

## 10 Years After: Growing up Muslim in the age of 9/11



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HUDSON, N.Y. -- In the decade following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Easha Khanam came of age as an American Muslim -- both as a young adult and as a devout follower of Islam.

She has grown from an elementary school student who dressed like every other, to a 19-year-old college student who wears the traditional hijab; the covering on one's head, usually a scarf, and a sign of modesty for Muslim women. Of course, being a young American woman not unaware of fashion, her scarf has a bright, floral pattern.

In the last 10 years, since 9/11, she has seen many things. She has seen her working-class parents frightened to send their children out into public; she has seen the bigotry of ignorance; she has seen the kindness of strangers; she has seen her religious conviction grow deep and her pride of being an American grow strong.

The result is a confident Muslim American who -- along with her older brother and two girlfriends, all interviewed recently during the last week of the Islamic holy days of Ramadan -- is not afraid to speak her mind about what it has been like to live in America, as a Muslim, since 9/11.

"I actually got to know my religion much more, much better, here, despite 9/11. It is such an open society that open practice of religion is normal," said Khanam. "There is a majority of

Muslims there (in her parents' home country of Bangladesh) but they are not as many practicing Muslims. One of the advantages of being a Muslim in America is that you are free to be open with your religion.”

Thinking back, though, she admits: “After 9/11, there were problems ...”

She speaks in perfect English when answering questions but moves casually into speaking Bangla, the general language of Bangladesh, when she is explaining a question to one of her girlfriends as the three were interviewed in a public room at the Hudson Public Library. Bangladesh borders India.

Khanam and her brother, Sourove Hassian, 23, are both American citizens, having been since their parents immigrated to Hudson nearly 15 years ago. She is currently a student at Russell Sage College in Troy, while he recently graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology. Their father works at a local manufacturing plant while their mother is a teaching assistant at an elementary school.

The two other young women at the library, Jabin Ahmed, 17, and Ishrat Zahan, 18, are both of Bengali descent as well. Ahmed, also a citizen, will be following Khanam to Russell Sage this fall, while Zahan, a 2009 immigrant, will be in her senior year of high school.

The first thing both Khanam and Hassian point out -- and their first line of defense against bigotry -- is that they are Muslims of Bangladesh heritage, not Middle Eastern Arab heritage and certainly not Saudi, the national background of the majority of the 9/11 terrorists.

“We felt it wasn't fair for us to be blamed for what one group of Muslims -- people who call themselves Muslims -- did,” said Khanam. “We did not do that. That was not right by our teaching.”

### **A little older, a little more cautious**

Hassian, being a little older in 2001, and maybe being a Muslim male whose every word needs to be carefully weighed, used humor to make the point when asked about trouble after the attacks.

“Right after (9/11), someone on the street called me a ‘desert camel jockey,’ I told them ‘I'm from Bangladesh. It's practically a rain forest’,” said Hassian. (Hassian was interviewed separately from his sister, at the basement prayer room, or Masjid, of the Hudson Islamic Center, an older but well maintained house in a working-class neighborhood. A Masjid can best be described as a small mosque, or Muslim prayer building.)

“It was frustrating that people called us Arabs instead of even thinking you are not Arab,” said Hassian. “Many people think that if you are Muslim, you are Arab. During the time following 9/11, there were times I was called many names, derogatory terms, and most of it has to do with living in the deserts. You don’t see that anymore. It is not common to have people pick on us that way anymore.”

Khanam’s memories are not quite as funny, but show both sides of the coin of public reaction.

“There was this one kid in school,” she said. “He said something rude, and I said, ‘What did you say?’ and he said ‘What are you going to do, blow up my house?’ And there were two guys who wrote something on the Masjid -- “Sand Nigger,” or something like that. They used spray paint to write on the Masjid wall, in the back. But then the police came. They took action right away. The mayor was there on the spot.”

Ahmed agreed with her friend that there was both bad and good following 9/11.

### **A kind act following 9/11**

“Our parents got really scared. They did not want us going out,” Ahmed said. “When your friends found out you were Muslim, they wanted to treat you differently... (but) there was one guy, from the community, he brought flowers and he said: ‘You still have people in the community who care, who love you and support you.’ There was a mix.”

However, Ahmed -- maybe being younger and less scared of saying the wrong thing -- almost takes personal affront at all the focus on 9/11, especially as the 10th anniversary comes.

“I am always told by my parents ‘Don’t talk about this stuff in public. Don’t mention 9/11 in public. It is like they are scared. And I am like “Why?” It is not like I did anything wrong.

“Every single year, during this time, people get so serious. They bring it up; they show footage of 9/11. It is just like a slap in the face for us. It reminds them, but it also reminds us. I expect that this anniversary, there will be some places, in the city (New York City) where it might get pretty harsh.”

While some bitterness comes through, for the most part, it seems as though the four young people simply want to move on with their lives.

One of the key precepts of Islam’s Ramadan, the Muslim holy lunar month of fasting, personal reflection and prayer, which ended with the end of August this year, is the idea of moving on from the past, from good and the bad one does, and moving into the future as a better person.

So while the memory of Sept. 11, 2001, is still a sometimes painful open wound to many Muslim Americans -- and, for most adults, a subject to be avoided if possible -- younger Muslims such as Khanam, her brother and her friends look forward to the day when they and their country can move on from the pain of that day and move into a better future.

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