

# Summary

**H**ow do Muslims in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom view Islamic authority? In this study, Karim Karim aims to shed light on this question. What sources Muslims regard as valid Islamic authorities is important to understanding their integration into Western societies. The topic also has implications for broader socio-political issues in these three countries and the rest of the Western world. Followers of Islam are re-examining their roles as good citizens and as good Muslims. This is an important process in contemporary times, when Muslims in Western countries face a range of options from secularism to religious extremism.

The findings are primarily drawn from a series of focus group discussions with “lay” Muslims. They reveal some of the complexities of this Muslim soul-searching, which is often portrayed simplistically in popular discourse as a contest between “moderates” and “fundamentalists.” The study provides insight into Muslims’ views on immigrant integration by revealing how the participants’ perceptions of religious authority shape their engagement in the broader society. It is particularly important for public policy-makers to understand Muslims’ expectations of their leadership because in Islam, faith and the material world are integrally connected. In other words, Muslims draw civic ethics from their religious beliefs. A number of the participants mentioned how important it is to live a balanced life. They expect their leaders to provide an enabling framework that takes into account the new circumstances they are encountering.

The research shows that Muslims in the West are evaluating in the context of their own present-day goals not only the status of their religious leaders, but also the pri-

mary legal and scriptural texts of Islam. Several focus group participants indicated that their regard for those they traditionally perceived as religious authorities had declined. They were still willing to listen to certain figures, but not blindly. They expected imams to be cognizant of the conditions in which Western Muslim communities live. They also wanted them to demonstrate a certain practicality based on their Islamic beliefs and to engage with real-world conditions. The believers in the groups insisted on thinking for themselves and taking a rational approach in matters of faith. Some of the participants even challenged the relevance of the primary scriptural elements of Islam in current times.

With this study, Karim hopes to improve the West’s understanding of how Islam frames the aspirations of Muslims for their successful integration into Western societies. This improved understanding would enhance the formulation of policies for more harmonious integration. In this regard the author suggests the following specific avenues be pursued:

- Policies should work toward alleviating Muslim alienation by ensuring that anti-racism and anti-discrimination programs deal with Islamophobia.
- Providing more support to social organizations that work to increase mutual knowledge and enhancing intergroup initiatives will have multiple benefits.
- Government consultations and NGO programming should be inclusive of Muslim organizations.
- Enabling more Muslims to participate in the policy-making process would provide first-hand knowledge about complex community issues.
- Government leaders, the public service and the media need to gain a better understanding of the contemporary debates among Muslims.