THE AMERICAN MUSLIM EXPERIENCE

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Recent events have brought heightened attention to Islam, but not necessarily deeper understanding. The Islam Project can help to change that by raising public awareness, offering information, and bringing people together in dialogue. The Project uses as a springboard *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet* **and** *Muslims***, two important documentaries that can help members of your community better understand Islam and the people who practice it. This module, which includes clips from both films, briefly explores the experience of Muslims living in the United States.**

FACILITATING A DIALOGUE
Discussions are most productive when people feel safe, comfortable, and challenged. That balance can be difficult to achieve when the topic is religion or politics or prejudice, so you may want to consider finding an experienced facilitator for your event. If you plan to facilitate the dialogue yourself, think about how you will ensure that the tenor remains respectful and everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

In planning an event, be clear about what you hope to accomplish. This module can:
- Help participants **learn** more about Islam and those who practice it.
- Provide participants with an opportunity to **listen** to each other, hear diverse voices, and gain new insight.
- Inspire participants to take the **lead** in their community by resolving to act. Below are suggestions for meeting these goals. Choose the ones that best meet your needs.

LEARN

For some people, providing basic information will be an appropriate and useful starting point.

     Ask people to listen for the answers to the following questions as they watch the film. After viewing, check to see how many questions they answered correctly. If there are many incorrect answers, you may want to talk about where to find reliable sources of information, why people had ideas that weren't correct, and how misinformation contributes to negative stereotyping.

How many Muslims are there around the world?
Estimated 1.2 billion.
How many Muslims are there in the United States?
Estimated 4 to 7 million.
Where do American Muslims come from?
Many are born here. Others come from all over the world.
What percentage of Muslims are Arabs?
An estimated 13 to 20 percent of Muslims are Arabs.

School principal Safaa Zarzour says of his Muslim school: "Our vision and our dream is that there is something that is called American Muslim identity forming for those kids — just like any other religious or ethnic group." Based on what you hear in the clips, summarize what you think students in his school are learning. Consider whether this affirms or contradicts other things you have heard about Muslim schools.

Review the list of stereotypes that Yasemin Saib creates with the students. Which stereotypes have you encountered? Where do they come from? What is their impact?

LISTEN

When we listen actively to others' stories, we're more likely to understand them rather than judge them. What can you learn — about assimilation, for example — from what people in the films reveal?

Thinking About Assimilation

Most immigrant and minority groups face the challenge of balancing the sometimes conflicting demands of faith and traditional culture with the pressures to assimilate into modern American society. How do people in the film deal with this challenge? Are there people in the room with stories to tell about the challenges of adhering to a faith or cultural tradition in the United States? What can you learn from their stories?

For further discussion:

Why does Nadia Bazzy want to wear the headscarf, or *hijab*, and why is her father conflicted about his 16-year-old daughter's decision? How is Nadia's choice an expression of her Muslim identity, and what does she intend to communicate about that identity? Do all Muslim women wear *hijab*? How is Nadia's view of *hijab* different from Yasemin Saib's? What are some types of religious dress that we find in other religions? How are they the same or different from *hijab*?

Some immigrant parents, observes principal Safaa Zarzour, "don't know a lot of what goes on in society," and their kids "kind of feel like they would like to make their mom and dad happy, but also there is this society that they face that they have to live in, and it is very hard to negotiate those two things." How does identity development for immigrants or children of immigrants differ from children born of American parents?

"It wasn't until I came to the United States," Yasemin Saib said, "that my spiritual identity came into question for the very first time, because I actually had the option of believing or not believing. I actually had the option of choosing to practice or not practice." How might living in a pluralistic society affect how people choose to practice their faith?

LEAD

The film clips can help people think of ways to lead their community to action.

Reactions to September 11

What was the impact of September 11 on the people in the film? Were their reactions like or unlike media portrayals of Muslims you have seen? How was their reaction similar or dissimilar to your own reaction? How did your religious, national, or ethnic identity influence what you experienced? According to the people in the clips, what does Islam teach about violence?

For further discussion:

Daisy Kahn: "September 11 put the Muslim community in the spotlight."
What changes when you're in the spotlight?

Kevin James: "Please don't be Muslims doing this." What did Kevin James fear?

Before legally resolving attempts to block Muslims from buying an empty church to house a mosque, the judge orders the community into inter-religious dialogue. Aminah McCloud thinks he should be given a Nobel Prize. Why? What can such dialogue accomplish? How might you arrange for such dialogue in your community?

Yasemin Saib helped create Muslims Against Terrorism because she believes that Muslims need to take responsibility for what extremists do in their name and because, she said, "We need to stop allowing extremists to dictate the public face of Islam." Similarly, says Kevin James, "You have to separate fanaticism, which every religion has, from the reality and the truth of that religion." How might people in your community counter fanaticism, especially in the name of their religion, culture, or nation?