

## Chapter 7

# American Muslims and the Rediscovery of America's Sacred Ground

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### INTRODUCTION

The American Muslim community is at a crucial crossroads. It is experiencing an existential crisis. Students of Islam in the West are beginning to ask questions about the future of Islam, and Muslims in an increasingly Islamophobic West are growing wary of the unrest and growing tide of extremism in the Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, American Muslims have reached a critical mass. This gives them a presence that promises influence in the mainstream society, and a visibility that also attracts a backlash, as people fear its growth and influence. Some scholars, such as Fawaz Gerges, maintain that the contemporary Arab and Muslim experience is similar to that of communities such as American Jews and Irish Americans, who too were assimilated only after being discriminated against, marginalized, and oppressed.<sup>2</sup> The difference is that the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, and the open-ended “war on terror” has exaggerated and traumatized further the potential for Muslims to become fully participating members in the greater American society.

The determination of the American Muslim community to make an impact on the political, theological, and cultural scene on North America, and the growing fear and prejudice against Islam and Muslims in the United States, has created a unique situation for Muslims. Unlike Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and others, American Muslims do not yet have a place in American society.

To understand the relative standing of various religious communities in the United States, consider this: since 2004, the State Department has been mandated by Congress to produce an annual report on global anti-Semitism. The purpose is to protect Jews worldwide from prejudice, hatred, and violence.<sup>3</sup> The United States now also funds many Christian projects through its faith-based-initiative programs.<sup>4</sup> But the same government also supports the PATRIOT Act and other initiatives that systematically target Muslims and violate their civil rights on the basis of their religion. This less-than-equal status of the American Muslim community has resulted in American Muslims being the victims of illegitimate laws passed in the Civic Public Forum.<sup>5</sup>

One only has to visit the Web sites of several evangelical Christian churches and communities to witness the horrific levels of Islamophobia that exist today. The case of General Boykin, while in charge of intelligence at the Department of Defense, is such an example. He visited Churches and indulged in anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Numerous Islamophobic comments made by prominent Christian leaders such as Rev. Franklin Graham, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Rev. Jerry Vine, and Rev. Pat Robertson also clearly suggest that there is an atmosphere in the United States that encourages anti-Muslim prejudice to thrive in the Conscientious Public Forum.<sup>6</sup> Having said that, it is also important to recognize that many Christian groups have come forward in solidarity with Muslims to protect their civil rights, that gradually an interfaith space has emerged sympathetic to Muslim conditions, and that many are working together to redress the situation.

American Muslim's internal struggles and outreach have generated a moral dialogue in the Conscientious Public Forum, which is developing a strong civil society movement to raise public awareness to impact the Civic Public Forum institutions that victimize Muslims. Because of these developments, American Muslims are uniquely poised to help all Americans rediscover America's Sacred Ground.

## ASPIRATIONS OF THE AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Muslim immigrants who started coming to the United States in the early 1960s had already tasted the elixir of Islamic revivalist fervor and experienced the brutality and autocracy of their governments of origin, which were interested in either crushing or co-opting emerging Islamic movements. Several members of the various Islamic movements such as the Muslim brother-

hood and the Jamaat-e-Islami came to America, and many of them soon discovered the epochal opportunity that America provided.

In a society where there is political and religious freedom, Muslims could quickly organize and freely establish Islamic movements that were constantly repressed in the heartlands of the Muslim world. While there was deep hostility and prejudice towards Islam and Muslims, it was nothing compared to the stifling character of despotic regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, and Palestine (under Israeli colonialism).

The easiest and often the only way for these Muslims to come to America was through the route of higher education. They came; they earned their Ph.D.s in natural and social sciences, and they stayed to create a crucial mass of intellectual Muslim elite in the United States. The nature of this immigration became a filtering process, allowing only better-educated and intellectually sophisticated individuals to enter from the Arab world. Add to this the flow of Muslim professionals and scholars escaping poverty and poor economies from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and the result was a Muslim leadership capable of articulating enlightened self-interest and formulating a far-reaching vision for the revival of Islam and Islamic values.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the freedom to rethink the Islamic civilization project and to indulge in serious rejuvenation of the stagnant Islamic sciences was not available in the Muslim world, American Muslims found that their new home in the United States opened new possibilities. Islamists who found themselves in leadership positions in the emerging American Muslim community essentially had one overriding goal: to revive Islamic civilization throughout the world, including in the United States.<sup>8</sup> They strongly believed that the key to reviving Islamic civilization was the intellectual revival of the Ummah (Islamic community or nation), which is in effect a top-down, overarching worldview approach to government. Intellectuals such as Ismail Farooqi and his Islamization of Knowledge Project, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his Islamic Philosophy and Islamic Sciences Project are indicative of this thinking. The founding of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists<sup>9</sup> was the first step towards establishing this revivalist thinking within some kind of institutional setting.

The freedom available in the West led to further institutional development of this revivalist agenda and led to the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in Virginia and the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, United Kingdom. These are think tanks dedicated to the intellectual revival of Muslims. The idea was simple. Freedom of religion and thought in the West, and in America in particular, would produce Islamic ideas and ideology and then be exported back to the Muslim world where they would be introduced and tested in the hope that they would stimulate and galvanize social and religious reform. Both centers have produced prolific literature in the forms of books and journals on various aspects of

Islamic sciences and social sciences. The most spectacular of such endeavors was the establishment of the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

IIU Malaysia is a product of American Muslim expertise and Malaysian resources. The president of IIIT, Abdul Hameed Abu Sulayman, who was also a founding member and president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), left the United States to take over as the rector of IIU Malaysia. He took with him not only the ideas of *Ismail al-Faruqi*, the Islamization project, but also many Muslim social scientists and intellectuals who had emerged in the free and challenging environment of American academia. There he sought to unite the so-called secular and sacred sciences in an attempt to create a generation of Muslim students well versed in modern as well as traditional studies, the essential ingredients for the reconstruction of a thriving Islamic civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Muslim leaders of this generation also created Islamic political organizations that are trying to increase their political and economic influence in the United States in the hope that it can be leveraged to improve the condition of the Muslim world. Such organizations include the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), American Muslim Council (AMC), Muslim Political Action Committee (MPAC), Kashmiri American Council (KAC), American Muslim Alliance (AMA), and American Muslims for Jerusalem (AMJ).<sup>11</sup> They use the resources of the American Muslim community to fight for freedom, democracy, and self-determination in the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup>

In the United States, the emerging leadership realized that the single most important goal was not to assimilate and disappear into the great melting pot, like many who had come before them. The need to defend and consolidate Islamic identity became the primary goal in the United States. Muslims were not in the United States to assimilate. They were in the United States to take their place in American society and be accepted. Thus, the development of the American Muslim community in the last three decades, at least among the immigrants, can be divided into two phases. The first phase entailed consolidation of the Islamic identity and the second phase entailed making an impact on the American society.

To realize these goals, nearly two thousand Islamic centers and over twelve hundred Islamic schools have mushroomed within the last three decades. Several Islamic movements, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), and the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA), emerged to galvanize momentum and fervor in adherence of Islamic practices so that the Islamic identity of the immigrant community did not dissipate. Traditionalist movements like the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a movement that focuses on ritual purity and revival, have taken root along with the *Naqshbandi Sufi* movement.<sup>13</sup> Further, the Islamic community has enjoyed the great advantage that comes from conversions. Even as assimilation took away many, reversion and conversion to Islam

brought many new believers within the fold and kept the critical mass of the community sufficiently large to preclude complete assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

The leadership of the intellectual elite, the resonant echo of the Islamic revivalist fervor of the Muslim world, the gradual transformation of America from melting pot to a multicultural society, and the rapid rate of conversion of Americans, both white and black, to Islam all provided energy and momentum for the sustenance of Islamic practices in America. Thus, the aspirations of American Muslim leadership became as follows:

1. Defending the Islamic identity of Muslims in America against assimilation.
2. Developing intellectual and political resources capable of making significant social and political changes in the Muslim World.
3. Making an impact on American society.

In the pursuit of these goals, the American Muslim identity gradually emerged as its community coped and adjusted to challenges within and without the community.<sup>15</sup>

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Yet the American Muslim leadership realized that the challenges to becoming fully accepted and respected participants in American democracy were two-dimensional. First, there were *barriers to acceptance* posed by ignorance of Islam and prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims, which was widespread in American society and fostered meticulously by America's political leadership and media.<sup>16</sup> Second, Muslims realized that there was *resistance to adjustment* within their community itself that would pose a major barrier to engagement with the American mainstream. Both of the challenges, internal and external, had an equal impact on the aspirations that the American Muslim community had set for itself.

### Prejudice, Resistance, and the Progression of Islam in America

Prejudice against Islam in the American mainstream presented several barriers to the practice of Islam. Every time there was a major political development in the Middle East, the American media would unleash attacks on Islam and its values. Islam was and is still presented as an irrational, undemocratic faith that is opposed to equality, freedom, and peace. The Western imagery of Islam as antithetical to Western values made it extremely difficult in the past for Muslims to publicly declare their commitment to Islam. The demonization of Islam in the media, and the prejudice, hatred, and

intolerance it bred, made practicing Islam in the public arena a dangerous prospect.<sup>17</sup>

Muslim women could not wear the headscarf in schools, at shopping malls, or in workplaces. For example, Muslim women wearing headscarves were usually screened out at the interview stage of applying for a job. If they started wearing scarves after they obtained a position, they were often terminated without cause. Teachers would object and send Muslim girls home for wearing the headscarf. Girls were punished when they refused to wear revealing clothes in gym classes or swimming pools. Social interactions in the workplace, which often take familiarity between people of different genders as given, were alien to many Muslim women.

Men faced discrimination for wearing beards or caps, and for wanting a longer break on Fridays to offer the congregational Friday prayers. Both men and women faced resistance to their requests for time off for Islamic festivals. Many Muslim scholars and intellectuals faced discrimination when seeking jobs in higher education and when writing on politics, particularly on Middle Eastern issues, from an Islamic perspective. The pressure to consume alcohol at parties, to eat non-*halal* food, and to participate freely in mixed environments remains very high. Moreover, Muslim men in high level managerial positions found that their careers could be jeopardized because Islamic etiquette and dietary laws socially marginalized them. Such ignorance of Islamic gender practices led to deliberate or unintended discrimination of Muslims. Work and school environments that lacked sensitivity to Muslim needs tended to become hostile.<sup>18</sup>

Ignorance about Islam and hostility toward it presented several challenges. The pressure to assimilate, to "normalize," was very high. As a result, many Muslims began to use Americanized versions of their names to hide their Islamic identity and even their foreignness. Muhammad became Mo, Jeffery became Jeff, Ali became Al. Others resisted and sometimes made a breakthrough and at other times paid the price.

Muslim families found that American public schools offered reasonable education for their children at no cost, but the public schools did not inculcate values consistent with the values of Islam. The food was not *halal*, the stories and the lessons were either based on Christian folklore or secular ethos. Muslim children found it difficult to resist the desire to be like their non-Muslim peers. Most parents struggled to establish themselves in their careers and found that they had little time to provide their children with the religious and cultural education that they needed.

Many Muslims, though, were neither disturbed nor concerned. They were pleased with their material success and tried to gain acceptance in the mainstream culture by distancing themselves from Islam and Islamic practices. For those who were not keen on defending their Islamic identity, life in America was full of promise. Many realized the American dream, and enjoyed the prosperity and freedom available in America. A large segment of

this group returned to Islam in significant ways once their children grew up and began to manifest some of the social ills of American society, such as sexual promiscuity, drugs, moral indifference, and other negative behaviors. Some still remain assimilated, finding themselves on the fringe of both the Islamic society in America and the general American society.

But many Muslims who came to America for political and economic reasons were determined to resist assimilation. They answered the call from the Islamists and Muslim intellectuals and *Dawah* (invitation to Islam) workers to join the various Islamic movements that mushroomed in the 1970s and 1980s. The first thing that Islamists did was to take over the National Arab Students Association, a secular ethnocentric organization, and dissolved it. They replaced it with the Muslim Students Association National. The national MSA and its branches at various campuses started working with local communities to establish small Islamic *Halaqas* (study circles) and *Musallahs* (prayer centers) in classrooms or rented apartments.

After graduation, with the help of the Muslim leadership that came out of the MSAs around the country, these small communities started establishing Islamic centers. In the late 1970s, the Gulf States had become cash rich with the rise in oil prices. Many of them gave generously to Muslim communities all over the world, seeking to establish mosques and Islamic schools. Some of the most important Islamic centers, like the Islamic Centers in Washington, D.C. and New York, were built with generous donations from them.<sup>19</sup>

With some foothold in communities and universities, Islamic movements began to fight against the pressure to assimilate. In the 1970s and 1980s, the response was purely defensive as the primary focus was to build large numbers of Islamic centers and Islamic schools. Islamic centers and their activities kept adults in touch with their beliefs and their heritage, and Islamic schools taught Islamic values and inculcated Islamic practices among the young. As mentioned previously, there are at the moment over two thousand Islamic centers and over twelve hundred Islamic schools in North America.<sup>20</sup>

These centers also became the hubs for activities by Muslims who in their countries of origin belonged to various Islamic movements. For example, the *Tablighi Jamaat*, an Islamic movement that is a loose network of activists who focus on Islamic rituals and encourage each other to pray regularly, quickly took root in many mosques, especially in Florida, Chicago, Upstate New York, and New York City. This apolitical and mildly spiritual movement is one of the largest Islamic movements in North America, with over one hundred thousand participants.

Similarly, ISNA and then ICNA expanded, focusing their activities on Islamic centers. Gradually all of the Islamic movements began holding annual national and regional conventions, which bring scholars from North America and the Muslim world to large convention centers. There, thousands of Muslims converge every year to listen to lectures on Islam and participate in various community and faith-related workshops. Currently, the

annual convention of ISNA attracts over thirty-five thousand participants and over one thousand scholars. The regional *Tablighi Ijtimas* (gatherings) attract anywhere between ten thousand and fifteen thousand attendees. ICNA averages between ten thousand and twelve thousand participants at its annual conventions.<sup>21</sup> At all these conventions, Muslim scholars and intellectuals from North America and the rest of the Muslim World interact with American Muslims and each other, providing a preview of the Islamic civilization that Muslims dream about.

### **A New Generation: Working in the Civic and Conscientious Public Forums for Civil Rights and Acceptance of Muslims**

By the beginning of the 1990s, the community as well as the leadership became more confident.<sup>22</sup> A new generation of American Muslims had grown up and emerged. Some were lost, but many of the young American Muslims made their senior generation proud. They were confident, successful, and deeply committed to Islam and the well-being of the Muslim *Ummah*. By then, the American landscape was dotted with Islamic landmarks. It was thought that it was time to have the same impact on American culture.<sup>23</sup>

While members of the senior generation were content to defend, the new generation was eager to be more proactive. They were not satisfied with the mere preservation of Islamic identity. They wanted Islam to be accepted and recognized as a constituent element of America itself.

This increase in confidence resulted in three major changes. The first was the emergence of the Council for American and Islamic Relations (CAIR) and its culture of "action alert activism." CAIR is a watchdog organization seeking to battle prejudice against Islam in both the Civic Public Forum and the Conscientious Public Forum. CAIR has a very large electronic mailing list, with over five hundred thousand names, according to Ibrahim Hooper, its communications director. Whenever an incident of Islamophobia is reported, CAIR sends an email to its members asking them to call, email, or write letters to the offending party.

In the Conscientious Public Forum, CAIR specializes in fighting negative stereotypes of Muslims and the demonization of Islam in the media, although it has not been as successful in this arena as it has been in the Civic Public Forum. There, among other things, CAIR fights discrimination in the workplace. Now, when employers fire Muslim women for wearing headscarves, they are likely to face the ire of CAIR. In addition, in the Civic Public Forum, CAIR is ready to take every available legal action to fight discrimination—from public exposure of discrimination to lawsuits. It also helps organizations by providing sensitivity training.

CAIR's biggest contribution, however, is the education it provides to the community about how to fight discrimination and prejudice. In the last few years, CAIR has enjoyed considerable success in restoring jobs and obtaining



compensation for Muslims suffering from discrimination. Following CAIR's success, several other organizations now also use the action alert activism made popular by CAIR to mobilize the community whenever and wherever prejudice and discrimination surfaces.

The second significant change has been the operating style of the college and university Muslim Students Associations, which have had a major impact in the Conscientious Public Forum. When the senior generation was in charge, the MSAs were focused on Muslims and sustaining their faith and Islamic practices. But with the MSAs' new generation at the helm, many more Muslims are outwardly focused. They are at ease with their Muslim identity and more interested in presenting a positive image of Islam.

Unlike the *halaqas* of the past, the biggest activity of the MSAs is the Islam Awareness week they organize, usually in October–November each year on hundreds of campuses in North America. Lectures on Islam, art exhibitions, and cultural events are organized to introduce America to the true dimensions of Islam. This is the new form of *Dawah* (invitation to Islam) developed by the new generation of American Muslims. The Islam Awareness weeks are so well-established that they have become nearly as ubiquitous on American campuses as hamburgers and Coca-Cola.

The third major development in the Conscientious Public Forum in the 1990s was the explosion of Islamic media on the Internet. The Internet provided American Muslims with an excellent opportunity to share information with other Muslims and to provide news and opinions from Muslims' perspectives on various topics. For decades, Muslims complained about bias in Western media. Now at least the Internet allows Muslims to disseminate the news that concerns them and to advance opinions and views on current events from an Islamic perspective. Websites like Iviews.com compete with CNN and other major global news providers for Muslim viewers and readers. The Internet has also facilitated fundraising, networking, and discussions and dialogue among Muslims from various perspectives, and has helped build consensus among Muslim activists in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

This newfound confidence resulted in the trend in the institutional development of the Muslim community of America to increase exponentially. Muslims have stopped spending all their resources, human and material, on institutions for identity preservation in mosques and schools and have begun to turn those resources to the Civic and Conscientious Public Forums. The 1990s experienced the emergence of organizations like the American Muslim Council (AMC), Muslim Political Action Committee (MPAC), American Muslim Alliance (AMA), American Muslims for Jerusalem (AMJ), and Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID). The explicit purpose of these organizations is the political mobilization of American Muslims to accumulate power that can be used to effect change in the Muslim world.

These organizations educate American Muslims in the nuances of democracy, pluralism, and interest-group politics. They mobilize Muslims to

participate in American politics at every level, from voting in elections to running for office. They actively lobby Congress and the executive branch to change American foreign policy toward Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan, and Kashmir in particular and the rest of the Muslim world in general. Hundreds of seminars and workshops have been conducted in Islamic centers all over the country and at regional and annual conventions of Islamic movements like ISNA and ICNA to encourage Muslims to participate in the American political process.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, all of the major developments discussed here indicated that American Muslims had begun to influence American politics and culture in the Civic Public Forum and the Conscientious Public Forum. Muslims have never lacked in commitment or zeal. Now they not only had gained a base to work from but also had developed the know-how to resist assimilation effectively and defend their identity from the social pressure to conform.

By the turn of the century, there was an upbeat mood in the community as it began to flex its political muscle. In reality, however, it was still in the infancy stage and needed considerable resources before Muslims would be able to match the powerful lobbies of such groups as Jewish and Cuban Americans. Small successes, such as the appointment of the first Muslim as a U.S. ambassador (to Fiji), the first Muslim federal judge, the first Muslim activist to the Congressional Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the first Muslim as deputy secretary of agriculture, all helped to fuel Muslim enthusiasm. These successes also gave credence to the claims of Muslim leaders that participation would bear fruit. In the presidential election of 2000, Muslims endorsed and voted as a bloc for the eventual winner, George W. Bush. For the first time, Muslims gained recognition as a political force of consequence.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Impact of the Tragedy of September 11, 2001**

It is difficult to articulate fully the impact of the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the American Muslim community. Suffice it to say that American Muslims were devastated. In fact, American Muslims were double victims of these attacks. On the one hand, hundreds of American Muslims died in the attack itself and during the rescue operation. On the other hand, American Muslims had to face drastic consequences as a result of America's response—the "war on terror."

Before September 11, American Islam was on the rise. The charisma of Islam was alluring to many. Islam was winning converts from all groups—whites, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, Hindus, Catholics—among both men and women who were drawn to Islam. Mosques were on the rise in every major city in North America, as well as Islamic schools and Islamic political action committees. American Muslim leaders, who had for a long

time been a frustrated and marginal group, suddenly found themselves in the company of presidents. Islam was the fastest-growing religion in America, in Europe, and in Australia, with 1.4 billion adherents worldwide, 6 million in the United States alone.

In the minds of American Muslims, their votes had made the difference in Florida, and Muslims were primarily responsible for placing George W. Bush, their choice, in the White House. Many American Muslims believed it was just a matter of time before the American Muslim population would outpace other groups in American society. Thus, they believed they would soon become a very powerful political force, enabling Islam to manifest itself in its truest form in America, and further empower America to become a great society. In November 2000, after the arrival of American Muslims as a political force, it was difficult to separate reality from fantasy.

However, September 11 abruptly changed all of this. Now, defending and preserving the existing achievements and assets, such as the nearly two thousand mosques, the various Islamic schools, charities, and access to media and government itself, became uphill battles. The two sources of Islam's growth, immigration and conversion, were now both arrested. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft's crusade, the domestic dimension of the "war on terror," targeted American Muslims and their institutions, and therefore put an effective stop to the flow of Muslims into the United States. Furthermore, the negative publicity regarding Muslims and Islam fomented very high levels of Islamophobia.

The media's strong association of Islam with extremist political violence sustained by Al Qaeda and the insurgency in Iraq did unimaginable harm to Islam's image in America. Not only has the community lost developmental momentum, but also most of its hard-earned goodwill has dissipated. Now Islam and America Muslims face hostility and prejudice as never before.

The most important aspect of the institutional development of American Muslims in the past thirty years was an implicit faith in American freedoms. Muslims never worried about their civil rights in America. So they invested in institutions that would either preserve the Islamic identity of the next generation such as mosques and Islamic schools, or advance the interests of Muslims overseas through the various charities and organizations dedicated to the Palestinian, Pakistani, Kashmiri, and other "back home" causes.

The attack on civil rights that has come in the form of various programs and legislation has caught the community off guard. The PATRIOT Act is a prime example. It has effectively nullified the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution directly, and the First and Ninth Amendments indirectly. American Muslims never expected, and were not prepared, to fight a major civil rights battle, and they have not yet begun to respond in earnest.

This shattering of the American Muslim dream and the crisis of civil rights has the community in total disarray. It is afraid, confused, and extremely

insecure about its future. Most American Muslims have very little use for the radicalism of militants that belong to Al Qaeda or the Taliban, which is primarily why they are in the United States and not in their countries of origin. They do not support terrorism or the extremism that is now threatening America. But they also cannot support the assault on their civil rights launched by the administration that they helped put into power. Increasingly, they are wary of the anti-Islam rhetoric coming from the Christian Right and its growing influence on the White House.

In a sense, American Muslims are caught between the war on terror and what they see as a war on Islam. They are not with bin Laden; they were never with him, but they are finding it increasingly hard to be with President Bush and his campaigns at home and abroad. Intuitively, American Muslims are seeking a third way, one that will save Islam from extremism and America from the decline in its civil rights standards. Unfortunately, however, American Muslim leaders are not yet able to articulate the third way.

### THE STRUGGLE WITHIN AMERICAN ISLAM AND REDISCOVERING AMERICA'S SACRED GROUND

As this chapter has shown, the transition of American Muslims from a fragile group focused on defending Muslim identity to an intrepid community determined to make an impact has been difficult. To understand the political dynamics and the various contentions, it is important to return to the two images of the West that Muslims currently entertain—America as a democracy and America as a colonial power. For the purpose of this discussion, the term “Muslim Isolationists” will be used to characterize those American Muslims who give greater significance to the imperialistic tendencies of the United States overseas in conceptualizing American identity. “Muslim Democrats” will be used to describe American Muslims who support American democracy. “Muslim Assimilators,” a third group discussed earlier, will refer to those American Muslims from the senior generation who chose assimilation, i.e., “normalization,” into mainstream American culture, rather than challenging what assimilation entailed.

The relationship between Muslim Democrats and Muslim Isolationists can best be described as a love-hate relationship. On Conscientious Public Forum issues concerning the defense of Islamic identity, such as establishing and maintaining Islamic centers and schools, these two groups cooperate fully, and the community appears to be seamless. But on political issues in the Civic Public Forum, these two groups break apart and do not see eye to eye on any issue. It is safe to say that, when preserving belief and rituals, these two groups have common ground, while they clearly entertain different conceptions of the role that Muslims, as Muslims, should play in American civic life. At the same time, Muslim Assimilators have succumbed to a

secularized approach to American politics and culture, eschewing Islamic identity as not particularly relevant to either the Civic or Conscientious Public Forums. It is in the clash of all of these differences in the wake of September 11 that American Muslims may help America rediscover America's Sacred Ground.

### **Muslim Isolationists: Identifying and Focusing on U.S. Excesses**

Muslim Isolationists hold that the United States is an evil empire dedicated to global domination. As a result, Muslim Isolationists focus their attention on events that support this view of America's imperialistic tendencies. In this decade alone, they maintain that the United States benefited from the Iran-Iraq War, then destroyed Iraq—the most advanced Arab nation—in the Gulf War, and made billions of dollars in profit by billing Muslims for that war. They have stressed how U.S.-led sanctions gradually squeezed the life out of Iraq, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslim children. They have watched in horror as the Israeli military has killed over three thousand Palestinians since September 2000 alone (nearly as many as the victims of September 11)<sup>27</sup> using a war machine that has benefited from U.S. aid—about \$4–6 billion every year, in excess of \$80 billion in total.<sup>28</sup> And now the Iraq War has raised even more alarm.

Muslim Isolationists have expressed alarm as they hear report after report in the media blaming the Palestinians for dying, and as they have witnessed the United States refusing to blame or admonish its ally Israel, while claiming to be the defender of human rights. Muslim Isolationists are incensed with the United States for what Muslim Isolationists view as its utter disregard for Muslim lives and Muslim society. This impression occurs in a context where, as this chapter has previously discussed, the American media demonizes Muslims, as well as Islam itself, at home and abroad.<sup>29</sup>

Most importantly, Muslim Isolationists report that they are not impressed with America's record on democracy or its values of freedom and equality. First, they point to the use of secret evidence on the basis of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, as well as the PATRIOT Act, used only against Muslims, which violates these values by not allowing defendants full and equal access to due process of law.<sup>30</sup> Second, they view American society as immoral, sexually decadent, greedy, and exploitative of the weak at home and abroad. Third, philosophically, Muslim Isolationists do not appreciate the values of freedom and tolerance because they fear that they will give people the opportunity to stray from what Muslim Isolationists think is true Islam. Fourth, theologically they disagree with democracy as a means of political governance because, for these Muslims, democracy is an institution that legitimizes the basest instincts of humanity and is an affront to divine laws. Muslim Isolationists describe the American political and legal

system as *kufir*, that is, a system against the laws of Allah and the Islamic *Shariah*, and therefore reject it totally.

The frustration and animosity that Muslim Isolationists feel as a consequence of American foreign policy excesses is translated into a rejection of all that is American and Western, including democracy and religious tolerance. The hostility toward America is also extended towards people of other faiths and makes Muslim Isolationists suspicious and paranoid even when they see the United States doing something that supports Muslims, like intervening in Bosnia and Kosovo to protect Muslims against a Christian state.

Muslim Isolationists argue that American Muslims must participate in an effort to revive the institution of *Khilafah* [Islamic Caliphate] that will magically take care of all Muslim problems. Some of the isolationists have organized themselves under the banner of *Hizb-ul-Tahreer*, a fringe political movement that advocates a narrow and harsh interpretation of Islam. In the last few years, the Muslim Isolationists have focused their attention on preventing the Muslim Democrats from engaging Muslims in the Civic Public Forum. However, their attempts to create intellectual and political ghettos have failed, as more and more Muslims are participating in the American political process.<sup>31</sup>

### **Muslim Democrats: Contributing to the Promise of America's Sacred Ground**

On the other hand, Muslim Democrats have transformed American Muslims from a marginal, inward-looking immigrant community to a reasonably well-organized and coordinated interest group. It is able to fight for Muslims' own rights and to assert their views at the national, as well as international, level. The key to the success of Muslim Democrats has been their understanding of the West and their liberal vision of Islam.

Muslim Democrats were quick to grasp the significance of the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom in the United States. In the beginning, religious freedom led them to organize institutions and movements solely focused on preserving the Islamic identity of American Muslims. This was a reaction to the perceived loss of Muslim identity that had taken place when Muslim Assimilators, who had come before them, had been culturally mainstreamed and therefore had lost all connection to Islam. But as more and more Muslims came to America, they answered the rallying call of Muslim Democrats. In so doing, they began to see a dream—a dream of a model Muslim community, practicing Islam as well as playing a role of moral leadership, guiding not only other Muslim communities, but also America herself toward a life of goodness and God consciousness. In this, they also answered the call of America's Sacred Ground to raise consciousness to God in order to discern what conscience directs and participate fully in American

public life from that perspective. That is, they saw themselves, in effect, as working to build the good society in America from the ground up.

Today, Muslim Democrats see in America not merely its imperialist impulse, but also the ideal of the respect for law and fellow human beings, which is embodied in the nonharming and legal consistency principles of the Civic Public Forum, as reflected in the Bill of Rights. Of course, Muslim Democrats are aware of the hypocrisy of the United States with regard to its own principles, when treating “mainstream” American citizens differently than Muslims. But this is not new to Muslim Democrats; they have witnessed Muslim nations employing disparate standards when dealing with others. Still, Muslim Democrats are frustrated with the United States when it does not fulfill its commitments to democracy and human rights in the Muslim world and violates its own fundamental principles.

Yet Muslim Democrats are also quick to acknowledge that Muslims are better treated in the United States than they are in Muslim countries. They have seen democracy, pluralism, and cultural and religious tolerance in action, and are fascinated by the ability to resolve political differences peacefully in the United States. They wish that Muslim societies, too, would be able to escape the political underdevelopment from which they currently suffer and rise to manifest Islamic virtues like those virtues that America’s Sacred Ground presents to the world. Most of all, they admire America for its commitment to consultation and desire to rule wisely through deliberation in the Civic and Conscientious Public Forums—an ideal to which Muslim Democrats aspire.

Muslim Democrats have had several successes in their struggle against Muslim Isolationists. First, they have been able to assume leadership positions quickly in nearly every avenue of American Muslim activism. Whether it is in the political arena of the Civic Public Forum or in religious affairs in the Conscientious Public Forum, Muslim Democrats hold sway. Second, they have been able to advance a vision for the American Muslim community, which makes American Muslims proud of themselves and galvanizes them to contribute their money and time in the pursuit of their vision of an ideal Muslim community that serves as a vanguard for other Americans. Their greatest achievement has been their liberal interpretation of Islam.

Through thousands of seminars; persuasive articles in monthly magazines and Islamic center newsletters; lectures at regional and annual conventions of ICNA, ISNA, AMC, CAIR, MSA, MYNA (Muslim Youth of North America), workshops, and leadership retreats in the last thirty years; and the Friday *Jumma* prayers across the nation, Muslim Democrats have campaigned to alter the way Muslims think about America and about Islam itself. They have fought for the legitimacy of their ideas against traditional scholars and battled against the siege mentality that has prevented Muslims from opening up and taking a fresh look at the world, as well as themselves, from the new perspective that their experience in America has given them.<sup>32</sup>

In the last three decades, Muslim Democrats have shifted the Muslim community's focus from battling Western values to building bridges with them. Muslim Democrats have rejuvenated the tradition of *ijtihad*, independent thinking amongst Muslims, and now openly talk about *fiqh al-akhliat*, that is, Islamic law, or the interpretation of the *Shariah* for places where Muslims are in the minority.<sup>33</sup> They have emphasized Islamic principles of justice, religious tolerance, and cultural pluralism.<sup>34</sup> They have Islamized Western values of freedom, human rights, and respect for tolerance by finding Islamic sources and precedence that justify them. Consider the following examples:

Islam's first amendment

*There is no compulsion in religion.* (Quran 2:256)

The Quranic sources for religious tolerance

*Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians,—any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness,—on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.* (Quran 5:69, 2:62)

The Quranic sources on pluralism

*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other; not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).* (Quran 49:13)

*And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences in your languages and colors; indeed in this are signs for people who know.* (Quran 30:22)

*To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.* (Quran 5:48)

The Quranic injunctions on moderation

*We have made you a nation of moderation* (Quran 2:143) . . . *so establish justice and moderation.* (Quran 55:9)

Quranic injunctions on democracy

*Conduct your affairs through mutual consultation.* (Quran 42:38)

The liberal understanding of Islam is also taking institutional form. A very good example of this development is the establishment of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) that explores common ground between Islamic governance and democratic governance that emphasizes rights and consent.



Thus, in the battle for American Islam, Muslim Democrats have enjoyed a resounding success. They have gradually marginalized Muslim Isolationists and rendered their arguments and positions illegitimate. However, there are still pockets of resistance that are confined largely to Internet-based discussion groups or Web sites. In the run-up to the election of 2000, the struggle between the two types of Muslim elite in America had intensified, but by that election the Muslim Democrats had prevailed. Muslim Democrats succeeded in mobilizing Muslims to register to vote, and they have voted since in such large numbers that the media and political parties now acknowledge them as a significant voting bloc. American Muslims have become not only eager to participate and make an impact in both the Civic and Conscientious Public Forums, they have made an impact already.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, Muslim Isolationists do not have a program or vision that attracts Muslims. Their call to establish *Khilafah* is without substance and lacks credibility because the vast majority of American Muslims have embraced the fundamental framework and values reflected in the American ideal—America's Sacred Ground—even if those ideals are not fulfilled completely in the United States today. For example, some of the Muslim Isolationists are disingenuous in their explanation about religious freedom in America and argue that all the positive things that are happening to Muslims in America are from Allah and that the American values of tolerance, freedom, and democracy do not contribute to such positive developments because they are just empty slogans. However, Muslim Isolationists do not apply the same determinist approach in explaining the misfortunes of Iraqis or the Palestinians. Muslim Isolationists contend that the bad things that are happening to them are not from Allah, but as a consequence of American and Israeli colonialism.<sup>36</sup>

There is an element of hypocrisy too in the manner in which Muslim Isolationists conceptualize their own role in America—a clear violation of the consistency principle of the Civic Public Forum. Muslim Isolationists maintain that, since the American system is not divinely ordained and is not geared towards realizing the Islamic *Shariah*, participation in that system constitutes (in their minds) violation of Allah's decree in the Quran (5:45) that Muslims shall not rule by anything other than what Allah has decreed. That is, Muslim Isolationists do not support a system that provides equal participation by all. Participation, they argue, means endorsement of the system; therefore they are opposed to Muslim participation in American politics—in violation of the American Sacred Ground duty to participate. However, they ignore the fact that in theory both the American Constitution and the Islamic state seek justice and the protection, as well as the moral and material well-being, of their citizens.

Other evidence of their hypocrisy is that, though Muslim Isolationists reject the entire American system, they have no qualms about participating in the American economy. They take jobs and pay taxes (to support the

system); some of them even start businesses in the system where, like the polity, the economy is also un-Islamic. When quizzed on this inconsistency and pressed further by suggestions that since they disapprove of the system they should migrate (which is an Islamic thing to do), Muslim Isolationists resort to accusing Muslim Democrats of being agents of the State Department and of being in league with the enemies of Islam.

*Tahreer*, the strict Muslim sect referenced earlier that is preferred by some Muslim Isolationists, has been shut down in most Muslim countries, most recently in Pakistan. The only places where Muslims are free to pursue *Tahreer* in the open and without any fear of state reprisal is in the West—the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Yet ironically, *Tahreer* condemns the United States and other countries of the West for their belief in democracy and freedom, while at the same time it is clearly evident that the very belief in religious liberty has helped those who adhere to *Tahreer* to escape political extinction.

With such a record, it is no surprise that Muslim Isolationists' activism is now limited to harassing activist Muslim Democrats and trying to place hurdles in their paths, such as spending Muslim Isolationists' resources attacking Muslim Democrats for "inventing" an American Islam in conjunction with American scholars like John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad that emphasizes the softer side of Islam.

## LESSONS FROM THE MUSLIM DEBATE

The debate between Muslim Democrats and the Muslim Isolationists has been engaged on the theme of the American Muslim identity and on the issue of whether and to what extent Muslims should engage with the American mainstream. As Muslim Democrats continue to prevail in that debate, there has been a newly emerging trend among Muslims in America. The community's decision to vote as a bloc in 2000 underscored the extent to which Muslim Democrats had succeeded in marketing the idea of democratic politics and pluralism to Muslims in America.

In political and social terms, Muslims had intuitively grasped the essence of America's formative Sacred Ground and had begun to cultivate their future in its fertile soil. By engaging American politics on its terms, Muslim Democrats underscored two important elements of the American polity. First, they began to view America as being a nation of nations, a community of communities, a polity of subpolities. Therefore, they came to understand that political debates and the formation of identity and interests would always take place through what Robert Putnam calls "two-level games."<sup>37</sup> Initially, each community experiences an internal debate about its self-identity, norms, and values, and also negotiates the specific interests it wants to pursue in the larger political arena—the Civic Public Forum. Once the community is able

to resolve who it is (identity) and what it wants (interests) in the context of its internal sphere—as, in McGraw's terms, a "community of conscience"—then it is ready, indeed empowered, to engage in the Civic Public Forum. Thus the prerequisite to engage American politics requires self-empowerment.

The second element is the transmission of the identity and interests to the Civic Public Forum. Thus, after Muslims debated what kind of Muslims they were and what they wanted in America, using both parameters of discourse and values deeply entrenched in Islamic ethos, they then had to assert in the Civic Public Forum that they were Americans like everyone else. They also had to assert that they had the same goal that everyone else should have: a better, more prosperous, more multicultural, and more open America that listens to all of its citizens.

Thus, American Muslims transitioned from an insular community focused on forming and preserving their identity in their new home to a community engaged in the Civic Public Forum. There they had to articulate their identity and values not in ethnocentric language but in legal and rational terms so that those who belonged to other identity spheres, such as American Jews, American Catholics, and African Americans, could understand them and accept them, so that they could participate in the continual pursuit of the realization of America's promise in America's Sacred Ground.

But the response of the Bush administration to the events of September 11 has resulted in new challenges as once again the discussion about the place of Muslims in America has been reopened. The Muslim Isolationists had receded into the background after the triumph of the Muslim Democrats in the debate over participation during the presidential elections in 2000. But now, with the systematic profiling of Muslims by the Department of Homeland Security, increased negative media attention, and Muslims feeling estranged and marginalized, Muslim Isolationists have returned with great vigor.

Muslim Isolationists have three powerful arguments, which have forced Muslim Democrats to reimagine Muslim identity in America and rearticulate Muslim goals. First, they claim that the war on terror is actually a war on Islam. Second, they contend that the United States is determined to use "moderate Muslims," a derogatory term in their lexicon, to distort Islam and undermine Muslim societies worldwide. Third, they maintain that the U.S. commitment to democracy and freedom is questionable. Indeed Muslim Isolationists question the very premises of the idea of democracy and pluralistic society as a cover for separating Muslims from Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Although the return of the Muslim Isolationists has once again reopened the old issues in the community, the shock of September 11 and its consequences also have galvanized the community in favor of the Muslim Democrat perspective, resulting in an extraordinary reaction. To taste liberty and see progress toward equal justice, and then see it severely curtailed, has made

the Muslim community even more aware of the importance of the “no harm” and “consistency” principles of the Civic Public Forum. It sees the need to participate from its unique perspective to help build American society as a good society in accordance with these principles. This realization has, in turn, resulted in the expansion of the number of individuals and organizations involved in Civic and Conscientious Public Forum debates to steer the United States toward its Sacred Ground.

Muslim participation in the Civic Public Forum has increased exponentially. Muslims are spending more money and time to influence the outcome of Civic Public Forum issues. Young Muslims have dropped out of medical schools and other science-related programs to join law schools to become civil rights lawyers. Furthermore, many individuals who had remained indifferent to the community's internal dynamics and its engagement with America have now joined the debate in earnest. The Muslim participation in the Public Forum has never been as animated, as diverse, and as rich as it is now.<sup>39</sup>

With the emergence of a more highly active progressive and liberal Muslim component, the internal Muslim dialogue also has taken new forms, touching upon issues ranging from the role of women in society to the role of Muslims as citizens in non-Muslim societies. The debates are theological, political, ideological, and also tactical.

These current debates are giving depth and substance to Muslim self-understanding and providing many dimensions on which they are engaging mainstream society. New think tanks have emerged that are geared towards domestic policy and fighting poverty,<sup>40</sup> and new groups have emerged that seek to reform Muslim understanding of Islam.<sup>41</sup> There are more intense discussions about U.S. policies at home and abroad; most importantly, American Muslims have transformed the focus of their identity—which hitherto was centered around their Muslimness—to *their Americanness*. Their fear that they may have become pariahs in their own nation is reshaping their self-conception and their notions of their host society.

Today, through their own experience of adversity, Muslims have come to understand that America is not a place to plant a new religious vision of a top-down state. Instead, the ideal of liberty and equal justice for which America stands, even when its government does not follow that ideal, is worth defending. For that reason, Muslims are now deeply concerned that America remains true to its foundations in America's Sacred Ground. Consequently, Muslims hope to dissuade the United States from its recent turn toward top-down governance under the influence of the emerging Christian political bloc.

## CONCLUSION

As a new generation of Muslims joins the community, the influence of Muslim Democrats is being consolidated. While the new generation is familiar with the problems of the Muslim world and its bill of complaints against the United States, life, as they know it, is in America, with all its pluralities and diversity—and with all of its own failures to realize its full promise. Muslims are strongly in the corner of the Muslim Democrats and have come to manifest and articulate the third way that they were seeking—the one that would save Islam from extremism and America from the decline in its civil rights standards. That third way is not to be Americans who are Muslims or Muslims who are born in America, but to be *American Muslims*.

American Muslims believe in Islam, they are democratic, and they respect human rights. They are economic and political liberals and social conservatives. They believe in freedom of religion and the right of all peoples, ethnic as well as religious, to be treated equally. They are aware of their economic and political privileges and grateful to Allah for it. They dream of making changes in Muslim attitudes, as well as Muslim conditions in other countries, so that their fellow Muslims can also learn the bliss of practicing Islam by choice and without any fear of the state or a dominant group.<sup>42</sup>

As Muslim Democrats seek to find a place for Islam and Muslims in America, they are reviving America's sacred traditions. Muslims have entered the Conscientious and Civic Public Forums as Muslims, where Muslims debate and articulate and even rethink their values, identity, and interests through internal democracy using the logos and ethos of Islam. Then they translate the will of the community into the logos and ethos of pluralist America and seek to realize that will on America's Sacred Ground.