

Diversity: Muslims in Fairfax

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An Informational Study

The population of the United States has become more diverse as percentages of minorities and various ethnic groups continue to increase. This pattern is being repeated throughout the developed world. The ethnic and religious mix varies from nation to nation, but today's reality is rapid change.

The committee decided to concentrate on Muslims, as one segment of our diverse community, in order to do as thorough a job as possible. It quickly became clear that although religion can be a unifying force, the various cultures represented by Muslims are in themselves quite diverse. Native culture is perceived to be the religious culture but, when compared with Islamic teachings, it is clear that cultural traditions usually dominate. Accurate statistics about Muslims are difficult to obtain. The numbers and percentages in this study are based on the best available estimates.

The Fairfax League's immigration studies (February 1998 and March 1999) were reviewed to refresh our memories on a complex topic. Contact was made with the Fairfax County Commission For Women/Office For Women. We learned that their *Women and Diversity in Fairfax County Forum*, held in April 2000, was a culmination of four roundtables conducted over the previous two years with women leaders from the African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern communities. They addressed four main areas of concern to these communities: human services, public safety, schools, and employment. We are addressing these same issues to some degree. Our constitutional requirement for separation of church and state precludes government directly focusing on Islam/Muslims. We felt that League could take a more direct approach.

Introduction

Who are Muslims?

Anyone born of Muslim parentage or anyone who has converted to Islam. They are followers of the religion Islam. The essence of Islam is contained in its holy book, the Quran. The Quran is believed to have been revealed in Arabic by God to the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Muslims who come from theocratic countries where Islam is the dominant religion can have difficulty adjusting to a

minority status in America. They are accustomed to having their lives ordered by the state and find that in a free country they must function on their own initiative.

Muslims vary from being non-religious, through varying degrees of involvement with Islam, to the very devout. In Fairfax, it is said, about 20 percent of the Muslim population follows religious practices and 80 percent are minimally or moderately involved in following Islam.

Why do they come here?

For the same reasons immigrants/refugees have always come. Most immigrants are looking for better opportunities for themselves and/or better educational and future opportunities for their children. Some have married Americans. Many have family in the United States, and immigration laws favor family members. Others are drawn to well-paid positions in the high tech sector; they are encouraged to apply for special visas for specific time periods to take these jobs. Refugees are seeking sanctuary from perilous conditions in their homelands and refugee camps. We understand that although other countries, including Canada and Australia, offer more generous and longer refugee support systems, many refugees choose to come to America because they recognize the name from the entertainment and sports industries.

Is there a difference?

Muslim or Islamic culture?

Islamic and Muslim culture(s) are not synonymous. Islamic culture is based on scripture, the Quran. Muslim culture(s) is based on people and their communities, what they do, and what they believe, all with a strong overlay of religion. Thus, Islam is interpreted differently in the various Muslim countries. Usually, in each country people think they are following the tenets of Islam when they are actually following native customs that may pre-date Islam. In theocratic countries, it is the leaders who set forth religio-cultural mandates. Women's dress is one example. In fact, many of these differences affect women and the way in which they are treated. In countries like America where there is belief in a liberated, equitable, and dignified position for women, many Muslims, men and women alike, are calling for reevaluation of attitudes and practices that, although adopted in the name of Islam, are actually contrary to the basic messages found in the Quran.

Where did they come from and when?

The first group of Muslims to immigrate to the United States was a small number who came between 1875 and 1912 from Greater Syria (what is now Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon). At the same time, a much larger number of Christians, who are better remembered, also came to America. Then, for a few years after World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, immigrants from that same area were mostly Muslims who joined relatives who had migrated earlier and had become successful to a degree. After enactment of further immigration laws in 1921 and 1924, immigration of Muslims was drastically curtailed. These laws set quotas for certain countries, including most of the Muslim dominated ones. During the 1930s, the Great Depression years, only relatives of Muslims living here were allowed to immigrate.

The next sizable group of Muslims came after World War II, between 1947 and 1969, as a result of looser immigration law. These people came not only from the Middle East but from India and Pakistan (after partition in 1947), Eastern Europe, and the USSR. Many were better educated and/or people of wealth.

In 1965, a new immigration act removed quotas by nationality. As a result, immigration from the Middle East and Asia increased and more than half were Muslims. Beginning with the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, civil strife in countries of the Muslim world has resulted in immigration to America, either as permanent resident aliens or as refugees. The number continues to rise. They have come because of war in Iran following the deposing of the shah in 1979, Pakistan's break off of Bangladesh, civil war in Afghanistan, the Iraq-Kuwait war and Kurdish conflict, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, civil war in Somalia, and wars and repression in other African nations. Many immigrants are close relatives of people already here or are refugees. People of wealth and/or education come, as they have in the past, to seek more education or a better life for themselves and their families.

Muslims now live in every country in the world. Today, Indonesia has the largest number of Muslims of any country but few have migrated to the United States from there.

How many Muslims live in the United States? In Fairfax?

The U.S. Census does not track religious preferences. It does try to count by race. Muslims from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are counted as white. The sub-Saharan black Muslims are counted as African Americans. Mosques do not have membership lists as they are open to all to pray and to participate in activities. One does not "belong" to a particular mosque. Individuals may attend any mosque and frequently attend and participate in activities of more than one mosque. Thus, mailing lists of mosques have duplications. Estimates of the total number of Muslims in the country vary from 3 to 10 million. It appears that a closer approximation lies between 6 and 7 million. According to Jane I. Smith's *Islam in America* (1999), first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants make up the largest proportion of Muslims. The number of native born is increasing rapidly because many Muslim immigrants/refugees are of child-bearing age or younger and Muslims tend to have a high birth rate. Some scholars of Islam in the United States project that 40 percent of Muslims here are African Americans. They seem to be included in some statistics but not others. Their inclusion or exclusion may account for at least some of the wide variation in estimates of national Muslim population. Even so, as the third-largest religious group in the United States and growing, many Muslims are asking for America to be called a Judeo-Christian and Muslim country. Because immigrants/refugees tend to have large families, they are now or will in the future provide a young workforce.

Closer to home, surveys of numerous Fairfax County school population records provide a somewhat clearer picture. It is projected that about 400,000 Muslims live in the greater Washington metropolitan area, which extends from Richmond to Baltimore. About 150,000 of that number live in Fairfax. Roughly half are native born, half are immigrants/refugees. Of this second group, 5 to 8 percent are refugees. There are enclaves of Muslims in Fairfax—wealthy Irani settled in Great Falls, middle-class Irani, Pakistani, Afghani, and Indians settled in Springfield and Reston/Herndon. Recent refugees live mostly in the Baileys Crossroads area. In 1988, there was one mosque in Fairfax with an average attendance of 360. At present, the largest mosque in Fairfax, Dar Al Hijrah near Falls Church, usually has about 1,000 attendees at Friday prayers and many more on holidays.

Most Muslims prefer to retain their religious and native cultures, and adaptation is necessary. An example is situations where privacy for prayer during the business day may be difficult or impossible. In these cases, it is permissible for them to combine the five Islamic daily prayers as needed.



Need brings ways.

An Arabic proverb



Similarly in schools, most of the time only the noon prayer would fall during school hours and may be accommodated.

Are Muslims politically involved?

As their numbers in the United States increased in the 1960s, a number of organizations were formed to bring together Muslims across the country and to work toward recognition of Islam and Muslims. Organizations of many varieties may be found—scientific, educational, financial, religious, etc. Among these is the American Muslim Council (AMC) in Washington, D.C., established in 1990. With chapters all over the country, its purpose is to educate Muslims about the electoral process. To do this, it arranges registration drives and has found that many are citizens and vote regularly. In Fairfax, for example, Dar Al Hijrah, which has a mailing list of 30,000, held a voter registration drive in September 2000. It revealed that about 80 percent of its voter-eligible congregants are registered.

It is an uphill battle, however, to get many immigrants/refugees involved. Many of them come from countries where political involvement can be dangerous. Persons from those situations tend to avoid any kind of civic participation here. Women from cultures where they traditionally remained in the home and had little outside contact tend to do the same here. Lack of or limited English skills is another inhibiting factor. Community leaders understand the importance of being involved in order to be heard, and they try to encourage a higher level of participation. So change is occurring, as evidenced by the presence of women on the executive board of a local mosque.

Another type of affiliation growing in number is the women's organization. One is the North American Council for Muslim Women, headquartered in Fairfax. It was established to promote the welfare of American Muslim women and hosts annual conferences on issues of particular concern to women, such as violence toward women and legal rights and policies applicable to women.

The Family

Islam teaches that a happy family life is the foundation of a healthy society and encourages marriage and having children. There is no single definition of the Muslim family, but it is normally an extended group including all relatives and sometimes other members of the community. Traditionally, the family is a cohesive unit that provides whatever assistance is needed by its members—of all ages. Even Muslim immigrants/refugees who may have become westernized miss the closeness and support of the extended family left behind in their native countries. It can be traumatizing for those

immigrants/refugees who suddenly find themselves bereft of this support system. Women with full-time employment outside the home may still be expected to cater to their mates as they had formerly done. It is thought that stress and fatigue may be contributing factors in the increase seen in domestic violence among the American Muslim population. This may be further exacerbated by various cultural traditions considered acceptable by immigrants/refugees, such as wife beating. Women often are discouraged by family and their communities from seeking outside help for matters that have always been dealt with privately. In Fairfax, VAN (Victim Assistance Network), part of the Community Services Board, operates a hot line, staffed by volunteers. They are trained to deal with persons of many different cultures and to refer callers to a variety of services. Among these services is the one and only 12-bed shelter for battered women operated by Fairfax County.



A monkey in his mother's eye is a gazelle.

An Arabic proverb



Some view the Islamic tenets on women as positive, in that they provide women with a stable, protected, and respected role in society as the mother who is head of the household. Others see them as outdated and repressive and believe that realistic accommodations must be made to doctrine set 1,400 years ago. Just as the Quranic provision that women are not obligated to share their assets and/or earnings doesn't hold up in modern economic situations, many women believe that women's legal rights should reflect more modern thinking. Examples include: the rigid separation of the sexes in public, which restricts women's movements; that a woman may inherit only one-half as much as a man; that the testimony of two women is required to equal that of a man in a court of law; and that Muslim males may marry outside the faith but females may not. Immigrants/refugees particularly need help in learning about the differences among Quranic provisions, cultural mores, and U.S. laws and customs.

Muslim Women's Dress

The basic principle of Muslim dress for men and women, according to the Quran, is modesty. But the Quran is not explicit in its definition of the idea, and it is women's attire that causes controversy. All interpretations of women's dress are based on only three Quranic verses. Basically, women are

advised not to draw attention to their beauty or “zeenah,” which should be covered, and only “what naturally appears,” generally defined as face, hands, and feet, should be shown. What this means is open to wide interpretation.



*The female voice has been ignored
because of the “patriarchal
progression of civilization.”*

Dr. Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Quran and Woman*



In some theocratic countries, very conservative women’s dress is strictly dictated and rigidly enforced. There women are completely covered except for face (sometimes only eyes), hands, and feet. In other Muslim countries, where native culture and tradition are important but not dictated, the choice is left to the woman; many choose to wear the traditional garb.

After the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, many Muslim women, who formerly wore no identifiably Muslim clothing, began wearing the more conservative dress as a sign of their allegiance to Islam, and this trend continues.

In the United States, one finds everything from the occasional severely clad woman, to the woman wearing a long-sleeved, loosely fitting garment and head scarf or “hijab,” to those women who wear no identifying article of clothing. Long-sleeved shirts with jeans and the “hijab” are common among Muslim youth.

The “hijab,” or head covering, is derived from the word “khimar” in the Quran. This was a loose scarf worn at the time of the Prophet Muhammad that covered a woman’s head, neck, and shoulders. Today, for many women, wearing the hijab and dressing conservatively is considered an act of faith. Therefore, objecting to a woman wearing her hijab at her place of employment is considered violating her right to practice her religion as she sees fit.

Economics

Typically, when many Muslim immigrants, and certainly all Muslim refugees, come to the United States, they are

financially insecure, making employment a critical issue. Jobs may be difficult to find for various reasons. Poor or no comprehension of English, lack of usable skills, inability to obtain a license in one’s profession or skill are all deterrents to finding employment. Added to these are the limitations Islam places on its followers. One should not work where alcohol is present, where one may have to handle pork or pork products, or where usury is involved (Islam defines charging or receiving any interest on loans as usury). The programs funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, federal money to help these newcomers adjust to their new life, take these restrictions into consideration when helping to find employment for Muslims. (Persons finding employment on their own make personal decisions regarding these particular situations.) Various private agencies also help with the very basics—from how to shop in a supermarket, to how to use kitchen appliances. One of the key pillars of Islam is alms giving, and for most Muslims this is a real obligation which enables them to provide for their own. Thus, mosques, organizations, and individuals also provide many services for their needy.

A breakdown of Muslim families in Fairfax by economic status is not available, but indications are that they are represented across the spectrum, from the wealthiest to the poorest. There is wealth within the Muslim community—some of long-standing and some brought more recently from native lands.

If the family or a group of people can obtain a small amount of capital, they often start a small business. Food establishments are a popular small enterprise in which a whole family can be involved. In Fairfax, in the past few years, a variety of Muslim-owned and oriented groceries, halal meat markets, bakeries, and restaurants have opened. Started at first for the Muslim community, these enterprises are now well patronized by non-Muslims as well and add breadth to the entire community.

Muslims see these efforts as providing goods and services primarily for their own community, offering those consumers the ability to maintain their own culture(s) rather than having to accept the mainstream American culture. In reality, their endeavors mesh with an ongoing national trend toward niche marketing, which has become very big business in the United States. Roughly \$2 billion is spent annually on advertising to attract long-standing ethnic groups and newcomers, whose combined spending power is estimated at more than \$1 trillion a year. Many fast-food restaurants now identify products containing any pork or pork products.

Employment/Childcare

An area of real concern among Muslims is whether the women of the family should be gainfully employed. The Quran actually encourages women's employment, when appropriate, and states that her earnings are hers to keep. It stipulates that it is the man's primary duty to provide for the family. The woman's primary duty is to care for the home and family, most particularly the children, although both parents are responsible for the children. In some Muslim countries there are professional, well-educated women who are accustomed to being employed. The vast majority of women, however, often poorly educated, unskilled, and living in non-urban areas, are family oriented and unaccustomed to associating outside their family group. In this country, many of them are faced with the necessity of helping the family survive financially. These women usually find their first jobs in the low-paying service industries. Employment then leads to other concerns, the chief being childcare. In Muslim society, the extended family is the rule; the child is always in the company of adult relatives. Leaving a child in the care of strangers is unheard of. These mothers must be convinced of the necessity for childcare and also assured that good care will be provided.

Education

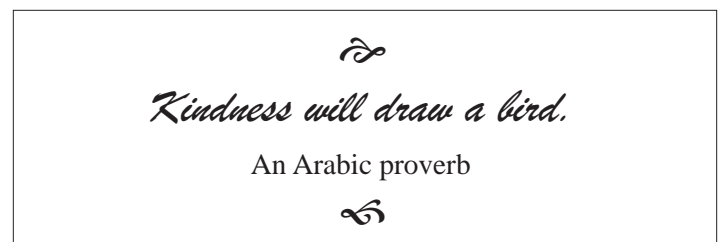
"Read" (or recite) is the first word God is said to have revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic scholars have interpreted this to mean that all Muslims, both men and women, are to be educated. Thus, education became an integral part of Islam. Realistically, until recently, education was available only to an elite few and those mostly male. At present, many Muslim countries recognize that for the economic well-being of their country, they must have a literate and better educated population. Therefore, they are providing more education from elementary school through high school, making education accessible to many more people. Although increasing numbers of girls and women are being educated, they remain in the minority. In fact, Afghanistan offers no education for girls. As a result, parents who can afford it send their children to other countries to be educated. This includes the United States and, specifically, Fairfax. Some return to their native lands, others overstay their student visa, apply for asylum, or seek permanent resident status.

The Muslim community in Fairfax, especially the women, strongly seek education for their children. It is most important to them. It is reported that 1 to 2 percent of Muslim children in Fairfax attend Islamic schools. Additional children and adults attend classes after school or on weekends for Arabic language and Islamic studies.

The best known of the Islamic schools in Fairfax is the Islamic Saudi Academy on Richmond Highway, where about 1,000 students are enrolled, representing 32 countries. The school offers K-12 to both sexes, but boys and girls are separated in classes and ride on separate school buses. Girls do not have as extensive a sports program as boys. In addition to meeting the standards for schools in Fairfax, the school includes Arabic and Islamic studies in its curriculum. The Saudi Arabian embassy established the school to provide an Islamic education for the children of its and other Muslim countries' embassies. Other local Muslim children fill the remaining slots. Tuition is charged, but the Saudi Arabian embassy provides financial support.

There is also a small, all-girl school, Al-Qalam, serving 60 students, G6-9. About half the students are native born; the others come from 10 different countries. Five principal languages and many dialects are spoken by students. This school does not have Fairfax accreditation due to its lack of science and computer equipment; money is always in short supply. The school receives no foreign government funds and has not received public funds designated for specific private school expenditure.

The Institute of Arabic and Islamic Sciences in America, located in Merrifield, is a part of a Saudi Arabian university. It offers bachelor degrees in Islamic studies and courses in Arabic as a second language. It also is a research and library center. Both men and women attend but are in separate classes.



The majority of Muslim children attend Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) where a number are enrolled in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program. Recently, Arabic was recognized as one of the most common languages spoken among ESL students, about 4 to 8 percent of the approximately 158,000 total student population. There are, of course, many native-born Muslim children whose first language is English.

FCPS has a pilot program teaching Arabic in four high schools. About one-fourth of the students are non-Arabic, perhaps drawn to the course because it fits their career plans.

Because FCPS has a large number of both Muslim and other ethnic group students, it is seriously involved in the diversity question and approaches it from several angles. The goal is to have successful students and to have parental involvement

with parents and school understanding one another as a means of achieving this goal.

In the policy and regulations area, the FCPS Human Relations Advisory Committee (HRAC) monitors and makes recommendations to the school board on diversity issues. Currently, the HRAC has three Muslim members as well as a League representative. A past recommendation of this group resulted in ongoing training on diversity for teachers and staff. The Muslim community was involved in developing a program.

The Office of Central Registration and the Parenting Education Center work to help schools understand parents and parents to understand the schools and how they operate; parental involvement is stressed.

One of the main concerns of the Muslim community is religious accommodation. FCPS has developed guidelines for religious accommodations for students based on FCPS policies and regulations. Some of the requests and guidelines particularly affecting Muslims are:

Accommodation for prayer. This is left to the discretion of each principal, who should grant the request if it can be handled easily, taking into consideration availability of space, time, and appropriate supervision. Accommodations for fasting at Ramadan may consist of the children using their lunch period as a study period. *[Ramadan is the Islamic Holy Month during which Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, or having sex from dawn to sunset.]*

Food. Lunch menus identify products containing any form of pork or pork products and offer alternatives.

Test schedules. FCPS does not designate specific days of religious significance on which testing is prohibited, but accommodations are to be made as long as they are reasonable.

Student clothing associated with religion. Students may wear such clothing; and clothing requirements for classes such as physical education may be adjusted to accommodate religious beliefs.

In their search for further education, Muslims attend both the Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and George Mason University (GMU). We were told that roughly 30 percent of the students at NOVA's five campuses are Muslim, many learning technical trades, others planning to go on to a four-year college. No statistics at GMU were obtained, but an estimate based on casual observation is that the percentage of Muslims seems to be much smaller. At both schools, there is a strong Muslim Student Association (MSA), which is represented in many colleges. One of its aims is to redefine



Too many cooks burn the food.

An Arabic proverb



Islamic identity in America as a unified culture based on the Quran and not a diffuse culture based on national ethnic and linguistic allegiances.

Dietary Issues

Historically, food has helped define the separateness of one creed from another through dietary taboos. Pork and pork derivatives, e.g., foods cooked in lard or jelly, which contains gelatin, are "haram," food and drink prohibited in the Muslim diet. In fact the slaughter of meat must be in accordance with the Quranic law. This forbids the consumption of animals slaughtered in any manner other than having the throat cut. "Halal" (approved) butchers sell meat that has been slaughtered in this way. Eating or drinking of animal blood is forbidden also. Addictive substances, including alcohol and drugs, are proscribed. Observant Muslims even question ingesting prescription medicines containing alcohol but are advised to take them when no alternative is available. Also banned are the meat of carnivores and certain sorts of cheese because animal products are used in making them.

Food is deeply respected in the Muslim world. It is important in entertaining others as well as providing for the individual's and the family's meals. Because Islam exists all over the world, no specific food is eaten by all Muslims. Favorite dishes are enjoyed in each country, especially on feast days. For example, in South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) a milky noodle pudding with nuts and cardamoms, originally from Iran, is a treat. Lebanese Muslims enjoy local foods, including rice, roast meats, and salad. Candy, nuts, and fresh or dried fruits, particularly dates, are well-liked. Cakes and local sweetmeats also are popular. Muslims often serve sweet food on happy occasions to express their hope that life will be just as sweet.

Recent Developments

Possibly the most dramatic change for natives and newcomers alike is due to high technology, particularly the Internet. It provides easy access to web sites in most foreign languages, with current reports from or of most native countries represented here. Programming originates from institutions of higher learning in this country as well as the American and

foreign news media. Technology enables U.S. residents to keep in touch with their homelands and, often, directly with their families and friends through e-mail. This ability to remain in close touch with relatives at home, and possibly offer help more quickly in times of need, helps immigrants feel more comfortable.

A recommendation from the *Women and Diversity Forum* held by the Fairfax County Office For Women last spring was to implement a U.S. Small Business Administration grant to establish a Women's Business Center of Northern Virginia. This program is a joint effort of the Fairfax County government, the Community Business Partnership, and the Mason Enterprise Center of George Mason University. Virginia's first center for women who operate businesses or want to start them opened in the Falls Church area in October 2000. Several Muslim women as well as a League representative were among the attendees at the center's opening. The program provides assistance in financing, procurement, and networking, as well as marketing advice. What impact this will have on Muslim women is not known but should open some opportunities for them.

Closing

In general, Muslims see American culture as having many faults, which they should not adopt. Therefore, they prefer to stand apart and accept American culture only in the areas acceptable to Islamic beliefs or where adaptation is possible.

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Time is gold.

An Arabic proverb

