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THE AMERICAN EXCEPTION

Why Muslims in the U.S. aren't as attracted to jihad as those in Europe

HOW CONCERNED SHOULD AMERICANS BE ABOUT HOME-grown terrorism in the U.S.? In the face of another plot by British Islamists, it's worth keeping in mind that America's Muslim community is strikingly different from those in Britain and the rest of Europe.

The first difference is in relative numbers. The most authoritative estimate of the number of Muslims in the U.S. is between 2 million and 3 million—less than 1% of the total population. In France, Muslims constitute about 8% to 9%; in the Netherlands, about 5.6%; in Germany, 3.6%; and in Britain, just under 3%.

More important, Muslims in Europe are concentrated in highly visible enclaves. In Brussels, for example, Muslim women and children beg on the streets and in the subways. And for blocks along the Avenue de Stalingrad, scores of cafés and stores are crowded with Muslim men—and no women. The only comparable sight in the U.S. might be in certain neighborhoods of Detroit and nearby Dearborn, Mich. But that would be the exception. American Muslims tend to be university-educated professionals living in the suburbs.

To be sure, many Islamist terrorists have come from well-off, integrated families. But the U.S. Muslim community is less likely to breed disaffection, because it is extremely diverse. In fact, it is probably the most diverse in the world, hailing from many parts of the globe, speaking numerous languages and practicing several different versions of Islam. This makes it less likely that any one group will dominate and more likely that each subgroup will adapt to its new surroundings.

The most vital difference between Muslims in America and their brethren in Europe is the U.S.'s enduring emphasis on religious liberty. Religion is accorded far more respect in the public realm in the U.S. than in Europe. Think about it. We are in the midst of a rancorous debate over immigration in which many Americans reject "hyphenated identities" like Mexican-American as a threat to national cohesion. Yet while evangeli-

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cal Christian, Catholic and Jewish Americans may disagree vehemently among themselves, the religious basis of their identity is not seriously questioned by anyone. If Muslim Americans are not so readily accepted today, it is not because they are believers. In Europe, by contrast, Muslims are resented and marginalized precisely because their religion threatens strong secular values.

In practice, America's religious liberty means that here there are very few—and no seriously divisive—disputes over Muslim head scarves. Religious liberty in the U.S. is also evident in the 250 or so full-time Muslim schools operating in America—about double the number in Britain, which has roughly the same number of Muslims. And in France there are only a handful of

Muslim schools—at last count, three.

In the same vein, Muslim political advocacy groups are much more visible and influential in the U.S. than in Europe. Walk into the headquarters of the Islamic Society of North America on the outskirts of Indianapolis, Ind., for example, and you will see stacks of religious literature ready to be mailed. But you will also see stacks of thick guides to the IRS code. Setting up and running their own



EVERYONE PLAYS Somali immigrants at a housing project in Portland, Maine

religious institutions gives Muslims a stake in the society while teaching them valuable skills in self-government and democracy.

Of course, many Americans would not like some of what they would see or hear in these self-governing institutions—schoolroom maps of the Middle East with no representation of Israel, expressions of sympathy for groups like Hizballah and, in the wake of 9/11 and the Patriot Act, passionate complaints about being unfairly targeted by government officials. Such claims can get exaggerated. But the point is they are voiced in a way that draws Muslims into the mainstream rather than keeps them out. It is striking how often these grievances are linked with the civil rights struggles of other Americans, including African Americans, Jewish Americans and Japanese Americans during World War II. As Muslims often put it, "This is how America treats its minorities. But they overcame it, and so will we." In other words, Muslims never sound quite so American as when asserting their rights against government policies they consider unjust. ■