Muslims and Citizenship in Canada

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Since 9/11, the multicultural fabric of Canada has been under strain. Racial profiling and a re-invigorated suspicion of immigrants, for example, have affected many Canadian minorities. Canadian Muslims, in particular, have felt a devaluing of their citizenship. Anti-Muslim and anti-Arab backlash, the repetition of a number of troubling media themes, and the impact of hastily-legislated omnibus anti-terrorism legislation have all affected the entitlements of citizenship and challenged the belonging that Canadian Muslims feel towards Canada.

Muslims in Canada: A Rich Heritage

In 1996, Daood Hassan Hamdani, an authority on Muslim demographics in Canada, gave an address on Parliament Hill in which he noted that the 1991 census indicated there were more than 250 000 Muslims in Canada compared with 98 000 in 1981 and 33 000 in 1971. Most came to Canada to escape racial or ideological intolerance, flee religious and political persecution, escape famine and, above all, to seek a better life.

Current lay estimates, based on extrapolations of immigration trends, place the Muslim population at 600 000.

Muslims make up the largest non-Christian community in 10 of 25 metropolitan areas across Canada. They have settled everywhere; however, the majority, about 85%, live in six major cities. In fact, Metropolitan Toronto has more Muslims than all of the provinces and territories combined, excluding the province of Ontario. Two thirds have settled within 350 miles of each other. Mr. Hamdani noted: "The Canadian-born Muslims, barely visible a decade ago, have emerged as a force that will influence the development and orientation of Muslim institutions in the country."

The resurgence of Islam among young Muslims and its growing acceptance by non-Muslims at a time when young people are increasingly alienated by organized faith is one of the most significant phenomena of Canadian religious history.

Islam's presence in Canada dates back to the mid-19th century. Agnes Love, a teenage bride of Scottish origin, gave birth to the first Muslim born in Ontario, 13 years before Confederation. The first Muslims to arrive in Canada were settlers and adventurers. After the Second World War, skilled workers and professionals helped reconstruct the post-war economy.

Then, in the mid-1960s, teachers, technocrats and entrepreneurs began arriving to contribute to the expanding economy. "The demographics and work ethic of the Muslim labour force have very significant implications for the cost and funding of the country's social security system," noted Hamdani. "Proportionally, they withdraw much less from the system and contribute much more to it than the Canadian population as a whole."

Canadians have become accustomed to seeing the signature minaret atop a mosque in most towns and cities. Today there are more than 200 mosques in Canada. The first mosque in North America, Al-Rashid, was built in Edmonton in 1938.

At present, third and fourth generation Muslims live in Canada alongside new immigrants from virtually every part of the world, from China to Nigeria. Muslims comprise a multiplicity of over 44 different ethnicities and nationalities.

A poignant indication of this is the appointment of two Muslims to the prestigious order of Canada: Lila Fahlman, an Edmonton teacher, community activist and founder of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women; and Haroon Siddiqui, Editorial Page Editor Emeritus of the Toronto Star.

It is thus clear that Muslims in Canada, though having ties elsewhere, have been full participants in the fabric of Canadian society.

Post 9/11: Suspicion and Solidarity

However, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, placed a tremendous burden on Canadian Muslims. The events of that fateful day were traumatic enough -- defenseless civilians of every faith, age and race, mercilessly slaughtered while going about their daily routines in the heart of North America. Canadian Muslims, like everyone else, were horrified and fearful. However, the brief unity in grief soon gave way to fearful isolation, once it became known that the perpetrators committed this heinous act in the name of Islam.

Canadians of the Muslim faith instinctively knew that they would become the subject of collective guilt in their own country. Many took precautions by keeping their children home from school, staying out of the public eye and contacting the police for protection for Muslim institutions.

Community organizations, individuals, and imams, all condemned 9/11 in the strongest possible terms as antithetical to Islam. Still, that did not stop those committed to venting their blind anger. Taunts, threats, physical assaults and vandalism against personal property and Muslim institutions were recorded by police units and across the country within the first months after 9/11.

Thankfully, our elected politicians were unequivocal in their opposition to the wave of hate activity. Prime Minister Jean Chretien, for example, stated that he was "ashamed by the escalating violence against Muslims and Arab Canadians," denounced the scapegoating of both communities, and promised that the full force of law would be brought to bear on the perpetrators. On other occasions, the Prime Minister dissociated Islam from the attacks. Conservative leader Joe Clark warned against a guilt by association standard that targeted Canadian Muslims and Arabs. Provincial leaders likewise issued similar warnings. New Democratic Leader, Alexa McDonough, was particularly vocal. She moved for a motion in the House of Parliament to "issue an urgent and immediate plea to political, community and faith leaders to speak out against violence, intolerance, or hatred of any kind, directed at Muslims, Arabs and other visible minorities." She furthermore proposed an action plan with a detailed budget and timetable to fight the rising tide of intolerance and racism directed against Arab and Muslim Canadians.

Many other groups also stood in solidarity with Canadian Muslims and Arabs. The Canadian Federation of Nurses, for example, issued a public statement exonerating Canadian Muslims of all blame and condemning hate activity directed at them, and on October 5, 2001, a coalition of thirty high-profile peace, labour, student, religious, women, environmental, cultural and community groups formed a national coalition to speak out against racist attacks resulting from the September 11th. The Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Canadian Council of Churches expressed sympathy and solidarity. In many cities, police services published notes of support and vigilance.

In addition to hurtful questions about their loyalty as citizens, Canadian Muslims were alarmed at the unprecedented powers given to the state under the new anti-terrorism legislation Bill C-36.

Media and the Entitlements of Citizenship

As the spike in documented hate crimes faded after two months, Canadian Muslims felt a more insidious form of discrimination: that of a community under suspicion. The entitlements of their citizenship were frequently compromised by a number of recurring media themes that questioned the loyalty of Canadian Muslims and held them to a stiffer test of patriotism than their fellow Canadians; represented them, with alarming frequency, as a fifth column; called for institutionalized racial and ethnic profiling; and framed them as 'violent' or the 'other'.

The charge of a complicit silence was frequently levied against Canadian Muslims. Muslims were held to a more rigorous standard than their compatriots – and found to come up short. From the outset, it was argued that Canadian Muslims should prove their loyalty and patriotism by, as Rory Leishman of the London Free Press stated, "doing whatever was necessary to track down terrorists and their sympathizers." Muslims bore a special responsibility – ostensibly because they shared the same faith with the terrorists – for rooting out terrorism in Canada. Haroon Siddiqui of the Toronto Star referred to this as "a stiffer test of patriotism." And although Canadian Muslims and their institutions did condemn the attacks unequivocally - a fact reported prolifically in the press - their patriotism was still singled out as suspect and worthy of scrutiny. Indicative of the lax civic consciousness of Canadian Muslims was the fact that they did not verbally pledge allegiance to Canada: "We rarely heard Muslims in the West pledging loyalty to the countries in which they lived," articulated National Post columnist George Jonas.

With alarming frequency, Canadian Muslims were portrayed as a 'fifth column' – sleeper terrorists waiting to undermine Canadian society. Most of these representations displayed raw speculation and an extreme paucity of hard data. In one example, a writer warned that "not all the terrorist caves are in Afghanistan…some are in Quebec and Ontario." Another – an increasingly common motif – stated that any one of the nineteen men who committed the attacks could have been your next door neighbour. In the Globe and Mail, a prominent columnist, Margaret Wente, warned that extremists, "turn out to be the guys next door. They watch baseball on Sony television sets. They go to bars. They eat pizza. They meet girls, or try to. They seem a lot like us, except they hate us, and want us dead." The same writer later revisited this theme in a column entitled, "The terrorist who's still next door." (Emphasis added)

Racial profiling was explicitly endorsed by a number of writers, even newspapers. The logic was simple; it was "not prejudice…nor Islamophobia," argued Peter Worthington of the Toronto Sun, but "good sense": "If Muslim terrorists hijack commercial aircraft and crash them into buildings, is it unreasonable that Muslims boarding aircraft get extra scrutiny?" It was multiculturalism, with its "relativistic creed that assumes all immigrant cultures are equally tolerant, civilized and enlightened," that was the culprit stated Jonathan Kay of the National Post. Consequently, he continued, "[W]e should not pretend that an effective fight against terrorism [in Canada] can be waged in a truly color-blind fashion. The fact is, those who plot the annihilation of our civilization are of one religion and, almost without exception, one race."

Samuel's Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis was resurrected and re-applied liberally to understand the attacks against the US. More problematically, however, is that it was consciously used to present an apocalyptic scenario of the West versus Islam. Many preferred to couch their analysis using Huntington as their intellectual bulwark. In his column entitled, "Don't buff the sharp edges off Islam," Robert Fulford of the National Post candidly quoted and endorsed Huntington's conclusion that "Muslims show a greater propensity for war than any of the other disputatious civilizations now competing for territory on the planet." Other columnists, however, were more direct, unencumbered by any theoretical rationalization. Peter Worthington of the Toronto Sun, for example, stated: "[N]o media outlets attack law-abiding Muslims or Islam as a religion just because it is prone to attract suicidal fanatics."

Citizenship and Civil Rights

The erosion of civil rights, particularly of Canadians of the Muslim faith, also weighed heavily in the minds of a fearful community. High profile cases of Muslims in Canada accused of aiding and abetting al-Qaeda further added to the anxiety.

Trial by media, guilt by religious identity, seemed to be the norm as the Canadian public was treated to a spectacle of Muslims paraded by the RCMP as "prime suspects": a Canadian NSERC nuclear engineer of Egyptian origin whose alleged wrongdoing was based on having a name similar to that of lead hijacker Mohamed Atta; an Ottawa man originally from Somalia who managed wire transfers for Canadians sending money to support their families in Somalia; a Toronto copy shop owner who was also the uncle of the infamous Nabil al-Marabh. Full of sound and fury, these dramatic announcements were found later to signify nothing.

Despite these glaring errors by intelligence authorities, Muslims have remained under a cloud of suspicion. A September 2002 IPSOS-Reid poll indicated that 35 per cent of Canadians were more suspicious of Arabs and Muslims from the Middle East, an 8-per-cent increase since the poll asked the same question on Sept. 21, 2001. And 48 per cent of Canadians also indicated that they favoured some form of racial profiling.

In addition to hurtful questions about their loyalty as citizens, Canadian Muslims were alarmed at the unprecedented powers given to the state under the new anti-terrorism legislation Bill C-36. It defined terrorism in broad terms; it allowed a terrorist list to be created as an administrative decision through the use of secret evidence and secret foreign intelligence evidence; it prescribed detention without warrant or charge for up to 72 hours if there were 'reasonable grounds' to suspect commission of terrorist activity; it provided for investigative hearings with no right to silence; it restricted judicial controls on wiretapping and extended the duration for authorization of wiretapping; it allowed the interception of international communications without a warrant; and it provided for a closed trial process, with restricted disclosure and relaxed evidentiary rules.

They were worried about the Bill's potential impact on innocent citizens. Those who will be wrongfully charged, arrested and imprisoned may be vindicated in the fullness of time, but at an incalculable cost: the stigma, shame and humiliation will have devastating effects on families, reputations, friendships, businesses and jobs.

It should be emphasized that community groups and institutions have urged Muslims to assist law enforcement in ensuring the safety and security of Canadian citizens. Standing up for justice, even against oneself or one's community, is an Islamic duty. However, assisting law enforcement should not be at the loss or forfeiture of fundamental rights and freedoms.

In a few instances, Muslim individuals have reported law enforcement agents asserting that no reason is needed to detain people, and that citizens can be detained under the anti-terrorism act without a warrant or charge. Similarly, Muslims have been told that if they do not speak immediately, they can be compelled to speak under the law. Both assertions by law enforcement are false. The anti-terrorism legislation does not allow individuals to be detained or compelled to answer questions without any basis whatsoever. And on a few occasions, when an individual has requested to speak to law enforcement in the presence of a lawyer, the agents have declined to meet. These are legitimate concerns regarding the rights of Muslims as Canadian citizens with regards to due process and fundamental judicial rights.

Mending the Mosaic

Given the above uncertainties, will Canada's unique multicultural foundation be eroded as openness gives way to suspicion; inclusion replaced by enclaves of disaffected minorities; transparency of justice clouded by secret evidence and secret trials?

The events of the past year have forced many Muslims to explain their faith to the wider public. This is a responsibility that the community should have borne long ago. It has also led to introspection, and in many instances to a strengthening of faith and identity. And it has exposed fundamental differences within the community regarding interpretation of religious teachings and its role here in Canada.

As Canadian Muslims look to the near past, they discover that many ethnic groups have gone through similar trials: Ukrainians and Poles during the First World War; Germans, Italians and Japanese during the Second World War, and Jews during the first half of the past century. By fighting discrimination, each group emerged stronger, with its role further entrenched in the Canadian mosaic.

Canadian Muslims must come to terms with the reality that it is now their turn. Will they fight discrimination and challenge violations to civil rights, thus contributing toward the evolution of social justice in Canada? Will they consolidate their tremendous reservoir of talent and values into instruments of change for the benefit of all? Or will they retreat into ghettos, contributing to the vicious cycle of mutual suspicions between "civilizations"? On a more sober note, what efforts will they make to forge opportunities for their children?

Social harmony, however, is a two-way street. And the results of a CAIR-CAN poll provide optimism: More than 60 per cent of Canadian Muslims reported acts of kindness and support by their fellow citizens in the wake of 9/11, according to a poll released in September 2002 by the Canadian office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN). Numerous interfaith dialogues, town-hall meetings, and open houses are evidence of the spontaneous outreach extended by other Canadians.

It is this wellspring of basic human goodness that must continue to flow for the preservation of social cohesion. The pillars of Canadian society – tolerance, compassion and fairness – will be tested in the years to come. Yet every Canadian must reflect seriously upon his or her role in shaping our society for the better, against those forces who desire otherwise. Are we, individually and collectively, up to the challenge?