

By Cody Snell | Published by the [Washington Window](#) , Vol. 79, No. 3, May-June 2010

When Noor Tagouri's parents told her she would be transferring to a religious high school in College Park, Md., she was expectedly reluctant. She would be leaving behind her friends, her home and public school in the close-knit confines of La Plata, Md. The southern Maryland town of about 6,500 people was the only home Tagouri had ever known after moving there from Alabama as a two-year-old.

Her parents decided to relocate to Bowie, Md., a prominent suburb of College Park – not because of a change in jobs or a desire to start over, but because they wanted their four children to attend the Al-Huda school, one of the only all-Muslim educational institutes in the state.

It was a decision that had been coming for a while, Tagouri's mother, Salwa, said. She and Noor's father could either let their Muslim teenage daughter try to suffer through the complexities of social life at La Plata High, or remove her from an environment that encouraged open interaction with the opposite sex in the form of dances and dating; things that are strictly forbidden for followers of Islam.

"We chose Al- Huda because we thought it was the right environment for her at this point of her schooling," Salwa Tagouri said. "We did not want her dealing with the social pressures that she would have to deal with in high school."

It's a choice that nearly every minority group in the United States has to confront at some point in their lives, to deliberately blend in to a similar demographical community or try to adapt to an environment where no one looks like you or truly understands your point of view. As Tagouri's story shows, neither option is an easy one.

At La Plata, Tagouri was an extremely active member of her high school. She participated in student government, played basketball and soccer, did gymnastics and participated in community service. With all these activities, she rarely had time to reflect upon being a Muslim at a school with only two other Muslim students, one of them being her cousin.

"You never really paid attention to the Muslim aspect," said Tagouri. "Except knowing your boundaries with certain things and not eating pepperoni on the pizza when it came to the cafeteria, but it was just school."

Even though Tagouri's religion was almost never an issue among her classmates and teachers, there were times when her differences from her classmates unexpectedly arose. Tagouri recalled an instance in her freshman history class.

"We were learning something about religion and Islam came up and a boy said something about terrorists," she said. "All of my older friends looked at me, waiting for my reaction and I

got really mad, but I didn't want to start throwing a fit.

"I told him that most of it wasn't true and I was really nice about it. Later on in the year he came back up to me and thanked me. He said you were the first nice person to me, and you were the last person I would expect to be nice to me."

The difficulty of being a minority in an almost all-white community wasn't that Tagouri was persecuted for her religion, but rather that she couldn't fully embrace it in a school where no one truly understood the teachings of Islam.

"It was hard to maintain your Muslim identity," she said. "It was easy to blend in, everybody knew what my religion was, but no one judged me based on that."

That's a common experience among students who transfer to Al-Huda – they felt as if they masked their religions when they were in public school. Rasha Haggan, one of Tagouri's teachers at Al-Huda, explained that the openness of religion is one of the things that makes the school so unique.

"At Al-Huda, the students can be more comfortable with their identity," she said. "Here we all share a very core belief and many of us come from the same countries and speak the same languages. Many times in public schools, Muslim students have to hide who they are."

That was among the key reasons the Tagouri family moved to Bowie in August of 2008, when Noor was starting her sophomore year of high school.

The transition was not smooth, however.

"When I first came here it was totally like I was the outcast," said Tagouri. "Everybody was so different to me. Everything just seemed so hard and so different. When I first came here I kind of gave it the cold shoulder, I didn't want anyone to talk to me."

In those first few months, Tagouri's personality at Al-Huda was a far cry from the energetic and vocal student government leader of La Plata High.

"If you asked anyone at my old school, they would say she is very vivacious and talks a lot, but when I came here I just stopped talking and didn't want anything to do with anybody."

Whether it was the strict adherence to an all black uniform, the constant assemblies where the students had to be in organized lines during morning supplications (a type of organized prayer), or the large amount of work that comes with any college prep school, Tagouri had to adjust to an entirely different culture.

Haggan, the teacher, said what Tagouri went through isn't unusual for transfer students.

"It's a very different environment for them at first," Haggan said. "We have to teach them how to work with the opposite gender in the classroom and then of course there is the uniform, which

many students seem to have an issue with.”