

Report on the journalism project

Muslims in the USA after 9/11

for the American Council on Germany, New York City

by

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Foreword

Before I start reporting on my journey through the United States in June 2002, I would like to thank the American Council on Germany for giving me the opportunity to travel to the USA as a journalist. I have spent four very impressive weeks in the country (being there for the first time in my life) and have met a lot of interesting people. Just back in Germany, it seems that the german-american relations have become a little cold (to use an understatement), due to differing points of view in the Iraq conflict and some – in diplomatic terms - not very polite remarks of the german chancellor Gerhard Schröder and members of his cabinet. Thinking about Americans who dislike so-called german „Anti-Americanism“ and thinking about Germans who dislike so-called american „Cowboy-behaviour“, it comes to my mind how important it is to bring people – not only politicians – together. Fellowships like the John J. McCloy Fellowship are very good way to do this.

When I was driving through the more rural parts of Michigan, on the way to an indian muslim assistant professor of political science with whom I wanted to talk about american patriotism and 9/11, I passed a house with about four dozens of american flags. On the roof, on the tree, at the gate, on the car, on the grass – everywhere. I thought: Oh my God, everything I have read about this crazy american *kitsch*-patriotism is true (as you know, we germans are the opposite extreme: even if some of us *are* patriotic, we would never call it like this). But when I got out of the car to make a photograph of this funny house (nobody will believe it if you can't prove this), a second car stopped by my side and a woman got out, camera in her hands, smiling. She was an american woman, and she found the house – of course – just as funny as I did. And I knew: Probably every german would have believed me that Americans have houses with four dozens star-spangled banners, even without a photo. But what we forget: Even Americans may find this funny. And although on every journey, if you want to, you can find some of your prejudices confirmed, you also should see a bigger variety and meet different people who don't always fit the picture.

I do believe that my picture of the USA has become much more realistic. And I do believe that people get along together better than politicians.

The Project

Very soon after two airplanes had crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York and another one into the Pentagon in Washington it was clear that the religion of the people who had done these unimaginable evil deeds was Islam. More: It was clear that they belonged to the terrorist network of Usama bin Laden and that they were not only Muslims, but also claimed their religion as a justification for the murder of some 3000 people. Which impact would this attack on America have on Muslims who themselves live in this country? In the weeks after 9/11, the FBI counted ca. 350 brutal attacks on Muslims, Arabs or people who looked like muslim or arab. The whole community felt excluded of american society, peeped at by the CIA and the FBI, interrogated and permanently controlled at airports. Many women who wear veils did not dare to go out on the streets and President Bush declared: „This is not the America I know.“

My idea was to talk to american muslims about their situation nearly one year after the attacks, to ask them about their feelings and their expectations for the future. What I found, were mainly two things: First a lot of mourning about how bad America treats them; and secondly a lot of mourning about american foreign policy in the Middle East. But I also found a lot of people who realized that american muslims have to do more by themselves to make their voice be heard, to get away from their complicated double loyalty towards their home countries and their new country who very often stand in opposite to one another. Being a quite new group of immigrants in the USA, Muslims just have begun to become an integrated part of american society. 9/11 does not necessarily have to mean a backlash for this ambition. It may also speed it up. As Lorraine Ali, an arab-american journalist at Newsweek in New York, puts it: „I think 9/11 has kicked everybody in the butt.“

History of Muslims in the USA

Note: Though I know that not all Arabs are Muslims, I tend to use the terms Arab and Muslim as synonyms in this report. When I speak of Arabs I mean Muslim Arabs, but much of the things affect Christian Arabs too, because they are seen by the public as coming from the same culture. When I speak of Muslims, I also mean

non-Arabs. All these groups of people have one thing in common: Living in the USA, a lot of things have changed for them after 9/11.

Muslims and Arabs are a relatively new part of the immigration nation USA. Zahid Bukhari, who has conducted a survey on political participation of Muslims in the US, calls them „the new kids on the block“. But this does not mean that they are not significant. Islam has about three million adherents between New York and Los Angeles. The biggest concentration is at the East Coast, the Midwest, the South and in California (these and most of the facts of this part of the report are based on the research of Prof. Yvonne Haddad, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.; on her writings and an interview I conducted with her on June 21, 2002 in Washington). According to Prof Haddad, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and by the year 2015 Islam will be the second largest religion in the US. There are 1209 mosques and Islamic Centres (which mostly is pretty much the same) in the USA, more than 60 percent founded in the last 20 years (according to information provided by the US Department of State. For more detailed numbers see <http://www.usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/muslimlife/homepage.htm>, and also different writings by Haddad, where you can also find a history of Black Muslims, a topic which I totally ignore in my report).

Muslims began to immigrate into the USA about 1875. The first ones came mainly from the Middle East for the same reasons everybody else went there: because of the success stories that were told about America all over the world. On a similar basis the next wave of muslim immigrants came to Ellis Island, mainly in the 1930s – most of these people were rather uneducated and were simply looking for their luck. The third wave, which took place in the middle of the 20th century, brought people who were fleeing from oppressive regimes in the Middle East and other muslim countries (most of these regimes still are in power). This time the muslim immigrants were often well educated. Right now we witness the fourth wave, which began in 1967. This wave consists of „those who are educated, fluid in English, and westernized. They came from a wide variety of countries, including many beyond the Middle East. These Muslims have not come to make a fortune and return home, but to settle, to participate in American affluence, and to obtain higher education and advanced technical training for specialized work opportunities.“ (Haddad)

This should be a good precondition for integration and participation. But did it work?

9/11

In a fact sheet on the condition of Arab Americans Post-9/11, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) lists 600 violent incidents directed against Arab Americans (http://www.adc.org/terror_attack/9-11aftermath.PDF), including also headlines like „Airline Racism“, „Employment Discrimination“, „Law Enforcement Profiling“, „Tensions in Schools“ and „Discriminatory Service or Denial of Service“ as well as Civil Liberty Concerns.

Nearly everybody I talked to during my journey could tell some stories of that kind. The principal of a muslim school in New Jersey who had stones crushing through the windows only hours after the attacks on the WTC and who sent all the children home, being afraid they could be hurt; the young author, who has written a book about american muslims and who always has books about Islam with her in her bag, who is interrogated at airports every time she takes a plane; the thirty-something modern woman, whose mother did not dare to leave the house for weeks – and the arab-american journalist, who, at her first flight after 9/11, spotted an arabic looking man among the passengers and thought: „I hope he is not a terrorist.“ Probably the man thought the same when he saw her on board of the plane.

But I do not think that this kind of discrimination is the main obstacle towards the integration of Muslims. It may be normal that after such attacks a country over-reacts. „If what happened on September 11th had happened in India, the biggest democracy, thousands of Muslims would have been slaughtered in riots on mere suspicion and there would be another slaughter after confirmation. But in the US, bigotry and xenophobia has been kept in check by media and leaders“, says Muqtedar Khan, a muslim and an assistant professor of political science, who immigrated into the US from India nine years ago. He wrote this and some other self-circiticism-stuff in his „Memo to American Muslims“, only a few days after the attacks, and put the text on his internet web site. The resonance was tremendous. The Memo was read by ten-thousands of internet users and reprinted 72 times in newspapers (<http://www.ijtihad.org/memo.htm>). Khan has lost friends because of this who told him he was betraying his religion and his origin. But all he tries to do is

to make his religion compatible with modern living. „The most interesting ideas in the muslim world come from Muslims in the USA and Europe. They are the avantgarde, because under the oppressive regimes in our home countries free thinking is not possible“, he told me when I visited him in Adrian, MI. Khan sees his role in doing *ijtihad*, which has got nothing to do with the infamous *jihad*, but which in arabic means the use of human intelligence and intellect to develop the islamic principles and origins towards modern life. Conservative Muslims would not allow this because they say everything is written in the Quran. Doing *ijtihad* means to use the Quran and stick to the principles of the religion but in a way that allows the believers to make a text from the 7th century valuable for modern times. Ijtihad was usual in some of the better times for Islam in history until it was forbidden by conservative authority. After my return from the USA Khan has published a book (*American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom*). In the question of integrating Muslims in american society he could be one of the most important figures, I guess.

Imam Hasan Qazwini of Dearborn (near Detroit) says his first thought after he saw the pictures of the burning WTC on CNN was: I hope this were not Muslims. But the negative impact on his community was not as bad as he expected. Maybe Dearborn is a good example of integration. Arabs and Muslims represent an economic strength here. Warren Avenue, which 20 years ago looked like part of a ghost town, now is a prospering business street with lots of arab restaurants, coffee shops and markets offering *halal* food (e.g. animals slaughtered according to the islamic rules which are very close to jewish rules). „I am very proud of this“, says Brigitte Anouti, a lebanese social worker for ACCESS, a social service for arabs in the region, who came to the USA as a child. She goes to the mosque, does not wear a scarf, laughs a lot and is a fan of Ralph Nader.

Double Loyalty

The most striking point I got from my interviews was the fact that everybody would not – as I had expected - talk about hate crimes in the first place. What seems to bother Muslims in the USA most is not US domestic policy towards immigrants but US foreign policy towards their homelands. In every conversation I held the topic very soon reached this problem. Lorraine Ali explains: „It is more difficult for Arabs and Muslims to feel home here, because the United States have been nearly

constantly at war with their homelands.“ Especially the policy in the israeli-palestinian conflict strikes them most because from their point of view Washington takes sides against the Palestinians. They are very upset about the american media, which most people I talked to declared to be biased. Namely the Wall Street Journal and the Fox News Channel are said to be very pro-israeli („I hate Fox News“, someone said to me). A young palestinian boy from Jordan, in blue jeans and a very westernized cool behaviour with a blond american girlfriend, told me when I met him in a Dearborn arab café: „Don’t believe the media. They don’t tell the truth.“ According to a survey among american Muslims, 68 percent say that the media does not fairly portray Muslims and Islam, and 77 percent say that Hollywood doesn’t (*Muslims in American Public Square*, see below).

Although american people showed much interest in Islam in the time after the attacks of 9/11 and the sells of the Quran and books on islamic culture and history raised, additionally their has been a whole bunch of books about the „islamic menace“. One of the most popular is „American Jihad: The Terrorists Among Us“, by Steven Emerson. Emerson was the one who declared Muslim extremists responsible for the Oklahoma bombing, shortly before the white American Timothy McVeigh was charged with the crime. American Muslims do not forget this kind of pre-condemnation and seem to be extremely touchy.

When I visited Imam Hasan Qazwini of Dearborn, a very outspoken person who met several times with president Bush and who is said to be „moderate“, he had a very calm voice during our conversation until we reached the topic of american media. „We all know who influences the media in the USA“, he told me. I looked at him and asked: „Well, who?“ He insisted: „Come on, you know it, everybody knows it.“ I told him I didn’t know. Then it burst out of him: „The pro-israeli lobby!“ As an evidence he showed me the front page of the New York Times of that day, with a photograph of the site of horror in Israel – the day before there had been a horrible suicide bombing. I said, well, but this did happen, didn’t it? His answer: „Yes, but it is only half of the truth. The papers do not show the suffering of the palestinians.“ The „Arab American News“, a bilingual newspaper based in Dearborn with a circulation of 25 000 copies and edited by Osama Siblani, had the headline „The Suffering Reaches America“ on its first issue after September 11, 2001.

I have heard about the „pro-israeli lobby“ or about the „jewish lobby“ very often during my journey, even from Prof Haddad at Georgetown University (who has

a photograph of George W. Bush with an Usama-bin-Laden-like beard on her desk). In Germany nobody could talk like this without risking his reputation. But then, Germany may be a very special case in this regard.

Muqtedar Khan said: „Muslims love to live in the US, but they also love to hate it.“ He calls this a „schizophrenic relationship“ with the new homeland. The situation in the Middle East and in Afghanistan and, recently, the talk about war against Iraq, make it difficult to combine the loyalty towards their original countries and the loyalty towards the United States of America.

Lobbyism

Speaking of Lobbys: Of course the arab and muslim community tries very much itself to gain influence in american politics. Right now there are four different kind of Muslim or Arab Lobby groups.

1. political groups, for example the American Muslim Alliance, the Arab American Institute or the American Muslim Council. They want to make the muslim community act politically for example by building voting blocks.

2. Civil rights groups, for example CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations) or ADC (American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee)

3. National groups, who speak in the interest of their homelands or the interest of special nationalities among muslims in the USA, for example the pakistani lobby.

4. Identity groups, for example the Islamic Society of North America, who mainly want to pave the way for islamic culture in american everyday life. They are engaged in building mosques, islamic schools etc. These groups are rather not political.

The influence of these groups is really small. Jean AbiNader, a christian Arab from the Arab American Institute, answered the question about his influence by putting thumb and finger of his right hand very close together. Anyway, they do gain some importance. Ibrahim Hooper, who converted to Islam and now is speaker of CAIR in Washington, told me about his fight with Hollywood about the blockbuster-thriller „The Sum of all Fears“ with Ben Affleck, which was out this summer. In Tom Clancy’s original best-selling novel, the bad guys are palestinian terrorists.

When CAIR heard that there was to be a movie based upon the novel, they started a campaign to delete the islamic terrorism part in the script. In the end – I do not know if it happened because of the CAIR campaign or for other reasons – there were no muslims in the movie, but a little strange plot with Nazis as the biggest threat to the world. In an article called „Admit terrorism’s Islamic link“ in USA Today (June 24, 2002) the conservative film critic Michael Medved criticized this, saying that it was ridiculous unrealistic in the age of Al-Qaida to make Nazis the biggest threat of all, just out of political correctness. „Not every Muslim is a terrorist, but nearly every terrorist is a Muslim“, he wrote. Hooper told me that this may be correct, but the problem was that Muslims in Hollywood movies *only* appear as terrorists. „When I talk with film critics about this and ask them to name some movies with different attitudes the only one that comes to their mind is *Robin Hood* with Kevin Costner and the black good guy Muslim played by Morgan Freeman.“

Political Participation

58 percent of American Muslims say they have experienced discrimination after 9/11 but a vast majority of 93 percent also say that they want to take part in the american political process. This result of the already mentioned survey *Muslims in American Public Square* (www.projectmaps.com) makes the conductor of this survey, Zahid Bukhari of Georgetown University in Washington D.C., very hopeful that the integration of Muslims is on a good way. In his view, the fact that America is a country built of immigrants makes it easier for Muslims to feel home. „When I want to send my children to an islamic school or want to buy *halal* food“, the practicing Muslim Bukhari told me, „I do not have any difficulties, because the Jews already have paved the way.“ Jews need *kosher* food, which is similar to islamic food regarding the slaughtering of animals. Because of this, said Bukhari, the american public is used to certain specialities among religious groups and does not have a problem to accept it. Bukhari, who came to the US from Pakistan in 1983 and still has a strong accent said: „There are footprints we can follow. Now it is up to the Muslims.“ It was not enough to react negatively towards the „unfair“ treatment of Muslims, but they should engage themselves, he said.

It may be a tragedy that american Muslims, after having gained some role on the political scene, now always have to prove their loyalty again. It seems, that after

Pres. Bush and others directly after 9/11 have visited mosques and embraced the islamic community now this community feels deserted by politicians who do not want to be associated with them. Some bad remarks about Islam by evangelical priests like Rev. Jerry Vines (who said in June that the prophet Muhammad was a „demon-possessed pedophile“) and also by conservatives like John Ashcroft (surely for Muslims the most hated person of the current american government) do not make it easier.

But the United States do have the potential to integrate a huge Muslim community, even if the Muslims themselves do not feel like this right now. In Dearborn, I took a car ride to the outer parts of Ford Road, where the construction site of the biggest mosque in North America is situated – right in the middle between a baseball field and two churches, one armenian and one orthodox. There I got to know Muhammad Musa, the facility manager of the mosque and the nearby islamic school. He was so polite to guide me through the construction site, showing me the prayers room and other parts of the mosque, being quite proud of the huge building. Until now it had a budget of 4 Million US\$, until completion it will be 15 Million US\$. It has got a 108 feet minarett, and when we climbed up there, Musa was talking about how difficult it is to be a Muslim in the USA. When we reached the top, he said: „There is still a lot of discrimination.“ Then we looked down on the two rather small churches from the top of the biggest mosque in the USA. I do not think he had a feeling for the absurd situation – a mosque between a baseball field and two churches, and the mosque dominating them all while he was lamenting about discrimination of Muslims.

This little story is not meant to illustrate that there is no discrimination. The opposite is the case. But as a concluding remark I would say that in America it could be easier for Muslims than in any other place in the world – if there wasn't american foreign policy and 9/11. In Germany for example it is much more difficult for Muslims to live their culture. There have been very intense debates whether Muslims should be allowed to slaughter animals without anasthesia (to gain *halal* food) or about building mosques. My impression was that the american society is much more open in these matters. Also I think that – regarding the fact that in their home countries Muslims live under oppressive regimes – in America (in Europe as well) they may be able to develop their belief. At least they have the chance if they are

strong enough to overcome their anti-americanism and if american society overcomes its anti-islamism. Then this impression of a „golden age of Islam in America“ (to speak in terms of book author Asma Gull Hassan) hopefully would swap over to the islamic countries and make changes possible there, too.

The times are not very good for this but during my stay in the USA I have met a lot of American Muslims who surely have the guts to just do it.

Closing Remarks

In the end, please allow me to make some remarks on the fellowship program itself. Working together with the ACG was a great pleasure. I got very helpful hints from the staff (namely Michele Steinbuch) during the preparation of my project and felt strong support while I was travelling. Of course it is a great chance to just go to the United States for four weeks and make research on something you are really interested in – and again I want to thank the Council and Mr Hugh G. Hamilton for that.

For coming fellows, I would like to mention some smaller problems. It is a little difficult to organize the whole project before it even starts. Using the internet was a very helpful possibility to find interview partners and information in general and to make contacts via e-mail quite quickly (I wonder what former fellows did in the pre-internet-age...). When I was in the US, at some place I would have liked to have more time because a lot more interesting people showed up whom I could not interview due to the the flight that was already booked; on the other hand at some place everything was done quicker than expected. Anyway, I do not really have a solution for this. But it is helpful to plan as much as possible. Finding hotels is a problem too, especially in New York. A data base with recommendable and affordable hotels for the convenience of future fellows could be helpful. Another topic is to tie contacts with american journalists. That would be a very interesting part of a fellowship for german journalists, of course. But unless you have journalists on your interview list anyway you won't meet them if you are just travelling along by your own. I think it would be a very good idea if fellows not only do research on their story but also have the oppertunity to take part in a journalism conference or something similar while being in the USA. I know that the Council does not consider this as part of the fellowship but maybe it can become a part?

Something else that came to my mind when I was in the USA: Being linked to a certain project should not bother you to do some other stories as well. I was looking for Muslims all the time and shouldn't have ignored all the other stuff that was along the way. In Washington I did a small piece about Americans and the Soccer World Cup which I directly mailed to my home newspaper, and there would have been some more possibilities like this if I had not been focused so much on Muslims alone. Four weeks is not much if you want to do research on the situation of American Muslims after 9/11, but if you consider how much you can print you come to the conclusion that you soon have collected more details than your paper has pages.

List of main interview partners:

Yasemin Saib, Muslims against Terrorism, New York

Lorraine Ali, Newsweek, New York

Ismael Khalil, principal of Al-Ghazzali School, Jersey City, New Jersey

Asma Gull Hassan, book author (American Muslims: The New Generation), Colorado (meeting was in Boston)

Muqtedar Khan, Assistant professor for political science, Adrian College, Adrian MI

Imam Hasan Qazwini, Islamic Center, Dearborn, MI

Brigitte Fawaz-Anouti, ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services), Dearborn, MI

Osama Siblani, Publisher, Arab American News, Dearborn, MI

Adel Kirollos, Director of Men's Programs, Arab-American Friendship Center, Dearborn, MI

Jean AbiNader, Managing Director, Arab-American Institute, Washington D.C.

Yvonne Haddad, Professor at Georgetown University, Center for Intercultural Studies, Washington D.C.

Ibrahim Hooper, CAIR (Center for American-Islamic Relations), Washington D.C.

Zahid Bukhari, Co-Director Project Muslims in American Public Square, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.