

NO LONGER SAFE AT HOME

Dr. Louise Cainkar explores
life for Arab-Americans
in a post-9/11 world.

By Joni Moths Mueller

All Arabs think alike. All Muslims are Arabs. They all are violent. They all oppress women.

Such labeling and stereotyping of Arab- and Muslim-Americans was accepted by some segments of U.S. culture long before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, says Marquette sociologist Dr. Louise Cainkar. These misconceptions contributed to a post-9/11 panic that shattered friendships, fueled prejudice, and gave two groups of native and immigrant citizens reason to fear for their safety. Cainkar, an assistant professor of social and cultural sciences, tells their story in her award-nominated book *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab-American and Muslim-American Experience After 9/11*.

“These ideas were so well ingrained when the attacks occurred that it was easy for some to argue that all Arab- and Muslim-Americans were dangerous, and, therefore, they were a suspect population in our country,” she says.

Cainkar’s book shares the flip side of a time of intense fear, captured as it was lived by Arab- and Muslim-Americans across metropolitan Chicago. Her research included 102 interviews with individuals, plus five extensive oral histories. Feeling unsafe and insecure in their home country was a dominant theme expressed by men and women alike, and it became the title of her book.

“People were more afraid of the policies of the Bush administration than of public backlash,” she says.

In one interview, an American-born Muslim woman said, “I feel like I need to get out of this country. But I was born here, and I’m just as American as everyone else.” Another woman, also born in

the United States, said she was afraid to dine in restaurants so she started using the drive-through window service.

“There was this palpable sense of fear, and their story has not yet been merged with the dominant September 11th narrative told by other Americans, that of living in fear of terrorists,” Cainkar says.

That’s the narrative Cainkar captures. “I wanted to know what was the normative, the average experience” of Muslims and Arabs after Sept. 11, “not the sensational story. In the end, it’s not a pleasant book to read,” she says.

Men reported living in fear of being arrested, interned and deported. Men and women said they were cautious about visiting public places and worried their homes could be attacked. Though men suffered the most from government policies, women took the greatest toll of public anger, Cainkar says, especially women wearing a headscarf or hijab.

“I was fascinated by the fact that women reported experiencing hate acts at a rate more than twice that of men. If the fear is of terrorists, why were women being attacked? And then I looked at my data and discovered that most of the women who experienced aggression were wearing a headscarf or in the company of someone wearing one when attacked,” Cainkar says.

She attributes the heightened attacks on women to a misunderstanding of hijab.

“Hijab is understood generally in this society as a symbol of oppression, patriarchy, lack of freedom,” Cainkar says. “People who believe that this is what hijab means, I believe, attack women in hijab

because they see them as anti-American, not respecting American values.”

But for Muslims, hijab represents an act of modesty and faith in God.

Cainkar says Muslims and Arabs reported two positive outcomes of the post-9/11 experience: a deepened religious faith and a determination to become more civically engaged.

“Many said: ‘I had to go back to read our religious texts. I couldn’t understand how Islam could be used in these attacks, and I needed to respond to people’s questions about my faith,’” Cainkar says.

People also expressed a realization that things won’t change if they don’t do something to change them, and so they deepened their relationships with the mainstream organizations that supported them in this time of stress.

“It didn’t drive people into their closets,” Cainkar says of 9/11, “it actually drove people out of their homes and onto the streets.”

Muslims and Arabs express optimism and confidence that the pendulum of public opinion that has swung against them since 2001 will soon change directions.

“My conclusion is that in some way things are better because there used to be a dominant anti-Muslim, anti-Arab narrative in this country, and, now, I think there are dueling narratives,” Cainkar says. “It’s still not a secure time. It’s better than the post-9/11 days, but we still have not achieved equality and justice.”



MULTIMEDIA:
Go to marquette.edu/experts to hear Cainkar talk about her research on Arab- and Muslim-Americans.