

Muslim American Concerns and Struggles Post 9/11

By Emily Liu

Arab-American Hisham Rifaey, a senior at the University of Rochester originally from Richmond, Wash., knew that his life would change after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, but he didn't know to what extent. He unthinkingly went about his daily routines, while the FBI targeted five of his friends, entering their homes and questioning them about Rifaey.

The FBI asked them about Rifaey's loyalty to the United States and wanted to know whether they saw him as a threat to the country. Although the FBI went to Rifaey's parents' home in Washington after Sept. 11, Rifaey didn't find out until months later that the Bureau had also gone after his friends to secretly investigate him.

"I wasn't so worried out that they were asking those questions, I was more in shock that they even knew who my friends were, my close friends," Rifaey said. "They knew everything about them and they knew my whole background. It's basically like some complete stranger asking your best friend all these questions, asking the most detailed questions about your life. I felt really violated by my country in a sense. It's not that my loyalties have changed toward my country, I've just started to become more conscious of my surroundings."

Limitations on freedoms like this coupled with strong disagreement on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East have caused Rifaey and many other Muslim Americans I interviewed from October 2004 to March 2005 to become disenchanted with the current administration. Although there are approximately 5 million Muslims living in the United States, many non-Muslim Americans still seem to view this population as "foreign" or as part of "the other" because even American-born Muslims, like those who I've interviewed, have and are experiencing problems with discrimination.

Five months after the re-election of President George W. Bush, the Muslim American community remains strongly opposed to U.S. domestic and foreign policies. Many Muslim Americans believe that the discrimination they have faced stems from American media and the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Middle East.

Newly released findings show that these Muslim Americans are not just imagining their negative treatment, and more importantly, the findings suggest that the discrimination is likely to continue.

A recent national study conducted by Cornell University found that nearly half – 47 percent – of Americans support some sort of restriction on the civil liberties of Muslim Americans. The study, completed in December, found that 22 percent of respondents said that the federal government should profile citizens as potential threats if they are Muslim or of Middle Eastern heritage. Approximately 26 percent believed that mosques should be monitored by U.S. law enforcement agencies, and 27 percent said that all Muslim Americans should have to register their location with the federal government.

James Shanahan, professor of communication at Cornell University, in collaboration with Erik Nisbet, a senior research associate with the Survey Research Institute, completed the survey with the assistance of the Communication 282 Industry Research Methods class in the Department of Communication at Cornell.

Media – to blame or not to blame?

In reaction to the survey results, all the Muslim Americans I interviewed, most of them college students and community leaders, cited the media as a major reason for negative and/or ignorant attitudes towards Muslims.

Ammar Naqvi, president of the Muslim Students Association at the Rochester Institute of Technology, says he wasn't very surprised by the study's results. He believes the media are partly to blame for the negative perceptions.

Shanahan's reaction to the study was similar, he said, citing the media as a major factor for influencing Americans' opinions. But, he doesn't consider the media to be at fault.

"Of course there are so many negative images of Islam in the media anyway, because so much is focused on Islam radicalism and terrorism, that I wouldn't say I was surprised," Shanahan said. "It's not that American television is out conspiring to present negative images of Muslims, but such that the images that news broadcasters would prefer in a war coverage are violent."

Shanahan said that these daily images include Islamic insurgents attacking American soldiers, so these are the images that are foremost in people's minds when they make judgment.

"It would be highly unlikely for everyone to expect the media to run stories about American Muslims leading productive lives," he said.

Brooklyn College Professor Moustafa Bayoumi believes that the results are not only depressing, but ironic. In a column distributed by Progressive Media Project, he writes: "As President Bush proclaims that the nation is ready to fight for freedom in the rest of the world, almost half of the American public seems prepared to curtail the freedom of their neighbors here at home."

Shanahan compares negative perceptions of Islam and media war coverage with negative perceptions of Catholicism and the media coverage of sexual abuse scandals, pointing out that it makes sense there to be negative attitudes towards those religions, because media coverage shape people's attitudes. Because media have to cover the war, Shanahan said, they are going to have violent images of Muslims attacking Americans. Arab-American Amel Ahmed, 24, a New York University sophomore, however, disagrees. She believes that media have been negligent in their coverage.

"That's an absurd connection," she said. "I understand the media have to cover the war and the immediate events, but that's just dangerous because it's not comprehensive and Americans are getting the short-stick. They're not getting the whole story."

Holding the media accountable for the stereotypes and hatred towards Muslims, Ahmed, who is majoring in journalism and Middle Eastern studies, said that the media's superficial coverage and negative portrayal of Muslims are unacceptable.

"They're portraying the Muslims as terrorists and suicide bombers...as undemocratic heathens and they don't show the other side," she said. "If that's what people see day in and day out, that's how they're going to think. They don't go deeper into context – is it a background issue, historical issue, why the Middle East is the way it is today, who put Saddam in power, how Iraq got to the point it was – they don't show you that. They just show you: Arabs – no democracy – barbarians. That's all people associate [with] when they think of the Middle East."

Aly Nahas, PhD., head of the Rochester Muslim Alliance and co-founder of the Rochester Islamic Society gives about two

lectures a week on Islam. Nahas said that when he speaks to groups in the community, they are most curious about "jihad." He's realized that Americans have misconstrued the word based on media misrepresentation.

"'Jihad' does not mean 'holy war,'" he said. "'Jihad' means to strive for the best, to always try and improve yourself and people around you and for the environment. But people take the word out of context to create something devilish."

According to Ziauddin Sardar, author of Introducing Islam, "jihad" is a constant struggle for justice and can take many forms.

Rifaey, who is the former president of the Muslim Students Association at the University of Rochester, also said that people will assume the worst of others based on media information.

One of the Cornell University study's key findings does affirm a high connection between media and negative perceptions of Muslims. According to the study's final report, twice as many respondents who pay a high level of attention to TV news (18 percent) feel *personally* in danger from a terrorist attack, as compared to respondents who pay a low level of attention to TV news (9 percent).

Rifaey, who has researched government and the media in his own academic work, said that what they'll get are news and images that have been heavily regulated by government in the name of national security.

But Shanahan said that there's probably more self-censorship than government censorship of media. He said there have been plenty of critical stories of the government conduct of the war, pointing to examples like Abu Ghraib.

In reaction to the survey results, Rifaey said that the findings show that Muslim Americans need to take greater responsibility to prove to non Muslims that they are average Americans and not violent people, since their actions are going to be generalized to represent those of all Muslim Americas, whether they like it or not.

"I'm going to blame a lot of Muslim Americans," he said. "A lot of them, out of fear, aren't standing up and saying I'm Muslim American. They'll change their names to Joe or Bob. By doing that, you're also not educating people."

Not all Muslim and Arab Americans think that they need to make efforts to prove themselves. Some say that they shouldn't have to educate the ignorant and they shouldn't be expected to represent a large and very diverse religion and race.

But Rifaey said that's an idealistic way of thinking. "If I walked outside thinking that I was representing myself, I would believe that, but people would still view me differently. I know I have a social responsibility to represent my race and religion."

Although Muslims may disagree on this point, most seem to agree that, as Bayoumi observes, "The problem is that we are being repeatedly told by the government and the media to expect to find a terrorist almost every time we encounter a Muslim."

Ahmed's realization that "Americans don't connect the dots" because media aren't giving them the whole picture allows her to see how Americans may perceive Muslims negatively.

But to most Muslim Americans, who have become victims in the process, this misinformation does not warrant mistreatment. The outcome of these negative perceptions, whether driven by media or not, is the difficulties that have infiltrated the lives of many Muslim Americans.

The effects of Bush's domestic policies: Facing discrimination post Sept. 11

These difficulties have transcribed into many Muslim American stories of targeted discrimination, like Rifaey's. In speaking with these Muslim Americans, I learned that all of them consider the Bush administration's Patriot Act as a key factor for their negative treatment.

The USA Patriot Act was passed in October 2001 in the name of "the war on terrorism," with little debate from members of Congress. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, the legislation could subject political organizations to surveillance, wiretapping, harassment and criminal action for political advocacy; expand the ability of law enforcement to conduct secret searches, give them wide powers of phone and Internet surveillance as well as access to highly personal medical, financial, mental health and student records with minimal judicial oversight; and allow FBI agents to investigate American citizens for criminal matters without probable cause of crime. The Patriot Act threatens rights granted under the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.

The Human Rights Watch group has observed that anti-Muslim activities increased by 700 percent after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Naqvi, who is a junior bio-informatics major from Long Island, N.Y., hasn't personally had an FBI encounter. But, even though he's grown up in a diverse area with a Muslim community, he too has faced discrimination post-Sept. 11.

He's mainly noticed getting searched a lot more than non-Muslims at airports. In late December 2004, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials searched his car at the U.S.-Canada border when he was riding back from a Muslim conference of more than 10,000 attendees in Toronto. Naqvi said he believed that it was racial profiling because everyone in that large group traveling together was Muslim and they were all stopped and searched.

"They even searched and forced a girl to take off her head scarf," Naqvi said. "I don't know what they thought was under there, maybe a bomb, weapons...I don't know."

According to the *American Muslim Perspective*, dozens of American Muslims were searched, fingerprinted and photographed on return from the Islamic conference that Naqvi attended. The Dec. 30 article stated that a spokeswoman for Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection confirmed that agents stopped anyone who said they attended the three-day conference, titled "Reviving the Islamic Spirit," based on information that such gatherings can be a means for terrorists to promote their cause.

Several of the Muslim citizens held at the border for up to six hours on Sunday night and Monday morning told the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) that they objected strenuously to being fingerprinted, but were informed by CBP representatives that "you have no rights" and that they would be held until they agreed to the fingerprinting procedure, according to the Dec. 29, 2004 *U.S. Newswire* article, "American Muslims Fingerprinted by U.S. at Canadian Border." One person was allegedly threatened with arrest if she attempted to leave the detention area without being fingerprinted.

U.S. Newswire reported that CBP officials on the scene cited "orders from above" to justify their actions.

For Naqvi, even more telling of how the Bush's policies have affected American Muslims were the sad stories of two

Muslim acquaintances. He told me about the FBI raiding an American Muslim's house in Colorado. The FBI took his laptop and questioned him, asking if he supported Iran. The Muslim Iranian immigrant attends a community college in Colorado. The other Muslim American was from New York City and he was questioned and harassed by the government because he was part of a religious group.

These are not isolated incidents. *The Seattle Times* in October 2004 reported that more than 1,200 Muslims and Arab-Americans were taken into custody after the Sept. 11 attacks. According to a March 15 *IPS-Inter Press Service* article, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) is still trying to discover who was rounded up by the Department of Homeland Security in the weeks preceding the 2004 Presidential election.

To Naqvi, the discrimination he has faced is a direct result of Bush's policies, namely the Patriot Act, the Iraq War and also President Bush's endorsement of Daniel Pipes, founder and director of Middle East Forum, a think tank devoted to advancing American interests in the region. When President Bush nominated Pipes to the board of the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), a nomination requiring Senate approval, many Muslim Americans were outraged since he is known to be a neo-conservative who supports racial profiling of Muslims.

Ahmed, the New York University student, said that her physical appearance has probably saved her from facing discrimination post Sept. 11.

"I don't look Muslim," Ahmed said. "I don't wear the veil and I don't dress like the typical Muslim woman, so I really didn't have any problem in that area." But, that doesn't mean she is unaware of the changes Muslim Americans have had to deal with because of the attacks. It's a different story for Ahmed's friends who dress more culturally.

"I don't don the veil, but I have friends who do, so when they walk out on the streets they'd always get comments like 'you're wearing a garbage bag on your head,' 'you're not in Afghanistan,' 'towelhead' – things like that," Ahmed said. Ahmed, whose hometown is New York City, said her parents faced discrimination post Sept. 11, especially her father. Because her father wears a *kufi*, a Muslim men's head covering, and has a beard, Ahmed said that it's obvious he's Arab.

“Right after 9/11 he got kicked out of a few stores in the city,” Ahmed said. “They just told him to get out. And my father didn’t say anything, because he didn’t want to start problems.”

Rifaey said that after the FBI questioned his friends, they were shocked because he was a “happy go-lucky guy.” Stunned that terrorism would even be linked to Rifaey’s name; his friends told the FBI that they were being ridiculous.

As Rifaey observes, it’s hard for people like his father, who is Egyptian and who works in a nuclear power plant in the state of Washington, to feel American or even feel welcome in the United States when he is constantly singled out at work because of his identity. According to Rifaey, anytime there’s a security issue, his father and his Muslim co-workers are immediately pulled out of work.

“It’s sad, but he’s gotten used to it,” Rifaey said.

When I learned about stories like these, I was shocked. Although I had heard and seen a few stories in the media about the impact of Sept. 11 on Muslim Americans, I didn’t realize how far-reaching and universal the experiences were until every single Muslim American I spoke with either faced discrimination or had those close to them face discrimination.

But I was really blown away when I interviewed a childhood classmate of mine, Mansoor Syed, 21, a senior at the University of Maryland, because he had actually experienced what I initially thought only happened to recent immigrants, not to people who had lived in the United States for more than a decade.

Syed’s family is Muslim and from Pakistan. They moved from upstate New York to Maryland when he was in high school. My interview with him in October was the first time we’d spoken since they moved, and this is what I learned:

“Once, a couple months after 9/11, the FBI came to my house and they wanted to talk to my brother alone,” Syed said. “He was 23 or 24, a young guy and around the age of the people they were profiling. They made me leave the house. They questioned him for at least 20-30 minutes.”

They asked his brother if anyone in his family was an extremist. Syed said that they might have targeted his family because one of his cousins lives in Pakistan.

Waheed Khalid, chairman of the Bergen County Chapter of the American Muslim Union in New Jersey, was reported in the

county newspaper, *The Record*, in February as stating: "Our government's actions following 9/11 have impacted and continue to impact tens of thousands of individuals in ways which seriously violate our Constitution. They include ethnically and religiously based interrogations, detentions, raids and closures of Muslim charities."

The Patriot Act, rammed into law following Sept. 11 as part of America's anti-terror campaign, severely influenced Muslim American attitudes toward the Bush administration. Since then, as Georgetown University law professor David Cole writes for *The Nation*, from the arrests of more than 5,000 Muslims made in antiterrorism sweeps, Attorney General John Ashcroft's record is 0 for 5,000, as the government has been unable to produce a single terrorism conviction. As Muslim Americans shudder and bear the brunt of policies brewed at home, their worries only deepen when they turn to Bush's policies abroad.

Bush's foreign policy in the Middle East: Frustrations and Disappointment

While Muslim Americans struggle to deal with the negative attitudes others have towards them and the limitations on their civil liberties, they are also deeply concerned about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Words like "disheartened," "disappointed," "scared" and "angry" describe their views on Bush's handling of that region. Although Rifaey, Naqvi and Ahmed are all American born, they all have relatives in the Middle East.

Rifaey, the University of Rochester senior whose relatives are all in either Egypt or Morocco, is worried that the situation will worsen in the Middle East. To him, Bush's foreign policy is "a big rollover." It's like he's just moving from one country to another in the Middle East without any strong or justified reasons, he said. His family members there agree.

"They don't feel like it's the United States' position to be the global police," Rifaey said.

Since the Iraq war, Rifaey has feared that the Middle Eastern situation is going to get worse. He thinks recent focus, including U.S. military positioning, has shifted out of Iraq and into other areas like Iran and Syria. Rifaey said he believes the United States will invade another Middle Eastern country and is worried

because he doesn't believe we'd ever get the truth from the administration.

"I can't even believe what I hear the administration saying anymore because of recent events," he said. "They say there's weapons of mass destruction, they say Saddam Hussein is connected and all this, but none of this has been proven or shown to have any validity when it came to Iraq. So even if they gave me facts on why they want to go into Iran, just as a generally informed citizen, not even being Arab-American, I don't see how a generally informed citizen could even believe that."

Naqvi believes that situations have worsened since Bush's re-election, specifically with the way Bush talks about Iran. Naqvi has family in Iran and family friends in Iraq and Lebanon.

"A pre-emptive strike on Iran will set the world on fire," he said. "The people of Iran are not like the people of Iraq – they will all fight. Furthermore, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Syria and the current elected regime in Iraq would also be affected and would support the Islamic Republic."

He said that other nations like Jordan and Turkey would become involved and the wars would lead to a greater backlash against Muslim Americans.

Naqvi's family and friends in the Middle East have deep hatred for Bush and his policies.

"They consider him a racist and consider this war an attack on Islam," Naqvi said. Naqvi shares the same views, believing that it's an attack on Islam because there are other problems in the world, such as those in North Korea, which are not being addressed.

Some may ask, if it was an attack on Islam, wouldn't the United States have attacked Saudi Arabia by now? Naqvi says "no" because Saudi Arabia has much investment in the U.S. economy.

"If it really was about democracy then the U.S should have attacked Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but it has not because they serve the interests of the U.S.," he said. "Bush lied about WMDs and Saddam being tied with September 11. Muslims are suffering the most."

Rifaey's family in the Middle East also resents Bush, viewing him as a tyrant. But, those in other countries are better than Americans at distinguishing the government from its people. He believes one reason why racial tension persists in the United

States regarding Arab-Americans is because Americans generally are incapable of realizing that not all Arabs and Muslims are terrorists or violent.

Naqvi believes that although Bush proclaims to want to instill democracy in Iraq, it won't happen because he doesn't think you can force democracy on a people. "It's like giving a civilian a gun and telling him to use it," Naqvi said. "He won't know how to use it until he's trained."

Ahmed voiced similar opinions, stating that democracy has to come from the actual people.

She really wanted Bush out of office in the 2004 election because of his Middle Eastern policies. Ahmed's parents are from Yemen and her maternal grandparents live there. They, and Ahmed, think U.S. foreign policy has a double standard.

"Palestinians have been dying every day because they want a democracy and their own state, but the U.S. says nothing other than giving Israel a pat on the hand every time they go in and kill another Palestinian, and meanwhile they're so gung-ho about giving Iraqis freedom," she said.

Ahmed doesn't think anything will be solved in the Middle East until there's a solution in Palestine.

"Otherwise, there's always going to be terrorists," she said. "People in the Middle East will always be angry, because that's the number one issue in the Middle East. One of the reasons we were attacked on 9/11 was because of Palestine – because there was no justice in Palestine. I don't think that in the long-term this is going to do anything as long as we keep ignoring the issue of Palestine."

Muslim Americans aren't the only ones who view the Bush administration's war in Iraq as an unjustified attack. As Cole puts it, the Administration "is simply anti-Muslim." American journalist Seymour Hersh, known for breaking the stories of the Vietnam War's My Lai massacre and the Abu Ghraib tortures, said in a public lecture that the war has had grim results because of the Bush administration's "shocking incapacity to lead."

"You don't realize how intolerable it is for the people there," he said. "In Baghdad, there's no running water, no garbage collectors...millions have fled. We've made it unlivable. By 11:30 you're kidnapped. It's hard to understand the impact we've had."

The Muslim Americans I interviewed really do not believe the United States is in the Middle East for what Bush proclaims as a fight for Iraqi freedom. Although they disagree with historical U.S. foreign policies in the Middle East, the current war is the first major change in foreign policy that many of my interviewees have experienced in their own lifetime, and, as voting citizens, they're not at all happy with what they see.

Their faith in Bush is so low, that they don't think any future decisions he makes regarding the Middle East would be really justifiable or for the true good of those in the region. It would take a lot from this administration, in domestic and foreign policies, to build the trust that has been lost or may have never existed from the Muslim American community.

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