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# Muslim Life IN ★ AMERICA

(Posted October 2002)

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**Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States today.** According to one recent survey, there are 1,209 mosques in America, well over half founded in the last 20 years. Between 17 and 30 percent of American Muslims are converts to the faith.

At the center of both traditional American life and the lives of the generally more recent Muslim immigrants is the family. As Shahed Amanullah, an engineer who lives in San Francisco, California, puts it, "American values are, by and large, very consistent with Islamic values, with a focus on family, faith, hard work, and an obligation to better self and society."

This booklet is a brief introduction to a complex subject, an attempt to explore in words and images the extraordinary range and richness of the way American Muslims live. That point of cross-cultural commonality -- the family -- is where we begin.



Members of the Tagouri family in Charles County, Maryland, are some of the growing number of Muslims moving into more rural parts. *(Jim Blair)*

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**TOGETHERNESS**

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This Muslim woman who came from Lebanon in 1985, settled in Dearborn, Michigan, and raised her five children there. The Detroit/Dearborn area has one of the largest Muslim communities in the United States. *(Sheila Springstein/Corbis Sygma)*

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### FAMILY LIFE

## THE TAGOURIS: One Family's Story

By Phyllis McIntosh

Phyllis McIntosh is a free-lance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

**The Tagouris of La Plata, a small town in southern Maryland near Washington, D.C., are in many ways a typical American family.** Father is a pathologist at the local hospital and serves as deputy medical examiner for Charles County. Mother is pursuing a Master's degree in counseling at Loyola College of Baltimore and hopes to become a licensed therapist in a school or in private practice. Like most suburban parents, they spend a lot of time on the road, ferrying their three children, ages 8, 5, and 3, to school and to dance classes, gymnastics, and Girl Scouts.

The Tagouris are also devout Muslims, and their faith is central to their busy lives. Despite his fast-paced job at the hospital, Dr. Yahia Tagouri drives to a nearby mosque at least once a day to make prayers, sometimes taking the children with him. For the other daily prayers, he retreats to his office. Most of his co-workers are non-Muslims, he says, but "when people see that my door is closed, they know it is prayer time, and they respect that." His wife, Salwa Omeish, who commutes about 180 miles round-trip to attend college classes, prays at home before and after school.

### How They Met and Married

Yahia, 41, grew up in Libya and attended medical school there. In 1987 he decided to join his brother in the United States, and he completed his specialty training at Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh and at Marshall University in West Virginia.

Introduced by friends, Yahia and Salwa, now 31, were married in 1992 and lived in West Virginia for a year before moving to Birmingham, Alabama, where Yahia completed a fellowship at the University of Alabama. There followed a year in Selma, Alabama, a town of 20,000 that was on the front lines of the civil rights movement for African-Americans in the 1960s. In 1996, the Tagouris moved north to be closer to Salwa's



The Tagouri family and a niece, gather in the sunroom to have their portrait taken.



A devout Muslim family, the Tagouris pray in their sunroom.

family, but instead of settling near Washington, D.C., they chose La Plata, Maryland, population 6,500, 40 miles to the south. They built a house in a quiet, upscale neighborhood several miles outside of town. Today their large, modern home is surrounded by trees and a spacious yard full of children's toys and play sets.

Salwa, also born in Libya, came to the United States at age 11 when her father took a job with the World Bank in Washington, D.C. She grew up in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, where she attended public secondary school and college.

Remembering those days, she says that not being allowed to date or go to dances and parties like most of her classmates did not particularly bother her at the time. Growing up in a large metropolitan area, she had many Muslim friends in her school. "Not only were we not allowed to do some things," she says, "I don't think we had any interest."

Like many young married American women, Salwa has kept her own last name -- Omeish -- instead of taking her husband's name after marriage. And like countless women, she carefully balances her own desire to further her education with caring for her family, which now includes Yahia's parents and a niece. But despite her professional aspirations, she declares that "family definitely comes first."

### Deciding to Wear the Hijab

Unlike many Muslim girls in the United States today, who wear the hijab in high school, Salwa did not cover until several years ago. Wearing the hijab "was something in the back of my mind that I wanted to do," she says. The main reason I wear it now is because God asks us to do it. It's a form of submission to God and not submitting to what society says we should look like."

Though much of the family's social life revolves around their mosque, the Tagouris count many non-Muslims among their friends and acquaintances. To their knowledge, they and their next-door neighbors, an orthopedic surgeon and his family, are the only Muslims in their immediate neighborhood. Among the 80 or so students in her classes at Loyola College, Salwa is the only Muslim.

Daughters Noor, a fourth-grader, and Yuser, just starting kindergarten, attended Christian preschools and now go to a public elementary school where virtually all the students are non-Muslim. There is no objection from teachers or school administrators when the girls stay home from school on Muslim holidays.



Outside their home, Salwa and Yahia Tagouri play ball with their children.



Everyone enjoys the swing set.



The youngest member of the Tagouri family, Muhumed, helps his father rake the grass in the back yard.

And Noor's teacher welcomed Salwa into the classroom to decorate a "Happy Eid" bulletin board in observance of the Muslim holiday, which for the past several years has fallen around the same time as Christmas.

Although most of her children's young classmates now seem oblivious to religious differences, Salwa acknowledges that it may be more difficult for her children during the teenage years than it was for her growing up in the Washington area. "We do worry, but we're strong in our faith," she says. "When we see differences, it doesn't bother us. We say, 'O.K., we don't do that and it's fine.'"

Because the local mosque, with only about 40 families, is too small to support religious classes, the Tagouri children spend the weekend with their grandparents or carpool with friends an hour in order to attend Islamic classes in northern Virginia. Noor, who at age 8 is learning to make her daily prayers, also receives religious instruction from a neighbor once or twice a week.

Will Noor and Yuser wear the hijab? The Tagouris stress that it will be strictly their daughters' decision. "You cannot force these things," Salwa says. "I could force them to put it on here, and they could go to school and take it off. We teach them that whatever they do in front of us or behind our backs, God is watching." "Once you teach them to see God in everything they do and keep God in their hearts, then their faith will be strong, and they will want to obey God and his orders, whether it's praying, fasting, giving charity, or doing a good job in their work," adds Yahia. "And if they get to that point they will probably want to wear the hijab."

### Teaching Islam by Example

Even though the Tagouris have spent their married life so far in less cosmopolitan areas of the United States, they say they have not been targets of religious intolerance. They believe strongly in spreading the message of their faith through example. "I don't talk about Islam that much," Yahia says, "but I try to show people what Islam should be by the way I live my life. Once they start to know me, they respect me for the man I am."

Even after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Tagouris say they personally felt no animosity from their fellow Americans. "In our community at least, it was the opposite," Yahia says. "People were very caring, asking if we were O.K. and if anyone had bothered us." Salwa, who started the fall semester at college two days after the attacks, was struck by the concern of her



Lunch in the Tagouri kitchen provides food and a time to be together.



Dr. Tagouri helps tidy up after the meal.



The three Tagouri children and their cousin watch favorite television programs after lunch.



Mrs. Tagouri, a Master's degree candidate at Loyola College, tends to some research at her computer.

classmates. "They asked how I was doing and said they felt bad for all the Middle Easterners who are being looked at differently."

What does anger the Tagouris, however, is the frequent use of phrases like "Muslim militant" and "Muslim terrorist" in the media. Salwa points out that there have been native-born American terrorists like Timothy McVeigh, who bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168, or the so-called Unabomber, who was responsible for a series of mail bombings. The press, she says, does not refer to these politically motivated murderers as a "Christian militant" or a "Christian bomber."

"To see Islam portrayed like this is hurtful," she says. "Islam comes from the word for peace. When we come into the house, instead of saying 'Hi' to each other, we say 'Peace be upon you.' Islam is all about peace, but too many people don't get that."

Although the men who bombed the World Trade Center may have done it in the name of religion, the Tagouris say, they obviously did not have God in their hearts. "A terrorist is a terrorist, without regard to what he believes in," Yahia maintains. "We should not link such acts with religion."

The couple cautions Muslims elsewhere in the world that what they read and hear about America also may not be an accurate portrayal of the American people or what it means to be Muslim in America. "There are a lot of Muslims in the U.S.," says Salwa. "Islam is the fastest growing religion in this country, and there are many converts. Our mosque in Birmingham was about 80 percent blond, blue-eyed Americans. I never saw anything like it."

Most importantly, she adds, "we can practice our religion more freely here than probably anywhere else in the world." "In America, if you work hard you are rewarded accordingly," Yahia says. "It is a blessing to be in a country where there is freedom of expression, justice, and the Constitution is applied to everyone. We feel truly blessed to be living in America."



Dr. Tagouri stands in front of the mosque in La Plata, Maryland, where he and his family attend services.



Dr. Tagouri points out the symbolism of new growth in his town of La Plata, parts of which were devastated by a hurricane earlier in the year.

*(Photographs by Jim Blair)*

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### FAMILY LIFE

## Living in Two Cultures

**"I don't view myself through separate identities.** The yardstick I measure by is my faith; everything else falls into place. My identity is an American Palestinian who is a Muslim."

-**Dr. Laila al-Marayati**, member U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

**"I feel not only proud to be an American** - to carry an American passport and travel worldwide - I feel that I can be myself, a fully practicing Muslim, particularly in America. This means I wake up in the morning without fear and come home at the end of the day without fear."

-**Imam Yahya Hendi**, member U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

**"I consider myself lucky to have been exposed to both cultures.** My children recall the close ties of our extended family in Istanbul - we had no TV, we shared every emotion. In the United States individuality is respected. I enjoy my privacy and solitude, the freedom of the press, and political expression."

-**Necva Ozgur**, School principal, Pasadena, California

**"Research shows that girls generally tend to stay away from sports,** especially if they must compete with boys. We're making sure the girls learn athletic skills without feeling hindered by their conservative attire. We want them to feel part of the American mainstream and not like oddballs. A Muslim soccer mom in hijab sitting on the sidelines of her child's game should not be a rare occurrence, but the norm."

-**Semeen Issa**, educator

**"When people say we'll never have elected Muslim-American officials,** I say, 'Hey, those are the same things they said about a Catholic named Kennedy running for president'."

-**Suhail Khan**, congressional staffer

**"Muslims all over the world are looking with high expectations toward the ummah community in the United States and Canada.** Its dynamism, fresh approach, enlightened scholarship and sheer growth is their hope for an Islamic renaissance worldwide."

-**Murad Wilfried Hofmann**, Muslim jurist

**"Increasingly, they [Muslims] are going to be claiming a place in the public square.** They still see themselves as an 'out' group rather than a 'core' group in American life right now, but that is going to change as they move into positions where they can assert their heritage.... It's a red-white-and-blue pattern in American history as each immigrant group has developed a congregational, organizational life different from their home countries. Their houses of worship are more than just houses of prayer, but centers for a whole range of fellowship and community programs just as the German Lutherans, the Irish and Italian Catholics and the Dutch Reform did in centuries before."

-**David Rozen**, Hartford Seminary

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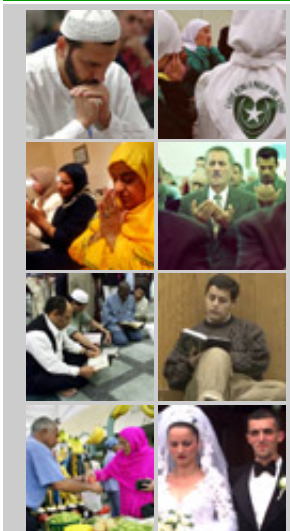
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### Family Life FACES OF ISLAM



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A portrait in concentration, this Iraqi-American Muslim joins fellow worshippers in a Michigan mosque. *(Sheila Springsteen/CORBIS/Sygma)*

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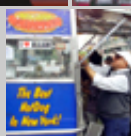
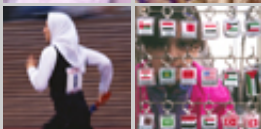
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### Muslim Communities EVERYDAY LIFE



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In Chantilly, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., a little girl delights in a carousel ride at the Eid-ul-Fitr festival. The festival is attended by thousands of Muslims. *(Chris Anderson/Aurora)*

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### MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

## Patterns of Muslim Immigration

By Jane I. Smith

Jane I. Smith is professor of Islamic Studies and co-director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. She is co-editor of the *Muslim World*, a journal dedicated to the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. Among her recent publications are *Islam in America*; "Islam and Christendom" in the *Oxford History of Islam*; *Muslim Communities in North America*; and *Mission to America: Five Islamic Communities in the United States*.

**Muslims living in the United States today represent a great many movements and identities:** immigrant and indigenous, Sunni and Shi'ite, conservative and liberal, orthodox and heterodox. While exact figures for the current number of Muslims in the U.S. population are difficult to determine, well over half are members of first-, second-, or third-generation immigrant families.

While there were some Muslims among the African slaves who came to work in plantations in the American South in the 18th and 19th centuries, very few retained an Islamic identity. Most scholars of Islam focus, then, on the immigrant Muslims who arrived in the West from the Middle East in the latter part of the 19th century. These Muslim migrations to America have taken place in what can be seen as a series of distinguishable periods, often called "waves," although historians do not always agree on what constitutes a wave.

The earliest arrivals came between 1875 and 1912 from the rural areas of present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel. The area, then known as Greater Syria, was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. The majority of the men coming from this area were Christians, though some were from Muslim groups. Economically motivated single men for the most part,



Many Syrian families settled in New York City during the latter part of the 19th century. Above, the drawing by W. Bengough, depicts everyday life and occupations in 1890 on Washington Street in Lower Manhattan in a Syrian immigrant neighborhood in the city. (*North Wind Picture Archives*)



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs a new immigration bill on Liberty Island in New York Harbor on October 3, 1965. (*AP/WWP*)

they worked as laborers and merchants, intending to stay only long enough to earn enough money to support their families back home. Some were fleeing conscription into the Turkish army. Gradually, they began to settle in the eastern United States, the Middle West, and along the Pacific Coast.

## U.S. LAW AND WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

After the end of the World War I, the demise of the Ottoman Empire resulted in a second wave of immigration from the Muslim Middle East. This was also the period of Western colonial rule in the Middle East under the mandate system created to "govern" Arab lands. The war had brought such devastation to Lebanon that many had to flee simply to survive. Significant numbers of Muslims decided to move to the West, now for political as well as economic reasons. Many joined relatives who had arrived earlier and were already established in the United States.



These ethnic Albanian refugees sit on prayer rugs to celebrate Muslim prayer services outside their dining hall at Fort Dix, New Jersey. (AP/WWP)

A new U.S. immigration law, passed in 1924, soon curtailed this second wave of immigration by instituting the "national origins quota system" - which set immigration limits according to the national origin of the foreign-born population of the United States in 1890 (later changed to 1920). During the 1930s, under this system, the movement of Muslims to America slowed to a trickle. Immigration during this period was limited largely relatives of persons already resident in America since they had preference under the system. Many of those living in the United States were now beginning to realize that their dreams of returning home probably would not be fulfilled and that they needed the support and structure provided by their families.

The third identifiable period of immigration, from 1947 to 1960, again saw increasing numbers of Muslims arriving in the United States, now from countries well beyond the Middle East. The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1953 had revised the quota formula assigned to each country of origin. Because the law was based on U.S. population percentages in the United States in 1920, immigrants during this period were primarily from Western Europe. Still, Muslims began to come from such areas of the world as Eastern Europe (primarily from Yugoslavia and Albania) and the Soviet Union; a few emigrated from India and Pakistan after the 1947 partition of the Subcontinent. While many of the earlier Muslim immigrants had moved into rural as well as urban areas of America, those in this third wave tended to be from urban backgrounds, and they made their homes almost exclusively in major cities such as New York and Chicago. Some were members of former elite families abroad. They were generally more Westernized and better educated than their predecessors, and came with the hope of receiving more education and technical training in America.

The fourth and most recent wave of Muslim immigration has come after 1965, the year President Lyndon Johnson sponsored an immigration bill that repealed the longstanding system of quotas by national origin. Under the new system, preferences went to relatives of U.S. residents and those with special occupational skills needed in the United States. The new law was a signal act in American history, making it possible for the first time since the early part of the 20th century for someone to enter the country regardless of his or her national origin. After 1965, immigration from Western Europe began to decline significantly, with a corresponding growth in the numbers of persons arriving from the Middle East and Asia. In this era more than half of the immigrants to

America from these regions have been Muslim.

Until the last several decades of the 20th century, then, most Muslims have chosen to come to the U.S. for purposes of economic betterment or education, with some emigrating after World War I because of political turmoil. But political turmoil in their home countries has been a primary motive for much of the recent Muslim arrival in America. Among the specific events that have brought immigrants and refugees to the West seeking escape and asylum were the military defeat of Arab states by Israelis in 1967 and the civil war in Lebanon and its aftermath.

The Iranian Revolution and ascent to power of Imam Khomeini in 1979, followed by nearly a decade of debilitating war between Iran and Iraq, brought some Iranians westward. Many have settled in America, with significant numbers relocating in California. It is estimated that there are nearly a million Iranians in the United States today. Since the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf War, large numbers of Kurds have come to this country. Also newly arrived for reasons of political strife and civil war are Muslims from Somalia, Sudan, and other African nations, and Afghanistan, as well as Muslim refugees of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.

For decades various forms of strife in India and Pakistan have encouraged many from the Subcontinent to seek a calmer environment in the West. England and the United States have been especially popular destinations. While Pakistanis, Indians, and Bangladeshis have been a small part of the Muslim immigration to America all through the 20th century, in the last several decades their ranks have grown significantly and today probably number more than one million. Pakistani and Indian Muslims, many of whom are skilled professionals such as doctors and engineers, have played an important role in the development of Muslim political groups in America and in lay leadership of mosque communities. Today more and more Muslims are arriving from countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia; many of these immigrants are also highly trained and often assume positions of leadership in American Islam.

## A COMPLEX COMMUNITY

Arab Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'ite, continue to comprise a significant proportion of the Islamic community in America. Increasingly, they are highly educated, successful professionals who are also leaders in the development of a transnational, transethnic American Islam. In addition, Turks, Eastern Europeans, and 緡gr鱧 from numerous African nations including Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, Cameroon, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Tanzania, and many others are highly visible members of the complex community that constitutes the American umma. Not only are immigrant Muslims working out how to relate to and work with each other effectively, but they also face the question of how to coalesce with members of various African-American Muslim movements. Recent African immigrants sometimes find the mix of religion and ethnicity particularly complicating.

In the early days of Arab immigration to America around the turn of the century, many Muslims - like first-generation immigrants of all nationalities - often seized the opportunity to better themselves through menial work such as migrant labor, petty merchandizing, or mining. Many Arab Muslims became peddlers, a trade requiring little in the way of language skill, training, or capital. Others served as laborers on work gangs such as those involved in the rapidly expanding business of railroad construction in the West. As Muslim women began to join male immigrants in America, they often found employment in mills and factories, where they worked long hours under very difficult conditions. These early years were hard for Muslims in America; many suffered from loneliness, poverty, lack of English, and the absence of extended family and co-religionists.

Gradually, however, as they stayed longer, more and more Muslims realized that returning home was no longer a viable possibility, and they began to settle into the American context. They married one way or another - young men who could not find Muslim partners imported their brides from their home country or, in some cases, married outside the faith. They began to find employment in more permanent kinds of businesses, often relying on traditional skills to begin restaurants, coffeehouses, bakeries, and grocery stores. They learned English, began to become more economically independent, and sought out other Muslims for the formation of communities in which they could begin the religious education of their children.

Seldom, however, did Muslims find life in America to be easy. The United States is often said to be "a nation of immigrants," a "melting pot" for all races and ethnic identities, but racial prejudice, particularly in the era before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, certainly existed.

For many years, then, the response of many Muslim immigrants was to attempt to hide their religious and ethnic identities, to change their names to make them sound more American, and to refrain from participating in practices or adopting dress that would make them appear "different" from the average citizen. Gradually, as the Muslim immigrant community became much larger, much more diversified, much better educated, and much more articulate about its own self-understanding, attempts to blend into American society have given way to more sophisticated discussions about the importance of living in America but, at the same time, retaining a sense of one's own religious culture. Part of the context for such discussions has come from the formation of Muslim communities, Sunni and Shi'ite, across rural and urban America, and in more recent years of national Islamic organizations representing religious, political, professional, and social forms of association.

## **SETTLED ACROSS THE LAND**

Today there are few places in the United States where one does not find Muslims living, working, and sending their children to public schools; recognizable facilities for Islamic worship (mosques, renovated houses, even storefronts) are common.

The first Muslim communities in America were in the Middle West. In North Dakota, Muslims organized for prayers in the very early 1900s; in Indiana, an Islamic center was begun as early as 1914; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is the home of the oldest mosque still in use. Dearborn, Michigan, outside Detroit, has long been home to both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims from many parts of the Middle East. Many were drawn by the opportunity to work at the Ford Motor Company plant, and having formed a community, they have been joined by other Muslims. Together with Middle Eastern Christians, these Michigan Muslims form the largest Arab-American settlement in the country.

Other major American cities have figured prominently as favorable locations for Muslims immigrating to America. The shipyards in Quincy, Massachusetts, on the outskirts of Boston, have provided jobs to Muslim immigrants since the late 1800s. The current Islamic Center of New England, the dream of a small group of families who settled there in the early part of the 20th century, is now a major mosque complex serving business people, teachers, and other professionals as well as merchants and blue-collar workers.

Islam has been present and visible in New York City for over a century. For most of its history the largest city in the United States, New York has been home to a rich variety of ethnic groups, and its Muslim population has included merchant seamen, tradesmen, entertainers, white-collar professionals, and owners of major businesses. Muslims in New York represent a broad spectrum of nationalities from virtually every country in the world. Mosque-building activity has flourished in New York. National Islamic

organizations find the city a particularly fruitful place to extend their activities, and a large number of elementary and upper-level Islamic schools, as well as Muslim stores and businesses, are springing up all over the city.

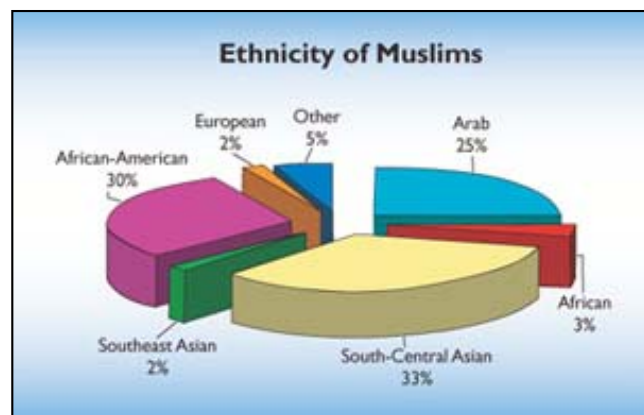
Another early home to immigrant Muslims was Chicago, Illinois, which some claim had more Muslims in residence in the early 1900s than any other American city. Today Muslims in Chicago are from the Middle East, India, Central and South Asia, and many other parts of the world. They are active in promoting their faith, providing a range of services to the Islamic community and interacting with one another as well as with non-Muslims. More than 40 Muslim groups have been established in greater Chicago.

Similarly, Muslims in the California cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco have found an agreeable climate in which to flourish. They too represent most areas of the Muslim world, most recently Afghans and Somalis and citizens of other African countries. The Islamic Center of Southern California is one of the largest Muslim entities in the United States, its well-trained staff widely known for their writings and community leadership. The center's impressive physical plant provides virtually every service that the immigrant Muslim community might possibly need.

Modern-day immigrant Muslims continue to face challenges as residents of the United States, and they are addressing these in a variety of ways. Questions of identity, occupation, dress, and acculturation are particularly significant for many American Muslims. Other major issues include the relationships among different racial and ethnic Muslim groups as well as with other American Muslims; how and where to provide an Islamic education for one's children; and appropriate roles and opportunities for women. Many are moving from a phase of dissociation from mainstream American life to much more active participation in political and social arenas. American Muslims appear to be moving into another stage of identity in which these kinds of issues are being confronted and resolved in new and creative ways. The result may well be that a truly American Islam, woven from the fabric of many national, racial, and ethnic identities, is in the process of emerging.

## POPULATION FIGURES

It is very difficult to estimate the precise number of Muslims currently living in the United States. Muslims tend to put the number somewhat higher than non-Muslim scholars and demographers; the estimated figures range widely - from around two million in one study to as many as seven million. There are several reasons for the varying estimates. First, because the U.S. Constitution mandates a separation of church and state that is reflected in American law, U.S. Census Bureau survey forms do not ask recipients about their religion. Neither does the U.S. Immigration Service collect information on the religion of immigrants. Many mosques in the United States do not have formal membership policies, and they seldom keep accurate attendance figures. In the words of University of Chicago religion scholar Martin Marty, "Counting noses has come to depend on two sources. One source is poll-takers calling during the dinner hour to ask, 'What is your religious preference?' The other source is religious leaders, on both the local and the national scene. People who respond to telephone



*(Chart based on information from the Hartford Institute for Religious Research)*

interviewers may have all kinds of motives for declaring themselves as part of this or that group, or no group at all. And people who report on the size of their congregations, denominations, and cohorts also have a variety of motives." The end result is that there is no official count of Muslims in the United States nor is there a number that is commonly accepted by all who have studied the question.

[Where Do American Muslims Live? »](#)

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## MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

WHERE DO AMERICAN MUSLIMS LIVE?

### Number of Mosques in the United States by State



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### MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

## A Mosque in Massachusetts

By Diana L. Eck

Diana L. Eck teaches at the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Since 1991, she has headed a research team at Harvard that explores the new religious diversity in the United States called the Pluralism Project. This essay is excerpted from her book *A New Religious America*, which is published by HarperSan Francisco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, and available wherever books are sold. Copyright © 2001 by Diana L. Eck. All rights reserved.

**The history of the Muslim community in Sharon, Massachusetts, is in some ways typical of a wide range of Muslim experience in America.** This new facility is a branch, an expansion really, of the Islamic Center of New England in Quincy, located just south of downtown Boston and not far from the birthplace of America's sixth president, John Quincy Adams.

The community dates back to the early 1900s when immigrants came from Syria and Lebanon to work in the Quincy shipyards. There were more Christians than Muslims at first and more men than women. Before long, the Muslims came together for prayers and special observances. Seven families, in all, lived in the area of the shipyards. Mohammad Omar Awad volunteered as the imam, the leader of the prayers. In 1934 they formed a cultural, social, and charitable organization called the Arab American Banner Society. They met in a house on South Street in Quincy, organizing informal religious lessons for their children, gathering for Friday prayers, and celebrating the two big Muslims feast days, Eid al-Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, the feast of sacrifice during the time of pilgrimage to Makkah. In 1962, after three decades of temporary housing, the leaders of this Muslim community decided to build a mosque on South



"The Islamic Center of New England is a small replica of the United Nations, with more than 25 different nationalities," says Imam Talal Eid. (*Boston Herald*)

Street. Almost as soon as the new building was dedicated in 1964, the community began to experience the impact of the new immigration. The small group of Muslims suddenly tripled in the decade between 1964 and 1974.

By the early 1980s the community took a giant step by hiring its first full-time imam, Talal Eid, who came from Lebanon and had been educated at the al-Azhar University in Cairo. He was jointly sponsored by the Quincy mosque community and the Muslim World League. Eid, along with his wife and two small daughters, arrived in New York with another Lebanese imam and his family. They had thought they would be neighbors in America, until they suddenly discovered that New England and New Orleans were more than a thousand miles apart.

Talal Eid has led the community now for over twenty years, somehow finding time for graduate work at Harvard Divinity School in the midst of an increasingly busy life. "Being an imam in America is totally different from being an imam in Lebanon," he said in an interview with the Pluralism Project. "There my role was limited to the mosque and dealing with the community, but here it is a combination: I lead the prayer, do the education, do the counseling, and deal with people of different backgrounds, cultures, nationalities, and languages. The Islamic Center of New England is a small replica of the United Nations, with more than twenty-five different nationalities." Today, Imam Eid has more than three hundred children enrolled in weekend education programs and two congregations in Quincy and Sharon.

Imam Eid's role has grown not only because of the expanding expectations of his own community, but also because of the expectations of clergy in America generally. This means taking on new roles such as hospital visitation and participation in interfaith clergy meetings and interfaith dialogue. "It's not only about educating the Muslims," he says, "but I also have to do my share in educating non-Muslims, because living in a pluralistic society you have to establish friendly relations with people who believe differently than you." As one of Boston's most prominent and visible Muslim leaders, Imam Eid participates in three or four interfaith Thanksgiving services and is called upon constantly to speak in churches, synagogues, civic organizations. He answers questions at Cambridge City Hall, rushes to the Quincy mosque for Friday prayers, then leads a session on Islam with nurses from the Children's Hospital. Imam Eid's daily rounds are as exhausting as those of the most harried of urban ministers.

Like many other Muslim communities in the U.S., the Muslim community of New England has experienced fear and pain along with growth. In March of 1990 a three-alarm fire swept through the Quincy mosque, causing an estimated \$500,000 worth of damages. The fire was attributed to arson, but the investigation was inconclusive and no



Students at the academy in Sharon, Massachusetts, enjoy a moment of play before afternoon prayer. (AP/WWP)



Although in the same room, men and women pray separately during Ramadan at Sharon's Islamic Center. (Republished with permission, Globe Newspaper Company Inc.)

one was arrested. The experience was unsettling for the community. Imam Eid recalls, "In the past, whenever a sad incident involving Muslims would take place in the Middle East or in any part of the world, people would focus on us. We received harassing calls and threatening letters. Angry people came over to demonstrate in front of the Islamic Center. And then there was the arson. If it's cloudy anywhere in the world it will rain on us here." For a year after the arson, Muslims pulled together and poured their resources and energies into rebuilding what had been destroyed -- the dome, much of the prayer hall, and the education wing.

Even before the fire, however, the Quincy community was bulging at the seams in the South Street mosque and had been looking for a larger home. In 1991 the group found a large building for sale in Milton -- an estate that had housed a Jesuit center with more than seven acres of surrounding land. It seemed perfect for a new Islamic center. Before long voices of resistance, apprehension, even suspicion were heard in Milton. Would there be too much traffic? Would there be enough parking? Would this be in keeping with the character of Milton? Dr. Mian Ashraf, a Boston surgeon and a prominent leader of the Muslim community, remembers the meeting with Milton neighbors. "They were worried we were going to destroy their neighborhood by bringing in a lot of people. A man from the newspaper asked me, 'Doctor, how many people are you expecting to come here to pray?' I said, 'Well, you know, on our great holy days, we will probably have thousands.' But of course there are only two such holy days a year. So the next day, the headline in the paper was 'Thousands of Muslims Coming for Prayers to Milton.' I was so upset."

Negotiations to buy the property went forward, but while the Islamic community was finalizing its mortgage arrangements, a group of Milton buyers purchased the property out from under them for one and a quarter million dollars in cash. "That was a bitter pill to swallow," said Ashraf "I questioned in my own mind, why did people do this to us? Is it true that they are discriminating against us? I didn't want to believe that because all my life nobody discriminated against me." Some in the Muslim community were determined to take the issue to court and fight for the right to be good neighbors. Others did not want to settle in a community that had already expressed such hostility. This is a difficult question, and it has been faced by one immigrant community after another in cities and towns across America as they negotiate to buy property and find themselves confronting the opposition of new neighbors. The community decided not to raise an uproar over the lost opportunity but to look toward the future and seek another property.

Happily, the opportunity soon came to purchase a former horse farm in Sharon, a small town of 15,500 that is more than half Jewish. "I got a telephone call," said Dr. Ashraf, "The man said, 'Doctor, I have just the place for your Islamic center. I've been reading in the newspaper what they've been trying to do to you. You want to build a house for worship, and I think I can help you.' He took me out to Sharon. He had fifty-five acres of peaceful land for sale. I fell in love with the place right away."

"Suppose the neighbors give us the same problem again?" asked Ashraf "What will we do?" This time, the community came up with a plan to introduce themselves to the town of Sharon. To begin with, they gave an educational videotape on Islam to every neighbor on the road. "We told them, 'If you have any questions, come talk to us. We'll have a meeting. We'll sit down. We'll answer your questions.'" Their proactive energy seemed to work, and the town of Sharon began to open its doors to the new Muslims. The rabbi of Temple Israel, Barry Starr, told Ashraf, "I think you are going to enrich our town. You're going to bring new things here." Starr called a meeting of the Sharon Clergy Association, and all of them had the opportunity to meet representatives of the Muslim community. The clergy voted a unanimous welcome to the Islamic Center. They printed their endorsement in the local paper, under the headline "Sharon Welcomes Islamic Center."

I found my way to the property in Sharon for the first time on the day of the groundbreaking, a rainy spring day in 1993. Appropriately, it was an interfaith groundbreaking, with rabbis, bishops, pastors, and priests -- all in hard hats -- joining the members of the Muslim community. As they turned their shovels of earth that day, many commented that they were breaking new ground for all of their religious communities. The Muslims had erected a great striped tent for the occasion, and we all crowded inside to hear the greetings and words of congratulations. I remember especially a young Muslim woman, a teenager representing the Muslim youth group, who stood on a folding chair and said the words American Muslims have said thousands of times in explaining their religious tradition to their new neighbors. "Islam means peace," she said. "I hope there will be a day here in New England, which has always been the birthplace of new ideas and great movements, when religious beliefs will not be held against anyone but will be a tribute to that person's moral strength."

Two years later the new center was open for its first ever Eid al-Fitr, the feast day at the end of Ramadan. It was a few days after the Night of Power, a sparkling late-winter day after an ice and snow storm. The frozen field of the former horse farm was a vast parking lot for the thousands who had come to pray. Dr. Ashraf announced with a sense of pride, "Today Eid is a formal holiday in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Because of our efforts, Eid is a paid holiday for Muslim workers and a religious holiday for our schoolchildren too. We need to let people know that Eid is our holiday." He shared with pleasure a letter to the American Muslim community from President Clinton. "Greetings to all those who are observing the holy month of Ramadan. As dialogue replaces confrontation....Hillary and I offer our greetings to Muslims everywhere."

After the Eid prayers, the crowd streamed down the hill, dressed in their holiday best -- bright selvar kamizes, sequined and mirrored velvet jackets, bright pink parkas, brilliant African cottons -- a festive and colorful congregation delighted and dazzled with the winter wonderland. "I have never seen an icy Eid like this!" grinned a young man from the Gambia in Africa. Juice, coffee, and doughnuts were served in the common room of the school at the base of the hill. "Eid Mubarak!" "Happy Eid!" greetings were exchanged in this growing congregation of Muslims, born in over thirty countries and forging now an American Muslim tradition.

The Islamic Center of New England is really a microcosm of Islam in America today, with its generations of history, its growing pains, its efforts to establish Islamic practice in a culturally diverse Islamic community, and its efforts to create Islamic institutions on American soil. Its saga of relations with non-Muslim neighbors is also a mirror of wider experience -- from the threats and arson attack to the zoning battles and finally the successful effort to build new bridges of relations with other communities of faith.

[Photos: Muslim Schools »](#)

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**MUSLIM SCHOOLS**



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Taking part in Cleveland, Ohio's pioneering tax-funded school voucher program, the first-grade class at Islamic School of Oasis learns about geography. (Photo by Steve Liss/TimePix)



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### EDUCATION

## Muslim Students in California

By **Mary Rourke**

Mary Rourke, a staff writer with the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper, specializes in reporting on religion. Copyright © 2001/Los Angeles Times Company

**Boys in front with their arms folded across their waists, girls in back with scarves covering their hair.** This arrangement fell into place as naturally as if the classroom where they had gathered were a mosque. Fourteen Muslim students were ready to begin their midday prayers.

Surrounded by desks, books, maps and slide projectors, the group paid no attention to the classroom chaos, nor to the racket outside the door. It was lunchtime at Palos Verdes Peninsula High School, and the campus was buzzing. More important for these boys and girls, it was Ramadan, the sacred month-long period during which Muslims are required to fast from sunup to sundown. This year, these students, ages 14 to 18, are determined to stand up for their faith through prayer in this quiet yet public way.

They say that praying together during Ramadan is one way they can show their commitment to a religion that has recently become the most discussed, criticized and defended of any in the world. "I feel that it's important to show people what my religion is all about, especially at a time like this," said freshman Rehan Muttalib, 14, whose parents are from India. "We need to clear up stereotypes."



Shabana practices her spelling in California's Huntington Beach Union School District where Arabic is taught in a pilot program. (Rick Loomis/Los Angeles Times Photo)



A young high school basketball player, who is Muslim, breaks his Ramadan fast after sundown. (Rick Loomis/Los Angeles Times Photo)

The terrorist attacks on the U.S. and the barrage of news about Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda terrorist network changed life on the campus of this upper-middle-class suburban public school, where about 285 of the 3,300 students are Muslim, according to

the school's administration office. About five years ago, a small group of the school's Muslim students formed a Muslim Student Union; the organization has taken on new resonance this semester, and the Ramadan prayer sessions are just one part of that.

The Union almost didn't exist this year-the students were so affected and distracted by world events that they missed the school's extracurricular activity registration deadline. "After Sept. 11 they were in shock," says James Maechling, the group's faculty advisor, "they couldn't get it together." Maechling is chairman of the religious studies department, as well as the world history department, which introduces major religions as part of the curriculum.

When it finally met, Maechling said the group was more focused than he has ever seen it. "Last year, there were only five or eight kids, and they met sporadically. This year, they've had an average of 20 students at meetings." A typical meeting includes a talk about some aspect of their religion by one of the students, prayers and lunch.

Two other clubs gather regularly to pray on the Palos Verdes campus: the New Life Club and the Servants of Christ Club, both organized by Christian students. Members of any religion are free to form a group, as long as they do not preach their religion or try to convert anyone, according to California's Board of Education guidelines. The study of religion is also within the boundaries of public school education, as long as the subject is presented in the context of history and culture, not religious instruction.

Most of the Muslim students at Palos Verdes High were born in the U.S. to parents who emigrated from Iran, Egypt, India and other Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Like their schoolmates, they face the usual social and academic peer pressures, but this fall they are also contending with a pervading mistrust of Muslims.

"At first, they scattered," Maechling said. "The day of the attacks they had a lump in their throats. It was too much for them." Some of the students who planned to join the Muslim Student Union were advised by fellow Muslims on campus to avoid calling attention to themselves. "They said, 'Don't do this,'" recalled junior Josh Mansour, 16, one of the leaders of the student union. The advice to blend in came from non-practicing Muslim students, he said. "They think Islam is a radical religion."

He sees it another way. "There are a lot of Muslim students on campus," he said. "Some of us decided it's important to practice what we believe, together, as a sign of unity." Though their backgrounds vary, these students are from observant families, and practicing their religion is not new to them. However, this year Ramadan carries larger responsibilities and commitments.

On the first day, several of the students recited from the Koran in Arabic during prayer time. One of them, Zeyad Maasarani, 16, learned the language at home. His mother taught it to him. He keeps up with it by watching Arabic language television. He and several other students said for them it seems urgent to stand up for their faith. But they also admitted to teenage insecurities about being judged by other students.

"I want to be seen as a regular teenager on campus," Muttalib said. "But I also want to be accepted as a Muslim, not something different or wrong." He said he is attending the Ramadan prayers on campus because he might not get to them on his own. Other students, however, said they feel safer, praying together. "We need morale building," Mansour said. "A lot of Muslims here and around the world are having problems. We want them to know they're not alone."

Asked about Bin Laden and al Qaeda, some of the students turned red-faced. "I don't think there are Muslim fundamentalists," Maasarani responded fervently. "There are

corrupt governments and extremists."

Muttalib was a bit more objective. "I see the Taliban and Osama bin Laden not as Muslims who practice the religion correctly but as people who misunderstand the religion," he said. "Most Muslims try to practice the core of the religion. I do."

Just last month, Maddy Ghorob, 14, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Iran, made a big decision about her style of dress. Women are not required to wear a head scarf, which is seen as a sign of modesty and a signal that they are trying to live by Muslim teachings that forbid sex outside of marriage and alcohol, among other things. While most of the girls who attended the Ramadan prayers wore Western clothes and only covered their hair to pray, Ghorob changed her entire wardrobe when she "took the veil." She now wears a long skirt and long-sleeve top as well, to completely conceal her figure.

"I swore I never would wear the veil," she said. As for her figure-concealing dress, she added, "my goal used to be to wear a size two, date and go to proms. Now, I want to be identified as Muslim. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Ghorob and others in the Muslim Student Union say that the vast majority of the Muslim students on campus are steering clear of anything that identifies them that way. "They're trying so hard to fit in, I can't tell the Muslims from everyone else," said Dania Arafeh, 14, one of Ghorob's best friends.

Arafeh started covering her hair with a scarf three years ago. Born in the U.S. the child of Egyptian-and Palestinian-born parents, she refers to women as precious jewels, citing the Koran as her source. "It doesn't mean a woman is any less if she covers herself," she said. "It's for her protection. Why give yourself away too soon?"

For decades, progressive Muslim and other religious leaders in the U.S. have advised new immigrants to leave their religious garb at home and dress Western style to fit better into U.S. society. Arafeh's fervor for traditional garb suggests a different vision for the future. "It'd be so cool if people from every faith wore their religious clothing," she said. "We'd all learn more about each other that way."

As Arafeh and Ghorob stood talking outside Maechling's classroom after the first day of Ramadan prayers, Bahareh Shayegan-Fatemi introduced herself to them. She had attended their prayer gathering but sat on the sidelines, watching.

"I came here four months ago from Iran," she explained to the other girls. "I didn't know any Muslims, so I hid myself and my ways." Her T-shirt and jeans helped prove her point. In Iran, women are required to wear a veil and robe that covers them. "I am so surprised," she said, suddenly giggly and breathless. "When you are alone, you are a drop of water. But here with the other Muslim students, you are part of the sea, one of many drops."

Shayegan-Fatemi couldn't say whether she would ever dress in traditional Muslim dress in the U.S. She wasn't even sure whether she would join the students again for Ramadan prayers.

"I'm so surprised," she said. "I need some time."

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### EDUCATION

A STORY OF MUSLIM LIFE IN AMERICA

## Portrait of a Teacher

"I teach in the American public schools. I also teach my own children in Islamic school."

--Rawia Ismail, Teacher, Toledo, Ohio

**"I'm a schoolteacher in public school in Toledo, Ohio in the United States of America.** I also teach my own children in Saturday school, Islamic school.

"I was born in Beirut, Lebanon and came to the United States in 1984. I have four beautiful children. I decided to become a teacher because I enjoy working with the children more than anything.

"At the Islamic Center I teach the kids about an hour of religion, an hour of Arabic, they have some lunch in between, and then we all do prayers together. This is something I have found to be the only way of life for me and my family. Being a Muslim means everything to me.

"I wear a hijab in the public school classroom where I teach. Children ask me a lot of questions. I have never had any child that thought it was weird or anything like that. And they like the fact, both them and their parents, that they're introduced to a different culture and a different religion.

"In my neighborhood, I see that all the non-Muslims care a lot about educating their children and family values, just as much as I do. I didn't quite see any prejudice anywhere in my neighborhood after September 11.

"In public school, I work a lot at getting the kids to understand that my religion is a lot like theirs, and the most important thing is that we should work on our similarities rather than our differences."



(McCann-Erickson)

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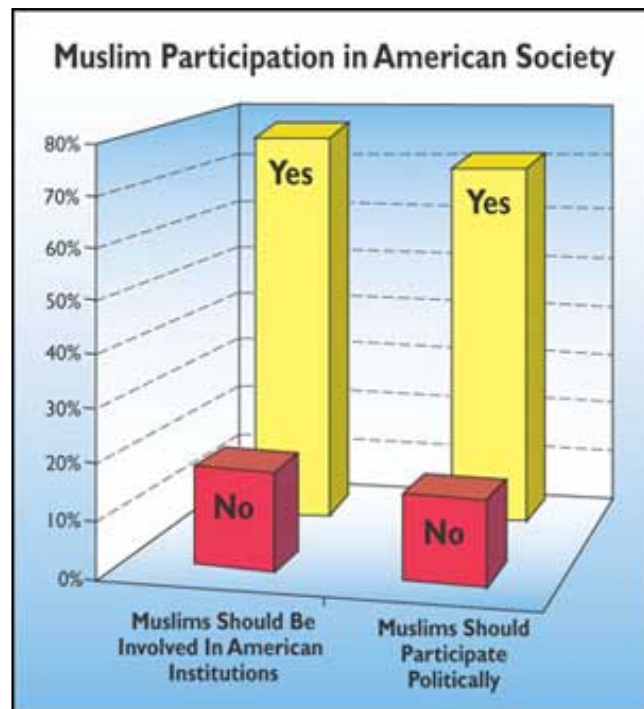
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### VARIETIES OF WORSHIP

## Demographic Facts

- Mosques in the United States: **1,209**
- American Muslims associated with a mosque: **2 million**
- Increase in number of mosques since 1994: **25 percent**
- Proportion of mosques founded since 1980: **62 percent**
- Average number of Muslims associated with each mosque in the United States: **1,625**
- U.S. mosque participants who are converts: **30 percent**
- American Muslims who "strongly agree" that they should participate in American institutions and the political process: **70 percent**
- U.S. mosques attended by a single ethnic group: **7 percent**
- U.S. mosques that have some Asian, African-American, and Arab members: **nearly 90 percent**
- Ethnic origins of regular participants in U.S. mosques:



(Chart based on information from the Hartford Institute for Religious Research)

**South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Afghani) = 33 percent**

**African-America = 30 percent**

**Arab = 25 percent**

**Sub-Saharan African = 3.4 percent**

**European (Bosnian, Tartar, Kosovar, etc.) = 2.1 percent**

**White American = 1.6 percent**

**Southeast Asian (Malaysian, Indonesian, Filipino) = 1.3 percent**

**Caribbean = 1.2 percent**

**Turkish = 1.1 percent**

**Iranian = 0.7 percent**

**Hispanic/Latino = 0.6 percent**

- U.S. mosques that feel they strictly follow the Koran and Sunnah: **more than 90 percent**
- U.S. mosques that feel the Koran should be interpreted with consideration of its purposes and modern circumstances: **71 percent**
- U.S. mosques that provide some assistance to the needy: **nearly 70 percent**
- U.S. mosques with a full-time school: **more than 20 percent**

The information above was drawn from the "Mosque in America: A National Portrait," a survey released in April 2001. It is part of larger study of American congregations called "Faith Communities Today," coordinated by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religious Research in Connecticut. Muslim organizations cosponsoring the survey are the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Islamic Society of North America, the Ministry of Imam W. Deen Muhammed, and the Islamic Circle of North America.

*Charts throughout this publication are from the same study.*

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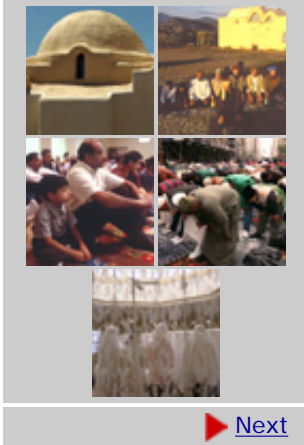
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### *Varieties of Worship* **PATTERNS OF PRAYER**



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Founded 20 years ago in northern New Mexico, and built in the North African style, Dar al Islam houses a mosque, a school, and a hospitality complex. *(AP Photo/Sarah Martone)*



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### VARIETIES OF WORSHIP

## American Mosques

**More than 1,200 mosques and Islamic centers have existed in this country,** according to a survey conducted in the latter part of the 1990s, but fewer than 100 were actually designed as mosques. The survey revealed that most Islamic congregations in the United States began in buildings that had been constructed for other purposes -- fire stations, theaters, warehouses, and shops.

The situation changed, however, after 1965 when the first large-scale influx of Muslims from various countries came to the United States. Mosques then began to be built for the sole purpose of ministering to the Muslim community as houses of worship and community centers. The great variety of religious diversity and ethnicity among American Muslims today is reflected in the variety of building design and organization.

The photographer and chronicler of mosque architecture, Dr. Omar Khalidi, a senior research scholar at the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, explains the three types of mosque architecture that now flourish in the United States.

"First, there are mosques that embody a traditional design



Curbside view of the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana. The building has elements of typical midwestern suburban architecture. (Courtesy Saudi Aramco World)



In Pullman, Washington, a traditional minaret graces this Islamic center. (Courtesy Omar Khalidi)



The interior space of the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana. (Courtesy Saudi Aramco World)



An interior view of the Mosque of the Nation of Islam in Chicago, Illinois. (Daniel Laine/CORBIS)



Built in 1979, The Islamic Society of North America in Plainfield, Indiana, has an austere character in which the mosque, the library and the office block form a unified scheme. (Courtesy Saudi Aramco World)



The innovative design of the Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico, rethinks the possibilities of geometry, space, structure, and material. (Kirk Gittings)

transplanted from one -- or several -- Islamic lands," Dr. Khalidi points out. "Second, there are those that represent a reinterpretation of tradition, sometimes combined with elements of American architecture. Third are the designs that are entirely innovative, like those of the Islamic Society of North America's headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana."

Most of the mosques in all three categories also function as classrooms, libraries, conference centers, bookshops, kitchens, and social halls, even as residential apartments.

Another important consideration in mosque architecture is the space for women to worship. In America, women generally are an integral part of mosque activities and play a very active role in the Muslim community. In a typical American Muslim family, the entire family turns out for worship, necessitating separate space for women, usually at a mezzanine level.

In many instances, mosque architecture in North America reflects the prevailing building designs of the area. "Over time a standard design will evolve which will be a happy blend between nostalgia and innovation," Dr. Khalidi predicts. "The new emerging mosques in



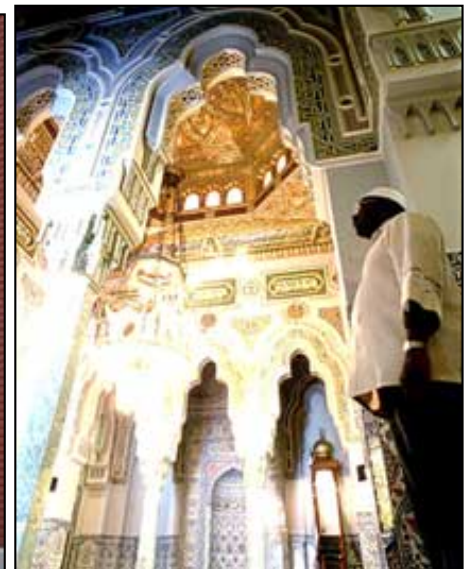
In Tempe, Arizona, a more traditional mosque with dome and minaret. (Courtesy Omar Khalidi)



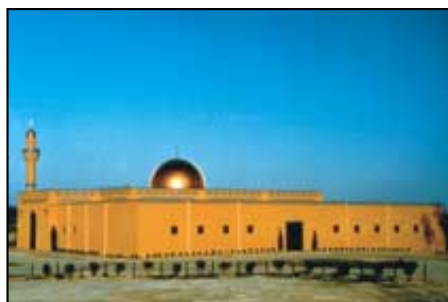
Since its completion in 1991, The Islamic Cultural Center has become a landmark in downtown New York City. (© Wolfgang Hoyt/Esto/Architect Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill)



The Islamic center of Southern California in Beverly Hills. (Scott Alfieri/Gamma Liaison)



A member of the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C, pauses after Friday services to admire the beautiful interior of traditional design. (Ken Lambert)



The Islamic Society of Greater Houston, Texas, built in the early '90s. (Courtesy Omar Khalidi)

the West are a far cry  
from just domes and  
minarets."

[Photos: Observing Ramadan »](#)

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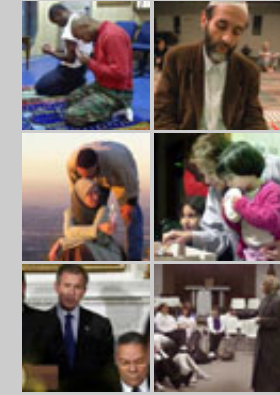
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### Varieties of Worship **OBSERVING RAMADAN**



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U.S. Navy sailors of Islamic faith pray aboard ship on the first day of Ramadan in 2001. (AP/WWP)

*Muslim Life*  
**IN AMERICA**

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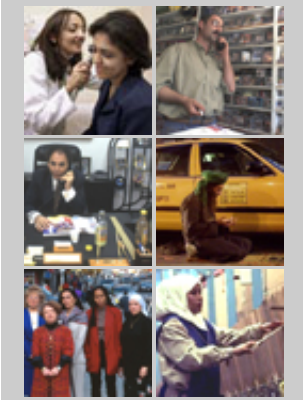
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*In the World of Work*  
**ON THE JOB**



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Dr. Leila Haddad examines a patient at a community health center in Dearborn, Michigan. (AP/WWP)

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**IN AMERICA**

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## Publications

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### IN THE WORLD OF WORK

## Beliefs and Banking

By Sheryl Jean

Sheryl Jean is a business reporter with the *Pioneer Press*, a newspaper in St. Paul, Minnesota. Copyright © 2001 PioneerPlanet / St. Paul (Minnesota) Pioneer Press / TwinCities.com.

**Abdirizak Bille of Minneapolis, a practicing Muslim, faced a quandary when he decided to start a small bus transportation service.** Bille needed a loan to get the business going, but traditional Islamic law prohibits him from paying interest, or *reba*, on debt.

Until recently, options have been limited for Muslim entrepreneurs like Bille. But in May, because of new efforts by Twin Cities groups, Bille was able to obtain interest-free financing for his firm, which transports immigrants to English classes.

Bille financed a 34-person school bus with \$15,000 borrowed from the Neighborhood Development Center in St. Paul. The group built a \$2,000 profit into his repayment plan. Bille pays no interest, and the center still earns an annual return because the profit replaces interest.

"I prefer to stay out of business than participate with interest," said Bille. Without the alternative financing, he would have needed to save enough money to buy the bus, or try to borrow money interest-free from friends, he said.

Twin Cities Muslims have spent the past year educating government officials, lenders and civic leaders about the need to accommodate Islamic beliefs through alternative financing. Banks say strict regulations have kept them from stepping up to meet the need.



An interest-free finance agreement with a neighborhood development center in St. Paul, Minnesota, enables this Muslim man to help pay for a van and equipment for his food delivery business that caters to homes and businesses in the Twin Cities area. (Richard Marshall/St. Paul Pioneer)



Muslim law prohibits giving or receiving interest, so buying or selling property may be difficult. This young man, a homeowner, waits to discuss some business information from his father in East Africa by e-mail. (John Doman/St. Paul Pioneer)

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(Complete text at  
<http://www.twincities.com/mld/pioneerpress/4406008.htm>)

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## Publications

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### INTO THE MAINSTREAM

## In the Words of President George W. Bush



### A CALL FOR RESPECT

**"When we think of Islam we think of a faith that brings comfort to a billion people** around the world. Billions of people find comfort and solace and peace. And that's made brothers and sisters out of every race. America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law professors, members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads. And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect."

*Remarks at the Islamic Center Washington, D.C., soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks*

### THE SAME GRIEF

**"It's important for our fellow Americans to understand that Americans of Muslim faith share the same grief** that we all share from what happened to our country; that they're just as proud of America as I am proud of America; that they love our country as much as I love our country. They share my profound belief that no American should be judged by appearance, by ethnic background, or by religious faith. I believe that strongly, and so do they."

*Remarks at Afghan Embassy in Washington, D.C., September 10, 2002*

### A HOLIDAY GREETING

**"Warm greetings to Muslims across the United States as you celebrate the Eid al-Adha holiday** and join in spirit with the millions gathered in Mecca to uphold the traditions of one of your most sacred feasts. America was built on a strong spiritual foundation, and the celebration of faith is central to our lives. As you celebrate the annual Hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam, you honor the great sacrifice and devotion of Abraham as recognized by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By educating others about your religious traditions, you enrich the lives of others in your local communities. The variety of nations and cultures represented by those who travel to Mecca each year, and the varied ways in which Muslims contribute to American life across the United States, are powerful reminders that ethnic and racial differences need not divide us when we share common values and purposes. By building strong foundations of mutual respect, we can achieve peace and reconciliation in our world. Laura joins me in sending best wishes for a joyous holiday celebration."

*Message on Eid al-Adha*

[Portrait of a Scientist »](#)

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## Publications

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### INTO THE MAINSTREAM

#### A STORY OF MUSLIM LIFE IN AMERICA **Portrait of a Scientist**

"I am basically an immigrant here, and the tolerance and support I have received myself is remarkable."

--Dr. E. Zerhouni, Director, National Institutes of Health

**"The notion that science can improve health has been borne out in Islam for many centuries.** There is a clear belief that through knowledge you can improve not just medicine, but the lot of man.

"I was born in Algeria, in a small town called Nidroma. I became very interested in medicine because I had an uncle who was a radiologist.

"I came to America in 1975, and everybody said, 'Johns Hopkins is the real Mecca of medicine, if you could go there, you'd do great.' I was totally embraced by the people there, my professors. Everybody told me, 'We're all immigrants here, we're all from different places, and we all meld together.'

"The mission of the National Institutes of Health is to advance knowledge about medical care and diseases that affect mankind. There are 18,000 people working here in Washington, and 45,000 projects that the institute funds throughout the world.

"When we develop a vaccine, it is made available worldwide. When we develop a new treatment, it is available worldwide. So it impacts on the health of everyone on earth.

"I was nominated to this position by President George Bush and confirmed by the United States Senate. What I can tell Muslims around the world is, I don't think there is any other country in the world where different people from different countries are as accepted and welcomed as members of a society and as good citizens."



(AP/WWP; McCann-Erickson)

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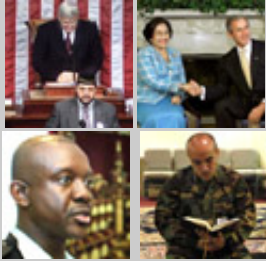
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*Into the Mainstream*  
**OFFICIAL  
RECOGNITION**



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Imam Yahya Hindi gives the opening prayer in the House of Representatives, November 15, 2001, the last day the House was in session before Ramadan. House Speaker Dennis Hastert listens with bowed head. (*Associated Press*)

*Muslim Life*  
**IN AMERICA**

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### INTO THE MAINSTREAM

## Native Deen's Muslim Rap

By Phyllis McIntosh

Phyllis McIntosh is a free-lance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

**The sound is the familiar street rap so popular with American teenagers.**

But the message is decidedly more upbeat than the dark themes of drugs and violence that permeate most rap. Consider the words from a song called "Intentions: "

*"My intentions cannot bring the reward, when they're out of line. So I pray to Allah to help me, to do everything for him only."*

Known as Muslim rap, this new musical phenomenon strikes a chord especially with African-Americans who make up about a third of all Muslims in the United States. The group behind the sound is Native Deen, three black men in the Washington, D.C., area who grew up as devout Muslims and want to use their talents to inspire other young people to keep the faith amid the pressures and temptations of modern life.

All three -- Joshua Salaam, 28, Naeem Muhammad, and Abdul-Malik Ahmad, both 26 -- are married and fathers of young children. When not making music, Salaam manages the civil rights division of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Muhammad works for an information technology company, and Ahmad designs web sites and teaches martial arts.

As Native Deen, they perform at Islamic conferences, fundraisers, weddings, and holiday gatherings - any place, they say, "where wholesome Islamic entertainment is needed." They shun clubs, bars, and discos, or any venue where Islamic prohibitions against alcohol, dancing, and many forms of music are violated. Most of their songs deal with growing up Muslim in America, remembering to make morning prayers and practice the faith without getting too caught up in material possessions and "the TV shows and the music videos." A few numbers simply exhort listeners to avoid drugs, or sex, or



In a rap style that is totally American and acceptable to all age groups, these three young men from around the Washington, D.C. area inspire other young Muslims to practice their faith.

*(Courtesy Native Deen)*

cheating in school with no specific mention of religion.

The group is careful to craft lyrics acceptable even to the most sensitive parental ear. "We make sure we don't put stuff in our songs that we don't want a four-year-old to repeat," says group leader Salaam. "Our music is something that parents and children can enjoy together. In fact, the parents encourage the kids to listen."

Because many Muslims believe that the teachings of the prophet Muhammad forbid the playing of most musical instruments, Native Deen uses only traditional drums in its live performances. Their tapes and CDs include a wider variety of percussion instruments, but a message at the beginning assures listeners that they will hear no wind or string instruments, which are considered especially taboo.

The three musicians formed Native Deen in 2000 after years of performing together and separately at Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) camps and other Islamic events. They and other artists recorded a series of tapes, called MYNA-RAPS, sales of which help support Muslim youth activities. "When we started traveling and performing together regularly, we decided, Let's call ourselves something," Salaam says. "Deen means religion or way of life in Arabic, so we picked the name Native Deen to signify the religion that's naturally in you."

Combining rap with Muslim themes wasn't a conscious decision, Salaam says. "Growing up Muslim and black in America, those were our experiences. That's naturally what came off our lips."

Word of mouth has been sufficient to land the young musicians gigs at Islamic events in California, Texas, and Illinois -- even an invitation to the United Kingdom, which they had to turn down because of a previous commitment. They attracted a following in Malaysia after a Malaysian television crew visiting the United States did a feature on them.

In the past few months, they've achieved a new measure of fame thanks to a radio show, "On The Scene with Native Deen," that airs every Friday evening on a local Islamic radio station and is broadcast worldwide via the Islamic Broadcasting Network (IBN) Web site. The program, a combination of music, patter, and live discussion, has been "very successful in attracting the younger crowd," mainly high school and college students, says IBN's acting program director Sohaib Elsayed. The performers "convey personality, they're engaging," he says. "They take the day-to-day issues of growing up Muslim in America and put them in a more humorous light."

The feedback the group gets from young fans is especially gratifying," Salaam says. "People come up and tell us how a song helped them get through ninth grade or inspired them to do different things by reminding them of their faith and that God is there -- and in a hip way."

With Native Deen, Muslims in the United States also "feel like they have something of their own," he adds. "They say now we can have entertainment at our events, and it doesn't have to be in Arabic. Our music is American, it's hip, and it's something everybody can be comfortable with."

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