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Among New York Muslims, Support for U.S. Strikes

By DANIEL J. WAKIN
and CHARLIE LeDUFF

From the Arab world's local *Main Street*, in Brooklyn, to Afghan mosques in Queens, to the halls of academe, many Muslims yesterday expressed sometimes tentative, sometimes anguished support for the attacks on Afghanistan. Many also feared for the innocent.

The long-awaited United States retaliation for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks provided a sudden and sharp focus for the feelings of Muslims who make their home just miles, not continents, away from the World Trade Center nightmare.

Unlike many Muslims abroad, who declared the bombing and missile raids an outrage against Islam, a number of Muslim New Yorkers said — publicly, at least — that the strikes were necessary. Others struggled with conflicting feelings: justice must be done, but not this way.

"I think right now we're really worried about people who are in Afghanistan, the men, women and children there who are innocent and might be in grave danger," said Noera Ayaz, 25, an American of Pakistani descent who is co-chairwoman of the Columbia University Law School's Muslim Students Association.

"As Muslims, we are taught to be conscious of all of humanity," she said. "What we've been hearing is that the attacks are being very targeted, on specific military targets. We're hoping that's the case."

Ms. Ayaz did not see the actions as an attack on Islam. "Islam is against terrorism," she said. So as a Muslim, she said, she favors the fight against it.

"Personally, I feel that whoever is responsible for the World Trade Center attacks should be brought to justice, but I'm not sure attacking Afghanistan is doing that," she said. "I wish I knew a better way to do that."

Along Atlantic Avenue near Court Street in Brooklyn, there was a strong police presence and an American flag in almost every shop window. That is because it is the Arab heartland of the city, a stretch with a long-established and heavy concentration of Arab-American businesses, many of them run by Muslims.

"My opinion? It's not just a matter of a couple of missiles," said Saad Almontsar inside his A & S tobacco shop as a police officer stood in the doorway. "It'll take a long run. It's worldwide. More important than the bombs is the political issue. We have to clean this up," he added, referring to terrorism, which he said was the scourge of all people.

Mr. Almontsar, who said he had been the object of hateful remarks since the World Trade Center attacks, said he found himself in an odd position. As a Muslim, vice president of the Yemen American Association and someone who has been in the area for 10 years, he finds himself these days as both a source of information about the Muslim world and as an object of scrutiny.

At the Hazrat Abudakr Islamic Center, an Afghan mosque on 43rd Avenue in Flushing, Queens, a crowd of men had already gathered yesterday to pray after the death of a mosque member that was unrelated to the World Trade Center attacks.

Many of them said they were seeking political asylum.

Some said they had fought with the Northern Alliance, the military force that controls a tiny piece of Afghanistan and is fighting

Continued on Page B11

CITY_21MC100_01183085 4

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NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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MUSLIMS

In Arab Neighborhoods, Support for U.S. Airstrikes

Continued From Page B1

the Taliban.

A shrine to the victims of the World Trade Center blast has grown at the front gate of the mosque.

There are newspaper clippings and photographs of the dead attached to a chain-link fence, and a cluster of lighted candles lining the sidewalk.

Every few minutes, groups of men emerged from the mosque and gathered around a car that had a radio blaring news about the bombing.

"We've been looking forward to the U.S. taking action," said Ekliel Mohmand, who lives in Flushing and immigrated to New York from Kabul.

"We believe the attack is not on the Afghan people, but on specific locations of the Taliban. At first we were concerned that the U.S. would attack Afghanistan with B-2 bombers and start carpet-bombing our country," he said. "But we think the attack is not on regular citizens, and so all and all it is a positive thing, a new beginning for our people."

Mohammad Nasim, who was at his home in Flushing yesterday, heard of the military strikes on CNN. "I'm happy because it will save the future of Afghanistan," he said.

Several of those at the mosque said they feared for their relatives' safety but that they believed the United States would be steadfast in attempts to avoid hitting civilians.

In Fresh Meadows, about 200 Afghan New Yorkers gathered at the Mustang Cafe Restaurant, an Afghan establishment, to discuss the situation. The reaction was somber.

"It's sad," said Abdul Aziz, 35, a janitor in Manhattan who lives in Flushing. "I have relatives over there, and I'm concerned about them. I wish it could have been done in a different way, if there was another way to solve the problem."

M. Ishaq Nadiri, the Jay Gould Professor of Economics at New York University, also attended the meeting. He described the mood of Afghan New Yorkers — even those who support the American actions — as one of great sorrow.

"They are absolutely sad that the country is being bombed," he said. "This community is highly, highly uncertain. There is a degree of depression that is both personal and communal."

CITY_21MC100_01183085 5

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