

# Generation 9/11



American Muslims who came of age in the last decade have had to navigate uncharted waters. For some, that has meant embracing the faith; for others, forsaking it.

By ANDREA ELLIOTT Published: September 8, 2011

Remziya Suleyman hardly noticed the rain as she stood in April under the shelter of a black umbrella in Nashville, waiting for the rally to begin. She had imagined this moment for months, yet her mouth fell open as a bus from Knoxville pulled up, and then one from Memphis, delivering the first of hundreds of Muslims to her charge.

Many had never voted, much less marched. In their native lands — countries like Syria, Somalia and Iran — protests brought dangerous repercussions. But here in Tennessee, a place long considered safe harbor for Muslim immigrants, they were confronting a new tempest: public opposition to mosques, rising hate crimes and proposed legislation aimed, they felt, at marginalizing people of their faith.

Then came Ms. Suleyman. Born of Kurdish immigrants and raised in Nashville, the chatty 26-year-old activist had gone from mosque to mosque, telling doctors, imams and homemakers twice her age that they could no longer stay silent. “The older generation was like, ‘No, this will pass,’” she said in her Southern cadence. “But if we do not speak for ourselves, who will speak for us?”

“I grew up hearing this is the land of the free.”

Ms. Suleyman belongs to the generation of Muslim Americans who came of age after 9/11. Many were bracing for the trials of adolescence at the time of the attacks, only to find themselves on unsteady new ground. Some became objects of ridicule at school or suspicion at airports. Their neighborhoods were upended as law enforcement agents raided mosques and businesses, and froze the assets of Islamic charities. Their fathers and uncles were among the hundreds of Muslim men who were arrested without warrant; thousands were eventually deported.

It is not fully known how this era has shaped America's younger Muslims. There is limited academic study of this group, despite the attention drawn to it by the recent Congressional hearings into domestic radicalization. But a growing cadre of sociologists, demographers and others who are examining the effects of 9/11 on this generation note several striking patterns. Some young Muslims have turned away from their faith, distancing themselves from their community and even changing their names.

“In some ways, they became the tragic experiment in what happens when people are bumped from belonging to not belonging,” said Michelle Fine, a professor of psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York who has studied Muslim American youth.

Yet for others, the last decade has brought a very different outcome: a spiritual and civic awakening. In the aftermath of the attacks, the children of Muslim immigrants became the first line of defense against a stream of queries by non-Muslims. They were already accustomed to being ambassadors “of all things Muslim,” said Musa Syeed, 27, a filmmaker from Plainfield, Ind. But the task took on a new intensity as their faith came under scrutiny. In the search for answers to complex theological questions, many drew closer to Islam.

In a new study by the [Abu Dhabi Gallup Center](#), two-thirds of young Muslim Americans said their religion was important to them. This group includes a rising number of young converts like Ify Okoye, 27, a nursing student from Beltsville, Md.

Known to some as “Generation 9/11,” Ms. Okoye and others set out to reclaim Islam's image in America, but found themselves in uncharted waters. Their community lacked the social cohesion and organizational prowess of other faith groups with deeper domestic roots. A majority of this country's Muslims are immigrants from Arab and South Asian countries who began arriving in the mid-1960s. This mostly professional class settled smoothly and ascended quickly.

Like other first-generation immigrants, they were at a remove from American culture, channeling their resources into building internal institutions like mosques and Islamic schools. “It's a natural course of things that the second generation says, ‘How do I participate beyond the bubble?’ ” said Eboo Patel, president of the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) in Chicago. “That transition was dramatically accelerated after 9/11.”

As hate crimes against Muslims soared, the youngest recoiled at first, keeping a low profile, said Lori Peek, a sociologist at Colorado State University and author of “Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11.” But in a study of Muslims, Dr. Peek found that many of her younger subjects changed course, altering career paths to pursue degrees in journalism and political science over their parents' chosen fields of engineering and medicine. They were motivated, she said, by a newfound desire to engage in American civic life — a trend also noted by Dr. Fine and Louise Cainkar, a sociologist at Marquette University.

This goal has manifested itself in unpredictable ways. Mr. Syeed, the filmmaker, headed off to film school at New York University in 2003, intent on using the medium as a “blunt instrument for change.” But in time, he grew weary of what he called the “Muslims are people too” narrative that has come to define the way Muslim Americans present themselves in artistic pursuits or to the news media. The older generation was particularly concerned, he found, with promoting a positive view of Islam, often at the expense of a deeper portrait.

“It’s about correcting stereotypes and not about engaging the craft in any of these mediums,” said Mr. Syeed, who will soon complete his first feature film, “[Valley of Saints](#).” “I’ve had to put that aside. It’s about telling good stories — universal, human stories.”

### **New to Islam, and Finding Her Way**

Ify Okoye converted to Islam while staring at her Dell computer. She was alone that evening, in the spring of 2002, when she searched Google for “shahada” — the Muslim declaration of faith — and read aloud the English transliteration of the Arabic words marking one’s passage into Islam. *There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger.*

Ms. Okoye, then 18, did not know she was supposed to have witnesses present. She was living in Montgomery Village, Md., with her Nigerian mother, a Christian, and had never been to a mosque. If not for the events of Sept. 11, and the raging debate about Islam that followed, she might not have been curious enough to pick up a Koran. But then she couldn’t put it down.

Like many converts, Ms. Okoye spent her first years as a Muslim in rigorous study. In March 2004, she enrolled in a seminar that brought to life the religion’s formative period, laying out in intricate detail the military victories that established Islam as a global force. She learned about Umm Haram, a female warrior who died on the battlefield. In a faith that is expressed through action, there was no greater act of sacrifice, Ms. Okoye thought.

“That image of someone standing up for their religion — dying for it — is really powerful,” said Ms. Okoye, who began using the name Umm Haram on Internet forums.

It had been one year since the United States invaded Iraq. At the time, Ms. Okoye was working with the Transportation Security Administration, screening passengers at Baltimore’s international airport.

The job was a kind of crossroads between Islam and America. Ms. Okoye bonded with the ex-military personnel working by her side, even as she fought her supervisor for the right to wear her [hijab](#). She was unsure of what disturbed her more: the Muslim passengers who were always pulled aside for scrutiny, or the fresh-faced soldiers who left for Iraq “walking and full of life, only to return in a wooden container smaller than a shoebox,” she recalled.

Ms. Okoye had come to observe a strict form of Islam. In her spare time, she listened to sermons by preachers abroad who called for American Muslims to make a choice between nation and faith: They could continue living in a country that oppressed Muslims, the preachers said, or they could take up the noble duty of jihad and come to the defense of their ummah — their global Muslim community.

Yet Ms. Okoye was both things — Muslim and American — and the message soon fell flat. Why, she wondered, did she need to leave America to serve her faith? The modern tactics of violent

jihad also troubled her, and in this she was not alone. Even as cases involving homegrown terrorism have spiked recently, [a new survey by the Pew Research Center](#) found that the number of young American Muslims who believe a suicide attack can ever be justified has dropped by half — from 26 percent in 2007 to 13 percent this year.

Ms. Okoye eventually turned her focus to a local cause: better prayer spaces for women in mosques. Muslim men typically congregate in separate quarters, a tradition that has left many women praying behind dark partitions or in crowded basements — spaces Ms. Okoye refers to as “the penalty box.” In 2010, she and some friends began staging what they called “pray-ins,” drawing from civil rights-era terminology.

They show up, unannounced, at mosques and pray in the men’s section. Sometimes the police are called. At one mosque in Virginia last year, a security guard shouted at Ms. Okoye and shoved her, she recalled. But she has pressed on, inspired by the Arab Spring.

“We want to put our faith into action,” Ms. Okoye said. “When it became, ‘It’s O.K. to be American and live here and work here and fight the good fight here,’ the battles changed and the frontiers changed and the issues changed. What I work on now is living here as a Muslim.”

### **Mobilizing the Community**

By the end of that April day, nearly 1,000 Muslims from across Tennessee had joined Ms. Suleyman, arriving in a fleet of buses, cars and off-duty taxis shuttled by Somali drivers.

They lined the hallways of the state Capitol, where lawmakers were deliberating on an antiterrorism statute that, in its original wording, singled out shariah, or Islamic law, as a security threat — the latest effort in a national movement fueled by rising antipathy toward Muslims. Under mounting criticism, Tennessee’s lawmakers had removed all references to Islam, but Muslim leaders were still nervous the statute would lead to unfair treatment.

Wearing a black head scarf with silver trim, Ms. Suleyman paced the Capitol as the hearings proceeded, stepping around clusters of older Muslims clutching prayer beads. She knew every crevice of these halls. It had been three years since Ms. Suleyman, fresh out of graduate school, began working as a lobbyist for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, dropping in daily to meet with lawmakers. She stood out in her hijab. One senator asked if she was a nun.

“I said, ‘No, sir, that’s a different religion,’ ” she recalled, laughing.

Ten years earlier, on 9/11, Ms. Suleyman was a sophomore in high school. She had never felt different until that moment, she said, when her peers began talking about “all Muslims as terrorists.” She escaped the kind of hazing other young Muslims endured, but some of her relatives were turned down for jobs or harassed at the supermarket.

Those trials held little comparison with what Ms. Suleyman’s family had experienced when they fled chemical bombs in Kurdistan for refugee camps in Turkey, finally landing in Nashville when she was 5. She learned to translate for her parents at doctors’ offices and banks, and grew up hounded by the feeling that her immigrant community lacked political and legal representation.

Soon after Ms. Suleyman started working as a lobbyist, Muslims in Tennessee confronted a fresh wave of opposition: vandalism, the proliferation of alarmist videos and a public outcry over plans

to build a mosque in Murfreesboro. It was there, in October 2010, that a truck nearly ran Ms. Suleyman's car off the road as she was trying to register voters, she recalled.

"In public restrooms I have seen people yank their kids away," she said, "and I am like, 'Really? Do I seem like that big of a threat?'"

Ms. Suleyman and a group of other organizers soon formed a "Muslim Rapid Response Team," holding conference calls and organizing mosques. As news of the effort spread, Muslims from Alabama, Florida and Georgia called Ms. Suleyman for tips on how to mobilize their own communities.

The antiterrorism statute was eventually signed into law by Tennessee's governor. But Ms. Suleyman remains hopeful.

"If we are not showing who we are as Muslim Americans, as Tennesseans, then what will happen to the next generation?" she said. "This is the first step. It's going to take a very long time."