The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, founded in 1922 as The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, is a leading independent, nonpartisan organization committed to influencing the discourse on global issues through contributions to opinion and policy formation, leadership dialogue, and public learning.

Strengthening America: The Civic and Political Integration of Muslim Americans

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON MUSLIM AMERICAN CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT
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Christopher B. Whitney, Project Director
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THE CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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For further information about The Chicago Council or this Task Force, please write to The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1100, Chicago, IL, 60604, or visit www.thechicagocouncil.org.

Project Director—Christopher Whitney

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Table of Contents

Foreword ............................................................ 3

Executive Summary ............................................. 7

Part I: The Challenge

1 Call to Action .................................................... 18

2 The Muslim American Experience ......................... 22

3 September 11 and Muslim Americans ..................... 28

4 The Challenge of Integration ................................. 33

Part II: Recommendations

#1 Expand and Recognize Muslim American Contributions to National Security .................. 37

#2 Improve Media Coverage and Public Understanding of Muslim Americans .................. 44

#3 Increase Civic Engagement among Muslim Americans ................................................. 49

#4 Build Stronger Muslim American Institutions ......................................................... 56

#5 Cultivate the Next Generation of Muslim American Leaders .................................... 63

#6 Give Ongoing National Attention to Muslim American Integration ........................... 68

Conclusion ............................................................. 70

Appendix: Muslim American Institutions .......................................................... 72

Signers of the Report .............................................. 86

Task Force Cochairs ............................................... 87

Participant Biographic Summaries .................................................. 89

Task Force Observers ............................................... 98

Task Force Session Speakers ...................................... 99

Selected Bibliography ............................................. 101

Sidebar Source Information ....................................... 105
America’s strength has long been tied to its commitment to diversity and its openness to the waves of immigrants arriving on its shores from every corner of the world. The talents and energies of these immigrants and their dedication to the values of their adopted country have made the United States the world’s strongest and most adaptive nation. Muslim American immigrants, while a relatively recent addition to the American mosaic, were on a path taken by many previous immigrant groups prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks. Those groups had come to the United States in search of the American dream and through hard work achieved much economic success. The path also eventually led them to full participation in U.S. civic and political life.

The Muslim American path to integration changed dramatically with the tragic events of September 11, which left many Americans questioning the loyalty and intentions of Muslim Americans. The subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the broader war on terrorism contributed to deepening suspicions at a time when Muslim Americans lacked well recognized institutions and leaders who could have helped respond to public concerns.

It is in the interest of all Americans not to allow an atmosphere of distrust and misunderstanding to endure. The nation faces critical foreign and domestic policy challenges relating directly to Muslim populations around the world, which Muslim Americans can help address. Muslim and non-Muslim Americans must work together to expand the opportunities for Muslim Americans to participate in the national discourse and help meet the urgent challenges ahead. Doing so will enhance the nation’s security and well-being and reaffirm our commitment to equality under the law, pluralism, and tolerance as bedrock principles of American society.

The Task Force

The Chicago Council Task Force on Muslim American Civic and Political Engagement was convened in February 2006 to consider the engagement of Muslim Americans in the national discourse on U.S. foreign policy. Cochaired by Farooq Kathwari, chairman, president, and chief executive officer of Ethan Allen Inc., and Lynn Martin, former U.S. secretary of labor and former U.S. congresswoman from Illinois, the Task Force brought together thirty-two leading figures
from around the United States to examine the challenges and opportunities for greater Muslim American civic and political participation and to develop a report of findings and recommendations. The Task Force’s mandate expressly did not include an examination of U.S. foreign or national security policy toward the Muslim world or any part of it, the perceptions of the American public and American leaders of events and issues involving Muslims outside the United States, the actions or attitudes of Muslim communities toward the United States and its policies and how those actions and attitudes affect Muslim Americans, or the views of Muslim Americans in particular of U.S. policies and actions in the Muslim world or any other dimension of U.S. foreign policy.

As a Midwest institution, The Chicago Council is well positioned to facilitate a dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim leaders on these important issues. The Midwest is home to four of the nine U.S. states with the largest Muslim populations, and there is great diversity within these communities. The Chicago Council also has a strong interest in addressing issues related to immigration. The Council believes that perspectives from the Midwest will be a valuable addition to the national discourse on Muslim American integration.

Acknowledgments

The Chicago Council would like to first thank the Task Force’s co-chairs, Farooq Kathwari and Lynn Martin, for their leadership and guidance through a demanding eighteen-month process. The Council is especially fortunate to have found two leaders with such broad and complementary experience who could bring their expertise to bear on such a complex and controversial topic. Informed conversations on the role of Muslim Americans in American public life are currently taking place only in a few, small specialized circles. It is a testament to the insight, energy, and dedication of Secretary Martin and Mr. Kathwari that the Task Force was able to assemble a broad and diverse group of prominent individuals on the topic; conduct a series of wide-ranging discussions with the group; seek the views of many interested parties from government, nongovernmental organizations, the media, academia, and civic communities in the United States and Europe; and incorporate the insights gleaned from this process into a thoughtful, wide-ranging report.

The Council would also like to extend its deep gratitude to the Task Force members. They brought varied backgrounds and perspectives to the table and yet were willing to work together during the deliberations to develop agreement on the broad framework for the report’s recommendations. I would like to thank them in particular for their commitment of time and knowledge and their willingness to exchange views in a frank and open manner.

The Council is grateful to Caroline P. Cracraft, formerly of the British Consulate General of Chicago, and Qamar-ul Huda of the United States Institute for Peace, who served as observers and advisors to the Task Force.

Nadia Roumani made invaluable contributions to the Task Force process with two commissioned papers on capacity building for Muslim American institutions that she wrote and presented to the Task Force. These studies provided important information for the development of the report. The Chicago Council would also like to thank Brie Loskota for her work in coauthoring one of the papers. I would also like to thank Craig Charney and his colleagues at Charney Research for organizing two focus groups of Muslims and non-Muslims that helped the Task Force understand perceptions of Muslim Americans.

The Task Force’s deliberations were informed by the knowledge and perspectives offered by outside experts who spoke to the Task Force. We are grateful to Richard Cizik, Marda Dunsky, Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, Sulayman Nyang, and Agha Saeed for providing their time, thoughts, and counsel.

The Council and Task Force co-chairs would like to thank the numerous government officials, community leaders, experts, and members of the media who met with delegations of Task Force members during visits to Los Angeles, New York City, Washington, D.C., London, and Paris. In particular, the Council would like to thank Andrew Seaton, the British consul general in Chicago, and Richard Barbeyron, the former French consul general in Chicago, for their assistance in organizing a very informative set of meetings in London and Paris, respectively. The Council would also like to thank Task Force member Philippa Strum for helping to facilitate these meetings, traveling tirelessly to participate in them, and for hosting the report’s release at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The Council extends a special thanks to all who contributed to the writing and editing of the Task Force report, most especially the Council’s executive director for studies, Christopher Whitney, who led the process of creating a report that expresses so well the agreed conclusions of the group. Patricia O’Toole played a critical editing role in refining the draft report, and The Chicago Council is very grateful for the time she dedicated to the project.
Several members of the Council staff played key parts in planning and implementing the project and creating the Task Force's report. As project director Christopher Whitney masterminded the entire project from beginning to end with great skill and extraordinary dedication. Alya Adamany very ably managed all the meeting logistics and provided valuable input to recruiting Task Force members, preparing session summaries, and developing the report. Council intern Victoria Strokova very diligently worked on the report sidebars and fact-checked the report. Chicago Council staff, including Rachel Bronson, Elisa Miller, Silvia Veltcheva, J.D. Bindenagel, Richard Longworth, Daniela Abuzatoaie, and Gina Demke, along with Chicago Council interns Ruby Khan, Leena Al Arian, Diya Bose, Amisha Chaudhary, Sarah Rashid, Katie Shepherd, and Keith Weghorst, also made valuable contributions to the effort.

Finally, The Chicago Council would like to express its deep appreciation and thanks to the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and Javeed Akhter for the generous support that made the Task Force and this report possible.

Marshall M. Bouton
President
The Chicago Council on Global Affairs
Muslim American organizations and leaders have not fully and readily acknowledged the potential for radicalism within the community and the need for vigilance in countering it has been a barrier to understanding and dialogue. Some Americans have continued to view Muslim Americans with suspicion because they question the compatibility of Islam with American values, focusing on issues such as the treatment of women and the separation of church and state.

Many Muslim Americans and some other Americans believe that hostility toward Islam and Muslim Americans is preventing their voices from being heard and their contributions from being recognized. The contention among some Americans that Islam is incompatible with American values is thought to fuel organized attempts to discredit Islam and exclude Muslims from the nation’s civic and political life. This has created fear and resentment among many Muslim Americans that has also contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust.

Further complicating the problem is the fact that Muslim Americans are a relatively new and numerically limited presence in American life. Like previous immigrants and other minority groups, they have not yet developed the capacity to speak out and be heard clearly in the public square. The Muslim American community lacks strong institutions and recognizable public or political voices to gain regular access to government and media circles. Americans’ knowledge of Islam and their personal contact with Muslims also remain sparse, undermining efforts to build respect through familiarity.

For all these reasons, Muslim Americans have been relatively absent from the public discourse and our civic and political life. This lack of engagement comes at time when the talents and perspectives of Muslim Americans are needed to address the enormous domestic and foreign policy challenges that face the nation, especially those related to Muslim countries and Muslim peoples around the world. The disengagement of Muslim Americans undermines American values, especially the conviction that the success of our nation relies on embracing our diversity and involving all our citizens in the public arena.

The gathering climate of suspicion and mutual mistrust, exacerbated by the lack of engagement and dialogue, threatens to marginalize and alienate some Muslim Americans to the point where the danger of radicalization of a small minority could become a real possibility. It would take only a single, significant act of terrorism in the United States involving Muslim Americans to cement the impression that rampant radicalism has taken root within the community.

Therefore, the Task Force believes that creating full and equal opportunities for civic and political participation of Muslim Americans is an urgent national need. It is vital that Muslim Americans find ways to demonstrate visibly their commitment to America, its institutions, and its values. This well-educated, diverse group has the potential to make contributions to civic life and policy discourse as varied and numerous as those of any other group of Americans.

The Task Force prepared this report in order to present a balanced, nonpartisan assessment of the current Muslim American experience and recommendations for expediting the Muslim American journey to full civic and political integration. Many immigrant and minority groups have had to overcome suspicion and hostility in order to win full acceptance in the public sphere. While there is no doubt that Muslim Americans would in time achieve full integration in U.S. society, just as other groups have, the need to accelerate the process is urgent. The risks of inaction are substantial: further marginalization of Muslim Americans at best and serious alienation at worst.

The goal of bringing Muslim Americans into the fold of American life as quickly as possible is in the interest of all Americans. Muslim American leaders and organizations, government, the policy establishment, the media, and other major institutions all have significant roles to play in this process. The short-term need is critical, and the long-term gains cannot be overstated. The civic and political engagement of Muslim Americans will not only increase security, but enrich our policies, our society, and our standing as a nation that upholds basic human values of decency and fairness and that provides hope and opportunity for all.

The recommendations that follow call upon a wide range of institutions and leaders, Muslim and non-Muslim, to assist in speeding the Muslim American journey to full participation.

Recommendation #1
Expand and Recognize Muslim American Contributions to National Security

The horror of the September 11 attacks brought Americans together in their common humanity and a sense of purpose in countering the threat of terrorism. Many Muslim Americans shared in this reaction and commitment. A number of prominent Muslim American organizations condemned the attacks of September 11, reached out to help the victims, worked to raise awareness of the Quran’s teachings against violence, and cooperated with law enforcement agencies
on antiterrorism efforts. While government officials have credited Muslim Americans for these and subsequent efforts, doubts about the efforts persist. The visibility and effectiveness of the Muslim American response to September 11 was limited in part by the lack of institutional capacity and recognizable voices in the community. It remains critical that Muslim Americans take more active steps to counter the threat of terror and that the government work more effectively to build trust and partnerships with the Muslim American community.

Disavowing terrorism

Many Muslim Americans have taken positive steps to denounce terrorism and differentiate their traditions from the beliefs of radical groups. It is crucial that they continue to focus on these positive steps as the danger of terrorism persists. While Muslim Americans question the fairness of holding all Muslim Americans responsible for constantly condemning the actions of a few extremists, the reality is that in the eyes of much of American society, the burden is still on Muslim Americans to respond. Muslim American leaders and organizations can amplify their condemnations of extremism and terrorist acts, strengthen their efforts to prevent radical activity within the Muslim American community, and find more effective ways to communicate these endeavors to the media and the public.

Expanding contributions to homeland security

Successful partnerships between Muslim Americans and local law enforcement such as Southern California’s Muslim-American Homeland Security Congress should be expanded. A national network of such partnerships could play a vital role in the early detection of potential threats. Programs like the Muslim Public Affairs Council’s “National Grassroots Campaign to Fight Terrorism” can be extended to all U.S. mosques. Muslim leaders can do more to encourage young Muslim Americans to seek employment with the U.S. government and could work with relevant government agencies to create internships.

The U.S. government can do more to facilitate communication and cooperation with Muslim America. Public statements by senior officials acknowledging the significance of Muslim American contributions to national security and emphasizing the importance of not holding any group accountable for the actions of a few would help build public acceptance and understanding of the community. Cultural sensitivity training for federal law enforcement officers would also increase the trust and communication necessary for fuller cooperation. A further vital step is to ensure that any investigations conducted by law enforcement be carried out in ways that do not violate U.S. laws and civil rights.

Recommendation #2

Improve Media Coverage and Public Understanding of Muslim Americans

In recent public opinion surveys, a sizable minority of Americans expressed fear and hostility toward Muslims and Islam, creating perceptions of a rising Islamophobia in the United States. Media efforts to educate the public on Islam and the lives of Muslim Americans have been complicated by the spread of terrorist violence in the Middle East and elsewhere and by terrorists’ continuing claim that they are acting in the name of Islam. While many major American newspapers and broadcast media have improved the quality of their coverage of Islam and Muslim societies since September 11, others have continued to present Islam as a monolith and to portray Muslims in stereotypical or biased ways that create an “us-versus-them” mentality. Public opinion studies also show that Americans who are more familiar with Islam and know Muslim Americans personally are more likely to see them as being like other Americans.

Working with the media

Media organizations and Muslim American groups could jointly sponsor seminars to address concerns on both sides and deepen relationships and understanding. Muslim organizations could train their leaders and spokespersons to communicate more effectively with the media and proactively pitch stories. The media can work to eliminate or clarify language that conflates Islam or Muslims with fascism or terrorism, strive for informed coverage of events—including Muslim American condemnations of violence and radicalism—and support the training of more Muslim American journalists.
Creating an independent, national organization dedicated to public education

The creation of a new nonadvocacy institution focused on educating the public about Muslim cultures and societies would help broaden American understanding. The institution would be nonethnic, non-denominational, and nonpolitical and would provide information on the rich and diverse heritage of the Muslim world through exhibitions, lectures, conferences, and publications. Over time, the organization could become a trusted, impartial source of information and expertise for the public, media, and government on the many facets of Muslim life throughout the world.

Undertaking a wide range of efforts to further public understanding

Demystifying Islam for the general public will require greater initiatives by many different Muslim American groups and other American organizations, working separately and in partnership. Interfaith activities, cultural events, and educational initiatives at the primary, secondary, and university levels would all increase awareness of the community and its intellectual, scientific, and cultural achievements. It is vital that non-Muslim religious and secular organizations take part in this work since they have the capacity to reach audiences that Muslim institutions cannot, and their participation would enhance the legitimacy and credibility of the message.

Recommendation #3
Increase Civic Engagement among Muslim Americans

Much of the groundwork for achieving increased civic and political integration is in place. Most Muslim Americans view the United States as their home. They see no contradiction between the moral teachings of Islam and the values that Americans hold dear. A number of institutions and initiatives are already positioned to help. Speeding Muslim American integration is in the interest of all Americans, and success will involve building on these foundations and creating stronger ties between Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

Expanding partnerships

Encouraging Muslim Americans to play a greater part in civic life should be a high priority for Muslim organizations. Opportunities for engagement can be increased by expanding existing partnerships with non-Muslim groups and by forming new partnerships. Such activities create opportunities for Muslim leaders to frame public service in a Muslim context and make civic participation a fundamental element of Muslim American life.

Forming a national leadership group of prominent Muslim Americans

A leadership network of prominent Muslim Americans could strengthen Muslim American institutions and create new programs to encourage Muslim youth to enter public service. The enhanced communication among Muslim American leaders would help their organizations and the community at large respond more rapidly and effectively to public and media interest, especially in times of heightened concern. Members of the leadership group could also serve as “community ambassadors” to the U.S. government, offering informed perspectives on U.S. relations with Muslim societies, and as interlocutors between Muslim Americans and Muslim communities abroad.

Building coalitions on important policy initiatives

Muslim American organizations could make a valuable contribution to the American body politic by expanding their participation in coalitions concerned with issues such as immigration, public health, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. This will help other Americans understand that Muslims have great concern for a wide range of issues affecting the national well-being. It will also enable Muslims to expand their contributions to the larger society and increase the moral authority of Muslim leaders when they seek support on issues of particular interest to Muslim Americans.

Bridging religious divides

The country would benefit from greater cooperation among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish organizations. All three faiths share a deep spiritual connection to the Middle East, but their disagreements over U.S. foreign policy and events in the region have severely strained interfaith relations and hampered the dialogue and collaboration on numerous important domestic issues. Current conversations can be expanded to include an increasingly diverse group of organizations, becoming the basis of a national forum for interfaith discussions.
Recommendation #4
Build Stronger Muslim American Institutions

Muslim American institutions do not have the range of opportunities for participation in the policy discourse to meet the community’s and the nation’s needs. Their limited role is partly attributable to the diversity of Muslim America, which complicates efforts to coalesce on issues or to create institutions that cross over among different Muslim American groups. The capacity constraints typical of young ethnic and religious institutions have also been a handicap. In addition, some institutions have avoided foreign policy issues for fear of drawing unfavorable scrutiny or detracting from their work on civil rights. While the challenge of strengthening Muslim American institutions may appear daunting, similar challenges have been met time and again by other immigrant groups and minority communities. Many of the strategies used by these groups can be emulated by Muslim Americans.

Increasing institutional effectiveness and engagement

It is critical that existing Muslim American organizations be strengthened further and that new ones be formed to help increase understanding of Muslim American life and facilitate participation in the civic and political discourse. Many existing institutions need to restructure, develop new strategies, and learn how to effectively deliver their messages. They need to provide Muslim Americans with education on the workings of American civic and political life, and they need to improve dialogue and interaction across ethnic, sectarian, and generational lines within the Muslim American community. As they build capacity, Muslim organizations will have more success in forming partnerships with non-Muslim organizations to address issues of common concern. American foundations should be encouraged to make a long-term commitment to helping these institutions become more effective.

Broadening academic and policy initiatives

The engagement of more Muslim American scholars in the activities of think tanks, research institutes, and universities on issues related to Islam and Muslim societies would also be valuable. There is a need for endowed chairs, fellowships, centers for policy and area studies, and other structures to support the work of established and emerging Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islam. Postdoctoral fellowship programs in Islamic studies that are open to Americans of all religious backgrounds as well as fellowship programs for young Muslim American scholars studying important public policy issues of all types are also needed. Enlarging the scope and impact of academic and policy initiatives will require the strong commitment of American universities, think tanks, government agencies, and philanthropists.

More collaboration between Muslim American institutions and established think tanks and research institutes would also strengthen Muslim American integration into the policy discourse. There are few strong links between Muslim American institutions and leaders and think tanks and research institutes undertaking work related to Islam and Muslim communities. More joint efforts would help add new perspectives to the policy discussions of think tanks and research institutes. It would also help Muslim American institutions build their knowledge base by providing more exposure to policy analysis.

Recommendation #5
Cultivate the Next Generation of Muslim American Leaders

Young Muslim Americans are also not as fully engaged as other American youth in U.S. political and civic life. Developing the leadership potential and professional skills of young Muslim Americans is crucial to creating an informed, seasoned, and capable group of leaders who can contribute to the betterment of the nation as a whole. Engaging young Muslim Americans in civic life is also a critical factor in reducing the potential for alienation.

Making leadership development of young Muslim Americans a priority

Muslim American organizations could work with local, state, and federal government agencies to create internship programs for young Muslim Americans. Think tanks and universities based in Washington should be encouraged to create fellowship programs to increase understanding of the policy process. Muslim and non-Muslim institutions can also jointly sponsor speaking tours to encourage public service among young Muslim Americans.
Training young staff and new leaders

Developing leaders and staff is essential if Muslim American organizations are to maximize their ability to contribute to the policy discourse. Young staff members need high-quality theoretical and practical training. Special attention should be given to leadership training for women.

Recommendation #6
Give Ongoing National Attention to Muslim American Integration

Establishing an American Diversity Dialogue

The Task Force proposes that an ongoing American Diversity Dialogue among Muslim and non-Muslim leaders be established to examine critical issues related to Muslim civic and political integration in the United States. This would help give prominence to the issue and provide thoughtful and informed assessments of Muslim American civic and political integration over time. The American Diversity Dialogue would meet approximately three times a year in a rotating group of cities and would commission research to inform its discussions. It would issue an annual report on *The State of Muslim America* that would be widely disseminated to policymakers, the media, and the American public. Dialogue leadership and membership should be drawn from a group of highly respected public figures such as former government officials, business and civic leaders, and policy experts.

Creating a national philanthropic initiative on American diversity

A national philanthropic initiative on American diversity would expand financial support to nonprofit, nonpolitical educational, research, cultural, and civic organizations in order to deepen appreciation of diversity in America and strengthen its expression in society. The initiative would focus particularly on the Muslim American experience, strengthening public understanding of that experience and creating opportunities for greater Muslim American civic and political participation. Funding would come from foundations and individuals during a one-time capital campaign. The initiative’s corpus would be spent over a defined period of time such as ten years.

Conclusion

The recommendations in this report are offered as a step toward strengthening the democracy entrusted to us by the founding fathers and the U.S. Constitution. The integration of minority groups, women, and immigrants into our civic and political processes has been slow, challenging work in the past. Yet its practical and symbolic importance cannot be underestimated. Muslims, like many other immigrant groups, came to the United States in search of religious and political freedom, in need of refuge, and in hopes of prosperity. The tragic events of September 11 and their aftermath have challenged our security, put the dream of America to the test for Muslim Americans, and called our values as a nation into question.

Yet with today’s critical foreign and domestic policy challenges, there is an urgent need for Muslim Americans to enter more fully into the national discourse. This is first and foremost the responsibility of Muslim Americans themselves, but also of the government, the policy establishment, the media, and other major American institutions.

By working together to ensure that Muslim American voices are heard, we will not only increase our own security, but make our foreign policy a truer expression of who we are as a nation and reaffirm our commitment to the ideal of *E pluribus unum* (one out of many).
Strengthening America: The Civic and Political Integration of Muslim Americans

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