

The Urgency of Controlling Muslim Immigration to the U.S.

THE EDITORS

Given the obvious risks of cultural friction and “homegrown” terror, one might assume that Muslim immigration is carefully regulated by the U.S. government. It is not. Although U.S. law categorically limits some groups (Communists, polygamists, etc.) based on their beliefs, Muslim faith currently presents no special hindrance to immigration.

In 2013 alone, the U.S. granted green cards (permanent resident status) to 9,552 immigrants from Iraq, 10,294 from Egypt, 12,863 from Iran, and 13,251 from Pakistan. While some of these immigrants from Muslim countries enter as refugees, most receive green cards on the same basis that over 80 percent of all legal immigrants receive them—that is, they happen to be related to someone already here. Such is the indiscriminate nature of our immigration system, which puts little value on skills and none on capacity for speedy assimilation.

It is mainly by geographic coincidence, not any kind of cautious public policy, that Muslim immigration to the U.S. is not higher than it already is. Western Europe is the destination of choice for most African and Asian Muslims, as getting there does not require crossing an ocean. The challenge of incorporating Muslim immigrants into a liberal Western society is now far greater in Europe than in the U.S. Nevertheless, it is important to take stock of Muslim immigration in the U.S., both to assess the current situation and to consider ways to avoid the problems that Europe currently faces.

First and most importantly, what percentage of the U.S. population is Muslim? The best source of information is the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study. Over the course of last summer, researchers conducted phone interviews with 35,071 Americans, creating an unusually large sample that is representative not just of the country at large but also of all 50 states individually.

The survey’s large and representative sample captured just 237 Muslim Americans. Despite their increasing cultural prominence in the U.S.—in debates over head scarves, Sharia law, the Ground Zero Mosque, and domestic terrorism—Muslims are still only 0.9 percent of the population, which is about the same representa-

tion as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Muslims remain outnumbered by other influential religious minorities, such as Jews (1.9 percent) and Mormons (1.6 percent). And of course the nation is still overwhelmingly Christian (70.6 percent), with a growing number of “unaffiliated” (22.8 percent), who are mostly lapsed Christians.

Interestingly, Muslims are spread widely across the 50 states. Though they are disproportionately more numerous in the northeast and less numerous in the south compared to other religions, only one state (New Jersey) is 3 percent Muslim, with the rest coming in at 2 percent or less. There are three times as many evangelical Christians as Muslims living in New York City (9 percent versus 3 percent), and New York State is just 2 percent Muslim overall. Similarly, the Detroit metropolitan area is known for “Dearbornistan” and other Muslim enclaves, but it is only 3 percent Muslim according to Pew, with Michigan 1 percent Muslim overall.

Still, there is more to the story than just population size. For detailed demographic information on Muslim Americans, we turn to the Pew Center’s 2011 survey specifically aimed at Muslims, which captured a representative sample of over 1,000. The most important finding is that about one in five American Muslims is black, as are 40 percent of native-born Muslims. Many black Muslims in the U.S. are followers of the Nation of Islam or its offshoots. As such, they are culturally different from the first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants from Asia and North Africa. When both populations are combined together, American Muslims appear to enjoy a socioeconomic status roughly on par with the general population.

They are quite different politically, however. Whereas the general public in 2011 was split 22 percent liberal versus 38 percent conservative (the rest were “moderate”), Muslim Americans were 27 percent liberal and 25 percent conservative. In addition, 70 percent of Muslims identified with the Democratic party, while just 11 percent considered themselves Republicans. These political labels are reflected in the way Muslims answered a question about whether they would generally prefer “smaller government, fewer services” or

“larger government, more services.” The general public preferred smaller government by 50 percent to 42 percent, but more than two thirds of Muslim Americans opted for larger government.

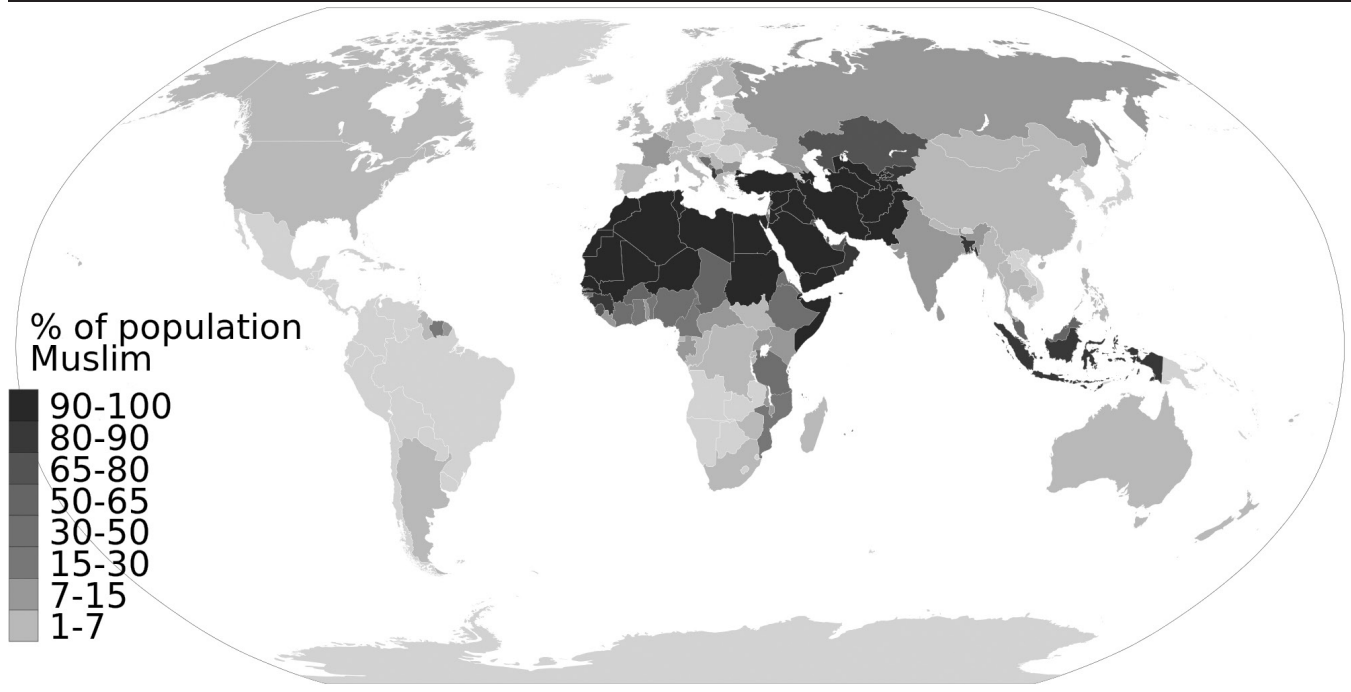
Those who downplay the problem of Muslim immigration would say that Muslims are not unique in their identification with Democrats and larger government. Most immigrants (and children of immigrants) to the U.S. feel the same way. They would go on to say that the sheer number of Muslims in the U.S. today is nowhere near enough to generate the ongoing riots and general unrest common in places with a larger percentage of Muslims, such as France and Italy.

Still, there are reasons to worry. First, given that Islamic terrorism involves highly organized international networks with far-reaching propaganda, even a very small number of extremist Muslims can cause lasting damage. The 9/11 hijackers all received visas to enter the U.S., though they were not permanent residents. LAX shooter Hesham Mohamed Hadayet was a permanent resident by virtue of the odious “diversity

lottery.” Fort Hood gunman Nidal Hassan is a U.S. citizen born to Palestinian immigrants. When we go to the airport, we all have to take off our shoes and throw away liquids because past international terror plots involving those items might inspire Muslims here at home. And it seems that every month we hear about an American citizen who wants to join ISIS and participate in the brutal violence the group perpetrates.

A second reason for concern is that the Muslim American population seems to be growing rapidly. When Pew conducted its religion survey in 2007, it found that 0.4 percent of Americans were Muslims, compared to 0.9 percent just seven years later. Because our legal immigration system prioritizes family-based immigration, small numbers of one ethnic group can quickly snowball into large enclaves. (This is the reason why the Washington, D.C. area has a large Salvadoran population.) Whatever one thinks about Muslim immigration in general, we should all agree that we need a much more rational, systematic legal immigration policy that can adapt to these kinds of challenges. ■

WORLDWIDE DISTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM POPULATION BY NATIONS



Sources: Wikipedia, Pew Research Center