the Roar

1801 Harvey Mitchell Pkwy. S., College Station, Texas 77840 • Thursday, Apr. 2, 2015 • Vol. 20 No. 5

# MUSLIM IN AMERICA

## Muslim students, despite facing widespread cultural ignorance, continue to cherish faith, freedom

**annie zhang & rachel lamb**
*executive editor and assistant editor*

It's been 14 years since 9/11, five years since the New York car bomber and four months since the Charlie Hebdo attack.

It's also been 14 years since the 9/11 "revenge killer," six years since the burning death of Ali Abdelhadi Mohd and two months since the shooting at Chapel Hill.

"You have to understand that there are some Muslims who legitimately fear being Muslim," senior Sibba Al-Khatani said. "They'll hide it. They believe in it, but they don't act like it because they don't want to be labeled Muslim."

But what does it *really* mean to be labeled Muslim in America?

"When you honestly look at Islam, it's an extremely peaceful religion. It was almost commanded that we treat our neighbors as family, that in our wills, when we died, we have to give something to our neighbors," Al-Khatani said. "We're never allowed to kill; if someone is hurting our feelings, we have to suck it up. We can't do anything about it."

With one in four people worldwide identifying as Muslim, Islam is the world's second-largest and fastest growing religion.

"Islam, to me, is my way of life. It's my safe haven, what I go to in times of trouble, what I go to in times of happiness," sophomore Nooran Riaz said. "To others, it's just this mysterious religion that some people use as an excuse to hurt others, which is completely wrong. [Those people] don't know what to think because the only version of Islam they get to see is the one on the news."

Today, only 27% of Americans hold Islam in a favorable view, according to a 2014 survey conducted by the Arab American Institute.

"If you look at what the media is saying, they think that [Islam] promotes violence," senior Lena Ayari said. "There's a quote in the Quran that says killing one person is killing all of mankind, so what you see in the media isn't representative of what Islam is actually about."

**"Islam"** continued on page 3.

# Muslim students hope to change misconceptions, end prejudice

**"Islam"** cont. from page 1

Indeed, the membership of terrorist organizations makes up merely 0.01% of the 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide.

"It's kind of obvious that these groups don't represent all of Islam, because most of their targets are Muslim, which doesn't make sense if they're trying to represent Islam," Ayari said.

As Al-Khatani pointed out, terrorist activities occur predominantly in Muslim countries.

"If you don't follow their way of thought, then you're not Muslim," Al-Khatani said. "They have a separate belief, and if we don't believe in that, then we're not Muslim to them."

Yet because of its more foreign nature, Ayari said, Islamic extremism "makes for more interesting news, because since many people don't know about it, it's more scary."

"No one ever says that all Christians are members of the Westboro church; we don't look at Christians and say that they're all extremists and horrible people," Al-Khatani said. "No, because there are extremists of every religion. There are some unfortunate people who made [Islam] have a bad name. It's ridiculous that people have this idea that every single Muslim that they come into contact with is going to be some extremist baboon."

Just recently, three Muslim students were shot in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, by Craig Stephen Hicks in what the police referred to as "a parking dispute."

"The media said it was not a hate crime, that it was a parking dispute, but it was obviously shown that the victims were targeted specifically because they were Muslim," Al-Khatani said. "[But] the media barely covered Chapel Hill. The only reason why people knew about it was through Tumblr and Twitter."

Despite the lack of media coverage, the effects of the shooting rippled through the American Muslim community.

"After the shooting at Chapel Hill, I was not allowed to leave my house," senior Samira Islam-Mina said. "Usually, my dad will drop me off at the mall for me to window-shop by myself, but this time, he was like, 'No. You are not allowed to leave the house.' He was super freaked-out."

Just as concerning was the media's application, or, in this case, a lack thereof, of the word "terrorist."

"A person is only called a terrorist if they are Muslim. If they are of any other faith, [people] usually brush it off as that person being psychotic," Riaz said.

But the media is not the only applying this double standard:

"We got called terrorists in seventh and eighth grade. There was a guy who, every time I left lunch, would call me a terrorist," Islam-Mina said. "I've never talked to him in my life, but just because I have a hijab over my head, [he's] going to call me a terrorist without understanding my religion at all?"

The hijab, a prominent feature of Muslim culture, is a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women to emphasize character over appearance.

"I lost a lot of friends when I did begin to wear it; people just stopped talking to me," Islam-Mina said.

> *"I've never talked to him in my life, but just because I have a hijab over my head, [he's] going to call me a terrorist without understanding my religion at all?"*
> senior **Samira Islam-Mina**

Like Islam itself, the hijab creates a pre-established image for Muslim women.

"It's a personality. [People] thought I'd be a nice, calm and quiet person," Al-Khatani said. "Lena [Ayari] is the perfect hijab-personality, and I'm the perfect non-hijab personality—not nice, not calm, and definitely not quiet—even though I wear one."

For senior Azra Ravzi, wearing a hijab embodies a conscious choice to represent Islam and the Muslim community.

"I've never been forced to wear a hijab. This has always been my decision, my decision to say that I'm ready to bear the flag of my religion. Everything I do reflects upon my religion, which yes, it adds a bunch of responsibility, but it's also a huge honor," Ravzi said. "People look at me differently, but that can be a good thing and a bad thing. Yeah, it's more responsibility because everything you do can be generalized, but at the same time, it's awesome, because I get to show that not all Muslims are bad."

Although Western views often portray the hijab as a "symbol of oppression," Razvi, Al-Khatani and Islam-Mina strongly object.

"I say this all the time—I don't have to wear a hijab; I get to wear a hijab," Razvi said. "I can't brag on it enough. People think it's oppression. Not even close. It's so freeing."

Undeterred, all hope to fight these common misconceptions with what lies at the very root of these stereotypes—the basic teachings of Islam.

"Islam teaches us to be the best we can be, to be the best people we can be—the most kind, most caring—the one who helps others," Riaz said. "The best way to show people what Islam is is to act like a Muslim, and show people what Islam is through your character."

Islam itself is divided into two distinct branches: Sunni and Shi'a. While Riaz, Al-Khatani and Islam-Mina belong to the majority, Sunni Muslims, Razvi and seniors Alizain Ali and Ali Kassam are Shi'a Muslims.

"We are a branch of Shi'a Muslims that's very modern; we have changed with society. Rather than taking interpretations straight from the Quran, we have one descendant of Muhammad who interprets it for us, and he gives us spiritual guidance on what to do," Kassam said. "He understands the modern society and modern world right now, so for that reason, we're able to adapt to American society. You'll see a lot of difference between our [branch] of Shi'a and the majority of Muslims."

Shi'a comprise about 10% of all Muslims, and are primarily located in Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.

"Our spiritual leaders tell us to adapt. We've changed a lot— even our places of worship don't stand out, and they try to blend in with the infrastructure around it,"Ali said. "But I don't want to say, since we're such a small minority, that change is good. The Sunnis are still happy with their lifestyles because they live their lives well on their own; they don't need to change their lifestyles."

Nonetheless, even with their differences in ideology, Ali and Kassam note that they too focus on improving Islam's reputation.

"[Our religious center] want us to become ambassadors of Islam, to show that Islam is a religion of peace," senior Ali Kassam said. "On top of that, they teach us other religions, too, and how all the religions intertwine with one another, how they work with each other."

Thus, the key to alleviating conditions for all Muslim Americans, Kassam said, is "understanding and cooperation."

"You know, one generation ago, it was the civil rights movement; it's happening slowly, gradually, and I think our kids won't be facing the same prejudice that we faced," Kassam said. "Hopefully, it'll be our generation who will hopefully eradicate the prejudice and set our children in the right direction for the future."

And as for now?

"You are also blessed to be in such a place where you're welcome to express your religion, to be in a place where you have the right to practice your religion," Riaz said. "As a Muslim in America, I feel lucky to be somewhere where I can show people what Islam truly is. That feeling isn't always there, but [for] the majority it is, and you realize how lucky you are."

Compared to countries like Tunisia and France where wearing a hijab is banned, America "is a very diverse and open community," Ayari said.

"These hate crimes are awful, but in my experience, being a Muslim girl in America is the best place to be a Muslim girl," Razvi said. "I can play sports, I can be in leadership positions, I can do clubs and organizations—whatever I want."

## **Percentages** of the United States population who are...


*Findings from the Pew Research Center*