

AMERICAN-MUSLIMS MUSLIM-AMERICANS



A Collection of Interviews
Edited by Politics Zone Team,
OnIslam.net



AMERICAN-MUSLIMS MUSLIM-AMERICANS



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INTRODUCTION

American Muslims or Muslim Americans, whatever the name is, the fact remains that this community is one of the most vibrant and developing in the American mosaic. The community passed through several stages and generations to reach its current level of engagement and productivity. Organizations such as CAIR represent a successful model where America's prime values are fought for by Muslims who believe in no contradiction between their dedication for Islam and their American homeland.

This book is a collection of interviews that OnIslam.net's Politics Zone team has conducted between 2009 and 2013 on issues pertaining to American Muslims in terms of identity, society, political engagement, interfaith dialogues, and US foreign policy. Interviewees include a diversity of activists and public figures in order to expose the reader to different views and angles.

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Politics Zone Team

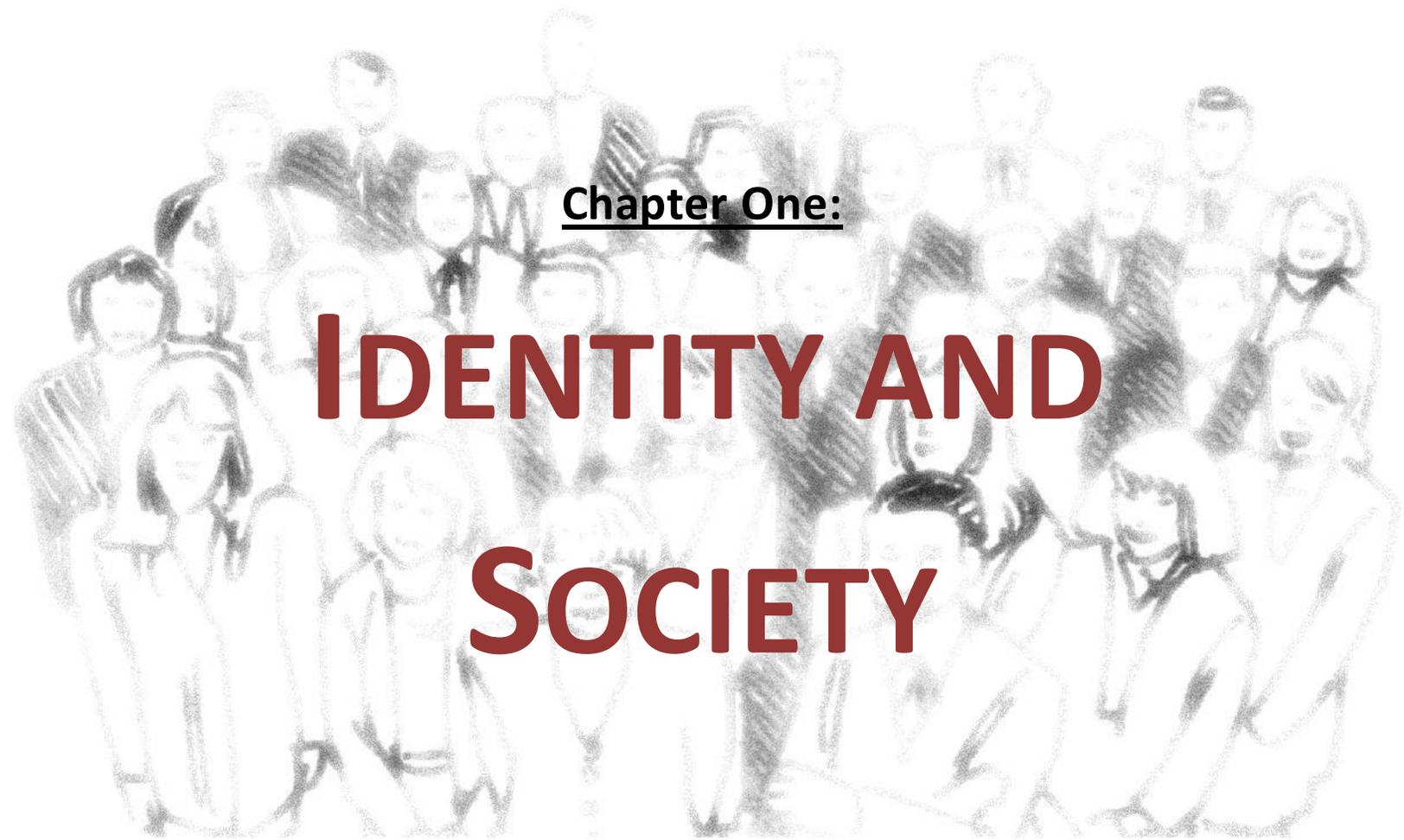
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Chapter One:

IDENTITY AND SOCIETY





US Muslims Ripening in the Melting Pot:

The Social Angle

Interview with Dr. Mazen Hashem



Publishing Date: 2008

Author: Abdelrahman Rashdan is an academican with a Master's degree in International Affairs and a Certificate in Middle East Studies from Columbia University.

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A unique phenomenon, a community that reflects the cultures of around 1.5 billion people, the backgrounds of diverse ethnicities, all brought under the flag of one nation. In a state that respects professionalism, pushes for diversity, and encourages multiplicity, the US Muslim community is required to keep united, hold tight to its values, keep professionalism, and not loose Islam. US Muslims represent a special social experience that is interesting to tackle and investigate.

OnIslam.net interviewed Dr. Mazen Hashem, an expert on US Muslims and a lecturer of Sociology at California State University. Born in Damascus, Dr. Mazen Hashem is a board member and the director of the American Center of Civilizational and Intercultural Studies and a founding member of Al-Rashad magazine. He holds a PhD from University California Riverside (2002), and MA from DePaul University (1989).

Topics Covered:

- Two dimensions that help understanding Muslims in the West
- Where to place US Muslims
- US Muslims and ethnic division
- Future of division or unity
- US Muslims among the religious groups
- Immigrants' culture vs. liberalism
- The traditional Arab patriarchal model of leadership
- Internal vs. political (external) work
- Factors playing for a better future for US Muslims



Title: Muslims of North America: A study of the Islamic Mobility from a Global Perspective

Author: Dr. Mazen Hashem

Publisher: Dar Al-Fikr, Damascus
(www.fikr.com)

Year: 2007

Pages: 208
(paperback)

OnIslam.net (OI): In your book "Muslims of North America" you suggested that two dimensions that help understanding Muslims in the West, confidence in own social identity and the well intention toward the larger society. Can you elaborate?

Hashem: These dimensions are critical when we talk about a multi-ethnic society, especially where there is a clear dominant group. Human beings are cultural beings; depriving people from their culture is like depriving bodies from necessary nutrients. Strong confidence in one's social identity is an enabling factor for the development of balanced individuals who can positively contribute to the well-being of their group. Likewise, maladjusted individuals are detrimental to their community, stereotyping it by their failure. Even successful, but alienated, individuals stereotype their communities through arrogance or self-hate.

However, it is not enough to have a strong cultural identity, for it could develop into chauvinism. That is why the second dimension is essential: to have good intention toward the larger society and to serve the public good. The claim of the universality of Islam by Muslims has to be translated into actions. If you are for justice, you are for it everywhere; if you are for social harmony, your actions should show it in all places.

OI: So, where do you place US Muslims in the past and into what have they developed?

Hashem: Early African American Muslims passed through torturous events until they rediscovered their true African and Muslims identity and developed confidence in it. North American Muslims of immigrant backgrounds also struggled to maintain their identity, but their story was not one of recovering something that was lost rather adapting what they already have to a new environment. In such process, social groups might become overly cautious, especially if they face subordination pressures from the larger and more powerful



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group in the society. That is normal. How would you expect that African American Muslims not to be, at one point of their development, vigilant in guarding their social being in the face of White supremacy? The same is true for newly immigrant Muslims who were keen to maintain their Muslim culture in the face of the commercial elements of the American culture. Were they too cautious of the new environment? Probably yes, and that is also normal, especially for the average person.

Those who haphazardly assimilate produce a social reality full of contradictions. Those who isolate themselves and strictly hold on the peculiar elements of their ethnicity end up in cocoons. It is the wise and confident who activates the principles of Islam to bear on the new reality in which their group lives. Muslims of North America made the transition in less than one generation. Major Muslim groups are now totally committed to address American reality. Such transition is admirable, although a lot is yet to be done and enormous challenges lie ahead.

A casual observer might overlook the internal dynamics within the American Muslim society if he or she does not appreciate the unique pattern of change in the Ummah. Change in the Muslim case does not occur in jolts with a group claiming monopoly over reform and casting itself as the progressive and enlightened. Rather, change is continual and takes place here and there at various societal levels in a form of virtual consensus. The absence of rupture at the surface does not mean the absence of piecemeal changes deep down.

OI: Is it true that US Muslims are currently ethnically divided and colliding? And why?

Hashem: Colliding is rather a strong word, and I would say definitely no. I like to note first that Muslims cast their intergroup relationship too idealistically. Some level of soft conflict is normal in human affairs, even among God-conscious believers. The important thing is how to deal with disagreements. The absence of

sharp and frequent conflict within the Muslim community is rather surprising, and it may be a function of being few in a vast land with limited areas of friction.

As for being ethnically divided the answer is a qualified yes. It is a qualified yes because the existence of divisions is something and divisiveness and antagonistic polarization is something else.

Saying that, there is a major divide between African American and immigrant communities, and there is only formal interaction between them. Obviously, that is part of the larger historical circumstances that put each group in a different social location. African Americans do feel that they are somewhat neglected by their more resourceful immigrant brethren. Immigrant communities, on the other hand, feel that they stand on shaky ground and that they are not in a position to provide meaningful help. So, there is over-expectations from one side and inattention from the other. However, recently some creative efforts started to address this gap, such as the Umma Clinic in Los Angeles, IMAN foundation in Chicago, and Zakat Project in Washington, DC area.

There is also differentiation along ethnic lines within immigrant Muslim communities, such as between Arabs and South Asians, where each draws on different cultural repertoire and sensibilities. When conflict occurs, it is usually over mundane issues such as how to run the Islamic center. The real source of the problem here is inadequate bylaws and lacking organizational procedures. However, after the disagreement arises, it may align along ethnic lines.

OI: How do you see the future of such division or unity?

Hashem: Let me first say that ethnic differences should be celebrated as they enrich the colorfulness of human existence. Diversity does not necessarily come at the price of unity. Contrary to popular imagination, Muslims in their history were always diverse.

As for the US Muslim community, divisions are melting down as it is going through similar experiences, both pleasant and not so pleasant experiences. Furthermore, it is a fact that American-born Muslims form now 37 percent of all Muslims [according to a 2011 [Pew survey](#)]. In other words, there is now a critical mass, even among the immigrant group, whose primary socialization and life experiences unfolded in the US. Add to this that when the children of immigrants grow up they play a significant role in advancing the acculturation of their parents.

Intermarriage also erects solid bridges among social groups; it is somewhat taking place among the second generations of immigrant Muslims, and I think it will sharply increase in the third generation. Most interaction and socialization then will take place within religio-class groupings — that is, between Muslims of similar religious orientation and similar social class position, such as occupation. The more pronounced divide will remain between African Americans and others.

OI: Where would you put Muslims in the US among the religious groups, are they more collaborative with Protestants or with Catholics and why?

Hashem: Muslims are becoming increasingly aware that they share with Catholics (as well as other cultural groups) more than they share with Protestants. White Protestant culture is highly penetrated by secular elements that left it rather an ineffective carrier of religious mandates, especially communal ones. Non-White Catholics are of Third World backgrounds and understand the pain of Muslims. White Catholics religious leaders, who feel that their community is being wrongly stereotyped or even victimized, are sympathetic to US Muslims. Also, many decent Protestants reject vilifying Muslims and reject the positions of the Protestant Christian Right. Nevertheless, it is the affinity in some social practices between Catholics and Muslims that bring them closer to each other.

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OI: An immigrant with a different ethnicity is to be accepted in the US only if he is productive and not holding strong to his ethnic background and heritage; "liberalism" is what is made to dominate the American life and not the immigrants' culture... to what extent are those statements true?

Hashem: Although Native Americans preceded White colonization, and although African Americans and Mexicans have as much historical heritage in this land as Whites do, the identity of the US was largely formed along Whiteness. Initially, Whiteness was restricted to Protestant Anglo Saxons, and then extended to Catholics and Jews from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as from Russia. The US was only too effective in assimilating those waves of immigrants whose cultures were erased except for few symbolic expressions (Chinese and Japanese were reluctantly incorporated; they feel that they are like "permanent strangers"). Educators describe the US as a language graveyard; it is also a graveyard of cultures. Such incorporation of honorary Whites occurred under liberal precepts, leaving the country with two foundations, one religious and the other liberal, with significant tension among them.



"How can not you be optimistic? African American Muslims rose up from the ashes, passed through a phase of syncretism, and landed finally on the path of orthodox Islam," Dr. Mazen asserts.

Practically speaking, the large numbers of immigrants from non-European and non-Canadian origins came after the Congress's 1965 immigration act that widely opened US doors. The racial and cultural composition of the land was significantly altered: on one hand the percentages of non-Whites climbed to 30 percent and those of foreign stock (foreign-born and the children of foreign-born) formed 20 percent of the population in the year 2000. Obviously, this was largely based on economic consideration in search for labor and skills. Some Whites feel that their country is changing and wish to maintain their privilege and cultural hegemony; such feelings get exacerbated when the economy is not doing well. Economy-based immigration policy forgets that people are first and foremost cultural beings. When you import muscles and brains, hearts and memories come along

with them. Immigrants, when are in large numbers, invariably bring with them customs, preferences, patterns of association, etc... in addition to religious beliefs and practices. This is the "American Dilemma," as it was once referred to.

OI: Do you think the traditional Arab patriarchal model of leadership and development will be more effective than the American institutionalized model in developing the US Muslim community?

Hashem: Well, if the American culture has something unique to offer, it is organizational models and management skills. This is exactly what Arabs, as well as some other Muslim groups, lack most. The US Muslim community is keen to strengthen its institutional base, which is still very weak and poor. Leadership style is heading in the right direction, and one hopes the trend accelerates. If Muslim institutions fail to incorporate the American-born generations, who generally command higher organizational skills, existing institutions are prone to become empty structures that will soon deteriorate.

OI: There are two different opinions among the US Muslim leadership, one that gives priority to community development, while the other gives internal and political (external) work the same importance. In your book, you argued for the first position. Can you explain why?

Hashem: US Muslims have not yet developed a political platform — a set of ideas and policy positions — that they can argue for. Civic engagement is not about garnering benefits to your group, but offering something to the public good. Politics of sheer interests is unethical. Of course, protecting the rights of Muslims as law-abiding citizens is vital. However, we need to remember that there is no law that specifically singles out Muslims. To the extent that a law disproportionately disadvantages Muslims, it is because of negative interpretation influenced by social attitudes.

Put in mind that the US political system is a federal one, and most of the issues that Muslims care for are not at that level.

Muslims have two sets of concerns. The first is middle-class concerns relate to health, education, safety, etc., and Muslims just need to join the conversation with their fellow citizens. Those activities are largely at the state and local levels. The other set is particular concerns related to religious activities and Islamic education. Unlike Europe, these are totally private enterprises in the US, and neither the Federal Government nor the local one interferes with them. Another top Muslim concern is the public image of Islam and of their communities and the ability to be able to speak on behalf of themselves. Obviously, the place to address such issues is the media and academia. Politics formalize the integration of minority groups, and some political work is necessary but is not sufficient.

OI: One would get a feeling of optimism when reading your book, what would you point out as factors playing for a better future for US Muslims?

Hashem: While naïve optimism and sweeping problems under the carpet leads to a state of sedation, active optimism that is not unmindful of challenges invites wonders. How cannot you be optimistic? African American Muslims rose up from the ashes, passed through a phase of syncretism, and landed finally on the path of orthodox Islam. All of that happened in just the course of four decades. This is startling. Religious sects usually splinter off the mainstream; the opposite happened here. The story of immigrant Muslims is also remarkable. Few entrepreneurs and student sojourners end up establishing vibrant communities. Muslims carry within them the genes of moderation and have the potential to offer America a unique blend out of its conservative and liberal elements. Building on the best what cultures have is what Muslims invariably did in their history, and there is no reason to think that the American case would be different.



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American Muslims are privileged structurally by being middle class, culturally by possessing a rich heritage, and virtually by connecting to an Ummah. More concrete indicators are also encouraging. Educational mobility among the young generation is impressive, and unlike the previous generation that was heavily represented in science and business, it pursues diversified endeavors that translate into human resources Muslims need. You can hardly find an indicator of the Muslim community that is below average. Probably, the most valuable resource American Muslims have is hope itself.

Thinking American and Muslim

Interview with Dr. Hadia Mubarak



Publishing Date: 2009

Author: Muhammad Qasim holds a BA in political science and an MA in journalism. He has extensive journalism experience and has worked for Asia Tribune, Voice of America, AVT Khyber TV, Pakistan Press International as Bureau Chief and as a visiting lecturer at Allama Iqbal Open University.



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When asked about Islam and gender, many would probably jump into the religious spectrum with either criticism or tribute; when it is political engagement of American Muslims, it is pointing fingers; and Muslim women are always oppressed and silenced... Yet, Hadia Mubarak gives it a second thought. The "On Faith" Muslim American panelist is regarding these issues differently. Her unique viewpoint of issues raised on almost daily basis in America makes her someone worth interviewing.

Hadia Mubarak is a full-time doctoral student at Georgetown University's Islamic Studies department. Her research interests include the development of Islamic family law, Islamic reform, and gender issues in Islam. Mubarak previously worked as a Senior Researcher with the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, a researcher with the Gallup Organization's Center for Muslim Studies and a researcher with American University's Islam in the Age of Globalization project. As a field researcher for the project, Hadia accompanied Professor Akbar Ahmed throughout the Muslim world and conducted on-site surveys and interviews with a range of Muslim scholars, government officials, activists, students, and journalists in Qatar, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, and India. The findings were published in *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*.

In 2004, Mubarak was the first female to be elected as president of the Muslim Students Association National (MSA) since its establishment in 1963. MSA is an umbrella organization of approximately 500 chapters in the United States and Canada, which serves to promote religious awareness on college campuses and foster an atmosphere that accommodates the religious diversity of its student body.

Mubarak received her Master's degree in Contemporary Arab Studies with a concentration on Women and Gender from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. She received her Bachelor's degree in International Affairs and English from Florida State University. Hadia's publications include "Young and

Muslim in Post 9/11 America" (The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs Vol. 3, No. 2); "Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-examination of Verse 4:34" (Hawaa Vol. 2, Issue 3); The Politicization of Gender Reform: Islamists' discourse on repealing Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code (MA Thesis, Georgetown University, 2005); and "Blurring the Lines Between Faith and Culture" (America Now: Short Reading from Recent Periodicals. 5th ed.), among many others. OnIslam.net did an interview with Hadia Mubarak about the rights of Muslim women, American Muslims, and the Muslim world.

Topics covered:

- Muslim American Women
- Islamic Family Laws
- Gender & Islam
- Political Engagement for US Muslims
- Propagandists & Attacks on US Muslims
- 9/11 and Social Role
- What the Muslim World Thinks
- Responsibility in the Face of Injustice
- Message to Muslim World Women

OnIslam.net (OI): American Muslim woman as an example of a Muslim woman: oppressed, silenced, or rather active and vocal?

Hadia Mubarak: As the recent Gallup report on Muslim Americans illustrates, Muslim American women's status and achievements defy every stereotype that exists out there about Muslim women. They are at least as likely as Muslim men to hold a college or postgraduate degree. Their greater level of education has

translated into greater numbers in the work force, as Muslim women have a greater level of economic gender parity of any group Gallup studied. More importantly, these women are not secular or non-observant Muslims, but Muslims who take pride in their faith, attend mosque regularly, and take an active part in their communities. This trumps the common stereotype that only secular, non-religious women achieve high levels of education and have successful careers.

OI: Your PhD research is on "The development of Islamic family law, Islamic reform, and gender issues in Islam", why this topic?

Mubarak: Family law, as currently applied in most Muslim states, is one of the areas most in need of legal reform. With the codification of Islamic law and the creation of modern nation-states, Islamic family law lost much of its flexibility and pluralism which had previously characterized Islamic judicial practice. Unfortunately, many of the existing family laws in Muslim states yield great injustices against Muslim women, especially when it comes to divorce, custody rights, alimony, etc. The state of women's rights in the Muslim world – for the most part – seems to defy in every way the spirit of justice and egalitarianism which the Quran and Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) had established.

OI: What difference do you see, in the Western (American) concept of "gender" and the "gender issue in Islam"?

Mubarak: I think it is difficult to speak of a homogenous conception of gender whether it is in the West or in the Muslim world. The truth is that a number of factors influence one's conception of gender with religion often being just one of many factors. Hence, we can find people in both Western and Muslim societies (those societies with a majority Muslim population) who espouse patriarchal and sexist views towards women, just as we can find individuals in both societies who espouse egalitarian and progressive views towards women. However, when we

examine the gender paradigm of Islam — as a religion — we find that it promotes equality, justice, and mutual respect between the two genders, with verse 9:71 being one of many such examples.

OI: Muslim American integration in political organizations: how far have they gone and what they need to improve?

Mubarak: In recent years, Muslim Americans have made significant progress in their political participation on the local level, which is what matters most in my opinion. People often look at Muslim representation at the national level to gauge Muslim political involvement, but that is a false indicator in my opinion. That is because politics begins at the local level. With increasing numbers of Muslims getting involved in local political parties, city councils, state legislatures, etc., it will only be a matter of time — with sustained effort — before this involvement translates into great representation on the national level.

There are two Muslims in the US House of Representatives, nine state legislators (two of them are women — Rashida Thlaib and Jamillah Nasheed) and a number of mayors, city council members, and county commissioners who are Muslim. Muslim Americans have begun to realize that unless they get involved and speak out on behalf of their own community, then others will fill the void and misrepresent Muslim issues and concerns, whether it be xenophobic radio hosts or bloggers who think that there is no place for Muslims in America or Muslim extremists who exploit Islam to pursue violent ends.

OI: How would you evaluate the attacks on American Muslims including you and how popular are the propagandists against Muslims in America?

Mubarak: I do not think they are relevant at all. In fact, these types of right-wing xenophobes pose the greatest threat to American democracy and liberties than anyone else. That is because they realize that American principles and values —

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as represented in the US Constitution and Bill of Rights — would mean that Muslim Americans have an equal right as anyone else to become successful, pursue their aspirations, lobby for their concerns, and lead Americans on the national level. Their fear and intolerance of Islam fuels them to incite hatred and fear of Muslims at all levels of society. Our struggle is not unlike the struggle of other minorities before us — be they Catholics, Jews, or African Americans — who had to overcome prejudice, hatred, and xenophobia through courage, moral consistency, and integrity. There is no question in my mind that these people will ultimately lose their battle because America is larger than the hatred, exclusivity, and racism that they propagate.

OI: Looking back to American Muslims before 9/11 and now, how would you assess their role in the American society?

Mubarak: 9/11 was a watershed moment for Americans at large, and specifically Muslim Americans. Personally, the pain I experienced in the days after 9/11 was multifold. There was the pain of the tragedy itself, the deep agony one feels towards those who never said goodbye to loved ones they would never see again. There was also the pain of seeing my religion, Islam, vilified as an inherently violent religion whose 1.2 billion followers, a fifth of the world's population, were suddenly seen as a threat to world security. I have to acknowledge that the most difficult pain I experienced in those days was the pain of realizing that people who shared my faith had committed such unspeakable horror ... It was unfathomable, unimaginable, and unforgivable to see my religion, my source of refuge, hope and peace in the world, become a tool for violence in the hands of men who had no regard for the sanctity of human life, and who had the audacity to use religion and God as a pretext for their political motives.



We were not allowed to ask "Why did this [9/11] occur?" but only "Why do they hate us?" (Reuters)



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While Muslim Americans were coming to terms with what just happened, they also had the double burden of absolving Islam and Muslims from association with such violence. For the first time, Muslim Americans were confronted with a sense of perpetual displacement in the psyche of the American public. Although we were born and raised in this country and knew no other place to call home, I and other American Muslims came to realize for the first time that we were not in fact perceived as American in the eyes of a large swath of the general public. As our religious beliefs became a reason for our incrimination after 9/11, as our organizations and places of worship became the target of vandalism and hate crimes, and as we were perceived as potential threats to the security of our own nation, we felt that our very identity as Americans was subjected to scrutiny, challenge, and contestation.

Muslim Americans realized that their ability to speak out and accurately represent Islam and Muslims had a direct bearing not only on their welfare and safety at home, but on US-Muslim relations abroad. As the war drums began to beat in the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim Americans were at the forefront of the anti-war movement. They underscored the fact that dropping bombs on innocent civilians and destroying a country's infrastructure would only exacerbate grievances against the United States and further jeopardize its security.

What exacerbated the national crisis in the aftermath of 9/11, in my humble opinion, is the failure of policymakers, academics, and political commentators to ask the right questions, to explore the historical, socio-political, and economic dynamics of the Muslim world and to ask the question "Why?" We were not allowed to ask "Why did this occur?" but only "Why do they hate us?" Thus, in the intellectual, political, and social landscape, the verdict had been pre-determined that the terrorists were driven by their deep-seated hatred and intolerance of Western values of democracy, liberty, and freedom. This final verdict allowed no room for intellectual debate or for the presentation of an alternative narrative, for what reasonable policy could one pursue towards people who hate you, who want to change your way of life, except for a policy of war and retribution?

The most fundamental problem in US-Muslim world relations today is our inability to view current events through the prism of historical, socio-political-and-economic conditions in the region. When it comes to the Muslim world, there is a dogged insistence among policy makers and the American public alike to view Islam itself as the source of current tensions between the United States and the Muslim world. The most dangerous aspect of this illogical premise is that it paints a picture that is inaccurate and hopeless. Not only does this culture dependency theory reek of religious bigotry, but this faulty analysis leads us to ignore real grievances that fuel anger and resentment towards the United States.

In fact, a recent poll by Gallup demonstrates that anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is not driven by hatred of US values, but hatred of US policies in the region, which can be addressed without compromising US interests. In fact, nothing would better serve US security interests in the Muslim world than to address and alleviate the widespread legitimate grievances of millions living in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, etc.

OI: You accompanied Professor Akbar Ahmed throughout the Muslim world, what did you find? and how significant it was?

Mubarak: Here are five of our top findings based on surveys we conducted in eight Muslim countries in 2006:

- US government and not Americans: Although anti-Americanism was clearly on the rise, nearly everyone with whom we spoke distinguished between the US government and the American people, making it clear to us that their frustrations, anger, and resentment were directed towards the US administration and not the American people. There was a genuine desire to improve relations and engage in a dialogue with the west. In fact the number one response on how to improve western-Muslim relations was to promote dialogue. Thus, although there was great anger in the Muslim world towards US policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, nonetheless, they were not at the point where that



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anger was threatening to translate into violence. There was still a great and deep desire to engage with the West.

- Lack of authentic "representation": Youth in the Muslim world felt that they lacked authentic representation. When we asked them "who represents Islam?" many expressed frustration that those who currently represent Islam in the eyes of the West are doing a great disservice to Islam and the Muslim world. They argued that those who represent Islam in the eyes of the West are either terrorists, leaders who know nothing about Islam, or opportunistic leaders. Muslim youth felt like they were not being valued according to their own merit, but that they were being defined through the prism of terrorism. The frustration with lack of genuine representation became more pronounced when we asked the youth how we could improve Muslim-Western relations. One of the top responses to that question was to send genuine Muslim representation to the United States, meaning those who understood Islam properly and could accurately convey it.

- Negative image of Islam in the West: In Turkey and in every Arab country we visited, the negative image of Islam in the West was considered the number one problem facing the Muslim world. For Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia, this was considered one of the top three problems. Muslim youth felt they must bear the brunt of this negative image and its consequences. There was a sense that the West's persistent allegation — that Islam promotes terrorism — is one of the factors that has perpetuated a negative image of Islam and Muslims around the world. Many of the respondents feel like the media is partly to blame for the negative image of Muslims. Thus, for Muslim youth, this negative image is grounded less in reality and more in stereotypical depictions of Muslims.

Although Western aggression, double standards, and influence were cited as problems, they were not as great of a problem as the West's ignorance of Islam or its incorrect association between Islam and terror. Thus, this response offers hope because ignorance can be overcome much more easily than hatred or

aggression. This was evident by the respondents' claim that the second top solution to today's problems is to expose and educate the West about Islam.

- Islamic revival and rejection of wholesale cultural osmosis: Our surveys reflected an increasing level of identification and commitment to Islam. In every single country we visited, without exception, one of the top three solutions to the problems facing the Muslim world is for Muslims to return to Islam or to increase their own knowledge of Islam. In contrast to a few decades ago, when nationalism dominated the discourse and public sentiment of the Muslim world, today Islam is the strongest force among the youth. Whether we were interviewing secular or religious schools, the contemporary role models of the students were all contemporary religious leaders such as Amr Khaled, Fethullah Gulen or Yusuf Qaradawi. Furthermore, many of the respondents acknowledged that one of the greatest changes in their societies was that their parents had a peripheral knowledge of Islam based on culture and family custom, but that today, the younger generation has a much greater grasp and authentic understanding of Islam. Due to greater technology and accessibility to information, youth told us they were no longer content with just relying on local imams for religious opinions, but would search for answers themselves through Islamic texts and religious websites.

OI: In an interview, you said, "I realized that there is a lot of injustice, and by knowing about injustice, you have to do something about it", can you explain the "injustice"?

Mubarak: Individuals have a moral obligation to eliminate injustice when and where they seem occur. In the Islamic tradition, this moral obligation is captivated by a powerful prophetic hadith in which the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) tells us: "Whoever among you sees an evil action, then let him change it with his hand [by taking action]; if he cannot, then with his tongue [by speaking out]; and if he cannot, then with his heart – and that is the weakest of faith." [Narrated by Muslim in his Saheeh]



The correlation between one's response to injustice and one's faith, in my opinion, is that one's response to injustice is a direct reflection of the state of one's faith in God. When one has internalized the idea that he/she will be held accountable before God for the way he/she has lived one's life, then one becomes aware of his responsibility towards others — whether it be the homeless person down the street or displaced Palestinians or Somalis thousands of miles away.

OI: What message, being a Muslim-women activist, you want to give to the American as well as Muslim world women?

Mubarak: There is a serious need to revive the egalitarianism and justice that Islam established as early as the seventh century. When Muslim women in the seventh century set off from Mecca to Medina on their own during the hijra, they were driven by the realization that they had a role to play in the creation a new political structure that was based on justice, equality, and divine truth. These women left behind everything they had, their families, their husbands, and their wealth. Many of them carried their children with them as they traveled through the hot desert on their own. Some were pregnant and actually gave birth to new life on their arduous journey, never giving up, never returning.

When Khawla bint Tha'lab went to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) to seek redress for her husband's sexual abandonment and found none, and then said, "I will take my complaint to Allah Almighty," she did so out of absolute conviction in the justice of God, that even if mortal men could not alleviate her grievance, that God would bring justice to her cause. In fact, the first five verses of chapter 58 in the Quran were revealed in response to this woman's plea.

It is this sense of God-consciousness that compelled women throughout the history of Islam to break through the shackles of cultural prejudices and constraints and set their own course into the future. These women eternalized



their status as God's vicegerents on earth and understood the importance of the responsibility they carried.

This is the legacy of the women who came before us and this is the legacy that we need to revive. It is a legacy that recognizes the mortality of our souls, and the equality of all human beings as servants of God. It is a legacy that compels us to re-evaluate our priorities in life, to probe our hearts and check the status of our iman (faith), to improve the lives of those around us, to contribute to society in a meaningful way, and to leave this world better than we found it.



CAIR's Care and American Muslims

Interview with Executive Director of CAIR,

Mr. Nihad Awad



Publishing Date: 2009

Author: Kamal Badr holds a master's degree in international studies from Al-Azhar University. His dissertation was "Modes of Reparation: Comparative Study on International Law & Shari`ah." He is currently a PhD candidate on the Migrants' Human Rights between Shari`ah and International Law at Al-Azhar University.

The location of the office of Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), being one of the sensitive areas in Washington DC, I see as a very important point that one can consider as power of straight factors of an organization. In Washington DC, very close to Capitol Hill, and not far from the White House, all of this has to deal with highly prestigious positions of CAIR and Muslim organization.

Entering the premise also is another plausible moment for me because what I see in the office gives me a sense of grandiosity that emanates from the pictures pasted on the wall; from the faces of the office attendants, the employees, the staff ... all of them wearing the face of seriousness and moving around putting papers, arranging files. It shows that these people are really into something very important for American Muslims.

They are also giving out a sense of studiousness ... Even the phone calls here and there explain why CAIR could be considered as a very active organization. That also strengthened my interest to have this interview with Mr. Nihad Awad, the Executive Director of CAIR.

Topics Covered:

- CAIR's Main Goal
- Effective Mechanisms
- Categories and Sub-divisions of CAIR
- The Post-9/11-CAIR
- Muslim American Activism
- Towards a Strong Muslim American Lobby
- American Muslims and the Muslim world
- Media Engagement

🌐 Muslims in the Recent Elections

OnIslam.net (OI): First of all, we would like to start with a brief description of CAIR in order to shed more light on its activity. When was it launched and how has it evolved?

Mr. Nihad Awad: CAIR stands for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in the United States and Canada. It was launched in 1994 and the basic principle behind its establishment is to enhance the understanding of Islam, promote dialogue, protect civil liberties, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

It has evolved from simple and humble beginning; Myself, Ibrahim Hooper, and Omar Ahmed founded the organization in Washington, DC. And, the formula was clear and simple from the beginning of CAIR's establishment. The formula is construction, engagement, communication, and the mobilization of the Muslim community with the wider society. We started in Washington, D.C. past the White House with a small office. Today, we have more than 34 offices in the United States and Canada, and CAIR stands to be the largest Muslim American civil rights

OI: What is the main goal of CAIR?

Awad: The goal is to enhance the understanding of Islam because the reality of Muslims and Islam are being severely misunderstood in the United States. It was incompetent on Muslims to step up to the plate, define themselves, and present Islam as it is.

It is crucial to help people of other faiths in the media, in public, and in office to establish direct and genuine relationship with Muslim community instead of allowing self-proclaimed experts on Islam or "terrorism" to push their agendas framing Islam in a negative political and social light as has been the case for decades.

Today, American Muslims define themselves with their institutions; I believe CAIR has contributed tremendously to this reality. There is a huge sense of identity and belonging to Islam and America. I think CAIR has contributed to crystallizing this American Muslim identity on the bases that you can be a Muslim and you can be an American.

Under the rule of law, American Muslims have equal opportunities and equal challenges. In fact, Muslims have more challenges as a minority, but also they are blessed that they have the task to give Americans a better understanding of Islam and to give a chance to non-Muslims to discover the beauty of Islam and Muslim life.

So, it has been a challenge and a reward at the same time; that is a unique experience and many Muslims are blessed to be passing through it.

OI: For you to be able to do that it takes a lot of expertise, tools, and mechanisms. What are the effective mechanisms CAIR uses to play its role?

Awad: Above all, it is God Almighty's help and support that pushed us where we are now in terms of effectiveness, visibility, and presence. From the beginning, we intended to use professionals in the field. And to be effective in our work, we have to use professional people and we need adequate human and financial resources.

We worked as full-timers; CAIR has been our lives, our mindset, and our main interest. We have given it all we could in terms of energy, interest, concern, and devotion. And also, a group of people of Muslim activists joined in.

They started to see the result of a professional presentation of Islam, of taking a balancing way of judging issues and taking steps that guarantee this balance showing that our formula is moderate.

We like being respectful of Islam, adherent of Islam, and respectful of others although you disagree with some of them. Building coalitions with so many



people, truly, proofs that the majority of people are good people on both sides; this is the discourse that should be. All of these together have shown Muslims in America that this is the best way and the Islamic way to approach issues.

Also, by using scientific and systematic tools of technology and means of communication by training people, experience is not limited to few people. We have managed to build a culture and a new generation of some activists nationwide who adopt and endorse this way of work.

All together, we feel that CAIR's experience has been an American success story; an American Muslim success story that Muslims are proud of. They are also proud of this organization that achieved its success in terms of support.

People love the organization; they respect it and want to be part of it because CAIR is part of their life and their experience. It is not disconnected; it deals with the grassroots; it builds the community from the bottom up.

OI: Going back to the issue of development and progress since CAIR's inception, could you tell us briefly about the categories and sub-divisions of CAIR?

Awad: The first part of CAIR's work is the protection of civil rights within the US constitution, and that takes the biggest chunk of our works offering free services in terms of counseling, representations, and defending people's rights.

The second part is training people to understand the law, not only in knowing and understanding their rights, but also knowing their responsibilities as citizens or non-citizens. This is very crucial because we do not just complain about confiscation and violation of these rights, but we sometimes complain about the lack of activism in the community, and, the two go hand in hand. You cannot just complain about your rights; you have to be involved, you have to volunteer, and you have to offer services.



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You have to be there at the table to negotiate your presence, proving your validity, your competency, and your benefit to the society before you ask for your rights, because you have sometimes to give.

The second component is media communications. It has been one of the most effective and important mechanisms of CAIR's work to communicate Islam, Islamic issues, and Muslim positions with the wider society through mainstream media.

CAIR has enjoyed great credibility with media outlets in cities, towns, and on the national level. We have worked with major networks from CNN, NY Times, and Washington Post.

OI: CAIR's headquarter is in Washington, DC and you have regional offices, what about the number of subdivisions?

Awad: We have divisions in almost [20] states. In some states, we have more than one office due to the significant presence of Muslim population there. For example, in California we have more than four offices; in Ohio we have about three offices; Florida and Texas, we have more than one office in each. The states where there is a big Muslim population there are more than one office to fulfill people's needs.

In 2001, we had only head offices. After 9/11, we added more than 22 offices, which was in response to the demands of American Muslims who believed that they needed an institution like CAIR to defend them. But also, CAIR needed strong presence in the community to show the representation and the presence of our work. The general public needed institutions like CAIR in cities and states where ignorance is prevalent.

We needed to build relationships at the grassroots level, which helped CAIR nationwide. We needed to have some political institutions because we work with local, state, and federal representatives who all have constituencies in towns and

cities. American Muslims live there, but they cannot have strong representation unless they have institutions that are able to organize and mobilize people to draw this relationship with the society. So, CAIR's strength initially comes from the grassroots and its wide presence in the United States. Our hope and aim is to have a strong office in every city and state of the union.

OI: Regarding post-9/11-CAIR — if I can use that term — in light of the lot of challenges facing Muslims with the spread of Islamophobia in the United States, how do you see CAIR in the post-9/11 era?

Awad: CAIR is not only seen the way we see ourselves. It is seen as the Muslim ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) because every group of people, minority, and community needs an institution that defends its rights and promotes its vision.

I believe that CAIR is seen as the institution that fulfills those aspirations, but also CAIR is not the only organization. There are other organizations that honorably serve the Muslim community. CAIR sees itself as a sister of those organizations and it works in coordination with other Muslim entities in the country.

OI: Do you see problems and challenges facing that course of action of "Muslim American activism"? And, considering the number of the active American Muslim organizations, can there be a kind of a Muslim lobby in the United States in the near future?

Awad: The challenges facing American Muslims are the ones really facing the United States itself, one of which is the sheer and deadly ignorance about Muslims in the country. The majority of people in the United States know nothing or little about Islam. Even, what they know about Islam comes from sometimes biased or unqualified sources that are selective in their depiction of the reality of Muslims or some hotspots in the Muslim world reflective on American Muslims.



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This has cost American Muslims tremendous suffering and isolation and cost the American society and government a loss of utilizing American Muslims and understanding true Islam and Muslims.

Eventually, we are faced with this tsunami of ignorance, but also a tsunami of interest in learning about Islam, because the majority of people in our society are good and open people; they respect multiculturalism and respect freedom of religion which was the first and basic foundation on which this country was based upon.

So, in dealing with ignorance you need sophisticated discourse and institutions able to communicate Islam and help American Muslims rise to the challenge to meet their responsibilities with fellow Americans. Lobbying is a daily effort and it is not just one entity to go and advocate on your behalf.

The best way of lobbying is when you have a collective societal expression — a true and genuine reflection of what you believe in and who you are dealing with, like politicians, media, and your neighbors. The best and most effective lobbying is to show your reality by making people feel that reality.

Now, in terms of specifics, some causes need special advocates in Washington and nation-wide to work with politicians to convince them with your perspective. Today in Washington, they are huge detractors of Muslims. Islamophobia is prevalent in society, and it is increasing and on the rise. It threatens Muslims, relationships between Muslims, and the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world.

The detractors of Islam and Muslims in America are small, but effective. They are well-funded and determinant. They are ignorant and some of them are politically-driven, so we are faced with these challenges. The best way is to build coalitions and even to reach out to some of these people, trying to respond to their issues and open dialogue with them.

Eventually, I see that the presence of Muslims in Washington will help not just lobby the government, it will help make sure that Islam is understood and

Muslims are understood in America. We are not a lobbying organization although some of our work requires us to deal with politicians and communicate other issues.

OI: The issue of lobbying is very important may be more to the external Muslim world, especially when it comes to the Jewish lobby. I think Muslims dream of having a strong lobby in the United States. Yet, the dream remains in terms of slogans. I do not know how it is possible to have this kind of dream realized; what do you think?



From the right: Mr. Ni had Awad, Mr. Kamal Badr, Mr. Ibrahim Hooper (CAIR's director of national communications)

Awad: I believe the growth of the Muslim presence in Washington, DC is not only to come from the growth of Muslim institutions themselves although it is a first step. There is a lack of numbers of Muslims organizations and also development of Muslim entities.

The very concept of having an organization for only lobbying would require huge amount of financial resources. I have been working in Washington for [19] years, and I understand emotional aspect of people who always question when we are going to have a Muslim lobby in the United States.

It is not like that simple. We need to develop Muslim activism in Washington in order to be effective and utilize our existing resources to upgrade performance, which will definitely create organizations that are working full-time in Capitol Hill and build relationships with policy makers, legislators, and law-makers. It is important to show them the Muslim American perspective that is fair and containing of all the values we all cherish. It is also important to defend the interest of the United States from a perspective that is caring about the society and our [Muslim] values collectively.

To be specific, the Muslim community organizations are working with congressmen and the administration. But, in order to have full-time entities



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working on relations with congressmen and US administration, you would require human financial resources that are going to be devoted for this.

You will be surprised that — contrary to common knowledge — when people think about those who are lobbying against Muslims and Islamic issues in Washington or in the whole country, they are not only a few visible institutions that you can name. In Washington, there are hundreds of organizations lobbying against Muslims that do not carry specific ideologies, but they have pseudo-names. And, I would refer you to the book called *Stealth Pacts: How Israel's American Lobby Seeks to Control US Middle East Policy* by Richard Curtiss.

More than one hundred political action committees are just working on one issue, in support for the state of Israel. So, this is not an emotional approach to a serious matter. It would require growth and development. I think the Muslim community goes in there because it is a natural growth.

I just warn against too much pushing of the Muslim world against the Muslim community [to have strong Muslim lobby]. I am afraid that too much pressure against American Muslims from the outside world, as well as from inside, will abort Americans from experience.

I think the Muslim world is at fault; when I say the Muslim world, I do not mean the Muslim Ummah, but those who are in a position of responsibilities. They have not had a clear vision or strategy on how to deal with the United States, even with American Muslims. They have not leveraged the relationships that are there with the United States. They did not utilize the relationship that they could have with American Muslims.

So, American Muslims are somehow isolated from the Muslim world. People in the Muslim world are sending American Muslims just hopes and demands, but there is no investment in the relationship — the same investment of the relationship we see with other communities and with other nations.

All we get from the Muslim world sometimes are hopes, demands, and wishes.



The Muslim world is at the crossroads in its relationship with the West and the United States, and I would like to see serious investments in that kind of relationships: practical, relationships, not just statements. I would like to see constructive action that can rebuild the relationship for the future. We have been lucky so far that even the confrontation has been limited.

But, I am afraid if we do not take care of that relationship, we are going to lose it to the few extremists in both sides who just trade in fear and profit from clashes between societies and countries.

While the majority is silent, the majority seems to be either indifferent or it feels it is sufficient just to complain.

OI: What kind of help can the Muslim world provide to American Muslims — the kind of assistance that they can render American Muslim organizations in pursuing their goals?

Awad: I believe that we need a line of thinking and hope that remain within Islamic ethics and universal values. I believe that as Muslims we just have to rise up to the challenges and meet our responsibilities. We need to believe that ignorance is treatable and reform is also needed in thought and behavior.

I hope that in the next few months or years we are going to witness a reform and resurgence in terms of an approach to solving issues.

Peace is very important to all of us as humans and Muslims worldwide and we have to work for it. We have to rectify the course that we are in — not change it. The same way that we ask the US government and the new administration to correct their actions and build bridges instead of building walls, we ask our Ummah, our Muslim community in the United States and everywhere, to take also mutual steps towards building this relationship; we ask them also to prepare new generations of leaders who are hopeful of working towards building this relationship and looking to the West as a partner rather than an adversary.



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This is the message that we are trying to promote in the United States: look at the Muslim world as a partner, not as an enemy.

Look for people who are hundreds of millions who are ready to hear you; cultivate this relationship by taking some goodwill gestures and initiatives to communicate the message of hope, tolerance, and coexistence.

I hope that at one point you will see serious nationwide, and sometime worldwide, initiatives led by credible Muslims and people of other faiths working in sincerity to accomplish their goals.

OI: In the same vein, CAIR has been dealing with a lot of media channels, Muslim and non-Muslim. How far did media help you reach out to others?

Awad: I think that we are filling a wide gap that has been growing. Today, all networks in the United States know that if they want to learn about the Muslim perspective they should go to Muslim spokespersons or Muslim organizations, local or national.

Today the American Muslim community is known to be present and able to interact with the society and with the media — contrary to what it used to be, may be [19] years ago.

In other words, if the media is interested in learning about Islam and Muslims, there are many Muslim organizations, and we have, for example, [about 35] offices nationwide ready to be part of the story and to make it in the news. However, we cannot fix the perception that is wide and prevalent in the public. Through the media, we continue to be depicted only through the actions of the few. We are always being framed in the negative news that comes from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and all these places.



This is the message that we are trying to promote in the United States: look at the Muslim world as a partner, not as an enemy.



Most of the news about Islam and Muslims in the Western media is negative. We occasionally see positive stories about Muslim contributions to the United States and the world, but this unfortunately does not make the news all the time. It comes once in a blue moon, as we say, and this is not sufficient to communicate the right perspective of the reality of Muslims.

We need to have our media outlets and CAIR has been the most successful in this way.

We have built relationships with reporters and media nationwide. It is not sufficient to be a guest on a program when you have to defend Islam all the time or you have to explain or condemn the actions of some Muslims; this will keep the negative and incorrect perception about Islam.

What we have to do — and we started to see results — is to encourage young Muslims to pursue the field of journalism, political science, and law. And, we started to see now some Muslims in some networks, newspapers, and radio stations talking about the economy and reporting about news, health care, and other issues.

That is to be one step towards changing the perception. Besides, in order to alleviate the negative perception, we shall work with alternative media and create our own.

OI: Let's talk about last elections; what kind of role that CAIR played in activating American Muslims in terms of the changes we saw in this elections compared to previous ones? And also, what are your expectations from the new administration?

Awad: I think that American Muslims through their organizations has worked to show that they are fully engaged in the political process and along civil lines.

CAIR, along with other organizations, has been busy in registering Muslims to vote, educating voters about issues, and mobilizing American Muslims to



volunteer and run for public offices. CAIR worked with candidates and on campaigns to make sure that Islam and Muslim issues and voices are known.

If you look at the results, 95 percent of eligible Muslim voters have voted, and this is a record and unprecedented percentage. The results pointed out that American Muslims believe in working inside the system. 89 percent of Muslims voted for change and voted for Obama, compared to two percent for John McCain.

However, despite the fact that there have been orchestrated and systematic campaigns to defame Islam and even to scare the public from Barack Obama because he has a Muslim middle name — as if being Muslim is an accusation, the vote for change has triumphed — candidates asked cynically what is wrong with being a Muslim?!

Eventually, a person like Collin Powel stepped up to the plate and said: what is wrong with being a Muslim and what if he, Barack Obama, was a Muslim?! What is wrong with a 7-year-old Muslim who wants to be the president of the United States of America? Powel also talked about Muslim contributions to the United States.

We needed to hear this message long time ago from other politicians and other candidates.

Despite all of these, American Muslims went full force in the political process and left their mark. Are they going to be recognized for their service, talent, expertise, and for their willingness to help change and improve our situation locally and internationally?



Chapter Two:

**POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT**



US Muslims: Uniting, Voting, and Becoming

Interview with Executive Director of MAS
Freedom, Imam Mahdi Bray



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Author: PoliticsZone Team, OnIslam.net

Diverse is the American Muslim community; different ethnicities and dialects ... Yet, Islam unites them under one umbrella in America. Being one of the most active political figures in the American Muslim community, Imam Mahdi Bray — Executive Director of MAS Freedom — is pushing Muslims towards more political participation, and thus more influence.

MAS Freedom's VIP (Voting is Power) [campaign](#) set its goal clear; "Participating actively in the process of voting is a first step toward that political empowerment so vital to our ultimate goal of raising and developing exemplary citizens who will contribute to the greatness of our country, and whose convictions and dedication will illuminate the brilliance and beauty of the great message of Islam."

OnIslam.net had the pleasure to interview earlier this year the Executive Director of MAS Freedom Imam Mahdi Bray. He talked openly about Muslim in America, their political participation, and what MAS Freedom is doing about it.

Topics Covered:

- Coordination between US' Muslim Organizations
- Ethnic Diversity Standing against Unity?
- Lobbying in the Congress
- Reaching Out to, and Educating, Voters
- Political Influence While Still a Small Minority
- Muslims Running for Positions and Appealing to Voters
- Basic Issues Disuniting Muslims
- Driving while Black, Flying while Muslim

OnIslam.net (OI): What is more precise to say, American Muslim or Muslim American community? And has it always been the same or changed?

Imam Mahdi Bray: I do that thing a lot with young Muslims, this whole thing of identity whether Muslim American or American Muslim for me is kind of inconsequential. I will tell you the reason why; it is like which comes first the chicken or the egg. It doesn't make any difference, if the chicken comes first, I'll cook the chicken and eat the chicken, and if the egg comes first, I will cook the egg and put some cheese in it and make myself an omelet. The point I am trying to make is the process of engagement. We are Muslims and we live in America, so as Muslims we have to engage in the society we live in and we have to engage our Deen (religion), so I think it doesn't make any difference.

The discussion sometimes premises on the assumption that if you put American first then for some reason you are denigrating being a Muslim; I don't see that as a conceptual aspect. I think that what it really is about being American Muslim or Muslim American is that you are Muslim, you live in America and, once again, you have to engage both aspects. You have to engage in the society you live in through the rules of Allah, Most High, and the example of his prophet Mohamed (peace and blessings be upon him).

OI: As president of the Coordinating Council of Muslim Organizations (CCMO) which, at face value, acts towards unity of Muslim organizations in the United States, why still there is not apparent unity among Muslim organizations?

Bray: I think there are a couple of reasons why. First of all, historically the primary institutions within the Muslim community in America have been the mosque, Muslim schools, and Muslim charities. We are looking at only a [20]-year-old phenomenon of other institutions like organizations that deal with civil rights and political empowerment that deal with policy issues (think tanks). These are new institutions that also deal with legal protection by forming a consortium of lawyers that will protect the legal rights of Muslims and Muslim issues.

There are also other coalition groups that are working with tactical coalitions with non-Muslim organizations as some issues confront us both as Muslims and non-Muslim in America. Because of the presence of these organizations now, the ability to collaborate is an emerging process and I think will get better Allah willing. Collaboration and unity, however, among groups in America does not happen overnight; there are some ethnic and religious groups that have been there for a while and they were able to create umbrella organizations.

I think for us in the CCMO, we are not dealing with the kind of rhetorical unity. I think that we are more focusing on coordination and hope that Allah, Most High, will strengthen us in terms of unity, so that is the first process.

OI: About 25 percent of the US Muslim community is Arab, 25percent Asian, 25 percent African American; don't you think that ethnic divisions can stand against the unity of this community?

Bray: I think that ethnicity is certainly a positive factor. I like the fact that in Muslim American Society (MAS) we see that as a challenge. Primarily, MAS happens to be the largest grass-root organization in the United States with 55 chapters in 55 states. It was primarily perceived as an "Arab organization", but its members realized that division according to ethnic lines is, above all, not the prophetic model that Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) taught us. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) grouped up and united the different ethnic groups and tribes, and we should follow him. So, ethnic division does not work on the prophetic model nor on the practical model, because if one divides based on ethnicity then it makes you weak, and the worst thing that a minority group in America can do is to become sub-minority within a minority, which does not make much sense.

Lastly, I think that it is important to understand that people often put a lot of emphasis on "I am from Egypt," "I am from Brooklyn," "I am from Karachi" ...do you think that Allah, Most High, would really care where one is from? So, if we



understand that concept then we can see how it is an inconsequential argument. It is like two bold-headed men arguing who will first use the comb.

MAS sees that as a vision with which we are working and striving to deal. It is a problem, but I would say it is getting better all the time for two reasons; Firstly, I think that it is getting better because we have children who are born in the United States. They have never lived in Karachi, they have never lived in Cairo, they have only lived in America, and that brings them together as a generation with less divisions based on ethnicity; even though, sometimes parents push it a little bit, but it is not engrained in the young generation — the third generation of Muslims — that is inhabiting the United States.

The second reason is that the tragic events of 9/11 put everybody together. The reality is that all of us, whether born in the United States or coming from outside, have been lumped in one boat in term of dealing with the backlash of 9/11. It have brought about some unity; 9/11 is a very tragic thing, but sometimes Allah will give you something that do not like, yet in some aspects it has some good in it. I think that the good that has come out of this is that it has forced Muslims to be able to have to work closer together because of the backlash, discrimination, and the other things that we face as the result of the events of 9/11.

OI: Politically, you have done some work about the political participation of US Muslim; the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) ex-president said that the reason behind the success of the AIPAC in the United States is that they present to the congress what is in the interest of the United States. What do Muslims do concerning the congress and working for the interest of the United States and which benefit will be for the US Muslims?

Bray: First thing is that you have to understand the political process in America and how Muslims historically have dealt with that. We are only about [15] years away from the great debate we used to have of whether voting is Halal or Haram, and that is mostly non-issue now for most Muslims. There are some segments



that say it is Haram, forbidden, or best case scenario: Bid'a, innovation in religion. But, in reality the comparison is not actually a good one when you talk about AIPAC because they have a long history of politics.

There is not only AIPAC, but many other interest groups and we are only [20] years into the formation of doing public policy and political work. So, the first thing that one has to do politically in order to have some impact is to get Muslims to understand conceptually that you can participate and change policies that affect your society without compromising the integrity of your religion.

That becomes a big question: if I get involved with this movement will I be a good Muslim? Every Muslim should be concerned about what he or she is doing, whether it is according to Islam, or whether it affects people in terms of how good of Muslims they are. So, that becomes the first conceptual aspect to theologically understand that you have a responsibility when you live in a society to engage in, but you don't engage for the sheer of power because there is no mightier power than Allah, you do not engage for vanity to say that we are the top group, and you don't engage to have dominance, you engage in it primarily for what Allah, Most High, asked you. You engage because you have the responsibility to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil.

So, with that mandate that you enter into the sphere of public policy; that is what we are at this point now, we are dealing with the conceptual aspect of enjoining good and forbidding bad by participating in a process that deals with public policy of who gets what, when, how, and how much. And so, we have not developed large think tanks or interest groups, but we are getting there.

In the elections of 2006, as a result of our effort of working and registering our people, educating, and mobilizing them, the front page of the *Washington Times*,

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which is not so flattering to Muslims, showed that the Democrats would have not been able to take the congress, particularly the Senate, had it not been for the Muslim vote in Virginia where we have a headquarters.

For us, we had a strategy; we identified the battleground states and the places where the elections would be close and we matched them up with figures of the number of Muslims in the battleground states. We then were able to narrow them down to about nine states, and ultimately they came down to be five states, and Virginia was one of them.

Then, in the 2006 elections, the Democrats were already winning the House of Representatives, yet it was kind of uncertainty about the Senate. And, it all came down to one state, Virginia, and one Senatorial election held between Jim Webb (Democrat) and George Allen (Republican), and the former won by 9,000 votes. But, here is what I call the "Muslim Factor" of our organizations, student, and Imams of Masjids, mosques, were able to do. Webb won by 9,000 votes, we put out 48,000 votes, which is 80percent of our total body of people who could vote in the state of Virginia.

So, 80 percent (48,000) of our people showed up at the polls. Of the 48,000, 93 percent voted for Webb, the Democrat, and 7 percent voted for Allen. So, I don't care how you slice it, dice it, or chop it, the fact of the matter that Webb won by 9,000 votes and we casted a little over 40-something thousand votes for Jim Webb.

The newspaper is correc; the Democrats won through the Muslim vote. I don't want to overestimate the political power of Muslims in America, but we are a sleeping giant, we are growing, and we are learning. Interesting enough, Carl



"We are dealing with the conceptual aspect of enjoining good and forbidding bad by participating in a process that deals with public policy of who gets what, when, how, and how much." — Mahdi Bray



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Rove, who was Bush's Chief of Staff or referred sometimes to as "Bush's Brain", was speaking to a group of conservatives in Boston about how they lost the Senate. He said they had counted the Evangelicals' (the Christian Right) vote and they knew they had a lot, but what they underestimated was the Muslim vote. This was a small victory, but indeed it was a victory.

My point is this, right now we are in the process of registering our voters and getting people to realize how important it is to participate in the process. We also are trying to train our young people to offer themselves to public office. We have our first US congressman from Minnesota the 5th district; so that is where our focus is on right now.

Also, we are building Political Actions Committees (PACs) because MAS doesn't participate in donkey or elephant politics (donkey and elephant are the symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties respectively). We rather educate people on the candidates and we tell them not to be obsessed with party labels and to look at the candidate and see how is it in the best interest of your community and in the best interest of the society; and that is how you should pick your candidate whether you are a Democrat, Republican, or, as in my case, an Independent.

By Allah's willing, I think, the time will come where we will have our own policy advocacy groups that will be able to rival AIPAC; but we are not at this stage; we are at the basic level.

[20] years ago we bought — for the lack of a better word — the overseas-model of how you do politics in America. We had a few uncles who made all the decisions for the community that didn't have to be engaged, they just trust the uncles to do it. But now, we are rather laying the foundations to start from bottom up and not the other way round, to have the house, family, and then place the roof up.

OI: What are the methods you employ in reaching out to people and educating them about the importance of voting?

Bray: More specifically, we call political workshops, trainings, seminars, and work boxes. We have booklets that we sell out that show how one can conduct campaign. Working online is one aspect; we use basic text stuff with no political science or law.

All Muslims at the domestic level, grass-roots, are those who are very important. It is about the people of the streets. All of them are thinking we do not want to do anything. We have organizations in Washington and to some degree; there is a sense of what we are doing politically.

We were taking pictures with Bill and Hilary having Ramadan breakfasts and we meet Malden Albright, and Collin Powell (both are former US secretaries during Clinton's and Bush's administrations respectively). Uncles send these pictures back to Muslim communities, saying that they are in the political arena, so it is a politics of fluff with no real stuff.

What happened was that superficiality, it is important to know candidates to have assessments to political figures, have some value in it, so you make recognition of your community. What happened when 9/11 came was that we were treated really badly. Thousands of Muslims rounded up like in Pinochet's Chile. Nobody knows where they were, family do not know where they were, lawyers do not know where these arrested Muslims were, and the government would not tell us about them.

Although it is a right, we have people concentrated for four months and nobody knew where they were. It was more than one thousand Muslims that were rounded up after 9/11, which the government had to report. Not one, I emphasize- had anything to do with terrorism. A rush of hysteria devalued all their human rights as residents and citizens of the United States of America. So, we began to see that we wanted to connect together and that's why we formed MAS.



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We are going to do it the very old-fashion way. We will go to the masses. No do not depend on me in Washington D.C. Let me send people to train you or let me come and train you and then you have skill sets to protect your community, how you deal with the media and the political process. We provide workshops and trainings. We provide power-point pontification. We do interactive trainings.

We do all trainings. We pretend actors and represent them to the congressmen and see how me and you come in and do your issue then we grade you upon it. We do press conferences. And let them to see how you do it right and how you do it wrong.

Sometimes, we tapped them and let them see how they actually look because that is how they would look to the public. And actually, with these kinds of trainings we say that forget national organizations in Washington D.C. you have to do it at the grass root level. All politics is local.

Yes, it is important to know about the national elections, but the reality is that 95 percent of Muslim children go to public schools. So, your first top should be whose in your school board, whose educating your children, you could be in the school board, so you are going to have your input as a Muslim parent. And that is what we mean by the grass-root level.

You have mentioned that mobilizing Muslim vote and getting Muslims engaged in politics for influence is very important. However, Muslims constitute only 2-3 percent of the population.

OI: How would they have influence on politics when they are a small minority? For example, the influence of American Jews is high despite their small numerical population. Yet, they have their lobbies, their Political Actions Committees, and experienced politicians, so how will Muslims have a similar impact?



Bray: I think that one of the things that is unique to American Muslims is that our relationships with the Jewish community are indirect, which is a little bit different if one perhaps live in Palestine.

We are less obsessed with the Jewish community. We do not play victim with things. We say ok, so they are out there. If their AIPAC says something about our leaders, or their senator says ugly things about me, do not make them even. Get better, work at it.

There is a thing also called coalitions. Our number is somewhat small, but in certain areas, because of our numbers like in Virginia, we make a difference. Because we are sizeable in Virginia, California, Texas, and Florida, we can influence national elections.

In addition to, we are saying that there are other groups that we can form strategic alliances with, like African Americans, because they know about civil rights and discrimination issues. I grew up in a civil rights community. I grew up learning how to do civil rights activities. My house was fired down by racists. I faced racists' terrorism as early as in 1955 when someone burned a house, shot guns into our homes and my grandmother was trying to rescue me, as 5-year old boy, and my brother. My point is this; we have something we can learn and do with African Americans who make a plausible portion of the Muslim community.

There is no an African American that does not have somebody, a cousin, or somebody in the family that is Muslim. You can even go to any places of African community and say As-Salam Alikom (greeting in Islam means peace upon you) and they reply we Alikom al salam (and you too peace upon you).

African Americans understand the Muslim content. In addition, they are viable ally, because they know civil rights' values and they know how to speak about civil rights.



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We are also talking about numbers. The largest minority groups, the Latinos, have common interest with us. We both have immigration problems and we can form strategic alliances around the issue of immigration. So, one has to think smartly about these politics. I think Muslims might have to know how to work inside the box and outside the box. Internally, we have to learn how to resolve our divisions and reach out together. And we have to reach out to people externally.

The idea that we cannot move forward before first organizing our community means nothing. I do believe that you have to work simultaneously inside your community and outside your community in a parallel track, which would give you the political momentum.

OI: Back to first questions, what comes first, being a Muslim or being American?

Bray: What comes first always is being a Muslim, but this is debatable. The order of the word does not dictate priority.

OI: Regarding Muslims who run for governmental positions, in districts, the Senate, or the House, how would they appeal to voters? What if one comes with issues in conflict with Muslim faith?

Bray: I think that a well-grounded Muslim can participate in the public and political process without compromising religious integrity. For example, I worked for a civil rights American movement, one of the oldest civil rights organizations. In the most recent years, the gay issues become a very important thing. I have worked for them for years. I made very clear my position on homosexuality based on my faith. I have to respect the humanity of every human, but my faith tells this lifestyle is not acceptable. I do affirmative action issues. I do discrimination issues.

I think that what happens to some weak Muslims is that they want to play what I call the 50s. They want to be half on that side and half on the other side. I think people respect you if you are straightforward and when you tell people where you stand. We have differences, especially strong ideological differences, but it does not mean that we have strong theological differences; we have common grounds.

Good Muslim officials should beware of these common grounds. The best Muslim officials who want people to get out and vote for them should do what great Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did in Mecca and Medina. He served everybody justly; he cared about everybody, Muslims and non-Muslims. Even the lady who threw something in front of his house; when she was sick, he was a good neighbor and went to check on her.

I am saying that as a Muslim, be it one with the highest income per capita and best educated in the United States and wealthy, one should care about the [approximately] 50 millions of our neighbors who do not have health insurance. In the United States, the richest country in the world, a young, poor boy died simply because he had a tooth disease.

The virus infected his brain. Two days later he was dead simply because his parents did not have the money to take him to the dentist. Islam addresses the conditions of humanity whether Muslim or non-Muslim. If we address these issues with humanity, and if we all found an apple everyone to be treated justly dividing it, we will make sure that the poor, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, are cared for.

OI: You have talked about disagreements between the Muslim communities in the United States and how you are working to bring them together internally in the political level. But sometimes, regarding grass-roots issues that are very

simple to solve, it does seem that US Muslims failed to solve them, like agreeing on fasting on the same day?

Bray: These problems are found not just in the United States but in the Ummah as a whole.

But in the United States if we find the Ummah Council or the Muslim Council, they would not organize fasting the same day, just basic things you know.

Because, again, it is a very basic problem. I mean it is simple, but the reason we have this kind of inability is that we have a big council that gives no day for the Eid. The problem is not the younger people, but people who come from Egypt, Morocco, and others which they call back home. It seems that a generation has on foot here in the United States and another in Egypt, Morocco, and Arab society.

As time passes, these issues become non-issues, because people identify with where they live much more with where their ancestors came from. I think of more of a casual thing. It is not a major Fitna, division. So, that is why at MAS, we put so much emphasis on young people. When it comes to the elders I do madness, when it comes to young people, we are mentor, and there is a difference.

OI: About your work, I do put your name in Google, and I found sites describing you as terrorist and you know all these descriptions that put you in the defensive. As a Muslim African American activist who is working in the United States, how difficult do you find your work to be? What challenge is in that?

Bray: One of the first challenges I have had since 9/11 is driving while black and flying while Muslim. Seriously, first of all you know, I am celebrating [35] years of being a Muslim. Each and every day, I am inspired, so I do not see myself always being in the defensive. I am seeing myself being proactive. Many who attack us are pro-Israeli groups and right wings who want to demonize me and things like



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that. Yet, they did this even to people who are far greater, like Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). So, who I am to cry over such things!

Secondly, I was used to it in civil rights movements, and I understand the strategy in civil rights movements: now terrorism, it was communism. Civil rights students were all inspired by Communism. We do not want to be second-class citizens. Today it is terrorism: the same soap, but with different ballets. I understand the strategy. I am so confident, not in the arrogant way, but through the strength and the blessing of Allah, Most High.

I am so confident that Islam or "Islamist" can stand in free market place of ideas with anybody else, even your detractors. So, I have a radio station and if you are the person who is right wing, co-Zionist, you are perfectly welcomed to come and say what you are going to say. You cannot defame other peoples' faith. Other than that, bring it on. Let us do it. Allah, Most High, gave us mercy to go into civil rights: my grandfather being civil rights activist and my mother being labor activist.

I grew around people who are used to fight for justice and things of that nature. And Allah, Most high gave me one full blessing; He allowed me to acquire all these skills and to bring them and dedicate them for him, and him only. I used to say thirty years ago I found Islam. No, I did not find Islam. Allah, Most High carry me to Islam. And, that is my motivating factor, so I do not care about those who attack me online.

How Can US Muslims Change Realities: Politicking US Muslims

Interview with Dr. Salah Soltan



Publishing Date: 2008

Author: Abdelrahman Rashdan is an academician with a Master's degree in International Affairs and a Certificate in Middle East Studies from Columbia University.

Dr. Salah El-Deen Soltan has been described as "one of America's most-noted Muslim scholars." Scrolling through his [twelve-page CV](#), one would be astonished at the amount of positions, publications, activities, researches, and workshops he held, led, or was part of.

As the founder of several US Muslim organizations, including the American Center for Islamic Research, the Sultan Publishing Company, and the Islamic American University, Dr. Soltan has proved that his insight of the American Muslim community is worth digging into.

It is obvious that the American-Muslim community needs change, needs to be more active in the US politics, and needs to change the policies of its country that has changed and continues to change the lives of a lot of Muslims all around the world. And it appears that Dr. Soltan is well-suited for the talk about this arduous mission.

"To achieve Allah's consent and Paradise through the reformation of the soul, the family, the society, and the nation according to the methodology of the Qur'an and the Sunnah," this is how he sees his mission in life, and it shows in this interview.

Topics Covered:

- Participation in elections
- Muslim Voters' Priorities
- The Ideal Presidential Candidate
- The Future of US Muslims

OnIslam.net (OI): Why should Muslims participate in the US elections?

Dr. Salah Soltan: I believe that such participation is not only permissible, but obligatory as well when it comes to the US elections; and the Islamic text proves that.

Allah — Subhanahu Wattaala ("Glorious and exalted is He") — says: [Hide not testimony] (Al-Baqarah 2: 283) and elections is a witness according to the agreement of many of the Ummah scholars. [Hide not testimony. He who hideth it, verily his heart is sinful] (Al-Baqarah 2:283) such scripture, along with many others, signifies that nonparticipation leads to the sinning of the heart.

Through research, collecting opinions of credible Sheikhs and Fatwa councils, arguing the doubts that some of the respectable brothers and Sheikhs rouse about the participation in elections, all of that made me end up with a firm believe that participation in the US elections from the juridical angle is an obligation.

Circumstantially, it is an obligation too. According to the constitution, the American system makes everything goes through elections. I believe that for every Muslim who lives there commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong goes through elections.

The last election before I left America was about smoking in public places in Ohio. Voters went to vote and Muslims were mobilized to vote against smoking in public, especially in restaurants.

Even the police have a board that is elected by cities' citizens. Mayors, governors, board electricity companies, and educational councils are all elected.

Another example there is a fierce debate between the elected educational councils in different parts of America on whether to consider homosexual boys and girls pervert or not. If people vote that they are normal not pervert, they would assign big number of social counselors, not to guide those boys and girls, but to guide their parents and teach them to accept their homosexual children and that it is normal, as statistics show that 70 percent of those who leave school and home are homosexual, who are not accepted by their parents and tend to



leave their parents which makes them drop out of school in order to work to earn their living. If Muslims were present in such debate, and demonstrate both logically and religiously that such homosexuality is prohibited pervert in all religions not just in Islam, the results would be very satisfactory.

I have an issue with brothers' nonparticipation in elections, the duty of participation in election is put forth only when there is a presidential elections. But presidential elections are part of a long chain in the structure of the American society. Thus, I would like our brothers who have Fiqh of reality to give attention to every election that occurs in any state not just to the presidential ones; I think this issue is really important.

The American congress is composed of the Senate and the House of Representatives and these are the most supreme powers after the president, and they give the needed legitimacy for the latter. The Congress can litigate the President and dismiss him. Thus, nonparticipation means the continuation of their crimes in our countries.

Jews are certainly less in numbers than Muslims now in the US. Our number is between 8 to 10 millions, yet although American Jews are no more than 6 million they have vision, plan, determination of whom to vote for and whom to ignore, and in some cases they support two candidates at the same time so that whomever wins becomes accountable to them. This is done in the Congress or the presidential elections. Jews in the US spend massive amount of money ion elections' publicity campaign.

The average sum of money spent on publicity for a Senate candidate is \$5 million and for the House of Representatives candidate is \$1 million, yet the US presidential candidate exceeds by far this amount. The most expensive presidential campaign was that of President Bush in year 2004; it reached billions of US dollars.

Such exorbitant expenditure on US elections by Jewish-owned mega-businesses and organizations is not done in philanthropy.

I will mention an example that Muslims in the US and Europe should be well aware of. Mr. Paul Findley's book "Silent No More" says that President Kennedy in his second elections had a shaky stand, and accordingly a man responsible for 300 Jewish organizations proposing to fund all his campaign on one condition which was to place the keys of foreign policy in his hands, and Kennedy refused such proposal. The result was the assassination of John Kennedy.

These facts, supported with incidents and numbers, prove that the participation of Muslims in the US elections is a judicial obligation and a circumstantial necessity. I hope that Muslims stop yelling at the Islamic centers and Masjids justifying not participating in elections with claims of widespread scandals in the US, especially in the municipality elections.



"Our number is between 8 to 10 millions, yet although American Jews are no more than 6 million they have vision, plan, determination of whom to vote for and whom to ignore." (Reuters Photo)

OI: Put between two choices of personal benefits — related to candidates' internal agenda — and the US foreign policy that affects the Muslims world, which choice do you think the US Muslims should ideally go for?

Soltan: In this case I would put methodology instead of a solution. The methodology in such case would be the presence of a Shura council according to the nature of the elections. If it was a local election, then the Shura council would be a local one that would decide which candidate is more appropriate. If it was a presidential election [...] then there has to be formed a Shura council from all US states that will assemble and take one decision? But for one US Muslim to sit alone and start making a judgment of who fits and who does not that is not correct.

This Shura council has three levels of choice. The first, is that it chooses the best out of two good candidates incase both had no drawbacks, which does not happen. The second involves choosing between goods and evils, the lesser harm

should be warded off for the greater benefit; if the harm is greater, then the benefit should be left. The third point, and which happens a lot in the US, is to choose the lesser of two evils; in the third case, both candidates will do harm to Muslims internally or externally, thus the choice will go to that who will do less harm to Muslims.

Thus, I propose two methodologies, one about decision making through the Muslim Shura councils that will work according to the municipality, state, or the US levels. The second is to value issues according to the best out of two goods, and then judging among the goods and evils, or judging the lesser of two evils concerning Muslims. This is the methodology and US Muslims can solve problems accordingly.

OI: What should the US Muslims look for in a presidential candidate?

Soltan: In my book "Muslims Participation in the American Elections: Its Obligation and its Islamic Guidelines," Sultan Publishing, 2005, I said that such conditions that determines an acceptable candidate should include that he does not be notorious for attacking Islam and to be qualified enough to the positions he is running for. If such candidate was not against Islam yet was not qualified enough, then he should not be chosen. If the two mentioned conditions were satisfied a Muslim can accordingly vote for such candidate.

OI: How do you see the future of the Muslim community in the US? Is it going for a better or worse one?

Soltan: I imagine that the future of the US Muslims is tied up to a number of factors. First is giving more attention to the internal development more than moving and extending outwards in the Da'wah activity. Muslims in the US need much more internal treatment than external one; US and European Muslim

communities need to bring up leaders and calibers much more than it is in the rest of the Muslim world.

Secondly, those Muslims must have the abilities to unite themselves behind one cause and say. The Muslim influence is conditioned with unity. As an example, in Birmingham, UK, where there is a high Muslim density, six Muslims ran into elections against each others and the other non-Muslim candidate won the elections because votes were wasted in the competition among the six Muslim candidates. Thus, the nomination of more than one Muslim candidate stood against the success of Muslims. We are facing an actual crisis because we are exerting some real efforts yet such efforts are wasted by disunity.

The third factor that will act towards a better future for the Muslim community is to foster political figures. Most Muslims in the US want to bring up their children to be either a medical doctor or an engineer; there are no Muslim Congressman except for only one who is a doctor and the others are lawyers. We have to direct Muslim youth since high school towards the study of law, but the mentality and culture of the immigrant Muslim community tend to put the study of medicine and engineering ahead of any other field.

Youth have to be directed to the study of political science and law, Allah Almighty said [If they had intended to come out, they would certainly have made some preparation therefore] (At-Tawbah 9: 46). We do not want to get into a competition and end up with a weak politician that would do more harm than benefit to Muslims. The Muslim politician should have strength, distinction, ability to deliver strong speeches, and good argumentative powers so that he can command what is right and forbid what is wrong in the correct way.

On the bright side, there is a sister who studied Shari'ah in Zaitouna University and then traveled to Stockholm, Sweden to study the Swedish language and post-graduate degrees. She ran in elections as a member of the municipal council and won; she is an excellent example that should be followed.



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Forth, we have to teach the Native American people and not only Muslims that acquired the nationality. Till now there are many Americans that have a negative look to non-native immigrants; Native American, white, and African American Muslims have to be taught and trained well to become distinguished lawyers political activists, and I confirm that they can be trained from the Zakah money.

Not only training and education is needed, there have to be leadership positions that such Muslims must be placed in. Such practical experience is extremely important so that they can be lively, effective, and powerful leaders that would impress other Americans making them feel that Muslim Americans are also caring for the common interests and not only that of the Muslim community. In my book, I mentioned as the first condition for the participation in the US elections is that the Muslim candidates should observe the welfare of the US society first and then the US Muslims community. When the American common person finds that the Muslim candidate keen on his security, economic wellbeing, cleanliness of streets, the quality of education, the absence of drugs, raping crimes, and violence, this will be the best way to convince Americans that Muslims are different from what Zionists and Islam-enemies are spreading and accusing them of being.

These are the factors that I see determining the future of Muslims in the US. Always I am optimist and I see the future of US Muslims to be more pleasant than now by Allah's willing.

CAIR on 9/11: What's Un-American?

Interview with CAIR Florida's Executive Director,
Mr. Hassan Shibly



Publishing Date: 2013

Author: Politics Zone Team



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In these twelve years that passed since 9/11, Muslims have evolved from the brink of being called "terrorists" and lived in the drapes of undutiful apology for what have been defaming the image of peaceful Muslims and Islam in total.

OnIslam.net took some questions to the most influential Islamic organization in the US, the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR).

Mr. Hassan Shibly, the Executive Director of Tampa Chapter of CAIR, thankfully spoke to OnIslam.net in an email-based interview on the anniversary of 9/11, in attempt to shed light on the realities that the American Muslims community is living through twelve years after the tragic events.

Topics Covered:

- 🕌 Unending Identity Question: American vs. Muslim
- 🕌 Post 9/11 Identity Development
- 🕌 9/11 and Awareness about Islam
- 🕌 US Muslim National Contributions
- 🕌 Surveillance Program and American Values

OnIslam.net: Years ago, typical questions you would get in an interview would be about your identity as an American versus you as a Muslim, did this change or are the same arguments still upfront in the community?

Mr. Hassan Shibly: The conversation on American Muslim identity continues to this day. I spoke at a [conference](#) about this topic this past weekend. The reality is that there is no contradiction between being American and being Muslim. The two are very complementary to each other. In fact, it is easier to be Muslim in America than most other places in the world. America offers Muslims the



freedom to be who they want to be and practice as they wish to practice; a freedom which is not even found in most so-called “Muslim” countries.

It is critical we teach our youth to appreciate the freedom America offers to practice Islam, and also American ideals like freedom of religion and assembly, which are necessary for Islam to flourish. Muslim youth also need to recognize that the notion that it is easier to be Muslim in a “Muslim country” is actually false. The reality is that countries in the Middle East have the same temptation, if not worse, that Muslim youth face in America, but lack the freedom to practice Islam that Muslim youth have in America.

It is also important to teach the American public about the beautiful message of Islam and that the things which Islam holds sacred: Religion, Life, Health, Wealth, and Honor are the same things that American values honor as well. Only those who see Islam and America as monolithic can see any contradiction between the two identities. For example, those who identify America exclusively by mistakes in its foreign policy such as the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have took the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, may see America as incompatible with Islam’s message of peace.

However, those that know America would know that America is much more than its foreign policy. It is a diverse and free nation where people of all ideas and beliefs have the right to compete to promote their ideals and that many Americans are advocates of peace, justice, and civil liberty and reject the crimes that have been committed in their names. Likewise, if a person sees Islam as simply what some criminals did on 9/11, likewise they will see Islam as incompatible with America.

However, those that know Islam know that the terrorists who executed 9/11 had nothing to do with Islam and that Islam rejects such crimes and all faiths have been hijacked by extremists to advance political interests.

In short, what can be said is that America is about liberty and freedom and Islam likewise is about freedom. One cannot have true faith if he is not free to choose his faith without compulsion. God does not want those forced to worship him, he wants those who love to worship him and freedom to choose is critical to that.

Some people mistakenly describe being American as looking or acting a certain way, however, America is about freedom and diversity and thus it is un-American to monopolize what it means to be American. Being a practicing Muslim makes you a better American because Islam teaches truth, justice, love, and compassion. Living in America will allow you to be a better Muslim because America offers the freedom to practice your faith and be who you want to be.

OI: How did CAIR along with other sister Muslim organizations help in developing the American Muslim identity since 9/11?

Shibly: Organizations like CAIR have been critical in preserving and defending a positive and healthy reflection of American Muslim identity since 9/11. We were critical in pushing back against the very small but vocal groups of both Muslim and Anti-Muslim extremists who wished to promote the message that Islam and America are incompatible.

We also provided a credible source of information for the media and public who was eager to hear the Muslim voice on issues of importance and learn more about the Islamic faith. In light of increased Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims since 9/11 organizations like CAIR helped the public realize that an assault on the freedom and liberty of American Muslims was in reality an assault on the liberty of all Americans.



American Muslims are playing a critical role in preserving freedom and liberty for all Americans and preserving the values necessary for America to remain a free and just nation. (Reuters)

OI: There is an Arabic idiom that says: “A detrimental might be beneficial,” does this apply on CAIR’s view of the aftermath of 9/11 in terms of increasing awareness about Islam?

Shibly: The events of 9/11 were so tragic and the loss of innocent life so severe that it is impossible to consider the terrible events as beneficial. Thousands lost their lives on that day, and two wars were subsequently executed where hundreds of thousands more also lost their lives. American freedom and liberty have also taken big hits and it will be a long time before Americans regain the liberty we lost on that day.

Unfortunately, for many Americans their first exposure to Islam was hearing that terrorists used the faith to justify their atrocious attacks. This naturally sparked much curiosity and interest in the faith and created a huge demand for answers about Islam. This resulted in many opportunities for the public to learn about Islam and see for themselves the beauty the faith represents and that only those with corrupted hearts could use it to justify terrorism.

OI: Beyond their inner contributions to the community, how do you assess the US Muslims contribution to the country at large?

Shibly: American Muslims are playing a critical role in preserving freedom and liberty for all Americans and preserving the values necessary for America to remain a free and just nation. American Muslims are at the forefront of the fight to preserve civil rights and fight against the bigotry and intolerance which may undermine our liberty.

There is no doubt that if America remains a free and just nation a century from now, it is because of the efforts of American Muslim civil rights activists and leaders who are defending the American Muslim community and public at large against gross government violations of liberty and American ideals outlined in the US Constitution. American Muslims are also highly educated and consist of many



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great business leaders and medical health professionals whose efforts ensure a higher standard of life for all people.

OI: Measured against the American values and ideals, how do you see the surveillance program targeting US Muslims?

Shibly: Surveillance programs targeting US Muslims are un-American and make our nation less free and less safe. It makes us less free because it violates the US Constitution for the US government to treat people differently and harass people simply because of their religious affiliation.

It makes us less safe because it is ineffective and leads to missing the overwhelming amount of terrorists and criminals that have no affiliation with Muslims. According to the FBI's own data, between 1980-2005 less than 6 percent of terrorist attacks in the US were carried out by Muslims. In the decade after 9/11, according to the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, 33 Americans were killed by terrorists of Muslim background, while 200 Americans were killed by white supremacist terrorists and 180,000 Americans were murdered.

Thus when you focus on a group where only a small minority of attacks comes from, you miss bigger threats and you destroy American ideals by wrongfully targeting minorities protected by the constitution.

Islam and Politics in Chicago

Interview with Chairman of Illinois Council for
Imams and Scholars, Imam Kifah Mustapha



Publishing Date: 2013 (with slight editing).

Author: Shahira Mahran is the politics section assistant editor and the former homepage editor and editor-in-chief assistant of OnIslam.net. She is a freelance translator of Islamic books and programs. Ms. Mahran studied English Literature and Translation at 6th of October University, Egypt.



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There is an estimated seven million Muslims in the United States, and around 400,000 Muslims in Chicago alone, where a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and national origins adopt different representations of Islam.

In the last ten years, 15 new mosques have been built to raise the number of mosques to 2,106 throughout the US; loyal visitors practice different ways of Islamic approach.

Recently, there has been a surge in new Muslim institutions across the country, and Chicago's record of growing mosques increased from 26 percent to 72 percent in 2011, according to a recent study. Ethnic groups are starting their own mosques too; they are Somalis, Iraqis, West Africans and Bosnian.

The Muslim community's increasing number of NGOs and mosques is a clear indication of a growing wealth and political connectedness of Chicago Muslims.

In order to bring OnIslam.net audience to a closer look on Muslims situation in Chicago and the representation of key Muslim figures in the State of Illinois, we took some questions to Imam Kifah Mustapha, the Chairman of the Illinois Council for Imams and Scholars and the Associate Director of the Mosque Foundation, the greatest Islamic organization of Chicago.

A recipient of the Mobilizer Award from CAIR-Chicago for his outstanding efforts in mobilizing masses for fundraising, through conducting benefits and banquets, Imam Kifah Mustapha acts as the representative of *Dar Al Fatwa* of Lebanon on behalf of the Lebanese Sunni Muslims in the US.

Serving as a member on the Advisory Board of Mission and Spiritual Care for Advocate Health Group in Illinois, Kifah is well-versed in US law and constitution, especially Muslim rights and minority groups.

Kifah is also a member of the Advisory Board of the Council for the Center for Faith and Community Health Transformation and a member of the Advisory Board of American Islamic College in Chicago.

Topics Covered:

- ④ Foreign Funds
- ④ Legal Regulation of Funding
- ④ Ethnic Diversity of Muslim, Point of Strength?
- ④ Effectiveness of the Interfaith Dialogues
- ④ Co-existence among US Muslims

OnIslam.net (OI): What is the role of the Mosque Foundation in attracting overseas funds from governmental institutions from Islamic and Arab countries? Do you face procedural security obstacles to provide funds from US authorities?

Imam Kifah Mustapha: We at the Mosque Foundation do not receive funds from any government entities overseas. It is part of our conviction that the community should support its own institutions to be free from any influence.

To the best of my knowledge any organization seeking funds from overseas should follow the Treasury Department guidelines.

OI: How can different methods of funding be put in effect under the virtue of the US Law and how far does the government give room for it?

Mustapha: I believe that most communities now living in the US depend for support on their own communities or travel within the US seeking support. It is not practiced much now that organizations travel abroad for help.

After 9/11 many organizations started also setting guidelines for their own reference next to the awareness of the updates from the Treasury Department even for local visiting institutions. At our Mosque for example when an organization applies to reach out to the community asking for help after a Friday prayer or during Ramadan we document the following:



1. The organization must be registered in the US with a non-for profit status called 501C3.
2. We need to look at their financial report of the year before for legitimate filing with the government.
3. We ask who are the board members serving so we would have an idea of true representation of the communities being served.
4. We ask for a letter of support from major known institutions.
5. We ask details of the project that funds are collected for.

OI: Does the nature of diversity of ethnic mosques in the US have a negative or a positive impact on the representation of Muslims in the US? What is the political role played by these mosques? For instance, are there mosques for Chechens? If yes, what was the role they played post recent Boston bombings?

Mustapha: The diversity of Mosques is part of the mosaic of the US based religious institutions. In the political arena, Mosques cannot be involved in promoting one candidate against another, which is against the law. Mosques do the following though:

1. Urge people to go and practice their right to vote.
2. Open forums about major community issues that are of a priority to the well-being of the community.
3. Open doors to any candidate to come and talk to the community to convince them of his political agenda.
4. Urge our young men and women to pursue positions in public service as part of their right.
5. Join coalitions to promote certain projects that will serve the community at large.

As to the second part of the question, Mosques regardless of who attend them of a certain ethnicity or not always try to be very cooperative with law enforcement agency. In the last attack in Boston, the local Imam identified one of the suspects and worked closely with the law enforcement agency in whatever capacity was available for him.

OI: What is the role of US non-Muslim political organizations in the interfaith dialogue with Islamic bodies? Can you cite some examples of previous achievements that bore effective fruits?

Mustapha: It works both ways, some are efforts by the Muslim community and others are a reach-out from the government to the Muslim community. This is a list of major establishment for our State of Illinois:



The diversity of Mosques is part of the mosaic of the US based religious institutions. (Reuters)

1. A DHS round table forum where representatives of all government and law enforcement agencies meet with leaders of community members every three months to discuss matters of safety and concerns.
2. The governor of Illinois established an Advisory Board from the Muslim community and assigned a liaison person between his office and the community.
3. The governor passed a law in Illinois to exempt Muslim students to attend school in universities during Muslim holidays.
4. Ramadan has been declared the green month in the State of Illinois.
5. A day now is registered at the State Capital of Illinois as a Illinois Muslim Action Day where community members go to speak to their representatives about issues of concern to them.
6. A law was passed called Charity without fear allowing Muslims to feel free to give charity as part of their right. This happened after 9/11 where many community members feared backlash from the government when donating to organizations as some of them were shut by the government.

Attempting to clarify the situation of Muslims in Chicago, focusing on the co-existence of Muslims living together in spite of their differences ethnically and racially, Imam Kifah noted the following points:

- 1- The approximate number of Muslims in Greater Chicago is about 400,000 Muslims.
- 2- The bulk of them are African Muslims, followed by Indians, Pakistanis and lastly Arabs
- 3- Mosques were established by immigrating nationals, for instance, one will notice there are mosques with national concentrations like a majority-Turkish-nationals mosque or, Bosnian, Arab, Indians and Pakistanis, etc...Yet, mosques are open to all nationals but famously certain mosques are attended by specific nationals.
- 4- There is coordination between mosques and Islamic institutions under the umbrella of Islamic organizations of Greater Chicago which is represented by some of these members that elect a president every two years.
- 5- Co-existence between Muslims inside mosques through volunteering to the available services in every mosque, then enrolling in administrative positions. Inside the walls of one mosque, you cannot find major issues, Alhamdulillah, among visitors; yet, some of the mosques that are located in relatively poor places do suffer from shortage of services and funding. On the other hand, if the visitors come from a higher social standard, of a better economic status, the mosques' issues are no longer there!
- 6- Some Mosques are registered as public trust (in mother organizations for example: North American Islamic Trust NAIT has more than 40 percent of Mosques registered) and these Mosques have a Board of Trustees that is elected from the general assembly who are the community members at large. Because of this hierarchy, the Mosque is based on many volunteer committees that the Board of Trustees oversees and manages.

Other Mosques are registered as private trust in the name of few people and in most cases those are the ones who established the Mosque. Public Muslim people have no say in the business of running the Mosque nor can be elected but only participate through appointment by the people who are the only authority of the Mosque.

7- The area of service in each Mosque differs from one to another:

1. Prayers: Five daily, Friday, Taraweeh, Eid etc.
2. Accepting donations of Zakat and then distributing it on needy community members
3. Providing Iftar dinners during the month of Ramadan
4. Providing services of funeral preparations and burials. It includes joining the family from hospital to funeral home, giving a reminder at time of wakes, honoring the deceased by bathing and Kafan, bringing the body for Salatul Janazah at the Mosque and accompanying the funeral to the cemetery for burial.

Mosque..they participate through appointment by the people who are the only authority of the Mosque.

5. Proving service of Islamic marriage and divorce. (We do not conduct Islamic marriage or divorce unless we have legal papers from the local legal court system.)
6. Offering counseling or arbitration in business based disputes.
7. Offering counseling in all family matters between spouses of parents, children, etc...



Chapter Three:

**INTERFAITH AND
US FOREIGN
POLICY**

Muslims and Interfaith Dialogue

Interview with Imam Yahya Hendi



Publishing Date: 2009

Author: Mutiullah Tayeb is an Afghan analyst and researcher. A specialist on Afghanistan and Central Asian affairs, he is the author of "Taliban's Return and Future Scenarios" published, in Arabic, by Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, Qatar.

US Muslims have increasingly assumed significant social roles within the American society. Recently, with Obama's overtures toward Muslims and the Muslim world, US Muslims have been spearheading constructive dialogue with Christians, Jews, and others, as well as serving as a bridge between the Muslim world and the United States.

Imam Yahya Hendi, the first full-time Muslim chaplain to be hired by an American university, Georgetown, is working in the United States to fill the gap between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Pursuing such a goal, Imam Hendi, the Imam of the Islamic Society of Frederick, continually gives lectures at churches and synagogues, hoping to create better understanding between Muslims and people of other faiths.

OnIslam.net conducted an interview with Imam Hendi to explore his own viewpoints about interfaith dialogue, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Obama's policy toward Muslims.

Topics Covered:

- Bush's "Islamofascism"
- Obama's Background Influence on Foreign Policy
- Palestinian-Israeli Conflict
- Religious Perspective on Two-State Solution
- Jews Suffered in Europe, Muslims Pay
- Interfaith Dialogue and Awareness About Islam

OnIslam.net (OI): You have been so close to the Bush Administration after 9/11. How can you explain Bush's usage of terms like "Islamofascism" and "crusade"?

Imam Yahya Hendi: The word "close" is a very relative term; I was neither his advisor nor his consultant. I met with him three times, and only once after 9/11 to ensure that American Muslims continue to be proud of their faith and that Americans see Muslims as their fellow neighbors and citizens.

Bush made a very good speech to ensure that American Muslims continue to be part of the fabric of the United States. It sent a message that America is not in a war against Islam or Muslims.

As for the usage of the term "crusade", Bush used it immediately after 9/11, before we met him. He never used it again after that meeting because of our "closeness" to him.

I remember very well that he immediately phoned the State Department and the White House, saying: "Listen! Stop it right now; this is wrong." The word crusade in English does not mean what it means in the Muslim World.

The word "crusade" in English means to literally be effective in changing something. It does not mean more than that.

Now, we say that we are waging a crusade against drugs, gangs, alcohol, poverty, or HIV, so I think this what president Bush meant.

He did not mean a Christian war against Islam.

After all, Almighty Allah says in the Holy Qur'an, [O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do] (Al-Ma'idah 5:8).



Bush used the word crusade to say that America will go as far as it needs to protect our country from any attack; and I agree with him.

I hope that Muslims wage crusades against dictatorships, poverty, and the mismanagement of resources.

The word crusade is a good thing in language. I think that the word was misunderstood and misinterpreted in the Arab and Muslim world.

I do not say that Bush was perfect. I disagreed with him about many things, including the war on Iraq. Bush knows my view; I told him my opinion face-to-face about the war on Iraq.

I disagreed with him on certain issues, but I agreed with him on other.

I was very close to the White House in terms of its aid to Africa that increased with billions of dollars, its fight of HIV virus — especially in Africa, and the administration's stance on Tsunami.

I think that America continues to be very clear about where it stands on those issues.

I noticed that the State Department, during the last year of the Bush Administration, completely stopped using terms like "Islamofascism" or "Islamic radicalism".

We were able to convince the administration that these words are not positive terms; and they are not for the interest of America, the Muslim World, or possible future mutual relations. Consequently, the Bush Administration stopped using these terms.

Now, there are other people who use the term "Islamofascism", and who will never like Islam no matter what Islam becomes.

I think that we need to be careful about using these terms that could entice hatred amongst the Muslim World and the United States.

OI: Do you think that the background of President Obama will be a factor influencing his policy toward the Middle East and the Muslim World?

Hendi: I voted for President Barack Obama, because I believed in what he could do for the United States and for its relationship with the Muslim World.

He wants to reach out to the Muslim world.

I think his name is helpful; Barack is *Baraka* (Arabic for blessing), and Hussein —from Kenya — will help. However, at the end of the day, I believe that dialogue is a two-way road. I want the Muslim World to reach out to the United States, and the vice versa.

Both have to sit around the table to end their tense relations.

The first nation to have ever acknowledged the independence of the United States under George Washington almost 240 years ago was the Kingdom of Morocco.

The first business deal to be signed in US history was with Morocco.

The first ship of goods to be welcomed by the United States was called *Sultana* that sailed from the Gulf of Oman.

So, America has always had good relations with the Muslim World, unfortunately in certain cases good relations did not exist. Both sides need to find a way to work with each other. So, I am very optimistic with the Obama Administration.



In the United States, there is no day without having someone going to a mosque to know about Islam.
(OnIslam.net Photo)

OI: Can there be a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while each side adheres to its religious doctrine to support their right to the land? Do you think the conflict is purely a religious or politically oriented one?

Hendi: I believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict is nothing but political.

Israelis want a place where they can feel at home after their ancestors had been persecuted for thousands of years.

We cannot overlook that reality, and it is their right to feel at home in a place controlled by them.

Palestinians are a part of Palestine, and they have the right to feel that they are in a home controlled by them without any threat; they have the right to self-determination.

For me, this is a political struggle; however, religion was used by both sides to entice violence, add fuel to the fire, and recruit more people for more violence.

I believe religion may have been a part of the problem, but it can be a part of the solution.

There is a possible peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but there are certain things that have to be done for making it possible.

First of all, both sides need to remember that both have equal rights to the land.

Secondly, the exclusion of one side is not good for the other, so both sides have to be equally included in the process.

Palestinians have the right to that land as much as Israelis have.

Israelis cannot keep thinking that Palestine is only their promised land, at the expense of Palestinians.

Thirdly, holy sites of Jews, Christians, and Muslims have to be completely honored and respected; no one should feel the power to destroy the other's holy sites.

Finally, religious leaders need to become part of the solution. I do not want Imams and Rabbis saying that "this is our exclusive land; get out of the land!"

Of course, I want my government — the United States — to be more involved in making peace.

OI: Within a religious context, how do you see the two-state solution?

Hendi: I do not want religion to be used by either party to cause war. Almighty Allah says in the Holy Qur'an: [... and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people] (Al-Ma'idah 5:32)

I do not want Jews, Muslims, or Christians to suffer.

I believe if peace could — I think it could — be achieved, it has to be around the table.

The injustices that have been incurred on Palestinians are very painful, and I believe those who committed those injustices have to pay the price and apologize for them.

The way forward is to find a way out of this. At the end of the day, one will know that those who were driven out of their homes need to return.

Those who were separated from their mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters need to be reunited with them.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem) needs to become a city where Jews, Christians, and Muslims feel at home.

This is for me what justice is. Justice is when Jews are able to live in Palestine or Israel, when both sides feel secure, and when they are able to apologize for what they have done against each other.

OI: Jews suffered in Europe, yet, Palestinians pay the price for that. How do you comment?



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Hendi: We cannot go back to what happened 60 or 100 years ago. We need to move forward with optimism and hope. We cannot keep pointing fingers. I am from a Palestinian background. I am still having my family living in Ramallah, Nablus, and Gaza. I have a sister living in Israel, an Israeli citizen.

I do not want Israelis or Palestinians to point fingers at each other. We need peace and an equal right to the land. Arabs and Jews will live together the way Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in Muslim Spain, Iran, and Egypt.

Jews were heads of the military under the Fatimid Dynasty, and leaders of the educational institutions in Muslim Spain. This is how we need to live; we need to live together.

OI: Some critics say that Americans are not interested in hearing about Islam. How far does interfaith dialogue work in the United States?

Hendi: It is not true. I am speaking in churches and synagogues every week when I am in the United States. At least, I am giving may be 50 lectures every year in churches and another 50 in synagogues.

I speak in universities almost every week. If one looks at my schedule, as my wife says, I live on air more than I live in my house.

The Qur'an was, and still be, the best-selling book after 9/11. I am producing my own nine DVDs on Islam that I hope Americans will buy easily.

The DVDs are professionally produced on woman and Islam, the Quran and Islam, Muhammed and Islam, Islam and other religions, and spirituality and Islam.

I know that Americans are interested in Islam and interfaith dialogue. In the United States, no day passes without having someone going to a mosque to know about Islam.

US and the Muslim World

Exclusive Interview with John Kerry



"A New Beginning" has been the dominant theme of Washington's policy towards Muslims, at least as it was enunciated by Obama in his historic Cairo speech which aimed at reaching out to the Muslim world.

Yet, Muslims all around the world still have some questions about the "role" the United States will presumably play in achieving a just, comprehensive peace to troubled areas in the Muslim world, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In 2009, OnIslam.net interviewed US Senator John Kerry, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the former US presidential democratic candidate, to exclusively answer its readers' questions on some much-debated issues about US-Muslims relations and the US role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Topics Covered:

- US' View of Muslims Worldwide
- Preferred Groups for the US to Speak To
- Kerry's 2009 Visit to Syria
- Policy Towards Somalia
- US' Support of Israel
- Achieving "Just" Peace

OnIslam.net(OI): How does the United States view Muslim communities around the world?

Senator John Kerry: As President Obama made clear with his speech in Cairo, America has started a new chapter in our history with Muslim communities worldwide. He shattered stereotypes on both sides, reminded the West and the Muslim world of our responsibilities, and reaffirmed one of America's highest ideals and traditional roles — that those who seek freedom and democracy,



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Muslim and non-Muslim alike, have no greater friend than the United States of America.

In February, 2009 I visited Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza. In April, I visited Pakistan and Sudan. At every turn, I heard a newfound willingness by people and governments alike to take a fresh look at America.

America is sending a simple message to all Muslims wherever they live: we share your aspirations for freedom, dignity, justice, and security. We are ready to listen, to learn, and to honor the President's commitment to approach the Muslim world with a spirit of mutual respect.

The United States has a great deal of work to do. An alarming number of Muslims today believe that our goal is not to end terrorism, but to dominate or diminish Islam itself.

And their mistrust is reciprocated by many Westerners who now wonder whether the gaps between us are unbridgeable, whether higher walls or fewer visas can substitute for the difficult task of coexistence.

Part of America restoring trust will be broadening relations with Muslim nations beyond the few lightning-rod topics — combating poverty, climate change, investing in human development, and creating knowledgeable societies.

Among our most effective steps to counteract extremism was providing the humanitarian aid to Pakistan and Indonesia in the wake of natural disasters: what mattered wasn't merely the assistance, it was the sight of American troops actively working to save Muslim lives.

OI: Which Muslims will the United States prefer to speak to (Imams, Mullahs, leaders, or people)?

Kerry: The United States is eager to engage with legitimate and respected voices from Muslim communities representing broad swaths of society, which could

include civic, religious, government, and business leaders, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens.

OI: Does your recent [2009] visit to Damascus indicate a certain US rapprochement toward Syria?

Kerry: I have long advocated and fully support President Obama's commitment to a deeper engagement with the Middle East.

American diplomatic efforts offer the best way forward and we have much to gain strategically by having this diplomatic channel formally open. Syria can play an important role in moving the region towards peace, and historically Syria has been a vital swing state in a troubled region.

Strenuous diplomacy will be required to advance our interests, and the ultimate challenge — moving Syria away from its marriage of convenience with Iran — will certainly not happen overnight.

OI: Is America willing to stop the terror in Somalia? What's your policy on Somalia?

Kerry: The issue in Somalia that generates the most attention in the United States is piracy, but America must recognize that Somali piracy is in part a by-product of Somalia's fragmented political situation. Piracy goes to the heart of America's national security and economic interests, and the renewed threat off the Horn of Africa demands a multifaceted, multinational effort — one that coordinates the world's naval powers, the United Nations, the international shipping community, and the nations that border Somalia.

We must also work for regional stability on land, and address the growing humanitarian crisis in Somalia.

OI: Why does America support Israel against all odds? To what extent do you think politicians in the United States have been influenced by the pro-Israeli centers and groups (such as MEMRI and AIPAC)?

Kerry: America undoubtedly enjoys a close and historic relationship with Israel. And, that close relationship will continue. However, I do not see it as hindering American leadership in support of peace for the Middle East or contrary to our other friendships in the region.

There is some misunderstanding about the nature of the influence of the pro-Israeli groups you mention. These groups are not driving the American-Israeli relationship; rather they are a consequence of that relationship. These groups are far from monolithic in outlook, and advocate every position left, right and center on US policy, reflecting the vast diversity of opinion within both the Jewish-American and larger American population.

In my own case, it is true that I have urged the Palestinian Authority to crack down on terrorism and the Arab states to reach out to Israel. I also visited Gaza in February to see first-hand the humanitarian conditions there and have been very clear, publicly and privately, that Israel's settlement activity undermines efforts to achieve peace and needs to stop.

Look at President Obama. While no one doubts that President Obama is a friend of Israel, he has made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict one of the centerpieces of his administration and has also been outspoken on the need to stop Israeli settlement activity.

OI: What will be Obama's plan in achieving "just" peace? How far can Obama force Netanyahu to disband the Israeli settlements/colonies and to accept the two-state solution?

Kerry: I want to emphasize that I do not speak for the President. We do not know exactly what an agreement would look like, and ultimately it is the



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Israelis and the Palestinians themselves who must reach an agreement that they can live with.

I believe that both peoples want peace and both peoples deserve peace. America's role, in conjunction with the Arab world, Europe and broader international community, is to help them get there.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot, in my view, be separated from the regional context. And so the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, in which every Arab country has agreed to the basic formulation of land for peace, can be a key component of moving the process forward.

I believe that President Obama shares this view. It is not an accident that Senator Mitchell's Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking efforts have taken him everywhere from Morocco to Saudi Arabia to Syria. Arabs should not wait until after an agreement to begin actually improving relations with Israel. I hope they begin to do so now.

Yet, they are rightfully concerned about Israeli settlement activity, as am I. We will see how Israeli policy evolves over the next several weeks, but I personally believe that it will be difficult to meaningfully move the process forward without a freeze in settlement activity.

There have been some positive developments in the West Bank in recent months, which should not go unnoticed. The Palestinian security forces are proving to be increasingly capable of establishing law and order. Israel has begun to remove some key checkpoints, which has immediate benefits for Palestinians. If we can link these developments on the ground to the broader regional diplomatic efforts and an Israeli settlement freeze, I believe that we have a context in which progress towards peace is possible.



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