



What Do One Billion Muslims Really Think?

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What do one billion Muslims really think?

Despite widespread media coverage of global terrorism by various self-proclaimed "Islamic" groups from America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, little is known about what the majority of the world's Muslims really think and feel. What do Muslims have to say about violence and terrorist attacks, democracy, women's rights and their countries' relations with the West? What are their values, goals and religious beliefs?

In November 2009, Washington, DC and New York movie audiences were able to learn some answers to this question when they watched *Inside Islam*, a groundbreaking film based on the 2008 book, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, co-authored by Georgetown University professor John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. The film premiered in Washington, DC this summer and has been touring the country since.

The film is based on many years of innovative research. Between 2001 and 2006, Esposito worked with Mogahed at Gallup, a research and public opinion organisation, to complete the largest study of Muslim populations worldwide. Their results challenged the conventional wisdom and the inevitability of a "clash of civilisations" even as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued.

Long before *Who Speaks for Islam?* was released, Washington's politicians were crafting policies about a people they barely knew. Indeed, Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu was correct when he said: "In these fraught days of heightened tension and increasing hostility, few books could be more timely."

Unity Productions Foundation (UPF) decided to turn the book into a film in 2008, recognising the importance of the message and the need to take it to an even larger audience. As Alex Kronemer, UPF co-founder and one of the film's executive producers, pointed out, the message of the book is one that US leaders need to hear: "In order to effectively engage the Muslim world, we have to understand what the Muslim world really wants."

The initial screening, specifically for an audience of policymakers, took place in August 2009 at the US Department of State. After viewing *Inside Islam* participants took part in a discussion with Kronemer, who had served at the US Department of State's Human Rights Desk during the Clinton Administration. The goal of these policy screenings—derived from the Gallup findings—is to help policymakers understand the impact of US foreign policy on Muslim attitudes towards the United States, and to understand that a shift in policies will go a long way towards improving Muslim perceptions of Americans.

The film's 3 June, Washington, DC, premiere featured former US Secretary of State Dr. Madeleine Albright as keynote speaker. After the screening, Albright said, "When fear takes over, communication stops and suspicion builds. That's why *Inside Islam* is such an important film, and why the extensive surveys conducted by the Gallup organisation are so worthwhile."

Since then, the film has been screened at several cities across North America. These events

bring together civic and political leaders and interfaith organisations, usually with a Gallup expert and UPF representative on hand to discuss the film and the poll's findings.

The Gallup poll found, among other things, that when asked what they admire about the West, Muslims frequently mention political liberty and freedom of speech. What audiences might also find surprising is that most Muslims—including 73 per cent of Saudis and 89 per cent of Iranians—say that women should enjoy equal legal rights with men.

To date, the film has been viewed by thousands of people. It appears that from Toledo to Toronto, from New Orleans to New York, audiences everywhere are yearning to know what a billion Muslims really think, including many leading decision makers. Other organisations have gone so far as to express interest in not only helping to screen the film through their networks but to also assist in the creation of educational materials so that younger audiences can benefit from the film's thought provoking information.

The film creates an environment where dialogue among civilisations, as former President Muhammad Khatami of Iran put it, becomes inevitable. The film prompts American audiences to reconsider their perceptions of Muslims—who are often also their neighbours. We hope that through movies like *Inside Islam*, fear and suspicion can stop, and communication can take over.

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