



## Research Commentary

*This is the first in a series of independent commentaries on published public opinion and social research in Canada*

### **What do Muslim Canadians Want? *The Clash of Interpretations and Opinion Research* (Christian Leuprecht and Conrad Winn)**

**Published November 2011 by  
The MacDonald-Laurier Institute**

#### **Research Overview**

In November 2011, the MacDonald-Laurier Institute published a new research study on the views of Muslims in Canada. The MacDonald-Laurier Institute is a relatively new, Ottawa-based non-profit “think tank” that among several activities “initiates and conducts research identifying current and emerging economic and public policy issues facing Canadians.”

The stated objective of this study is to “contribute to an understanding of Canadian Muslims’ attitudes to the pluralist-democratic values that matter deeply to Canadians.” Central to this focus is testing which of three competing perspectives best explains how Muslims in Canada relate to western values:

- i. Confrontational – systemic alienation from Canada, based on an underlying conflict or clash of Muslim and non-Muslim populations (as per Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis)
- ii. Assimilationist – a broad embracing of Canada and its democratic values
- iii. Divided community – a diverse range of perspectives across the Canadian Muslim community, on such issues as terrorism, foreign policy and Sharia law

The research consisted of a telephone survey conducted with a sample of 455 Muslims in the Ottawa area (plus an additional sample of 47 Christian Arabs, for comparative purposes), and 11 focus groups held with Muslims in Calgary, Ottawa, Gatineau, Montreal and Mississauga. Most groups included a mix of Muslims, with three comprised solely of Uyghurs (Chinese Muslims).

The report identifies two sources of funding for this research: a) START - A National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, A Center of Excellence of the US Department of Homeland Security based at the University of Maryland; and b) Bryn Mawr College (a small private women’s college on Philadelphia’s prestigious Main Line)

The main conclusions can be summed up in three points:

- Muslims generally see Canada as a welcoming place and pluralistic (not racist), and admire immensely the country, its freedoms and lawfulness
- The opinions and views of Muslims in Canada conform primarily to the “divided community” perspective, reflecting diverse opinions on most of the issues studied, including terrorism, Israel, the return of the Caliphate, Sharia law, and the USA.
- The diversity of opinion among Muslims in Canada is of concern because it means some hold views on some topics (e.g., Hamas, Iran) that represent a threat to the country’s national security.

The report also includes commentary from three noted experts:

- Daniel Pipes, President of the Middle East Forum, and visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University
- Alex Wilner, Senior Fellow at the Center for Security Studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology
- Salim Mansur, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario

A copy of the full report is available at: <http://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/What-Do-Muslim-Canadians-Want-November-1-2011.pdf>

## Commentary

This is an interesting study in an area that calls for serious research, but unfortunately the research fails to live up to its objectives, and the published report leaves some important questions unanswered, and draws conclusions that are not fully substantiated by what is reported. There are four key points:

### 1. Documentation of how the research was conducted

The report which the MacDonald-Laurier Institute published on this research provides surprisingly little documentation of the research methodology and instruments, well below accepted standards for academic and professional publications. Missing are essential details of how the research was conducted (field dates, who conducted the work, sampling design and selection), the wording of questions, and a full presentation of the data collected.

While many readers may have little interest in methodological details, they are critical to demonstrating the validity and accuracy of the findings and conclusions. Their absence undermines the effort to conduct an important piece of research that warrants serious attention.

### 2. How well the research reflects the views of all Muslims in Canada

The research sampled the Muslim population from a handful of urban centres in Canada, based on a survey and focus groups in Ottawa and focus groups in four other cities. A central unanswered question is how well these individuals represent the cities from which they were drawn (one of the methodological aspects not documented), but the larger issue is that this sampling design does not meet the minimum social scientific requirements for being representative of Muslims across Canada, or even of the cities from which they were drawn.

The study authors acknowledge the limitation of conducting the survey only in Ottawa, but then go on to argue that conducting focus groups in other cities helps compensate for the lack of population coverage. This is a specious argument as it is well established that qualitative methods such as focus

groups are not designed to provide results that can be extrapolated to the broader populations. This research did not cover the Muslim population in such a way as to consider the findings as representative of this population, and to be presented as otherwise is incorrect and misleading.

Also problematic is the fact that the study provided no discussion of the rationale for the composition of the study sample. Why, for instance, there was a focus on Uyghurs? What was the purpose of adding a small sample of Christian Arabs (with a subsample of only 47 respondents that is too small to provide for valid statistical analysis)?

### **3. Reference to previous research**

The report starts with the premise that there has been a dearth of empirically-based research on Muslims in Canada. But surprisingly it makes no reference to any previous research with the Muslim population in Canada (or in other countries), including the Environics Institute's own Survey of Muslims in Canada, which was widely reported when it was released in 2006 (This study was mentioned briefly by Salim Mansur in his commentary). Nor does it reference comparable work conducted in the US and European countries by the respected Pew Research Center.

Reference to previous research would have made it clear that these findings are in broadly in line with other studies showing that Muslims in Canada hold a diverse range of opinions on most issue. This point is made by two of the study commentators (Daniel Pipes and Salim Mansur), who also point out that a diversity of views is the *only possible* way to characterize any community "made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals." They seem to be saying that the study's framework of three competing perspectives is neither relevant nor constructive as a way to think about how Muslims view their place in a country such as Canada.

The term "divided community" is perhaps just a different way of saying "diverse range of views", with the former framing the issue in the language of conflict. Perhaps this choice of words reflects in part the study's central focus on political radicalization and national security.

### **4. Areas of focus**

Apart from the methodological issues, the topics addressed in this study have a notably narrow focus around politics, radicalization and national security (a focus perhaps guided by the priorities of funders). These are relevant topics, but hardly comprehensive of many other equally relevant aspects of what it means to be Muslim in Canada today. Moreover, this focus reinforces the all-too-prevalent stereotypic framing of Muslims around terrorism and cultural conflict. The study title "What do Canadian Muslims Want" is misleading in suggesting a broader scope than what is actually covered.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this research addresses important questions but does little to contribute to our understanding of the Muslim experience in Canada. Of greater concern is the reports' unsubstantiated conclusion that diverse opinions in the Muslim community somehow represent a "disquieting" threat to the country's security. To publish such a conclusion from research that lacks the necessary methodological rigour and balance is a disservice to the country's Muslim community, and dangerously misleading to others who might mistakenly accept this study as credible evidence of a threat.

What the authors and commentators all agree on is that further in-depth research is needed to better grasp the attitudes and behaviours of Muslims in Canada. Consistent with this perspective, the Environics Institute plans to update its own research on Muslims in Canada in 2012.