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## Sept. 11: Five Years Later

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Washington Post reporter **Tara Bahrapour** was online **Wednesday, Sept. 6, at noon ET** to discuss her story, [Young U.S. Muslims Strive for Harmony](#), about two young Muslim men in the Washington area and how they dealt with their faith after the Sept. 11 attacks.

The story is part of The Washington Post's special series [Sept. 11: Five Years Later](#).

### The transcript follows:

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**Tara Bahrapour:** Hi everyone, thanks for joining this discussion. I'm looking forward to it.

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**Washington, D.C.:** Are these Muslims Americans first, or second, or last? I have a hard time seeing any uniformed commitment to the principals of the United States of America, and support against terrorism!

**Tara Bahrapour:** I interviewed several young Muslim Americans for this article who were weighing what it meant to be Muslim and what it meant to be American and whether there was a conflict. For the most part, among those I talked to, there was no fundamental conflict -- they felt they were both. It was more figuring out the details on how to handle it when Islam and America seemed to be at odds with each other.

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**Falls Church, Va.:** The Muslim religion is at direct odds with an open liberal democratic society, so why do they come to Western nation if they abhor our open society, and loose morals, and unclean dietary laws in our public schools.

Our nation's history of tolerance for all religions was also based on other religions not demanding that the US changed its customs, and mores to fit one particular religion. To point some NYC schools has upended cafeterias for Muslim students - a city wide test was moved because it fell on some Islamic holy day, and complaints against Muslim men not speaking to or even assaulting female cops, female civic employees and even female lawyers and judges.

Couple all of this with a suspicious absence of American flag waving, and you wonder why Muslims are creating this atmosphere for themselves!

**Tara Bahrapour:** As to why they come to a Western nation, one third of Muslims in America are U.S.-born African-Americans, and many others are born here to immigrants or are the children of immigrants, so they are already here. That was the case with the two young men I wrote about in my story.

You bring up the point that America has a history of tolerance for all religions. I've heard this point made both by non-Muslims who feel that Muslims are trying to impose their religion on them, and by Muslims who feel their religion is not tolerated here. From feedback I have gotten on this subject, my impression is that the more communication, the better. I hope the Muslims I wrote about who are working to get involved more with civic life will help deepen the debate & increase understanding.

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**Southeast Washington, D.C.:** I guess being a young Muslim nowadays is kinda like being a black person in America. Even though you have done nothing wrong, you still feel that society doesn't treat you the same as everyone else. You feel as if you're looked upon as a potential terrorist/ killer/other negative stereotype. And there nothing you can do to change their minds.

People are treating you differently

**Tara Bahrapour:** I have talked with many Muslims who felt this way after September 11. But many do feel that there is something they can do to change minds. By speaking out, by engaging with the broader, non-Muslim society, by being open to dialogues that might challenge them but get these issues discussed. In looking for subjects for my article I came across Amin Al-Sarraf, the young man I wrote about, who is devoting himself to bringing about this kind of dialogue. Unfortunately I also came across Muslims who felt it was a bad idea to talk to the press, or had been told by their mosque leaders not to talk to the press or to outsiders. I think with any religion --

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Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc -- you will find people who are open to dialogue and exploration of ideas and people who are not.

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**Woodbridge, Va.:** I am a 42 year old white woman who still has a hard time with the fact that some Muslim women choose to wear these full body shrouds or that they are ridiculously submissive to the whims of men. If these women are not allowed to work, then how are they and their families supported? What if their husbands walk out on them? Do they starve? Between this and women getting stoned in Pakistan for adulterous affairs, I am sick and tired of seeing Muslim women apparently bearing the brunt of all that goes wrong in the world.

I have nothing good to say about ultra-orthodox anything. Do these hardline Muslims really expect to get along in Western society when they criticize everything about it constantly? Do they think the average American is happy about the oversexed culture and its obsession with stupidity like Britney Spears? How do they expect us to get along with them when they make no effort to get along with us?

**Tara Bahrapour:** Many women who wear hijab, including the wife of Basim Hawa, one of the subjects of my article, also work outside the home, join book clubs, drive cars, play sports, get divorces, and do many of the same things that women who don't wear hijab do. Without discounting the difficulties faced by women in certain fundamentalist societies, I think it is important to recognize that the hijab doesn't necessarily equate with those injustices. It has become a symbol of a lot of things that often don't apply to the women who wear it.

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**New York, NY:** I read this story and I am surprised that these kids were not pushed further on what they really think about being an American, and I sensed that there was almost a double-speak, condemning terrorist who act in their name, but also a subtle excuse for those who are outraged at the US, and that outrage does turn to violence.

Why were none of the Muslims pressed hard on the absolutely, unequivocal barbarity of killing human beings over a cartoon of Muhammad?

Sorry, I am still not seeing the all-American kid in many of these Muslims!

**Tara Bahrapour:** The young men I wrote about both said they were unequivocally opposed to violence in the name of Islam. In fact, it was the violence in London last summer that propelled Al-Sarraf to begin the Muslim American Project, an initiative to discuss these matters and try to make sure that kind of violence does not rise up among American Muslims.

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**Boston, Mass.:** In response to this comment:

"To point some NYC schools has upended cafeterias for Muslim students"

Well before NYC schools "upended" cafeterias for Muslim students all universities, schools, and colleges "upended" their cafeterias to comply with Kosher rules. I wonder if that person complained then!

The problem is that the language used by many bigoted Americans right now against their FELLOW Americans (terms like "they") - is creating an "us versus them" society.

**Tara Bahrapour:** Muslims I have talked to have mentioned that accommodations have been made for other faiths in schools and the work world, the most obvious being the Christmas holiday. Most say that they would like to have options -- in the school lunch case it could be the option of cheese pizza or beef hot dogs, for example. I don't know the history of battles to have Kosher food in cafeterias, but I imagine the feelings are similar -- among other things, wanting one's kids to feel included.

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**Falls Church, Va.:** Could you tell us something about the Muslim Student Association? Are they a force for social integration or segregation?

I noticed the women on my campus who updated the MSA bulletin board wore full hijab.

**Tara Bahrapour:** From what I understand, the Muslim Student Associations at universities and high schools are largely independent of each other and of any central philosophy. That means they can vary widely. One university's MSA can be very conservative and homogenous while another's can be much more diverse. I have also heard of MSAs bring in leaders from outside the university, who can influence the direction of the MSA. And have heard of individual MSAs changing over the years, becoming more conservative or more liberal depending on the students at that given time. So the question of whether they are a force for integration or isolation really depends on the individual MSA at any given time.

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**To the Muslim:** "And there nothing you can do to change their minds."

Be an exceptional American citizen! Don't try to understand the mind of a terrorist, condemn their vicious acts - loudly and without equivocation! Fly the American flag, and join our chorus for the resounding defeat of terrorists! Boldly state that your heart cries for AMERICAN soldiers getting killed and not for some person who don't know in a country you never visited who happens to Muslim and was killed by a bomb because al Qaeda uses his tent as a hang out!

**Tara Bahrapour:** Thanks for your comment. Many US Muslims agree with you that the answer is to be vocal in condemning terrorism and stating who they are and what they believe. I must say, however, that flying a flag, like wearing a scarf, or putting a ribbon magnet on your car, or displaying any other banner about your beliefs, should be an option -- to be done if it feels right to you -- not a requirement to prove your allegiance. I've heard some Muslim women say they feel hostility from some Muslims over their decision not to wear a scarf, and I've heard some Americans say they've felt hostility from other Americans for not flying a flag, or not stopping their pool game and putting their hand on their heart when the pledge of allegiance was playing. Any time a display of allegiance comes from intimidation it stops being allegiance and becomes something else.

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**Germantown, Md.:** Excellent article. We are both Muslims and Americans- we love this country, Osama Bin Laden is a terrorist-killer of innocent people and has no religion. I am an infidel under Osama's twisted logic. I condemn all barbaric acts against anyone.

**Tara Bahrapour:** Thank you. Many Muslims I spoke to felt this way.

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**Washington, D.C.:** I think your article is great. I'm fascinated by the various ways people make choices about religion and was left with a couple of questions about Hawa and Ballve. First, how did she come to the decision to convert to Islam? Second, if they chose not to "date" in the way many Americans do, then what process did they use to determine they would be a good match for life? Finally, I've never heard of Muslims not celebrating birthdays. What is the reason that some choose not to?

**Tara Bahrapour:** Thank you. Ballve had explored several religions as a teenager and decided to convert to Islam after meeting Muslim students at her university who were willing to listen to and answer her questions in a way she didn't feel she'd gotten from others before. She was also drawn in by their faith as an antidote to the "party" atmosphere at the university.

As to how Muslims date, I have seen a whole range of how Muslims date -- from arranged marriages, to group outings, to dates with a chaperone, to dating in private but nothing physical, to having intimate relations in a serious relationship. I think it reflects the wide range of Muslims in the U.S.

As for birthdays, some I talked to said it was not something they did in their countries so it didn't feel natural to do it here. Others said they only celebrate Islamic holidays and birthdays did not fall under that category. Others said they started doing it here for their kids.

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**State of Disbelief:** Your answers to the questions posed above reveal a noticeable pattern of denial in the Muslim community. Denial that Muslim belief and behavior are in any way responsible for the current climate of distrust. Sure Americans can be bigoted and stereotype, but that's not ALL that's behind the way Muslims are viewed in our society. Please discuss how you feel Muslims have contributed to the current climate?

**Tara Bahrapour:** I hear what you're saying. I think it's often a vicious cycle, with mistrust on both sides contributing to insularity. By the same measure, communication on both sides can help break down the mistrust. Both Muslims and non-Muslims can be part of the problem and part of the solution. I would just caution against generalizing about "all Muslims" since the Muslims here represent such a vast range of approaches and opinions, and lumping them all together it can alienate people who might be able to contribute to the debate. I see as much problem with Muslims who won't engage with non-Muslims as I have with non-Muslims who won't engage.

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**Arlington, Va.:** The posts you are receiving are turning my stomach, and confirming my fears about the bigotry that is rampant in this country and seemingly "accepted." So what if these kids want to eat cheese pizza and wear the hajib? I'll take looking at a young Muslim woman in traditional garb over a pierced belly button hanging out of low-cut jeans any day.

Your article about the kids who feel they are "ambassadors" of their religion reminded me of my experience, as one of two Jewish kids in my elementary school class, explaining the Jewish holidays to my classmates. I never felt like observing my religion put my patriotism and loyalty to the US in doubt to others, and see no reason why the same understanding is not extended to Muslims in this country.

**Tara Bahrapour:** Thanks for your comment. What's great about the U.S. is that the woman in traditional garb can --and often does -- eat pizza with the pierced-bellybutton woman.

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**Munich, Germany:** The closest comparison that I can think of to the current American-Muslim dilemma is WWII and the internment of Japanese Americans into camps. Whereas the government felt that Japan could infiltrate America through the Japanese community, most Japanese Americans had no interest in war or politics.

Perhaps both sides, the government and the Muslim communities, can use that piece of history to better evaluate the situation.

**Tara Bahrapour:** That was certainly a point that came up after 9-11 in the Muslim community -- there were fears that such camps would be set up for Muslims here. Learning from history is certainly something we could all benefit from.

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**Austin, Texas:** Are you troubled by the degree of anger expressed by some of these posters?

Personally, I would like to see those Muslims (and there are some) who want to live in the US without being part of it and who won't adapt at least somewhat to US social values and mores AND those xenophobic love-it-or-leave-it European-Americans be sent off somewhere where they could have at each other.

Then maybe the rest of us could work toward some understanding.

**Tara Bahrapour:** It's often the case that the extreme views are the loudest ones, but it's good to remember that between the poles there are people who want to work toward that understanding.

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**Chicago, Ill.:** Thanks for the chat.

Boston's response above is a good example of the problems I think a lot of well-intentioned Americans have with Islam. He or she managed a not-so-subtle dig at Jews (in discussing kosher cafeterias) and a completely one-sided complaint that Muslims are being alienated because non-Muslims now refer to them as "they."

The problem Muslims have is that, at present, Islam is the only major religion that seems plagued by these suicidal and homicidal practitioners of the faith. Large segments of the Islamic world seem to either condone or rationalize away violence carried out in the name of Islam. Sure, most (but not all) of it is outside the US, but the people blowing up buses and shooting up cultural centers do so in the name of the same faith that these Muslims here in the US are practicing. I think the rest of us can be cut a little slack if we don't simply take at face value the assurance that Islam is a peaceful religion that we must respect. Thanks.

**Tara Bahrapour:** Throughout history, but also in our time, in recent years, there have been examples of murder and violence in the name of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Fortunately, most people who adhere to these religions don't agree with that. Fundamentalism, in any religion, often seems to stem from issues that don't necessarily have to do with the faith itself, and I think it might help if people can separate the religion from the other issues.

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**Long Beach, Calif.:** I have evangelical Christians, Muslims, Catholics, Jews and a Buddhist in my immediate family.

I can tell you that when Christians stop trying to take over the Middle East for themselves, when innocent Muslims start condemning tribal reactions of their murderous brethren, when Jews free the Palestinians, and when the Catholics and Buddhists start leaning harder on freedoms for the oppressed the world will be a better place.

Until then all you can do is point out their collective hypocrisy and vote.

**Tara Bahrapour:** thanks for your comment.

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**Woodbridge, Va.:** I'm kind of surprised by the number of anti-Muslim comments here. I wonder if some folks are not aware of the number of "assimilated" Muslims living harmoniously with their neighbors in this country.

That said, I think it is really important for Muslims not to slip into making excuses for terrorists, ever. People do this sometimes to defend and explain their culture, but it gives mixed messages to confused or bored young people who might be tempted by the terrorist groups.

**Tara Bahrapour:** Good point. One issue I have come across in reporting on young Muslims is the number of them who have been raised secular and are now interested in exploring their faith and are looking for guidance. The guidance can come in many forms, and it is not always coming from the most tolerant or secure place. And yes, the messages can be mixed and confusing for young people. Again, I think the more Muslim leaders and activists speak out, the more options these young people will see to choose from.

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**Tampa, Fla.:** The hostility of some of the first couple of commenters towards Muslims is amazing--and sad. As for asking whether American Muslims are Americans first and Muslims second, I would remind you that millions of right-wing American evangelicals consider themselves Christians first and Americans second. They proudly state this on their TV networks and in their sermons on how to vote. I've seen prominent evangelical ministers tell their flocks "when you vote, vote as a Christian first and an American second." Where's the outrage on this? Why should Muslims behave any differently?

And consider the Christian Zionists and American Jews who support Israel over America? Don't waste your time charging me with anti-Semitism. If it's OK to question the dual loyalty of one group, it's OK to question it for ALL other groups. I don't see evangelicals and Likkudnik Jews marching against Israeli treatment of Palestinians. I don't see them marching against US support of Muslim dictators.

As for fighting terror, I guess the writer missed seeing the FBI's head of counter-terrorism saying one of the reasons we don't have a home-grown jihadist problem here like they have in the UK is the close cooperation and support of the US Muslim community. What more does the writer want? Right-wing violence and terror?

As for Islam being incompatible with democracy, says who? There's no democracy in the Muslim world? When was the last time the US supported a democracy in the Muslim world? Mossedegh in Iran? Hamas in the Occupied Territories? Khatami in Iran? The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt? The Islamic Front in Algeria? Where were these only-now ardent supporters of democracy?

It took Christianity 1800 years to produce a democracy. Until then, Christians supported the divine right of kings and opposed democratic revolutions. The Catholic Church was the strongest opponent of democracy in Europe in the 19th century. Islam has been around only 1300 years. They still have 500 years left to match the record of Christianity when it comes to supporting democracy. Indeed, one can argue ALL religions are incompatible with democracy because they all posit a law greater than that of any constitution. It's not coincidence the Founding Fathers were atheists, agnostics, and deists.

As for "a suspicious absence of American flag waving," what about all the AIPAC conventions where Members of Congress pledged allegiance to the Israeli flag, with no Stars & Strips in sight? Sure, AIPAC corrected this small oversight this year, but didn't seem to notice it in past years. When Jonathon Pollard steals our most closely-guarded atomic secrets for Israel and Israel then sells them to the USSR--Reagan's Evil Empire--no one raises the question of dual loyalty of Israel's supporters.

It just comes down to politics. Muslims here and elsewhere are being demonized to drum up support for the GOP and Israel. They need to stand up and get in the faces of these bigots.

**Tara Bahrapour:** This comment brings up some points I have heard others make.

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**Washington, D.C.:** Thanks for an interesting article. I do feel badly that many Muslims feel as though they're being unfairly tarnished and blamed, but I wonder if this could be alleviated by coming out more forcefully against terrorism. For example, many usually say that they condemn such-and-such act, but in the same breath, also mention the suffering in Palestine or Iraq, etc. This sounds to me like they're in a way justifying the extremism. When the Hmong hunter killed his fellow hunters in Minnesota, the Hmong community there immediately issued a statement saying how much of an anathema it was; they didn't mention how he might have been provoked with racist comments. I also feel like many Muslims identify with their religion before their nationality, which I wonder if that also sets them apart.

**Tara Bahrapour:** This is another comment that brings up a lot of points others have made.

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**Tara Bahrapour:** I really appreciate all your input and wish there were time to continue for hours, because I think this is a discussion that needs to be ongoing. I posted a couple of comments at the end that I felt represented many of the others. I think the fact that so many people are eager to participate in the discussion is a great sign, and I hope that Muslims and non-Muslims will increasingly find ways to do this. I'll be looking for ways to explore the issue further, and I'm very grateful for your thoughtful comments along the way. Bye for now.

Tara

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