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Does America Have a "Muslim Problem"?

By: Robert Spencer
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Does the United States have a "Muslim problem"? Bret Stephens and Joseph Rago of the *Wall Street Journal* say no; on the contrary, they say, "America's Muslims tend to be role models both as Americans and as Muslims." Stephens and Rago grant that "it takes no more than a few men (or women) to carry out a terrorist atrocity, and there can be no guarantee the U.S. is immune from homegrown Islamist terror." However, evidently Hillary Clinton has the measure of Islamic terrorism as well as child-rearing: "But if it can be said," Stephens and Rago continue, "that 'it takes a village' to make a terrorist, the U.S. enjoys a measure of safety that our European allies do not. It is a blessing we will continue to enjoy as long as we remain an upwardly mobile, assimilating — and watchful — society."

This is an apt expression of the prevailing conventional wisdom that a lack of upward mobility and assimilation causes jihad terrorism. For Stephens and Rago base their sanguine view of American Muslims on purely economic and social factors: "59% of American Muslims have at least an undergraduate education, making them the most highly educated group in America. Muslim Americans are also the richest Muslim community in the world, with four in five earning more than \$25,000 a year and one in three more than \$75,000. They tend to be employed in professional fields, and most own stock, either personally or through 401(k) or pension plans. In terms of civic participation, 82% are registered to vote, half of them as Democrats. Interestingly, however, the survey found that 65% of Muslim Americans favor lowering the income tax." Stephens and Rago report that "according to Ishan [sic] Bagby, a professor at the University of Kentucky who recently made a study of mosque attendance in Detroit, the average mosque-goer is 34 years old, married with children, has at least a bachelor's degree, and earns about \$74,000 a year. If this is representative of Muslim Americans as a whole, it suggests that the religiously committed among them hardly fit the profile of the alienated, angry young Muslim men so common today in Europe."

On top of this affluence and civic mindedness, "the overwhelming majority of Muslims arrived here legally"; "21% of Muslim Americans intermarry"; and "Muslim Americans benefit from leaders who, despite some notable exceptions, are generally more responsible than Muslim leaders in Britain and Europe."

Unfortunately, however, none of this data amounts to what Stephens and Rago wish it did. It is noteworthy in the first place that they invoke Ihsan Bagby's study as evidence of the comfortable assimilation of American Muslims, since Bagby himself has rejected the notion of assimilation: "Ultimately," he has remarked, "we [Muslims] can never be full citizens of this country. . . because there is no way we can be fully committed to the institutions and ideologies of this country." He said this in the early 1990s and may have changed his views since he said this, but note that his quarrel was with American "institutions and ideologies," not with economic injustices real or perceived.

While American Muslims may indeed be role models in their wealth and high voter registration rate, it is not at all true that only ill-educated poor people actually commit terrorist atrocities. This has been disproved again and again. A forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Marc Sageman, recently conducted a study that led him to conclude that, in the words of the *Times* of London, "the typical recruit to Al-Qaeda. . . is upper middle class, has been educated in the West and is from a professional background." Likewise, Princeton economist Claude Berrebi studied over twenty years of data on suicide bombers from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, only to conclude, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that "only 13 per cent" of the jihadists "were from a poor background, compared with 32 per cent of the Palestinian population in general," and that "suicide bombers were also three times more likely to have gone on to higher education than the general population."

We have witnessed the same phenomenon in the United States. Maher Hawash worked at Intel. He made \$360,000 a year. He was in the U.S. legally — in fact, he was a naturalized citizen. I would be surprised if he had not been registered to vote. He married an American. Stephens and Rago would have confidently held him up as a role model and considered inconceivable the idea that he could turn out to be a jihad

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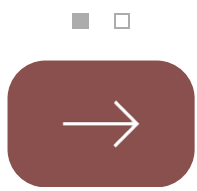
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2 ב-60 ש
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שקיעה קיצית
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terrorist. And yet that is exactly what he turned out to be.

The WSJ article is yet another manifestation of a fundamental misunderstanding that blankets the public discourse about Islamic terrorism. Even at the *Wall Street Journal* they don't understand that the primary motivation of the jihadists is a religious ideology, not resentment born of economic injustice or marginalization. Economic injustice and marginalization are things they understand; a religious ideology that can move men to give up good lives and devote themselves to murder and destruction is so far out of their purview that they cannot even imagine it, and take all the evidence of it that is in front of their faces as indications of something else.

There very likely are model citizens among American Muslims. But none of the statistics marshaled by Stephens and Rago does one thing to establish whether or not there among all these affluent and law-abiding Muslims there are people who, like Mike Hawash, are nursing jihadist sentiments.

Stephens and Rago do include a caveat: "neither a first-rate Western education nor economic affluence offers any inoculation against extremism: Just look at the careers of 9/11 ringleader Mohamed Atta, educated at the Technical University of Hamburg, or Daniel Pearl killer Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who did undergraduate work at the London School of Economics." One may hope that these *Wall Street Journal* reporters will one day undertake to find out why Atta and Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh turned to jihad terrorism — if they aren't too afraid of what they might find. That fear, and the general unwillingness to face the real causes of Islamic terrorism, is what constitutes America's *real* "Muslim problem."

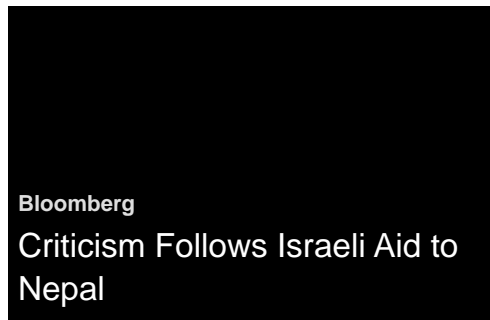
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