

## Muslim America

# Islamic, yet integrated

### Why Muslims fare better in America than in Europe

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THE State Department estimates that up to 100 American jihadists are fighting in Iraq and Syria. A video appearing to show a second American journalist being beheaded by the Islamic State is circulating. You might think this would be a difficult time to hold the annual conference of America's largest Muslim organisation.



Yet the Islamic Society of North America's gathering, which took place in Detroit over the Labour Day weekend, served as a reminder of how well America is assimilating a religious minority that has often struggled to feel at home in Europe. The conference hall was filled with Muslims of different races wearing clothes that identified them with different traditions. The Islamic Boy Scouts had a stand, as did a Muslim liberal-arts college from California. People discussed how to erect mosques without infringing America's arcane building regulations, or swapped business cards in the food court. The star turn was a Southern Baptist, Jimmy Carter (whose grandson is in the news, too: see page 42). The only overt hostility to Israel came from two Hasidic Jews in fur *shtreimel* hats, who had come from Brooklyn to announce their solidarity with the people of Gaza.

America's Muslims differ from Europe's in both quantity and origin. The census does not ask about faith, but estimates put the number of Muslims in the country at around 1% of the population, compared with 4.5% in Britain and 5% in Germany. Moreover, American Islam is not dominated by a single sect or ethnicity. When the Pew Research Centre last tried to count, in 2011, it found Muslims from 77 countries in America. Most western European countries, by contrast, have one or two dominant groups—Algerians in France, Moroccans and Turks in Holland. This matters because the jumble of groups in America makes it harder for Muslim immigrants and their descendants to lead a life apart. Different traditions get squashed together. When building mosques, says Chris McCoy, a Kentucky native who is a prolific

architect of Islamic buildings, “the question is usually not whether we should have an Indian- or a Saudi-style dome but, can we afford a dome?” Mixing breeds tolerance: Pew found that most American Muslims think that their faith is open to multiple interpretations, making them the Episcopalians of the Islamic world.

America’s Muslims are better off than their European co-religionists. They are almost as likely as other Americans to report a household income of \$100,000 or more. The same cannot be said of the Pakistanis who came to work in the now-defunct textile mills of northern England or the Turks who became guest workers in West Germany. Many American Muslims arrived in the 1970s to complete their higher education and ended up staying. Muzammil Siddiqi, chairman of the Fiqh Council of North America, which issues fatwas, or religious opinions, to guide the behaviour of the country’s Muslims, is typical: he was born in India and holds a Harvard PhD in comparative religion.

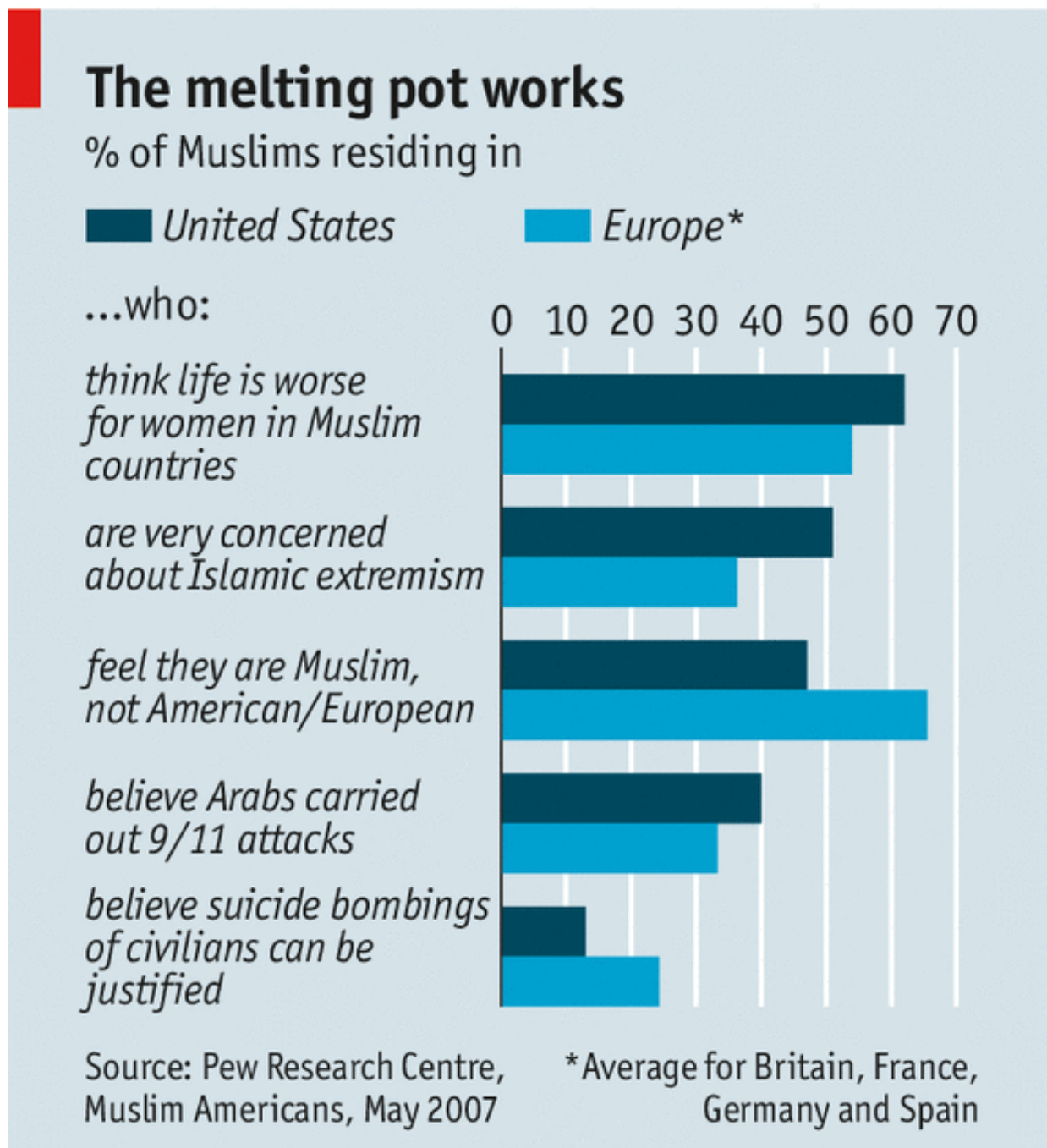
There is a stark contrast between this group and some of the more recent immigrants from Somalia, who have fewer qualifications and lower wages (as do African-American Muslims, who make up about an eighth of the total). This divide, if anything, makes America’s Muslims look more like the nation as a whole.

On various measures of integration, Muslims score fairly well (see chart). A Pew study from 2011 found that 15% of Muslims who are married or living with someone have a spouse of a different faith. This may sound low, but it is higher than the intermarriage rate for American Jews at a comparable moment in their history, and above that of modern Mormons. According to the Pentagon, there were 3,600 Muslims on active duty in the armed forces in January 2012, the most recent date for which numbers are available. This reflects a plan to recruit Muslims to fight in Islamic countries where an ability to speak Arabic or Pashto is helpful.

Alas, one or two American Muslims fight for the other side. In 2009 Nidal Hasan, a US army psychiatrist, shot and killed 13 people on a military base in Texas. He was encouraged by Anwar al-Awlaki, an American propagandist for al-Qaeda, who was himself killed in a drone strike in Yemen in 2011. The State Department says that the government has increased the scrutiny of travel plans made by people who have expressed sympathy with foreign Islamists, and will monitor Muslims returning from Iraq and Syria.

But this is hard. Douglas McCain, a 33-year-old African-American who converted to Islam in 2004 and was killed in August while fighting in Syria, travelled to the war zone via Turkey—an unremarkable place to go on holiday. Moner Abusalha, who drove a truck bomb into a restaurant in Syria in May, went to Jordan, returned to Florida and then set off on his suicide mission. In both cases relatives and friends were baffled by what the two men did. Nor is it clear that there were grounds for preventing either from travelling abroad.

A few  
bad



apples

For the past dozen years the FBI and other agencies have been watching mosques in the hope of spotting would-be terrorists early. This has yielded little, although the FBI did reveal one alarming conspiracy in 2009, when four men were convicted of planning to shoot down planes with missiles and burn synagogues in New York. Not many American Muslims want to become terrorists. And as the deaths of Mr McCain and Mr Abusalha suggest, there is no map for the journey from basketball-loving teen to violent extremist.

If the September 11th attacks permanently altered America's view of Islam, they also changed Islam in America. Peter Skerry of Boston College says that a few decades ago it was common for

religious leaders to agonise over whether it was possible to be a good Muslim and live in America. That argument disappeared almost overnight, as did the question of whether it was appropriate for American Muslims to vote. At the conference in Detroit, speakers made frequent approving references to the protection afforded to the free exercise of religion by the constitution. Mr McCoy, the architect, regretted that his elderly clients often wanted to stick a minaret on their mosques to make them look like something from back home. He longed, he said, for American Islam to create distinctive architectural forms of its own. In this, style lags substance. When it comes to their faith, America's Muslims have already made something new.

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