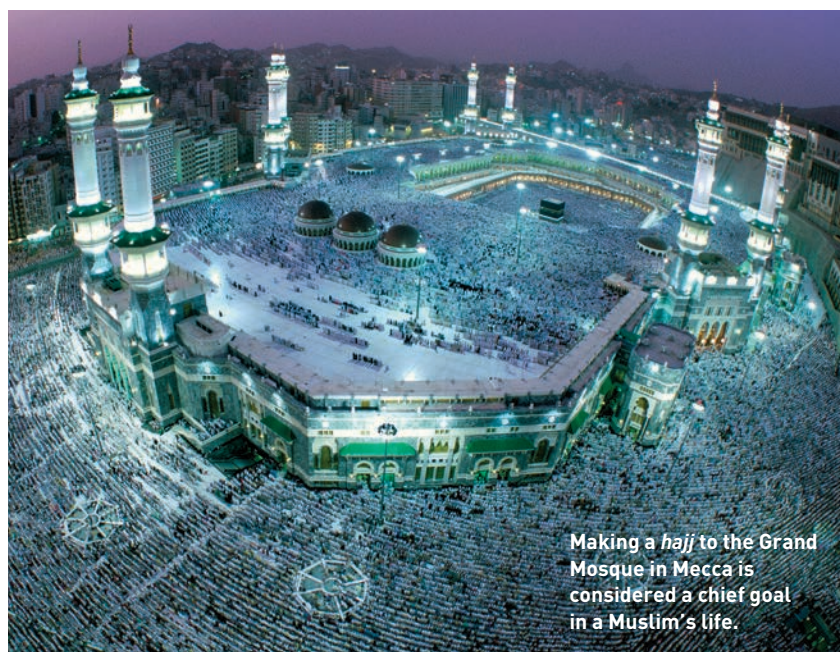
Muhammad and began revealing the word of God to him. These revelations continued for 23 years and became the basis of the Koran, Islam's holy book.

➔ "Islam emerges out of the same tradition as Judaism and Christianity," says Haroon Moghul.

Muslims honor Abraham as the father of both the Arab and the Jewish people, and recognize Moses and Jesus as prophets. But Islam holds that Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet, and that the Koran is God's final revelation.

➔ The basic principles of the faith are contained in the Five Pillars of Islam. First is the belief "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

The others include that Muslims must pray five times daily, tithe (give away a portion of what they earn), and fast during the month of **Ramadan**. Finally, all believers who have the health and the means must make a *hajj* (pilgrimage) at least once to the Great Mosque in Mecca, the center of the Muslim world.



Making a *hajj* to the Grand Mosque in Mecca is considered a chief goal in a Muslim's life.

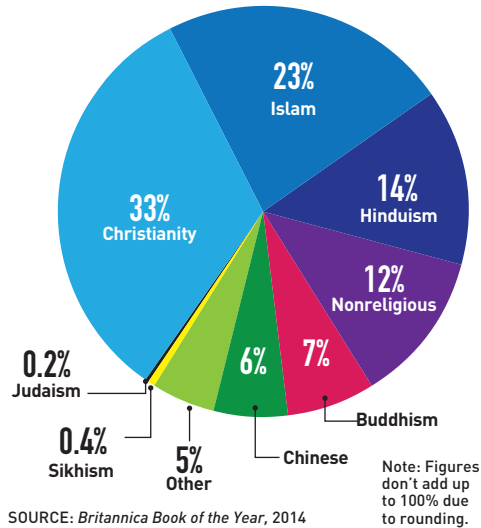
ISLAM AT A GLANCE



IS ISLAM BIASED AGAINST WOMEN?

Many Westerners think so—seeing, for instance, that in Saudi Arabia, women aren't allowed to drive. Moghul says that this has little to do with Islam. Rather, it's a sign of a "patriarchal," or male-dominated, society that can't let go of old ways. "Denying women the right to drive seems profoundly un-Islamic to me—and, in fact, to nearly all Muslims," he says.

WORLD RELIGIONS Islam is the world's second-largest religion (2.2 billion-plus believers).



SOURCE: *Britannica Book of the Year*, 2014

DRESS CODES

Islam's holy book, the Koran, instructs Muslims to dress with modesty. For men, that means avoiding tight clothing. For women, modesty generally means covering the hair and much of the body. Here are a few options:



◀ CHADOR

Muslims can often tell where someone is from by what they wear. The chador, which drapes over the body but leaves some or all of the face open, is most common in Iran.



◀ HIJAB

The word *hijab* can refer to the concept of modest dressing. A hijab is also a simple covering for the head and shoulders. Women all over the world wear it in many ways, and it is often very stylish.



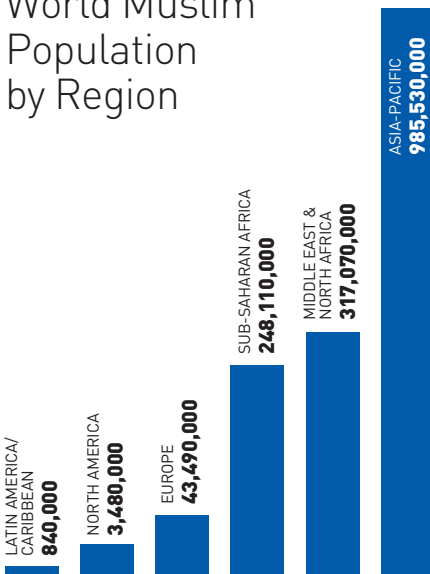
◀ BURKA

The burka is a tent-like garment that covers the entire body, often with a net window over the face so that no one can see in. Burkas are common in Afghanistan.

SUNNI & SHIA Islam's Main Divisions

Most Muslims belong to one of Islam's two main **sects**. The split between the Sunni and the Shia dates back to Muhammad's death in 632 A.D. The majority of his followers chose his companion Abu Bakr as the first *caliph*, or successor. This faction is known as the Sunni. Others backed Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. This group, the Shia, insisted that leadership should be passed through the Prophet's family. The dispute led to war—and a bitter split that has lasted 1,500 years. Today, about 90 percent of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. In the Middle East, the rift between the two groups continues to fuel political rivalry and violence.

World Muslim Population by Region



SOURCE: Pew Research Center, 2012



“Authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence.”

—Pope Francis

Leader of the Roman Catholic Church

56

Percent of American Muslims ages 18-29 who said they had been treated with suspicion, called offensive names, singled out by law enforcement, or threatened in the past 12 months.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center, 2011

associated with extremists here or overseas, says Haroon Moghul.

“American Muslims are American,” he insists. Muslim victims died in the 9/11 attacks and many Islamic leaders have consistently denounced terrorist acts. “We can’t understand why people assume we have any responsibility for events on the other side of the world,” Moghul says.

Muslims anywhere who say they are killing in the name of Islam are distorting religion by looking for a reason for violence that’s not in the Koran, Moghul says. “The sad fact is [that] when people want to use violence, they find whatever justification they need to.”

Encouraging Signs

Just how different are Muslims from other Americans? Not much, if at all, say many American Muslims. For her part, Irum Ali stresses her utter normality. “I’m totally normal. I go to school and I work and I live in Texas—and I have my entire life,” she says.

Anna Bigelow teaches religious studies at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. In important ways, she says, American Muslims today are like the waves of Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries. “Historically, it has taken a long time for minority populations to become familiar and accepted in U.S. society,” she points out.

But Bigelow is encouraged by the growing numbers of non-Muslim students taking her courses on Islam. “They have Muslim friends, neighbors, or co-workers and have become curious to learn more than what they see in the media. For me, this is very hopeful.”



Many Muslims—like these Pakistani women protesting a U.S. film—object to Western depictions of Islam.



HOW MUSLIMS ABROAD VIEW THE U.S.

Few Muslims worldwide support terrorism, say experts. Yet Muslims *do* condemn what they see as widespread disrespect for Islam in the U.S. and other Western nations.

Muslims overseas particularly resent years of U.S. involvement in their countries’ politics, including the support of repressive governments like Egypt’s. “Many Middle Eastern Muslims primarily experience America as the government that funds their dictators, arms their militaries, or bombs their territories,” Haroon Moghul says.

It’s also true that a growing number of Muslims, particularly young men, have turned to violence. START, a group at the University of Maryland that studies terrorism, counted more than 15,000 attacks by extreme Islamist groups worldwide in 2014.

Much of the killing in the Islamic world is done by Muslims against Muslims. (See “Sunni & Shia,” previous page.) But leaders of groups like Al Qaeda also exploit feelings against the U.S. and the West. William Braniff, executive director of

START, says these militants are often motivated by a sense of desperation after suffering from years of repression and poverty. “It’s hard to get a job. Governments are corrupt,” Braniff says.

In certain Muslim countries, like Yemen and Iraq, people have lived for generations without freedom and with little chance of prosperity. Terrorist leaders are able to convince some of the most desperate that the U.S. and the West, by propping up corrupt governments, are at the root of their misery. “That’s very attractive to people who feel those grievances every day,” Braniff says. “Now they have somebody who’s to blame.”

Meanwhile, Soumaya Khalifa sees progress toward acceptance of Islam in America in a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision. The Court ruled that an Abercrombie & Fitch store in Colorado had discriminated when it refused to hire a young Muslim woman who was wearing a hijab. “Personal and religious freedom—this is a clear case of what

this country is all about,” she says.

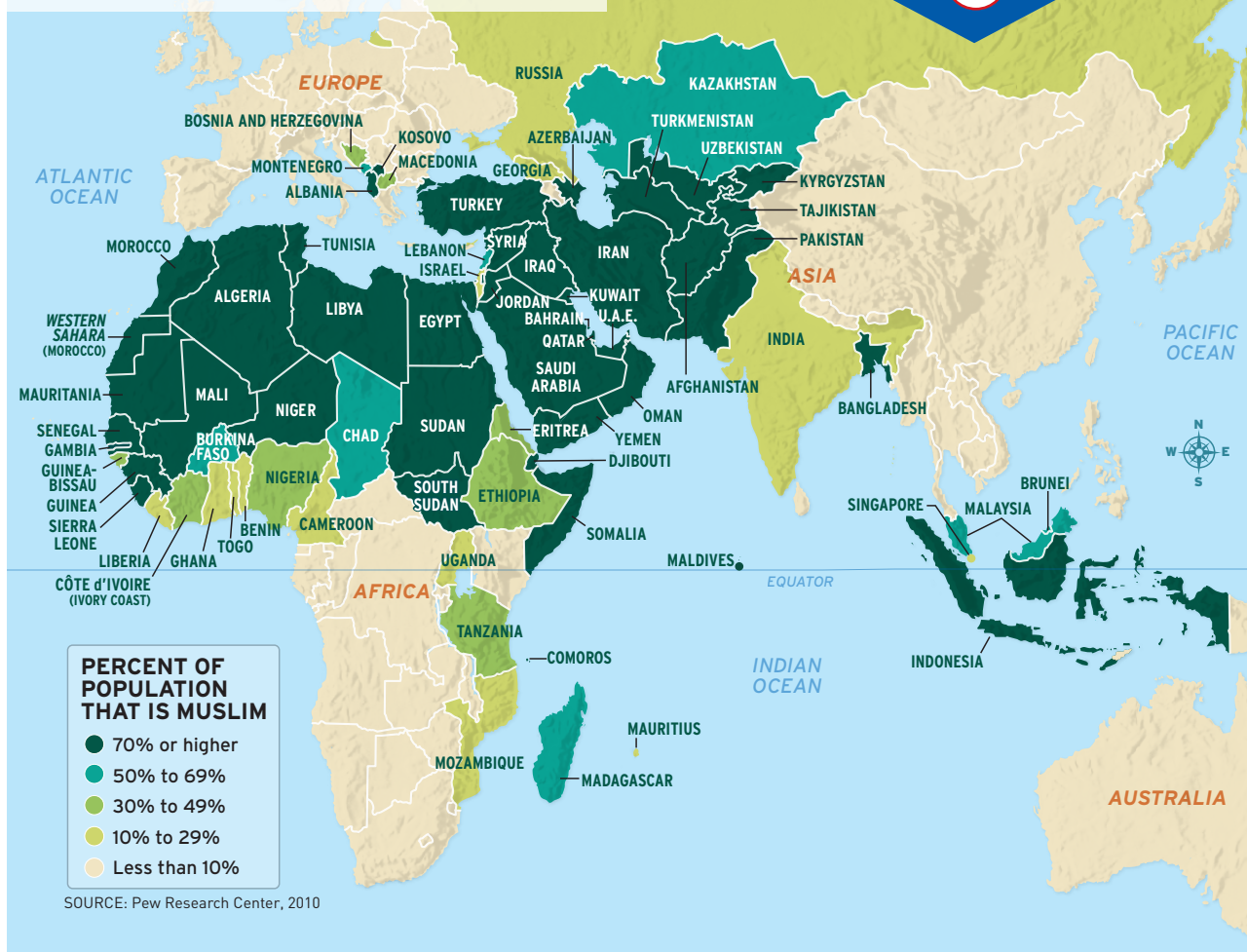
Still, according to Moghul, there is work ahead: Muslims and non-Muslims must continue to discover their common values. “We need to hear each other in order to respect each other,” he explains. Islam, he says, is a faith of peace and inclusion. “We believe in improving the world, not destroying it.” ♦



THE HEART OF ISLAM

Although Muslims are spread all over the world, a majority live in these countries.

Play the Mapman™ Game at scholastic.com/js.



QUESTIONS

1. Most majority-Muslim countries are located on which two continents?
2. About what percent of people in Iran are Muslim?
3. About what percent of Russians are Muslim?
4. Which country in north-central Africa is between 50 and 69 percent Muslim?
5. The equator runs through which countries that are more than 70 percent Muslim?
6. Which countries in Europe are at least 70 percent Muslim?
7. India lies between which Muslim countries?
8. Which country in southeastern Africa is between 30 and 49 percent Muslim?
9. What is the northernmost country in Asia that is more than 70 percent Muslim?
10. One majority-Muslim country bordering Syria is 40 percent Christian. Which is it?

YOUR TURN

How are Muslims viewed in your community? If you are Muslim, how do you fit into the community? What would you change?



Watch a video on the history of Muslim veils at scholastic.com/js.