

More Muslims Are Coming to U.S. after a Decline in Wake of 9/11

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America's newest Muslims arrive in the afternoon crunch at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Their planes land from Dubai, Casablanca and Karachi. They stand in line, clasping documents. They emerge, sometimes hours later, steering their carts toward a flock of relatives, a stream of cabs, a new life.

This was the path for Nur Fatima, a Pakistani woman who moved to Brooklyn six months ago and promptly shed her hijab. Through the same doors walked Nora Elhainy, a Moroccan who sells electronics in Queens, and Ahmed Youssef, an Egyptian who settled in Jersey City, where he gives the call to prayer at a palatial mosque.

"I got freedom in this country," said Ms. Fatima, 25. "Freedom of everything. Freedom of thought."

The events of Sept. 11 transformed life for Muslims in the United States, and the flow of immigrants from countries like Egypt, Pakistan and Morocco thinned sharply.

But five years later, as the United States wrestles with questions of terrorism, civil liberties and immigration control, Muslims appear to be moving here again in surprising numbers, according to statistics collected by the Department of Homeland Security and the Census Bureau.

Immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia are planting new roots in states from Virginia to Texas to California.

In 2005, more people from Muslim countries became legal permanent United States residents—nearly 96,000—than in any year in the previous two decades.

More than 40,000 of them were admitted last year, the highest annual number since the terrorist attacks, according to data on 22 countries provided by the Department of Homeland Security.

Many have made the journey unbowed by tales of immigrant hardship, and despite their own opposition to American policy in the Middle East. They come seeking the same promise that has drawn foreigners to the United States for many decades, according to a range of experts and immigrants: economic opportunity and political freedom.

Those lures, both powerful and familiar, have been enough to conquer fears that America is an inhospitable place for Muslims.

"America has always been the promised land for Muslims and non-Muslims," said Behzad Yaghmaian, an Iranian exile

and author of "Embracing the Infidel: Stories of Muslim Migrants on the Journey West." "Despite Muslims' opposition to America's foreign policy, they still come here because the United States offers what they're missing at home."

For Ms. Fatima, it was the freedom to dress as she chose and work as a security guard. For Mr. Youssef, it was the chance to earn a master's degree.

He came in spite of the deep misgivings that he and many other Egyptians have about the war in Iraq and the Bush administration. In America, he said, one needs to distinguish between the government and the people.

"Who am I dealing with, Bush or the American public?" he said. "Am I dealing with my future in Egypt or my future here?"

Muslims have been settling in the United States in significant numbers since the mid-1960's, after immigration quotas that favored Eastern Europeans were lifted. Spacious mosques opened in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York as a new, highly educated Muslim population took hold.

Over the next three decades, the story of Muslim migration to the United States was marked by growth and prosperity. A larger percentage of immigrants from Muslim countries have graduate degrees than other American residents, and their average salary is about 20 percent higher, according to census data.

But Sept. 11 altered the course of Muslim life in America. Mosques were vandalized. Hate crimes rose. Deportation proceedings began against thousands of men.

Some Muslims changed their names to avoid job discrimination, making Mohammed "Moe," and Osama "Sam." Scores of families left for Canada.

Yet this period also produced something strikingly positive, in the eyes of many Muslims: they began to mobilize politically and socially. Across the country, grass-roots groups expanded to educate Muslims on civil rights, register them to vote and lobby against new federal policies such as the Patriot Act.

"There was the option of becoming introverted or extroverted," said Agha Saeed, national chairman of the American Muslim Task Force on Civil Rights and Elections, an umbrella organization in Newark, Calif. "We became extroverted."

In some ways, new Muslim immigrants may be better off in the post-9/11 America they encounter today, say Muslim leaders: Islamic centers are more organized, and resources like English instruction and free legal help are more accessible.

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But outside these newly organized mosques, life remains strained for many Muslims. To avoid taunts, women are often warned not to wear head scarves in public, as was Rubab Razvi, 21, a Pakistani who arrived in Brooklyn nine months ago. (She ignored the advice, even though people stare at her on the bus, she said.) Muslims continue to endure long waits at airports, where they are often tagged for questioning.

To some longtime immigrants, the life embraced by newcomers will never compare to the peaceful era that came before.

"They haven't seen the America pre-9/11," said Khwaja Mizan Hassan, 42, who left Bangladesh 30 years ago. He rose to become the president of Jamaica Muslim Center, a mosque in Queens, and has a comfortable job with the New York City Department of Probation.

But after Sept. 11, he was stopped at Kennedy Airport because his name matched one on a watch list.

A Drop, Then a Surge

Up to six million Muslims live in the United States, by some estimates. While the Census Bureau and the Department of Homeland Security do not track religion, both provide statistics on immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. It is presumed that many of these immigrants are Muslim, but people of other faiths, such as Iraqi Chaldeans and Egyptian Copts, have also come in appreciable numbers.

Immigration from these regions slowed considerably after Sept. 11. Fewer people were issued green cards and nonimmigrant visas. By 2003, the number of immigrants arriving from 22 Muslim countries had declined by more than a third. For students, tourists and other nonimmigrants from these countries, the drop was even more dramatic, with total visits down by nearly half.

The falloff affected immigrants from across the post-9/11 world as America tightened its borders, but it was most pronounced among those moving here from Pakistan, Morocco, Iran and other Muslim nations.

Several factors might explain the drop: more visa applications were rejected due to heightened security procedures, said officials at the State Department and Department of Homeland Security; and fewer people applied for visas.

But starting in 2004, the numbers rebounded. The tally of people coming to live in the United States from Bangladesh, Turkey, Algeria and other Muslim countries rose by 20 percent, according to an analysis of Census Bureau data.

The uptick was also notable among foreigners with nonimmigrant visas. More than 55,000 Indonesians, for instance, were issued those visas last year, compared with roughly 36,000 in 2002.

The rise does not reflect relaxed security measures, but a higher number of visa applications and greater efficiency in processing them, said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, part of Homeland Security.

Like other immigrants, Muslims find their way to the United States in myriad ways: they come as refugees, or as students and tourists. Others arrive with immigrant visas secured by relatives here. A lucky few win the green-card lottery.

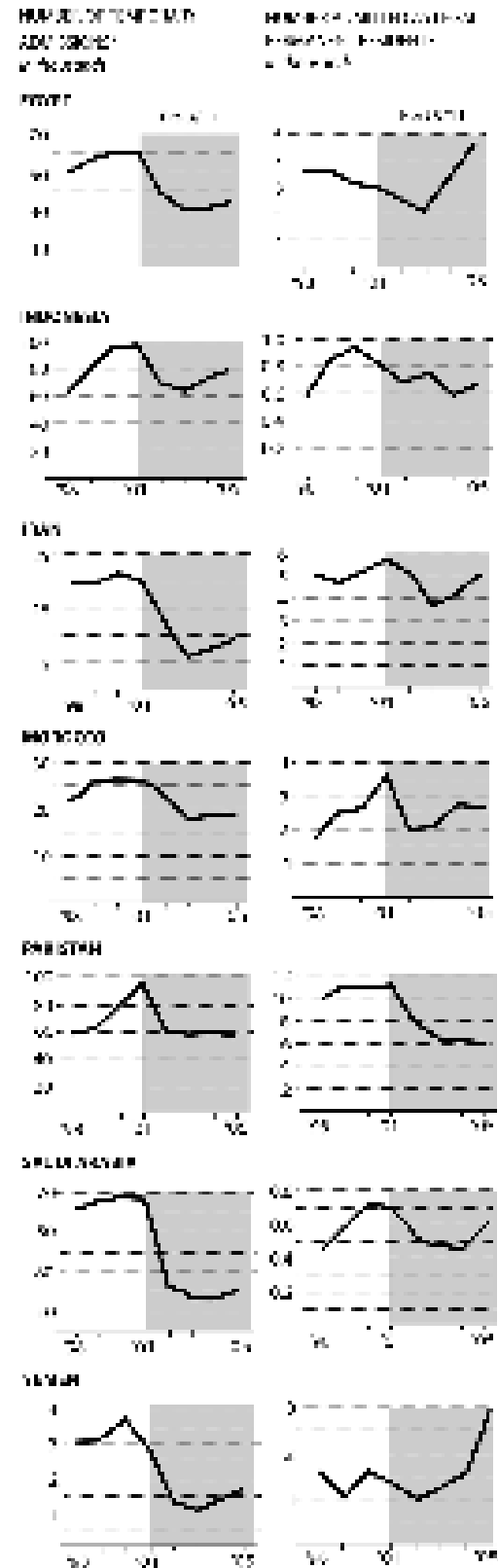


Figure 1 Muslims Before and After 9/11. The number of people entering the United States from many predominantly Muslim countries declined sharply immediately after Sept. 11 but has resurged since 2004.

*Includes students, tourists, foreign diplomats and business travelers, who may have been admitted more than once in a given year.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

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Ahmed Youssef, 29, never thought he would be among the winners. But in 2003, Mr. Youssef, who taught Arabic in Egypt, was one of 50,000 people randomly chosen from 9.5 million applicants around the world.

As he prepared to leave Benha, a city north of Cairo, some friends asked him how he could move to a country that is “killing people in Iraq and Afghanistan,” he recalled. But others who had been to the United States encouraged him to go.

He arrived in May 2005, and he found work loading hot dog carts from sunrise to sundown. He shared an apartment in Washington Heights with other Egyptians, but for the first month, he never saw his neighborhood in daylight.

“I joked to my roommates, ‘When am I going to see America?’” said Mr. Youssef, a slight man with thinning black hair and an easy smile.

Only three months later, when he began selling hot dogs on Seventh Avenue, did Mr. Youssef discover his new country.

He missed hearing the call to prayer, and thought nothing of unrolling his prayer rug beside his cart until other vendors warned him against it. He could be mistaken for an extremist, they told him.

Eventually, Mr. Youssef found a job as the secretary of the Islamic Center of Jersey City. He plans to apply to a master’s program at Columbia University, specializing in Arabic. For now, he lives in a spare room above the mosque. Near his bed, he keeps a daily log of his prayers. If he makes them on time, he writes “Correct” in Arabic. “I am much better off here than selling hot dogs,” he said.

Awash in American Flags

Nur Fatima landed in Midwood, Brooklyn, at a propitious time. Had she come three years earlier, she would have seen a neighborhood in crisis.

Hundreds of Pakistani immigrants disappeared after being asked to register with the government. Thirty shops closed along a stretch of Coney Island Avenue known as Little Pakistan. The number of new Urdu-speaking pupils at the local elementary school, Public School 217, dropped by half in the 2002–3 school year.

But then Little Pakistan got organized. A local businessman, Moe Razvi, converted a former antique store into a community center offering legal advice, computer classes and English instruction. Local Muslim leaders began meeting with federal agents to soothe relations.

The annual Pakistan Independence Day parade is now awash in American flags.

It is a transformation seen in Muslim immigrant communities around the nation.

“They have to prove that they are living here as Muslim Americans rather than living as Pakistanis and Egyptians and other nationalities,” said Zahid H. Bukhari, the director of the American Muslim Studies Program at Georgetown University.

Ms. Fatima arrived in Brooklyn from Pakistan in March with an immigrant visa. She began by taking English classes at Mr. Razvi’s center, the Council of Peoples Organization.

She has heard stories of the neighborhood’s former plight but sees a different picture.

“This is a land of opportunity,” Ms. Fatima said. “There is equality for everyone.”

Five days after she came to Brooklyn, Ms. Fatima removed her head scarf, which she had been wearing since she was 10. She began to change her thinking, she said: She liked living in a country where people respected the privacy of others and did not interfere with their religious or social choices.

“I came to the United States because I want to improve myself,” she said. “This is a second birth for me.”

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