



*The immigration experience of Muslims in America tracks those of its predecessors in most ways—including the normalization of even radical Islamic political currents.*

# THE AMERICANIZATION OF ISLAMISM

By MOHAMED NIMER

America prides itself on being a country of immigrants, and a country of immigrants it certainly is. Yet over the years pride has had to contend with resentment. In each wave of newcomers there have been some, and often many, who, once their families were established as American citizens, looked askance at more recent arrivals. From the anti-Catholic Know Nothings of the 1840s to the anti-Asian and anti-Semitic fulminations that led to the restrictive immigration laws of 1924 to the anti-Hispanic pulses of American opinion in recent years, many Americans have not inclined to lift their lamp beside

the golden door, in the words of Emma Lazarus's poem gracing the Statue of Liberty.

It is almost impossible to say anything that is both useful and accurate about the American immigration experience between this vast arch of pride and resentment. Over the years immigrants have come to America from every land and for many reasons, and the mixed receptions they have received invariably shaped the new arrivals' views of their adopted homeland. Although every immigrant community's experience has differed, American policy as a whole has been more welcoming at certain times and less welcoming at others.

From roughly 1924 to 1965, American politics enforced a niggardly attitude toward immigration to the United States. The broad liberalization of immigration protocols in 1965 reversed that attitude, making this year the best practical starting point for understanding

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Muslim immigration to America. Before 1965, the number of foreign-born Muslims in the United States was small. Since 1965, significant immigration from a range of Muslim-majority countries has created a new dynamic in the American immigration experience. In previous waves, what was happening in the countries of origin paled in significance to what was happening in America. But in the Muslim immigrants' case, the journey to America coincided with several factors that increased the pull of the old world compared to the demands of the Americanization process.

Many parts of the Muslim world experienced religious revivals following the end of colonialism. For the most part, these revivals were not anti-modern in character; indeed, they were spurred on by increased urbanization and literacy, the hallmarks of the modernization process in traditional societies. Meanwhile in America, the civil rights movement and ensuing counterculture inaugurated an era of hyphenated-American multiculturalism that has since planted deep roots in American intellectual and social life. Non-European immigrants enhanced the diversity of American society and appreciated its project of re-making them into new Americans. A new religious pluralism became part and parcel of this synergy, as well.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, America's superpower status projected American culture into the world as never before. As non-European immigrants were coming to America, America in various ways was coming to their countries of origin in the form of pop culture, trade, foreign aid and tourism. A new balance of perceptions and expectations arose like none before in American immigration history. These new circumstances made the process of becoming an American more complex both psychologically and socially. It became harder for immigrants to leave the old world behind, particularly now that Americans no longer insisted that they do so. Americans did continue to insist on political loyalty, to be sure, but what being an American had come to mean had grown so diffuse that it baffled many newcomers seeking the

tried-and-true Americanization formula that for decades had balanced old-world heritage with new-world identity.

Of course, the exact nature of that balance had never been constant. There have been cases of immigrant communities wanting to be in but not of America, as illustrated in the extreme by the Amish community. There have also been myriad examples of individuals and families, if not whole communities, that were eager to leave all old-world traces behind. Those fleeing religious or ethnic persecution tended to fall more readily into this latter extreme. Most groups, however, ended up somewhere in between: integrating, yet without sundering all attachment to foreign lands and causes.

In some cases these attachments turned into present-day ethnic and religious lobbies. Thus, following the American Civil War, Irish-American veterans staged an ill-fated raid into Canada in support of attempts to overthrow British rule in Ireland. A century later, the Irish still supported the rights of their kinfolk in their ancestral land despite having produced some of the most powerful political families in American history. America's Jews likewise have a complex history with foreign attachments because of their historical experience. Some of their leaders openly advocated assimilation. The Reform Movement in America, like its original in 19<sup>th</sup>-century

<sup>1</sup>See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (Harper, 2001).



AP Photo/Mike Fiala

**Two Muslim diners lunch at a McDonald's restaurant in Kuala Lumpur.**

Germany, actively encouraged the secularization of immigrant Jews. The advent of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel refocused questions of communal authority and loyalty and in general made sorting out the balancing formula more complex. One can tell similar tales—although each one is distinct in its particulars—about Americans of Greek, Armenian, Polish, Norwegian, Cuban and Christian Arab descent, among many others.

Newer immigrant groups are rapidly following in the footsteps of older ones, as is manifest in America's South Asian and Latin American communities. One Latin American leader recently argued that, just as American Jews have influenced U.S. Middle East policy, Latinos should help shape American policies in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>2</sup> But what of Muslim Americans? How do they fit into the extraordinarily complex and ever-changing saga of American immigration?

The Muslim experience in America is not unique as far as the pull of the old world goes, but it is very diverse. Muslims have come to the United States from many different countries and cultures, including those of the Arab world, Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Central Asia and more besides. Thus they differ markedly from Muslim immigrant populations in Europe, which tend to be more homogeneous in terms of countries of origin (for example, Turks in Germany or Algerians in France). Because of this, Muslims in America seem more inclined to adopt a pan-Islamic religious identity that is less attached to their cultures of origin—even more so as one generation gives way to the next. Muslim organizations in America also tend to form around more abstract religious identifications rather than the national cultural ones that bind Turks in Germany and North Africans in France.

There is, of course, a big difference between the experience of individual immigrants and immigrant families, on the one hand, and immigrant-based organizations, on the other. As has been the case with other immigrant

communities, groups claiming to speak for the American Muslim community, broadly defined as it is, do not necessarily represent exactly whom they claim to. As remains the case with other immigrant communities, the Muslim immigrant organizational environment in America is fractured, competitive and frequently unruly. This was the case before 9/11, but neither most Americans nor the U.S. government had reason to pay much attention. Things changed after that grim day in September 2001. Americans and the U.S. government scrutinize Muslim organizations far more

## Groups claiming to speak for the American Muslim community don't necessarily represent whom they claim to.

closely than before, and the image that Muslim organizations project into American society is now vastly more important to the majority of American Muslims who are not dues-paying members of any of these organizations. Perhaps "everything" didn't change with 9/11, as was so breathlessly proclaimed the morning after, but for Muslims in America, everything really did change.

Before 9/11, for example, some American Muslim groups received substantial funding from Muslim donors abroad and openly raised funds in America for charitable assistance overseas. While many groups have curtailed these activities, others have continued and even increased such exchanges. How typical Muslims feel about all this has changed as well. After 9/11, Muslims feared an outburst of what quickly came to be known as Islamophobia. All things considered, however, Islamophobia turned out to be marginal, at least before the Ground Zero mosque episode temporarily revived it. Nothing better testifies to Islamophobia's general weakness than the

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<sup>2</sup>Cited in Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 10.

steady influx of Muslim immigrants to the United States since 9/11.<sup>3</sup> Yet some Muslim organizations exaggerated its prevalence for recruitment and fundraising purposes, leading many individual Muslims to resent these organizations for downplaying the prevalence of tolerance toward Islam in America.

Clearly, like all immigrant groups, Muslim immigrant organizations act as entities with corporate conceptions of identity and interest. Some were founded in America, while others originated overseas. Among the latter, some have mission statements that incorporate the American reality, while others simply transferred their old identities, with an old psychology attached to it, to the new land. Immigrants therefore bring to America not only ideas and customs but also the power structures and longstanding debates from their countries of origin. Over time, the American political system and American society have managed to diminish and ultimately to break such connections as they have in the past, amalgamating their organizational energies into the American political mix. That is happening now with American Muslim organizations, with the 9/11 spotlight tending to accelerate both the process and the natural stresses and anxieties associated with it.

The structural development of the Muslim community in America clearly indicates that historical patterns of integration are ongoing. The framework of democratic pluralism is alive and well, and the varying political ambitions of Muslims are being made to fit within it. Even those who support Islamization have found a niche for their activism in the West by defusing points of friction between the demands of Western citizenship and Islamic ways of life, including attachment to the Muslim *ummah*. Muslims' self-avowed transnational identities are in practice being subordinated to national and global political dynamics. Even those who want to empower the *ummah* politically can find a place in American public life if they champion capacity-building for Muslims to



REUTERS/Mike Segar

**A construction worker's stickered helmet sits on a bench inside One World Trade Center tower as construction continues on the building and at the World Trade Center site, March 17, 2011.**

claim their rightful place in the international system, as opposed to championing Muslim opposition to the West.

We can see this process at work in the ways that immigrant Muslims are assimilating economically. Even corporations that have developed *sharia*-compliant mortgages and investment options are subject to the financial industry's regulations. Islamic lenders like LARIBA American Finance House and Guidance Financial calculate their profit margins while taking into consideration the going interest rate in local markets. Islamic securities like those offered by Amana Mutual Funds Trust are modeled after socially responsible mutual funds that exclude "sin stocks." This is not to suggest that the Islamic character of these groups and behaviors is merely symbolic, but that it is shaped by American business culture and functions within the parameters of the American free-market economy. The most recent evidence of this trend is reflected in the decision by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to approve the *sharia*-compliant University Islamic Financial, a subsidiary of University Bank in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Observant Muslims have thus found ways to interpret their religious law within the demands of American law and business practice.

<sup>3</sup>Mohamed Nimer, "Muslim People, Traditions and Movements in America" in Pew Research Center, *Mapping Global Muslim Population* (October 2009).

In the social sphere, too, the structure of Muslim life has blended into the larger mosaic of American associational experience. Mosques have already taken a volunteerist Protestant social character. Nearly 2,500 Muslim community groups in America run the gamut of faith and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Many organizations have more links to surrounding civic institutions than to other Islamic groups. There have been efforts to bring these institutions under one umbrella, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), but only a fraction of Muslim organizations opted in.

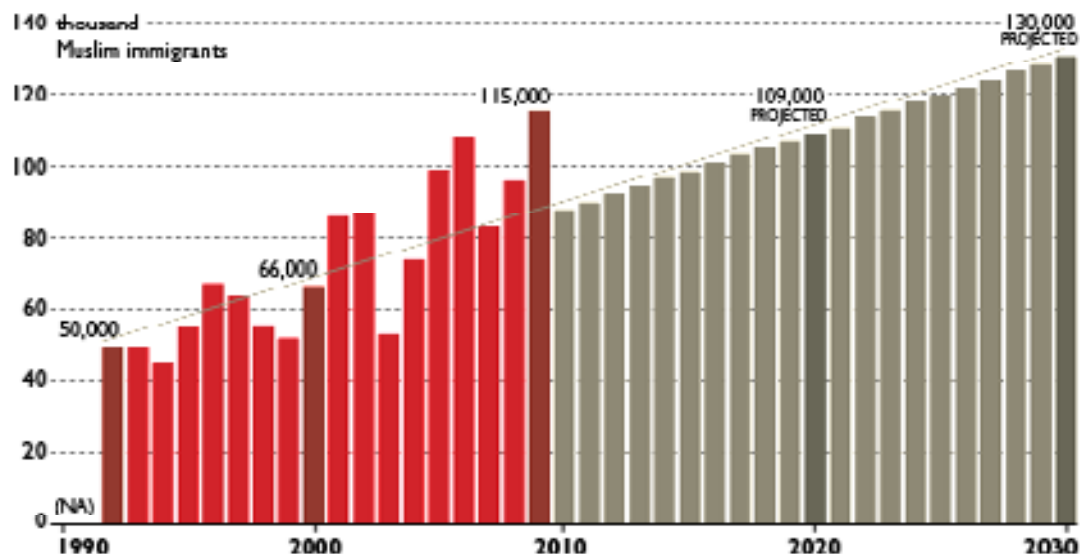
Wealthy American Muslims, too, have tended to avoid community activism and indigenous Muslim organizations have tended to eschew the national stage. This reticence of Muslims to organize as Muslims has had a somewhat perverse although unsurprising result: It has left Islamist immigrants as major representatives of the public face of Islam in America. They now lead most if not all national-scale Muslim groups in America, and many of them are connected to governments and groups overseas. If they resist assimilating politically and cannot or do not wish to self-isolate like the Amish, then the perception of an Islamic fifth column on American soil is inevitable. It is for that reason that public concern about the transplantation of Islamist politics, in which American Muslims

are beholden to priorities developed in power centers overseas, is not illegitimate. It must be addressed, so long as nothing is done to limit the rights of Muslims as American citizens to practice their faith and participate in the growing network of global communication.

Addressing public concern about Muslim organizational life in America requires American Muslims to squarely face several issues. Since Islamist integration in America is unlikely unless leaders of Islamist groups reverse their definitions of the center (which they often locate overseas, in Islamabad, Riyadh, Cairo or Qom) and periphery (which they think is here), we need to know if the agendas of Islamic immigrant groups are based on the American experience of their members or on foreign desiderata. We need to know if members of Islamist groups truly respect the obligations of American citizenship, or if they abide by them opportunistically merely to enjoy the rights and tactical advantages citizenship brings. We need to know whether or not groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have genuinely moderated their

<sup>4</sup>Mohamed Nimer, *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 14–6.

## Annual Muslim Immigration to the United States



Source: Pew Forum analysis of U.S. Department of Homeland Security data on new permanent residents, 1990–2009, and 2005 New Immigrant Survey data on proportion of Muslims from each country of origin. The trend line represents a combination of estimated Muslim migration from 1992–2009 and projected Muslim migration from 2010–2030. Figures are rounded to thousands.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • The Future of the Christian-Muslim Relationship, January 2011

views as a result of their members' experiences of life in America, or not. Reviewing the history of Islamist immigrants and organizations in America may shed light on all these issues.

## Culture Shock

Different circumstances brought Muslim immigrants to America, but all came willingly out of self-interest. Most Muslims came here not for a religious mission but to pursue work and study. Until the mid-1980s students made up the bulk of arrivals. On American campuses, members of the Arab Muslim Brotherhood movement met their South Asian counterparts who were affiliated with the *Jamaat-i-Islami* (Islamic Group—JI). Together they created the Muslim Student Association in a meeting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1963.

They began developing shared experiences on American soil. Both groups found non-Muslims on campus to be surprisingly welcoming. With all the anti-Western imperialist messages they had heard overseas, they had not expected Americans to help them find a place to pray, an office to meet or funding for their campus activities. The religious freedom they found added to their motivation to become more involved in community life off campus.

Oil wealth in the Arab world allowed the Gulf States to send many thousands of Arab students to America. Some formed the Organization of Arab Students, which was initially dominated by Arab nationalists. The defeat of the Arab states in the Six-Day War in 1967 presaged a rise in Islamist tendencies, which had been brutally suppressed in some countries. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood took over the Organization of Arab Students and in 1974 changed the organization's name to the Muslim Arab Youth Association (MAYA). This group became a vehicle for agitation by Arab Islamist students denied free expression in their countries of origin. They invited overseas Islamist leaders to speak to them. Some of these students eventually returned home; others lingered in the United States and gradually abandoned the foreign-oriented MAYA.

By the late 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership for the United States and Canada

acquired a modicum of autonomy from the international movement. (Previously, members reported to organizations back in their countries of origin.) Soon the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States began to split into different formations that bore little resemblance to the old structures. For example, in the early 1980s some Muslim Brotherhood leaders broke away to form the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), an international organization with twenty offices around the world that published works on Islamic intellectual reform. The group promoted the concept of *fiqh al-aqaliyat* (jurisprudence for Muslim minorities), which justified the independent interpretation of religion by Muslim minorities.

Meanwhile, former Muslim Student Association members who had moved from school to the workplace began engaging in community development. With petrodollar funds, they established a base of operations in Plainfield, Indiana, in 1983, where they offered training and facilitation services for local communities and mobilized nationally. Some of their founders were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or *Jamaat-i-Islami* movements prior to their arrival to the United States. Some of these leaders maintained strong ideological ties to these organizations. Consequently, they split from the ISNA and resumed their traditional activities. *Jamaat-i-Islami* members had formed the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) in the mid-1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood remained underground until the mid-1990s. The ISNA continued to attract support among more settled Muslims. Its annual conventions are now attended by more than 30,000 participants, and it has also engaged in substantial interfaith activities, especially since September 11.

The rise of groups splitting from the Muslim Brotherhood and forming national and international organizations caused the Muslim Brotherhood leadership to feel somewhat marginalized. By the late 1980s, it became aware of the fact that many of their comrades had acquired citizenship and settled in America permanently after receiving job offers or marrying Americans. But it was not until the Gulf War of 1990–91 that Muslim Brotherhood leaders began to reconsider their status as a group and to adopt a more visible presence in the community.

Many local leaders were featured prominently in the media because they opposed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Media networks began running series like “Islam in America” that profiled local mosque leaders during the conflict. Some of these leaders joined local Christian congregations and other civil society groups in antiwar activism following the U.S. military intervention to liberate Kuwait.

To protect and build on their gains, and to reconcile themselves to the reality of operating in America, Muslim Brotherhood leaders adopted a new policy of *alanyah* (public as opposed to secret organizing). This meant that MAYA, which hosted overseas speakers and catered to international Muslim students, started to look both out of place and unnecessary; it soon disbanded. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood took on the new name Muslim American Society, which opened an office in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1996. The Muslim American Society thus appeared to be distancing itself from its mother organization, the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB).

The Muslim American Society even reconsidered the conventional Brotherhood curricula taught in the group’s basic cell unit (the *usra*), which serves as a study group and the lowest level in the organizational structure. The writings of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna are now classified as the founding ideas that the Muslim American Society continues to cherish. Later writings by figures such as Sayyid Qutb, whose radical views developed during the harsh suppression measures against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have reportedly been abandoned.<sup>5</sup> This decision underscores the Brotherhood’s newfound pragmatism. Making concessions in education is a welcome step on the path to Americanization.

Still, the Muslim American Society has remained silent on key goals upheld by the IOMB, which include the establishment of an Islamic state and the liberation of “the Islamic nation” from non-Muslim occupation.<sup>6</sup> The Muslim American Society claims it has severed organizational links to the IOMB, but the group states that it aspires to unite Muslims without explaining whether this relates to the notion of the *ummah* (global community) beyond the cultural realm. A 2004 *Chicago Tribune* report

suggests that the Muslim American Society has 1,500 active members and another 10,000 prospective members.<sup>7</sup> While this energetic base has been influential in community centers, especially when adding the weight of other Islamist groups, it is a rather small gathering for a group that has been operating freely for nearly half a century.

Whether Islamists ultimately withstand the pressures of Americanization will depend on how they integrate the power structure they brought with them into the power dynamics in their new country. Early signs show that younger leaders, including first-generation American members, are interested in mainstream forms of civic activism. For example, the Muslim American Society’s Green Muslim Team and DC Green Muslims exhibit a form of public-interest advocacy acquired in America. Such activities remain unknown among Islamic movements in Muslim-majority lands.

## A Palestinian Exception?

The tug of the old world has remained particularly strong for Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood members who came to America with a strong attachment to the historical grievances of the Palestinian people. They established the Islamic Association of Palestine (IAP) in the early 1980s in hopes of raising awareness among other Muslims about their cause. The rise of Hamas after the 1987 Palestinian *intifada* intensified Palestinian identity among IAP members at a time when many were also becoming American citizens. IAP supporters established the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, which distributed American

<sup>5</sup>See MAS Freedom Foundation, “Muslim American Society Official Statement Concerning the Muslim Brotherhood as Approved by its Board of Trustees”, September 20, 2010.

<sup>6</sup>See *al-Nitham al-Am lil-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (General Bylaws for the Muslim Brotherhood), March 2, 2010.

<sup>7</sup>Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Sam Roe and Laurie Cohen, “A Rare Look at Secretive Brotherhood in America”, *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 2004.



**Musa Mohammed Abu Marzook**

Muslim charitable contributions mainly in Palestinian refugee camps. In 1989, Palestinian refugees Ahmed Yousef and Musa Mohammed Abu Marzook established another association, the United Association for Studies and Research, which conducted research on the Palestinian cause, Islamic movements and the West.

As a Muslim Brotherhood leader in America, Abu Marzook tried to bring the various Palestinian Islamic groups under his wing. He also began re-establishing his clandestine connections in the Occupied Territories, but the extent of his involvement overseas was not known until after 1992, when he participated in the establishment of the Hamas Political Bureau. Using the United Association for Studies and Research as a base, he shuttled between the United States and the Middle East until he returned to the region in 1994.<sup>8</sup>

The Abu Marzook affair coincided with the 1993 Oslo Accords, which shifted Palestinian power politics in several ways. Islamist Palestinians in America responded varyingly. Some

broke away from Hamas because of its inability to find a proper place in the unfolding post-Oslo realities. Others decided to lie low until circumstances changed and choices became clearer.

Some leaders of the second group, such as Nihad Awad and Omar Ahmad, left the IAP in order to join American Muslim converts in establishing the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 1994. Like their brethren in the Muslim American Society, they did not explain how their new line of activism was connected to their past, which left them in an awkward position after the United States designated Hamas as a terrorist organization in 1995. These leaders neither developed a Palestinian-American identity beyond Hamas nor defined a realistic vision for Islamic activism on Palestine. They also failed to resign themselves to exiting the conflict (although, for all practical purposes, it seems like this is what they did).

After September 11, the U.S. government placed the Holy Land Foundation on the list of terrorist organizations. An executive order froze its funds in 2001, and then its leaders were prosecuted. After their conviction in the second trial in 2009, the FBI severed its contacts with CAIR National, whose leaders had prior association with the Holy Land Foundation.

Yet this is not a simple matter of innocent

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<sup>8</sup>To make a long story shorter, U.S. officials arrested Abu Marzook at JFK Airport in 1993, but no charges were filed. Israel requested his extradition soon thereafter, and for two years Abu Marzook fought that request. Ultimately, the courts decided in favor of extradition, but then Israel suddenly dropped its request. Abu Marzook was then “shopped” to various Arab countries as U.S. officials sought to get him out of the United States. Jordan eventually agreed to receive him. After he left the country, Abu Marzook was listed by the U.S. Treasury Department as a Specially Designated Terrorist, meaning among other things that he cannot travel to the United States

and guilt. CAIR is much larger than its national office. The organization operates like a franchise, in that local offices are completely independent of the national center. Although the national office seems fixated on complaining about Islamophobia (as if that were the most important Muslim concern in America), local branches often produce progress in interfaith relations and religious accommodation. Regardless of what becomes of the national office, CAIR's anti-discrimination work, modeled after the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, is substantive. It has contributed to the Americanization of Muslim immigrants through a form of activism that also appeals to indigenous Muslims and U.S.-born children of immigrants. The phenomenal growth of CAIR from one office in 1994 to thirty in 2010 testifies to the seductive nature of the American principle of freedom of religion. But CAIR National remains highly dependent on foreign funds—one reason it justifiably remains in the crosshairs of critics and law enforcement agencies, and one reason that the Obama Administration's April 2011 decision not to prosecute CAIR leaders has been so controversial.

The internal tensions within CAIR over the question of Palestine were somewhat relieved by the establishment of American Muslims for Jerusalem in 1999. The group initially gained the endorsement of a wide range of American Muslim groups, from the ISNA to the African-American Ministry of W.D. Muhammad. Yet soon after its launch it began acting within the framework of diaspora Palestinian Islamist politics. It could not pull the Muslim Palestinian community into a coalition with secular Palestinian Americans, nor did it fit within the overall structure of the American Muslim community because it lost the initial focus on Jerusalem that appealed to other Muslims. By 2005 it was defunct. Three years after the demise of American Muslims for Jerusalem came American Muslims for Palestine, which provides information, training and networking with like-minded individuals and organizations to raise awareness of issues pertaining to Palestine and its cultural heritage.

On balance, then, Palestinian Islamic activists in America learned that they do not have to

hide their passion for Palestine here as they have had to do in Egypt or Kuwait or Syria. They also learned to align their public advocacy with the quest for peace and justice. Even the scarred Palestinians, with their deep attachment to historical grievances, could not resist Americanization. Conservative groups and writers who continue to accuse them of fealty to Hamas usually rely on pre-1995 evidence.<sup>9</sup> In the long term, the rise of American-born members to CAIR leadership positions will quell the controversy over the loyalties of CAIR's founders and their connection to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Contemporary Islamic activism in America is a work in progress. If the past experience of the Muslim Brotherhood is telling, efforts that do not mesh with American realities will not amount to much.

## Implications for Homeland Security

Foreign money coming to America is part and parcel of the American-dominated global order. America is the world's metropole, the epicenter of activism of many sorts. The question is whether the emerging Islamist power base in the United States is acting within the parameters of the American national interest and, of course, within the demands of U.S. law. This issue is particularly crucial for Palestinians after the Fort Hood shooting by a Palestinian-American Muslim, Major Nidal Hasan. While Hasan was a loner who found al-Qaeda through the Internet, a similar incident by another person of Palestinian descent may cause a profound change in how American authorities view Palestinian immigrants. The growing list of global jihadists, whether among converts or first-generation U.S. Muslim citizens, may drive America to err on the side of caution.

Unfortunately, a generalized fear is likely to lead many Americans to lump all Islamic

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<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Steven Merley, *The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States* (Hudson Institute, 2009); and Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia Press, 2010)

activists under the label of “radical Islam.” Muslims who react with indignation, while paying only lip service to the need to distinguish themselves from extremists, help neither themselves nor their communities in this regard. There is no point in telling people who are afraid that their fear is somehow illegitimate or misplaced—particularly when by all rights it isn’t.

The main reason for Islamist timidity in the face of terror lies in the fact that many activists, in the United States and elsewhere, haven’t figured out their own place in world affairs. The behavior of Islamists in America seems evasive because their statements and activities do not project a clear vision or define objectives that make sense within the experience of most Americans. Islamists demand rights and constitutional protections, but they do not speak the language of American politics or practice its normal forms of interaction.

Immigrant Islamists thus blamed the Bush Administration for political crackdowns on Muslim organizations after September 11, yet the behavior of U.S. security agencies has hardly changed under the Obama Administration. Muslim community activists have responded by expressing a feeling that Obama has betrayed them by not delivering the change he promised. The impasse in their relationship with the U.S. government may in turn spark another round of crackdowns, especially if there are more incidents of homegrown Muslim political violence. The danger for the Obama Administration is this: In the absence of an alternative national Muslim leadership, shutting down more Islamic organizations or prosecuting more Islamic activists may just reinforce an already widespread impression within that community that the U.S. government is pursuing a witch-hunt. Prosecution may send a few more individuals to jail, but it may also increase the gap between the government and the Muslim immigrant community as a whole, well beyond the Islamist organizational rank and file.

An alternative way to deal with obstinate but non-violent Islamist leaders is to nudge them into thinking that a strategic decision to integrate into American society is a *dharura* (a law of necessity, in Islamic jurisprudence). An offer of general amnesty for past non-violent yet technically prosecutable activities in exchange

for telling the whole truth to American law enforcement officials could serve to divide Islamist ranks. Junior leaders otherwise fearful of talking to Federal agents may come forward if offered a fresh start. This can take different forms and carry restrictions, but it would have a good chance of revealing the long-term intentions of Islamists in America. The prospect of deep division within their ranks may persuade top leaders to consider reform as urgent.

The U.S. government should try to push non-violent Islamist Americans in the right direction as part of its national security strategy. There is no better antidote to the rising specter of violent extremism among young Muslims in America than having top Islamic leaders feel secure about becoming American and publicly proclaim in mosques that Muslim settlement in America is a new chapter in a shared history rather than a transient stage in global Muslim-Christian conflict. Those who have decided that America is home will most likely come forward. Conversely, those who have not developed this mindset will feel isolated. They may ultimately change their minds, or they may leave. Either choice would mark an improvement for them and for America.

To clear away past grievances is to disrupt the mutually reinforcing atmosphere of fear and suspicion between Islamist groups and U.S. law enforcement. This will also increase the chances of recruiting Muslims in good standing for special service in government as translators, intelligence analysts and other specialized jobs. Of course, vigilance will be required, but the creation of a new set of dynamics at the macro-level stands the best chance of success.

After all, it’s one thing for Muslim organizations and activism to stop causing headaches for U.S. security agencies; it’s quite another to have them as allies in the fight against political violence and extremism. This should be the long-term policy aim, and it is not beyond reach. The Americanization of political Islam is both possible and desirable. Certainly there is ample historical precedent for it, from sub-Saharan Africa all the way to Indonesia. Muslims have often freely accepted the political and cultural framework of a non-Muslim society. Surely they can do so again in the freest and most tolerant society on earth. 🌍