



## *Images of Muslims in Western Scholarship and Media after 9/11*

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### **Abstract**

This article endeavors to trace changes in the images of the Muslim of the Orient, a product of Orientalism, to contemporary images of the Muslim post 9/11, marking a transition from classical Orientalism to a new Orientalism or Islamism. The study demonstrates how most Western scholarship and media, through the construction of so-called Islamophobia, have portrayed Muslims in terms of global terrorism, Islamic jihadism, fanatic Islamism, fundamentalism, fascism, and Islamic authoritarianism. Much of the scholarship and media dealing with Islam and Muslims require critical assessment and revision. The article also addresses ways through which Muslims in academia and the media have opposed negative images of Muslims. For instance, in response to the irrational acts of extremists that have fostered negative stereotypes of Islam, public lectures, sermons, conferences, and media programs have recently and abundantly been made by Muslim scholars and media activists to present Muslims positively at both the national and global levels.

### **Introduction**

Much Western scholarship and media, particularly in the United States, that have dealt with Islam or Muslims in the Middle East as well as worldwide, have manipulated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and have defined such events within contexts of religious extremism, global violence, and the war on terror resulting in negative, fear-inducing, and stereotypical images of Muslims. It is worth noting that ethnic archetypes and negative stereotyping of Arab and Muslim Americans have been discussed by scholars such as Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007), Edward Said (1978, 1981, 2001), Salait (2006), Jack Shaheen (1997, 2001, 2008), Smellring (2006), Stockton (1994), and others. Despite the fact that the two factors, mainly an individual's ethnicity/religion and a "Muslim name" remain the primary causes of discrimination. These two factors are believed to have triggered 63% of the total cases reported to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) during the 2007 calendar year.<sup>1</sup> Muslims and Arabs have experienced a variety of forms of discrimination and stigmatization based on other factors such as race, language, dress (especially veil and headscarf),<sup>2</sup> customs, and heritage (el-Aswad, 2006a, 2010). Even lawfully prepared food (*halāl*) has been attacked and



ridiculed as being notorious and unclean. Further, Muslims have suffered both economically and politically since the events of 9/11 and the declaration of the global war on terror, the consequence of which has been the lengthy, costly, and implacable invasions of two Muslim countries, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Much of the scholarship and media addressing Islam is in need of critical assessment and revision, especially when we recognize that the image of the Muslim as a threatening “Other” that has emerged in the West has been predominantly fabricated. This article seeks to trace the changes in the image of the Muslim of the Orient, criticized by Anouar Abdel-Malek (1963) and Edward Said (1978) as a product of Orientalism, to contemporary images of Muslims generated after 9/11, marking a transition from classical Orientalism to Islamism or new Orientalism (el-Aswad, 2008). It is worth noting that while Said’s 1978 work, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* dealt with the biases of Western scholarship, his 1981 work *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, discussed and criticized the Western media that distorted and misrepresented the Muslim world.

### **Scholarship: From Classical Orientalism to Islamism and New Orientalism**

As Said has argued, the roots of Orientalism can be traced back to the era of colonialism, which resulted in the fragmentation of nations and the rise of geopolitics based on economic interests. Although some of Said’s writings were published prior to September 11, 2001, they nonetheless highlighted the hardships that Arabs and Muslims faced in both their homeland and their new land as a result of colonialism, fragmentation, and migration. For Said, the image of the Orient is expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship. Orientalism can be regarded as “a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient” (Said, 1978, p. 202). The Orient has become a mirror image of what is the inferior and alien Other to the West (Said, 1978).

More specifically and recently, the “Orient” has become the “Islamic Orient,” “Muslim East,” “Arab Orient,” or “Arab East.” Thomas Friedman, in his attempt to distinguish between the West and the “Arab East,” focused on certain symbols. Friedman argued, “The symbol of the West is the cross—full of sharp right angles that begin and end. But the symbol of the Arab East is the crescent moon—a wide ambiguous arc, where there are curves, but no corners” (Lockman, 2004, p. 219). In his comments on the previous statement Lockman said, “Friedman’s dichotomization of the West and the Arab world, each neatly equipped with a symbol that purportedly expressed its essence, its core cultural attributes and fixed mentality, was no doubt crude and simplistic, even laughable; but at a critical moment it offered Americans an easy way both to make sense of a complicated and often confusing world and to reassure themselves about their innocence,



righteousness and rationality” (Lockman, 2004, p. 219). Though Lockman’s statement offered explanation, it further implied the projection of features contrary to “innocence, righteousness and rationality” onto the Other Muslim or Arab.

With the exception of select Western scholars such as Corbin (1969), Eickelman and Piscatori (1996), Geertz (1960, 1968), Haddad (2011), Netton (1989), and Said (1981), who have sought to understand and present Islam objectively, much Western scholarship and mainstream media have portrayed Muslims in terms of global terrorism, Islamic jihadism, fanatic Islamism, fundamentalism, fascism, and authoritarianism. These global depictions of Muslims have generated what is known as Islamophobia or irrational fear of Muslims (Ali et al., 2011; Allen, 2010; Esposito & Ibrahim, 2011; Gingrich, 2005; Gottshalk & Greenberg, 2008; Hamdon, 2010), and have not only aggravated sociopolitical problems in the Arab/Muslim world such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, violence, and the “brain drain” caused by migration but have also led to serious questions concerning indigenous cultures, identities of Muslim diaspora, and the emergence of what is so-called Islamist terrorism. Terrorism is defined as a political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, involving the death or the threat of death to noncombatants (Schreiber, 1978).

New Orientalism, viewing Islam in terms of antimodernity and antidemocracy, is represented by the work of numerous contemporary Western scholars who follow the new Orientalist paradigm of Bernard Lewis (2003) based especially on his work, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. The broad concept of classical Orientalism has been modified and restricted to political Islamism and the fear of Islam in general, and of Arabs and the Middle East, in particular. Islam has become a center of fear (i.e., *Islamophobia*). Muslims have been debunked and portrayed in much of Western scholarship as the exotic other, the enemy—imagined or real, and the despotic, antidemocratic, and terroristic. Images of suicidal bombings for the United States and Europe, or the West, have become iconic of the Islamic “culture of death” (Asad, 2007, p. 5).

The majority of Muslim societies are depicted as adopting religious and anti-secular world views. For instance, Charles Taylor (2007, p. 3) states, “many milieu in the United States are secularized, and I would argue that the United States as a whole is secularized. Clear contrast cases today would be the majority of Muslim societies.” Further, plenty of theories and scholarly books have addressed topics such as “Islamic Fundamentalism” (Davidson, 1998), “The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West” (Kepel, 2004), “Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad” (Springer, Regens, & Edger, 2009), “Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West” (Wiktorowicz, 2005), “Global Jihadism” (Brachman, 2009), “Islamic Imperialism” (Karsh, 2006), “Muslim Mafia: Inside the Secret Underworld that’s Conspiring to Islamize America” (Gaubatz & Sperry, 2009), “The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror” (Lewis, 2004), and “The Theory and Practice of Islamic Terrorism” (Perry & Negrin, 2008), to mention a few.



Many of these theories that offer to explain Islamist terrorism have been generated in the United States (Asad, 2007). The problem with the ideology of the anti-Muslim industry, represented by New Orientalism and Islamophobia, is that the fight against violent political Islam is viewed as a fight against Islam as a whole.

In his work, *Lost in the Sacred: Why the Muslim World Stood Still*, Dan Diner (2009) conveyed contempt for Islam and designated reasons behind the failure of the Muslims, more specifically the Arabs, by blaming Islam. He claimed that in the religion of Islam, the sacred has been the main cause for their failure or lack of progress and falsely asserted that, “as a religion embracing law, power, and domination, Islam is an intrinsically political religion” (Diner, 2009, p. 9). To support his claim, he unjustifiably argued that Islam has hindered almost all attempts to introduce modernity and secular world views to Middle Eastern societies. The claim that religion hinders progress or modernity has been and can be refuted as a mere biased judgment.

Diner, as Lewis, criticized Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) for blaming the West for creating distorted images of the Orient but carried on developing an alternative Orientalist assumption, “New Orientalism” that has slandered both Islam and Arab culture. In a similar fashion akin to Patai’s biased account (1973), Diner’s views of Arabs are as nomadic and nondemocratic tribes relying more on the power of the clan than on their own individual contribution. Further, he portrayed Arabs and Muslims as lacking any desire for seeking innovations. Diner ignored the fact that Arabs contributed significantly to the cultural, mathematical, and scientific innovations during the Dark Ages of the West. Without the remarkable contribution of the Muslim world, there would have been no Renaissance in the West.<sup>3</sup> Further, Diner confined his work to a narrow view emphasizing internal factors, mainly religion or Islam instead of providing a balanced framework of both inside and outside factors, including sociopolitical, global, and imperial forces.

Other cynical books, by Buchanan (2002) and Caldwell (2009), for example, argued that Muslim immigrants in Europe have maintained an Islamic culture or identity antithetical to the liberal values of that continent. Muslim immigrants are incapable of integrating into our Western society. However, the claim was that with the increase of Muslim immigrants, Europeans will be a minority in their land. Caldwell stated that while government officials in Europe “refused to link the words *Islamic* and *terrorist*, the fact that the terrorists themselves claimed a religious motivation gave them a measure of immunity from criticism” (Caldwell, 2009, p. 96; italics are in the original). The last phrase in that quote, moreover, mistakenly implies that Islam and terrorism are inseparable. Caldwell shares this outlook with most Western scholarship assuming that the lack of democracy in the Muslim world is a core reason for Islamist terrorism.

Similarly, some studies such as those of Mohammed Hafez (2003) and Jennifer Noyon (2003) argue for a connection between the absence of democratic



politics and Islamist violence. However, the alleged causal relationship between the democratic deficit in Muslim societies and Islamist terrorism has not been supported by scholarly investigation. Recent studies demonstrate that there is no evidence that a necessary causal relationship exists between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism (Dalacoura, 2006).<sup>4</sup> A significant implication of these studies for Western policy toward Muslim or Middle Eastern societies is that “an excessive concentration on democracy as the solution to the Islamist terrorist problem is misguided” (Dalacoura, 2006, p. 522). The “Arab Spring” or “Muslim/Islamist Spring,” started in early 2011 as a popular movement against oppressive and undemocratic regimes in the Middle East, puts such preconceived stereotypes of Muslims into question (el-Aswad, 2011).

Another example, the work of Karsh and Kumaraswamy (2008), which provided baseless anti-Islam propaganda, relied on debatable sources of information including newspapers, TV shows, and speeches of politically rather than religiously oriented leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser who, among others, did not represent Islam or so-called Islamism, but rather were known for their abrasive persecution of members of the Muslim Brotherhood including Sayyid Qutb, the leading intellectual of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, among others.

“Deeply rooted ethnocentric prejudice and an unwillingness to see beyond political expedience have contributed to a demonization of Islam as a religion of violent terror alongside the older Judeo Christian charge of heretical error” (Varisco, 2005, p. 6). Through sweeping generalizations about Islam, the work of Karsh and Kumaraswamy proliferates a culture of hatred and hostility by unjustifiably attributing negative attitudes to Islam in its relation to certain cultures and countries, including Israel. In fact, the book addresses a subject that has little to do with Islamic attitudes toward Israel but much to do with Jewish attitudes toward Islam and its Holy Book, the *Qur’an*. For example, one reads in the section entitled, “The Long Trail of Islamic Anti-Semitism” that Medina Jews “became Muhammad’s staunchest critics, highlighting the gaps and inconsistencies of the Quran” (Karsh & Kumaraswamy, 2008, p. 2). The authors provide an incorrect explanation of the concept of martyrdom in Islam arguing, “Islam, in contrast to Judaism and Christianity, was from its beginnings an assertive, conquest-oriented faith, and as such sanctified martyrdom in the battle against infidels and heretics” (Karsh & Kumaraswamy, 2008, p. 30).

The portrayal of Islam as a conquest-oriented faith to rationalize martyrdom is completely untrue and implies the politics of aggression and terrorism. Such portrayals overlook other core Islamic values and concepts such as peace, justice, charity, unity, and truth and their impact on communities throughout the world (el-Aswad, 2012). History has proven that Islam spread through countries such as Indonesia via peaceful means such as trade, and not by the sword (Ricklefs, 1981). Furthermore, current political aggressive behaviors on the part of Muslims/Arabs are not disproportionate to those of other nations and ideologies.



The lack of direct contact and reliance on second-hand information go hand in hand with persistent monolithic views on Islam and Muslim communities. The problem is that certain Western organizations and security policy centers have generated anti-Muslim reports and new Orientalist books. For example, the Center for Security Policy has published and funded anti-Muslim books compiled by Boykin et al. (2010), Gaubatz and Sperry (2009), and Sperry (2005), among others.

The grave ignorance about Muslims and their stereotypical images in scholarship and press the world over is responsible for the emerging conflict between the West and Muslims as represented in Samuel Huntington's theory (1996) of the clash of civilizations that appears irrelevant in both Eastern and Western contexts. In a pessimistic answer to his question concerning the future of Orientalism, Hübinette (2003, p. 80) states, "Orientalism will always exist in one or another form as long as the West has hegemonic power. Orientalism is strongly intertwined with the Western self-image to such an extent that if Orientalism goes, then Western world power or even the West itself must also go." It is worth noting that most Muslims, conservative and nonconservative alike, disapprove of Islamist terrorist's religious assumptions such as those of Osama Bin Laden. Within this context, it is important to refer to Bruce Lincoln's comparison between George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden in which he traces a strong convergence of perspective between the two leaders: in dividing the world into two opposing camps of good and evil, disqualifying the option of neutrality, and using the image of children as innocent victims in justifying their causes (Lincoln, 2003, pp. 20–26).

### **Media and the Manufacture of False Images of Muslims Worldwide**

The events of September 11 have motivated the Western media to create negative images of Muslims worldwide and not just inside the United States. "Several prominent media icons of the Christian right have gone so far as to label the prophet Muhammad a 'terrorist' and the *Qur'an* as the 'enemy's book'" (Varisco, 2005, p. 6). Some of the media manufactured images of the Arabs and Muslims include mad religious imams or mullahs, cartoon bombs in Muslim turbans (Bowman, 2006), airplane hijackings, skyscraper terrorism, and suicide bombers. Offensive video clips and a hate film called "Innocence of Muslim," made by anti-Islam propagandists, was posted September 12, 2012, on the Internet slandering Islam and portraying the prophet Muhammad in an extremely negative fashion. Such derogatory images confirm that Americans and Europeans view Islam suspiciously and as a problem (Varisco, 2005). A recent study, focusing on British broadsheet newspapers and their negative depictions of Muslims, refers to journalists as representing the British society's powerful groups, middle and upper classes or élite, creating discourses of prejudice and anti-Muslim racism (Richardson, 2004).



These widespread negative images also show how pervasively anti-Arab and anti-Muslim attitudes have become accepted or adopted by Westerners who consider themselves impartial and open-minded. The deep-seated negative understandings of Islam in the United States affect discourses and actions of Muslim Americans who have become subject to the web of racism that includes media stereotypes, hate crimes, and dehumanizing ideology. New media and online web sites that virtually attack Islam and Muslims, including Muslim scholars, have increased. Some of these web sites include, for example, “Campus Watch: Monitoring Middle East Studies on Campus.” The terms “watch” and “monitoring” express not only violations of academic freedom but also the unjustified hegemony and power over students and scholars of Middle East and Muslim studies. Another web site, *Islamist Watch*, claims that it combats the ideas and institutions of radical Islam that seek hegemonic control through applying the Islamic law in the United States and other Western countries. Similarly, “Jihad Watch,” founded by David Horowitz and directed by Robert Spencer, “Stop the Islamization of America,” an anti-Islam organization affiliated with “Stop Islamisation of Europe (SIOE),” led by Anders Gravers Pedersen, a Danish anti-Muslim activist, and “Atlas Shrugs” among others, participate, though differently, in attacking and dehumanizing Islam and Muslims. According to a recent statement, “America faces in addition to the threat of violent jihad another, even more toxic danger—a stealthy and pre-violent form of warfare aimed at destroying our constitutional form of democratic government and free society. The Muslim Brotherhood is the prime-mover behind this seditious campaign, which it calls ‘civilization jihad’ ” (Gaffney, 2012).

More mainstream Western media, such as Fox News, view Islam as necessarily antidemocratic (Farouqui, 2009). This in turn causes negative perceptions Muslims may have toward an inconsistent and biased United States foreign policy toward the Muslim world or Middle East (el-Aswad, 2006b). The Arab news media has further aggravated negative views. Arab regimes in the region, through their control of most Arab media, have manipulated the fears of ordinary Arab people by playing up negative stereotypes of the West. By concentrating the frustration and anger of their people on exterior matters, authorities may take the focus off their oppressive regimes. However, recent revolutions in the Middle East countries (e.g., the Arab Spring) managed to uproot and change some of these corrupt systems.

In a recent article, “Jihad against Islam,” Robert Steinback (2011) argues how 10 years after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, a second wave of anti-Muslim hatred is sweeping the country. The outrage seems largely propagated by politicians and others seeking to capitalize on Americans’ fears.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, American Republican politicians responded harshly to the proposal of the building of a mosque near ground zero. This marked “a dramatic shift in the party’s posture toward Islam—from a once active courtship of Muslim voters to a very public tolerance after Sept. 11 to an openly aired sense of mistrust” (Smith & Haberman, 2010). More recently, Alice Stewart, the spokeswoman for Republican ex-presidential contender Rick



Santorum “misspoke” when she attempted to clarify Santorum’s position. She stated that Santorum was referring to President Obama’s policies “in terms of radical Islamic policies the president has” (Weinger, 2012). She later apologized, stating that she should have said his “radical environmental policies” (Weinger, 2012).<sup>6</sup> Such misstatements may reflect the footing on which some American presidential contenders establish their platforms and vie for American votes or the extent the words “radical” and “Islam” are so closely, perhaps uncritically, associated so as to slip so easily off the tongue. Western media infrequently distinguishes between the religion of Islam and the political affairs that occur in most Islamic countries. The role of Western media in depicting or creating reality is crucial in the formation of public opinion (Poole, 2002). On the one hand, Western media creates the idea that Muslims are “coming back” to Islam. This is not true in most cases, because most Muslims have never deserted Islam in the first place. Islam has always been a core measurement or component of their lives. On the other hand, Western media has repeatedly stressed the reality of bomb blasts, flag burning, and the misconduct of Muslims, especially imams or men of religious learning accused of politically mobilizing Muslim people. Moreover, Muslims have been repeatedly caricatured in Western media. The representation of the violent Muslim does not only serve Western propaganda but also generates good profits. The utility of presenting Muslims in stereotypical ways has been exploited extensively by producers of films, television dramas, comics, and advertising (Poole & Richardson, 2006).

The Western media has created another source of Islamophobia related to the fear that Muslim Americans aspire to impose the Islamic law (*shari’a*), based on the *Qur’an* and Sunna or the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, and their code of behavior on American people, including non-Muslims, threatening the social fabric of American society (Elliot, 2011). One of the most antagonistic online propaganda against Islam and Islamic law (*shari’a*) is Creeping Sharia. Westerners such as Chuck Norris (2011) seek to expose danger of creeping Islamic law. Pat Robertson and Michele Bachmann warn about media whitewash on terrorism. In that warning, Robertson describes Muslims as people who “want to destroy Western civilization. They want to bring us back to the Arabia of the 7th and 8th centuries, that’s what you find in the *Qur’an*,” (Tashman, 2012). Media portrays *shari’a* as rigid, dangerous, and inflexible dogma including brutal criminal penalties, intolerance of contemporary life, and misleading practices.<sup>7</sup> The journalist Paul Sperry (2005) claims that the goal of Islamist extremists is to replace the U.S. constitution with the *Qur’an* and turn America into an Islamic state.

In a recent study, based on a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews with 212 Muslim Americans, Julie Macfarlane (2012), states that the present “moral panic” over *shari’a* and its alleged impact on American legal and social culture is disruptively overstated. She confirms that none of the 212 respondents, including many imams, legal scholars, Muslim lawyers, and others working in the



legal system suggest that the courts should directly apply Islamic law to Muslims or non-Muslims. For most Muslim Americans, *shari'a* represents a private system of morality and identity, primarily concerned with marriage and divorce rituals aside from formal religious observances such as prayer, fasting, and the celebration of religious festivals. Many Muslims view the civil courts as “man’s law,” in contrast with *shari'a*, which is “God’s law,” but are equally clear that they are required to obey the law of the land (Macfarlane, 2012).

The extreme stereotype asserts that all Muslims are terrorists, although it is said that terrorists are the minority of Muslims. The biased and distorted media coverage that misrepresents Islam and Muslims has recently been discussed by scholars including, for example Alsultany (2011), Farouqui (2009), Karim (2006), and others. Alsultany (p. 312) points out that Christians and Jews who commit violent actions such as bombing abortion clinics or bulldozing homes in Palestine and slaying the families living there on behalf of the Israeli army are not portrayed in the Western media as representative of people who adhere to Christianity and Judaism. However, in the case of Islam, the terrorist or violent incidents are depicted as representing the entire religion. Even Muslim organizations that condemn the use of violence do not receive the media attention given to others who call for violence. The issue of blaming the entire Muslim faith for the actions of rogue extremists represents dangerous and groundless practices of collective punishment. This kind of unjustified thinking, of a binary discourse of East–West or Islam/West is rooted in a “they/we” division that is irrational and ethnocentric. The publication of negative cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* has widened the conflict between Islam and the West.

Through utilizing the binary of West/Islam, some Western writers have criticized Muslims’ reactions toward the dehumanizing cartoons. For example, Bowman (2006, p. 59) claims, “the one thing we know about Islamic societies is that it is still quite easy for a traveling imam with a portfolio of dodgy cartoons to appeal to Islamic honor in a way that has been quite foreign to us in the West.” Further, Bowman depicts Islamic culture as “a primitive honor culture: one in which it is entirely right for me to do to you what it would be entirely wrong for you to do to me” (2006, p. 59).

### **Muslims’ Response: Countering Stereotypes and Islamophobia**

This section addresses the countermeasures taken by Muslim intellectuals with respect to the distorted images of Muslims in both Western scholarship and media. It is worth noting that the American pluralistic society reflects and accommodates Muslim diversity. However, negative stereotyping has united Muslim Americans to counter resentment and to portray themselves not only as a Muslim or an Arab but also as an American.



Put differently, Muslim Americans see in such crisis an opportunity to speak out and show what their faith really is, having faith in the pluralistic and free society of the United States. In exercising their right to free speech, Santorum, a potentially high-stakes influential American official, has been criticized by Muslim Americans for not seeming to be aware that like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is an Abrahamic religion.<sup>8</sup>

Most Muslim scholars in the West, particularly in the United States, through both their knowledge of Western literature and daily interactions in Western societies, seek to develop equitable understanding and knowledge of the West. They have made a serious attempt to investigate and evaluate Western culture and thought. Muslim intellectuals strive to deconstruct Islamophobia through providing positive images and constructive representations of Muslims. They also urge Muslims abroad to look around themselves and identify the differences or anomalies that plague their communities.

Put another way, Muslims in academia and the media oppose the negative images of Muslims made by Western scholars and media that view violence and suicide bombing as icons of Muslims' culture of death. In response to the irrational acts of extremists that have fostered negative stereotypes of Islam, public lectures, sermons, conferences, workshops, and media programs have recently and abundantly been made by Muslim scholars and media activists to present Muslims positively at both national and global levels (Carpenter, 2010; el-Aswad, 2010). A scholar points out that Muslims and "Arab Americans fought with the American forces in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. Dearborn, Michigan, has a center for Veterans of Foreign Wars whose members are all Arab Muslims."<sup>9</sup> With so much bloodshed, people need to emphasize the peace and tolerance that can be found in all the major faiths.

In the modern and globalized world, the primary instruments of Muslim community are social cyber networks and forums (*muntadayāt*) of regular people, scholars, and students who interact across the vast territorial reaches of the Islamic world, operating in transnational zones of shared discourses. As cultural mediums social cyber networks encompass cultural, personal, or private and public aspects and go beyond instantaneous tangible practices or rituals to include continuous reciprocity of material and immaterial symbolic codes between people, Muslim and non-Muslim (el-Aswad, 2012).<sup>10</sup>

In order to provide significant insights to Islam and Muslim societies as well as to question derogatory misconceptions of non-Muslim societies toward Muslims and vice versa, Muslims, especially in the United States, have established institutions and organizations equipped with cyber communication and online facilities. These institutions include, for example, the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), American Moslem Society (AMS), the Arab–American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADA), Association of Muslim Social Scientists in North America (AMSS), Islamic Center of Detroit



(ICD), The Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA), Muslim Unity Center (MUC), Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI), among others.

Though Muslims in America have found in the common acknowledgment of their Islamic identity a bond for social cohesion, their effort to provide positive and correct images of their religion goes beyond the borders of national or regional affiliation in such a way that Muslims can express common ideas and beliefs notwithstanding diasporic or nostalgic implications (el-Aswad, 2012). This awareness is reflected in the reaction of Muslim Americans to the visit of the *Qur'an-burning* Pastor Terry Jones to Dearborn to speak at the Islamic Center of America against radical Islam. According to the Arab American News, Muslim Americans responded, "Terry Jones and his supporters are wrong about Islam and the *Qur'an*. We know it and we should show it. We welcome the opportunity to meet this man with a strong interfaith coalition and show support for the Muslim community in Southeast Michigan. Let's meet hate with love and show Americans of other faiths what Islam is really about."<sup>11</sup>

In his work, "The Clash of Ignorance," Edward Said (2001) argues that "if we think of the populations today of France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Britain, America, even Sweden, we must concede that Islam is no longer on the fringes of the West but at its center. . . . In the creation of this new line of defense the West drew on the humanism, science, philosophy, sociology and historiography of Islam . . . Islam is inside from the start."

Public interest in Islam and Muslims has exponentially multiplied since the September 11th attacks. Put differently, despite the fact that more than 10 years have passed since the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, and despite the fact that Americans see Muslims as facing more discrimination inside the United States than other major religious groups, there are profound changes in Americans' views of Muslims. According to a recent survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center (2009), there are "modest increases in Americans' familiarity with Islam compared with the months following the 9/11 attacks. Those people who know a Muslim are less likely to see Islam as encouraging of violence; similarly, those who are most familiar with Islam and Muslims are most likely to express favorable views of Muslims and to see similarities between Islam and their own religion." This image resulting from personal contact seems to be different from the image generated and projected by the media.

Muslim Americans show great interest in interfaith dialogue explaining their religious beliefs and practices to non-Muslim people. To render interfaith initiatives effective, different Muslim groups in the United States have been active in addressing certain misconceptions among themselves. For instance, in southeast Michigan, the Sunni and Shi'a have engaged in cultural religious dialogue where, in May 2007, representatives of more than 24 Islamic centers and institutes representing both Sunni and Shi'a met at the Council of Islamic Organization of Michigan and signed



the “Muslim Code of Honor”<sup>12</sup> denouncing sectarianism, advocating mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence of all sects within the universal Muslim community or *ummah* (el-Aswad, 2012).

Muslim Americans have become interested in establishing interfaith dialogue engaging with Christians and Jews through Islamic centers, mosques, and web sites. For example, the Council of Islamic Organization of Michigan (2011) has created a special interfaith program on its web site entitled, “Muslim Volunteer Day” that encourages Muslims, especially young people, to participate in Christian and Jewish activities such as the Jewish community’s Mitzvah Day and/or Christmas Day. The program urges Muslims to volunteer at a variety of places in Metro Detroit helping the neighbors celebrate their special holidays.

Furthermore, most Friday sermons address social, ethical, and interfaith related issues with a focus on Abrahamic sacred traditions. Personal and social interactions are effective tools in eliminating or changing the misconceptions non-Muslims and Muslims have about each other’s communities. Such interfaith dialogues have a significant impact on people’s social and cultural domains. In Dearborn, Michigan, for example, both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans publicly and candidly share Muslim International Conferences and Festivals among other cultural, social, and religious activities. Also, during religious occasions, such as the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast, and celebratory feasts (*‘eids*), non-Muslims are invited to participate in Ramadan *Iftar* (breaking the fast) and share food and beverages.

Interfaith relationships play an important part in intercultural marriage. For instance, while marriage between Muslims and Christians, as well as between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, is rare in the Muslim homeland, marriages between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims and between Muslim men and Christian women have occurred in the United States. People have maintained, however, that Muslim women cannot marry Christian men unless they adopt Islam as their religion, which they do in many cases.

The interfaith dialogues have positive outcomes reflected in relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide. Despite the negative connotation of the theme, “Muslim-Western Tensions Persist,” the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey (July 21, 2011)<sup>13</sup> finds somewhat of a thaw in the American and European attitudes when compared with five years ago. A greater percentage of the Western public now see relations between themselves and Muslims as generally good when compared with 2006. In four of the six largely Christian nations included in the study, most say they have a positive opinion of Muslims: The United States (57% favorable), Britain (64%), France (64%), and Russia (62%).

It is worth noting that according to a recent study, conducted by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, that was released on February 8, 2012, documented terrorist crimes committed by Muslim Americans have declined. It states that 20 Muslim-Americans committed or were arrested for terrorist crimes in



2011, down from 26 in 2010 and 49 in 2009. Also, of about 14,000 murders in the United States in 2011, not a single one resulted from Islamic terrorism (Kurzman, 2012).<sup>14</sup> Drawing on government sources, public opinion surveys, election results, and in-depth interviews with Muslims in the Middle East and around the world, Kurzman (2011) concludes that terrorist groups are insignificant and marginal in the Muslim world.

### Conclusion

It is true that political Islam has been influenced by many fundamental ideas in the past 100 years. But a distinction must be made between Islam and those who use it for political ideology. This statement is not made to defend political Islam, but rather to assure that Muslims have a right to pursue and conduct their lives peacefully in the United States, Europe, or anywhere.

Moreover, Islamist terrorist movements are a small minority compared to the overwhelming majority of Islamist movements, which are neither violent nor terrorist. It is startling to find that certain leaders in Western scholarship and media are the architects of Islamophobia and anti-Islamic ideology. Despite the fact that Muslims in the Western hemisphere are affected by intolerance shown toward Islam, they continue to have access to functioning institutions for safeguarding their rights. A recent report, issued in April 2012 by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), entitled “Engaging American Muslims: Political Trends and Attitudes,” has shown that Muslim Americans are well informed about politics and pay attention to what is happening both at home and abroad. The vast majority of them want to be politically involved, with 95% stating that American Muslims should participate in the political process.<sup>15</sup>

This article suggests that progress in the domain of developing religious tolerance must not be hindered by poorly informed people or those with negative intentions. Islamophobia and related stereotypes of Muslims in both Western scholarship and media are offensive and an unacceptable affront to human values and democratic principles.

Hate crimes have spawned an interfaith relationship that the Muslim community wants to invigorate. Muslim Americans have made open attempts to offer clarification about their heritage and to teach others about their religion (Islam) in an attempt to dissuade reluctances, intolerances, and injustices against them. Instead of hate rhetoric aimed at teaching American people how to stigmatize Islam as fascist, the effort should be made to bring Muslim and non-Muslims or other religious communities together to increase dialogue, understanding, and peace (el-Aswad, 2007). There is an urgent demand to replace the destructive discourse of the “clash of civilizations” in favor of a new constructive discourse of “dialogue between civilizations.” This objective can be achieved through effective interaction, collaboration, and exchange of ideas.



## Notes

1. See CAIR's report: "The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States," retrieved 2008, from <http://www.cair.com/civil-rights/civil-rights-reports/2008.html>
2. See Elver's recent work (2012) on the headscarf controversy.
3. See the work of Jonathan Lyons (2009) that shows how much Western ideas owe to the golden age of Arab civilization.
4. For further information on the insignificant relationship between democracy and terrorism, see Dalacoura (2006), Kurzman (2011), and Lutz and Lutz (2010).
5. For more information, see, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2011/summer/jihad-against-islam>
6. For further information, see Weinger (2012).
7. See, for example, Boykin et al. (2010).
8. See Hassaballa (2012).
9. See United States Commission on Civil Rights (2003).
10. For further information regarding new media and cyber-Islamic environment, see, for example, Bunt (2009), Eickelman and Anderson (2003), and el-Nawawy and Khamis (2009).
11. For further information, see, <http://www.cair.com/ArticleDetails.aspx?ArticleID=26818&&name=n&&currPage=1&&Active=1>. See also, the 2010 legal report of Arab American Anti-discrimination Committee, <http://www.adc.org/media/adc-publications/>
12. For further information on the Muslim Code of Honor, see <http://ciomonline.com/about-us/preamble>
13. See Pew Global Attitudes survey, "Muslim-Western Tensions Persist," retrieved July 21, 2011 from <http://pewglobal.org/2011/07/21/muslim-western-tensions-persist/>
14. See also <http://sanford.duke.edu/centers/tcths/> and [http://sanford.duke.edu/centers/tcths/documents/Kurzman\\_Muslim-American\\_Terrorism\\_in\\_the\\_Decade\\_Since\\_9\\_11.pdf](http://sanford.duke.edu/centers/tcths/documents/Kurzman_Muslim-American_Terrorism_in_the_Decade_Since_9_11.pdf)
15. For more information, see <http://ispu.org/GetReports/35/2457/Publications.aspx>

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