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Young U.S. Muslims Strive for Harmony

9/11 Spurred Action, Helped Define Beliefs

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Standing in the small, fluorescent-lighted room that served as George Washington University's Muslim prayer area, Amin Al-Sarraf pointed to the six-foot-high plastic partition dividing the space.

It had been a point of contention at the university's Muslim Students' Association. Some members thought the partition, common in mosques to separate men and women when they pray, was a necessary part of their religion; others disagreed, saying women had trouble hearing the imam.

"Some see it like the Great Wall of China in the middle of the room," Al-Sarraf explained, adding that there was a fear "freshmen will get a bad taste in their mouth -- like this is how the MSA's going to be."

Al-Sarraf didn't want to alienate anyone. In his post last year as president of the Islamic Alliance for Justice, a political group under the umbrella of the MSA, he'd heard of Muslim groups at other universities making students feel excluded for not dressing a certain way, for example. Perhaps, he mused aloud, his MSA could come to a compromise: Keep the partition, but make it shorter.

For Al-Sarraf, 22, a student of international relations who graduated in May, the partition quandary was part of a larger debate taking place among American Muslims, especially young ones: how to incorporate their religion into daily life. The question has become more pressing -- and more pressured -- since Sept. 11, 2001, linked Islam, in the eyes of many Americans, with acts of fanaticism and murder.

Immediately after the terrorist attacks, Muslims began to feel the heat. Women in *hijab* became targets of hostile remarks; mosques were sprayed with graffiti and vandalized. Some Muslim immigrants were required to register with the government, and families got unexpected knocks on the door from immigration and FBI officers.

In some communities, resentment swelled as Muslim men disappeared, deported to their home countries or swallowed into a law enforcement system many Muslims felt had convicted them of ill-defined crimes. The United States went to war, first in one Muslim country, then another.

To many Muslims, it seemed that the United States was going to battle against them. "These policies create the impression in the minds of many people . . . that to fight the war on terror you have to fight some kind of war on Islam," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Until Sept. 11, being Muslim in the United States had not necessarily meant taking a special stand or

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explaining the actions of others. But in a new social climate, Muslims had to decide, more concretely, what it meant to be both Muslim and American.

For two young Muslim men in the Washington area, the process of refining the balance between faith and country, set in motion by the attacks, has played out differently.

Al-Sarraf, raised in a multiethnic family that frequently discussed how Islam fit into mainstream America, was propelled into a leadership role aimed at integrating Muslims into broader society.

Basim Hawa, son of Palestinian immigrants, went from ignoring many tenets of his religion to thinking actively about what they meant to him and, ultimately, throwing off the trappings of American life that didn't fit with Islam.

'Ambassadors of Their Culture'

Al-Sarraf grew up the eldest of four children in leafy Pasadena, Calif., with an Iraqi father and a mother who is half Palestinian and half German American. His parents signed up the children for hockey and soccer and took them to deliver food to the homeless on Thanksgiving.

"We wanted our children to grow up feeling comfortable in their skin as Muslims and as Americans," said his mother, Amira Al-Sarraf.

At his secular private high school, Al-Sarraf started a Muslim club, which was popular, he said, because it gave out free pizza. He gave annual presentations during Ramadan, but few people focused on his religion.

Then, during senior year, terrorists struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. His principal asked him and his brother to give schoolwide talks about Islam, which their mother said "validated their role as ambassadors of their culture."

Al-Sarraf said Sept. 11 "gave me extra motivation. I think all Muslims felt extra pressure -- to be the token of what Islam really is, to defend Islam."

His light skin, cleanshaven face and green eyes make it hard to guess his background. But sitting in a Starbucks at the GWU student union, he spoke authoritatively of the challenges Muslims growing up in the United States have faced since 9/11.

"The natural trend of immigrant communities," he said, is that "the first generation comes, establishing itself. Then the next generation has a different set of issues, figuring out who they are and how they fit in."

The terrorist attacks accelerated that process. "There was this pressure on the Muslim community to grow up in a year, when it's a 20-year process."

Last year, when Al-Sarraf awoke to hear that four young Muslims had blown themselves up in the London subways and killed 52 other people, he felt chilled. The four were not unlike him and his friends: middle class, educated, raised in the West. And yet the bombers were so alienated from their environment that they had sought to destroy it.

Just as after Sept. 11, Al-Sarraf's impulse was to take action, feeling "that we need to address the issue before it gets as far here as it did in other places." Al-Sarraf did not see extreme isolationist Islamic groups

in the United States, but he felt it was up to his generation to take a stand.

"Who's going to be the ones to address it?" he asked. "And the realization was that . . . it's us."

After the bombings, he and 15 friends, mostly students of political and international affairs, sent out a news release to U.S. campuses, condemning the attack. The next month, they started an initiative to encourage young Muslim Americans to get involved politically, to develop a collective identity, to vote and to consider forming lobbying groups or running for office.

Longing for Change

For Basim Hawa, religion had been built in but not deeply felt.

He grew up in a house on the border of Arlington and Fairfax counties, the middle of five children. Every morning and evening, his father went to Dar al Hijrah, a mosque in Falls Church, to pray.

"He used to try to make us go when we were younger," recalled Hawa, a strapping 27-year-old with closely cropped black hair, a full beard and an easy smile. "We went to Saturday school to learn to study Koran in the Arabic language, and my dad would always try to make us speak it around the house. He would always make us pray, so that was something built into us from an early age."

Hawa prayed five times a day because he was supposed to. But he often postponed the prayers until nighttime and would rush through without concentrating. "I never had doubt of my religion," he said. "But it just wasn't always on my mind."

Other things were. At J.E.B. Stuart High School and in college at Virginia Tech, he said, he hung out with friends who "went out a lot, went out to clubs, dated, partied. My parents until today still do not know a lot of the things I did."

For years, he tried to excuse his behavior. "Because I prayed, because I fasted at Ramadan, I always used to think to myself that what I'm doing is not so bad."

But he was tormented by thoughts of the life he felt he should be leading. At night, he prayed to God to change him. "I would wake up and feel guilty. And as I went through life, I felt more guilty and more guilty and more guilty."

When the terrorists attacked, Hawa said, he didn't feel affected personally. He didn't have a beard, he said, and he didn't experience much backlash.

Then, a few weeks later, he traveled with his father to Jerusalem to visit relatives. While they were gone, government agents knocked at the family's door in Fairfax to ask his mother questions. Why had the father and son left the country? Where had they gone? What were they doing?

The visit jarred Hawa. He was as American as anyone, but now he was suspected of acting against national security. The agents didn't come back, but other Muslims he knew didn't get off so easily.

Hawa had attended Dar al-Hijrah, the same mosque as some of the men who were prosecuted as the "Virginia *jihad* network," although he said he didn't know them well. And he had listened to taped lectures by Ali al-Timimi, who was sentenced in 2005 to life in prison for inciting young Muslims to wage war

against the United States.

Hawa dismissed the prosecutors' argument that the men were dangerous, saying although he does not know all the facts, he does not think the evidence was sufficient to convict them.

"I think it's a misunderstanding of what 'jihad' means. I think people now associate it with wars, but there's the inner jihad, the struggle that people go through with work, their families, " he said.

In the year after Sept. 11, friends and co-workers began asking Hawa questions, such as "What does Islam say about the bombers?"

"The news was now 'Islam, Islam, Islam,' " he said. "It was on my mind a lot more often now because of the questions being asked." He said he believed the attacks were "100 percent" wrong, but he didn't know enough to answer the questions as well as he wanted to.

During Ramadan in November 2002, Hawa signed up with a local spiritual leader, Imam Mohamed Magid of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, for a trip to Mecca. He wanted to see whether he could embrace Islam more wholly.

The sheer scale of the experience awed Hawa. Walking in an ocean of fellow believers, he felt they were part of something greater than themselves -- or even their countries.

"You have 3 million people all in the same area who are all dressed in the same outfit. It's very peaceful, with people helping each other. Everybody's there for the same reason."

He came back changed.

"I never stepped back into a club; I never stepped back into a casino; I never touched alcohol; I never dated or approached a girl."

The next month, strolling through Tysons Corner mall on Christmas Eve, he ran into Tiffany Ballve, whom he'd known at J.E.B Stuart as an athlete who wore T-shirts and jeans. When he saw her at the mall, he was startled.

"I was like, 'Wow, you're wearing a scarf,' and she's like, 'Yeah, I became Muslim.' "

They married three months later.

Avoiding Isolation

Last year, after Al-Sarraf and his friends sent out the call for Muslims to get involved, Muslim groups at 15 universities promised to help spread the ideas of their initiative, the Muslim American Project.

"Many young Muslim Americans, particularly those who have been raised in primarily immigrant religious communities, struggle to reconcile the seemingly incompatible aspects of their identities," the message said. "At the core of the struggle lies the question, Can one be both Muslim and American? . . . Isolating ourselves by remaining within the safety nets of familiar groups, or allowing ourselves to become lost in the crowd will prevent us from establishing a thriving community in this nation."

Al-Sarraf said they were criticized on both ends -- by non-Muslims who didn't trust them and by Muslims who asked: "What are you doing? Why are you compromising your religion, talking to these people in Washington?"

U.S. Muslims had for many years avoided politics, Al-Sarraf said, pointing their children toward such fields as engineering or medicine. "They say going into politics is dangerous, you'll get corrupted, you'll lose your religion."

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued, he said, the idea that "hey, we're killing Muslims" troubled many students.

The communities were also debating whether paying taxes or voting supports a system that is "oppressing Muslims abroad," said Ahmed Younis, national director of the Washington-based Muslim Public Affairs Council and a friend of Al-Sarraf's.

But Younis said Al-Sarraf and his friends represent an evolution of that debate. "9/11 has changed the conversation," he said. Before, people thought they could choose political isolation. But post-9/11, "their political integration is a prerequisite for their ability to make a change in both domestic and foreign U.S. policy."

Integrating With Mainstream Culture

Early on a Friday morning, the sky still dark, a few cars filed into the ADAMS Center's parking lot. Hawa, in a white T-shirt and red sweats, was there for 5:15 prayers, which he attends most days before going to his job as a software company consultant.

Imam Magid led the prayers and then taught a religious class. Hawa had suggested the topic: the life of the prophet Muhammad.

Sitting on the carpet in a small circle of men, wearing a beige robe and knitted cap, Magid put the prophet's view into a 21st-century context.

"No one will enter paradise if his or her neighbors will not feel safe from them," said Magid, his lively cadence accented by his native Arabic. "My neighbor, whether Muslim or not Muslim, must feel I am not doing harm to him, whether by having loud music, or having a fight over a parking space or having water sitting around breeding mosquitoes."

Sitting cross-legged beside his mentor, Hawa took notes.

Afterward, Magid said that he worries when young people go to extremes, staying in the mosque all day and calling movies or sports or social activities *haram*, forbidden. To him, these are part of a balanced spiritual life.

"All the extremism now in Britain, all this is because people have the wrong idea of what religion is. I tell young people, 'You have three choices in America -- isolate yourself; assimilate and do everything in popular culture that you're going to do; or integrate' -- and that's what we're advising people to do."

Magid does not sanction all mainstream American activities -- adult co-ed swimming and shopkeepers selling alcohol are not all right with him. But he is troubled by those who preach against a long list of

American activities, from celebrating Thanksgiving to shaking hands with non-Muslims.

Hawa is constantly making decisions on when to participate and when to excuse himself. He and Ballve don't celebrate birthdays, but they play soccer and go to her parents' house for Thanksgiving.

"Everybody has their own little ways," he said, sitting with his wife and 7-month-old son, Hamza, in their Sterling apartment. "For example, if a female put out her hand to shake it, then I would, but maybe someone else I know who celebrates birthdays wouldn't shake a woman's hand. These are forms of jihad -- struggles we go through."

Hawa votes but has stayed away from public life. His friends send him letters on Muslim causes to forward to elected officials, but he sheepishly admits he's never sent one.

"I don't agree with all the decisions that our government makes. But the reason why I'm here is I do love the country. And it's a land of opportunity. And the life here is much easier than life overseas. I do consider myself an American Muslim."

'Humanizing One Another'

Over the winter holidays, Al-Sarraf visited London and was struck by how second-generation Muslims viewed themselves as more tied to their parents' native countries than to England.

"I didn't get the sense of the British identity being an important aspect," he said.

The isolation among European Muslim communities resurfaced last month when British Muslims were arrested for planning to blow up transatlantic flights. Some experts have said that isolation, and living in tight enclaves, has made young Muslims in Europe more likely to be drawn into such plots.

The ADAMS Center and GWU's Muslim Student Association try to combat that by holding events with Jewish and Christian groups. The MSA has held Eid banquets with campus Jewish organizations and sponsored a dialogue between Muslim and Jewish students.

Al-Sarraf called the meetings "a way of humanizing one another."

He has taken his mission into his professional life. This summer, he worked at the State Department's Israel and Palestinian Affairs Office. This semester, he entered Whittier Law School in Costa Mesa, Calif.

GWU's MSA never did resolve the question of the partition. The debate continues each year, as new people come and go.

Tomorrow: Attacks challenge Salafi Muslims.

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