Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11
By Lori A. Peek
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This riveting work describes the lives of Muslim Americans immediately after the most prolific and horrific attack on American soil in its history. Not only did 9/11 change the way Americans think about their daily living, but the effect that this tumultuous event had was profound on the living of a small, but growing minority of Muslim Americans. Lori Peek, in a rather descriptive portrayal of the events surrounding 9/11, gathers the stories of an educated group of 140 Muslim American women and men ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-five years.

What does Lori Peek suggest in the word “backlash”? Could the events told in her work be perceived as a normal reaction to the terrorist attack as suggested by many political right activists here in the United States? As one reads deeper into Peek’s detailed work, it is clear that this “backlash” experienced by Muslim Americans was abnormal. This verbal harassment and intimidation, as told by these men and women in this study, include verbal slurs and derogatory names that were commonplace prior to the attacks but more intensified post-9/11. Nonverbal hostility changed from one of curious or confused glances to more overt hostile and confrontational stares known as the “hate stare.” African Americans have a shared history with Muslim Americans with this kind of nonverbal hostility as told by the author, yet African Americans have a lengthier history of collective suffering. Even friendships and personal relationships that Muslim Americans had prior to 9/11 were altered immediately after this occurrence. Selina, a second-generation Lebanese American, tells her story of a friend who expressed a pronounced fear in her presence the day after the World Trade Center collapsed. The author suggests that the Bush Administration’s liberal use of fear-mongering terms such as “Arab terrorists” and
“Muslim terrorists” greatly contributed to this sense of fear. Beyond the abstract reactions, the more overt discriminatory practices were those of employment and housing discrimination, discrimination in education, violent confrontations, and religious and ethnic profiling. A prolific example of such discrimination was founded in a 2004 study initiated by the Discrimination Research Center. Their findings of 6,000 fictitious resumes to employment firms throughout California concluded that candidates with Muslim or Arabic sounding names were much less likely to be brought in for an interview than applicants whose names indicated that they were of European or African descent. On housing discrimination one of the research subjects, Khalid a graduate student from Turkey, was forced to live homeless for several weeks following the terrorist attacks because of the inability to secure an apartment based on his Islamic name and heavy Turkish accent. The backdrop of this type of behavior may have been encouraged by the FBI’s call on property owners, landlords, and public housing officials to be aware of potential terrorists attempting to rent apartments. As for discrimination in education, in the year post-9/11 the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Council on American Islamic Relations revealed more than 200 cases of physical violence, threats, and harassment targeting Arab American and Muslim American students. Tahira, who was pursuing a doctoral degree in English and was a graduate teaching assistant, explained her discriminatory encounter with one of her students. This student refused to work with Tahira, complaining to her professor that Tahira’s religious attire was oppressing.

There is no surprise here of profiling and violent confrontation since much of this is captured in the U.S. media. Hate crimes against Muslim Americans have surged post-9/11, with ADC and CAIR reporting a combined total of over 2,400 violent incidents and the FBI tallied 481 hate crimes in the last 3 months of 2001. This involved grievous bodily harm, and tens of thousands of dollars worth of damage to places of religious worship, and Muslim and Arab-owned businesses and homes. The untold story is one of religious and ethnic profiling. U.S. public opinion historically has been clearly against the practice of profiling. The open rhetoric of monitoring U.S. mosques or profiling Muslim Americans at U.S. airports as suggested by several NYC Assemblymen, and a number of federal government policies and programs explicitly targeted Muslim and Arabic communities in the United States, may have factored in the change of these opinions. Perhaps, as implied by Peek in her work, this general elite consensus on the necessity of these types of policies encouraged Americans to express newfound levels of support for ethnic and religious profiling. An alarming minority of Americans, as suggested by reports issued by the New York Times and Cornell University three years after 9/11, favor special surveillance and some curtailment of the Muslim Americans’ civil liberties. Peek points out Robert Merton’s argument that disasters bring out, in “bold relief,” aspects of social systems—such as discriminatory laws and support for certain kinds of profiling—that are not so readily apparent during less stressful time periods.
In spite of this “backlash” many Muslim and Arabic Americans found comfort in acts of solidarity. This kind of solidarity following 9/11 was a personal need for inner peace and a broader search for community sought in a movement toward greater religious affiliation. Although Muslims generally kept a low profile following the terrorist attack, Muslims expressed a growing desire to become more active. Muslim involvement in mosques and other Islamic institutions surprisingly surpassed pre-9/11 levels.

Although Lori Peek does a fundamentally sound analysis of scrutinizing the lives of the young Muslim men and women, two points need to be made countering the author’s sample of the Muslim American population that was studied. Although Muslim Americans, in general, are more educated than the average American adult population the question begs why the author failed to include in her analysis research subjects who were not so well educated. Here, the author may benefit from hearing the stories of those who were closer to the daily events “on the ground.” These could include, but not be limited to, gas attendants, janitors, construction workers, and service workers in the food industry. These individuals are, more directly, “in the face” of the American public and may experience stories similar, but also very different than those explained in this research. In addition, the author chooses a much younger cohort of individuals. Although the stories explained in this work were indeed extraordinary, perhaps older adults may “view” the backlash so well told here in rather different ways. An older population of adults may have resided here longer and may have become more accustomed to the daily harassments, although disturbing as it may seem, they may view this activity as “normal” in their everyday living experiences (although 9/11 did heighten this type of activity).

While relating the stories of Muslim Americans struggling for acceptance in America following 9/11, Peek’s work in Behind the Backlash offers analytic insights that spell out many of the social dynamics processing Muslim marginalization and traumatization, as well as in their constructive responses. Peek does well in explaining why Muslim Americans were so readily vilified and then so easily victimized by some of their fellow Americans and their government, and sheds light on the social forces associated with post disaster blame assignment and backlash. What Peek describes has important implications for all Americans concerned for minority groups that suddenly become suspect, and in this case the focus of national attention after an unnatural disaster.