

Mingling with Muslims in Your Community

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At 4:00am, you see a young male walking down the street. He has a beard, a kufi (skullcap) on his head, is dressed in "middle-eastern clothing," and carrying a Quran*. You conduct a pedestrian stop and investigate. The young man tells you he's on his way to the Mosque* to pray.*

Possible Terrorist?

"Come on," you think to yourself, "Who walks to 'church' to pray at 4:00am?" This kid must be lying to me.

You request backup then grab the Quran and toss it on the hood of your car as you search him, but it slides off and falls on the ground. You handcuff him, place him in the back seat, and start asking him terrorism-related questions including what Islamic organizations he belongs to, what Mosque he attends, and how many times he prays a day. You search his wallet and find a "suspicious" piece of paper written in Arabic and question him about it.

He pleads with you to let him go because he is going to be late for prayer and insists he isn't lying. He is clearly frustrated with your questions. As you continue, your backup arrives. He overhears you and your partner making jokes about him probably being a terrorist. After 45 minutes, you're convinced he wasn't involved in any criminal activity and release him.

What you didn't know is that he has information about an unsolved murder in your area. But now, he won't share it because he's convinced that law enforcement can't be trusted.



Photo on left: A grandmother from a local Muslim community visits the LASD Muslim Community Affairs Unit booth at a family picnic celebrating Eid el Um (Mother's Day).

Bottom photo: Students at a local Islamic school listen to Deputy Sheriff Morsi explain the proper use of 9-1-1



Facts and Figures

Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the USA and the world

25% of the world's population (1.6 Billion) is Muslim.

3 million Muslims live in the USA, 2% of the U.S. population.

Nearly 70% of Muslims worldwide are Asian, only 20% are Arab.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country.

China has more Muslims than Syria, Germany more than Lebanon, and Russia has more than Jordan and Libya put together.

Very high percentage of Muslims are highly educated in professional fields such as medicine, engineering, aerospace, education, and defense industries; many with top-level security clearances.

Why do I need to know about Muslims?

Having knowledge about other cultures not only broadens your knowledge, but it actually makes your job easier. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States as well as the world. Having a good rapport and building trust with your Muslim community will help you solve crimes and resolve quality of life issues.

Just like all other Americans, Muslims want to live in crime-free neighborhoods. Yet the Muslim community has been hesitant to contact law enforcement for a variety of reasons. When you build trust and a good rapport with people, they feel comfortable approaching you with valuable information that can help you succeed.

Know Your Community

Knowledge about the members of our communities, their cultures, beliefs, and customs is crucial. You may not agree or even accept the practices of some segments of the population,

but you should show respect to them. Adding to our challenges as peace officers is that although some cultural practices are illegal in the United States, they may be well accepted in other parts of the world. We should know about the fears and concerns of our communities, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. It is part of our duty and why the people gave us the authority to police them.

Muslims Worldwide

Muslims are an integral part of communities throughout the world. With an estimated 2.5 million Muslims living in the United States, you are likely to come in contact with a Muslim in the near future, if you haven't already.

According to a CNN report, nearly one out of four people worldwide is Muslim; that's more than 1.5 billion people. The report states 66% of the world's Muslims are from Asia, while only 20% are from Arab nations. Indonesia and Pakistan have the largest and second largest Muslim populations respectively; neither of which, contrary to popular belief, speak Arabic.

Many Americans cannot distinguish between a Muslim and a Sikh, due in part to the constant image of a turban-clad Osama bin Laden on television news reports. Many Sikhs are mistaken for Muslims but they actually practice Sikhism, a completely different religion. In fact, the first victim of a hate crime after 9/11 was a Sikh who was murdered in Arizona as revenge for the terrorist attacks. Sikhs are readily identifiable by their turban, beard, and a metal bracelet called a Kara. Conversely, there are very few Muslims in America that wear a turban at all.

As a result of the ongoing media coverage of a very few criminals committing heinous crimes in what they claim is in the name of their religion, Muslims and Islam have received a lot of scrutiny. Yet, the vast majority of Muslims are law-abiding, highly educated, successful, and family oriented people with the same dreams and desires as any other American. Muslims have historically taken up professions such as medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, and educators. They also serve in our military, government, defense industry, fire, and law enforcement fields; many with high-level security clearances.

Muslim Families Struggle to Keep Their Culture

Muslim parents who migrated to this country want their children to retain their cultural and religious beliefs. However, Mosques and formal Islamic schools are scarce. Some families rely on Halaqat* held at private residences in the evenings. You may respond to a call concerning a group of "suspicious middle easterners" who have been routinely gathering late at night at a residence. Obviously, officer safety should always dictate your actions; however, knowing that there is a lack of Islamic schools, you might approach things differently, and know better what questions to ask.



Deputy Sheriff Morsi and Sgt. Mike Abdeen in discussion with local Muslim community members.



Saadia Khan of the Muslim Public Affairs Council explains some of the customs of the Islamic faith to Sgt. Deborah Cotto.



Deputy Sheriff Morsi speaking with teachers during a break at a local Islamic school on Career Day.

Why are Muslims Afraid of Law Enforcement?

Muslims have been victimized by hate crimes. Following 9/11 and again after incidents such as the Ft. Hood shooting and the Christmas day plot onboard a Detroit bound flight, Muslims have been the victims of harassment and violence. Meanwhile, because of prior experiences Muslims had with corrupt police and government officials in Muslim countries, Muslims in the U.S. also fear government and law enforcement here.

In fact, many Muslim countries have a national police force. This contributes to immigrants carrying over the misunderstanding here that American law enforcement is an extended arm of the federal government. Furthermore, Muslim victims often do not report crimes because they are afraid that law enforcement will either ignore their concerns, or target them later, just as like what happens in their foreign countries.

It's All About Building Trust

Mistrust between community members and law enforcement can be reduced by implementing community outreach programs. We, as public safety officers, need to build trust with our communities. Sheriff Leroy D. Baca strongly believes and guides the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with the philosophy of Public Trust Policing (www.lasd.org) through partnerships with the communities we serve. Sheriff Baca and many policing leaders believe that it is incumbent upon law enforcement to recognize that without the full faith and cooperation of the public, the mission of public safety is severely impaired.

Trust can, in part, be accomplished through regular personal contacts. Simply visiting your local Mosque or Islamic center during Jumma* prayer and meeting with your community will play a major role in building trust. Another way to build trust is by demonstrating that you have taken the time to learn about the different customs and traditions.

Try to visit Mosques and Islamic Centers during their open houses, annual Eid* celebrations, or join them for a Ramadan* iftar*. Muslims fast, abstaining from food and drink, every day from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. Muslims also often attend all-night prayers and early morning prayers during the entire month. In jails, Muslim inmates might ask for suhur* or iftar* outside of your regular meal times. You can also assign your school resource officer to visit Islamic schools in your area to give presentations about safety or participate in career day; all kids love firefighters and cops.

Common Arabic terms

Islam is a religion; a Muslim is a person who practices Islam. The word "Islamic" is used to refer to nouns such as Islamic center, Islamic art, Islamic clothing, etc; not Islamic people.

Allah – Arabic word meaning God; non-Muslim Arabic speakers also use the word "Allah"

"Assalamu Alaikum" – Common Arabic greeting meaning "Peace be upon you"

Quran – Islamic holy book (like the Bible or Torah)

Mosque or Masjid – Place of worship (like church or synagogue)

Jummá – Friday congregational prayer (like Sunday mass)

Hijab – Scarf some females wear on their heads as a sign of modesty. The hijab cannot be removed in the presence of males. If necessary for identification purposes, ask a female officer to accompany the female detainee in a private place to remove her hijab.

Burqa – Full body/face covering worn by some women, usually only worn in Saudi Arabia

Kufi – Skull cap worn by some men (like Jewish yarmulke)

Ramadan – The holy month when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset

Iftar – The nightly meal to break the fast at sunset during Ramadan

Suhur – An early-morning (4:00am) meal eaten before starting the fast

Eid – "Celebration" commemorating the end of Ramadan

Halaqat – Community Quranic study sessions held at private residences

Islamic Cultural Norms

Muslims pray five times daily at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and dusk.

Muslims are in deep concentration during prayer and may not immediately respond to your commands, give them a few minutes to finish.

Since Muslims place their heads on the prayer rug, shoes are not allowed on the prayer rug or in designated prayer halls in Mosques.

The avoidance of eye contact is a customary practice to show respect, not a sign of deception or lack of cooperation.

Some Muslims prefer not to touch the opposite gender. Do not be offended if a male Muslim does not shake the hand of a female deputy and vice versa. Additionally, same gender searches should be performed whenever possible.

Muslims are prohibited from consuming products containing pork or drinking alcoholic beverages.

A Citizen Academy is another great approach to build the trust of your community. When the community is educated on law enforcement procedures (e.g. why we serve search warrants, detain at gunpoint, ask to see hands during traffic stops, department policies, etc.) they have a better understanding of law enforcement, which helps to diffuse misconceptions that lead to distrust.

These simple gestures will let the Muslim community know that law enforcement will be by their side during good and bad times.

Could this knowledge have helped?

Imagine if the male that was detained at 4:00am filed a complaint or lawsuit claiming discrimination, harassment, and unlawful detention. It all could have easily been avoided if the deputy had prior knowledge that it actually is reasonable for a Muslim to be walking to the Mosque at 4:00am to perform the early-morning prayer. The detention could have ended as soon as the male explained that he was en route to the mosque and a check of his record came back clear. Complaints are time consuming, costly, and can tarnish an otherwise great reputation.

Try It

Assign a patrol deputy to act as a liaison between your local Muslim community and your department. If you have a Muslim deputy that is willing to take on the task, he or she may be the best suited to carry out your outreach efforts; although it's not necessary he or she be a Muslim. What is important is to expose all deputies and officers to the Muslim community. The Muslim community in your jurisdiction will appreciate the time you are taking to get to know them, and they will appreciate you. 🌟

Deputy Sheriff Morsi is a 10-year veteran of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. He has worked assignments including custody, patrol, transit, and investigative units. He is currently assigned to the Emergency Operations Bureau - Muslim Community Affairs Unit as a community liaison deputy. For more information about the LASD Muslim Community Affairs Unit, visit www.lasd.org or www.lasd.org/sites/MuslimOutreach or email MuslimOutreach@lasd.org. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is currently developing a "Law Enforcement Interaction with the Muslim Community" training video. Once completed, the video will be made available to all law enforcement agencies.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department will be presenting two programs at the National Sheriffs' Association Winter Conference in Palm Desert, CA, January 2011. Sergeant Mike Abdeen and Deputy Sheriff Morsi will be presenting "Why Develop a Muslim Community Outreach Program?" and Captain Mike Parker will be discussing "Marketing Your Sheriff's Office."

To read more about Muslim Outreach and the Muslim Community Affairs Unit of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, visit www.lasd.org and see the Sheriff President's Issue/Conference Issue 2010 of the National Sheriffs Association *Sheriff* magazine.



Sheriff Lee Baca is greeted by members of the Muslim community before a town hall meeting at an Islamic Center.