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Judging by talk radio chatter, Americans these days are more alarmed by Mexican day laborers hanging out on street corners than by the prospect that Islamist terrorists will blow up the Brooklyn Bridge. Yet large numbers of Americans are anxious and do feel threatened by Muslims around the globe, including the roughly three million Muslims living today in the United States. But is there any good reason for Americans to fear the Muslim communities in their midst? That is the focus of the four books reviewed here. Each in its own way illustrates the enormous gaps in knowledge about American Muslims that we as a nation have barely begun to address. For its insights or what it unwittingly reveals about Muslim attitudes, each also adds to our understanding.

Geneive Abdo worked for more than a decade as a foreign correspondent in Egypt and Iran. Undoubtedly, that experience, as well as growing up in San Antonio, Texas, in a Maronite Catholic Lebanese immigrant family, help explain the freshness of her approach. In Mecca and Main Street, Abdo has no axes to grind, and her perspective is remarkably uncluttered by the blinders and preoccupations that many journalists bring to this topic. Yet her very openness leaves her without a steady compass by which to navigate the crosscurrents of the contemporary Muslim American scene.

Abdo does avoid the bromides of naive liberals, who typically insist on treating Muslims as not so different from earlier immigrants to America. She is convinced that there are looming challenges among Muslim Americans, but she is not very clear as to what those challenges are. She is also careful to emphasize that there is “no evidence of militancy” among Muslims here, by which she presumably means no signs of terrorist activity. Still, she highlights an emergent “rejectionist movement” among young Muslim Americans who, in her words, “are trying to create their own world where they can find comfort in their faith and their communities” and “are placing their Islamic identity first.” Their religious orientation, she relates, is much more intellectual than the innocent and unreflective faith of their parents. They are “not interested in blindly following the teachings of an imam simply because he is a religious figure.” At the same time, she notes, these young people “are often more observant of Islamic practice than their parents. Many young women are wearing headscarves, even if their mothers didn’t cover.”

Abdo argues that these developments “largely defy decades of history in a nation of immigrants, and they challenge the American ideal of diverse cultures linked by a shared attachment to common goals and dreams.” But are these trends, if true, really so different from those of other immigrant groups—Greeks, Jews, Irish, Italian and many others—whose children or grand-children self-consciously reclaimed some aspect of their heritage to define their particular American identity? If what she identifies among Muslims here today is fundamentally different from other groups, Abdo does not make the case very cogently.

An admittedly dramatic episode involving changes at a prominent mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, does suggest a degree of difference. The Dix mosque was founded in an old pool hall in 1937, when it was used mostly by Lebanese-Syrian immigrants. There were also a few Yemenis, whose numbers remained low until the permissive changes in U.S. immigration law in 1965. “Soon, the Yemenis controlled Dix
completely, and life was turned upside down”, writes Abdo. Eventually, the Lebanese retreated and established a new mosque.

The Yemeni men of the Dix mosque typically dress in traditional garb, white gallabiyas; their wives and daughters in jilbabs, ankle-length dresses. They are not well educated and are economically marginal. The mosque’s all-male, mostly immigrant board has been very traditional and over the years has forced out several less conservative imams. As described by Abdo, the Dix mosque and those who attend it are hardly typical of their more numerous educated and affluent Muslim American brothers and sisters. Abdo nevertheless points to this group of Yemenis as somehow representative of the broader phenomenon of Muslims turning inward in America, especially since 9/11. This example, however, highlights little more than the traditionalist views of this one group of Muslim immigrants from a particularly underdeveloped society.

Abdo herself devotes a good deal of attention to how many young Muslims born or raised here gravitate away from traditionalism, even toward Islamic rock and rap. If her careful chronicling of these Muslim youth currents suggests anything, it suggests how absorptive American society is and how adaptive Islamic faith and values can be. In the same vein, Abdo highlights how Muslim women in America are attaining greater visibility and authority in mosques and other settings. The prime example she features is Ingrid Mattson, the recently elected president of the Islamic Society of North America, the largest and most traditionalist national Muslim organization. Mattson, by the way, is a Canadian who was raised as a Catholic, converted to Islam, eventually got a doctorate from the University of Chicago, and now teaches at the Hartford Seminary. Unfortunately, Abdo never adequately helps the reader make sense of these disparate images. As a result, Mecca and Main Street ends up reflecting the anxiety and confusion of Americans about the Muslims in their midst rather than helping clarify or resolve them.

A more successful effort to address the complexity of Muslim America is American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion by former Wall Street Journal reporter Paul Barrett. To an even greater degree than Abdo, Barrett lays out the many facets of Islam in America, including the troubling undercurrents of anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, as well as the possibilities for change and adaptation. More to the point, he does this in such a way that the reader gets a clear picture of a diverse and complicated phenomenon without being overwhelmed by detail. Without a doubt, this is the most incisive and balanced analysis of Muslims in America yet written.

Barrett presents chapter-length vignettes of seven different individuals: Osama Siblani, the Lebanese-born publisher of the Arab American News, based in Dearborn; Khaled Abou El Fadl, an outspoken UCLA law professor educated at Yale but raised by Egyptian parents in Kuwait; Siraj Wahhaj, a Brooklyn-born African-Americ-
mentalist. He points, for example, to Wahhaj’s friendly relations with public officials and black Christians, emphasizing that a “full-fledged Wahhabi would refrain from such ties.” As Barrett observes of Wahhaj, “Some of his sermons, opinions, and past personal affiliations betray an affinity for fundamentalism. But the roots of his anger at American society trace more directly to the condition of American blacks than to grievances grounded in the Middle East.”

Similarly, Barrett traces how Wahhaj’s disturbing ties to the notorious “blind sheikh”, Omar Abdel-Rahman, mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, led to his being named an unindicted co-conspirator by Federal authorities. But he also points out that on one occasion Wahhaj actually assisted Federal prosecutors by testifying in the trial of four Muslim extremists with ties to al-Qaeda, individuals who were then convicted for their involvement in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Barrett’s portrait of Lebanese-American publisher Osama Siblani is similarly nuanced. Siblani is a Shi’a who, even after 9/11, has been heard loudly supporting Hizballah. As he declared to the *Detroit News*, “How could you not support a group that has driven an occupier from your country?” Barrett goes on to point out how this prominent Muslim American, who supported George W. Bush in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004, once said to him: “I support the resistance to an occupation, not only in Lebanon, but anywhere in the world. . . . In fact I support right now the Iraqi resistance against American forces there.”

Barrett recounts the scene at an October 2004 banquet celebrating Siblani’s political action committee’s endorsement of John Kerry. With members of Congress and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm present, Siblani declared, “George Bush betrayed us! Take our country back from those Taliban in Washington!” On another occasion Siblani tells Barrett a joke about a fictitious meeting with Bush in which the publisher says, “What’s the difference between you and Osama bin Laden?

Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America
impressive prosecutorial record against Islamist terrorists since 9/11.

At the end of American Islam, Barrett presents an overview of the challenges facing Muslims in America, arguing persuasively that “moderate Muslims must speak up and act forcefully to protect America—and American Islam—from a tiny minority capable of doing harm.” But he also argues that non-Muslims need to acknowledge the pressure that Muslims here have been under since 9/11. As he puts it, “Publicly acknowledging this psychic burden and showing some empathy would improve relationships with Muslims of all stripes and begin to counter accusations that Americans seek to persecute followers of Islam.”

In this regard, Barrett praises President Bush for having made “a decent effort to distinguish Islam and Muslims generally from the targets of the antiterrorism campaign.” But he also urges Bush and other national figures to “speak out against Islam-hating Christian fundamentalists” such as Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham. Their silence in this regard, I can report from my own discussions around the country, has had a powerfully negative impact on Muslim Americans. Finally, Barrett calls for the Justice Department to upgrade its performance in the prosecution of terrorists, and for an end to abusive and discriminatory treatment of Muslim inmates and detainees. Hard to argue with that.

The conflicting and confusing images of Muslims that Barrett sorts through so carefully are exemplified by Muslims in the United States, a book by two immigrant Muslim social scientists, Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Kassim Kone, both affiliated with the State University of New York at Cortland. Theirs is a flawed but frequently insightful and invariably honest study that is perhaps most useful as a document illustrating the multifarious views among Muslims in America today.

Non-Muslim Americans will be gratified to hear Ba-Yunus and Kone echo what I have heard many Muslim immigrants recount about the United States:

Why do Muslims want to migrate to the West, especially to the United States? Perhaps their motivation to migrate is the same as that of other people from the developing countries—plenty of good jobs, higher wages, higher standard of living, quality of life including a democratic system of government, equality before the law and freedom of speech, which are rare commodities in the Third World in general and in the Muslim World in particular.

Like most Muslims I have encountered, the authors emphasize America’s tradition of religious liberty: “Like the followers of all other faiths in this secular society, Muslims have been able to practice their faith more freely than it is possible to do so in many Muslim countries.”

Moreover, Without ignoring anti-Muslim incidents before and after 9/11, Ba-Yunus and Kone nevertheless offer this rather startling observation—startling, that is, coming from the halls of contemporary academia:

Americans are generally nice people. To say “thank you” or “sorry” to someone, to hold the door for someone, for instance, are American cultural traits. . . . Most Americans, irrespective of race or religion, are neighborly, friendly, and charitable. Despite a great deal of opposition to immigration, most ordinary Americans go out of their way to accommodate new arrivals in their midst. Newcomers are often invited to churches, into homes, and are befriended.

Such observations come with some real insights about Muslim life in America. For example, contrary to popular understanding, Ba-Yunus and Kone point out that the typical imam is typically just an employee of the mosque board and therefore typically in a precarious position. By contrast, African-American imams—not unlike many black Protestant preachers—are often powerful figures.

Ba-Yunus and Kone also present some interesting findings about Muslim women in the United States, highlighting for example the high divorce rate, especially among less-educated, foreign-born Muslim women in their forties and fifties. Similarly helpful is the authors’ emphasis on the many sources of disunity among Muslims here, including the highly contentious matter of hilal, which refers literally to the new
or crescent moon. Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, the sighting of the new moon is critical to the timing of key religious observances. But how this is to be done—where in the sky, at what time of day, with the naked eye or scientific instruments or with astronomical calculations—is a surprisingly divisive issue among American Muslims, hailing from varied climates and traditions across the globe.

Despite its virtues, *Muslims in the United States* has some real problems. There are disturbing factual errors. Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City, not in New Jersey. Immigration restriction began with an act of Congress in 1921, not 1920. The liberal immigration policy legislated in 1965 was not “hastily withdrawn in 1970 under the Nixon administration.” There are other such mistakes, too numerous to list.

Much more troubling is Ba-Yunus’ and Kone’s treatment of the Palestinian issue. To their credit, in their straightforward manner they put the matter front and center, emphasizing its critical importance to Muslims in the United States and indeed around the globe. But Ba-Yunus and Kone themselves demonstrate the evasiveness and moral obtuseness about this topic that Barrett highlights. At one point, they bizarrely equate Saddam Hussein with the Israelis:

Saddam Hussein was a bad man, we were told, because, among other things, he broke at least a dozen U.N. resolutions. How many U.N. resolutions did Israel choose to ignore during the same period that the media did not care to discuss?

They go on to defend Hamas as “a Palestinian organization that has nothing to do with Osama Bin Laden. It is never known to have hurt any Americans and is never known to have engaged in any anti-American policies.” Acknowledging Hamas’ reliance on suicide bombers inside Israel, Ba-Yunus and Kone highlight the organization’s social service programs and conclude: “It is beyond most Arab and Muslim Americans as to what is wrong in helping a people who never tried to harm the United States.” However questionable these various claims may be, on this last point about the sympathies of Arab and Muslim Americans, Ba-Yunus and Kone are surely, albeit disturbingly, correct.

Most troubling, however, is how these two otherwise discerning Muslims readily exculpate terrorists of moral responsibility for their actions:

Today the United States is only one of the few unconditional supporters of the state of Israel despite all the atrocities that it continues to commit against rock-throwing Palestinians who are now forced to become suicide bombers—terrorists in the jargon of the American government and the media. [emphasis added]

Would any of this surprise Steven Emerson, the indefatigable investigative journalist who has spent more than a decade documenting the activities of Islamist terrorists and their supporters in the United States? His latest book, *Jihad Incorporated: A Guide to Militant Islam in the U.S.*, makes the case that militant Islam is a pervasive force in contemporary America. Emerson is an anti-jihadist muckraker who piles fact on fact on fact to produce this 535-page encyclopedic tome with an attitude. Rather artlessly, by accretion if nothing else, Emerson earns the attention of his readers, even skeptics to the possibility that there is cause for concern—that there are Islamist terrorist organizations operating in the United States either relying on our liberties and generosity to raise money for criminal activities overseas, or for operations against us here.

Emerson’s most impressive brief is against former University of South Florida engineering professor Sami al-Arian, whom Federal authorities charged with raising funds for the terrorist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Al-Arian was eventually acquitted of several of the counts against him. Yet on the basis of the remaining deadlocked charges, he did accept a plea agreement providing for his deportation in exchange for acknowledging his involvement with this terrorist organization—a relationship he had strenuously denied for more than a decade.

So no, Emerson would not be surprised by the sympathy expressed for Palestinian terrorists by Ba-Yunus and Kone. Indeed, he claims to have evidence of active support for such activities across a variety of Muslim-American
individuals and organizations. For example, he identifies the aforementioned Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), an umbrella organization of over 300 mosques whose annual meeting brings together at least 30,000 Muslims, as a “radical Islamist organization.” Emerson similarly identifies another national Muslim organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). Indeed, he accuses MPAC’s guiding spirit, Maher Hathout, with using “Wahhabi tactics” to redefine moderate, mainstream Islam. Emerson makes similar charges against the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which is now the largest Muslim-American advocacy group.

Yet the organizations Emerson paints with the same radical Islamist brush differ in important ways. CAIR is most obviously rooted in radical Islamism. Its key leaders are of Palestinian origin and come out of an organization called the Islamic Association of Palestine (IAP), with clear ties to Hamas. CAIR is fundamentalist in its interpretation of Islam, but it is moderating under the influence of American-born Muslims. The organization also receives funding from the Saudis and other Gulf sources. Yet, as Emerson rightly emphasizes, such critical details are routinely ignored by academics and journalists, who often refer to CAIR as simply a Muslim civil rights organization.

ISNA also has ties to the Saudis—not surprising, since the organization emerged out of the Muslim Student Association (MSA). The Saudi government supported the MSA in the 1960s as a means to reinforce Muslim identity and combat socialist tendencies among Muslim students studying in the United States. Today, those ties are attenuated. With Mattson, its newly elected female president, ISNA’s religious orientation is hardly fundamentalist. I have heard its leadership publicly denounce the intolerance and bigotry of Saudi religious authorities. No such developments get any attention from Emerson.

Finally, MPAC legitimately claims to be the most progressive Muslim-American organization. It is certainly the most self-consciously oriented toward assimilation into the American mainstream. The organization’s former spokesperson was an American-born Muslim woman who did not wear the hijab, or headscarf. Strongest in Southern California, MPAC maintains a network of full-time Muslim elementary schools there that include in their curriculum art and music, unlike more traditional Muslim schools. As a matter of explicit policy, MPAC has always rejected funding from foreign sources. None of this fits with the Wahhabist label Emerson pastes onto it.

To be sure, these differences fade quickly when it comes to controversies over individuals like Sami al-Arian, who has been supported by both CAIR and MPAC. But is this because they share his radical Islamist ideology? Or because they sympathize with the Palestinian cause? Or because, as Muslims in America, they feel a bond with another Muslim who has felt the prosecutorial force of the Federal government—

Emerson is an anti-jihadist muckracker who piles fact on fact on fact.

at a time when others among them have also felt that force, not always appropriately?

These are difficult questions, to which insufficient attention has been paid. Yet Emerson has a ready-made response: “These groups have acted as the self-appointed spokespersons of ‘mainstream’ Islam and were established in the United States with a very specific political Islamist agenda that is not mainstream.” In other words, these organizations are misrepresenting and distorting the views and interests of Muslim Americans. And if we delegitimize their leaders, then the more benign mainstream will emerge.

If this scenario sounds familiar, it is. It parallels what Americans were told before we invaded Iraq: Just get rid of Saddam and his Ba’athi thugs and the natural democratic moderation of the Iraqi people will emerge. Yet as the works of Barrett and Bayunus and Kone suggest, the Muslim mainstream in America, while hardly Ba’athi, is more sympathetic to defenders of the Palestinians—including Islamist terrorists—than we typically acknowledge. As dire as Emerson’s
scenario of hundreds of terrorists operating in the shadows is, the more mundane reality of some three million American Muslims is in some respects even more troubling—and certainly more complicated.

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