

ISLAM

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A study showed negative images of Islam after 9/11, which slowly improved over the years, Kamel said. However, U.S. attitudes toward Muslims have turned increasingly hostile, she said.

Those angry feelings have been fueled by the planned construction of an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York City and a Florida minister's plans to burn copies of the Koran. A recent Washington Post poll showed 49 percent expressed an unfavorable view of Islam.

"The recent controversies and Islamophobia are as high as they have been in a very long time," Kamel said.

As a result, Muslims are concerned about their children's safety and their own workplace discrimination, she said.

"This is not the America we have known," she said. "Most (Muslims) came here to escape religious persecution and political persecution. They enjoy many freedoms in this country."

The media continue to promote anti-Muslim biases and do not reflect mainstream Muslims, Mahdi said. The media tend to blame Islam for terrorism and don't present the positive dialogue

or actions of Muslims, she said. "9/11 was perpetuated by a group of Muslims who do not (reflect) all of us," she said, noting that educated Muslims reject radicalism.

As far as burning the Koran, Mahdi said any religious group would be offended if its sacred texts were desecrated.

The recent criticisms of Muslims have brought support from other faiths, Kamel said.

"We have Baptists, Catholics and Jews who spoke out against the Florida minister who was threatening to burn the Koran," she said. "This bigotry does not represent the Christian and Jewish faiths. The Florida minister doesn't represent the other Christian leaders."

El Idrissi said he supports First Amendment rights in the Florida case. However, the media have magnified the incident and given it new life, he said.

"The minister in Florida, let him burn his Koran, but don't create a platform for him," he said.

In response to an audience question, El Idrissi explained major tenets of the Islamic faith which have led to its rapid growth.

"It's clear you are not to attack. It's clear you are not to kill old people and children," he said. "You are not to force into submission to Islam. You incorporate cultures."

Islam is not the religion of the

sword, and most Muslims do not call for the enforcement of Sharia — or Islamic — law on Western nations, he said.

Muslims have a long history in the United States, Kamel said.

"Twenty percent of the slaves brought from Africa were Muslim. We have third-, fourth- and fifth-generation Muslims living in this country," she said. "When people yell to Muslims, 'Go back to your country!', which country are you talking about?"

Many people do not understand the difference between religion and nationality, Kamel said.

"Not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslims. There are Arabs who are Christian or Jew," she said. "The largest number of Muslims is in Indonesia. The Latino Hispanic Muslims are one of the largest growing groups of converts. Muslims speak all languages and come in different colors."

The current anti-Islam sentiments may harm young Muslims, Kamel said.

"My children were born here (in the United States), and they are proud of being Muslim-Americans. I don't want them ashamed of their religion," she said. "Right now, our young people believe they have to choose between their American identity and their Islamic identity. They

shouldn't have to choose between them. They should be both."

Kamel sees a growing exclusion of Muslims from American society, treating them as outsiders in their own nation.

"If it's an 'us versus them' concept, then we would be nothing but Native Americans," she said. "We would all be guests in this country."

An audience member asked about the media portrayal of Islam's treatment of women.

"The (media's) idea is that all women are treated bad (under Islam)," Mahdi said. "But in the Koran, women have rights."

Muslim women balance their professional and family lives, Mahdi said. However, countries have different policies which may restrict a woman's role, she said.

El Idrissi agreed, noting the Koran texts are clear but there are differences in cultures and traditions. Even within his own family, El Idrissi said he and his parents show different levels of observing Islam.

An audience member asked why a mosque near the Pentagon has not created the public furor seen with the plans to build an Islamic center near Ground Zero.

Those planning to build the New York City center have

received all licenses and are following the law, Kamel said.

"It's mainly politics and a lot of negative publicity," she said. "They put out in the media that it's a mosque, but it's an Islamic center for dialogue. There is a room where Muslims can pray five times a day."

The controversy surrounding the NYC center grows every day, fueling anti-Muslim sentiment, Kamel said.

"If you don't (build the center), that's sending a bad message to the extremists," she said. "But after all this anger, who knows?"

An audience member asked what Islam thinks of the West.

While opinions may vary depending on the individual's social class and education, Muslims around the world generally hold a high opinion of the West, particularly the United States, Mahdi said.

"They really appreciate the freedom and way of life (in America). They want to use (those freedoms) to express their opinion and raise their children," Mahdi said. "They immigrate here because they like this way of life."

Kamel agreed, noting the fascination with American culture despite disagreeing with some aspects such as the high divorce rate.

"Many (Muslims) criticize the social issues, but I haven't met one person who doesn't want to go to America," she said. "It's where you go to make your dream come true. The dream is still alive, it's just not as vibrant as 10 years ago."

Because of their favorable view of the United States, Muslims find it hurtful when they are criticized by Americans, Kamel said. Muslims are also wary of two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both Islamic nations, she said.

"They don't want to see neighboring countries bombed. They wonder, are we next?" she said.

Muslims are also wary of U.S. support of Israel, particularly if it harms other Muslims and Islamic nations, she said.

Kamel urged audience members to join the fight against anti-Muslim bigotry.

"We need to stand in solidarity when any group is attacked," she said. "We then end up with dignity and mutual respect for other human beings."

Despite the current rise of anti-Islamic feelings, Kamel said she sees hope through dialogue such as that found at Wednesday's USD forum.

"It's a very challenging time, but it's also a very promising time," she said.

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