



CBC

## How Islamophobia is driving young Canadian Muslims to reclaim their identity

**Pressure to answer for Islamic extremism might explain why young Muslims feel more Muslim than Canadian**

By Shanifa Nasser

April 27, 2016

---

Laya Behbahani never questioned her Canadianness until a recent incident at the Vancouver airport.

The 31-year-old lecturer at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., was born in Iran and moved to Canada when she was 13. While going through the passport check after returning home from a trip, she said, she was pulled aside by a border services agent and questioned about her religion and why she frequently travels outside the country.

At one point, Behbahani said, the agent asked her: "How Canadian do you really feel?" "It made me stop and wonder, 'Why would you ask me that? Would you ask someone without a headscarf that question?'" she said.

The majority of young Muslims in Canada feel Muslim first and Canadian second, an [EnviroNics Institute survey](#) released Wednesday suggests. Some experts suggest that's because young Muslim Canadians feel a strong societal pressure to have to [answer for violence](#) perpetrated by extremists in the name of Islam and are struggling to reclaim their Muslim identity for themselves.

Among young respondents who said their citizenship and their faith were important parts of their identity, 61 per cent said being Muslim was the most important part of their identity and six per cent said being Canadian was the most important. Twenty-six per cent said both were important.

- [Éric Grenier | Muslim Canadians love Canada, but faith more important to their identity](#)
- [Read the complete Environics survey](#)
- [See what CBC readers had to say about the survey](#)

### Most respondents 'very proud' to be Canadian

Behbahani's experience of being singled out because of her religion was shared by about a quarter of the survey respondents in her age group. Twenty-six per cent of those age 18 to 34 said they have experienced discrimination because of their religion and 24 per cent because of their culture or ethnicity.



The Environics survey, based on phone interviews with 600 Muslims across Canada, found that more than eight out of 10 Muslims are "very proud to be Canadian." Their biggest complaint about living here? Overwhelmingly, Canadian winters.

But asked if they are primarily Muslim or Canadian, young Muslims answered that they are Muslim first, even if they were born here, as the majority of young respondents were. For Behbahani, the finding isn't surprising given her own experience at the Vancouver airport and similar undue scrutiny that many Muslim Canadians say they face while going about their daily lives.

"As Canadian as you feel, when individuals acting in the capacity of the government do things like this, it sends a very loud message that, 'No, you're not one of us.'"

### **Shaking the stigma of extremism**

The Environics survey released Wednesday is a follow-up to one conducted 10 years ago, and while the memory of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S. by al-Qaeda militants is not as fresh today as it was then, its effects still resonate, the 2016 survey suggests.

The angst of 9/11 has faded, but public concerns about the cultural integration of immigrants are growing, and Muslims continue to be viewed with discomfort, if not suspicion, by some," the survey concluded.

The reason for that is no mystery to Rahamatullah Siddique, 25, a Calgary business consultant who runs the Own It Institute, a non-profit organization that provides outreach services for newcomers, youth and other community members.

"We see certain extremist groups associating their acts with our religion ... that's really created a stigma," he said. Many young Muslims in Canada feel saddled with a responsibility to have to answer for violent attacks carried out in the name of Islam, said Toronto-based legal scholar Azeezah Kanji.

"Being a securitized population under suspicion in Canada is really the dominant experience that we've had," Kanji said.

### **Identity under scrutiny**

Assya Moustaqim-Barrette, 27, of Oakville, Ont., says she and her peers feel they are being judged based on the actions of Muslim extremists.

"On the one hand, you have people in certain parts of the world that are calling themselves Muslim and doing horrific actions ... on the other, you have Canadians making conclusions based on that," Moustaqim-Barrette said. "It's a hard place for a young Muslim to be in."

The pressure to answer for violent attacks carried out by Muslim perpetrators has driven some young Muslims to pull away from their faith and others to try to recapture it, said University of Toronto political science lecturer Katherine Bullock.

Bullock, research director at the Tessellate Institute, was a partner in the Environics study but acknowledges the numbers don't tell the whole story.

"A lot of youth have felt let down," Bullock said, stressing that her comments stem from her research, not the survey itself. "They feel their Canadian identity has been put in question — as if their citizenship depends on the whim of the government. "To be a Muslim in Canada today is to be a person of scrutiny."

**'Proud to be both'**

Yet for many Canadian Muslims, trying to find where their Muslim identity ends and their Canadian one begins is a senseless exercise.

Montreal-born Arden Maaliq, 25, sees no reason to choose. "To be Canadian — or at least this is what they tell us — is to be proud of multiculturalism, and that would mean embracing your Muslimness," he said.

Siddique agrees: "I don't see any conflict. I'm a Muslim. I'm Canadian. I'm proud to be both." On the whole the survey revealed older and younger Muslim Canadians were divided on the question of their identity. In the 60 and older age group, almost twice as many respondents said they feel Canadian first than in the 18-34 age group, despite most of the older respondents being immigrants.

- [Muslims use hashtags to reclaim identity online](#)
- [Why some young Muslims feel disgruntled](#)
- [Muslim teen forgives shopowner who kicked her out](#)
- [Ottawa shooting inflated rhetoric of 'homegrown terrorism'](#)

Behbahani thinks that's likely because older generations still remember the difficult circumstances they left behind when coming to Canada.

"I feel like because they've had to earn it, they perhaps identify more as Canadian than Muslim," she said.

As part of the survey, non-Muslim Canadians were also asked how proud they are of their Canadian identity, but fewer of them said they were proud to be Canadian.

"As a population made up mostly of immigrants (many having arrived in the past decade), Muslims truly stand out as being among the most enthusiastic group of Canadian patriots," the survey found.

Kanji worries that that greater degree of patriotism actually points to a disturbing phenomenon.

"I really do think it's a product of the tremendous pressure that's been placed on the Muslim Canadian community to declare itself not a fifth column in Canada ... to prove itself loyal," Kanji said. "Are we constantly asking other communities to prove their patriotism?"

**More engaged citizens**

For Kanji, the fact that younger Muslims identify primarily as Muslim suggests they are comfortable enough with their place in Canadian society that they can be critical of it. Having grown up here, they recognize their rights and liberties but also have a deeper awareness of not only Islamophobia but racism against other populations, such as blacks or aboriginal people, Kanji said.

As a result, "They're saying, 'No, I'm not going to acquiesce to the demand to sideline my Muslim identity in order to declare myself a patriotic Canadian,'" she said.

Carleton University professor Karim Karim, who heads the school's Centre for the Study of Islam, thinks the key question going forward is "how as a society we are marginalizing and alienating people."

"Being under the threat of discrimination, of being perceived in a negative light ... that has an impact on how you see yourself," Karim said. Behbahani has felt the impact of that firsthand.

"We've constantly been made to respond to these attacks and the assumptions about us and our identities," she said.

But paradoxically, she says, the pressure to dispel stereotypes about being Muslim has forced her to learn more about Canadian laws and policies — making her a more engaged citizen as a result.

"As we've learned more about ourselves, we've also learned more about what our society stands for," she said. "So, in a way we've become more Canadian."