Issue Brief: Minority Religions and Public Opinion

**Key Words:** Minority religions, Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, Anti-Muslim sentiment

**Description:** This issue brief examines public opinion of minority religions in the United States. While Americans generally possess non-dogmatic views on religion, certain minorities, especially Muslim Americans, have garnered unfavorable sentiments from the American public.

**Key Points:**
- The United States has one of the first and most extensive legislations promoting religious freedom in the world.
- The religious breakdown of the United States is very diverse, though most fall under the umbrella branch of Christianity.
- After the September 11 attacks, anti-Muslim sentiments have become more widespread in the United States, resulting in increased hate crimes, targeted surveillance, and anti-mosque opposition.
- Due to increase in perceived discrimination, 16% of Muslim Americans believe the American people are unfriendly towards them.

**Images:**

*Protesters opposing the construction of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero.*

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% of Muslim Americans who have experienced each of the following in the last year

- People have acted suspicious of you: 28%
- Been called offensive names: 22%
- Been singled out by airport security: 21%
- Been singled out by other law officers: 13%
- Been threatened or attacked: 6%

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Polling from the Pew Research Center on discriminations faced by Muslim Americans.²

Anti-Muslim subway ads in New York.³

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Issue Brief:

Religious minorities were among the first minorities to come under the protection of U.S. legislation. The centrality of religious freedom, one of the crucial tenants during the foundation of the United States, was fortified by its inclusion in the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, leading to the relative religious diversity of the country. Currently, the religious demographics of adults in the United States breaks down as following: 78.4% of the population fall under the umbrella branch of Christianity, with 51.3% affiliating as Protestants, 23.9% as Catholics, and the rest falling under Mormonism (1.7%), Jehovah’s Witness (0.7%), Orthodox (0.6%), and Other (0.3%); 1.7% affiliate with Judaism; 0.7% with Buddhism; 0.6% with Islam; 0.4% with Hinduism; 1.2% identified with other faiths, including 0.7% as Unitarians and less than 0.3% with Native American religions; 16.1% are unaffiliated.4

While religious minorities have extensive protection under the law, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employers from discriminating based on religion, public opinion on religious minorities cannot be legislated. Though more than half of Americans rated religion as highly important in their lives, on the whole, the American population has, according to Pew Research, “a non-dogmatic approach to faith.”5 Seventy percent of the religiously affiliated believe that their religion is not the only path to salvation and 95% of Americans agree that all religious texts ought to be treated with respect.4

Nevertheless, some religious minorities have garnered unwanted attention from the American public. Most salient, the September 11th attacks and the rhetoric surrounding the subsequent War on Terror has brought a wave of Islamophobia to the United States that has pervaded throughout the following decade. Composing 0.6% of the American public, Muslim-

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5 http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf
Americans have been on the receiving end of rhetoric accusing the group of being religious extremists, terrorists, and possessing values that do not cohere with traditional American values and lacking allegiance to the United States.

About a third of Americans hold unfavorable opinions of Muslims and almost two-thirds of the population feel uncomfortable with the idea of a Muslim President. Americans are evenly divided over whether Islam is incompatible with the American way of life, with two-thirds of Republicans agreeing that Islam is at odds with American values, and a majority of Democrats disagreeing. These biases tend to affect the daily lives of Muslims, with 28% of Muslims surveyed responded that people have acted suspiciously towards them in the past year, 22% have been called offensive names, and 21% have been singled out by airport security. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Muslim and Arab Americans increased from 28 to 481 from 2000 to 2001. Due to these aggressions, 16% of Muslim-Americans believed that the American people are unfriendly towards them.

Controversial issues involving Muslim-Americans include anti-mosque opposition, with more than half of the states reporting one or more incidences of anti-mosque activity in the past few years, among the most famous was the protesting of the Park 51 community center near Ground Zero. As well, several Muslim-Americans have sued the New York Police Department

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for targeting Muslim-Americans in a covert surveillance program.\textsuperscript{12} The Patriot Act, too, has received criticism for being discriminatory towards Muslim Americans.

Public opinion surrounding Muslim-Americans tend to correlate with political and religious ties, with Democratic, political independents, Catholics, religiously unaffiliated, and non-Christians viewing the population more favorably than Republicans, Tea-Party members, and white evangelicals.\textsuperscript{13}

Religious minorities in the United States possess long-standing and comprehensive protection under the law, and public opinion in general are favorable to the acceptance of these groups. Nevertheless, certain biased sentiments do spring up, and targeted religious minorities feel the consequences of this discrimination.

\textit{Works Cited:}


**Websites:**

Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: http://www.pewforum.org/

Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition: http://maclc1.wordpress.com/

American Civil Liberties Union: http://www.aclu.org/

Muslim Matters: http://muslimmatters.org/