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Introduction

The attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, unleashed an almost unimaginable torrent of pain and destruction. Since that day, countless scholarly articles, books, edited volumes, and impressive pieces of investigative journalism have dissected and analyzed the events leading up to and the consequences of the terrible calamities that will forever mark that moment in history. This book is distinct in that its central focus is on those persons who were caught up in the extraordinary wave of hostility and backlash violence that followed the terrorist attacks.

Specifically, *Behind the Backlash* chronicles the exclusion that Muslim American men and women faced before and especially in the aftermath of 9/11. This book draws on the voices of Muslim Americans to describe the range of discrimination they experienced, to explain the personal and collective impacts of the backlash, and to shed light on the ways in which Muslims adapted in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. To begin, I offer a brief explanation regarding the origins of this work and my encounters with the people whose experiences are the subject of this text.

Growing up, I, like the majority of Americans, knew little about the beliefs and practices of the more than one billion people around the globe who follow the religion of Islam.¹ No Muslims lived in my hometown in rural eastern Kansas, where the vast majority of the population was white and Protestant and the most serious religious divisions were

between the Baptists and the Methodists. I was first exposed, albeit briefly, to Islam when I went away to college and took a class on world religions. The course description promised an introduction to the histories and central beliefs of the world's major religions, including the three great monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Three fifty-minute class sessions were dedicated to Islam as part of the larger section on “Eastern Religions.” Although educational in some respects, these lessons also served to promote the incorrect view of Islam as a foreign religion practiced only in distant lands.

My first serious introduction to Islam came a few years later, when I moved to the mid-size city of Fort Collins, Colorado. It was 1997, and I had accepted a position to coordinate a program aimed at retaining ethnic minority university students who were pursuing degrees in the natural sciences. Aisha—a native of Afghanistan—was one of the undergraduates selected to participate in that program. She was a sophomore in college at the time and was working on her bachelor's degree in computer science. When I first met Aisha, I had no idea that she was Muslim. She wore no headscarf or other visible signifier that might have offered some clue to her religious beliefs, and I was not yet savvy enough about the world to know that nearly all Afghans are Muslim.²

Soon after I started my job, Aisha approached me and asked if she could use one of the vacant offices so that she could pray between classes and work. She explained that she was Muslim and that one of the requirements of her faith was that she pray facing toward the holy city of Mecca five times each day. Because she spent long hours on campus, it was difficult for her to find a private space to perform her noon and midday prayers. I readily agreed to Aisha's request but then quickly admitted my ignorance when it came to virtually everything associated with Islam. Aisha laughed and, in her usual good-natured way, assured me that I was not alone. She then asked if I might like to have dinner at her house one evening so that I could meet her family and try some of her mother's homemade Afghan food. I did not know it at the time, but Aisha would become the first of many who would teach me about what it means to be a Muslim in America.

Looking back, I suppose that, in some respects, I was drawn to Aisha because of our differences. Although only a few years separated us in age, our lives had unfolded half a world apart and in extraordinarily different ways. Aisha was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, just before the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Like all other Afghans, Aisha and her family suffered tremendous losses in the protracted and bloody ten-year war that followed. Aisha's father, both of her grandfathers, and several other family members died in the fighting. One of her uncles and several other family friends were taken by the Communist-controlled government and were never heard from

again. Aisha's mother was forced to quit her job as a teacher after she and the other women at the school received death threats. Soon thereafter, Aisha and her three siblings had to stop attending school because of the growing risks that daily bombings and frequent landmine explosions posed. Aisha's immediate family was financially well-off before the war started, but they would eventually lose the land that they owned, their home, and all their material possessions.

Aisha was nearly ten years old when she, her two sisters, her younger brother, their mother, and four other female family members fled Kabul. The nine of them—like the millions of other Afghans who were displaced as a result of the conflict—left everything that they had behind and boarded a bus headed to Pakistan. They traveled for days through the treacherous mountains of their war-torn country, only to be turned back by Soviet guards at the border. Aisha and her family returned to the bus devastated, but a sympathetic driver encouraged them to find another way to pass the checkpoint. Two days later, under the cover of night and hidden in a rice truck, Aisha's family slipped across the Afghan border and into the city of Peshawar, Pakistan.

Upon their arrival in Pakistan, the family managed to rent a tiny apartment with the help of Aisha's grandparents and an uncle who had emigrated to the United States. Aisha attended a school in Pakistan that was opened specifically for Afghan refugees. The students sat on cold, dirt floors in the unheated and overcrowded building. They had no desks, books, paper, or pencils, and the teacher was forced to write the day's lessons in chalk on the dirt classroom walls. Aisha and the other children didn't mind, though, as they were thankful to be alive and in school. They had seen too many of their former classmates killed or maimed in landmine explosions back in Kabul.

As a child, Aisha often fantasized about living in the United States, and, after nearly three years in Pakistan, her dream came true. Aisha's uncle, who had recently married and moved to Fort Collins, sent word that the family had been granted immigration papers. Plane tickets were waiting for Aisha and her eight other family members who had survived the war and escaped Afghanistan. Upon receiving the incredible news, the family closed the door on their apartment in Pakistan and never looked back.

Aisha and her family arrived in Colorado in 1992. School officials were not sure what to do with her and her siblings, because the children did not speak any English and no school district employees spoke their native Farsi language. Aisha was thirteen years old at the time, and, because of her age, she was ultimately placed in the eighth grade. For the first several months of school, however, she had absolutely no idea what the teachers or the other students were saying. But she was determined to learn. To pass her exams,

Aisha would memorize the shapes of letters and words and then would write the answers based on the images stored in her mind. Every afternoon she would watch Barney, the beloved purple dinosaur, on television. Aisha learned some of her first words in English by repeating the catchy tunes that Barney would sing to his predominantly preschool-age viewing audience. After eating dinner with her family, Aisha would spend what was left of the evening studying and doing homework in her cramped bedroom. She would often struggle with writing assignments late into the night, looking up words in the dictionary until she could string them together in a coherent sentence.

After about six months, Aisha was able to speak a limited amount of English, although her heavy accent left her vulnerable to the taunts of her peers. A few years later, it was impossible to tell that Aisha was not a native English speaker. After she had mastered the language, Aisha continued with her rigorous study habits, now turning her efforts toward math and science. She maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout high school and eventually went on to earn several scholarships to attend the local university.

Aisha had always been a believer, and she had relied on her faith to make it through the most difficult times in her life. As she reached adulthood and started college, the pull toward Islam and the importance of asserting her Muslim identity became even stronger.³ Aisha became more involved in the local mosque and also led several initiatives on her university campus to educate the public regarding Islam and the plight of Afghan refugees. During her senior year of college, Aisha began wearing the hijab, or headscarf, as a symbol of her devotion to her faith. Several of her family members had discouraged her from wearing the headscarf, as they feared she would be harassed and would not be able to get a job. Aisha defied her family and insisted on wearing the scarf. She was proud that she could represent Islam and was relieved when she was hired to work as a computer programmer soon after her graduation in the spring of 2001.

Then, four months later, the 9/11 hijackers carried out the coordinated air assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As Aisha watched the Twin Towers collapse over and over again on television, she was overwhelmed with sorrow. She had spent the first decade of her life living in the midst of terrible violence, and she had never imagined that the United States—a place where she had always felt safe—would become the target of such hateful destruction. The blow was worsened when she learned that the men who committed the atrocities claimed to practice the same religion she did and that Osama bin Laden, the leader of the al Qaeda terrorist network responsible for the attacks, had apparently sought refuge in her native Afghanistan.

Aisha could not help but wonder about her future in the United States. Her teachers, co-workers, and others in the community had always held

her up as a source of inspiration and hope: Aisha was living proof that the American dream was alive and well. Would she now be viewed by those very same people as a threat? Would strangers believe that she was a terrorist who wished to do them harm? Would the doors that had previously been open to her now be closed indefinitely?

The Islamic faith has long been misunderstood, misrepresented, and viewed with suspicion in the United States and throughout much of the Western world.⁴ Yet nothing could have prepared Muslim Americans for the response that followed 9/11. Although some members of the public issued calls for tolerance and restraint, fearmongers seemed to drown out the voices of reason. In the aftermath of 9/11, religious leaders, politicians, media pundits, and self-proclaimed terrorism experts exploited the feelings of an already-terrified citizenry by offering gross overgeneralizations and blatantly incorrect depictions of Muslims as monoliths of extremism and hatred.⁵

Franklin Graham, an evangelical Christian leader who delivered the invocation and sermon at President George W. Bush's 2001 inauguration, described Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion" after the terrorist attacks.⁶ Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, referred to the Prophet Muhammad (whom Muslims revere and believe was the last messenger of God) as a "demon-possessed pedophile" and added that "Allah is not Jehovah either. Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people."⁷ In his 2002 book, *The Everlasting Hatred*, Christian prophetic writer Hal Lindsey warned Americans that "Islam represents the single greatest threat to the continued survival of the planet that the world has ever seen."⁸ John Hagee, an evangelical pastor whose weekly sermons are broadcast to millions of homes, has long been an outspoken critic of the Islamic faith. In a post-9/11 radio interview, he stated that "those who live by the Qur'an have a scriptural mandate to kill Christians and Jews. . . . [I]t teaches that very clearly." Yet, for a man who purportedly knows so much about Islam, Hagee repeatedly and incorrectly refers to Muslims as "Islamics."

Soon after 9/11, Saxby Chambliss, a Republican congressional representative and future senator of Georgia, informed a group of law enforcement officers that the best antiterrorist measure for his district would be to "turn loose" the local sheriff and "let him arrest every Muslim that crosses the state line."⁹ Chambliss seemed to be simply echoing the calls for racial and religious profiling that Republican Representative John Cooksey had previously expressed, telling a talk radio show host that "someone who comes in that's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around that diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over."¹⁰

On separate occasions, television commentators Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity compared the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.¹¹ Talk radio host Michael Savage told listeners that to "save the United States," lawmakers should institute an "outright ban on Muslim immigration." Savage also recommended making "the construction of mosques illegal in America."¹²

More than twenty books on the "Islamic menace" were published in the one-year period following the 9/11 attacks.¹³ Two of those books became best-selling titles among the thousands of books on Islam at Amazon.com: *American Jihad: The Terrorists among Us*, by Steven Emerson, and *Militant Islam Reaches America*, by Daniel Pipes. In his writings on the threat that the growing Muslim population allegedly poses in the United States, newspaper columnist Cal Thomas advises his readers that "it is past time to stop worrying about political correctness . . . and [time] to start telling the truth. America's enemies are among us. They are here to kill us."¹⁴

Never before had Muslims been subject to such overt hostility from so many different corners. Not surprisingly, violent outbursts and discriminatory actions followed: Civil-rights organizations recorded thousands of incidents of anti-Islamic and anti-Arab harassment, hate crimes, and vandalism in the months following 9/11 (see Chapter 2). In addition to the attacks on Muslims and Arabs, public anger was directed at other religious and ethnic minorities who were mistakenly identified as "Middle Eastern." Federal officers raided mosques and froze the assets of several major Islamic charities that regularly sent donations overseas. Arab and Muslim men were questioned and arrested. Some were deported without their family members' knowledge of their whereabouts. Others were detained indefinitely and denied access to legal counsel. Members of religious and ethnic minority communities were barred from boarding airplanes based solely on their names, appearances, or countries of origin. Muslim children were bullied by their peers, and adults were fired from their jobs.

It was during the dark days immediately after 9/11 that I decided to document and to analyze the reactions of Muslim Americans to the terrorist attacks. Sociologists have long recognized that crisis events offer important opportunities for learning about human behavior and group life. In 1969, Robert Merton argued that disasters bring out, in bold relief, aspects of social systems that are not so readily apparent during less stressful periods.¹⁵ Nearly a decade earlier, Charles Fritz noted that disasters make normally private behaviors and interactions visible for public observation by compressing vital social processes into a brief time span.¹⁶ But disasters do more than simply reveal the inner workings of society. These events may also further unravel the weakest seams in the larger social fabric, intensifying preexisting inequalities and prejudices.

The 9/11 assaults have become a historical marker, seared into the consciousness of all Americans. Most citizens are likely to remember where they were and what they were doing when they first learned that the United States was under attack on the morning of September 11, 2001. Muslim Americans are no different. For them, however, the tragic events represent a dividing line not only in American history but also in their own collective religious history.

I spent just over two years, from late September 2001 through the end of December 2003, gathering the stories of 140 Muslim American women and men. All these individuals were practicing Muslims who were active in their local faith communities. They were relatively young, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-five years, and almost all were pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees or had recently graduated from college.¹⁷ These students and young professionals had their feet firmly planted in the United States, although many had traveled abroad or had lived in other countries for extended stretches of time. Most (82 percent) were born in the United States as the children of recent immigrants or they had migrated at a very young age.¹⁸ The remaining respondents had come to the United States to pursue educational or work opportunities (11 percent) or had converted to Islam as young adults (7 percent).

Because some spaces associated with Islam are segregated by gender, my position as a female researcher allowed me more access to women than men. Consequently, women made up the majority of my informants ($n = 93$), although I interviewed a number of men as well ($n = 47$). The participants were predominantly of South Asian ($n = 69$) or Arab ($n = 46$) descent, and I also interviewed white ($n = 13$), Latino ($n = 6$), and African American ($n = 6$) Muslims.¹⁹ All were fluent in English, and more than 70 percent spoke at least one other language (including Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Pashto, Punjabi, Bengali, Turkish, Cambodian, French, Indonesian, and Japanese). I conducted all the interviews, which lasted between one and four hours, tape recorded them, and later had them transcribed verbatim. This process produced thousands of pages of qualitative data. My analysis of the data is based on numerous close readings of the typewritten transcripts, which I coded using a qualitative software program.

In the first three months after 9/11, I organized small group interviews with all those who had agreed to participate in the study. These interviews allowed me to capture a wide range of perspectives from a relatively large and ethnically diverse sample of Muslims.²⁰ In the subsequent months and years, I followed up on the focus groups by interviewing participants one on one. I interviewed many of the people who appear in this book three to four times over the period of this research. In addition, I kept in touch with several of the participants via telephone and e-mail and thus was able to

pursue various themes and issues after the years of systematic data gathering were completed. Longitudinal studies of this sort are rare in the field of disaster research, where the one-time case-study method predominates.²¹ Yet, as sociologist Brenda Phillips has argued, it is exactly this sort of long-term, intensive immersion in the field that is required to acquire a thorough understanding of human behavior in postdisaster settings.²²

Most of the people who participated in this project lived in New York City at the time of the terrorist attacks. I also drew a smaller sample of interviewees from Colorado (where I lived in 2001). This other group allowed me more frequent access to a number of respondents and enabled me to compare their experiences with those who resided at the physical epicenter of the disaster.

I launched this study less than three weeks after the 9/11 attacks. I understood that it was vital that I get into the field quickly to collect valuable information, which would be lost if it were not captured in the short time frame following the attacks (disaster researchers refer to this as “perishable data”).²³ This methodological decision was not without consequences, however. The community that I set out to study was in the midst of the worst public and political backlash in its collective history. By the time I began collecting data in New York City on September 29, 2001, a rash of anti-Muslim hate crimes had already been recorded, and hundreds of Middle Eastern and Muslim men had been detained by federal authorities.

Given the magnitude of the 9/11 catastrophe and the shockwaves that it sent through the Muslim American community, I was concerned about my ability to access individuals who would agree to be interviewed. I also recognized that my status as an outsider to the religious faith could present various methodological barriers.²⁴ Therefore, I worked to foster relationships with a number of key informants in various Islamic student and professional organizations. I identified these organizations through Internet searches and based on the suggestions of colleagues and Muslim acquaintances. I made telephone calls and sent letters and e-mails until I made contact with at least one leader within each organization who was interested in the study. These key informants were crucial to the success of this project, as they introduced me to their friends, assisted with scheduling interviews, and vouched for me as a trustworthy person and researcher.

Much to my relief, once I actually began conducting interviews, I found that the young women and men were eager to tell me their stories. In fact, of all the people I approached after 9/11, only one individual declined to participate in the study. Some said that they felt it was their “obligation” to speak out, as they wanted their voices heard at a time when they felt vilified by the media and much of the public. Others simply appreciated having the opportunity to share their experiences with someone who was genuinely

interested in learning more. The research seemed to have a cathartic effect for many, as the extended qualitative interview format allowed the participants to talk freely about various issues relevant to their lives.²⁵ Throughout the text, I have changed the names and some identifying characteristics of the participants, to protect their privacy.

These men and women invited me into their homes, classrooms, and places of work and worship. I accompanied them to political and religious speeches and peace rallies, sat through college classes, shadowed them at their jobs, attended Muslim Students Association (MSA) meetings, observed Friday prayers at mosques, and ate Ramadan dinners at Islamic centers. I was invited to and attended several weddings and graduation parties, which allowed me the opportunity to interact with the friends and family members of the respondents. When participating in these various events, I always attempted to follow Islamic norms of social interaction (removing my shoes before entering someone's house, avoiding touching members of the opposite sex, wearing modest clothing, observing gender-segregated seating patterns, and so forth). I adhered to these rules of etiquette out of cultural and religious respect, and because I believed it would have been methodologically irresponsible and inappropriate to have behaved otherwise.

Spending time with the respondents helped me verify and better understand the experiences and information that came to light in the qualitative interviews. For instance, one of the greatest fears that the participants expressed immediately following 9/11, particularly among the women, was traveling on public transportation alone. As I walked through subway stations and sat on trains with these young women, it quickly became clear that the suspicious and angry looks they reported were not exaggerations.

Interest in the size and characteristics of the Muslim American population has risen sharply in the aftermath of 9/11. However, estimating the number of Muslims in the United States has proven difficult. The U.S. Census Bureau and the Immigration and Naturalization Service are not legally allowed to collect data on the religious affiliations of citizens or immigrants—due in large part to the principle of church-state separation—and therefore precise figures for the number or demographic characteristics of Muslims living in the United States do not exist. Moreover, because Muslims represent a very small percentage of the overall American population, figures drawn from general population surveys tend to be unreliable or overlook Muslims altogether.²⁶ Additional difficulties in counting the number of American Muslims emerge from the diverse nature of the population itself. Muslims can be of any race or geographic origin, and immigrants from dozens of different countries, native-born Muslims, and converts to the faith make up the Muslim American community.²⁷

As a result of these and other barriers to reliable data collection, estimates vary widely regarding the size of the population, and at times disagreement develops concerning who should be identified and counted as Muslim. The media, drawing on a variety of sources, commonly characterize the size of the Muslim population in the United States as ranging somewhere between three and nine million persons.²⁸ The Hartford Institute for Religious Research coordinated a 2001 study that estimated a population of between six and seven million Muslim Americans.²⁹ More recently, the Pew Research Center conducted a 2007 study that concluded that approximately 2.35 million Muslims lived in the United States. The Pew study, which was based on a nationwide survey of a representative sample of Muslim Americans, found that roughly 65 percent of adult Muslims living in the United States were born elsewhere and that slightly more than half of all native-born Muslims converted to Islam.

One thing that is certain is that the size of the Muslim American community is increasing steadily. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, and some scholars predict that by the middle of the twenty-first century it will become the nation's second-largest religion—surpassed only by Christianity in terms of its number of adherents.³⁰

The growth of the Muslim population in America can be divided into several distinct phases. The first Muslims in North America may have been seafarers who made the perilous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean before Christopher Columbus.³¹ Later, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, an undetermined number of African Muslims were brought to America under the brutal slave trade. These individuals were largely forced to abandon their faith, their traditions, their native languages, and their friends and families.³² The adoption of Islam by some twentieth-century African Americans has been linked, in part, to an emotional tie to this early New World history.³³

The earliest voluntary migration of Muslims to the United States began during the late 1800s and consisted mostly of individuals from Eastern Europe and parts of the Ottoman Empire, including modern Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine.³⁴ Around the middle of the twentieth century, significant numbers of Muslim students from developing countries began attending American universities.³⁵ These individuals, many of whom eventually settled in the United States, helped establish some of the first national Muslim organizations and major Islamic centers and mosques in American cities.

Three primary factors drive the more recent and rapid expansion of the Muslim American community: (1) birth rates, (2) religious conversion (especially among African Americans and whites), and, most significantly, (3) changing immigration trends and patterns.³⁶ In 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which repealed highly restrictive

country-of-origin quotas established in the 1920s that favored Western European, mostly Judeo-Christian, immigrants. This post-1965 change in federal immigration policy led to an unprecedented diversification of the American population over subsequent decades, as millions of immigrants and refugees arrived from around the world, pulled here by economic and educational opportunities or pushed from their homelands as a result of political turmoil, wars, revolutions, and environmental disasters.³⁷ These and other social, political, and economic forces have made the United States the most religiously diverse nation on earth, and Muslim Americans represent an increasingly important segment of society.³⁸

In the aftermath of 9/11, the media and public officials often used the terms “Muslim” and “Arab” interchangeably. This conflation of categories led to the perception among many that all Muslims are Arab and that all Arabs are Muslim.³⁹ This is certainly not the case. Muslim is an identifier used to describe those who believe in the religion of Islam, and thus Muslims can come from any nation and be of any racial or ethnic background. An estimated 1.57 billion Muslims live in countries spanning the globe, and only about 20 percent of the world’s Muslims reside in Arabic-speaking countries.⁴⁰ In fact, the four nations with the largest Muslim populations—Indonesia (203 million), Pakistan (174 million), India (161 million), and Bangladesh (145 million)—are all located outside the Arab world.⁴¹

Approximately 300 million Arabs live in the world today. Arabs represent a heterogeneous ethnic population that shares a cultural and linguistic heritage and includes people who live in or trace their ancestries to countries in northern Africa and southwestern Asia where the primary language is Arabic.⁴² The 2000 U.S. Census identified 1.2 million Americans who reported ancestry in one of the 22 Arab countries, but Arab American advocacy organizations claim the population may be three times that size.⁴³ Arabs may be of any religious background; in the United States, an estimated two-thirds of all Arab Americans are Christian, with the remaining one-third being Muslim.⁴⁴

The Muslim American community is strikingly diverse. Muslim immigrants to the United States, who make up nearly two-thirds of the entire Muslim American population, come from at least 68 countries, and these individuals have different traditions, practices, doctrines, languages, and beliefs.⁴⁵ According to the Pew Research Center, more than one-third (37 percent) of all foreign-born Muslims are from Arabic-speaking countries. An additional 27 percent emigrated from South Asian countries, including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. A substantial number of Muslims have also arrived from Iran (12 percent), Europe (8 percent), and sub-Saharan Africa (6 percent). Even with the heavy presence of immigrants among the Muslim population, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of

all American Muslims are U.S. citizens. Just over one-third of all Muslim Americans were born in the United States, and, of these individuals, most identify as black or African American (56 percent), white (31 percent), or Hispanic (10 percent).⁴⁶

Muslims live in every state in the United States, although they tend to be concentrated in large cities and traditional immigrant-receiving centers. The ten metropolitan areas with the largest populations of Muslim Americans include Los Angeles; New York City; Detroit; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Orange County, California; Houston; Oakland; San Diego; and Boston.⁴⁷ Despite their predominantly immigrant and ethnic minority status, Muslims are actually less residentially segregated than many other groups. Most Muslims live in neighborhoods where they form a distinct minority amid a mostly white majority (notable exceptions exist in such places as Detroit and New York City, and, as their numbers continue to grow, it is likely that Muslims will begin to create enclaves elsewhere).⁴⁸

Socioeconomic factors may help explain the high rates of residential integration among the Muslim population. With the exception of African American Muslims, America's Muslims are generally better educated and more affluent than the nation as a whole. Nearly 60 percent of Muslim Americans hold college degrees, which is more than double the national average.⁴⁹ Muslim American women are one of the most highly educated female religious groups, second only to Jewish American women.⁵⁰ Muslim Americans also have the highest degree of economic gender parity—meaning that men and women tend to be more on “equal footing” in terms of earnings—of any religious group in the United States.⁵¹

Muslim Americans experience lower poverty rates than most other religious or ethnic minority groups in the United States, which is not surprising given their generally high rates of educational attainment. More than half of all Muslims have incomes in excess of \$50,000 a year, and their average overall annual income is about \$55,000.⁵² These statistics reflect the fact that nearly 50 percent of all Muslim Americans earn their living in such professions as engineering, medicine, teaching, and business management.⁵³ Muslims also represent a relatively young segment of American society: Three-quarters of adult Muslims are younger than fifty years old.⁵⁴

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many Americans, and this is especially true for Muslim Americans. A nationally representative survey found that 80 percent of Muslim Americans acknowledge the importance of faith in their lives.⁵⁵ About 60 percent of Muslim Americans say that they pray every day,⁵⁶ and just over 40 percent attend services at a mosque at least once a week.⁵⁷ Younger Muslim Americans (those under age thirty) report attending religious services more frequently than do older Muslims.⁵⁸ Muslim American women are as likely as Muslim American men to attend

mosque at least once a week.⁵⁹ This is in sharp contrast with the gender pattern observed in many Muslim majority countries, where men are more likely than women to regularly attend religious services.⁶⁰

In 2003, the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) launched a national “Islam in America” ad campaign. In running the series of advertisements, CAIR, which is one of the largest and most active Islamic civil-rights and advocacy organizations in the United States, hoped to address common misperceptions about Islam while also underscoring the significant diversity of its followers. The campaign kicked off with a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, headlined with the words, “We’re all Americans.” Just below the headline, the ad featured photographs of a white man, an African American girl, and an Asian man and asked the question “But, which one of us is a Muslim?” The response, “We all are. . . . [W]e’re American Muslims,” was followed by three paragraphs of text that outlined a number of basic facts about Islam and Muslims. Other major Islamic organizations, including the MSA national office, the Islamic Circle of North America, and the Islamic Society of North America, have embarked on similar campaigns to educate the public regarding the basic tenets of the faith.

Even before the 9/11 attacks, Muslim Americans faced an uphill battle in their quest to enlighten a mostly non-Muslim public. For decades, Americans have been bombarded with derogatory images of Muslims in film and television. On the big and the small screen, the Islamic faith is regularly linked with the oppression of women, holy war, and terrorist attacks. Jack Shaheen, who reviewed more than 900 Hollywood movies for his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, notes that when mosques are displayed onscreen, the camera inevitably cuts to men praying and then gunning down civilians.⁶¹ Mainstream American and Western print and broadcast media also regularly, and unapologetically, reinforce the worst stereotypes about Islam—that it is a violent, primitive, and imminently hateful religion.⁶²

Since 9/11, negative perceptions of Muslims have been on the rise. For example, an *ABC News* poll found that four months after the terrorist attacks, 14 percent of Americans believed that mainstream Islam encourages violence. A year and a half later, that number had jumped to 34 percent.⁶³ In the same *ABC News* follow-up survey, 43 percent of Americans expressed the view that Islam does not teach respect for the beliefs of non-Muslims. In 2004 and 2005, CAIR commissioned two national surveys to gauge public sentiment about Islam and Muslims. Both surveys concluded that about one in four Americans harbors prejudice against Muslims. Specifically, in 2004, the survey found that 26 percent of respondents agreed that Islam teaches violence and hatred; 27 percent agreed that Muslims value life less than other people; 29 percent said that Muslims teach their children to hate nonbelievers; and just over half, 51 percent, agreed that Islam encourages the

oppression of women.⁶⁴ These numbers remained virtually unchanged in the 2005 survey.⁶⁵

In 2006, *ABC News* conducted a survey of 1,000 adults across the United States. The results showed that nearly six in ten Americans think Islam is prone to violent extremism, almost half regard the religion unfavorably, and about one-quarter of respondents openly admitted to harboring prejudicial feelings against Muslims and Arabs alike.⁶⁶ A *USA Today*/Gallup poll, also conducted in 2006, found that more than one-third of Americans (39 percent) feel some prejudice against Muslims. The same percentage favored requiring Muslims, including those who are U.S. citizens, to carry a special identification card “as a means of preventing terrorist attacks in the United States.” About one-third said American Muslims were sympathetic to al Qaeda, and 22 percent indicated that they would not want Muslims as neighbors.⁶⁷ By 2009, a majority of Americans had a negative impression of Islam, with 53 percent of Gallup survey respondents reporting that they viewed Islam unfavorably.⁶⁸

Americans’ attitudes toward Islam and Muslims are undoubtedly shaped, at least in part, by their lack of familiarity with the faith and its followers: Approximately six in ten Americans acknowledge that they do not have even a basic understanding of Islam.⁶⁹ In addition, many of those who report some knowledge of Islam actually hold incorrect beliefs about the faith. For example, about 10 percent of Americans think that Muslims worship a “moon god,” a notion that most Muslims would find not only false but also offensive.⁷⁰ These issues are further compounded by the fact that most Americans have no close relationships with Muslims. According to one study, only about one in five non-Muslim Americans has Muslim friends or colleagues.⁷¹ Several surveys have shown that those who are more knowledgeable about Islam—either through education or personal contact with Muslims—are a good deal more likely to view the faith in a favorable light.⁷² Research has also found that familiarity and contact with Arabs and Muslims leads to more willingness to defend the civil liberties of these persons.⁷³

The aforementioned survey data point to two troubling trends: First, most Americans have very little knowledge of the Islamic faith; and second, public opinion has grown increasingly negative toward Muslims in the years since the 9/11 attacks. If history has taught us anything, it is that ignorance and hostility make for very dangerous bedfellows, especially during times of war and national insecurity.

Indeed, the United States has a long record of demonizing immigrants and ethnic minorities from enemy countries during times of conflict. With the U.S. declaration of war against Imperial Germany on April 6, 1917, approximately half a million German immigrants were classified as “enemy

aliens.”⁷⁴ During World War I, the federal government conducted round-ups of Germans, registered more than 260,000 male and 220,000 female enemy aliens, and arrested and subsequently detained roughly 6,300 Germans in internment camps.⁷⁵

Just over twenty years after the last German internees had been released, the United States entered World War II. This time, almost a million immigrants and American citizens who traced their roots to the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—were labeled enemy aliens, fingerprinted, and registered. Approximately 2,300 Germans and an estimated 200 Italians in the United States were interned in camps during World War II.⁷⁶ Race prejudice and war-time hysteria resulted in the incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese American men, women, and children for the duration of World War II.⁷⁷ More than two-thirds of the Japanese detainees were native-born American citizens, although this status was meaningless in the face of mass arrests and forced removal from their homes and communities. Ultimately, none of the Japanese detainees was incriminated for any involvement in sabotage or espionage.

In one of many belated apologies issued to Japanese Americans, President George H. W. Bush promised that the atrocities committed by the federal government would “never be repeated.”⁷⁸ Yet, in 1986, the Reagan-Bush administration considered using two military compounds in the southern United States for the possible internment of Arab Americans.⁷⁹ A few years prior to that, the Carter administration contemplated the arrest and incarceration of Iranian students at U.S. universities as a result of the hostage crisis growing out of the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran.⁸⁰ The Federal Bureau of Investigation launched one of its first national campaigns to interview and to deport Arab Americans following the Munich massacre.⁸¹ The crisis began when Palestinian militants kidnapped eleven Israeli athletes and coaches during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. The militants murdered all eleven hostages, and five of the eight terrorists were killed when German authorities attempted to rescue the hostages.

Since 1999, the U.S. government has entered into a series of contracts with major corporations to build detention camps at undisclosed locations within the United States. The government has also contracted with several companies to manufacture thousands of railcars, some reportedly equipped with shackles, apparently to transport detainees.⁸² In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, calls for the internment and mass deportation of Muslims abounded, and a provision in the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 (introduced as the Provide Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001) created a legal framework for establishing detention centers to incarcerate U.S. citizens and foreign nationals.⁸³ Understandably, promises of “never again” offer little consolation to Middle Eastern and Muslim

Americans, who are keenly aware that they are the latest minority group to be defined as threatening outsiders following a national tragedy. With that awareness comes heightened levels of anxiety and mistrust.

The purpose of the chapters that follow is threefold. First, drawing on official statistics and in-depth interviews, I examine the character and breadth of discrimination that Muslim Americans have endured before and especially after the 9/11 attacks. As this book shows, Muslim Americans were confronted with stereotypes and harassment prior to 9/11. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Muslims experienced a dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of these hostile encounters. *Behind the Backlash* documents the verbal harassment; violent threats and intimidation; physical assault; religious profiling; and employment, educational, and housing discrimination that Muslims faced following 9/11. Second, I explore the personal and social impacts of the backlash. The first-hand accounts provide a glimpse into the personal and collective trauma that can arise when religious minorities are subjected to extreme prejudice and exclusion. Third, I discuss the ways that Muslim Americans have coped with and responded to assaults on their faith, families, and personal identities. I draw on sociological insights to explain the struggles of young Muslim adults to establish community and to define their identities during a time of national crisis. Ultimately, this book explores how disasters and other crisis events impact the most marginalized members of our society.