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Country's Unwanted Children

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Country's Unwanted Children
Text and photography: Amr Alfiky

Abstract:

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 thrust American Muslims into the spotlight, where they were bombarded with suspicion. Their lives, habits, and religion were intensely scrutinized by the government and their fellow Americans. Yet, they were also portrayed in the media in a simplistic and stereotyped manner. Millennial Muslim Americans – who came of age after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent rise of Islamophobia in the U.S – have known no other America.

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Text:

Hadiya Abdelrahman, remembers vividly how FBI agents paid frequent visits to her Islamic school, Darul Arqam in East Brunswick, New Jersey to ask the students about how their parents reacted when they heard the news of the 9/11 attacks. Hadiya was only TK years old. A few months later Hadiya's mother, Iman Althawadi, who can easily identified as Muslim as she wear 'niqab' –a veil worn by some Muslim women in public that covers the face apart from the eyes, was attacked by a man who spat at her and said racial slurs as she grocery shopped in Central Jersey. Hadiya witnessed that, too. These experiences profoundly shaped her view of her birthplace.

“We are this country's unwanted children”, stated Hadiya, 26.

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 thrust American Muslims into the spotlight, where they were bombarded with suspicion. Their lives, habits, and religion were intensely scrutinized by the government and their fellow Americans. Yet, they were also portrayed in the media in a simplistic and stereotyped manner. Millennial Muslim Americans – who came of age after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent rise of Islamophobia in the U.S – have known no other America. Here, we talk to some of them.

For many in this generation of Muslim Americans, the Muslim part of their identity has become the most determinant aspect of their lives, often to the exclusion of the other ways in which they see themselves. Regardless of whether it is an identity they desire or relate to, the demonization of Islam in the American imagination paired with law enforcement's sustained surveillance and interference in their communities has had a lasting effect on many of these Americans and their communities.

According to a new estimate by the Pew Research Center, in 2017, there are around 3.5 million Muslims in the United States, making up to 1.1% of the US population. Pew found that around 75% of Muslims perceive significant bias against them, with 68% believing that media representation of them is unfair.

Pew also reported almost “six-in-ten U.S. Muslims adults are first-generation Americans, having been born in another country. An additional 18% are second-generation Americans – people who were born in the U.S. and who have at least one parent who was an immigrant. About a quarter (24%) of U.S. Muslims are U.S. natives with U.S.-born parents (i.e., they are from families who have been in the U.S. for three generations or longer), which is the case for nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults overall (73%).” Another survey by Pew Research Center in 2017 showed that Muslim Millennials make about half the Muslim population in the U.S. While within the general public 15 percent of all Millennials are immigrants, Muslim millennials are less likely to have been born abroad than are Muslim adults.

Motivated by her very own experience growing up as a Muslim in the U.S. after 9/11, Indian American, Rahma Bisla, 31, pursued a career in trauma therapy. She argues that there is a direct link between Islamophobia and deteriorating mental health and PTSD of her clients. Ms. Bisla has worked extensively on PTSD, which she says, is too often associated solely with U.S. war veterans as opposed to the Muslim American experience after 9/11. “A trauma response is a normal survival reaction that you have to an abnormal situation,” she explained in an interview with Vice. “I started seeing how trauma responses are linked to this constant state of fear and defensiveness you live in as a Muslim American.” she added.

This is a crucial link to understanding the long-term impact the deteriorating mental health has on a community that is both successful academically and financially yet cannot live out their full potential due to the micro and macro levels of Islamophobia they experience, Ms. Bisla explained.

Today, conversations about mental health are becoming more common in Muslim meeting places because of groups like the Institute of Muslim Mental Health, which produces public resources and toolkits for community members.

Sara Zayed, 24, an Egyptian Muslim American woman and a classmate of Abdelrahman, recounts being on a bus with other students on their way to Darul Arqam after 9/11. “As a middle schooler on a field trip, I clearly recall a passing truck driver miming a gun shooting at our bus with a banana,” Ms. Zayed said. She didn’t dismiss the gesture as playful or as a joke, but attributed it to the fact her school identified as Islamic, as visibly marked on the bus.

This discrimination and marginalization were the main reasons Hadiya, Sara and many others strongly bonded over their daily struggles as Muslim American women and their shared faith. “In our darkest hours, we sought light and hope in one another.” Sara said.

For Hadiya’s older sister, Banan Abelrahman, 27, there is life before 9/11 and life after. That day is “when who we are became the forefront of how we navigate our everyday; how we were read, and thus how we read,” she said. “It does not leave much room for the self, to always be alert, to always be on.”

The sense of being unwelcome which accompanied the frequent FBI visits to their school after 9/11 has continued to this day, she said.

For Banan, such moments included the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who often used inflammatory language about minorities, including Arabs and Muslims. She recalls when Mr. Trump was elected in November 2016. She was in Egypt doing her masters in migration and refugee studies at the American University in Cairo – “I had to process the news from a distance. Distance works in funny ways; fear is magnified when all you hear are curated tidbits of what life is like ‘back home’.” Banan’s fear for her family and loved ones in the U.S. pushed her to immediately call her mother, “You don’t know how people will react; we need to read the situation first.” Banan told her mother over the phone.

In a poll conducted by Adelphi University, nearly 90% of Muslim Americans stated that Islamophobia had a negative impact on them and their families during the recent elections.

In March 2018, the New York chapter of Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-NY), a national Muslim advocacy organization, reported that hate crimes against Muslims has increased 73 percent since U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s election. In the second quarter of 2018, CAIR recorded 1,006 potential bias incidents in which 43 percent were defined as “anti-Muslim bias incident.”

For many of those interviewed in this piece, this identity shift post 9/11 was crucial in how Muslims began to become more aware of their surroundings outside of their homes, of the way they interact with others, and of how others perceive them. At the same time, they also began to understand, even from a young age, how discrimination seeped into their everyday lives. From government databases such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, which required non-citizens from certain countries to ‘register’ with whom? after 9/11, to private discrimination in getting employment, to school bullying, to street harassment and violence, many felt they were more isolated from the rest of American society and under threat precisely because of their Muslim identity especially those are easier to target –hijabis and those who make their religion their prime identity.

Shabih Tul Aisha Aftab, 25, a Pakistani American woman, native of New Jersey and a childhood friend of Hadiya and Banan, recalls an anti-Muslim hate incident that occurred in 2017, when “a man came up to me and threatened me physically because of my Muslim identity,” she said. “No one stopped to help. I guess it comes with the territory when you’re such an obvious symbol of Islam by wearing hijab. It solidified the isolation I had felt for a long time.” she added.

In 2011, the Associated Press published a series of investigative reports that revealed that the New York Police Department (NYPD) — headed by Commissioner Raymond Kelly — “had built an aggressive domestic intelligence program after the Sept. 11 attacks that put Muslim businesses, mosques and student groups under scrutiny.” These reports were the main reason different Muslim communities in New York and New Jersey filed lawsuits against the NYPD to stop their spying programs.

Although there is not any accurate statistics of how many Muslim communities and individuals are being surveilled by law enforcement agencies, both the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) supported multiple lawsuits that Muslim Americans filed against different law enforcement agencies in different parts of the country.

In 2013, Asad Dandia, 19 at the time, started a faith-based charity- “Muslims Giving Back” with some of his friends in Brooklyn, New York. A few months later someone Dandia had brought into their charity, and into the mosque, Shamir Rahman, announced on Facebook that he was an NYPD informant, spreading fear through the community. Afterwards Dandia was told to stop bringing new people to his local mosque, and that the charity he had co-founded was no longer welcome to collect funds after Friday sermons.

“When I learned the news, I froze. I couldn't believe that an NYPD informant had been in my home. I feared even more for my family than for myself,” Dandia wrote in an online ACLU article published in June 2018. According to Dandia, the informant would ask people he met for their phone numbers and would often take pictures with or of them.

Dandia and his friends later learned that Rahman, the informant, shared pictures he had taken of people at the charity events with the NYPD. As a result, the charity stopped using social media to publicize their activities. “We only post photos of members with their faces blurred out,” Dandia wrote, which “hurts our ability to promote our work and to serve as an example to other young Muslims.” Dandia says that he is now more wary about sharing his charity work with people he doesn't know personally. What started for him as a way to showcase positive aspects of Islamic faith has now become an isolating endeavor.

The next year he joined five other plaintiffs in suing the NYPD for spying on their communities despite his initial fear that the lawsuit would cause problems for him within his own community, and affect his career

The case, known as *Raza v. City of New York* resulted in a settlement agreement, which prohibits the NYPD from “launching investigations based on discriminatory premises.” The agreement also stated that the department's use of informants “will be checked by a civilian representative with extensive authority to monitor the department's compliance and to report violations.”

Surveillance of Muslim American communities exacerbated fears and feelings of marginalization in different communities in New York and New Jersey. A report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) entitled, “The NYPD Muslim Surveillance Program”, stated that the NYPD had engaged in religious profiling and surveillance of Muslim communities since 2002. This program extended beyond New York and into neighboring states such as New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. According to the ACLU, the program was conducted on the basis that “Muslim religious belief and practices are a basis for law enforcement scrutiny”.

This direct surveillance included stationing undercover police cars outside of mosques and taking pictures and videos of those attending prayers and their license plates. This was coupled with recruiting informants who attended mosques in order to surveil those worshipping inside and identify regular worshippers.

Moreover, many Muslim Americans -mostly women- claim that they have become targets and are randomly selected for extra security screenings at U.S. airports whether flying domestically or internationally.

"Why am I being targeted? What did I do? What did we do?" Zainab Merchant asked herself when she realized that she has become a permanent "random selectee" for the TSA's Secondary Security Screening Selection - SSSS.

Merchant, a 27-year old Muslim American is a mother of three, living in Orlando, and a graduate student studying International Security and Journalism at Harvard University. She is also the founder and editor of 'Zrights Studio'; a website where Muslim Americans express opinions and discuss trending issues from culture to politics. Zeinab has to travel frequently for school as well as personal trips. This has proven to be quite difficult as she has been singled out for excessive, undignified searches, and treatment by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and U.S. border officers every time she travels.

In September 2016, Zainab and her family were travelling from their home in Orlando, Fla. to a wedding in Vancouver. After check in, they were subjected to an extra set of security measures, questioning and pat-down searches which resulted in them missing their flight as well as waiting at the airport for another seven hours. They were exposed to the same treatment on their return on the U.S side. Zainab wrote about her experience on her blog. In March 2017, she was again detained and searched. This time the searches became more rigorous. Her bags were emptied publicly, school notebooks were read, and she was questioned about her critical blog posts regarding her distressing experiences with the TSA. To Zainab's surprise, the TSA started asking her about her religious beliefs and if she or members of her community supported ISIS.

TSA and Customs and Border Protection inspections became a normal part of Zainab's travel experience. "So, they've seen all my pictures, all of my pictures without my hijab, they've seen all my contacts, my friends. We don't know what they're doing with my information? Are they putting a bug on my phone?" While the Fourth Amendment guarantees the rights of citizens to their privacy, it doesn't apply the same way at the borders. Zainab claims that her privacy rights get violated even while flying domestically . In early 2018, Zainab was on her way from Orlando to Boston to attend her classes at Harvard University. After she was subjected to a secondary screening where agents inspected an injury she had from a previous accident and patted her down, they demanded what they called "a deeper look". Although Zainab stated that she was fearful and untrusting of their treatment in private and explained that she was wearing a menstrual pad – the part of the search that was in question - she was given no choice but to enter a private screening and show the agent her menstrual pad.

"The anxiety which is caused by the travels have made us miss important weddings. It made me even contemplate giving up my studies. It made me basically stop living life the way I wanted to live with my kids freely. We try to take short car trips. Or contemplating even moving," said Zainab.

In August 2018, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a formal complaint on Zainab's behalf with the Department of Homeland Security asking for a broad investigation and review of both TSA and CBP policies and "whether those agencies are singling out persons for additional scrutiny, searches or prolonged detention based on First Amendment-protected expression or association, including religious affiliation."

In addition, Zainab has made repeated attempts in applying for Freedom of Information requests, contacting congressmen, even meeting with officers and agents, yet she has never managed to get answers as to why her rights are being repeatedly violated. "I respect security, because obviously this is what I study and I understand the reason for security to keep people safe." Zainab explained how she dedicated her graduate studies at Harvard to trying to find answers to her life-altering situation. "Many people go through this, many Muslims go through this, because I have seen that every time I was searched, or detained. Everybody there with me, was either brown or Muslim."

Zainab and many Muslim Americans (some of whom were interviewed in that piece) are feeling even more fearful of the future under the current administration as laws and regulations continue to use fear to discriminate against a certain religion or community.

"It makes me feel, persecuted in my own country and it makes me feel that justice is faltering. That's why I decided to raise my voice and it wasn't easy." Zainab said .