

Muslims and America: Faith on the Line

More than four years after the Sept. 11 attacks, Muslims in the United States and around the world are grappling with tension inside and outside their faith. Many have come to believe that the war on terrorism is really a war on Islam.

A seven-part series by

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Muslims feel the pressure of terrorism crackdown

By Jon Sawyer

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FALLS CHURCH, VA.

As Sheikh Shaker el Sayed stood before his congregation for the start of Friday prayers last month at Dar al-Hijrah Mosque, he looked out upon a community that was in distress but strong in faith.

Off to one side, seated on the prayer carpet beneath the mosque's circular skylights, was Allam al-Alami, an engineer from suburban Virginia, grieving over the loss of five close relatives killed the previous week in a suicide-bomb attack at a wedding party in Amman, Jordan.

On the floor to al-Alami's left was Abdelhaleem Ashqar, a former business professor at Howard University, awaiting trial on charges that he helped the militant Palestinian group Hamas over a decade ago. On his ankle: an electronic monitoring bracelet that records his every move.

In the upstairs prayer room for women, wearing a full hijab that covered her face except for her eyes, was Mirsada Stabancic, 27, a mother of four. Her husband, former St. Louisan Randall "Ismail" Royer, is serving a 20-year sentence for supporting Kashmiri Muslims in their violent struggle for independence from India.

And in the main prayer room, directly in front of el Sayed, stood Omar Abu Ali, solemn and distinguished, a Jordanian-American computer programmer in a pinstriped suit.

Abu Ali had come to prayers from the federal court in Alexandria, Va. A jury had begun deliberations that morning on the most serious of charges - that his son Ahmed had joined an al-Qaida terrorist cell in Saudi Arabia and conspired to assassinate President George W. Bush. Five days later, he would be found guilty, on all counts.

No wonder, then, that on this day the imam urged his congregation to look beyond the trials of this life, to reflect that "no judgment in this life will be final. There will be a review. And the review is not going to be in the appeals court or the Supreme Court. . . .

"So today, if you are wronged - if you cannot speak, if you cannot make your point because in this life a judge has made up his mind or her mind to do injustice because of whatever reason, don't be sad," el Sayed said. "You are only wronged for the few days in which we are living, and those count for nothing in comparison to eternity."

"We are in love with this country"

Imagine a community of faith devoted to its members but also open to outsiders, a big-hearted place that sponsors schools, comforts the afflicted and cares for the needy - the sort of place that could raise \$12,500 cash at a single service for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Place that community just outside the nation's capital. Make it the biggest mosque in the region, drawing several thousand people to prayers each week - among them, newly arrived immigrants as well as established professionals and diplomats.

Then imagine sustaining that community, and its faith, amid a series of federal prosecutions - terrorism-related cases that the Bush administration hails as landmark victories but that members of this community view as either ill-conceived or outright abuse of government power.

Dar al-Hijrah ("Land of Migration") mosque was established in 1983, in a house in this suburb of Washington. The house still stands, but services are held in a larger building next door that was completed in 1991 with financial help from the Saudi government. The mosque has no current Saudi support but does have close links with the Muslim American Society and the Islamic Society of North America.

The mosque picked up notoriety when it was disclosed that two of the 9/11 hijackers had worshipped there, for a period of several weeks in spring 2001. El Sayed, who took over as imam in July, has been the target of criticism himself for public comments - made as general secretary of the Muslim American Society - praising Palestinian resistance to Israel.

El Sayed, 54, an Egyptian immigrant, complains that media accounts often convey false impressions, so often that he almost despairs of doing interviews.

"This is an open mosque," he says, referring to the apparent presence here of the hijackers. "Anybody could go through the doors at Dar al-Hijrah and come out, without any of us knowing they were there. . . . Yet, the more this story is reported, the more it is asserted one way or another, it suggests that Dar al-Hijrah is somehow a haven for unsavory personalities - which is not correct. A total distortion.

"Wherever I go, there is always the question, that we have not condemned terrorism enough," he said. "Should I just make a condemnation song, a CD of it? We quote it on our Web site, we speak it to the media, yet people are not willing to take our answer for what it is."

El Sayed says that amid all the tension since the 9/11 attacks, too many forget that Muslim Americans are both - Muslims and Americans, committed to faith and country alike.

"We are in love with this country," he said. "We have a vested, personal and community interest for this country always to be safe. We will never waver on that issue. Even if the government does the most awful things to us, we will not waver on that."

Crackdown,or overreaching?

After 9/11, the Justice Department proclaimed that the gloves were off, that it would seize every opportunity to go after suspected terrorists.

"Let the terrorists among us be warned," then-Attorney General John Ashcroft declared in late 2001. "If you overstay your visa, even by one day, we will arrest you. If you violate a local law, you will be put in jail and kept in custody as long as possible. We will use every available statute. We will seek every available prosecutorial advantage."

Nowhere has that strategy been applied so forcefully, or successfully, than in the eastern district of Virginia. U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty, a former Ashcroft aide, has racked up more terrorism-related convictions and guilty pleas than any other prosecutor. He was recently nominated as deputy attorney general, the No. 2 post in the Justice Department.

But to many of the estimated 40,000 Muslims who live in the Washington area, those same cases look like overreach, in a climate all too permissive of attacks on Islam itself.

They recall the comment by President George W. Bush, quickly retracted, referring to the U.S. anti-terrorist war as a "crusade." They note the incendiary remarks from well-known Christian evangelists - the Rev. Franklin Graham's depiction of Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion," for example, or the Rev. Jerry Falwell's description of the Prophet Muhammad as "a violent man, a man of war" and "a terrorist."

There was also the statement by Ashcroft himself, in an interview with columnist Cal Thomas in late 2001: "Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for Him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends His Son to die for you."

Guilty pleas and long sentences

Prosecutors referred to the series of cases over Kashmiri independence, including that of St. Louisan Royer, as the "Virginia Jihad"; local Muslims refer to it dismissively as the "paintball" case because of allegations the defendants trained at a local paintball course.

The charges were based on alleged violations of the Neutrality Act, a rarely enforced statute dating to 1794 that bars U.S. citizens from joining military action against countries with which the United States is not at war. Participants were accused of taking part in training exercises, with the aim of joining Lashkar e-Taiba, a militant Muslim group fighting for Kashmiri independence from India.

Six of the 11 defendants pleaded guilty, three were convicted at trial and two were acquitted. Two of the defendants got reduced sentences after pleading guilty to charges that the group also contemplated fighting with the Taliban against U.S. forces; the others denied any such intent.

The paintball group had attended lectures by a charismatic Iraqi-American imam named Ali al-Timimi, at a storefront mosque in downtown Falls Church. Al-Timimi, who was also a Ph.D. cancer researcher, was convicted this year of inciting others to levy war against the United States. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Abu Ali's conviction on conspiracy charges was based almost entirely on a confession he made while in custody of the Saudi Arabian security service. His claim that he confessed only after being tortured was rejected by the jury.

U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema presided over most of the "Virginia Jihad" cases and also that of Ali al-Timimi. She called the mandatory sentences that federal guidelines required her to impose - life for al-Timimi and up to 85 years in the "paintball" cases - "appalling."

A Palestinian activist

Another case that has fueled resentment among Muslims is that of Abdelhaleem Ashqar, the former Howard professor charged with helping Hamas.

The indictment alleges that in the early 1990s, when Ashqar was a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, he helped launder and disburse about \$1 million to further the aims of Hamas.

His alleged that actions in support of Hamas all took place before 1995, the year Hamas was officially designated a terrorist group by the United States. The indictment also cites his refusal to testify about Hamas before federal grand juries in 1998 and 2003, despite an offer of immunity.

The evidence against him came from pre-1995 FBI wiretaps and a break-in at his Mississippi apartment, both conducted as intelligence operations that required no court warrants.

Ashqar and two other Hamas supporters were charged in August last year, a week before the Republican National Convention, in a case that Ashcroft hailed as a major success for the USA Patriot Act provisions that made it easier for intelligence information to be used in law enforcement.

The indictment relied on the Racketeering and Corrupt Organizations statutes, originally aimed at organized crime. The Justice Department's announcement noted that these were allegations only. Other parts of the government were less careful:

"Three Hamas Terrorists Indicted for Racketeering" was the headline on a State Department Web site.

Ashqar, 47, lives in suburban Virginia with his wife, a teacher. He has been under house arrest since shortly after his arrest. Trial is scheduled for October in Chicago. In the meantime, he is confined to home except for two hours each weekday morning and afternoon and for Friday prayers.

Despite his confinement, Ashqar registered as a candidate in the Palestinian presidential elections in January - and came in fourth.

Ashqar grew up in the West Bank, in a family of political activists. In the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks jailed his grandfather, an agitator for home rule. In 1936, the British authorities then governing Palestine jailed his father, an outspoken cleric. Ashqar himself was jailed - and tortured, he says - by the Israelis. Prosecutions like his are merely a continuation in this country of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he believes. He considers the Virginia Jihad case as an equally miscast part of the war on terrorism.

"The only case that is different is Abu Ali," Ashqar said, referring to the alleged conspiracy to assassinate the president that ended in conviction last month. "But that young man grew up in this community," he said. "Everyone knows him. They simply don't believe the charges."

Could friction over such prosecutions end up alienating Muslims in communities such as Falls Church? Could there be an American version of Leeds, England, hometown of the second-generation Pakistani Muslims who blew themselves up in the London suicide attacks in July that killed 56 people and wounded 700?

Ashqar said he doesn't think so, that in his opinion American Muslims are more integrated into the broader society than Muslims in Europe and more willing to seek out constructive political power. What worries him is the generation of younger Muslims who come to mosque infrequently, if at all, and who view their situation through an American prism.

"For us immigrants, I compare the situation here to the situation in Israel or I compare it to the situations where Muslims live under dictatorship, and for me it is still tolerable here," he said.

"But for the younger generation, who have lived only here, it often feels intolerable. They insist on standing up now."

Case shows U.S. outsources interrogation, some say

By Jon Sawyer

12/04/2005

ALEXANDRIA, Va.

As Attorney General Alberto Gonzales stumbled through an awkward pre-Thanksgiving defense of the administration's counter-terrorism legal strategy, he couldn't know that a jury in an Alexandria, Va., federal court was about to give that strategy a boost.

Gonzales was explaining why the government had decided after three years to try suspected terrorist Jose Padilla in federal court - and drop the most notorious of charges that Gonzales's predecessor, John Ashcroft, had announced with such fanfare in 2002, that Padilla was conspiring to unleash a "dirty" radioactive bomb on American civilians.

Lawyers familiar with the case quickly noted what Gonzales tried hard to evade: that the "dirty bomb" allegations relied on information obtained during aggressive interrogation by U.S. intelligence personnel of senior al-Qaida members, using techniques that prosecutors were loathe to expose to cross examination in open court.

A few hours later, across the Potomac River in Virginia, a verdict was delivered in another terrorism case against a U.S. citizen in which interrogation was at issue. But in that case, the questioning was done by foreign authorities and became key evidence used to convict the defendant, Ahmed Abu Ali, 24, of conspiring to assassinate President George W. Bush and hijack commercial airliners.

The government's victory laid out a prosecutorial road map for getting around the legal and public-relations sensitivities in dealing with the tough tactics used to gather evidence against terrorist suspects. The case against Abu Ali was based almost entirely on Abu Ali's confession, obtained not under the rules governing U.S. police procedures but behind closed doors in Saudi Arabia, a nation long associated with torture and abuse.

The prosecution of Abu Ali was headed by Paul McNulty, U.S. attorney for the eastern district of Virginia and the man just nominated as deputy attorney general. He issued a statement after the verdict declaring that the case "firmly established Abu Ali as a dangerous terrorist who posed a grave threat to our national security." A Washington Post editorial hailed "an outcome that has happened too infrequently in the war on terrorism: a conviction in a major case following the regular rules."

Yet to members of the local Muslim community, and at least some independent observers, what happened in the Alexandria courtroom - and to Abu Ali - was anything but "regular."

Testimony of torture

Abu Ali is an American Muslim whose parents are natives of Jordan. When he was arrested by Saudi authorities in June 2003 he was a 21-year-old student at the University of Medina. He was held there without charge until February, for months at a time in solitary confinement, denied access to his family and to a lawyer.

U.S. officials insisted that they had no hand in Abu Ali's detention - even as Saudi officials speaking on background to the Post-Dispatch and other news organizations said they were holding him only for U.S. convenience. Consular officers at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh assured Abu Ali's family that they were pressing for his release - even as FBI agents on the scene fed questions to Saudi interrogators and were given the opportunity to interrogate him themselves.

A grand jury in Virginia indicted Abu Ali in February and he was returned to the United States to stand trial. The surprise development short-circuited a habeas corpus case Abu Ali's family had brought on his behalf in the District of Columbia, in which the judge had ordered the administration to reveal the nature of its role in the Saudi detention.

During a pretrial hearing, Abu Ali testified he had been beaten by officers of the Saudi Mubahith, or state security service. U.S. District Judge Gerald Bruce Lee denied a defense motion to throw out Abu Ali's confession; he said he did not find credible the defendant's claim that he had been tortured.

He also barred the defense from introducing evidence that documented torture in Saudi Arabia, including the State Department's annual human rights report detailing the country's "abuse of prisoners, including beatings, whippings and sleep deprivation."

Assistant U.S. Attorney David Laufman said defense claims that the Saudi Mubahith officers had lied about their treatment of Abu Ali were "preposterous." The two officials appeared under pseudonyms, in depositions videotaped earlier. Defense attorneys questioned them during the depositions but were given no opportunity to cross examine the Saudis in court.

"A simple confession"

In his closing statement, Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen Campbell acknowledged that "this is a simple confession case." And a highly dramatic one at that, with a relaxed-looking Abu Ali declaring on videotape that he came up with the idea of assassinating Bush because he "wanted to be the brains of the plan." He said he aimed to get close enough to shoot Bush or, failing that, to attack with a car bomb.

What the case lacked was corroboration - physical proof beyond Abu Ali's own words and material Saudi agents had gathered from an al-Qaida safe house prior to Abu Ali's arrest, material he then cited in his confession. The prosecutors were reduced to highlighting a handgun magazine found in the Virginia home of Abu Ali's family and a book by al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahari.

In his confession, Abu Ali named only one person with whom he had discussed the alleged assassination plot. That person was killed in a shoot-out by Saudi police shortly after Abu Ali's arrest.

The jury spent nearly three full days reviewing the case but there was never any doubt as to the guilty verdict, said a juror who spoke to the Post-Dispatch on condition that her name not be used. Abu Ali's videotaped confession was key, she said, as was the jurors' belief that Abu Ali didn't appear in the videotape to show signs of torture.

The juror was misinformed, however, as to a key timeline in the case. She said it was her understanding that Abu Ali claimed to have been beaten until "just a few days" before the videotaped confession. The defense team contended in court that the beating took place during the first two days after Abu Ali's arrest; the confession was not videotaped until after 47 days.

The Saudi security officers acknowledged that during those nearly seven weeks Abu Ali was held in solitary confinement. He was subjected to post-midnight interrogations nearly every night as a convenience to him, they said, because it was cooler than during the day. Immediately after videotaping the confession he was released to the prison's general population.

Whose justice?

The juror said the Saudi testimony struck her and other jurors as credible but she also said that to her knowledge none of the jurors were aware of Saudi Arabia's documented history of prisoner abuse.

"I can only make my decision based on what the judge deems to be necessary information for us to hear," this juror said. "I wasn't allowed to look up anything about Saudi jails."

The jury was unmoved, she said, by the closing statement of defense attorney Khurram Wahid, an impassioned plea that Abu Ali's treatment was not in keeping with American standards of arrest, interrogation or trial.

"This is a case about taint - the taint of the Mubahith confession machine," Wahid said. "They arrested him and subjected him to their brand of justice. That's not our brand of justice."

That brand of justice was good enough, however, for the 12 jurors in Alexandria, Va. The Abu Ali case in that sense was a landmark - the first successful "outsourcing" of an American citizen for interrogation and confession abroad. It will not likely be the last.

"Nothing about this case followed the regular rules," said Georgetown University Law Center professor David Cole, in a statement objecting to the Washington Post editorial praising the legal disposition of Abu Ali's case.

Cole represented Abu Ali's family in the lawsuit alleging U.S. complicity in his Saudi detention. He noted that Abu Ali was returned to this country last winter only after the federal judge in that first case demanded that the Justice Department reveal its role in his detention.

Cole said the verdict raised the possibility - he hoped unlikely - of "a novel way" around the obstacles the administration has encountered in cases, like Padilla, that rest on direct U.S. interrogation.

The solution? "Having other nations do our dirty work, and then bringing defendants to trial here."

Attorney: Limits on defense left questions unraised By Jon Sawyer 12/03/2005

WASHINGTON

On paper, Ahmed Abu Ali is among the most dangerous of al-Qaida terrorists. A federal jury convicted the Virginia man last month of plotting to assassinate President George W. Bush.

Yet more than a year ago, at a time when Abu Ali's confession was still secret, a senior FBI official with direct supervisory responsibilities in the case assured Abu Ali's family that the bureau had "no further interest" in his detention.

Michael A. Mason, the assistant director in charge of the FBI's Washington field office, the unit with prime responsibility for the Abu Ali case, also discussed its status at a town hall meeting at Dar al-Hijrah Mosque in Falls Church, Va. He told that audience that the FBI had no "continuing interest in this individual."

Abu Ali's attorneys considered Mason's public statements and e-mails critical to their defense - part of a pattern that showed both the U.S. role in Saudi Arabia's 20-month detention of Abu Ali and U.S. doubts as to the validity of his confession, which Abu Ali asserted was the result of torture.

The defense team also sought to introduce classified government documents, indicating that U.S. government agencies had first requested that the Saudis detain Abu Ali further and later that they release him for return to the U.S. - directly contradicting U.S. claims during Abu Ali's 20 months of Saudi captivity that U.S. officials had no say over his detention.

The authenticity of the documents was not questioned but they were not admitted into evidence. Neither was Mason called to testify. U.S. Judge Gerald Bruce Lee ruled that the documents were not germane to Abu Ali's confession. He said that Mason's public comments were not germane because they were personal opinion.

Giving the jury access to Mason and the documents "would at least have put into question whether or not the government really believed his confession statements," said Khurram Wahid, Abu Ali's attorney. "It would have raised the question that the government was prosecuting him for reasons other than a legitimate belief that the evidence is credible."

In an interview Thursday, Mason said he had checked with agents assigned to the case and was unable to identify the documents that were excluded from evidence in Abu Ali's trial. The office of U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty declined requests for an interview with prosecutors in the case.

Mason said that his testimony wouldn't have helped Abu Ali's defense. What he had tried to convey at the mosque meeting and in the e-mail to the family was that the FBI had no interest in Abu Ali's further detention in Saudi Arabia, he said - not that "we had no interest, period."

Mason said he empathized with Muslim concerns about discriminatory treatment.

"As a black man, born in 1957, I'm not unsympathetic to the way they feel," he said. "I remember walking into the malls as a kid. I know what it's like to walk in and suddenly someone's following you, just because you look different."

Randall “Ismail” Royer's letters from prison

Randall “Ismail” Royer grew up in Manchester and is a graduate of Parkway South High School. A Muslim convert, he pleaded guilty last year to federal charges of helping a pro-Pakistani Muslim group fight Indian forces in the disputed territory of Kashmir. He is currently serving a 20-year sentence at the medium-security federal prison in Allenwood, Pa.

Prior to his arrest in 2003 Royer worked in communications positions for the Muslim American Society and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), two mainstream Muslim groups. Royer attended American University in the early 1990s but left for Bosnia, where he served for several months in the Bosnian army. While in Bosnia he met his wife, Mirsada Stabancic.

Royer, 32, wrote the following letter, dated Nov. 2, to Washington Bureau Chief Jon Sawyer. He describes his life in prison, his current studies in religion and history, and his view of U.S. government policies toward Muslims in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He also talks about his relationship with his parents, his wife and their four children.

“Dear Jon,

“Thank you for your letter. I would be happy to put the answers to your questions down on paper. Your inquiry gives me a chance to do so.

“As for my day-to-day schedule: Most inmates work 8-hour-a-day jobs, as did I until recently in the kitchen, but [I] have now landed a janitorial job in my housing unit, which takes only about an hour or two hours of my time in the morning, five days a week.

“The rest of my time is spent on study, physical exercise, and socializing.

“As far as my studies, I have divided them up into Islamic studies and, for lack of a better word, non-religious studies. In my religious studies I am focusing on the Quran - -the science of its proper recitation in Arabic as well as reading Quranic commentary (exegesis) and memorization of its verses -- and also the Arabic language.

My ‘non-religious’ studies are in the topics of Language, History and Philosophy.

“In Language I am studying English grammar and literature. I have read about 60 to 80 books since being arrested, including Henry James, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Swift, Hemingway, Homer and on and on. I’m learning Spanish (this prison has a Spanish-speaking majority), maintaining my Bosnian (aka Serbo-Croatian), and intend to delve into the field of Linguistics. My parents have, at my request, printed out the course catalogue from MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and I’ve selected linguistics courses that I’ve asked them to obtain the reading lists and syllabi for.

“In History my focus has been on American and European history, perhaps because those are the books I’ve found in the libraries of the various jails I’ve been in since my arrest. But I have a particular interest in the American and French Revolutions, which are key to understanding the modern era and the resulting events and ideas that shaped it. I also am fascinated by ancient history – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Jews.

“In the field of Philosophy, I am most interested in existentialism and other modern thought, because it is most relevant to the modern era. I’ve been reading Sartre, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

“The common thread, perhaps, in most of this (i.e. History, Literature, Philosophy) is to understand the modern world by understanding the paths we took to arrive at where we are today. This, with the ultimate goal of, once being able to describe the malady, then being able to prescribe an antidote. My mother would say this is yet another manifestation of wanting to ‘save the world,’ which perhaps landed me here in the first place.

“But I will also say that this experience has burned me out, to some degree, on ‘saving the world’ – or maybe it would be better to say, I’ve matured, and now I seek simply to understand it, for understanding’s sake, and not for any grand purpose.

“In any case, once all this input reaches a critical mass and I am impelled to start writing again, one of my main goals is explain to my fellow western Muslims the world in which they live and Islam’s role, potentially and as it is now. I have, for example, a draft of a very long essay on being an American and a Muslim, from an entirely different perspective than the superficial treatment this topic has received.

“The dilemma at the core of my paper, however, is broader in its impact than simply American Muslims. The issue is really the state of Western man, who has abolished religion as the home of his soul, and replaced it with ideology, nationalism, and consumerism. The Muslim is uncomfortable in this environment, not (only) because he / she is a member of a minority ‘foreign’ religion, but because his religion – unlike Christianity – never experienced a Protestant Reformation which fragmented the soul of modern man and placed religion in a box. (Ironically, some Protestants play the role of wanting to weaken the church / state divide, when it is Protestants who led to the setting up of the wall in the first place, by helping to precipitate the downfall of the Catholic Church’s dominance in the lives of western men and women.)

“So Muslims are out of sync because they haven’t traveled this path. But Western man is out of sync with himself because this path’s logical conclusion (‘God is dead’) means the withering of his soul.

“Also, I have written extensive notes on the issue of terrorism (definition: political violence against civilians – NOT Muslims in a legitimate war against other soldiers), its origins and its impermissibility in Islam. Also, on the alien ideas present in many modern so-called Islamist movements. To be clear, the purpose of these writings will be to correct the Muslims, not to please the Muslims’ critics, which seems to be a reason many Muslims come out with seemingly similar writings.

“What am I reading now? ‘Crime and Punishment,’ by Dostoevsky; ‘An Introduction to the Sciences of the Quran;’ ‘Game Theory: A Non-Technical Introduction,’ by Morton Davis; the Quran, and ‘Arabic for English-speaking Students.’

“I exercise regularly. We don’t have weights here but I do calisthenics, pull-ups, push-ups, dips and I run three miles every other day, which I hope to begin increasing to marathon length, eventually (obviously not every other day!) I have a good book on the topic of running ... I have never been in better shape than I am in now.

“Socializing. I am now in general population. At first, I spent two months in segregation (in Oklahoma Transfer Center, then here) while they tried to figure out whether I was a homicidal fanatical berserk terrorist as described in my Pre-Sentencing Report (which consisted mainly of the indictment and the government’s motions from my bail hearings). That’s funny because in the year I was at Alexandria (Va.) jail, I and two of my co-defendants were tutors in the GED and ESL programs, and recognized as role models by jail authorities. Then we came to the BOP [Bureau of Prisons] (part of the Department of Justice, our prosecutors) and suddenly we’re dangerous.

“I have no problems with any inmates here. I am a full participant in our religious community here, which

itself is respected by other inmates and groups of inmates. And the rule here is to respect others and you will be respected, while being aware of your surroundings and holding one's head up. This heads off most potential problems. Also, the practicing Muslim doesn't gamble, watch TV frequently, use drugs or alcohol, or fraternize with homosexuals – which are all avenues to violence.

“There are eight housing units here. The Muslims in my unit get together in the evening to eat, talk, laugh and worship. We see the Muslims from the other units in the chapel and in the exercise yard and chow hall, and are fairly close. As everywhere, there are a few who practice, a number who don't really, and those in the middle.

“The prison population is divided into gangs and other groups. The Muslims' relationship with them is usually good, as we are respectful and uninvolved in their antics, and at the same time constitute a large segment of the prison population.

“It's funny that I remember thinking, shortly before I realized I was in legal trouble, how I would be able to handle myself in prison. I don't know why I thought about that at the time. I suppose the human being is resilient and able to adapt to whatever situation he is in. There are certainly those in much worse situations than I am.

In fact, this is how I stay positive (most of the time). By realizing there are others in worse situations, and by taking each day one at a time, trying to end each day a little smarter, a little stronger, and closer to God.

“The most difficult part of this whole experience – really, in perspective, the only difficult thing – is being cut off from my family. The prison authorities here, when I arrived last year, decided to prevent me from using the telephone for the rest of my 20-year sentence (aside from one 15-minute call a month). The justified this legally by saying that my [Pre-Sentence] report indicated I had used the telephone at some point in my case (so do most inmates!) and BOP policy allows them to, therefore, restrict my calls. I'm fighting that.

“Last year, a particularly nasty FBI agent contacted the prison and told them my wife had violated security procedures at the Alexandria jail, which was a bald-faced lie, with the intent of preventing her from visiting me. The prison turned her away when she and the kids came to visit me (driving 5 hours). The prison first said I would never see her again (on top of not talking to her), then relented when she got a letter from the Alexandria jail clearing her of the false charge.

“What initially sent me into a several months-long debilitating depression was not being able to see my children, to whom I am very, very close. But through patience and prayer, I have worked through this. In the Alexandria jail the Muslim chaplain gave me very sound advice: When you begin thinking about your kids, instead of pining over them, pray for them instead. It is more productive and better for your mental state.

“What people don't realize is that every second you spend with your family is more precious than gold. A half an hour spent reading to your children or throwing a football with them is better than a hundred overtime hours spent to buy them a bunch of stuff, or worse, for one's own aggrandizement.

“Another thing is my parents, with whom I am also very close. I used to get agitated and bored hearing my dad tell his stories, or talk about his work or his computer or whatever. But now when he comes to visit I say things to provoke him to tell me his stories, then sit and blissfully listen to them.

“And of course, with my wife, I think of all the things I could have done better – been more romantic, and all that, spent more time with her.

“And at the same time, with all this, I don't regret wanting to help the innocent men, women and children of Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir and Chechnya. It is sad that after 9/11, acts of heroism would be seen as crimes, simply because of the religion of the innocents I sought to protect. (The government would say I mischaracterize what happened, of course, but Americans traipsing off to join the Israeli army aren't

prosecuted for violating the Neutrality Act! Or anything else).

“As far as the alleged plan to fight against American soldiers in Afghanistan, which is distinct from the above, I did not plead guilty to that and I specifically deny that it existed. The government witnesses simply rubber-stamped the prosecutor’s scenario to win sentence reductions, and are known and admitted liars.

“The government has made a major mistake in adopting the approach of treating ALL Islamic movements, with certain rare exceptions, as actual or potential threats. My group of friends and I, for example, never thought for an instant, or even discussed, any kind of anti-American actions. It was and is the last thing on our minds. Lashkar e-Taiba is focused exclusively on Kashmir, and within the Islamic milieu is involved in the intellectual struggle AGAINST al Qaida. The head of Benevolence International Foundation was imprisoned for sending x-ray machines to Chechens, who couldn’t care less about America. Examples abound.

“What is to be gained by declaring a sort of global crusade against Islamic movements everywhere? I am far from the romanticist who says these fighters in these trouble spots have always behaved Islamically and nobly, but there are serious underlying reasons for these conflicts (most of which are asymmetrical) – mainly severe political oppression or military occupation. For the U.S. to blame the victim and throw its cards in with the morally wrong party, simply because the victims (or their champions) are Islamically oriented, is to invite blame and potential retaliation – and, of course, to provide ammunition for those who seek a clash of civilizations.

“I would also add that Ibrahim Hamdi and I are alone in the whole ‘Paintball 11’ (now 12 or 13) group that ever really considered fighting anywhere, anyway (I actually did, in ’95). The rest were paintball players or fantasists, with the misfortune of knowing us. Even those who traveled to Pakistan were known to me as non-serious people going through motions, for show, and merely fooled around there for a little bit and moved on. I’ve heard the FBI first became aware of the post-9/11 group of four travelers to Pakistan [including Royer] when one of them, upon returning to the United States, began bragging about around his university campus that he gone with the intention of fighting the United States. Perhaps the ‘fantasy’ of doing so would be a more accurate term, and anyway he speaks for himself, and the first I heard of it was when the FBI began asking questions about it, and our homes were raided.

“I believe and have always believed, that al Qaida belongs to a sect called the Khawaarij, an extremist sect that is known for killing Muslims, and declaring them to be disbelievers for any sin, large or small, thus authorizing their murder. I ask Allah to guide them and hope they repent.

“Islam is far from that. It is a simple religion, in which the soul gives up the worship of all gods but God, then tries his best to perform good deeds for His sake, and leave off bad deeds for His sake. To respect and love his parents, family and neighbors, and to speak true and pleasant words, and to give to the poor, and establish justice and peace in the earth. War is sometimes inevitable, but it should be a last resort, and clear, nearly universal boundaries must be respected, after which peace – the default – must be established. It might seem for the average American that Islam over-emphasizes violence (I’m sure the impression is mutual for many Iraqis, and others), but most of the “third world” is rent by instability, including the Muslim world, so this impression is simplistic.

“I am an American, have not stopped and never will stop being an American. I wish only the best for my land in this life and in the next. Islam does not belong to the East or West, because God created us all. A civilizational conflict, which seems to be where we’re headed, would be a tragedy and a waste, especially considering how much we have to learn from one another.

“Finally, it would be worthwhile to reflect on the words of bin Laden, from a recording released shortly after 9/11, in which he said, ‘Now you will see that America’s freedom is just a façade’ (or words to that effect). In another tape, from 2003-04 I believe, he said, “It seems in some ways Bush and I are working toward the same goal.” (I believe he intended: total war) Sept. 11 and its aftershocks served the interests of all the wrong people (Muslim extremists, enemies of civil rights in the U.S., defense contractors, despots in Muslim countries, Islam and Muslims’ political and religious adversaries, etc.)

“Sincerely,
Ismail Royer

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Dec. 1, 2005

Dear Jon,

“Thank you for all the reading material and the news from home. The sermon really hit home. (Giving the family a copy of the letter is fine!)

“I hope my letter answered at least some of your questions. It’s hard to conduct any kind of in-depth (deadline-oriented) interview by mail. I hope I can be of service to you to the extent that it’s practicable.

“Thoughts on these cases: what you have is, for the most part, mountains being made of molehills. Before 9/11, law enforcement never would have bothered themselves with someone involved with rebels in the Himalayan mountains or in the Caucasus, or a bunch of Muslims playing paintball, or a cancer researcher given to making incendiary speeches. Now three of us are serving life sentences; me 20 [years], [Ibrahim] al-Hamdi 15, etc. As far as Ahmed Abu Ali [convicted in Virginia last month of plotting the assassination of President George W. Bush, in a case based on a confession Abu Ali gave to interrogators in Saudi Arabia], I give him the benefit of the doubt where Saudi intelligence services are concerned. That video [of confession] was the end product and its antecedents are unknown. It’s just inconceivable that a videotaped confession in a country known (by the State Department) to torture would be accepted as evidence in a U.S. court. If a murderer can have the charges dropped because he wasn’t properly advised of his rights, how much more extreme is Ahmed’s situation? Plus, I know Ahmed and I just can’t believe it of him.

“In our situation, what you have is a passel of prosecutors and FBI agents who are taking advantage of post-9/11 hysteria to build their careers. The outcome of these cases is predetermined by judges who are submissive to the administration and a jury pool ready to believe the worst about Muslims. Many of us laughed when we were arrested and saw these indictments, and read the overblown language with which our legitimate activities were described, and the wild claims of cooperating defendants. But none of us is laughing now, and indeed the wilder the accusations, the more likely, it seems, a Muslim will be convicted.

“This is not to say that there are not Muslims in the world who are dangerous to U.S. security. But we just were not those people.

“I think the American people need to be concerned because once the system is bent to start putting a minority in prison, the system stays bent. If they can search my house without a warrant, they can do that to you, too. If they can say that a book I had or a newsletter I started were overt acts in a criminal conspiracy, they can do that to anyone.

“[Osama] bin Laden said in a videotape shortly after 9/11, ‘Now the world will see that America’s freedoms are really an illusion,’ and the politicians and intelligence forces seem intent on proving bin Laden right.

“And the reality is that families are destroyed by all this. By my count, there are 19 children of the 13 people arrested in my case (including the [original] 11 plus [Ali al-] Timimi and [Ali Asad] Chandia), and then parents and wives. This is a lot of people to grow up orphaned because of paintball and an Indian subcontinent border dispute.

“Sincerely yours,
“Ismail”

Soul-searching in Britain

By Jon Sawyer

12/04/2005

LEEDS, ENGLAND -- When Ruqqayah Collector led a protest march last month through the downtown streets of this old industrial city, she was making a stand for justice, for her faith and, not least, for her hometown.

Collector, a 21-year-old Muslim and the daughter of Indian immigrants, grew up in this part of Yorkshire, a region with relatively high numbers of Asian Muslims and a history of periodic racial strife.

New infamy for the city followed the terrorist attacks in London on July 7. The bombings killed 56 people, including four suicide bombers, and wounded another 700. It turned out that the bombers were from metropolitan Leeds.

So this city - which takes pride in its art museums and theaters, and a gleaming new downtown based on a financial-services boom - finds itself the focus of media caricature, of anti-immigrant politicians and of challenges to the patriotism of people like Collector - people who have never lived anywhere outside the United Kingdom.

"I find it difficult if someone says, 'Are you British, or Muslim?' because it's not as if they clash in any way," she said. "The fact that they're even asking the question shows that they're already assuming that it's got to be one or the other."

The London bombings have produced much soul-searching, within the Muslim community and beyond, about what led a quartet of relatively well-educated and apparently well-adjusted young men - one of them a teacher, another a cricket player - to embark on such violence.

What is most surprising in the bombings' aftermath, however, is what hasn't happened.

The United States responded to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks four years ago by enacting sweeping new law enforcement powers and rounding up hundreds of Muslim Americans for indefinite detention, measures imposed with virtually no debate and little dissent.

The London attacks on July 7 were in one respect more startling even than 9/11: The four suicide bombers were born and raised in the United Kingdom itself.

Yet when British Prime Minister Tony Blair proposed his own sweeping increase in police powers, including the right to detain suspects without charge for as long as 90 days, he suffered his most stinging defeat since taking office eight years ago.

It's too soon to tell whether the rebuke to Blair marks a watershed. The House of Commons went on to approve detentions as long as 28 days, doubling the current limit. Debate continues on Blair's other proposals, making it a crime to "glorify" violence or to "incite" religious hatred, and giving police broad new powers to shut down suspect mosques and organizations.

British public opinion still strongly favors cracking down on extremist groups. Another terrorist attack might stiffen spines for even tougher measures. But there are signs, even here in Leeds, of a shift in mood.

The fish-and-chips shop in the working-class neighborhood of Beeston where suicide bomber Shehzad Tanweer once worked has a new name, and a big sign out front says "Under New Management."

There is still plenty of evidence of anti-Muslim sentiment, from not-subtle job discrimination to newspaper tabloid headlines with deliberately provocative (and grossly inaccurate) headlines such as "Christmas is banned: It offends Muslims."

But when several dozen supporters of the anti-immigrant British National Party gathered a few weeks ago in downtown Leeds to protest the government's prosecution of their leader, they were met by several hundred counterprotesters chanting, "Black and white, unite to fight."

Carrying one end of an anti-fascist banner was Collector, 21, leading a group of students from the University of Leeds.

Collector was elected last spring as education officer for the university's Student Union, the first Muslim woman wearing hijab covering to stand for university office and win. She says pressures related to the war on terrorism have served to strengthen the faith of many Muslims.

"It led to people questioning, 'Where do we fit in? Why are we always challenged?'" she said. "It also led to more research into our faith. 'What does our religion actually say about everything?' It led to people experiencing their faith more, to being proud of the fact that they were Muslims."

Another university student is Nazar Waheed, newly arrived from Pakistan, who is working toward a master's degree in wireless communication. He says he is unfamiliar with Wahhabism or Salafism, the extremist strains of Islam cited by al-Qaida and other terrorist groups. Their violence is anathema to Islam as he knows it.

"Whatever is in the Quran, we have to follow," Waheed said. "And in the Quran nowhere is it written that you can kill. If anyone does that and calls himself a Muslim, I don't think he really is a Muslim."

Waheed says he has experienced no discrimination since arriving in England in September, either on campus or in the city. But he also notes his failure thus far to find a job, in a city whose unemployment rate is among the country's lowest.

"I've applied at least 80 places so far," he said. "When they see me, when they see I'm Asian, there are no jobs."

Peter Lazenby, a veteran journalist at the Yorkshire Evening Post, points to what he calls "a degree of racism" when it comes to employment and other opportunities for this region's Asian Muslim minority.

"You find Asians with university degrees driving cabs because they can't get jobs elsewhere," he said. "I think people see their names on applications and they don't get interviewed. It's a very quiet sort of racism, hard to pin down. But it's there."

Reactionary politics

Terrorist attacks and a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment have been good for the British National Party, which traces its roots to neo-Nazi parties. As recently as the late 1990s, it was identified with skinheads and soccer hooligans.

Now the party is actually winning council seats in some cities and making inroads beyond. In last year's elections for the European Parliament, the party polled 800,000 votes nationally, or 4.9 percent. Its share in the Yorkshire area around Leeds was some 100,000 votes, or nearly 10 percent.

"There was a time when we were happy to get whoever we could," said Nick Cass, 31, a former squash pro and now the party's Yorkshire organizer. "Now, thankfully, we can be choosier."

The party has dropped its call for the forced deportation of all Asians, Caribbeans and other "non-British" British; it talks up cash incentives instead. But the party would halt public funding of multilingual education, Cass said, and force Muslim women to give up head scarves.

"I can't go into a bank wearing a crash helmet," he said. "I'd be arrested, because with the helmet they can't see who it is. Yet I can't question women wearing burqa (full-body coverings)?"

The head of the party is Nick Griffin, a Cambridge University-educated lawyer and a smooth-talking Welshman who compares himself to Winston Churchill in the 1930s, a lonely voice warning his countrymen of troubles to come.

"We're in a long struggle," he said, "one that I believe will go on for 20 years, as to whether Western civilization as we know it will survive in Europe, or whether it instead will become Islamicized."

The campaign to clean up the party's image stumbled when the BBC aired a documentary last year based on undercover reporting. Griffin was caught on videotape calling Islam a "wicked, vicious faith." A colleague talked of blowing up a local mosque.

Griffin dodged eggs and jeers last month in Leeds, as he ducked into crown court for pretrial hearings on charges of inciting racial hatred. In an interview outside the courtroom, he insisted that publicity over the trial would only help his party's cause.

"It's a lose-lose for the government," Griffin said. "Either I get off - or they send me to prison for, among other things, warning a year ago that terrorist attacks were coming. If they want to send me to prison for that, fine."

"Far from the mosque"

Muslim community leaders in Leeds say they are mystified - and broken-hearted - by the London attacks, which they condemn as a perverse misreading of the faith. They suggest that the violence has more to do with British influences, and British policy, than with Islam.

"Unfortunately the people who do these attacks are very far from the mosque," said Jamil Ahmed, an educational consultant and secretary of the Islamic Center of Leeds, the city's largest mosque.

"The problem is that the government said, 'Don't harbor extremists,'" he added. "So when the young people talked that way, we sent them away."

After the July 7 attacks, the British Home Office recruited Muslim leaders to serve on working groups to assess the causes of extremism and recommend policies in response. Their reports, released last month, said Blair's government had erred in both its diagnosis and proposed remedies.

The reports recommend several new national policies, including:

A grass-roots educational campaign by influential Muslim scholars, aimed at young people, to counter extremist views.

A campaign to increase the visibility and opportunities for Muslim women.

A curriculum for Muslim schools, drawing on the work of an advisory council of mosques and imams.

Government resources to build partnerships between local police and Muslim communities.

The working groups rejected Blair's repeated assertion that British foreign policy, and specifically its support for the Iraq war, was unrelated to the attacks July 7. The reports called British policy "a key

contributing factor" to extremist violence. It also said Blair's proposed new laws on shutting down suspect mosques and organizations would further radicalize such groups by sending them underground.

A key group that Blair has proposed to ban is Hizb ut-Tahrir (the "party of liberation"), a professedly nonviolent organization that critics consider a recruiting vehicle for more extremist Muslim groups. The group's spokesman, Taji Mustafa, rejects the charge.

Mustafa accused Blair of making "a crazy caricature of Muslims imposing their will on everyone - when in fact it's Blair who is imposing his view on the world.

"They don't see the fact that what is being crammed down the throat of people today is liberal democracy," he added. "You talk about human rights, but then you have Guantanamo. . . . You talk about democracy, but then you take us to war in Iraq over the objection of most British people. . . . You talk of free speech, but then you want to ban a nonviolent political party."

One neighborhood's view

In Bradford, a former textile center just west of Leeds, the Muslim face of Great Britain is evident in neighborhoods of brick rowhouses that were built for millworkers more than a century ago but are now filled almost entirely by Asian immigrants.

Bradford was one of several cities in Yorkshire rocked four years ago by race riots similar to riots this year in France. In Yorkshire, the unrest was spawned by British National Party sympathizers but escalated into a general outburst by Muslim youths that left 326 police officers injured and nearly \$20 million in property damage.

Zameer Shah, a second-generation Pakistani immigrant, helps his father manage two grocery stores in the Barkerend section of Bradford. A candidate for city council, on the Conservative Party line, Shah says inter-ethnic relations in Bradford are generally good but that he worries about the younger generation.

"The problem is young Muslims, the second and third generation (of immigrants). They don't have the same ties to our homeland, or to their parents. They want to see themselves as British, but then they find they aren't really accepted as British. And that makes them vulnerable to extremist groups."

Shah says one such group is Hizb ut-Tahrir, which like some other Islamist groups, calls for the restoration of a single caliphate, or ruler, governing Muslims worldwide. "It has some appeal but it's not realistic," he said, noting that "there were lots of wars and rebellions" in the era of caliphate rule that ended with the Ottoman Empire's collapse. His own family is Shiite Muslim, he added - "and we know that under the caliphate Shiites experienced 1,300 years of persecution."

The Rev. John Bavington is the priest at St. Clement's Anglican Church in Barkerend, a parish whose population of 10,000 is now 75 percent Muslim. Ten mosques have sprung up in this part of Bradford over the past three decades, while the membership in Bavington's church has dwindled to 60. The church hall is now a Muslim community center.

"Vicars don't come with a job description, and I've had to ask myself what I'm trying to do," said Bavington, on a walking tour through the parish with Topspin, his black Labrador. "I'm trying to develop a Christian community in St. Clement's that supports, welcomes and loves our Muslim neighbors in a genuine way - that goes beyond me merely meeting with the local imams."

Bavington is well-suited to the task. He grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. His four sons include 3-year-old Akil, a Pakistani boy Bavington and his wife are in the process of adopting.

News that the four suicide bombers in London had grown up in this region left the community "stunned," Bavington said.

"The Muslims I spoke to were just horrified by it," he said. "Local shopkeepers, the imam at the nearest mosque - they didn't know what to say. They didn't want to apologize for it because that would imply they had something to do with it. And yet they knew that as Muslims they'd be associated with it."

Bavington said he wasn't surprised that Parliament has balked, so far, over Blair's call for a post-bombing crackdown on civil liberties and harsh treatment of Muslim mosques and groups that challenge British policies. He cited Britain's experience with imperialism as the reason.

"I think it's a question of history, the United Kingdom's role as world power in the 18th and 19th century, particularly our role in the Asian subcontinent," he said. "I think what the British learned, over a long time, is that you have to rule by consensus."

Bavington said the United States, a superpower only since World War II, had not yet developed that same sensitivity about the use of power - a sensitivity that he said was located at the heart of religious beliefs that Muslims, Christians and Jews all share.

"The Old Testament is full of challenges to people in power, to live such that those over whom they have power feel safe and secure," he said. "The relationship between the powerful and the ruled can only be secure when there is justice and human rights."

Still us and them?

By Tim Townsend

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

12/03/2005

Maysa Albarcha, holding her daughter Sara, shops last month with her sister-in-law, Remy Javed, at the St. Louis Galleria. Albarcha and Sara are St. Louis natives. Javed and her family are from Pakistan.
(Robert Cohen/P-D)

For the family of Bassam and Maysa Albarcha, the last Thursday in November comes with certain traditions: Twenty-five cousins, aunts and brothers from Missouri, Illinois and Pennsylvania converge on Maysa's parents' home in Ballwin, some with a turkey or other dishes in tow.

There's the annual "Best Turkey" contest (Bassam and Maysa won last year, mostly due to Bassam's rice, peas and pine-nut stuffing). And after dinner there's NBA basketball on TV, and the "project in the garage" that occupies Bassam and his father-in-law.

The Albarchas, in other words, participate in the cultural ritual known as Thanksgiving. "You see an American family celebrating Thanksgiving on TV or in movies," said Maysa. "That's us."

The Albarchas are among at least 20,000 Muslims in the St. Louis area. Their family is among a growing number of followers of Islam to adopt U.S. cultural traditions.

The history of the United States is filled with ethnic and religious groups assimilating into the American mainstream, and Muslims are no different - except in one regard. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the specter of terrorism has loomed, and individual American Muslims are paying a price.

They are living through a time in which Islam is being examined like never before by a skeptical but curious public.

"We are now, whether we like it or not, in the spotlight," said Sheikh Mohammad Nur Abdullah, imam and director of the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis.

In St. Louis and across the country, American Muslims have a lot to say about how they believe they are perceived by their non-Muslim neighbors in a post-Sept. 11 world. "Those 19 hijackers happened to be Muslim," they often hear themselves telling non-Muslims, "but they did not act for me. They may have claimed to act in the name of Islam, but they did not act for Islam."

Islam, they say again and again, had nothing to do with that day.

So, for the last four years, the United States - their own country - has been an interesting place for American Muslims. They have been harassed, questioned and eyed suspiciously - not just by the government - but by their neighbors and co-workers, and especially, they say, by some in the media.

Along with the suspicions have come questions. "After 9/11 there was a certain openness and curiosity about Islam," said Ahmet T. Karamustafa, professor of Islamic thought at Washington University.

Abdullah said the number of non-Muslim visitors to St. Louis' main mosque, in Ballwin, has increased so much that its members have had to organize more outreach efforts and open houses, and they have trained more young people to speak to visitors about Islam.

Many American Muslims, by necessity, have become patient teachers, eager to tell their fellow Americans about their food, their families and, especially, their faith.

And it's on that stage that they are living their lives, trying to accept and absorb both the negatives and the positives of the last four years, trying to understand how they are perceived by their non-Muslim neighbors, trying - maybe more than anything else - to become just another ingredient in the big American stew.

"Islam in America," said Sherman Jackson, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Michigan, "is part of the ongoing American project."

American Islam

There is disagreement in American Muslim circles as to whether celebrating Thanksgiving is haram, or forbidden, but most American Muslim religious authorities say because the message of Thanksgiving is cultural, not specifically religious, it's OK to celebrate.

The increasing acceptance of Thanksgiving and some other U.S. traditions by Muslims suggests that a new kind of Islam may be forming: American Islam.

For 1,400 years, Islam spread from its origins in Saudi Arabia and has adapted to the cultures in which it found itself. Islam's U.S. arrival is recent, making its influence on American culture slight compared to that of other religions.

Similarly, American culture has yet to make much of an impact on Islam here, but just as there is a Pakistani Islam that is markedly different from a Malaysian Islam that looks nothing like Nigerian Islam, so too, say many Muslim scholars, an American Islam is beginning to take shape.

If there's a frustration in the American Muslim community about how its members are perceived by non-Muslim Americans, for some it is a frustration tempered by an understanding of human nature.

"For a lot of Americans, Islam is the unknown, and often it is the unknown that is feared," said Saaqib Rangoonwalla, an editorial board member of InFocus, Southern California's largest Muslim newspaper. "And when you're scared of something, the first thing you want to do is stomp it out - like a spider. But Muslims here are not the other. They are Americans, like we are all Americans."

That concept is difficult for some non-Muslim Americans since the Sept. 11 attacks, said Khaled Hamid, 42, an allergist from west St. Louis County and father of two teenage boys. "You sometimes hear people say things like, 'I'm not prejudiced, but when it comes to Muslims I have concerns,'" said Hamid. "We are outside, and we feel like people are completely oblivious that there might be good Muslims here."

In September, the Muslim Public Affairs Council surveyed American Muslims aged 14-25 who attended the annual conference of the Islamic Society of North America. It found that 70 percent noticed "significant hostility toward Muslims in the general American public," while just 53 percent said "the general American public sees Muslim Americans as a legitimate part of the country's pluralism."

But discrepancies with other poll numbers could illustrate a disconnect between how American Muslims see themselves being perceived and the way most Americans view them.

A poll in July by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that most Americans - 55 percent - say they have a favorable opinion of American Muslims. That's 10 percentage points higher than in 2001 before Sept. 11. The poll also found that the number of Americans who say Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence has fallen from 44 percent to 36 percent in the last two years.

Ali Javed, 24, from University City, said the non-Muslims he works with at Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. are often curious about his religion. Some even try to help him adapt American culture to his faith.

"In a way they look out for me," he said. "We go to happy hour, and they know I don't drink so they'll order me a Coke, or if I'm fasting, they won't eat around me, or tell me where they went for lunch. As Muslims, we shouldn't think all non-Muslims are after us."

Some scholars believe numbers like Pew's suggest that non-Muslim Americans are simply discovering that some of their neighbors and co-workers, people they get along with and like, happen to be Muslim - something that's not immediately obvious in most cases, unless a Muslim woman is wearing a hijab, or head covering.

That can lead to a phenomenon that Washington University's Karamustafa calls "exceptionalism," when non-Muslims believe that their Muslim friends are the exception because they've been Americanized but that the majority of the Muslim world is suspect.

"Sometimes, if we know someone well, they might say, 'But you are the exception,'" said Hamid. "Why are they assuming I am the exception?"

Javed said friends "may like us on an individual level, but when you start talking about the Muslim world as a whole, things change."

Media portrayals

Most Muslims agree that there is one American enemy conspiring to defame Islam, and many refer to this enemy consistently as "the media." Individual media culprits can be anything from conservative author Ann Coulter to daily headlines about Islamic extremism to movies about terrorism in which the bad guy seems invariably to be Arab and Muslim.

A study in 2004 by the Media & Society Research Group at Cornell University found that 32 percent of Americans who paid a "high level" of attention to television news agreed that "all Muslim Americans should be required to register their whereabouts," as opposed to 22 percent of those who paid a "low level" of attention to TV news.

"American opinion of Islam is driven by the media," said Anas Ziu, 24, an Albanian graduate student at St. Louis University. "And as far as I've seen, the media says we're all bad."

Gulten Ilhan, 39, is a humanities professor at St. Louis Community College. When she recently tried to take a group of students to Turkey, she found parents hesitant - mostly due to the images of violence in the Middle East they had seen on television. "They think their kids are going to get beheaded," she said.

September's poll by the Muslim Public Affairs Council found that 95 percent of the young Muslims surveyed felt Muslims did not "get a fair shake in domestic U.S. media."

Ali Alshehhi, 24, a meteorology student at SLU, said non-Muslim Americans are increasingly seeking answers about Islam for themselves. "Many people ask me about Islam, they ask me what Ramadan means," he said. "They come to the mosque on Fridays to watch us pray. After 9/11 people have become curious, and they want to know for themselves, not through the media, what Islam is."

The Pew poll found that "among those most knowledgeable about Islam" 61 percent view American Muslims favorably and 49 percent held a favorable view of Islam. Among the lowest-knowledge group only 47 percent had a favorable view of American Muslims and 24 percent had a favorable view of Islam.

A report on young American Muslims by the Muslim Public Affairs Council said that "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."

"I've been here ten years, and people treat me nice," said Nermin Begic, 26, a Muslim from Bosnia. "But some don't understand that not all Muslims are terrorists. I came from war, I don't want to have war again. I want peace."

"I can share a part of me"

There are no reliable tallies, nationally or locally, of American Muslims or of Muslims in St. Louis. Estimates range from between 3 million and 8 million Muslims in the United States, and between 20,000 to 60,000 in the St. Louis area.

A Cornell poll in 2002 found that 70 percent of Muslims in the United States are under the age of 40, and 40 percent are under the age of 30. Younger, educated Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim, exude an aura of idealism when it comes to relations between American Muslims and non-Muslims.

"I have a good amount of friends who are Muslim, and none of them have ever felt different to me than any of my other friends," said Jason Phillips, 19, a Catholic from Texas who is a sophomore at Washington University. "They're just part of my group of friends. I just see them as people."

Maheen Bokhari, 21, a junior at SLU, agrees. "I think we're at the point where people don't look at us as different any longer," she said. "I think we're looked at as equal citizens here."

This next generation of American Muslims - born, bred and educated in the United States - will be critical in defining an eventual American Islam, say scholars.

"Children of immigrants have a different perspective on Islam in the U.S.," said Meagan Reid, a professor of Islam at the University of Southern California. "For younger Muslims, their Muslim identity has come to the fore since September 11th in a big way because that identity is being forced upon them by Americans."

More than half of the young Muslims polled by the Muslim Public Affairs Council in September said they didn't experience any conflict between their American identity and their Muslim identity. That, according to the council's report, demonstrates a "high rate of integration" among this generation of American Muslims, very different from "the reality of British Muslims, who have not laid claim to a 'British Muslim identity.'"

Many younger American Muslims handle their dual identifications - as Americans and as Muslims - by becoming politically active, signing up with civil rights or political organizations. Others recognize the need to teach about their faith in a less formal fashion, one non-Muslim American at a time.

Irfan Asif, 24, is a financial analyst who lives in Chesterfield and often talks to non-Muslims about his religion.

"I wouldn't call it a responsibility, but more of a chance to educate people who come to you with questions," he said. "My religion is a part of me, so I can share a part of me by sharing something about my religion."

When people ask Maheen Bokhari about her faith, she feels some pressure to make a good impression. "It's important to represent my culture and my religion properly," she said.

For Ali Javed, teaching his friends about Islam is also about making sure non-Muslims can defend the faith, or at least Muslims, if need be. "You hope that one day, your friend might turn to someone (who is disparaging Muslims) and say, 'I know a Muslim, and he's not like that,'" he said.

Uthayla Abdullah, 22, is a native St. Louisan who is hoping to become a journalist. While earning her degree at Washington University, she was inundated with questions about her faith and Muslim culture. Abdullah wears a hijab and so is approached in coffee shops and other public places. "You get tired, but you have no choice but to continue," she said. "You have to represent an entire faith, and this may be the one interaction with a Muslim they'll ever have."

Still welcome?

In the months after the Sept. 11 attacks, Maysa Albarcha, then 26, thought Muslim women who covered their heads were crazy. "It made them targets," she said, sitting in her home in Creve Coeur on Thanksgiving morning. Her husband, Bassam, was in the kitchen trying to figure out what the little plastic knob on the turkey was for. A plate that read "God Bless Our Home" hung on the living room wall. Across the room, a decorative hookah sat on a table.

Three years ago, on a three-month trip to the Middle East, Maysa had a revelation when she saw, in person, that Turkish women were not allowed to wear the hijab in any public buildings, such as government offices, schools or courts. "I realized they didn't have the right to do what, in the U.S., I have every right to do, and I wasn't doing it," she said.

She decided to wear the veil for the first time in her life, but she was nervous about what would happen when she returned to St. Louis, and to her neighborhood. "When I came back here, that was the test," she said. "I didn't want them to think I was a terrorist, that I'd gone to the Middle East for three months and now I was back and different."

The reaction she got from friends and neighbors was not the one she was expecting.

"No one said anything," she said. "They would have normal conversations with you, and I'd be thinking, 'Are you going to say anything about the big piece of fabric on my head?' But no one ever did."

Maysa, 30, and her three children (10, 6 and 2) were all born in St. Louis. And since she was a girl, Maysa said, anytime she flew back to the city from anywhere else, she's looked out the window searching for St. Louis' defining landmark.

"I love the Arch," she said, "and whenever I see it from the plane, I know I'm home."

But on that day three years ago when Maysa flew into St. Louis from her trip to the Middle East, a hijab covering her head, the Arch stirred something different in her, a question that has yet to be fully answered.

"I saw the Arch and knew I was home, but I wondered if I would be welcome here any more," she said. "I wondered how friendly my home would be to me now."

Islam Q&A POST-DISPATCH 12/03/2005

Q: What do Muslims believe?

A: The faith that Muslims practice is called Islam, which means "submission to God." Muslims believe in one God, which, translated into anglicized Arabic, is Allah. One of the five pillars of Islam is the Shahada, the Muslim declaration of faith: There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger. The other four pillars are prayer, fasting, charity and pilgrimage.

Q: Who was Muhammad?

A: Muhammad, also known as the Prophet, was born in Mecca, in present-day Saudi Arabia, around 570 A.D. Muslims believe Muhammad was God's final prophet, sent to provide God's word to man through the Quran. Muslims do not consider Muhammad a god and do not worship or pray to him, though his life is considered the model by which all men should live.

Q: What is the Quran?

A: Muslims believe the Holy Quran is the literal word of God, revealed to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel over 23 years, beginning when Muhammad was 40. While the Quran is the main source of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, Muslims also regard the hadith, or the sayings and doings of the Prophet and his followers, as a guide to the sunna, or Muslim way of life.

Q: What does Islam say about Christians and Jews?

A: Because all three religions are descended from Abraham, Islam teaches that Christians and Jews are "people of the book," and that many of the central figures in Christianity and Judaism — Adam, Moses, Jesus — were prophets who simply preceded Muhammad.

Q: What is the hajj?

A: The annual pilgrimage to Mecca is an obligation — once in a lifetime — for Muslims who are financially and physically able. About 2 million Muslims from around the world descend on Saudi Arabia in the 12th month of the lunar calendar. (This year, the hajj will begin sometime around New Year's.) Pilgrims all wear simple white coverings to eliminate class distinctions.

Assumptions take their lumps as West meets Middle East: Journalists: Comparing notes

By Jon Sawyer

12/11/2005

BEIRUT, LEBANON

Take a dozen journalists, half from the United States and half from countries throughout the Middle East.

Put them together for a week of workshops and reporting in war-scarred, volatile Lebanon.

Then watch the sparks fly -- and assumptions die.

For Omayma Abdel-Latif, a senior reporter with Cairo's Al Ahram newspaper, the most revelatory moment came at the end of a group interview with the Lebanese director of Hamas, when a couple of the American journalists balked at adding their e-mails to a list for follow-up material.

"They were fearful when the Hamas guy took their e-mails that if they were found to have e-mails from Hamas, they could be questioned or go to jail," Abdel-Latif said. "That I could not grasp."

Fran Quigley, a civil-liberties attorney and free-lance reporter from Indianapolis, was startled that Israel loomed so large in how the Middle Eastern journalists saw U.S. policies in the region.

"Our colleagues viewed all U.S. actions in the region through the prism of U.S. allegiance to Israel," Quigley said - more important than talk of spreading democracy or even access to oil.

For Khosrow Soltani Kasseb, editor of the Tehran-based Iran News, the most surprising moment came during a group interview with the commander of forces in southern Lebanon for Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite resistance movement that led the two-decade struggle against Israeli occupation forces that ended with Israel's withdrawal in 2000.

Given Hezbollah's reputation for strict piety and rigid rules, the women in the U.S. journalist group arrived with their heads dutifully covered. Also on hand: a local woman reporter from Beirut, wearing a hot pink elastic top, tight pants - and nothing at all on her head.

"I never imagined that they would let women appear without observing full Islamic hijab" covering, said Soltani. "It sounds as though I, too, had been influenced by the extensive negative propaganda by the Western media."

Assaulting stereotypes

The journalists meeting in Beirut were part of a workshop on international reporting in which participants might learn as much from one another as from the instructors. The workshop was sponsored by the Iowa-based Stanley Foundation and by the Reuters Foundation.

The result was spirited exchanges in Beirut, in the classroom and interviews and over dinner, and in e-mails since.

"The one thing I walked away from Beirut with was this overwhelming sense that Americans and Middle Easterners need to talk to each other," said Sean Harder, military affairs reporter for the Savannah (Ga.) Morning News. "Not on a diplomatic or political level," he adds, "but person to person."

Raed el-Rafei, 28, of Beirut's Daily Star, said: "I think the way the media makes news just makes us miss the point most of the time. When the media is always reporting on suicide bombers and politics, we miss the human touch."

For the American journalists, the diverse backgrounds of their Middle Eastern counterparts was itself an assault on stereotypes.

Abdel-Latif is the hijab-wearing daughter of a devout and conservative Sunni family, for example, while el-Rafei grew up in a secular Sunni family reading Sartre and Camus and "feeling very much distant from everything related to religion."

Soltani, the Iranian journalist, was born in the Kurdish city of Mahabad, the son of a Sunni father and Shia mother. His wife is Shia, too. "According to the law, since my father was a Sunni, I am also supposed to be a Sunni," he writes. "But since I am not a practicing Muslim, it really does not matter to me - Shia or Sunni!"

Santa Essa, 31, is a Baghdad University-trained chemist who became a journalist only after the 2003 war and isn't a Muslim at all. An Assyrian Christian, she works for the Aswat al Iraq news agency. In jeans and T-shirt, a baseball cap backward on her head, she views issues of sectarian strife with the jaundiced eye of someone who has seen too much violence, too close.

"Am sorry to be late," she wrote in an e-mail last month. "I had funeral (my cousin was killed by roadside bomb)."

Beneath the surface

Essa said her main complaint about Western journalists was naivete, that they took too much at face value. "If you talk with a mixture of Muslims, they will try to appear as very lovely people and say they love each other," she said. "But if you live in Iraq, you'll see that it's lies. Not all of them, but most of them - they don't love each other."

Essa works with one of the many independent media outlets that have sprung up in Iraq, most with U.S. government help. But her complaints about superficial Western coverage are echoed by colleagues at more-established regional newspapers.

Abdel-Latif, the Cairo journalist, answers with a stinging critique when asked what bothers her most about Western media coverage of terrorism and the Middle East.

"Ignorance, ignorance, ignorance," Abdel-Latif says. "There is no effort I feel on the part of the American journalists to understand the societies they are covering. They come with their preconceptions and stay as long as they want but leave with the same preconceptions. No lessons learned."

For the journalists at the Beirut workshop, there was a lesson a few days after they headed home in how words can inflame - and confuse.

The occasion was an appearance by Iran's new hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at a Ramadan conference in Tehran on the subject of "The World Without Zionism." At the conference, Ahmadinejad, speaking to 4,000 students, called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

The firestorm that followed was predictable: denunciation by U.S. and other Western leaders, editorial condemnation in major Western media, the cancellation of a Tehran visit by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The only thing missing, said Iranian journalist Soltani, was any acknowledgment that Ahmadinejad's remarks were neither new nor, in the Iranian context, incendiary - not in a country where "Death to Israel" chants have been a staple of Friday prayers since the era of Ayatollah Khomeini two decades ago.

"These slogans remain slogans and nothing more," Soltani told fellow journalists in an e-mail. "Let's not forget the occasion in which Ahmadinejad said those things," he added - "a conference dubbed 'The World Without Zionism.' What else did you expect him to say? Viva Israel?"

"What is certain is that no one here (I mean the officials) has any intention of wiping out a state by killing its people!" Soltani said. "They just wish Israel did not exist or would somehow perish for the cause of Palestine."

Entrenched distrust undermines White House effort to reach out

By Jon Sawyer

Sunday, Dec. 11 2005

WASHINGTON

Karen Hughes says that when she agreed earlier this year to become America's point person on public diplomacy, with a special emphasis on reaching out to Muslims, she read every report on the subject she could find.

"One of the things that came through (was) that America is perceived as talking at people rather than listening to them," she said in an interview with the Post-Dispatch in her suite of offices at the State Department, where she now serves as undersecretary for public affairs and public diplomacy.

"And so I felt it was important early in my tenure here for me to travel and reach out and listen to people - both for me to be able to hear and learn and understand better, but also to show a willingness for America to listen."

Critics say that's precisely what she hasn't done.

They say Hughes is still in spin mode, deploying the media skills that served President George W. Bush so well in her years as his communications director but that are more problematic when it comes to friction over the U.S. war on terrorism and its role in the Middle East.

Sheikh Shaker el Sayed, a prominent Muslim leader in the Washington area, said Hughes' tour this fall of Muslim countries had the look of photo ops, staged meetings with prominent leaders and pre-screened groups of citizens.

"I wish she had gone to see real people in the real streets instead of meeting with just politicians and the elite," said el Sayed, the imam, or preacher, at the Dar al-Hijrah Mosque in Falls Church, Va. "She seems to have taken on a very narrow mission - of trying to convince people over there of how correct the administration is, no matter what people might think.

Common ground?

Hughes acknowledges that her challenge is more than words. She talks about funding to bring in more foreign students, to improve American proficiency in foreign language and the teaching of English overseas, to enhance the U.S. presence on Arab television and radio.

Yet as she runs through some of the thorniest issues policymakers face, from allegations of torture to skepticism over America's goals in Iraq, Hughes says again and again that if critics better understood U.S. policies, they would be supportive.

For example, she said, while many Muslims disagreed with U.S. intervention in Iraq and its pro-Israel stance, she has found common ground on the need to stay the course now in building a democratic Iraq and on working toward Bush's goal of an independent Palestine.

A "lot of it is sort of building a deeper understanding of what we're doing, why we're doing it and what we're really working toward," Hughes said.

Similarly, Hughes acknowledges that most people in the Middle East believe that Iraq is worse off now than before the U.S. invasion and also that U.S. troops remain an army of occupation. But she says that's because they don't understand that most Iraqis believe they are better off and that "what you have in Iraq today is an independently elected government" that will hold parliamentary elections later this week.

That skepticism prevails in the region appears beyond dispute.

A survey for the British defense ministry disclosed in October in The Telegraph found that 67 percent of Iraqis feel less secure because of the occupation and 82 percent "strongly opposed" to the presence of foreign troops.

In a University of Maryland survey of six Arab nations released earlier this month, 69 percent of those polled said they "do not believe" that promoting democracy is America's real goal in Iraq or the Middle East. Of those surveyed, 76 percent said oil was "a major objective" of U.S. policy in the region; 68 percent cited the protection of Israel, 63 percent a U.S. desire to dominate the region, and 59 percent a U.S. goal of weakening the Muslim world.

Detainees, abuse

Hughes said communication was also at the root of friction over the issues of torture and U.S. treatment of detainees. She cited the abusive treatment of Iraqis by U.S. personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison last year as a case in point.

"What's important for the world to know is that Americans were sickened by the abuses that occurred in Abu Ghraib, just as the world was," she said. "Just as Muslims were offended, we were deeply offended."

She said the problem is that "the crime has got a lot more attention than the punishment," citing the convictions of low-ranking personnel as proof that the system worked. She brushed aside the critics who say that the abuse was a matter of policy and that policymakers went unpunished.

"That's simply wrong," she said. "The policy of the military is to treat prisoners humanely and with respect."

Hughes said that was the case as well for the approximately 500 detainees still held at the U.S. facility in Guantanamo, Cuba.

"Every inmate who is now held at Guantanamo has had a hearing, an administrative review of their case," she said. "They have access to the courts."

The administrative hearings within the military were begun only after they were compelled by a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court last year, over administration objections. Detainee access to the federal courts also came about only as the result of a Supreme Court ruling, one that the administration is now seeking to limit through Congress.

"On its face, technically, yes, the government is now permitting access to the courts," said Avidan Cover, an attorney with Human Rights First who has monitored the Guantanamo proceedings. "Yet they are fighting it tooth and nail, in the courts, and not every individual has had a hearing. And this entire process, including the administrative tribunals, was resisted by the administration from the very beginning."

A "lethal brew"

James Zogby, president of the Arab-American Institution, has studied American attitudes toward Muslims and the Middle East, and vice versa, for years, often in concert with his brother John Zogby, the pollster.

James Zogby believes that misunderstanding is growing and that administration rhetoric about the war on terrorism has only made it worse.

Two years ago, 74 percent of those surveyed in a Zogby poll said "I need to know more" about the Middle East. When the question was asked this year, those saying they needed to know more had dropped to 57 percent. "Fear and anger and ignorance are a lethal brew," Zogby said, "but fear and anger and thinking you know are even more dangerous."

Open-ended survey questions also produce disturbing results, he notes. When people are asked to name the best thing they associate with the Arab world, or with Islam, a consistent majority can't come up with a single answer. Asked what word they associate with "Arab" or "Muslim," top choices are invariably "terrorist" and "danger."

This partly reflects the Muslim-associated terrorism of recent years, Zogby acknowledges - but only partly. It's also comments like those of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, referring to the Middle East as a "malignant" place, and popular entertainment like Showtime's current "Sleeper Cell," a 10-part dramatic series that features Arab-American terrorists.

Most wounding of all, to Arabs and Muslims, is a media representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that to them appears relentlessly pro-Israeli.

Zogby cited coverage of this summer of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, specifically the many wrenching stories about Israeli settlers forced to abandon their homes.

"Where have the stories been about the Palestinians forced to leave their homes because of Israel's construction of the security wall?" he asks. "You would think from the coverage that no one has been forced out of their homes."

Using the media

Zogby was among the speakers who addressed the impact of media bias on Western-Muslim relations at a symposium this fall at George Washington University. David Chambers, former director of programs for the Middle East Institute, made the point that media manipulation is very much a two-way street - and that no one is more proactive than al-Qaida and its many terrorist offshoots.

He said the media is "a central player" in the terrorists' strategy "to wear down the United States and its allies in a long-term war of attrition."

Zogby acknowledged al-Qaida's use of the media, but he said it does not compare to the U.S. presence in the Middle East.

"I grant the use terrorists are making of the media, sometimes effectively," he said. "But in the past 30 years, we have spent more money, fought more wars, cost more lives, had more at stake, and exerted more capital in the Middle East than anyone else in the world."

Clovis Maksoud, director of American University's Center for the Global South, says that in bridging the U.S.-Middle East divide, nothing matters more than the language we use. And when Americans across the political spectrum responded to the Sept. 11 attacks with the question, "Why do they hate us?," he said, they burned bridges simply by their choice of words.

"Arabs and Muslims don't 'hate,'" he said. "A fringe group does, a group of extremists that wanted to push the Bush administration - and has succeeded - into a polarity of right and wrong."

"Hatred is the rupture of dialogue, an attempt to justify killing and the killing of oneself. . . . But anger - which is characteristic of most of the Arab and Muslim world - is an invitation to dialogue and debate."

"So the question shouldn't be, 'Why do they hate us?' but 'Why are they angry?'"