

Regarding US Muslims: A Misguided Debate

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Laurie Goodstein's article, 'American Muslims Ask, Will We Ever Belong?' was intended as a sympathetic reading of the concerns of US Muslim communities facing increasing levels of hostility and fear. While generally insightful and sensibly written, the article also highlights the very misconceptions that riddle the bizarre debate pitting American Muslims against much of the government, the mainstream media and most of the general public.

This is how Goodstein lays the ground for her discussion: "For nine years after the attacks of Sept. 11, many American Muslims made concerted efforts to build relationships with non-Muslims, to make it clear they abhor terrorism, to educate people about Islam and to participate in interfaith service projects. They took satisfaction in the observations by many scholars that Muslims in America were more successful and assimilated than Muslims in Europe." (New York Times, September 5, 2010)

This argument is not Goodstein's alone, but one repeated by many in the media, the general public, and even among American Muslims themselves. The insinuation of the above context is misleading, and the timeline is selective.

True, it largely depends on who you ask, but there seem is more than one timeline in this narrative. The mainstream interpretation envisages the conflict as beginning with the hideous bombings on September 11, 2001. All that has happened since becomes justified with the claim that 'Muslims' started it. These same 'Muslims', some argue, are now twisting the knife by wanting to build a mosque not too far from Ground Zero, and they must be stopped. The media fan the flames of this fear, while unknown, attention-hungry zealots propose to burn the holy book of Islam. Scheming rightwing politicians jump on board, fiery media commentators go wild with speculations, and the public grow increasingly terrified of what the Muslims might do. Even the sensible among all of these groups advise Muslims to basically try to make themselves more likable, to assimilate and fit in better.

That timeline and logic may be omnipresent in mainstream society in the US, but many on the fringes dare to challenge it. More, throughout Muslim-majority countries, in fact most of the world, September 11, 2001 was one station, however bloody, among many equally bloody episodes that defined the relationship between Muslims and the United States. Again, it all depends on who you ask. An Iraqi might locate the origin of hostilities with the Iraq war of 1990-91, and the deadly sanctions that followed, taking millions of civilian lives over the next decade. Some Muslims might cite the US military presence in holy Muslim lands, or their intervention in Muslim countries' affairs. They may also point to the US government's support of vile and brutal regimes around the world.

But the vast majority, while acknowledging all of these, will refer to the genesis of all

hostilities – before Saddam Hussein existed on the map of Arab politics, and before Osama bin Laden led Arab fighters in Afghanistan, with the direct support of the US, to defeat the Soviets. It is the tragedy in Palestine that has continued to pain Muslims everywhere, regardless of their background, politics or geographic location. They know that without US help, Israel would have no other option but to extend its hand to whatever peace offer enjoys international consensus. With every Palestinian killed, an American flag is burned, since the relationship has been delineated with immense clarity for decades. When US General David Petraeus argued last March that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was fomenting anti-American sentiment, he spoke as a military man stating a fact. He was right, although many continue to ignore his remarks at their own peril.

True, timelines can be selective, but empathy requires one to understand another's perspective and not just one's own.

The Florida Priest on a mission to burn the Koran needs to see past his own terrible prejudices. Media commentators need to stop pigeonholing Muslims, and realize that there is no such thing as a Muslim polity in America. There is no truth to the idea that all Muslims hold the same religious values and political aspirations which are at constant odds with 'American values', and which need to be amended in order to make peace with their 'new' surroundings.

Needless to say, talks of 'assimilation' are misguided. Muslims have lived in the United States for generations and have become an essential part of American life. Millions of US Muslims are also African American. Do they too need to assimilate? And if not, should we divide American Muslims to groups based on ethnic background, skin color, or some other criterion?

One cannot offer simple recipes by calling on the general public to adopt this belief or ditch another. Public opinion is formulated through a complex process in which the media is a major player. However, it is essential that one remembers that history is much more encompassing and cannot be hostage to our diktats and priorities. Such selective understanding will surely result in a limited understanding of the world and its shared future, and thus a misguided course of action.

That said, Muslims must not fall into the trap of victimhood, and start dividing the world into good and evil, the West and Muslims, and so on. How could one make such generalized claims and still remain critical of the notion of a 'clash of civilizations'? It remains that many Americans who have a negative perception of Muslims are not motivated by ideological convictions or religious zealotry. Most American clergy are not Koran-burning hateful priests, and not all media pundits are Bill O'Reilly.

There is no question that the conflict remains largely political. Misconceptions and misperceptions, manipulated by ill-intentioned politicians, media cohorts and substantiated by violence and war will not be resolved overnight. However, hundreds of interfaith dialogues and conferences will not change much as long as American armies continue to roam Muslim countries, support Israel and back corrupt leaders. Reducing the issue by signaling out a Muslim community in this country and then calling on frightened and fragmented communities to 'make more effort' is unfair and simply futile.

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