American Muslim perception of US foreign policy in the Middle East

The American foreign policy has been a hot button issue for decades. It has had profound effects on different peoples in different regions all over the globe. But what sort of impact has it had on Americans? The American foreign policy in the Middle East has been a controversial issue since September 11th. American involvement in the Middle East dramatically increased as opposed to its previous, already active, interference as a result of 9/11. As troops began landing in predominantly Muslim countries, questions were posed on how this would affect the future relationship between the Muslim world and the Western world. It is no secret that there is a strong anti-American sentiment prevalent among Muslims overseas. Which begs the question, what about Muslims in America? How do they feel?

The recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict in December highlighted the American foreign policy in the Middle East. As the death toll rose, so did the impatience among Muslims worldwide. I chose to investigate if this impatience and frustration was observable among Muslims in America.

This research is not the first of its kind. Since 9/11, US intelligence agencies have vigorously sought to further their knowledge regarding Muslims in America. In the most recent Republican National Convention Dr. Ron Paul cited research that the CIA had been conducting in regards to American foreign policy. The CIA developed the blowback principle based on the research. Essentially, the blowback principle implies that there is a direct relationship between the degree of influence America has overseas and the potential threat America could face at home. They found that the blowback principle holds especially true in regions densely populated with Muslims. Newer research has focused on
Muslims in America, and their possible affiliation with Muslims overseas. Although the purpose of their research was to improve national security and to detect potential threats, it still provided a foundation in studies exploring Muslims in America.

My hypothesis is that Muslims in America find the current US foreign policy quite troubling because of its heavy presence in the Muslim world. It is my opinion that the foreign policy troubles Muslims in America to the extent that it impedes on their ability to fully identify themselves as Americans. Instead, Muslims more readily associate themselves as outsiders in America.

The pool of my interviewees consisted of Muslims who were students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a Muslim and a member of the Muslim Students Association, I had several acquaintances with whom I may interview. Every Friday the local mosque (CIMIC) holds a congregational prayer. A significant portion of the Muslim student population attends this prayer. As the prayer finished, I stood outside of the exit and approached some of the acquaintances I knew. After re-introducing myself, I gave some brief background information on my research and proceeded to schedule interviews. Altogether there was six people that I conducted interviews with.

Hasan

Hasan is a second generation Sudanese-American Muslim. He is a junior at UIUC, and graduated from a private Islamic school near his home in the south suburb of Chicago. Hasan lives on campus in an apartment adjacent to the local mosque. Hasan is an executive member of a couple of Muslim registered student associations, and was very interested in the research. After the Friday prayer, we scheduled to have the interview over lunch at the university union.
The first question I asked Hasan was regarding his feelings about the recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He responded in an intense and passionate manner. Calling the conflict a massacre that should have been prevented by the world, he went on saying, “But I guess we learned now that we can’t rely on the rest of the world, it's everyone for themselves”. Hasan was livid about the recent conflict; he even suggested that it wasn’t a conflict at all. He seemed incredibly disturbed at the unevenness of causalities when comparing both sides. Hasan described America’s role in the conflict as a partner to Israel, and characterized the relationship between American and Israel is not beneficial, and that “they have nothing to offer us, except an ethnic lobby that won’t shut the f*** up”.

Hasan was obviously dissatisfied with the US foreign policy. Hasan thought the US foreign policy could be summed up in “a few, simple words; Imperialistic, xenophobic, unnecessarily involved.” Hasan feels that the US foreign policy towards the Middle East is facilitates anti-American sentiment among Muslims overseas. He showed confusion towards America’s presence in Iraq, asking what did Iraq do to Americans.

Hasan suggests that America’s foreign policy wreaks havoc in the Middle East. He says that Muslims overseas suffer, and that bothers him because he sympathizes with them. American action overseas, specifically in the Middle East, affects because he worries about his family overseas, as well as his “fellow Muslims”.

Hasan admitted that he does, “to a certain extent, feel alienated in America as a Muslim, because that is what the media does. They do a great job of instilling fear and hate in the minds of Americans, and they constantly work to make this country a living hell for someone... i.e. Native Americans, the Irish, the Blacks and now Muslims.” Hasan mentions that he tends to “avoid far-left or far-right sources because they are ridiculously biased”.

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Hasan says that he hasn’t “necessarily felt like an outsider, just that I wasn’t liked”.

Hasan feels that Muslims in America “live in an atmosphere of estrangement”. He implies that they don’t have a sense of belonging, and that finding acceptable ways to work themselves back into society are often shadowed by attempts of “over-assimilation”. Hasan feels that America should end its “parasitic relationship with Israel”, and that this would certainly help deflate some of the issues Muslims have with the foreign policy.

During Hasan’s interview it was apparent that Hasan still identified himself as an American. There were several times during the interview that he used words like “us” and “we” in regards to America, or Americans. It is obvious that he views himself and other Muslims as Americans, but feels that there is animosity in the US against Muslims. He attributes most of the animosity towards the media, but suggests that the foreign policy contributes to his sense of alienation.

Despite his ability to identify as an American, Hasan still recognizes that the foreign policy, media, and other forces like racism play a role in making it difficult for him to make this identification, but nonetheless, he still makes the identification.

Shaheer

Shaheer is a second generation Egyptian-American Muslim senior on campus. Next semester he plans on attending medical school. Shaheer also lives near the local mosque on campus, and as a frequent visitor to the mosque elected to have the interview in the mosque after the evening congregational prayer.

Shaheer, like Hasan, was very passionate about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He thought the conflict, as well as American involvement, was “completely absurd”. And that “the death toll ratio speaks volumes as to the injustice and false pretenses to the further
Shaheer felt that the US foreign policy in the Middle East “turned its face towards the injustices”, and that instead of using peace and justice as its foundation, it used common interest. Unlike Hasan, Shaheer felt that the US and Israel stand to benefit from the foreign policy, but this beneficial relationship is at the expense of the Muslim world. Shaheer suggests that the foreign policy is all about monetary gain, and that this common perception of the Muslim world and the Western world at odds because of differing beliefs and values is incorrect, stating, “It’s not the clash of civilizations, rather it’s the clash of interests.”

Shaheer feels that the US foreign policy distances himself from other Americans. Shaheer deems it impossible to identify himself as an American because of the foreign policy. In regards to whether it was his Muslim identity that made him feel this way about the foreign policy, he admitted that it does, but also that any person who is aware of some of the actions that are taken under this foreign policy would also throw up a “red flag”.

Shaheer also stated that he avoids CNN and FOX news as sources of information, Shaheer believes there are many reasons to avoid the channels but cites that “the two major ones is that they have interests and stakes in a lot of the world’s issues.” Shaheer claims that “CNN has shifted towards an entertainment channel” rather than a news channel, and that this is obvious in there reporting and methods.

Shaheer suggests that the foreign policy modifies some of its principles and allow open talks with polarized nations. This modification will help reduce the isolation of Muslim nations and their people. Shaheer mentioned that it was much easier for him to identify and relate to other Muslims, while it was uncomfortable for him to surround himself with non-
Muslims. Shaheer explains saying “because my ideals and morals don’t match the general population”, and proposes that this could be in part because of the atmosphere Muslims live in, which he explains as, “Muslims in America are living in a hostile and unwelcoming environment where the clash of ideals and morals cause problems and is fueled by misconceptions pushed by the media”.

Shaheer, like Hasan, states that the media plays a role in determining the atmosphere and environment that Muslims are placed in America. Shaheer is critical of the foreign policy’s seclusion of Muslim nations. Shaheer considers that the foreign policy is a source of frustration and confusion for Muslims in America and in the Middle East. Shaheer also claims that there is a difference in morals and values between Muslim Americans and other Americans that divides the two, and makes it hard for one to relate to the other.

Ramsey

Ramsey is a second generation Syrian-American Muslim junior. Ramsey recently became a US citizen despite living in the US for the majority of his life. Ramsey is a resident advisor for a student-housing dormitory on campus. Ramsey chose to meet at the engineering library.

Ramsey expresses anger and discontent with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He finds the number of dead women and children particularly troubling. Ramsey says that the participation of America in the recent conflict was problematic for him, he goes on saying, “I recently learned, in my international health class, that The United States gives more money to Israel than they do to all the sub-Saharan African countries combined. That is an absolutely ridiculous statistic. The worst part of it all is that this money goes to killing innocent people.”
Overall, Ramsey felt that the American foreign policy “is a disgrace”. He was most upset with the US “taking sides”. Ramsey says his interest in the Middle East foreign policy comes from the fact that he is Middle Eastern, and that “Islam teaches us to treat all other Muslims like brothers and sisters.”

Ramsey declares that it is harder to identify himself as an American because of the foreign policy and states, “It's times like these where I find it almost impossible to be proud to be an American. How can I be proud to be a part of a country that indirectly massacres innocent civilians? It's times like these where I do not want to call myself an American.

Ramsey reiterates what the other interviewees have already stated in regards to the media, but Ramsey doesn’t necessarily avoid the sources he feels are unfair. Instead, Ramsey prefers to take in as many sources as possible in order to obtain an “unbiased”, objective understanding. Ramsey does admit that, “unfortunately, some of the sources, such as Fox News, are so overtly biased that it boggles my mind”.

Ramsey insists that his sense of alienation stems from the foreign policy, various media outlets, and racism. Ramsey pointed out how after 9/11 all of his immediate family members were subject to hate crimes. Ramsey constantly references misunderstandings that most Americans have in regards to Muslims and Islam. Ramsey articulates “it is hard to associate myself with other Americans when they have been brainwashed to believe that my religion, ethnicity, and culture are all about violence and terrorism.” Ramsey also responds that “the saddest part is that my religions preaches the opposite”, and proceeds to cite a Quranic verse that equates the killing of one soul to the killing of all humanity.

Ramsey reinforces the theme that the foreign policy contributes to the sentiment of alienation, as well as the inability to identify as an American. But Ramsey also cites the
influence of the media. Ramsey also mentions the function of knowledge regarding Islam and how it relates to Muslims in America. Ramsey feels that the lack of knowledge among Americans is a causative agent of alienation.

Osama

Osama is a second generation Indian-Pakistani American Muslim junior. He lives off campus and is an executive member of one the biggest student-university organizations on campus.

When asked about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Osama was one of the few interviewees that did not express visible distaste, or a pro-Palestinian position. Instead, Osama proposed that all parties involved should engage in political talks rather than military combat. Osama asserted that the US should be careful in the Middle East when it comes to conflicts, saying choosing a side “is a very dangerous prospect”. Osama thinks the US will benefit the most out of playing the role of the mediator, or moderator. Osama thought that US involvement in the most recent conflict reflected the increased presence of the globalization phenomenon. Unlike the previous interviewees, Osama thought that Israel served as a proxy for the United States in the Middle East, and that the US stood to gain from this relationship. Osama acknowledged that he is not entirely familiar with the Middle East foreign policy, but did admit that he was sure that Muslims, as a result of the foreign policy, were suffering.

Osama says, “if Muslims are suffering, I am suffering”, and that “religiously any injustice across the world is my problem... as a Muslim, I have the duty to be an agent for peace and justice”. Osama also found no issue identifying as an American, “I am an American. I have freedoms, resources, and other privileges here in the US that I probably
would not have anywhere else in the world. Part of being a citizen is recognizing that you have an obligation to loyalty to the country that you're a citizen of. I know that is kind of controversial but that is how I feel. The caveat is that as an American if I do not agree to some action, it is also my responsibility to ensure that the government is acting in a fair and just manner.”

But Osama did not fail to point out that “most domestic [sources of information] are biased” and that “international sources are the best”. Rather than list the news organizations he felt were biased, or slanted in some way, he cited the New York Times, and the Economist as true journalism. He did confess that no matter what source you use, you will occasionally run into some biased position, “at some point it just comes down our own judgment”. Osama added that the “media is an important vehicle for social change”, and upon this realization “a more comprehensive worldview” can be established. He continues on to say if the media realizes this, American-Muslim relations, as well as Global-American relations will inevitably improve.

Osama addressed the issue of alienation as a problem that could be attributed to Muslims themselves, rather than the government. Like Shaheer, Osama expressed that he is “more comfortable around Muslims” because of differences in morality. However he did specify that many American Muslims and non-Muslims share the same worldview, so if alienation does arise “it is not policies, but dialogue” that makes him feel this way. Osama explained that many “dialogues are framed in a way that automatically dismisses the Muslim perspective”. And that “while freedom of speech is celebrated in this country, any Muslim making comments that may be deemed even slightly off the mainstream can land them in jail, or worse. Yet publications may publish all the inflammatory anti-Muslim material they
wish, it is a double standard.” Osama did mention that isolation of Muslims by non-Muslims upon recognition is met with Muslims isolating non-Muslims, implying a reciprocal relationship.

Osama goes on to declare that Muslims overseas see “the deleterious effects” of the foreign policy on their country’s economy, stability, and well-being. Notwithstanding the evident issues that the Muslim world and the Western world have with each other, Osama feels that “the current atmosphere is undefined”, and that “the previous anti-Muslim agenda has been pushed to the past”. This is an era of learning and knowledge, and that the future looks bright for American-Muslim relations.

Osama’s unique take on several points of this research reflected his understanding that he is an American citizen, thereby making him apart of the decisions this government takes. Rather than just be upset with some of the decision-making this government makes, Osama believes he should change that. Despite being readily able to identify himself as an American, feelings of alienation are not unknown to Osama. Osama suggests that differing morality, lack of dialogue, and media portrayal are all factors to this sense of estrangement. However, Osama places blame on both American Muslims and non-Muslims for the distance they put between themselves.

Amer

Amer is a second generation Jordanian-American Muslim senior who will attend law school next semester.

As an active member in the Students for Justice in Palestine organization, Amer was unhappy with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Amer was “very annoyed at America’s reluctance to condemn anything Israel does. The blind support America gives Israel kind
of freaks me out. It makes no sense to me.” Amer thinks we should be aware of the
strength of the Israeli lobby and how the lobby influences politicians and decision-making.

Amer believes that the foreign policy that America, like all countries, maintains is
motivated by America’s will to serve its own best interest. Despite this intention, Amer
indicates, that he is sure the best interest is not always served in some decisions.

Amer specified that he never really felt alienated, and to feel alienated it would have to
do more with how other Americans treat you, rather than decisions made at the federal
level. Amer also disclosed that his lack of knowledge was part of the reason why he wasn’t
very involved in the effects of the foreign policy, but that it didn’t stop him from realizing
how it impacted Muslims in America, and overseas. He believes that “Muslims overseas
are going to view America as a country that’s willing to kill Muslims as long as it benefits
America in the end. Here in the states, same thing”. Amer said that the foreign policy
should discourage war, and that the aid to Israel should stop.

Amer described the atmosphere in the states for Muslims as “great…. I wouldn't want to
change it, given the realistic alternatives. We live in the same atmosphere as any other
American, except, as we believe, we're blessed with God given knowledge on how to
approach life. Here, we're allowed to practice that lifestyle. I never felt any discrimination
or anything else that would contribute to a negative atmosphere.”

Amer is very comfortable in the states; he doesn’t distinguish himself from other
Americans. He identifies as a Muslim, and supports Muslim issues overseas, and
recognizes that there are decisions made in the states that Muslims will object to, but does
not seem to take these decisions personal. However, he does believe in political activism
among Muslims, and does exhibit a desire to change the policies in place.
Munther

Munther is a second generation Palestinian-American Muslim junior who is in the College of Business at UIUC. Munther is an active member in many Palestinian advocacy groups.

Munther was just as upset about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the other interviewees. Munther said, “Since we give billions of dollars per year to Israel…I feel that we are largely responsible for the tragedies in Gaza”. Munther also attributes the animosity many Muslim and Arab nations feel is a result of the foreign policy’s favoring of Israel. He also claimed that the foreign policy isolates Muslims and makes them “feel like we’re not really wanted.” Munther wishes the foreign policy were more balanced, and open to dialogue with all countries.

Munther, like the other interviewees, said he chooses international news organizations over domestic ones, and that he “avoids Fox, unless he’s in the mood for comedy”. Munther implied that the period following 9/11 was the only time he ever felt like an outsider, using the patriot act as an indication of what was going on. Munther did go on to say that the current atmosphere for Muslims is “alright” because “more and more people are learning about Islam and trying to educate themselves, which creates a relationship of understanding. There is still racism and prejudice out there, and I think a lot of it has to do with our foreign policy and media coverage.”

Munther does not seem to have a problem identifying as an American, he like Hasan used words like “we”, and “us” when referring to American decisions and actions. Conversely, he did indicate there were times he felt like an outsider. Munther felt that the role of the media, and the foreign policy in the US, were sources of frustration, alienation,
and animosity.

Conclusion

All of the interviewees objected the foreign policy the US maintains in the Middle East. However, many of them did not solely attribute instances of alienation to the foreign policy. The interviewees all mentioned the role of the media. There was a unanimous and unequivocal recognition that FOX news was a biased source. Some interviewees avoided FOX, while others indulged. The media to the interviewees can correct or instill a stereotype among Americans, they view it as a powerful entity. In order to help Muslims feel more at home, the interviewees implied that the media has to welcome them.

Despite many of the interviewees specifying possible policy changes and advocated political involvement among Muslims, none of them were able to truly affiliate themselves with a political party. Some said they hold certain views in certain situations; but overall, there was not a single party that satisfied them. This is an important finding, if Muslims don’t find the political system suitable for them, then a feeling of hopelessness is bound to arise.

The interviewees expressed concern over the relationship America maintains with Israel. A significant, noticeable observation is that every time they mentioned the death toll in the recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the interviewees became more intense and they spoke faster and louder. The interviewees were most bothered by other Muslims dying. Many interviewees expressed that their interest in the foreign policy was mainly due to its affecting other Muslims. It seems that the Muslims in American were easily able to relate to Muslims overseas. Many indicated that Islam taught them to care about other Muslims.

My hypothesis was partially correct. I suspected that the foreign policy would alienate
Muslims in America and eventually lead Muslims to feel unable to identify as Americans. All of my interviewees were able to identify as Americans regardless of the foreign policy, but alienation was an issue for the interviewees. However, the foreign policy was not the sole contributing factor. Many interviewees cited the media, American legislation (patriot act), and miscommunication between Americans, as sources of alienation. Perhaps a more elaborative study including a larger representative sample of American Muslims can provide insight into these findings.