

The Muslim-American Muddle

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A DECADE AFTER 9/11, America has reached a political and intellectual stalemate regarding the Muslims in its midst. Many Americans continue to fear their Muslim neighbors and fellow citizens, if not as potential terrorists then as terrorist sympathizers — or, more generally, as the bearers of an alien culture shared by America's enemies.

Stoking these fears are a handful of zealous investigative journalists and bloggers who recycle a body of facts about the Islamist origins of most Muslim leaders and of virtually all major American Muslim organizations. Largely taken from the federal government's successful prosecution of the Holy Land Foundation, a Hamas front group, this evidence is incontrovertible — yet its implications are far from clear. As critics repeat and re-examine them, the facts take on a frozen-in-time quality, like artifacts of political archeology never put into any wider context. The critics fail to acknowledge that individuals who once espoused Islamist views do not necessarily remain committed to them over time. People do mature beyond youthful folly and rage, and America causes immigrants to change.

On the other hand, our political, media, and intellectual elites routinely dismiss these findings as irrelevant ancient history. This, too, is a mistake, both substantively and politically: Though these Muslim leaders and organizations do not represent all (or even most) Muslim Americans, they do dominate the relevant political space. Moreover, their Islamist ideology has had, and continues to have, a formative influence on how Muslims think of their place in America and of America's relationship to the Islamic world. Elite opinion also systematically denies or ignores the fact that Islam is a dynamic, even aggressively

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proselytizing religion. This is *not* to suggest that Muslim-American leaders are terrorists or terrorist sympathizers; nor is it to criticize how they interpret the call to advance Islam. Like many Christians, many Muslims regard their own exemplary actions as the best way to spread their faith. Nevertheless, Muslim leaders readily acknowledge that not so long ago they dreamt of, as some have put it, “the crescent flag one day flying over the White House.” For most leaders, perhaps for all, this fantasy has long since collided with reality. Yet its influence lingers.

The failure of our elites to acknowledge such evidence has fueled the anxieties of Americans. But if elites have been too cavalier about the challenges Islam poses to America, ordinary citizens and their tribunes have been too alarmist, depicting scenarios in which Muslim leaders are not only devious (which many have been) but also omniscient—as if they were exempt from the difficult tradeoffs that all political actors inevitably face. In fact, Muslim leaders have typically been recent arrivals largely ignorant of America’s huge, dynamic society and its complicated politics. Like other immigrants forced to learn and adapt, they have made many mistakes.

Remarkably absent from both the elite and popular story lines is an appreciation of how America has changed Muslims. To be sure, not all of these changes have been benign. But we must address them all the same. Such a reckoning would not only abate our credulity about the competence of Islamists, but would also help to restore our faith in the resilience of American values and institutions—a faith that has been strikingly absent among American Islam’s most strident critics. Most important, it would facilitate our addressing the real challenges posed to America by Islam.

Among these challenges, the most salient is the loyalty of Muslim Americans. This is not to suggest that Muslims are actively disloyal. Yet their loyalty to this nation is muddled. This confusion is due in part to the influence of cosmopolitan values and corresponding policies (such as dual citizenship), and partly to contemporary America’s apparent unwillingness to place serious demands on its citizens. Beyond these factors, however, the Muslim-American confusion over loyalty also reflects the lingering influence of Islamist leaders, institutions, and ideology. This more subtle challenge is hardly unprecedented in our history as a nation of immigrants—but in our debates about America’s Muslims, it has been overlooked both by complacent elites and by alarmist populists.

WHO ARE AMERICA'S MUSLIMS?

In assessing America's Muslim community, even basic facts can be hard to come by. For example, after years of interviews and field research, I have met only one Muslim who did not confidently assert that there are 6 to 10 million of his brothers and sisters in the United States, and that their number is growing all the time. This second point is correct, but the first certainly is not. The U.S. census is prohibited from collecting information about religion, so there are no precise data about the size of the Muslim community. The most authoritative, however, are those from the Pew Research Center, which estimates that there are about 2.75 million Muslims in the United States. Of those age 18 or older, more than 60% are foreign-born. Other reliable estimates tend to hover in the same range.

Muslims therefore represent less than 1% of the U.S. population, a much smaller proportion than in the nations of Western Europe. In further contrast with European Muslims, Muslims in the United States tend to attain education and income levels roughly comparable to those of the broader population. For instance, according to Pew, the share of Muslims who have graduated from college is about the same as the portion of all American adults who have done so: 26% of Muslims, compared to 28% of the population at large. Similarly, American Muslims report household incomes of \$100,000 or more at about the same rate as Americans generally: 14% of Muslims, compared to 16% of all U.S. adults. These figures undoubtedly reflect the fact that Muslims have typically come to the United States in pursuit of higher education. Yet as pockets of poverty among groups like Somalis and Yemenis suggest, this has not always been the case: Pew also finds that, in 2011, a higher percentage of Muslims than Americans generally report household earnings under \$30,000 (45% of Muslims, compared to 36% of all Americans).

In light of questions about Muslim loyalty to the United States, it is also worth pointing out that Pew reports high naturalization rates among Muslims. Seventy percent of foreign-born Muslims here are American citizens. Among those who arrived before 1980, virtually all are now citizens; among those who arrived during the 1980s, about 95% are; and of those who arrived in the 1990s, 80% are citizens.

Frequently remarked on, but little appreciated, is the enormous diversity of this small (but growing) population. America is home to the most varied agglomeration of Muslims on the planet. The

overwhelming majority are Sunnis, but Shias represent about a tenth. Among the Sunnis, there are also significant differences stemming from allegiances to different interpretive legal traditions, or *madhhabs*. For instance, the leaders of the largest Muslim-American organization, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), cope every year with disputes among their primarily Sunni membership over how best to determine by moon-sighting the start of Ramadan. And because Islam is an “orthopractic” religion — concerned more with appropriate behavior than with doctrine — similar disputes abound.

There are also racial and ethnic differences. The most visible and important is that between immigrant-origin and African-American Muslims. This refers not to Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam — a small, racist cult that never had much to do with Islam — but to African-Americans either raised in or converted to orthodox Islam, typically Sunnis but also a few Shias. Overall, according to Pew, these represent 13% of all Muslims in America. (If one includes the substantial number of Muslim immigrants from Africa, then about 23% of Muslims here are racially black.)

African-American Muslims typically gather in their own mosques and have their own distinctive styles of worship. Generally unfamiliar with Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, they often feel at a disadvantage relative to their immigrant-origin brothers and sisters. Such feelings are exacerbated by glaring disparities in income, education, and occupational status. And because African-Americans are typically drawn to Islam’s emphasis on equality among believers, they are often disappointed when practice falls short of the ideal. Disappointment can sometimes turn to outrage; both sides, however, make continual efforts to overcome this divide, driven in part by political expediency.

Less volatile are ethnic, national-origin, and linguistic differences. The Pew Research Center identifies at least 77 source countries for Muslims residing in the United States. The most salient distinction is between Arabic speakers from the Middle East and Urdu, Pashto, and Hindi speakers from South Asia. In most metropolitan areas, one finds “Arab mosques” and “Indo-Pak mosques,” at least among Sunnis. Among Shias, the most relevant ethno-national distinction is between Iranians (Persians) and Indo-Pakistanis.

To be sure, neither South Asians nor Arabs necessarily cohere to form distinct groups. The line dividing Indians from Pakistanis (and Bangladeshis) is obvious. Different Arab sub-groups also have divergent

histories and political contexts. Egyptian-Americans, for instance, do not see the world the same way Moroccan-Americans do, nor do they have the same concerns about American policy toward their respective countries of origin—where they invariably have continuing family, business, and political ties. Palestinians have their own unique and tragic experience. And as the Arab Spring reminds us, when it comes to U.S. policy, individuals often organize not as Muslim Americans but as Libyan-Americans, Syrian-Americans, and so forth.

Another fault line emerges based on the relevance of religion to people's lives. According to Pew, nearly seven in ten Muslims in America say religion is “very important” to them. Yet less than half report performing the five daily prayers required of all Muslims. Most Muslims in the United States do not attend mosque regularly; indeed, about one-fifth seldom or never attend. Only about one-third report to Pew that they go to a mosque to participate in social or religious activities other than the customary religious services. It is difficult to say what exactly explains these differences, of course. Some Muslim Americans regard religion as a private matter that does not belong in the public square, and many of these presumably do not attend a mosque or get involved in Muslim-American organizations. But there is also a sizable segment of Muslims here who have rejected the faith, or at least have chosen not to act on it in any obvious way. Such individuals are likely to identify themselves simply in terms of their national origins.

Taken together, these differences make it highly problematic to speak of any single Muslim-American community. Non-Muslims generally fail to appreciate how challenging this extraordinary diversity is to Muslim-American leaders. Indeed, the imperative of overcoming fragmentation and forging a “Muslim-American” political identity explains a good deal of the behavior of both the leaders and their organizations.

THE CHANGING FACE OF ASSIMILATION

The other prominent element in any demographic portrait of Muslim Americans is the extent of their social and cultural assimilation. In this case, too, reliable data are difficult to come by. But there is a good deal of anecdotal and fragmentary evidence underscoring how much Muslim immigrants have adapted to life in America.

One reason this trend has not received more attention may be the embarrassment of Muslims at where they began, in cultural terms. Like

many other immigrants, the Muslim students who started arriving in the late 1960s did not typically intend to remain permanently; even after securing jobs in their chosen professions, most planned to return home someday. But unlike other immigrants, these newcomers were profoundly alienated from American culture and society. Not only did they regard Islam as superior to Judaism and Christianity, they also feared that their salvation was threatened by their very presence in America.

This was certainly what their leaders were telling them. Consider, for example, the *Parents' Manual: A Guide for Muslim Parents Living in North America*. It was first produced in 1976 by the Women's Committee of the Muslim Students' Association of the United States and Canada, and was re-issued in 1992 by American Trust Publications — both organizations established by Muslim Brotherhood activists. Widely available for many years from book merchants at Islamic conferences and meetings, the manual states that "Islam is a total system of life for man and his society . . . hence it is infinitely superior to any system or ideology which man can devise." And as the chapter on sex and marriage declares, "We are actually living in an environment in which our Islamic standards of purity and modesty meet with a continual threat and can easily be destroyed altogether." The authors then urge Muslims to avoid Christmas, Easter, Halloween, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and even birthdays:

The sincere Muslim is very modest about himself and is shy of being the center of attention. He knows that he did not create his own life, does not sustain it day by day and year by year, and does not consider his particular existence as deserving public attention on the anniversary of his birth.

Even more revealing is the manual's depiction of America as *jahiliyyah*. As the authors explain, the term designates "a society which is ignorant of the purposes of man's creation, his relationship and responsibility to his Creator, and the goals for which he should strive in this world." *Jahiliyyah* comes from the lexicon of Islamist intellectuals such as Abul A'la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb; in the hands of violent Islamists, it has justified terrorism. The manual does not use the term this way, but it does urge parents to "strive to keep our Islam and the Islam which we pass on to our children pure and uncontaminated by the attitudes of this *jahiliyyah*, and . . . to change this *jahiliyyah* little by little into Islam."

At the same time, the manual states that “none of these ideas is offered as a *fatwa* or dogma,” and invites readers to be reasonable and rely on common sense. Indeed, despite its clear condemnation of birthday celebrations, the manual acknowledges that “if the young Muslim child feels very strongly about it, probably little harm will be done to celebrate his birthdays in a moderate manner during his early years.” Regarding non-Muslim acquaintances, it says that while one’s closest friends must necessarily be Muslims, parents should teach their children that “Muslims must treat non-Muslims just as kindly and fairly as they treat Muslims so that [they] will never use their being non-Muslim as an excuse for misconduct toward them.”

A similar pattern is evident in a more authoritative source: Muzammil Siddiqi, a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina, former official at the Saudi-backed Muslim World League, and long-time member of the Fiqh Council of North America (the juridical body interpreting *sharia* law for Muslims here). In a 1986 article in *Islamic Horizons*, a periodical sent out by ISNA to thousands of Muslim households, Siddiqi invokes the classic distinction between *Darul-Islam*, those places where Islamic law prevails, and *Darul-kufr*, those where it does not. Citing the teaching that a Muslim may reside in the latter to perform a specified task but “must return to *Darul-Islam* as soon as the task is finished,” Siddiqi leaves no doubt that America is *Darul-kufr*, and that “we are in real danger of assimilation to a non-Islamic culture.” But then, surprisingly, Siddiqi concludes, “We do not suggest that Muslims should leave America or go back home whence they came.” And he reassures his readers that his proposed course of action “will not deprive you of your jobs or your professions.”

So what does this leading Islamic jurist propose? That Muslims “make the intention of hijra for the sake of Allah.” *Hijra* literally means migration, but here the allusion is to the flight of Mohammad and his followers from Mecca, where they were being persecuted, to Medina, where they formed the first Muslim community. In contemporary Islamist thought, *hijra* refers specifically to withdrawing from modern secular society. Accordingly, Siddiqi urges Muslims in America to establish and support mosques, to build Islamic schools and colleges, to read Islamic books and magazines, and to ensure “an Islamic system of marriage for Muslim youth.”

Is this a viable strategy? Siddiqi was proposing a bargain that other immigrant groups have managed to pull off, at least for a generation

or so. But the stakes are different—and higher—for Muslims. Indeed, Siddiqi, the authors of the *Parents' Manual*, and other Islamists left their people in a real dilemma: You have chosen to live in a corrupt and ungodly society where the fabric of daily life is completely at odds with the teachings of Allah, they told their followers. Yet you should be nice to your non-Muslim neighbors and co-workers, pursue your careers in medicine and engineering, and send your children to American universities, as long as you stick close to your mosques and schools and make sure your daughter marries a good Muslim.

No wonder so many Muslims have shunned this advice. As noted above, most American Muslims do not attend mosque regularly. Moreover, the available evidence indicates that fewer than 5% of Muslim-American children attend full-time Islamic schools. Even if many Muslim immigrants have not quite assimilated to the broader American culture, in many respects their children have.

From another perspective, though, Siddiqi's formula can be deemed a success. Before 9/11, many Muslims managed to pursue careers and education while remaining aloof from the mainstream of American life. Fueled in part by continuing immigration and some conversions, mosques and Islamic schools grew in size and number. The few Muslim forays into the wider society, particularly into politics, were defensive in nature—for example, the response to fallout from the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Many Muslims, probably most, continued to believe that it was *haram* (forbidden) to vote in America. In any event, those interested in politics tended to focus on developments back in their home countries, to which many still planned to return.

By the 1990s, a few Muslim leaders were heard to complain that mosques were “ethnic country clubs” and “Islamic fortresses.” Islamic schools, they felt, were too isolating. As countless Muslims have recounted to me, however, it took the events of 9/11 to finally “force us out of our cocoons.”

Over the past decade, Muslim leaders have seriously endeavored to get ordinary Muslims to engage with American society and politics. Yet there are still counter-currents pulling them away from anything not tied to their faith. For example, at meetings nominally devoted to Islamophobia or civil-rights issues, attendees not infrequently change the subject and ask leaders if it is permissible to befriend non-Muslims or attend business luncheons where alcohol is served.

Such questions do not necessarily come only from recent immigrants. At one memorable session at the 2004 annual conference of the Islamic Circle of North America, Siddiqi found himself before a roomful of agitated young men preoccupied with the upcoming presidential election. They fervently wanted to punish George Bush for both his domestic and foreign policies and to vote for Bush's Democratic opponent, John Kerry. One young man stood and pleaded: "Imam, wouldn't my support for the Democrats, who clearly favor homosexual rights, jeopardize my good standing as a Muslim?" Another queried: "Does voting for Democrats make you complicit in homosexuality?"

Siddiqi's response was direct and startling: "Let them have homosexuality . . . No one is forcing you to be a homosexual." He continued: "If you think Kerry and the Democrats are the best candidates, then vote for them."

There is no way of proving that Siddiqi meant what he said that day, though I believe he did. In either case, as noted by Olivier Roy, one of the foremost students of Muslims in the West, "Politics has little to do with sincerity." More important is that Siddiqi and other Muslim leaders are publicly pushing back against the same conservatism they once worked to instill. We should be under no illusion that his foundational views have changed, but Siddiqi, like other leaders, has been desperately trying to extricate Muslims from the bind he helped lead them into.

Back in his 1986 *Islamic Horizons* article, Siddiqi discussed *da'wah*—the practice of inviting others to accept Islam—as one potential way out of that bind. *Da'wah* is analogous to Christian missionary work, though it is important not to lose sight of contemporary Islam's particular dynamism and the triumphalism of many of its adherents. Muslims debate the precise nature of the obligation to do *da'wah*, but because there are no clergy specifically tasked with it, Muslims regard it, one way or another, as the responsibility of each individual. In his article, Siddiqi presented *da'wah* as the only possible justification for permanent residence in America.

Yet these leaders—and many of their non-Muslim critics—fail to consider how *da'wah* is to be pursued by Muslims bound in their self-protective cocoons. How can Muslims engage non-Muslims about the virtues of Islam if they are not allowed to have lunch with them? One legitimate response has been to do *da'wah* among lapsed Muslims. But this has only exacerbated the isolation of Muslims from the broader American community.

Thus, after decades of calling for more engagement with non-Muslims, Muslim leaders are still caught up in habits that undermine their stated goals. For example, I recall the 2007 annual convention of the Muslim American Society (MAS) at a hotel outside Chicago. Taking advantage of low rates, Muslim organizations typically schedule their major gatherings over holiday weekends, including Christmas and Easter. On this occasion, MAS leaders were especially mindful of the need to reach out to non-Muslims, but also mightily aware that few if any were in attendance. Speaker after speaker urged that next year's convention involve more non-Muslims. Yet as my conversations and interviews revealed, even the most earnest did not realize that this objective would require that they not gather on Christmas Eve. (Last year, MAS again convened over the Christmas holiday.)

PARAMOSQUE ORGANIZATIONS

The Muslim American Society is one of several national organizations dominating the political space of the Muslim-American mainstream. The others are the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR). As a recent Gallup survey confirms, only a small segment of American Muslims (12%, at most) regard any one of these organizations as representing their interests. Nevertheless, these groups define and articulate the Muslim-American agenda and they are where non-Muslim elites in the media, the government, and the academy turn for Muslim interlocutors.

As noted above, these national organizations were all initiated and shaped by Islamists. Nevertheless, they differ in revealing (but overlooked) ways. The oldest and largest is ISNA, which attracts more than 30,000 Muslims to its annual convention. Over the years, however, ISNA has evolved into an all-purpose umbrella organization that lacks a clear mission. It is therefore more useful to examine ICNA and MAS—smaller activist groups founded for the explicit purpose of building an Islamist movement in the United States—and to then turn to the newest and most controversial Muslim-American organization, CAIR.

ICNA and MAS are sufficiently alike that, over the past decade, they have been pursuing a gradual merger. These so-called paramosque organizations were both founded to overcome the inevitable parochialism of mosques. In this sense, they can be likened to the YMCA, whose

Protestant founders were similarly impatient with the way that individual congregations sapped energy that could otherwise be used for more dynamic outreach.

Membership in ICNA and MAS is open to both mosques and individuals. The latter, known as “Islamic workers,” are critical to the mission, meeting frequently in small, tightly knit groups called *usra* (meaning “family”) for study, discussion, and outreach. Their reading lists inevitably include a few Western authors, but the emphasis is on the Islamist canon: Abul A’la Mawdudi, founder of the Pakistani Islamist party, Jama’at-i Islami; Hasan al-Banna, Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood; Sayyid Qutb, Islamist theoretician and martyr; and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, contemporary Islamist theologian.

Yet ICNA and MAS differ in critical ways, which helps explain why their merger is expected to fail. ICNA emerged from ISNA in 1974, when a group of Indo-Pakistanis caucused to form their own organization. For many years, ICNA meetings were conducted entirely in Urdu, reflecting the group’s immigrant membership. Today, business is conducted in English, but large gatherings inevitably include break-out sessions in Urdu and other regional languages. From its inception, ICNA has had direct ties to Jama’at-i Islami, and in the early 1990s a prominent insider wrote that ICNA was “controlled” by that Islamist party. Today that link looks to be much more attenuated.

By contrast, MAS traces its lineage directly to the Muslim Brotherhood, and most of its membership is Arab. For many years, MAS was not a single organization but a network of affiliates tied to Brotherhood organizations back in Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, and other Arab countries. Focused on developments back home, these groups lacked coordination and were often at odds. Periodically, the Egyptian Brotherhood would seek to impose order through mediators dispatched to the United States. Over time, these groups did come together and in 1992 formed MAS, making it a much younger organization than ICNA. Up to that point, these networks had operated clandestinely in America, reflecting habits developed to evade intelligence services back home, where comrades and families remained vulnerable. As a result, MAS and its predecessors did not proselytize—and even today, after almost 20 years aboveground, it still does not focus on *da’wah*.

ICNA, on the other hand, has always operated openly in America, just as the Jama’at-i Islami does in Pakistan. Thus ICNA has engaged in

da'wah, especially among non-Muslims. Its workers compete to spread the faith, and it is clearly more preoccupied with outreach than is any other mainstream Muslim organization. Indeed, the only time I have ever been pressed to convert was by a young physician, an immigrant from India, working at an ICNA-sponsored health clinic in Chicago.

This focus on *da'wah* has led to ICNA's commitment to providing social services to struggling families, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The organization's national headquarters has long been in Jamaica, Queens, where many of its resources are devoted to assisting neighbors, including many African-Americans. Indeed, ICNA has particularly strong ties to American blacks, who are noticeably present at its meetings and conventions. In this same vein, ICNA has long been engaged in *da'wah* to prisoners. No similar commitment is evident at MAS.

ICNA has also spawned a media initiative, SoundVision, which operates bookstores and produces videos on topics ranging from the life of the prophet to teen sex. In the aftermath of 9/11, ICNA established a hotline—877-WHY-ISLAM—to inform non-Muslims about the faith. Most recently, the organization has sponsored an annual ad campaign in transit systems in New York and other cities. Typical messages placed on the sides of buses are: “Why Are So Many People Like You Becoming Muslim?” or “Islam—Submission to God.” Such efforts reveal ICNA's commitment to *da'wah*, as well as its naïveté, as its leaders fail to appreciate how provocative and threatening such campaigns can be to non-Muslims.

There is considerable irony in the contrast between ICNA's sustained outreach to non-Muslims and its institutional ethos, which is strikingly parochial and rigid, especially when compared to that of MAS and the other mainstream organizations. For instance, one encounters more *niqabs* and *burquas* (though relatively few in absolute terms) at ICNA gatherings than at MAS and ISNA conferences. Even more telling is the segregation of the sexes: Along with a Sisters' Wing, ICNA holds separate “sisters' sessions” at its conventions, and in joint sessions enforces separate seating and other arrangements more fastidiously than do other organizations. When a woman was elected president of ISNA a few years ago, an ICNA leader commented to me, “It will be a very long time before a woman ever heads ICNA!”

MAS leaders display a similar conservatism, but also a certain cosmopolitanism, expressing disdain for ICNA's naïve approach to *da'wah* or criticizing the group's rigid sex segregation. In general, one finds in MAS

greater openness to American culture, especially popular culture, than in ICNA. For example, at a lecture on relations between the sexes for male college students sponsored by the Bay Area chapter of MAS, the speaker indicated that it was not absolutely mandatory that a Muslim woman wear *hijab*, and also argued that dating was not necessarily contrary to Islamic law. What Islam does require, he said, is respectful and decorous relations between the sexes, based on an understanding of their critical emotional as well as physical differences. Toward that end, he urged his young listeners to read linguist Deborah Tannen on gender differences in language.

Then there was the national hip-hop concert tour sponsored by MAS in the summer of 2007. Featuring the group Outlandish (consisting of two Danish-born Muslims and one Honduran Catholic), the tour was an effort by some MAS leaders to reach out to their youth. It proved controversial when, at the Manhattan concert I attended, scores of Muslim teenagers began to move to the music in a way that looked a lot like dancing, which Muslims typically do not condone. Failing even to turn a profit, the tour antagonized conservatives in MAS, and its sponsors eventually left the organization. When I related this episode to an ICNA official, he rolled his eyes and declared that nothing similar would ever have been attempted by his organization.

STASIS AND CHANGE

Despite these differences, ICNA and MAS share the same basic Islamist ideology and place the same emphasis on the work of the *ustas*. They also organize very similar regional and national conferences. Indeed, the most visible step toward a merger between the two groups has been their joint sponsorship of each other's annual conventions—events that attract between 5,000 and 10,000 Muslims and also resemble (in format if not size) the massive annual convention of ISNA.

To a non-Muslim observer, perhaps the most striking aspect of these gatherings is the complete absence of any acknowledged tie to the United States. While immigrant organizations typically find ways to demonstrate loyalty to their adopted country, ICNA and MAS do not. No one pledges allegiance to the flag, and indeed there are no flags on display. (This is also true of the typical Islamic school.) When attending an ICNA convention over a Fourth of July weekend, I heard not a word about the significance of that date in American history.

Convention-goers are routinely urged to mobilize and vote to overturn the Patriot Act and protect their civil rights, but they are almost never urged to consider the obligations that their fellow Americans typically understand as a condition of citizenship.

This lack of any overt display of loyalty to America may in part reflect the disdain expressed by non-Muslim elites toward patriotism and the nation-state, which tend to be viewed as outdated, unnecessary, or even dangerous. And with the elimination of the draft and our reliance on a professional military, the signal sent to earlier immigrant groups about the importance of military service as a way to demonstrate their commitment to America is now far weaker.

Yet the absence of acknowledged obligations to America is also directly attributable to Islamist ideology. For instance, the leaders of these organizations have never explicitly renounced the caliphate—the dream of a restored sovereign Islamic regime ruled by an individual understood to be Allah’s vice-regent. Failure to reject this notion obviously engenders confusion among many Muslim Americans, especially youth. Similarly, the routine invocation of the *ummah*—the worldwide community of Muslims that transcends all barriers of ethnicity, race, and nationality—fosters ambivalence, and reinforces the already pervasive inclination to avoid military service or to oppose *any* use of American force in Muslim countries.

Equally striking, though, is the fact that the vast majority of people attending such gatherings do so for non-ideological reasons. The substantive sessions are typically a backdrop against which entire families—parents, children, grandparents—catch up with old friends and associates, often in the hope of finding suitable marriage partners for the young. Normally discreet Muslims refer to these get-togethers as “meat markets,” and it is easy to see why, as adolescent girls dressed in stylish *hijab*—sometimes coordinated with tight designer jeans and painted toenails—glide around checking out the boys, who of course return the compliment.

Generations cross paths at the conferences’ bazaars, where scores of merchants and non-profits sell *halal* foodstuffs, ethnic clothing, *sharia*-compliant mortgages and investments, educational materials for children, satellite TV subscriptions, religious videos, and books. Others feature information about Islamic charities operating here and overseas, advocacy and political groups, and, on occasion, a recruiting officer from the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security.

Despite such fellowship and commerce, the conventions' formal purpose is to hold plenary sessions, panels, and workshops where "scholars" hold forth on topics ranging from Qur'anic notions of *jihad* to getting fathers more involved in parenting. The term "scholar" gets used indiscriminately to describe anyone presuming to address such gatherings. The speaker might be a high-school teacher talking about American youth culture, a political activist denouncing the Patriot Act, or an imam with a Ph.D. from Harvard examining what the Qur'an says about marriage. In traditional Islam, "scholar" is an honorific, reflecting a deeply ingrained respect for religious learning. Among Islamists, it represents a challenge to such authority, and a willingness to hear Islam interpreted by individuals with no recognized religious training.

In any case, the same individuals speak at all these events, and their presentations are invariably tedious and pedantic, especially when addressing religious topics. Tacitly acknowledging the problem, organizers routinely call upon a few reliable African-American Muslims, who combine Islamic themes with a personal, evangelical style that is especially appealing to young Muslims raised here. Unfortunately, these speakers also tend to express their alienation from America.

It is ironic that these two organizations, ICNA and MAS—founded to advance the Islamist movement by transcending the inertia and insularity of mosques—have become mired in the consuming task of staging all-too-predictable events. As one insider articulates the resulting problem: "We don't have leaders, we have managers. We have speakers."

But this deep organizational stasis has not always been evident to outside observers, in part because of the many surface changes that have taken place in recent years. As noted above, Muslim leaders struggled during the 1970s and '80s to adapt their Islamist ideology to American life by urging Muslims to get along with their neighbors and co-workers while at the same time utterly rejecting American values and encouraging efforts to convert non-Muslims. The result was "Islamic fortresses," whose inadequacies became evident to all but the most obdurate in the wake of 9/11. Since then, the leaders have adapted further, urging Muslims to secure their rights as American citizens through full civic and political engagement. Yet these leaders have not reconciled these adaptations with the Islamist ideology that they continue to uphold, or that they at least have not renounced.

How these leaders and groups manage this posture is difficult to fathom. Deception and dissembling should not be ruled out, but these do not provide a satisfactory explanation. More likely factors are habit and filiopietism. For many Muslims, even those who are not Islamists, figures such as Qutb and al-Banna are simply part of their heritage. Among the more initiated, these two figures are also revered as martyrs. A further factor is the sheer opportunism of the leaders involved, which typifies the Muslim Brotherhood wherever it has been closely examined. The result, according to one former Muslim leader, is that his colleagues “refuse to deal with their baggage.”

OVERSEAS INFLUENCE

The place of Islamist ideology in the contemporary life of American Muslims is thus more complex than their critics suggest. But what about the critics’ other common theme—the influence of foreign Muslims on their American co-religionists? As noted earlier, there has been considerable contact between ICNA and MAS and their Islamist colleagues in Pakistan, Egypt, and elsewhere. But these ties have likely diminished over time. Even critical analysts of the Muslim Brotherhood downplay the influence of Egyptian leaders on affiliates in Europe and America, emphasizing that the latter respond mostly to local political dynamics.

Even more scrutinized is the influence of the Saudis, who have spent millions on initiatives in the United States, such as the distribution of Qur’ans and other books, salaries to imams, contributions to build mosques and schools, and generous funding for Middle East studies and other departments at American universities. In Los Angeles, the Saudis built and have maintained the lavish King Fahd mosque. In Northern Virginia, the Islamic Saudi Academy—funded and operated by the Saudi government—has dominated Islamic education in the nation’s capital for years. And the Saudis have contributed financially to Muslim Brotherhood initiatives throughout the world, including in the United States.

Yet all this money has not earned the Saudis as much support and goodwill as their critics tend to believe. On the contrary, Muslim leaders have frequently criticized, privately and on occasion publicly, heavy-handed efforts by the Saudis to manipulate them. At least one major organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, has long had a policy of refusing to accept any overseas support; its founder, Maher Hathout, has specifically bemoaned the Saudis’ influence on American mosques.

The biggest rift arose in 1990 and '91 over the Saudi-backed deployment of U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf region in Operation Desert Storm. The Saudis leaned heavily on all the major Muslim-American organizations to denounce Saddam Hussein's invasion and annexation of Kuwait. This effort was not very successful: In fact, all but one of those organizations refused to back the Saudis. This response was attributable primarily to the leaders' ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose affiliates for the most part supported Saddam (who had positioned himself as the champion of the Palestinians and the Palestine Liberation Organization). Only the Kuwaiti and Iraqi affiliates of the Brotherhood supported the U.S. invasion, for obvious reasons. Hardly gratifying from the American perspective, this story nevertheless underscores the fact that the interests of Muslims here do not always converge with those of their overseas benefactors — even the Saudis.

The Saudis did score one success, however, and it was revealing. The only Muslim organization to support Desert Storm was the American Muslim Society, a group of African-Americans headed by Wallace D. Mohammed, son of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Mohammed. Having long since rejected his father's racist, anti-American cult, W. D. Mohammed was drawn to the Saudi position for two reasons. First, he was dependent on the Saudis both for validation as a genuine Sunni Muslim and for financial support. Second, he was a staunch patriot willing to back an American-led effort abroad. This episode highlights the fact that Saudi influence on Muslim Americans is hardly uniform: Though not widely noted, that influence has been greater on African-American Muslims than on those of immigrant origins. W. D. Mohammed is a benign example, but for some other African-Americans, Islam — especially Saudi-backed Salafism — reinforces an already profound sense of alienation. As former MAS leader Souheil Ghannouchi has written: "Immigrant leaders preached a version of Islam that made many African American Muslims feel like foreigners in their own country."

Clearly, overseas influences on Muslims in America are limited and conditioned by domestic social and political dynamics. A particularly salient example of the latter surfaced at an ISNA convention a little more than two years after 9/11. At one morning session, an ISNA leader took the podium and delivered an unscheduled talk about the *Noble Qur'an*, a handsome, hardbound edition in numerous translations underwritten

and distributed worldwide by the Saudis for free. Yet the speaker was there to criticize the *Noble Qur'an*, not to praise it. He pointed out that its annotations included offensive characterizations of Christians and Jews, which the Saudis had not removed despite ISNA's repeated protests over several years. He stated that many "good Muslims" who bear no malice toward Christians and Jews were not taking such offenses seriously enough. He then told his listeners: "If you see copies of this edition of the Qur'an, buy it and destroy it. It is a weapon of mass destruction."

The reception to these comments was mixed. Among the thousand or so Muslims in the room, there was a good deal of fidgeting and murmuring beneath the polite surface. In conversations later that day, I heard considerable discomfort with such criticism of the Saudis. A few weeks later, I caught up with the speaker and remarked that I had never heard such a blunt public rebuke of the Saudis by a Muslim-American leader. I then asked if he had ever made such comments outside the confines of his organization. His immediate, reflexive response was: "Of course not, I'm creating a constituency here!"

IDENTITY POLITICS

As we have seen, one of the major challenges facing Muslim leaders eager to create constituencies is overcoming the sources of division among the array of groups that comprise their community. Before 9/11, one way of bridging these divides was to appeal to the Palestinian cause. This strategy worked at times, but the issue was generally too fraught with disagreement to promote genuine cohesion. After 9/11 and the resulting scrutiny under which Muslims have come since the attacks, civil rights has emerged as the leaders' most powerful tool for mobilizing and unifying their co-religionists. The challenges inherent in both approaches become evident when considering the most visible, and most notorious, Muslim-American organization — the Council on American Islamic Relations, or CAIR.

CAIR was established in 1994 by two Palestinians — Omar Ahmad and Nihad Awad — who had come to America as university students. Before conceiving of CAIR, Ahmad and Awad were active in the Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP), founded in 1981 by the Muslim Brotherhood to promote the Palestinian cause. Until its demise in 2004, the IAP was closely tied to Hamas, raising funds for the terrorist group and publishing its materials in America.

The idea for CAIR emerged from an infamous meeting convened in Philadelphia in 1993 by another Brotherhood affiliate, the Palestine Committee. The early 1990s were tumultuous years for the Brotherhood and Palestinian Islamists: Their support for Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War had alienated their Saudi backers. The implosion of the Soviet Union cost them another sponsor. And the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, signed in September 1993, not only threatened Hamas's declared goal of eliminating the state of Israel, but also legitimated its secular rival.

Meeting in Philadelphia a few weeks after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Ahmad, Awad, and their colleagues conceived of an organization that would engage the wider community of Muslims in America — not just Palestinians — to work against the accords, by raising funds for the Palestinian struggle and encouraging Muslims to get more involved in American politics. They had in mind a broad campaign to influence American media, public opinion, and eventually policy. A year later, the Council on American Islamic Relations — a direct outgrowth of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas — was open for business in Washington, D.C.

It is astonishing, given this history, that the mainstream American media should routinely describe CAIR as “a Muslim civil-rights organization.” It is one thing for CAIR's leaders to ritualistically deny and obfuscate the organization's origins; it is quite another for America's academic, political, and media elites to systematically ignore them.

There are, however, two notable exceptions. The first is the FBI. After a long and difficult legal battle, the Bush administration successfully prosecuted the Holy Land Foundation, a Texas-based Hamas fundraising front to which Ahmad and Awad were clearly connected. CAIR was an unindicted co-conspirator in the case; as a result, the FBI eventually suspended formal contact with the group.

The second exception is the investigative journalists mentioned earlier. These indefatigable critics rush into the vacuum left by reticent elites, but they don't quite fill it. Habituated to recycling the same old facts, such critics fail to step back to examine the larger picture. If they did, they would see that CAIR has adapted in many ways to American political culture, and that this process of Americanization has made CAIR a much more formidable organization than any of the other prominent Muslim-American groups. Indeed, while Gallup reports that barely 12% of

Muslims regard CAIR as representing their interests, that figure is higher than the one reported for any other Muslim-American organization.

Since 9/11, CAIR has emerged as the pre-eminent advocate for Muslim Americans. Like other nationwide advocacy groups in America, its efforts and ethic are dominated by its Washington headquarters, where a full-time professional staff works under the direction of political entrepreneurs adept at identifying causes capable of generating contributions from widely dispersed supporters. In other words, CAIR is a “checkbook organization”: Members are not connected to it through any enduring ties of friendship or social solidarity, but rather through their commitments to its specified goals. And as those commitments inevitably ebb and flow, members routinely join up and drift away. To keep ahead of “the churn,” holding on to existing members and attracting new ones, headquarters must continually demonstrate its effectiveness through lawsuits, administrative rule changes, studies, congressional testimony — any accomplishments that can be communicated to members through newsletters, e-mails, and the media.

For their substantial start-up costs, advocacy groups rely on wealthy sponsors, often foundations. Since few foundations have been willing to risk their tax-exempt status on pro-Muslim advocacy, CAIR partly relied on the Holy Land Foundation. Subsequent support has come from various Saudi and Persian Gulf sources, almost certainly rendering CAIR more reliant on overseas funding than any other major Muslim-American organization.

From the outset, CAIR made its name denouncing bias against Muslims. Its breakthrough came in 1995, when it publicized harassment and hate crimes against Muslims in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. CAIR also picked fights over apparent offenses to the prophet Mohammad by Simon & Schuster and *U.S. News*. The organization’s most visible early victory came against Nike in 1998, when it orchestrated a global protest against a line of athletic shoes whose logo could be mistaken for the Arabic script for “Allah.” More generally, CAIR has urged Muslim immigrants to become citizens, and has encouraged Muslim Americans to register and vote, pressure their elected officials, and demand their rights. Toward this end, the organization literally waves the flag: Unlike ICNA and MAS, it displays Old Glory at its events, and its *U.S. Congress Handbook* devotes several pages to proper flag etiquette. That publication also prints the full text of the Pledge of

Allegiance, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and all four stanzas of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

CAIR has thus overcome many of the limitations, both organizational and ideological, of ISNA, ICNA, and MAS. Unlike these organizations, CAIR is not rooted in face-to-face immigrant networks. Nor are its members involved in *usras* or similarly intense small groups. CAIR does not get involved in the religious development of its members, among whom are a diverse array of young, educated second-generation Muslim Americans. In these ways, CAIR transcends the ethnic boundaries defining other groups and constitutes the first genuinely Muslim-American organization.

Nor does CAIR get bogged down in planning annual conventions. Not reliant on social networks requiring constant renewal, CAIR has not been drawn into hosting “meat markets” for families, bazaars for merchants, or panels for scholars. The organization does hold an annual banquet in Washington with the usual after-dinner fundraising appeal, but this is a far cry from the large gatherings that are a year-round preoccupation for other groups.

Still, as often happens in advocacy organizations, CAIR’s members eventually sought one another out and organized local affiliates. And CAIR National has welcomed these regional chapters, granting them considerable autonomy as local franchises with their own boards, staffs, and web sites. This laissez-faire response to grassroots spontaneity has afforded CAIR much dynamism and visibility, especially in the crucial period after 9/11. But it has also led to new challenges.

Regional affiliates like CAIR-Chicago have in recent years hired lawyers to litigate civil-rights complaints, which CAIR National has not typically done. College students flooding in as interns and volunteers at local chapters have included substantial numbers of women, some of whom wear *hijab* while others do not. This is one of many signs that the regional chapters have been less rigid than CAIR National, where wearing *hijab* has been enforced. Indeed, some regional leaders can be heard criticizing the influence of Islamists at Washington headquarters, especially with regard to the Palestinian question.

Such local initiatives have exacerbated longstanding tensions within CAIR, between those members focused on the needs of Muslims here in America and those focused on developments overseas, especially building support for the Palestinians and Hamas. In theory, CAIR was founded to mobilize the former to benefit the latter. These tensions have

roiled CAIR National for some time, and in 2007 they came to a head in a protracted internal battle that has been largely ignored by the organization's many critics. That battle resulted in the defeat of the overseas contingent, led by Omar Ahmad, who effectively withdrew from any further involvement in the organization he had helped create.

CAIR has thus emerged, at both the national and regional levels, as the most Americanized of all the mainstream Muslim organizations. Yet this is hardly good news, because the style of politics now practiced by CAIR makes it more difficult than ever to deal with the organization's Islamist "baggage."

CAIR's strident brand of identity politics may seem less frightening than fifth-column activism on behalf of Hamas, but it remains highly problematic. In a style as relentless as that of its critics, CAIR denounces the indignities visited on Muslims by government bureaucrats and Islamophobes across America. Such grievances are not without merit, but CAIR infuses them with the hyperbole that pervades advocacy politics in contemporary America. And this only deepens the self-absorption of educated young Muslims who refuse to acknowledge that their organizations and leaders bear any responsibility for the suspicions that other Americans continue to harbor toward them, their leaders, and their faith. Instead, these young Muslim Americans, unlike their immigrant parents, lay full and unapologetic claim to their rights as citizens, while admitting no corresponding duties—other than the familiar "duty" to dissent and demand more rights. This is perhaps the most significant and complicated challenge posed to the nation by contemporary American Islam.

CONSTRUCTIVE PRESSURE

How should we respond to this challenge? We must begin by recognizing that the legal and political values and institutions that helped Americans to avoid overreacting after 9/11 have subsequently hindered us from facing up to the more subtle threat from Islamism. No longer should mainstream American institutions routinely and uncritically engage with Muslim leaders and organizations that have not—at some point, in some way—demonstrated a willingness to address questions about their history, and about the compatibility of their views with American values and political principles.

This means, however, that non-Muslims must pose such questions in reasonable and constructive ways. We must move beyond the

inquisitorial stance of critics engaged in mere political archeology. The repeated unearthing of the same damning facts only encourages Muslims, goaded by the strident advocacy of groups such as CAIR, to wrap themselves in resonant but evasive rights talk.

The fundamental problem is not disloyalty among Muslim Americans, but their reluctance to confront the implications of the Islamism that has been part of their milieu and that their leaders continue to invoke, however ritualistically or unreflectively. Thus, the primary goal should be to exert constructive pressure, in different ways and to different degrees, on Muslim Americans—leaders and ordinary citizens alike—to “deal with their baggage.” An exemplary step in this direction is the FBI’s policy shift away from contact and cooperation with CAIR. So was the Bush Justice Department’s prosecution of the Holy Land Foundation. Today, however, the Obama administration is pursuing a more accommodating policy toward Muslim-American organizations. This is regrettable, but in truth there is only so much the government can or should do on this front. The most appropriate and effective source of pressure will be non-governmental actors, especially universities, think tanks, and the media.

If any such substantive engagement with Muslims is to be undertaken, then non-Muslim Americans will need to be much better informed. We must overcome the populist paranoia, fueled by the evasiveness of our elites, that demeans a free people. And rather than obsess over the presumed influence of overseas ties on Muslims in America, we need to be cognizant of how American Muslims have adapted to some of the most dysfunctional aspects of our own politics.

Essential to any improved understanding will also be a greater appreciation of America’s history—not its mythology—as a nation of immigrants. There are, for instance, relevant parallels between Islam as an assertive, triumphalist, immigrant faith and Catholicism in the last century. Still more relevant are the parallels with German-Americans during World War I, and then, immediately after the war, with anarchist terrorists and the resulting Red Scare. Perhaps the most striking parallel of all emerges from later in the 20th century, when radical socialists and communists clung to utopian illusions of a workers’ state, even as they progressed up the social and economic ladder in America—much as successful Muslims today continue to invoke the notion of the *ummah*.

The lessons of this history are many and complicated. But surely one is that, ordinarily, questions of loyalty have been worked out over time,

as immigrants and their offspring assimilate and adapt to American society. Another is that these tensions have rarely been acted upon or seen as mortal threats.

But we are not living in ordinary times, and today's threats are more immediate. We do not have the luxury of time to allow Muslims to sort out their loyalty to America. We—and they—must face the challenge now.