

# **The Muslim Presence in America**

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This article looks at the community of Muslims in America from a demographic, historical, organizational and socio-economic point of view and concludes with a discussion on the socio-economic status of the Muslims residing in America.

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# The Muslim Presence in America

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## Abstract

Although Muslims began migrating to America in large numbers only in the nineteenth and particularly, the twentieth centuries, there are sources suggesting that the Muslim presence on the continent even predates Columbus' famous voyage to the "New World." This article looks at the community of Muslims in America from a demographic, historical, organizational and socio-economic point of view. The author traces the different migration patterns of the Muslims to America as well as their ethnic composition. He surveys some of the important Islamic organizations and their mandates. He touches on the Shi'a presence as well as the African American communities in the United States. The article concludes with a discussion on the socio-economic status of the Muslims residing in America.

**Keywords:** Muslims in America, Muslim immigration to the United States, African American Muslims, Shi'a Muslims in America, Islamic organizations in America, Socio-economic status of Muslims in America.

## Statistical Survey

In the early 1900's, Western sociologists and political analysts never reckoned that within a century, Islam would emerge as a formidable force in international politics. For this reason, very few studies on

the political, economic, cultural and regional influences affecting the Muslim world were conducted. In North America, and, in the United States, Muslims were always marginalized, and their activities came under scrutiny. However, during the past three decades, and particularly in the aftermath of the glorious victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, previously held assumptions and theories became invalidated and were replaced with newer analyses and interpretations about the status of the Muslim world and the religion of Islam.

Since religion and beliefs are not accounted for in the U.S. National census—a census conducted once every decade—it is difficult to ascertain the precise population of Muslims in America using these records. Nevertheless, they do identify the ethnic origins of its citizens as well as the former nationalities of its immigrants, and using this data, researches have been able to estimate the number of Muslims in America.

Based on U.S. administration statistics, the population of immigrants from Islamic countries to the United States from its earliest records till 1965 has been relatively low when compared to the number of immigrants from non-Islamic countries. In the period between 1820 and 1965, only 517,367 citizens immigrated from areas which had sizeable Muslim populations, including the Balkans, the former Ottoman Empire (present day Turkey) and the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). However, from 1966 to 1980, the number of immigrants from Islamic countries increased significantly to 865,472. During the 1980's, the number of immigrants from the Muslim world to the United States reached 921,100, and between 1990 and 1997, it increased to 997,000.

Of course, not all of these immigrants were Muslims. In fact, between 1820 and 1960, Muslims composed only thirty percent of the Indian immigrants who migrated to the United States. Also, between 1980 and 1990, only one third of the immigrants from Lebanon were Muslims. Similarly, many Iranian migrants to the United States, particularly in the period 1980–1990, were Jews, Christians, and members of other non-Islamic ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, when one looks at the total number of people emigrating from Muslim countries to the United States from the early nineteenth century till the present, most them are Muslims. Based on the official U.S. statistics from the year 1820 to 1997, this amounts to 3.3 million immigrants—a mere five percent of the sixty-four million immigrants to America during the same period. Accounting for birth and conversion, the number of Muslims in America today is estimated to be between six and nine million.

The largest number of immigrants to the United States has been from the Arab countries and is followed by (in descending order): Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Tunisia, North Africa and Europe (particularly from the Balkan countries including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the former Yugoslavia republics). Immigrants from other parts of Africa and Asia, such as the Central Asian republics, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Africa, rank next respectively. There has been a significant number of Afghani immigrants to the United States—30,000 between 1980 and 1990, and 13,600 during the following decade.

## History of Muslims in America

Muslims not only accompanied and assisted the Italian–Spanish sailor, Christopher Columbus, during his epic voyage to the American continent in 1492, they also accompanied other Europeans who crossed the Atlantic and set foot on what became known as the “New World”. In fact, Columbus’ “historic discovery” took place precisely a few years after the downfall of the last Islamic rule in the Spanish Peninsula, and there is an authentic hypothesis suggesting that Muslims residing in the Iberian peninsula two centuries prior to Columbus’ voyage had already dispatched sailors to that part of the world and had even established friendly ties with the original inhabitants in the land (later named “Red Indians” by the Europeans). In 1474, by sowing internal discord among the Muslim rulers in Southern Europe, Isabella of Seville, and Ferdinand of Aragón, managed to establish their monarchy and began the eventual expulsion of the Muslims from the peninsula. In 1492, the same year that Columbus began his voyage towards the West, the last Muslim fortress of resistance in Granada fell.

Since the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain and Portugal, the role of European Muslims in the voyages to the American continent was hardly mentioned in Western literature. Yet the accumulated knowledge worked on and refined by Muslim scientists during the peak of their civilization—especially in the fields of geography, history, astronomy and mathematics, as well as their broad contribution to the naval sciences—was all transferred to the Christian West and inherited by the Spanish and Portuguese explorers.

The “discovery” of America by the Europeans took place simultaneously with two other historic events in the Islamic World: 1) the invasion of the Mongols and 2) the emergence of the Ottoman Empire. The coming to power of the Mongols in East Asia was a terrible catastrophe for the Islamic governments of the Iranian Plateau, the Arab countries and Central Asia. As for the emergence of the Turkish Muslims and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, the focus within the Muslim world was shifted away from Western Europe towards the eastern part of the Mediterranean. With the conquest of Constantinople and the defeat of the Byzantine Empire, Islamic influence was localized around Eastern Europe.

While the Ottoman Empire was politically and militarily occupied with Eastern Europe on one side and the Safavid dynasty in Iran on the other, Western imperial powers, particularly Spain, France and England, were engaged in occupying and colonizing different parts of the American continent. With the weakening of the Islamic empire over the ensuing centuries, not only in Western Europe, but also on the Indian subcontinent and in Africa, the control of the high seas fell to the Western world, and to Spain, Portugal, England, France and the Netherlands.

In the nineteenth century, contact between the Muslims—and more broadly speaking, the Islamic World—and the American continent was quite limited though still existent. The actual migration as well as occasional visits of the Muslims from around the globe to America, took place in various phases.

In the nineteenth century, visits and immigration by the Muslims took place based on invitations and

employment opportunities available for top experts of the Islamic world. For instance, in 1856, the U.S. army employed a Muslim man by the name of Haji 'Ali to breed camels for the army in Arizona and California. 'Ali was thus invited to America, where he later became a U.S. citizen and permanent resident.

The first groups of immigrants from Islamic countries entered the United States after the American Civil War from 1875 till about 1912 before the outbreak of World War I. The majority of them were Christians from Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon who had studied at missionary schools in the Middle East and had migrated to America mainly due to economic and religious reasons. Yet there were also Muslims among them, not only from the mainstream Sunni and Shia branches, but also from the 'Alawi community in Syria as well as the Druze in Lebanon.

The second wave of migrations from the Islamic world to America took place after the end of World War I and concurred with the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. Due to restrictions in numbers imposed by U.S. Immigration laws—which favored immigrants primarily from European countries—the population of Muslims entering America remained small in that period.

The third wave of migrations began in the 1930's. According to the new U.S. immigration laws, Muslims residing in the United State were permitted to sponsor their family members and relatives to become permanent residents. The fourth wave, during which a large and significant number of Muslims, particularly from the Middle East, immigrated to America began at the end of World War II and continued till the 1960's. The majority of them were merchants, university students, tradesmen and technicians in various fields, and their reasons for immigrating varied from economic to socio-cultural to academic.

With new amendments in U.S. immigration laws in 1965, race and nationality lost their predominance as criteria in the immigration selection process; instead what was considered was the country's need for different technical skills and managerial expertise, as well as its economic and developmental requirements. Such amendments provided an opportunity for skilled Muslims around the world to immigrate to the United States.

This led to the fifth and final phase of Muslim immigration to America, beginning in the mid 1960's until the present, where the greatest wave of Muslims from the Islamic world migrated to the United States, particularly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, the Arab countries, Palestine, Turkey and parts of North Africa. It was not only the economic opportunities available in America that encouraged many Muslims to move, but also the internal developments within the Muslim world itself. The wars between the Arab countries and Israel in 1967 and 1973, the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s, and the occupation of various Islamic countries by European powers, such as the occupation of Afghanistan by the Red Army of the former Soviet Union, played a major role in accelerating the trend of Muslims migrating to America.

More recently, other world events have had an impact on Muslim migration patterns including Israel's

invasions of Lebanon and Palestine and its occupation of those two countries, the two recent wars in Iraq, the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the sudden independence of the former Soviet Republics from the hegemony of Kremlin, and the political developments in Africa, particularly in Morocco. For instance, in the mid 1970's, and before the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the number of Iranians that lived in America for various reasons was no more than 70,000 out of which over 50,000 were university students. During the three decades that has passed since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the number of Iranians living in the United States has reached someone million, only a small fraction of which are Iranian Jews.

Other factors, including the rapid growth of tele-communication and transportation means as well as the growing job market in the academic and university sectors have also contributed to the large numbers of Muslims moving to America, despite the negative aftermath of the tragic events of 9-11.

## **The Shi'a Presence in America**

It is estimated that twenty percent of the Muslim population of America belong to the Shi'a *Ithna-Asheri* school of thought. The majority of these are Iranians, whose numbers are estimated at one million. Others are from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Syria, while a small fraction are from other Islamic countries.

The population of Shi'as in America drastically increased between 1950 and 1970 due to the large numbers of university students from Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq. However, it was only after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran that their presence as a separate entity within the folds of Islam was noted. Of course, the success of the Islamic Revolution also created an awakening within the Muslim world and played an important role in furthering the Islamic revival movement in other parts of the world. During this period, the Shi'as in America were politically active and groups such as the Association of Muslim Students, headed largely by Iranian immigrants, played a very important role in mobilizing the Muslims and in enlightening the U.S. public during the course of the Islamic Revolution.

## **Islam within the Afro-American Communities**

The history of Muslim Africans in America dates back to the early seventeenth century, when Africans would be forcibly uprooted from their homeland and shipped to the American colonies in what became known as the "Atlantic Slave Trade." Many of them were originally Muslims but were forced to hide their faith or convert to Christianity, adopting a new name in the process. Alex Haley, in his famous novel *Roots*, traces the story of an African Muslim slave named Kunta Kinte and his forced relocation from Gambia to America. The strenuous and heart-rending journeys of other Muslim slaves, such as Muhammad Yeylani, are documented and preserved in various libraries including the Central Library of Georgia State University. Due to their conversions and the Christianization of their names, their Islamic heritage is often forgotten.

It is only in the early twentieth century that Islam as a social phenomenon among the Afro-American population entered the public arena when it was coupled with ideas of “Black nationalism” and the civil-rights movement in America. This was, perhaps, first publicized by Wallace Fard Muhammad in 1930 who established an organization for Afro-American Muslims in Detroit, Michigan called ‘the Nation of Islam’ (NOI). From 1935 to 1975, the NOI was led by Elijah Muhammad who was responsible for turning it into a national organization with 75 different centers across the country. Although initially part of the movement, Malcolm X (an initial chosen by him to refer to the fact that most Afro-Americans were unaware of their own heritage) later separated himself from NOI after a trip to Saudi Arabia to perform the *hajj* where he realized that the “Black separatist” vision and theology of the Nation of Islam was quite different from that of mainstream Sunni Islam. Instead, he formed the Afro-American Unity Organization but was assassinated soon after in 1965.

As for the NOI, it continued until Elijah Muhammad’s own death in 1975, whereupon his son, Warith Deen Muhammad, attempted to steer it away from his father’s theology and black separatist views and renamed the organization ‘Muslim American Society’. In 1978, Louis Farrakhan revived a reconstituted Nation of Islam based on the original theology of Wallace Fard Muhammad and his own mentor, Elijah Muhammad and has been its leader since. Due to his views and some of his comments about various groups, Farrakhan has become a controversial figure in the media. Nevertheless, he has associated himself with other prominent African American leaders and was responsible for organizing the Million Man March in 1995 as well as the Million More Movement in 2005, in which he was able to mobilize large numbers of Afro-Americans. He has been a critic of American society, its foreign policy and its blind support of the Zionist Israeli regime. In fact, his harsh stance against Israel has often put him at odds with the Zionist lobby in the United States.

The Nation of Islam has become highly publicized through the media, a fact which has given rise to the popular assumption that most African Americans are members of the Nation of Islam. However, estimates suggest that out of the 2.5 million African American Muslims living in the United States, only between 30,000 and 70,000 belong to the Nation of Islam. Most of the Afro-American communities belong to one of the mainstream Sunni schools of thought, while a portion of them to the mainstream Shi’a school.

In recent decades, the influence of Islam among the Afro-American community has been far more intense than the influence of any other religion and faith. A study conducted in 2005 suggests that of the 20,000 non-Muslim Americans who become interested in Islam, 63% are of African heritage while 27% are of Caucasian descent. The Islamic identity of many African Americans is easily identified by their names, and today one can find many a prominent figure in sports, entertainment, politics and other spheres who are Muslims of African heritage.

## Muslim Organizations in America

The political, social, cultural, vocational and economic organizations and administrative bodies of Muslim Americans can be broadly categorized into two types. The first type includes organizations that are meant to satisfy the needs of a particular ethnic group of Muslims and are often funded and subsidized by Islamic governments or other foreign institutions. An example is the Arab Society Center for Economic and Social Services. Within this category one can also mention the local organizations that cater to a specific schools of thought within Islam, such as the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, *Hanbali*, *Shi'a Ithna-'Ashari*, as well as all other smaller Islamic sects, such as the *Isma'ili* and the *Ahmadiyyah*, each of which have their own particular centers and engage in their own socio-cultural activities.

The first mosques in the United States were built during the first two decades of the twentieth century and include the one built by Albanian Muslims in Minnesota in 1915. As the population of Muslims grew in the United States, so too did the number of mosques, such that by the early twenty-first century, more than 1,200 mosques have been erected in the various U.S. cities. The number of part-time and full-time primary and high schools in which the Qur'an is taught, is increasing, and today there are over 1,000 such academic centers throughout the United States. In addition to mosques and schools, there are more than several hundred active Islamic charity funds and endowment foundations that play important roles in offering social, health, family and academic services to the Muslims in America.

The second type of administrative bodies include organizations that are more ethnically inclusive yet have a specific mandate or goal that is common to all Muslims regardless of their cultural background. The Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is an example of this. A feature of the Muslim experience in America is that they are often forced to interact with Muslims of other ethnicities. This often leads to a sense of cooperation and mutual understanding, as well as a shared notion of being Muslim in a largely non-Muslim environment.

The Muslim Ring of North America is another Islamic association that was founded by a group of South Asian Muslims during the 1970's and has had some social activities in recent years. One of their periodicals, the *International Message*, is distributed throughout the United States and Canada, and it aims to propagate the Islamic identity of American Muslims, to facilitate the achievement of Islamic ideals, and to debate the issues of mutual concern for Muslims internationally. Similarly, the U.S. Muslims' Society, which was initially established by Arab students and graduates of American universities, has launched broad-scale activities in recent decades including their publication, the *U.S. Muslims' Magazine*.

The Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) was established in 1994 and its main goal and major activities are focused on broadening the level of public awareness about the realities of Muslims in America. They are also involved in highlighting the rights of Muslims in the United States as well as advocating and seeking justice on behalf of Muslims who have been discriminated against in one form or

another.

Other Islamic organizations, working parallel with CAIR, include the Council for General Islamic Affairs and the Union of U.S. Muslims, whose activities attempt to promote Islamic solidarity and to improve public awareness regarding the Muslims in America. They also encourage Muslims to take part in public and regional elections and to participate and cooperate in the political, social and cultural spheres of America.

In terms of academic activities, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, established a few decades ago by the Palestinian Isma'il al-Faruqi in Washington D.C., is an example of the scientific-cultural activities pursued by Muslims in the United States. The institute has, so far, published numerous works on Islamic Culture, Islamic History and Muslim Society in America. Today, one of the objectives of the institute is to present an Islamic version of the social sciences.

Another active Islamic organization in the United States is the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) which initially evolved from the Association of Muslim Students. Its branches include the Islamic Association of Scientists and Engineers, the Islamic Association of Medical Doctors and Physicians, and the Islamic Association of Social Scientists. One of the major activities of ISNA is sponsoring an annual conference, which is attended by some 30,000 Muslims.

## **Socio-Economic Condition of American Muslims**

Comparative studies conducted on social and economic aspects of the Muslim community in America and that of other minorities shows that the average level of a Muslim's academic studies is 14 years, which is higher than the level of academic studies of other minorities. In general, the average Muslim in the United States will complete at least two years of university.

The income level of a Muslim family in the United States is higher than the average income of a Spanish- or Caucasian- American family. Interestingly, the average annual income level of Iranians in the United States is over \$65,000 which is higher compared to other ethnic communities in the United States. The level of academic studies, income and employment among the Muslim communities is, on the whole, higher than comparative indexes of other immigrant minorities living in America. It should be noted that these statistics exclude the status of the U.S. Jewish society whose members immigrated to America long ago.

The statistics also show that the income, property ownership and academic level of the Muslims have been increasing in recent years. For instance, in 1995, the average income level of a Muslim residing in the United States was \$51,966; today this amount has increased to \$55,958. An average of 5.59% of Muslims residing in the United States today own houses, an increase of a full percent from a decade ago. It is also noteworthy that Muslims reside in districts and neighborhoods where the academic level is considered high.

In this respect, the situation of Iranian Muslims residing in America is noteworthy for they seem to fare better than other ethnic Muslim communities in the U.S. The average income level of the residents of districts where the Iranians reside is well over \$70,000. Moreover, 63% of American Iranians are homeowners and 46% of them are university graduates. There are no precise and reliable statistics about the percentage of Iranians that have migrated to America or those that have become U.S. residents. For instance, U.S. Census records of 2000 estimated the population of Iranians at 370,000. However, this figure is much lower than a comparative statistic published in the same year by other national organizations, which estimated the population of Iranians residing in the United States to be between 800,000 and 1,100,000. A large percent of Iranians – between 300,000 and 600,000 – live in Southern California. In 2006, the Islamic Republic of Iran's Interests Section had some 400,000 dossiers on the status of the Iranian families living in the United States, and according to these reports, the population of the Iranians residing in the United States is over one million strong. The vast majority of the Iranian Muslims belong to the *Shi'a Ithna-'Ashari* school.

Despite the pressure imposed against Muslim immigrants residing in the United States, particularly after the 9–11 terrorist attacks, the political activities of Muslims in the country have increased noticeably in the past four years. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Zogby Institute, a vast majority of Muslims believe the current situation provides the best opportunity for spreading awareness about Islam in the United States. As for the “Fight against Terror” campaign, the same opinion polls show that many Muslims in the country (at least thirty–three percent) believe that the United States is leading a campaign against the Islamic world and not just terrorism. Another conclusion from the Zogby polls is that there is a strong tendency among Muslims to strive towards Islamic unity, and the actual establishment of broader Islamic political, social and cultural organizations seems to attest to the veracity of these conclusions.

Various other opinion polls, conducted by the Zogby Institute in recent years, show that as many as three–fourths of Muslims in America participate in philanthropic activities, pay alms, and allocate a certain amount of their monthly and annual incomes to support charity funds. Forty–five percent of American Muslims have stated that they are voluntarily contributing to the social development affairs of Muslims. Based on the same polls, as many as ninety–five percent of American Muslim citizens support the U.S. Public Welfare Plan, which includes a national health project for all American citizens. Of course, the United States is the only major industrialized country in which there is no national public health service in effect for all its citizens. Ninety–five percent of American Muslims also believe that all types of racial discrimination in America must be eliminated while fifty–nine percent agree that environmental protection laws and directives must be ratified. Almost all–American Muslims believe the government should support the deprived and poor social classes.

In terms of mosque attendance, the polls are not as encouraging. Twenty–nine percent of American Muslims take part in Friday Prayers, congregate in mosques and visit the Islamic centers in their neighborhoods. Only twenty–five percent of them participate in congregations at mosques and Islamic

centers more than once a week.

Construction of mosques and Islamic centers, however, is on the rise. On August 1, 2005, the *Washington Post* published a cover story on Islamic centers in Virginia, Maryland. According to it, the number of large mosques in that state – mosques with a construction budget of at least two million dollars – has increased over the years. Over 300,000 Muslims live in the suburbs of Washington, where most of the mosques are large enough to accommodate a congregation of a thousand Muslims at a time. In the United States, just as in Europe, not only is the population of Muslims increasing, rather, the inclination of the followers of other religions to convert to Islam is much greater than their inclination to accept any other religious or non-religious doctrines.

Presently, Muslims make up 5% of the population of Europe, and according to a report published in the July 15th issue of the *Financial Times*, the population of Muslims in Europe would double within two decades. According to the same report, 5% of the population of Germany, 3% of the population of Denmark, 4% of the population of Sweden, 5.5% of the population of the Netherlands, over 8% of the population of France and 5% of the population of Switzerland are Muslims. Other European countries, too, have Muslim minorities, in addition to 50% of the population of Bosnia–Herzegovina and a vast majority of the Albanians that are Muslims.

“Towards new frontiers” was a motto chanted by the United States in their endeavor to expand their geographical, political, cultural and economic hegemony throughout the world. Today it is the Muslims who, through immigration, are conquering new frontiers and spreading the influence of Islam outside of the Muslim world. Very few American intellectuals would have contemplated a few decades ago that America would become an appropriate cradle for nurturing Islamic activities and culture. The various developments on the international scene, the rapid growth of information technology, transportation and telecommunications, the economic and political developments within the Islamic world, and the ever-increasing awareness of Islam have come together to place American Muslims at a historic crossroad.

The significant growth of the Muslim population in the United States provides a good opportunity for the Islamic community there to think twice about the challenges which they are grappling with in the contemporary world and about the role that Islam can play inside the largest military and economic power of the world.

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