

Running Head: MUSLIMS IN THE U.S. MILITARY

Allah and Uncle Sam: The Experience of Muslims in the U.S. Armed Forces

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Abstract

Muslims make up a large segment of American society yet remain underrepresented in social science research. This article presents the results of qualitative interviews with six Muslims serving on active military duty in the U.S. armed forces. Interviews focused on the participants description of their faith, challenges to integrating Islam with the military culture, and additional difficulties arising since the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Respondents report a variety of barriers in the military, most of which are manageable by the individual. Despite these issues, respondents feel the military culture is more supportive of their religious beliefs than the civilian society. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and absence of Muslims who may have left the military due to conflicts between their religious faith and military culture. Future research may need to examine how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas when military duties conflict with religious identity.

Allah and Uncle Sam: Muslims in the U.S. Armed Forces

Most Americans are unfamiliar with Islam or have a distorted view of it (Cooper, 1993). The attacks of September 11, 2001 have fueled media reports on Islam, increasing awareness of the segments of Islam tied to terrorism and hatred of America. Such a presentation of Islam, however, misrepresents the religion and values of Muslim Americans and does not lead to increased understanding.

Islam is reported to be the second largest, and fastest-growing religion globally (Esposito, 1999), and this growth is reflected in the United States. The Islamic community in the United States is estimated to be similar in size to that of the Jewish community at approximately 6 million, yet Muslims lack the political, cultural and economic leverage of Jewish Americans or other minorities (Cooper, 1993; Mazrui, 1996).

Muslims are underrepresented in the social sciences literature (Carolan et.al., 2000) and research on Muslims in the military appears to be nonexistent. This project explores the experiences of Muslims serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, balancing their prescriptions of faith with the demand of military operations. Given the strong religious convictions that committed Muslims believe in and live by, this study was formulated with the anticipation that this population experiences unique challenges in combining two tradition-bound institutions, with further difficulties arising since September 11, 2001.

According to the Air Force Personnel Center (2002), there are 746 members of the Air Force who identify themselves as Muslim - about 0.1% of all officers and 0.2% of enlisted personnel. The majority of Muslims in the Air Force are African-American (58%). Similar rates can be found in the other branches of the armed forces.

The Religion of Islam

A brief description of Islam is necessary in order to contextualize the results of this project and understand the responses of the participants. Muslims are followers of Islam and strive to fulfill the five pillars of Islam. The first is Shahada, or a Muslim's declaration of faith. Second is Salat, the five daily prayers offered at specific times throughout the day. Third, Sawm, is the observation of the Islamic month of Ramadan, to include abstinence from food, drink, and sexual activity during daylight hours. Fourth, Zakat, is an offering of 2.5% of savings to assist the poor. The last is Hajj, a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam includes strict behavioral, moral and health codes and other guidelines for daily living (Ayyub, 2000; Esposito, 1999; Lewinson, 1999; Nadir and Dziegielewsdi, 2001). Drugs and alcohol are forbidden, dress codes prescribed, and roles of men and women defined. Islam is more than a religion involving worship at designated times. Instead, Islam encompasses one's entire life, the purpose of which is to do good and forbid evil (Nadir & Dziegielewski 2001).

Islamic doctrine comes mainly from the Qur'an, the holy book revealed to the prophet Mohammed. Guidance also comes from the Sunnah of Mohammed – his sayings, practices and living habits. There are also other writings and direction from Islamic scholars and teachers (Nadir & Dziegielewski 2001).

Methods

The objectives of this project are to give voice to Muslims in the military and to explore their experience of merging a culture of Islam with a military environment, particularly since September 11th. Such objectives call for the use of qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Padgett, 1998; Ragin, 1994). The research involved open-ended interviews guided by topic areas, or what Ragin (1994) refers to as sensitizing concepts.

Participants

Six active duty Muslims were interviewed for this study in May and June 2002. The participants were contacted through Air Force Base and Army Post chapels, as well as by referral by other participants, resulting in a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The sample included three Air Force and three Army members, with one female and two male participants from each service. Four participants were African-American, and two Caucasian. Five participants were born and raised in the United States and converted to Islam after serving in the U.S. military for an average of 14 years. One participant was born and raised Muslim in the Middle East, immigrated to the U.S. after the Gulf War, and joined the military in 1998. The sample included one officer and five enlisted personnel. All participants are in good standing in the military and have plans to fulfill their current service commitments.

Procedures

Each participant signed a written informed consent and confidentiality statement, and volunteered for the study without pay or incentive. Interviews were open-ended, and designed to address three basic areas: 1) participant's description of Islam and personal beliefs, including stories of conversion, 2) interaction between Islam and life in the military, and 3) personal impact of September 11th. Interviews lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using QSR NUD.IST 5.0, 2000. Open-coding was used in the analysis in order to use concepts and themes arising from the data rather than using a-priori categories (Padgett, 1998, Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The concepts and themes that emerged were reviewed and checked with the participants and colleagues versed in Islam. This approach enables the discovery of a thick description, but generalizability is left to the reader (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results

The respondents volunteered a lot of information in each of the areas addressed by the interview. All three areas – description of Islam and conversion, interaction between Islam and military life, and impact of September 11th – are addressed below.

Description of Islam

Respondents define Islam as submission to God – the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians. This similarity with Judeo-Christian traditions, which is often overlooked by most Americans (Cooper, 1993), is demonstrated in statements from our participants:

“Christianity, Judaism and Islam – they all have the same beliefs in the oneness of God. And a lot of people are not wanting to see that it is interlinked.”

“Islam is not a complicated religion. I mean the line of prophets in Islam are the same that they are in Judaism and Christianity. But most people in America are totally misinformed.”

“The most important misunderstanding about Islam – that people think that Islam is something different than Christianity or different than Jewish. Islam is part of Christianity. It is part of Jewish....Islam in Arabic means surrender to God. So if you surrender to God in your guidance, in your actions, and you follow what God tells you, this is Islam, by definition. So Christians are Muslims by definition. And Jewish are Muslims by definition.”

There is a strong emphasis on the daily practice of the religion, not only with praying five times a day, but as one respondent put it, “always constantly being aware that Allah is watching.” This constant awareness translates into an effort to be at peace with Allah, oneself and with the other people. Tolerance and unity of humankind is an important principle. One

participant emphasized the lack of discrimination in Islam as opposed to his experiences prior to converting to Islam:

“So I try to get them to understand that in Islam there is no color. So that’s the first thing that they have a problem grasping, because within Christianity, of course there is color. White Christians go to one church; black Christians go to another. Hispanics might go to another. So they have a hard time grasping that, but I try to get them to understand that in Islam, in the eyesight of Allah, we are all the same. We are like teeth in a comb and the only thing that differentiates us in his eyesight is what’s in our hearts.”

This sense of unity and emphasis on daily religious practices contributes to Islam being a lifestyle as well as a religion, and provides a sense of purpose and stability to the respondents that converted from other faiths where they previously experienced contradiction and inconsistency.

Our African-American participants all reported being stereotyped as belonging to the Nation of Islam, an American black nationalist group that originated during the Great Depression and is currently led by Minister Louis Farrakhan (Gardell, 1996; White, 2001). Our respondents report an assumption by most people that they belong to the Nation of Islam because they are Black and Muslim. None of our participants, however, affiliate with the Nation of Islam, which they describe as being a primarily political group falling outside of mainstream Islam.

Conversion. Five of the six respondents converted to Islam from a variety of Christian backgrounds. Their introductions into Islam also varied, although most had friends who were Muslim. One had attended the Million Man March and another was introduced to Islam by reading a book about Malcolm X. In describing their conversions, our participants described

Islam as a lifestyle with daily reminders of their faith – something they had not experienced in their previous religions:

“...as a Baptist I went to church on Sunday. Monday through Friday I didn’t think about God.”

“I was raised Catholic and I’ve only been Muslim for a little over three years now. Maybe the hypocrisy that I saw in the Catholic church and in my own home – the things I saw in Catholicism. . .in Islam, things just make sense to me.”

Both the incorporation of Islam into one’s daily life and the clarity of its doctrine appear to have played a part in the conversion process. This is consistent with the findings of Sandormirsky and Wilson (1990) who state that the practice of a religion tends to be more important to sustaining commitment to a religion than the beliefs themselves. The network of Muslims on military installations, though small, appears to be very strong, sometimes providing the primary social support system for these individuals.

Reactions of Family. The strong support of other Muslims provides stability and encouragement that these converts often lack from family members. All five participants who converted to Islam related strong negative reactions from their family. The following is representative:

“They weren’t very happy. You know, actually my mother, father, brothers, have been probably my toughest opponents coming to Islam. Because I was raised as a Christian, and because I was raised in a pretty strict Christian household, pretty strict Christian family, their view was that Christianity is the only way to heaven. And for me to step outside of that, you know, to a whole different way of life, or a whole different way of thinking, I think that they would

have much rather have had me not be anything at all than to be Muslim. I think they would much rather me say I'm nothing. Because at least if I'm nothing, at least they look at it as there's still a chance for me to be Christian. But the fact that I was saying that I was Muslim – they did not really want to deal with that.”

Despite strong opposition from their families, all of our respondents reported some improvement in family relationships since their conversion, although religion remains a taboo subject for some.

Life in the Military

Notwithstanding the negative stereotyping in America that equates Islam with terrorism (Cooper, 1993), our respondents describe a very different experience within the military. They report a culture that is accepting and supportive of cultural diversity and that provides a distinct contrast to society in general. The following comments highlight some of the experiences within the military community:

“And I wasn't expecting to catch any heat [for September 11th], but looking back on it, the fact that I haven't really lets me know what the climate is here in the military. The military is so many years ahead of just American society as a whole as far as tolerance and acceptance and being able to see people for who they are.”

“In the military I wouldn't find any of these things [like harassment and prejudice]. Really, the privilege we have here, and the benefit that we have, that really people take diversity serious. And they don't look at you at all. They have an understanding and broad mind because many of them have been outside [the

United States]. And they have been really with Muslims and with a diversity of people and with other cultures.”

“And then when I’d go [on temporary duty], they would plan everything around my prayer time. They’d say, “When you got to pray?”....And then when I would fast during Ramadan, they wouldn’t make me do [physical training] in the morning, or anything like that. So, people were alright. They really looked out for me.”

“The command here made absolutely sure that no adverse action would happen toward us. They were very good about that. Every command called all their Muslims out, and we had different meetings, and it’s like, if anything happens, come to your chain of command and we’ll resolve it.”

While these comments present a very positive climate in the military, some participants knew of Muslims who had negative experiences and even separated from the military because of them. The military as a whole apparently has established a climate of tolerance and acceptance, but individuals in the military still carry personal biases and prejudices that can create a hostile environment for some.

Chaplains. The primary religious support on a military installation comes through the military chaplains and is governed by military regulation. For example, Army Regulation 165-1 (2000) specifies that “all soldiers are entitled to chaplain services and support,” and Air Force Instruction 52-101 (2002) outlines the requirement for “religious accommodation.” Our respondents report that most military chaplains are supportive although there have been a few that, as one participant put it, “have a dim view of Islam.” Overall, the military installation chapels have accommodated the Muslim community and ensure that there is a place in the chapel

to hold services, according to our participants. This is important given the fact that some military installations are in communities that have no civilian Muslim congregation.

It remains unclear whether our respondents' experience with regard to chaplaincy support is typical. Many of our respondents have been assertive enough to ensure that they have the religious opportunities they desire, but we don't have information on those who may be less assertive. The researchers contacted the chapels on ten military installations throughout the Southwest as part of their efforts to recruit participants, but the majority of chapels were not able to provide a valid point of contact for the Muslim population on base, and were not able to give information on the time or location of services.

Personal Initiative. A common theme among the participants was that being a faithful Muslim in the U.S. military requires initiative on an individual level. While military regulations stipulate that all military members will be supported in their religious beliefs, it is ultimately the individual who must make their religious needs known in order to successfully merge military mission with religious obligations.

"What the Muslim soldiers need to do is let their supervisors know, or let someone in their chain of command know what they need."

"You know, but for us as Muslims, our Sabbath day is Friday, so if it means that we have to work a little bit harder, you know, to be able to get to worship Friday, then that's what we have to do."

The participants in this study all reported support and accommodation from their units and commanders when their religious needs were made known, suggesting that some conflicts experienced by minorities in the military may simply be tied to needs that haven't been made explicit.

Cultural Conflicts. Aside from a general need for Muslims to show initiative, respondents identified a number of things that create conflicts for them. Some of the issues are general and apply to the American society; others are specific to life in the military.

Islam prohibits usury, or any contract bearing interest, and this can create difficulties in a capitalist society (Lewison, 1999). Purchasing homes and vehicles can require violation of this tenet of faith. One participant made it a point to say that the only credit card he possessed was the Government Travel Card, the use of which is mandated for official government travel.

Education of children presents unique challenges. Participants stated that the ideal would be for their children to attend a Muslim school, but in most places that is not possible. The challenges in public schools center around the lack of time to accommodate the mandatory midday prayer, the celebration of Christian-based holidays, the composition of school lunches, and the lack of Islam-related education.

The recognition of holidays is also an issue for active duty Muslims, with Christmas being the biggest challenge. In the mid 90's, the military as a whole pushed to emphasize the *holiday* season rather than the *Christmas* season. Even still, most military units have a Christmas or holiday party in December that is either a formal or an informal military function. The explicit or implicit obligation to participate can be frustrating to Muslims who do not recognize a holiday at that time of the year.

One respondent commented on the prayers offered by chaplains at formal military functions, noting that such prayers should be "universal" prayers, but sometimes are concluded "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," at which point the prayer ceases to be universal and excludes Jews and Muslims.

Both of our female participants commented on their inability to cover their heads when on duty. While the long, head-to-foot albayah typically associated with Muslim women is required when they pray and is the preferred dress when possible, there is no requirement to wear it at other times. However, our female participants specifically noted that military regulations prohibit them from wearing any head cover or scarf that can be seen outside of the standard military headgear.

All participants referred to their obligation to make a midday prayer. While it is preferred to make this prayer at the appointed time and with other Muslims, participants often have to adapt by praying alone in their workspace and by making up the prayer later in the day.

The Muslim holy month of Ramadan presents unique challenges in the military. Ramadan is a month of purification and involves abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations from one hour prior to sunrise until sunset. Many military units start the day with mandatory physical training, and this creates significant difficulties for Muslims if they are required to perform strenuous exercise in the morning and then cannot eat or drink until the sun goes down. The importance of personal initiative was mentioned earlier, and comes into play here. The participants that we talked to who have successfully negotiated this issue have arranged with supervisors and commanders to either be excused from physical training during Ramadan or to complete their requirements on their own at a more accommodating time.

The conflicts mentioned above can largely be resolved by the military members and their chain of command or are minor enough that they do not create significant personal conflict. There are two other areas, however, that seem to be much weightier than those presented so far. These touch on larger issues that are suggestive of larger dynamics that the military may have to address.

One participant reported frustration when studying at the Defense Language Institute (DLI). His studies were in Arabic and he noticed the conspicuous lack of any reference to Islam despite the close connection between Arabic and Islam in the Middle East.

“I was like, how could there be no references of Islam in the language when the majority of this region are Muslim.... You know, like all the greetings and all the pleasantries of meeting someone, that’s all in Islam. But at DLI, they teach you something else. You know, so when you go to the Middle East and you greet someone like that, they look, they give you a look because they don’t teach you the basic greeting that people even in the States use that are Muslims. You know, they’ll say, “Salaam al makim.” But at DLI, they don’t teach you that.”

The last issue has to do with the most basic function of the military, that of military combat. One participant brought up a philosophical conflict, one that the participant has not been forced to confront – what would a Muslim in the U.S. military do if sent to make war on an Islamic country? All participants made it very clear that they are dedicated to America (see “Patriotism” below) and are dedicated as service men and women, but there remains the issue of Muslims combating Muslims. One participant stated:

“Would I go and shoot another Muslim, if I knew they were another Muslim, no. Because we’re not supposed to. If a Muslim kills another Muslim – in the Qu’ran it says that even more so, even if it’s in self defense – we’re not supposed to kill another Muslim. That’s like dictating a path to the hellfire.”

This same issue was brought out in discussing the attacks on September 11th. A “true” Muslim should never kill another Muslim. This is part of why acts of terrorism are not condoned in Islam. Muslims participating in such acts are seen as extremists, not a true Muslims. It is

difficult to say what would happen if our Muslim soldiers and airmen were to be placed in a combat situation where Muslims would knowingly have to physically engage other Muslims. However, other participants stated that military service is not in conflict with the Islamic faith.

September 11

As with most Americans, our participants were still able to recall what they were doing and the emotions they felt when they learned of the attacks on September 11th. They responded as Americans with sorrow for the victims, anger at the perpetrators, and patriotic fervor for their country. But they also felt fear and betrayal as Muslims.

“I was really shocked. I was just, I mean, I felt hurt, I think like everyone did, I think around the world, when they saw the heinous actions that went on. And then, after that, I was – I hope it’s not Muslims. I was – I pray it’s not Muslims that did it.”

“What I’ve seen is a lot of people are ashamed right now that they are Muslims.”

“I think, like, especially now, this time, after last September, everything’s a challenge, almost everything’s a challenge for a Muslim because you constantly have to stomach this ignorance.”

Our respondents emphasized that Islam is a religion of peace, and point out that the characterization of all Muslims based on the acts of a few extremists is unfair and inaccurate. Judging Islam by the acts of Osama Bin Laden and other terrorists is illogical; almost all participants compare the leader of this incident to other infamous figures who have perpetrated horrible acts. One participant talked about Jim Jones and noted that any religion can produce extremists. Another participant referred to Timothy McVeigh as “a Christian extremist, saying

he was doing that for what he believed was part of his faith also.” And consider this statement from another participant:

“You can look at people like Adolph Hitler. He was born a Roman Catholic. He murdered millions, not thousands, millions. But Christians, mainstream Christians, have no problem disavowing themselves from that. And here in America, Southern Baptists disavowing themselves from the Ku Klux Klan who, historically speaking, did the same thing. Southern Baptists went to church every Sunday; they got out of church and said, “hey, let’s go lynch someone.””

While such a statement may appear bold and even offensive to some, it reflects the injustice our participants feel at having their religion described based on the acts of extremists. “You have to judge the religion,” according to one participant, “not by the people, but rather by its holy book.”

The term “fundamentalist” proved to be a highly charged one. Respondents react to the media’s use of the term and claim that fundamentalism is taking on an unjustified negativity. The terrorists, they suggest, were not fundamentalists, but extremists.

“...that’s a huge misrepresentation. I mean, if they’re fundamentalist, they follow the precepts of the religion. I mean, that’s what I see in the dictionary what fundamentalist means.....you’re making the word something that it isn’t. But I would like to be a fundamentalist. I just pray that I do enough to be a fundamentalist.”

“...I hate when they use the term fundamentalist. Because these Muslims are not fundamentalist. Because the Qur’an is the fundamentals of Islam. So what

you seen on September 11th, that is not part of the Qur'an, and we hate for them to use the term fundamentalist. You know, what they are is Islamic extremists."

The attacks on September 11th, as repeatedly reported by our participants, are contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an and Islam which prohibits the killing of innocent people, the elderly, women, children, and other Muslims. As one participant put it, "you kill innocent people, commit suicide, kill other Muslims – you're going to hell."

Reactions of Friends to September 11. The immediate impact to the social support systems of the participants was, for the most part, negligible. Half of the participants reported no negative reactions from friends and coworkers, but the other three reported some negative consequences. One reported hearing of other Muslims being verbally harassed at a shopping center, but did not witness or experience anything. Another received a negative reaction from a Muslim congregation when he attended worship services while still in uniform. The last participant reported being confronted by a friend on her religion and losing another friend who saw her as being guilty by association with the Islamic faith.

Media Portrayal. One of the biggest and most chronic frustrations for our participants has been the media coverage and its portrayal of Islam. Most media stories regarding Islam place emphasis on terrorists, Middle East conflicts or the Nation of Islam and Lewis Farrakhan. None of these portray mainstream Islam, but instead perpetuate a distorted view and misunderstanding of Muslims living in America. While there is occasional educational programming on Islam, one participant asserts that "the only thing you really get in the media here in America is negativity." The hatred of America and the Jihad against non-Muslims are not descriptive of the majority of Muslims. As pointed out earlier, by definition of the term Muslim, Christians and Jews can be considered Muslims. The hatred of America has less to do with the teachings of the Qur'an and

Islam itself, and more to do with the culture, ignorance and politics in the Middle East (see Cooper, 2001 for one treatise on the politics).

Patriotism. With the anti-Islamic sentiment and the negative media portrayals that our participants have experienced, they all emphasized their dedication to the United States and see service in the military as part of their patriotism. It is this compatibility between Islam and American society that they would like to emphasize, as summarized by two of our participants:

“My basic message would be that Muslims are patriotic Americans. I would say that they love this country. For the Muslims that know their faith and know the Qu’ran correctly and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed directly, there is no conflict. And most Muslims realize that Americans are not at war with Islam. They are at war with the perpetrators of the horrendous event that took place of September 11th.”

“So when the Constitution said one nation under one God, or under God, that’s, for me, enough.... I’m very happy to serve because I feel that there is something that I have to pay back to the United States.”

These strong patriotic statements emulate the American willingness to fight for country and freedom, include religious freedom. The participants in this study maintain a strong identity as Americans that they merge with their identity as Muslims.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

As we started this project, we expected to find Muslims in the military having difficulty merging their religious culture with the demands of military life, and that these conflicts could be exacerbated by September 11th. While we found some incidents of discrimination, intolerance

and structural barriers within the military, the overwhelming message was that the military provides a safe and supportive environment for the practice of Islam. Despite the increased media attention since September 11th, participants report little negative effects within the military, and, in some cases, increased support.

All of our participants could be characterized as moderate or mainstream Muslims. Each has demonstrated personal initiative in seeking the support of his or her unit and commander to find religious accommodation within military. As Muslims, they believe they have more in common with their Judeo-Christian colleagues than they have differences. Participants perceive a greater acceptance and tolerance in the military than in the larger society, providing an environment that accommodates the differences in religious practices, especially if the individual makes the religious needs known.

Limitations

This study has examined the experiences of six Muslims in the U.S. military. With such a small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to other Muslims in the military. While none of the Muslims we approached turned down the opportunity to participate, we only had access to those that identified themselves as being Muslim, had remained in the military and participated in Muslims services on base. There may be Muslims in the military who do not openly identify themselves as Muslim due to fear of discrimination and other repercussions. In addition, this project did not include men and women who left the armed services due to religious or cultural conflicts between their religion and their military commitments.

Practice Implications

The primary social support for Muslims tends to be contained within their own religious community. As one participant put it, Muslims "tend more...to stick together and take care of

their own.” They are unlikely to seek formal mental health services and may be apprehensive about asking for help, turning instead to religious leaders who are committed to and understand the same religious beliefs. This reluctance to seek professional services has been found by other researchers (Carolan et. al., 2000; Ayyub, 2000). Clinical interventions are more likely to be effective if they involve resources in the Muslim community. In a military context, mental health assessments can be mandated by commanders and family violence intervention is required for any reported domestic violence. Professionals must be aware of these barriers to accepting professional intervention that limit voluntary participation and may complicate mandated interventions.

Given the reluctance to voluntarily seek formal social work services, practice with this population may be more likely to fall outside of the clinical arena. Practitioners may find more acceptance of their efforts in community awareness, policy practice, outreach and prevention where the emphasis can be placed on diminishing public prejudice, stereotyping and misunderstanding.

Conclusion

This study adds to the small but growing literature on Muslims in America and points at many opportunities for future research. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to better inform professionals regarding intervention with this population. Many of the social and family dynamics of American-born converts to Islam are different than those of Muslim immigrants (Mazrui, 1996). Both the diversity of cultural backgrounds and the unifying thread of religion must be considered when looking at the Muslim population in the United States.

Unique challenges exist in the military and provide ample opportunity for research. The military already has a vast research system to perform climate assessments that focus on the

morale, unity and quality of life issues of specific squadrons or of a whole branch of the military. The climate assessment program could be modified to provide cross-sectional studies that analyze the climate across different religious and ethnic groups.

Group identity and roles have been referred to in this study and could provide the basis for a completely different analysis. The negotiation of roles and identity is another vast opportunity for research with various populations in America. Immigrant groups and their adaptation of group identity as they conform to U.S. society is one such population. Some religions, including Islam, can present unique challenges to the negotiation of roles and group identity, as suggested by the discussion of Muslim-on-Muslim conflict. Such areas need further research in order to understand how such internal conflicts are negotiated and what factors determine action when religious and professional identities call for opposing behavior.

This study has looked at the experience of six Muslims serving on active military duty in the United States armed forces. The juxtaposition of Islam with the military culture provides tremendous benefits as well as some unique challenges. Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that our participants are Americans that believe in Islam. In other words, their identity as Americans is just as pronounced as their identity as Muslims, and their religious beliefs strengthen their dedication as members of the U.S. military.

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