



Istanbul Zaim University

Examining American Islam

Abdullah Al-Arian

Hafsah Kanjwal

Butheina Hamdah

Editor - Riad Alarian

Center for Islam and Global Affairs
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Tel.: +90-212-692-9689

Fax.: +90-212-693-8229

E-mail: ciga@izu.edu.tr

Web: ciga.izu.edu.tr

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Foreword

Explaining the cause and character of one's religious or national identity is often like constructing a rather large, if not intimidating, jigsaw puzzle. Daunting as the task may initially seem, we can nonetheless organize the puzzle pieces into something reasonably coherent with just a bit of effort. But if answering what it means to "be a Muslim" or "be an American" is simply a matter of putting together the pieces of a puzzle, then addressing the far more nebulous question of what it means to "be an American Muslim" is like composing the overture to an orchestral piece.

What does it mean to have an American Muslim identity? Is there such a thing as an American Islam? If so, what do its adherents represent and what exactly does it mean to "be an American Muslim?" These are questions which, for at least the better part of the last two decades, have come to occupy the minds of American Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Reacting to the various social and political pressures they now face, American Muslims have worked tirelessly to explain the relationship between their religious and national identities. Many of these efforts have involved insisting on the allegedly natural, longstanding harmony that exists between Islamic norms, on the one hand, and American values, on the other. Indeed, there is no shortage of editorials and public statements from American Muslim leaders and thinkers affirming this belief.

Of all Muslim minority groups in the world, American Muslims are arguably the most socially assimilated, and are noticeably proud of that fact. Unlike French or British Muslims, for example, American Muslims have more seamlessly integrated into the fabric of American society. Partly for this reason, American Muslims have come to think of themselves as admirably different from the rest of the Muslim world. If anything does truly distinguish American Muslims, it is surely this belief in their own extraordinariness.

In line with this belief, American Muslims are increasingly accepting, adopting, and defending social and political causes that are traditionally looked at with moral suspicion by the majority of Muslims worldwide. This ranges from the promotion of non-heteronormative sexual lifestyles to the endorsement of Israeli claims to Palestinian land. Many American Muslims have chosen to break with the consensus of their religious community on these and other matters, in large part to more closely align with the general, mainstream American consensus. These realities make it all the more difficult to navigate what it means to be both a Muslim and an American today.

To better understand these timely and complicated issues, This volume has three essays from American Muslim scholars and researchers, analyzing various elements of the American Muslim experience. The contributions in this collection will broadly inspect the relationship between so-called “American” and “Islamic” values—paying particular attention to the impact of the former on the latter. To varying degrees, the essays discuss the following questions: What is American Islam? What makes American Islam unique? To what extent has American Islam been influenced by liberal principles, and what are those principles? To what extent have these influences been positive or negative? What social and political forces, if any, influenced the “liberalization” of Islam in America? What are some of the ways in which this phenomenon is arguably evident?

Department of Islamophobia and Muslim Minorities Studies (IMSS)
Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA)

Editor's Note

In July 2018, Muftah Magazine published a special collection titled “Examining American Islam” that included six essays from American Muslim academics, writers, and community leaders. The collection broadly analyzed the relationship between “American” and “Islamic” values and sought to interrogate the ideas that moderate and complicate “American Islam” as a discrete sociocultural formation. With permission from Muftah Magazine, the Center for Islam and Global Affairs is republishing three of the essays from the special collection in the hope of expanding the discussion on American Islam and galvanizing both popular and scholarly examinations of its meaning and future. To access the original collection, please visit <https://muftah.org/special-collection-american-islam/>. To learn more about Muftah Magazine please visit <https://muftah.org>.

I. Is American Islam Exceptional?

Abdullah Al-Arian

In a 2005 essay in the *Boston Review*, the late historian Howard Zinn traced the notion of American exceptionalism from the earliest European settlements in North America to the presidency of George W. Bush. The American invasion and occupation of Iraq, Zinn argued, represented the fulfillment of a longstanding belief that “the United States alone has the right, whether by divine sanction or moral obligation, to bring civilization, or democracy, or liberty to the rest of the world, by violence if necessary.”¹ That same year, an article entitled “Making Muslims part of the solution” appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, asserting that not only had Muslims properly assimilated into the broader American society, but that they had begun “to actively participate in the struggle against religious extremism” that was a key feature of the Global War on Terror.² Citing a prominent American Muslim leader’s journey from latent radical to vocal advocate for the Bush agenda, the author boasted that American Muslims had come to recognize “the opportunities the liberal US political system offers them” to contest their marginalization.

Nearly a decade later, the same American Muslim leader co-authored an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Let Islamic reform start in America.” Together with his co-writer, he situated American Muslims as leading agents in a global Islamic revival due to the fact that “they have the freedom and the intellectual capacity to create

¹ Howard Zinn. “The power and the glory: Myths of American exceptionalism.” *Boston Review* 30, no. 3 (2005).

² George Melloan, “Making Muslims Part of the Solution,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB111205503593491358>.

positive change for Islamic reform.”³ After denouncing the repressive practices and abuses committed by foreign authoritarian rulers and militant groups in the name of Islam, the authors concluded that “Islam liberated us from the shackles of religious tyranny, and we will struggle to liberate ourselves by declaring our independence from the tyrants and clerics who have usurped authority and religion in claiming sovereignty over Muslims world-wide.”⁴

If the language of the piece evokes a broader discourse of exceptionalism that has characterized American attitudes toward the rest of the world, that is the end result of a process several decades in the making. Debates surrounding the evolution of Muslim communities in the United States have long featured in general discussions about the integration of religious and ethnic minorities. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, such questions became fraught with greater political stakes and global implications. In light of some of these recent developments, it is worth exploring the extent to which American Muslims have incorporated notions of American exceptionalism into their communal identity, and in turn, developed a distinct notion of American Muslim exceptionalism.

Instrumentalizing History

Recent years have seen a surge in the number of scholars documenting the history of Islam in America. These historians have produced rich studies that have shed new light on the experiences⁵ of West African Muslims brought to the Americas as slaves, the

³ Salam Al-Marayati and Maher Hathout, “Let Islamic Reform Start in America,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2014. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/salam-al-marayati-and-maher-hathout-let-islamic-reform-start-in-america-1414713552>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sylviane A. Diouf. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas.* New York University Press, 2013.

establishment⁶ of Islamic institutions by a wave of immigrant workers during the early twentieth century, and the broader continuities and changes that, by the end of the century, had characterized⁷ the Muslim community's evolution as a hyphenated American identity in its own right. By underscoring the complexity and diversity of the Muslim experience, these valuable works have demonstrated, among other things, that American Islam precludes a solitary, linear narrative. Rather, as scholar Sherman Jackson has shown,⁸ the contemporary American Muslim community reflects multiple genealogies that are alternately in congruence and in conflict with one another.

While Islam in America dates back to the colonial era in which, by some accounts ten to fifteen percent of slaves brought from West Africa were Muslim, the contemporary Black Muslim community originated primarily in the indigenized movements of Islamic consciousness that emerged during the early twentieth century, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. The most recent wave of Muslim migrants, who arrived predominantly from the Middle East and South Asia following the relaxation of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, experienced similar challenges to earlier waves of migration that were motivated by political unrest and economic need. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, these experiences had seemingly converged following the large-scale adoption of Sunni orthodoxy by Black Muslims and the gradual assimilation and indigenization of immigrant Muslims and their descendants.

As American Muslims increasingly amalgamate their experiences and incorporate them into the larger corpus of American

⁶ Sally, Howell. *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim American Past*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁷ Kambiz, GhaneaBassiri. *A history of Islam in America: From the new world to the new world order*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁸ Sherman A, Jackson. *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the third resurrection*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2005.

history, they face the challenge of avoiding triumphalist narratives that lend themselves to exceptionalist readings. In his critique of such narratives, historian Eric Foner posits that Americans have largely constructed a linear view of their history, one of overcoming odds and upholding ideals.⁹ America's westward expansion, for instance, has been presented as the basis for the country's democratic principles and self-reliant individualism.

In the case of American Muslims, the selective appropriation of history occurs in similar fashion. The narrow reading of the past goes beyond the ostensible purpose of demonstrating belonging. Rather, it can operate to construct a narrative of historical inclusion that weaves Muslims into the overarching story of American exceptionalism. Muslims can trace their roots to many of the most definitive moments of American history. They participated¹⁰ in the American Revolution, contributed¹¹ to the nation's industrialization, and gave their lives in two world wars. They serve as living proof of America as a melting pot, bolstering its economic and cultural greatness.¹² Recent polling has affirmed that they have assimilated far more successfully than Muslim immigrants in Europe, leading one commentator to note¹³ in the

⁹ Eric, Foner. "American Exceptionalism, American Freedom." *The Montréal Review*, January 2013. www.themontrealreview.com/2009/American-Exceptionalism-American-Freedom.php.

¹⁰ Ayla, Amon. "African Muslims in Early America: Religion, Literacy, and Liberty." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, February 21, 2017. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/collection/african-muslims-early-america>.

¹¹ Susan, Kim. "The Auto Industry's Forgotten Legacy: Diversity." *Time*, December 11, 2008 <https://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1865121,00.html>.

¹² Stuart, Jeffries. "The Muslims who shaped America – from brain surgeons to rappers." *The Guardian*, December 8, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/donald-trump-famous-muslims-us-history>.

¹³ Megan G. Oprea. "Is the U.S. Better at Assimilating Immigrants Than Europe?" *The National Interest*, August 9, 2017. nationalinterest.org/feature/america-better-assimilating-immigrants-europe-21846.

conservative outlet *The National Interest* that in the United States Muslims “vote and participate in the democratic system and believe that through hard work anyone can succeed, the bedrock of American political philosophy.”

It is worth noting that the adoption of the language of exceptionalism has occurred largely against the backdrop of contentious public debates and efforts by political elites to erase¹⁴ Muslims from American history, peg¹⁵ them as suspicious foreigners, and exclude¹⁶ them from spaces of political contestation. It was in the face of such pressures that in 2007, Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, chose¹⁷ to take his oath of office on a copy of the Qur’an once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson’s Qur’an has had a mythic aura¹⁸ attached to it ever since, sparking wider discussions¹⁹ of the pluralistic worldview of the nation’s founders, and in particular their acceptance of Islam as a faith to be practiced freely in the United States.

¹⁴ Margari, Hill. "Islamophobia and Black American Muslims." *Huffpost*, December 15, 2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/margari-hill/islamophobia-and-black-am_b_8785814.html.

¹⁵ Kaveh, Waddell. "America Already Had a Muslim Registry." *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/12/america-already-had-a-muslim-registry/511214/>

¹⁶ Teresa, Watanabe. "Frustrated U.S. Muslims Feel Marginalized Again.", *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2002. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-sep-27-me-muslim27-story.html>

¹⁷ Frederic J. Frommer. "Ellison Uses Thomas Jefferson's Quran." *Washington Post*, January 5, 2007. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/05/AR2007010500512.html>

¹⁸ Peter, Manseau. "Why Thomas Jefferson Owned a Qur’an." *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 31, 2018. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/why-thomas-jefferson-owned-qur-1-180967997/>

¹⁹ Denise A. Spellberg. "Why Jefferson’s vision of American Islam matters today ." *The Conversation*, June 1, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/why-jeffersons-vision-of-american-islam-matters-today-78155>

Insofar as it lends historical continuity to the current struggle against Islamophobia as a political and cultural force, embracing the narrative of American exceptionalism can be both powerful and appropriate. Nonetheless, doing so without recognizing the historical expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment, as seen through a more critical reading of that same history, can be problematic. While framers of the U.S. Constitution expressed²⁰ hostility to the possibility of integrating any religious tradition into the American political system, they singled out Islam as particularly incompatible with American ideals. And as historian Karine Walther recently demonstrated,²¹ U.S. foreign policy throughout the nineteenth century was driven by feelings of Christian supremacy toward Muslim societies to a far greater degree than previously thought.

Similarly, the civil rights movement offers a powerful historical antecedent for current struggles against systematic discrimination. But as some scholars have cautioned, adopting a triumphalist reading of that history serves to negate its most instructive lessons. In 2016, philosopher and critic Cornel West noted²² that the sanitized version of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life had become so popularized that "much of America did not know the radical King." In the eyes of West and other critics, King's true legacy defied the broader narrative of American exceptionalism: King indeed had a dream. But it was not the American dream. King's dream was rooted in the American Dream—it was what the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness looked like for people enslaved and Jim Crowed, terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized by American laws and American citizens. The litmus test for realizing King's dream was neither

²⁰ Richard, Berstein. "Thomas Jefferson's Quran: How Islam Shaped the Founders." *Daily Beast*, July 11, 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/thomas-jeffersons-quran-how-islam-shaped-the-founders>

²¹ Karine, Walther. "Islamophobia Is an American Tradition." *History News Network*, November 11, 2015. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/160982>

²² Martin Luther King Jr. *The radical king.*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/239755/the-radical-king-by-martin-luther-king-jr-cornel-west/9780807034521/>

a black face in the White House nor a black presence on Wall Street. Rather, the fulfillment of his dream was for all poor and working people to live lives of decency and dignity.

Those words became particularly instructive following the death of the most iconic symbol of Islam in America just a few months later. As Americans mourned Muhammad Ali's death and celebrated a life of great courage and sacrifice, his legacy became dutifully integrated into the narrative of an America that had overcome its historic struggles with racial injustice. When the nation's political elites lined up to pay their respects to Ali, who at one time could lay claim to the title of most hated man in America, they appropriated the personal indignities he endured and reframed them as part of the story of American progress. Reflecting on Ali's achievements, Barack Obama observed²³ that "his victory helped us get used to the America we recognize today."

Commenting on Ali's death, Bill Clinton wrote²⁴, "we watched him grow from the brash self-confidence of youth and success into a manhood full of religious and political convictions that led him to make tough choices and live with the consequences." Of course, anyone aware of Ali's denunciation of racism at home and imperialism abroad and the toll it took on his life knew that the nation did more than "watch" his journey. Even Donald Trump, who would ride a wave of anti-Muslim

²³Arnie Seipel. "Read: President Obama's Remembrance Of Muhammad Ali." *National Public Radio*, June 4, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/06/04/480743833/read-president-obamas-remembrance-of-muhammad-ali>

²⁴"Statement From President Clinton and Secretary Clinton on the Passing of Muhammad Ali." *Clinton Foundation*, June 4, 2016. <https://www.clintonfoundation.org/press-releases/statement-president-clinton-and-secretary-clinton-passing-muhammad-ali>

bigotry to the White House later that fall, offered²⁵ a note of condolences for “a truly great champion and a wonderful guy.”

Owing to the prevailing political climate, American Muslims reflecting on Ali’s legacy emphasized²⁶ his ability to “normalize” Islam in the United States and, through his lived example, demonstrate the compatibility of his faith with his love²⁷ for his nation. As Muslims continue to be systematically targeted in the age of the War on Terror, it would seem fitting to produce²⁸ an unassailable icon who stood as the community’s peace ambassador²⁹, not only to the rest of the country, but to a “troubled” Muslim world as well. There are, however, limits to such a narrative, especially in its inability to confront persistent structural abuses that are often rendered invisible in part due to the dominant mythology surrounding a “good Muslim hero.” There was perhaps no more painful reminder of this than when U.S. border agents detained³⁰

²⁵ David Smith. "Muhammad Ali tributes led by Barack Obama: The Greatest. Period." *The Guardian*, June 5, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/04/barack-obama-muhammad-ali-tributes>

²⁶ Matthew Bell. "Even at his funeral, Muhammad Ali wanted to share his Muslim faith with the world." *The World*, June 9, 2016 <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-06-09/even-his-funeral-muhammad-ali-wanted-share-his-muslim-faith-world>

²⁷ Jonathan Eig. "Muhammad Ali fought for America to understand Islam, not fear it." *Andscape*, January 30, 2017. <https://theundefeated.com/features/muhammad-ali-fought-for-america-to-understand-islam-not-fear-it/>

²⁸ Henry Gass. "The religious journey of Muhammad Ali, 'ambassador' of Islam." *The Christian Science Monitor*. June 10, 2016. <https://doi.org/https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2016/0610/The-religious-journey-of-Muhammad-Ali-ambassador-of-Islam>.

²⁹ Michael Ezra . "Muhammad Ali’s strange, failed diplomatic career." *Politico*. June 5, 2016. <https://doi.org/https://www.politico.eu/article/muhammad-alis-strange-failed-diplomatic-career/>

³⁰ Emma Graham-Harrison. "US border agents ask Muhammad Ali's son: 'Are you a Muslim?.'" *The Guardian*. September 25, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/25/muhammad-ali-son-detained-questioned-us-border-control>.

Muhammad Ali's own son and questioned him about his Muslim faith less than a year after the entire country had come together to celebrate his father's life.

Constructing American Islam

In confronting the rising challenges of marginalization and discrimination, it is imperative not to idealize a past to which the roots of many current structural injustices can be traced. Writing about the tendency for Black Americans "to labor under the false universal that enshrines the values and aspirations of the dominant culture," Sherman Jackson has warned³¹ that:

Embracing America should not be equated with embracing the American state's or the dominant culture's false universals. To pretend that there is only one American history and social reality and thus only one normal or acceptable response to these is to reinforce the invisibility of American whiteness as a socially constructed mode of being whose "normalness" reclines fundamentally on the use (and at times abuse) of power.

However, Jackson proceeds to draw a distinction between the black experience in America, which produced such adherence through "power and control," and that of the colonial experience in African and Asian contexts, in which the gift of a civilizing education to colonial subjects elicited an appreciation for the virtue of Western achievements. In suggesting this, Jackson appears to lend credence to the perception that immigrants to the United States (Muslim or otherwise) more readily embrace its universal system of values. This contention misses the point of colonialism as little more than an exercise in power and control in its own right. In fact, the waves of migration from these formerly colonized lands to the United States, particularly during the past half century,

³¹ Sherman A. Jackson. *Islam and the Blackamerican*. (Oxford University Press, 2005).

represent the height of mass consternation with the failures of post-colonial projects and the endurance of neo-imperial predation. Thus, the adoption of American exceptionalism was by no means a historical inevitability, and certainly not one that predates the most recent wave of Muslim migration.

Today, roughly three-quarters of Muslims in the United States are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. Coupled with their largely privileged socio-economic status and their vocal claims to spiritual authority (given their proximity to an “authentic Islam”), it is this segment of the community that has most forcefully advanced the notion of American Muslims as a distinct political community over the span of the last two decades. That program centers on the premise that Muslims in the United States have coalesced around a particular understanding of their faith, one that is simultaneously rooted in an authentic and universal set of Islamic beliefs and practices, and also informed by its integration of core American values. In this way, American Islam was “liberated” from the cultural and political baggage of Islam as it continues to be lived in its historic homelands, while embracing America’s melting pot ideal to erode the community’s internal ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic divisions. This notion of “a moral geography of the American Medina,”³² as anthropologist Zareena Grewal has termed it, formed the basis of the foundational institutions of a community that recognized the need to anchor its spiritual and national identities in its immediate environs.

Since 9/11, there has been no shortage of descriptive analyses of how American Muslims are distinct from their co-religionists the world over. American mosques are noteworthy for accommodating reinterpretations³³ of traditional ritual practices. American Muslims have

³²Zareena Grewal. *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. (NYU Press, 2013).

³³ Jaweed Kaleem. "Progressive Muslims Launch Gay-Friendly, Women-Led Mosques In Attempt To Reform American Islam." *Huffpost*, March 29, 2012.

found innovative ways to address questions of maintaining a halal³⁴ diet or finding love³⁵ while staying true to their religious values. They have carved out spaces within popular culture to express their identity, embracing musical genres ranging from hip hop to country. They have devised new ways of fulfilling their commitment to charity and community service. American Muslim athletes, artists, scientists, business leaders, and intellectuals have consistently spoken of their unique position as representatives of an American minority community that enjoys tremendous opportunities to succeed in their respective fields. Islamic scholars in the United States have affirmed that the American Muslim community should develop its own religious rulings on questions of Islamic practice that do not arise in more traditional contexts and have devised several institutional bodies toward that end.³⁶

In these and a myriad of other ways, the American Muslim experience is indeed distinct from any other, including that of Muslim minorities in other Western societies. Even while recognizing the lingering racial, ethnic, cultural and class divisions that have yet to yield a homogenized community, the ideal of a unified community of Muslims exists more visibly in the United States than anywhere else. The question remains, however, how have American Muslims constructed a model of communal identity worthy not only of celebration but emulation as well?

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/29/progressive-muslims-launch-gay-friendly-women-led-mosques_n_1368460.html

³⁴ Rabiya Chowdhury, "The Rise Of Halal Cuisine In An Age Of Islamophobia." *National Public Radio*, October 26, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/10/26/554298738/the-rise-of-halal-cuisine-in-an-age-of-islamophobia>.

³⁵ Abigail Hauslohner. "Muslim, millennial and single: A generation struggles to find love." *The Washington Post* February 14, 2018.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/muslim-millennial-and-single-a-generation-struggles-to-find-love/2018/02/14/0e81763a-085a-11e8-b48c-b07fea957bd5_story.html

³⁶ The Usuli Institute. "The "American Madhhab" with Sherman Jackson | The Conversation Series" YouTube video, March 5, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DQdeCG9tRk>

In other words, how does a unique experience become an exceptional one?

The answer to this question lies in a critical examination of the extension of American Muslim communal engagement from the cultural and socioeconomic spheres into the realm of formal politics. On a number of metrics, from rates of post-secondary education to average income levels, American Muslims have performed on par with or better than the rest of the country.³⁷ Nevertheless, the community's relatively integrated socioeconomic position exists in stark contrast to its perpetual exclusion from national politics, a notable disparity with few analogues in U.S. history.

This disenfranchisement bore persistent attempts to advance discriminatory policies targeting Muslims. As far back as the 1980s, U.S. government officials considered proposals for the roundup and internment of people from eight Muslim-majority countries residing in the United States.³⁸ By the mid-1990s, the Clinton administration was detaining Muslim immigrants indefinitely without charge.³⁹ Despite strong constitutional challenges⁴⁰ to these practices, in the aftermath of 9/11 American Muslims could do little to prevent the dramatic expansion of policies that securitized the community and subjected it to a host of abusive practices. These included unlawful detentions,⁴¹ surveillance of

³⁷ "Demographic portrait of Muslim Americans" Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (July 26, 2017) www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/

³⁸ Ben Wofford "The Forgotten Government Plan to Round Up Muslims." *Politico Magazine*, August 19, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/08/secret-plans-detention-internment-camps-1980s-deportation-arab-muslim-immigrants-214177>

³⁹ Ronald Smothers. "U.S. Bars or Expels Suspect Immigrants On Secret Evidence. " *The New York Times*, August 15, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/15/us/us-bars-or-expels-suspect-immigrants-on-secret-evidence.html>

⁴⁰ "Press Releases." CAIR, November 4, 2022. <https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/634-cair-calls-on-congress-to-repeal-use-of-secret-evidence.html>

⁴¹ Alia Malek. "Unlawful Detention on US Soil." *The Nation*, December 22, 2011.

community leaders,⁴² infiltration of mosques,⁴³ entrapment of youth,⁴⁴ criminalization of speech,⁴⁵ and cracking down on Islamic charities.⁴⁶

Such invasive practices would inhibit any minority religious community from fulfilling its basic spiritual and communal functions. Rather than mobilize around calls for the restoration of American Muslim rights, however, community leaders aimed to leverage their privileged socioeconomic status to gain entrance into the domain of elite politics. This has resulted in a piecemeal approach to questions of civil rights, the professionalization of activism, and the adoption of exceptionalist arguments in the development of American Muslim identity politics.

Disciplining American Muslims

As the Bush administration outlined its policy objectives largely within the rubric of combatting terrorism—and its “Islamic” variant in particular—American Muslims understood the cost of entry into politics to be the re-appropriation of their religious identity in conjunction with current national security priorities. The disciplining of American Muslim community leadership occurred largely through subjecting Muslim

<https://www.thenation.com/article/unlawful-detention-us-soil/>

⁴² Glenn Greenwald, Murtaza Hussain. "Meet the Muslim-American Leaders the FBI and the NSA Have Been Spying On." *The Intercept*, July 9, 2014.

<https://theintercept.com/2014/07/09/under-surveillance/>

⁴³ Jerry Markon. "Mosque infiltration feeds Muslims' distrust of FBI." *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2010.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/04/AR2010120403720.html>

⁴⁴ <https://theintercept.com/2017/04/20/more-than-400-people-convicted-of-terrorism-in-the-u-s-have-been-released-since-911/>

⁴⁵ Glenn Greenwald. "The real criminals in the Tarek Mehanna case." *Salon*, April 13, 2012.

https://www.salon.com/2012/04/13/the_real_criminals_in_the_tarek_mehanna_case/

⁴⁶ Bryan Denson. "Islamic charity founder Pete Seda 'vindicated' by ruling saying feds tried to turn tax fraud into terrorism." *The Oregonian*, August 23, 2013.

www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/08/pete_seda_vindicated_by_appeal.html

leaders to the cyclical demands of commendation and condemnation. Those Muslims who stressed the docile nature of their faith tradition, denounced religious extremism, and posed no serious objections to the underlying logic of U.S. counterterrorism policies (both foreign and domestic) were granted access to formal political spaces. Those who did not were marginalized. Scholar Mahmood Mamdani captured this binary in his 2005 study dissecting the construction of the “good Muslim, bad Muslim” categories that governed the post-Cold War order and placed American Muslims on the frontlines of an impending clash between the Western and Islamic worlds.⁴⁷

The consequence of defining Islam largely in opposition to Islamophobia is that it necessarily impels Muslims to adopt ethical commitments grounded in a desire for formal acceptance. In sharp contrast to the immediate post-9/11 era of mass scrutiny of Muslims, roughly a decade later the Obama administration had successfully expanded what was initially a state-led project to include community institutions, chiefly through Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs.⁴⁸ American Muslim leaders were enlisted to share the burden of policing their communities and, in the process, were effectively narrowing spaces for the expression of critical views. Programs such as the Safe Spaces Initiative, which was devised by one leading American Muslim organization, signaled a major shift of priorities and resources from protecting communities from continued infringements on their civil rights to promoting state counter-radicalization programs.⁴⁹ The same

⁴⁷ Mahmood Mamdani. *America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. (Penguin Random House, 2004). <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/106769/good-muslim-bad-muslim-by-mahmood-mamdani/9780385515375/>

⁴⁸ Faiza Patel. "Countering Violent Extremism." *Brennan Center for Justice*, March 16, 2017.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/countering-violent-extremism>

⁴⁹ Frank Stoltze. "LA Muslim group seeks to identify troubled youth, avert homegrown terrorism ." *KPCC*, September 2, 2014.

group even proceeded to honor⁵⁰ a local law enforcement official who had carried out a mapping program of Muslim communities in Los Angeles. Later, LA was one of three cities chosen to host a CVE pilot program in part due to the strength of local “faith-based partnerships and collaboration.” Similarly, for its role in “curbing⁵¹ violent extremism,” hosting political officials, and maintaining strong ties with authorities, a Northern Virginia mosque received⁵² the FBI’s community leadership award and was anointed “the model mosque of America.”⁵³

After having long ignored the concerns voiced by American Muslims, Obama elicited the participation of a wide range of community organizations at a White House summit on CVE in 2015. Of particular concern is that this new level of engagement has done nothing to stem the tide of the abuses listed above, as many of these programs’ advocates insisted. A recent investigative series by The Intercept showcased continued civil rights violations by federal authorities against American Muslims throughout the Obama era.⁵⁴ Seemingly immune to American Muslim public diplomacy efforts, Republican politicians in forty-nine states were observed to have “openly attacked Muslims with words and

<https://www.scpr.org/news/2014/09/02/46408/la-muslim-group-seeks-to-identify-troubled-youth-a/>

⁵⁰ "MPAC to Honor Justice Dept. Civil Rights Division & LAPD Deputy Chief at Convention Banquet." *Muslim Public Affairs Council*, December 14, 2010.

<https://www.mpac.org/blog/mpac-to-honor-justice-dept.-civil-rights-division-lapd-deputy-chief-at-convention-banquet.php>

⁵¹ Ify Okoye. "Zaid Shakir & Mohamed Magid on Curbing Violent Extremism." *Muslim Matters*, January 27, 2011 <https://muslimmatters.org/2011/01/27/zaid-shakir-mohamed-magid-on-curbing-violent-extremism/>

⁵² Sharon Reed. "FBI Presents Community Leadership Award to All Dulles Area Muslim Society." *Patch*, Apr 15, 2016. <https://patch.com/virginia/ashburn/fbi-presents-community-leadership-award-all-dulles-area-muslim-society-0>

⁵³ Mike Ghouse. "The Model Mosque of America; Adams Center." *Huffpost*, June 29, 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-model-mosque-of-america-adams-center_us_57737840e4b0d24f8fb51952

⁵⁴ "Trial and Terror." *The Intercept*, April 17, 2017. <https://trial-and-terror.theintercept.com/>.

proposed legislation since 2015” according to another report.⁵⁵ An earlier finding by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) revealed that the FBI used “community outreach forums” to spy on Muslim community members.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, over time, this disciplining effect worked to instill in the broader community a belief that American Islam is an ideal type worthy of dissemination. In the view of one commentator, writing for the Middle East Policy Council, Muslims in the United States have seamlessly adapted notions of American exceptionalism to fit the demands of their communal identity:

American Muslim exceptionalists believe that God brought Muslims to America, the world’s richest and most powerful country, for a purpose. They recognize that they constitute one of the most educated, advanced and wealthy Muslim societies in the world. They hoped that in a land where both freedom of religion and freedom of thought are protected, an authentic Islamic revival and reform movement could emerge that would not only prove that Islamic principles were truly divine, but also find a path for the Muslim world to negotiate the challenges of modernity.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hannah Allam, Talal Ansari . "State And Local Republican Officials Have Been Bashing Muslims. We Counted." *Buzzfeed News*, April 10, 2018.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahallam/trump-republicans-bashing-muslims-without-repercussions?utm_term=.hlnKalVEZ%2525252523.psQez1noR

⁵⁶ Jerry Markon. "FBI accused of spying on Muslims at community outreach forums." *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2011. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/fbi-illegally-using-community-outreach-to-gather-intelligence-aclu-alleges/2011/11/30/gIQA1qxyGO_story.html?utm_term=.fab7da8f8da3

⁵⁷ Muqtedar Khan. "Political Muslims in America: From Islamism to Exceptionalism.", *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (2015).

This belief has manifested in various ways. In the face of rising anti-American sentiment around the world, under the previous two administrations, the U.S. State Department sponsored global tours for American Muslims to share their experience as a successful minority faith community in the United States with Muslim populations across Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁵⁸ As political scientist Hisham Aidi has shown, these diplomatic missions, which sometimes relied on Muslim hip hop artists to combat widespread critiques of American foreign policy, were modeled after the jazz diplomacy undertaken against communism during the height of the Cold War.⁵⁹

Fast on the heels of the 2015 White House summit on CVE, whose talking points stressed⁶⁰ that combatting radicalism constituted a global mission, American Muslim leaders took up the challenge of creating counter-radicalization programs for export to the Muslim world. Participating in the “Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies” in Abu Dhabi, a delegation of American Muslims collected a first prize award in a competition to develop online tools to counter extremist messaging by ISIS. The winning idea was a social media site that promoted positive Muslim role models in the hopes that young Muslims around the world would avoid the lure of militant jihadism by finding inspiration in the story of a Muslim NFL player, for example.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Arsalan Iftikhar. "My State Department Trip to Central Asia." *The Islamic Monthly*, March 17, 2014. <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/my-state-department-trip-to-central-asia/>

⁵⁹ Hisham Aidi. "America's Hip-Hop Foreign Policy." *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2014 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/americas-hip-hop-foreign-policy/284522/>

⁶⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. FACT SHEET: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>

⁶¹ Dina Temple-Raston, "How to Take the Internet Back From ISIS." *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/how-to-take-the-internet-back-from-isis>

Even in expressing sympathy for the anti-authoritarian mass protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa beginning in late 2010, the American Muslim community frequently framed its support through the logic of U.S. interventionism. Throughout the Arab uprisings, a number of American Muslim organizations called upon American officials to lend formal assistance to pro-democracy initiatives in Tunisia and Egypt, and in the case of Libya⁶² and Syria,⁶³ supported calls for direct military intervention.⁶⁴ As a community that has traditionally faced considerable backlash⁶⁵ for its advocacy on behalf of issues of concern within the Middle East, reorienting its policy promotion toward U.S. strategic objectives signals a natural progression of an increasingly assimilated American Muslim polity. But to do so while uncritically reproducing the language of American democracy promotion (which has been at the heart of its exceptionalist mission) risks reducing American Muslims to the status of transplanted native informants.

American Muslim Exceptionalism

As a minority community representing less than two percent of the population, American Muslims rarely figure into the national political debate. Their presence, if it is acknowledged at all, tends to center around efforts by political figures to stoke fear of homegrown terrorism. In fact, a recent study revealed that incidents of anti-Muslim violence are more

⁶² "MPAC Stands in Solidarity with the Libyan People in Toppling a Tyrannical Regime." *Muslim Public Affairs Council*, August 24, 2011.

<https://www.mpac.org/issues/foreign-policy/mpac-stands-in-solidarity-with-the-libyan-people-in-toppling-a-tyrannical-regime.php>

⁶³ "On Intervention in Syria." *Muslim Public Affairs Council*, September 6, 2013.

<https://www.mpac.org/publications/policy-papers/on-intervention-in-syria.php>

⁶⁴ "Press Releases." CAIR, November 4, 2022. <https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/14246-cair-calls-on-trump-to-fulfill-syria-safe-zones-promise-after-deadly-gas-attack-on-civilians-2.html>

⁶⁵Peter Beinart. "The Denationalization of American Muslims." *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/frank-gaffney-donald-trump-and-the-denationalization-of-american-muslims/519954/>

closely linked to U.S. electoral cycles than to actual incidents of terrorism committed by Muslims.⁶⁶ Aiming to counter this trend during the 2016 presidential election, the Democratic National Convention (DNC) gave center stage to Khizr Khan, the father of a fallen soldier who took Trump to task for his campaign's use of hateful rhetoric. During his speech, Khan introduced his family as "patriotic American Muslims with undivided loyalty to our country."⁶⁷ Having arrived as immigrants, he continued that "we believed in American democracy, that with hard work and goodness of this country, we could share in and contribute to its blessings." Waving his copy of the U.S. Constitution, Khan challenged Trump to heed its ideals, before offering his endorsement of Hillary Clinton.

Naturally, Khan's speech elicited the wrath of Trump and his campaign machine, which issued racist replies and crude denunciations. Within the community, however, the Khan moment signaled the crystallization of American Muslim exceptionalism. Upon a national stage, both literally and figuratively, this moment showcased a faith community that had seamlessly woven itself into the fabric of an idealized national identity. In its uncritical adoption of militarism as a measure of patriotism, it eroded the space for internal political critique. In its veneration of the founding national myth, it obscured a history of systemic abuses against marginalized populations. Watching the flow of emotional celebrations across the community prompted one observer to call it "the moment American Muslims have been waiting for."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ "Anti-Muslim Activities in the United States 2012-2018." *New America*, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/anti-muslim-activity/>

⁶⁷ Jess Staufenberg. "Khizr Khan's DNC 2016 speech: Read the full transcript from the grieving Muslim father who addressed Donald Trump." *Independent*, July 29, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/dnc-2016-khizr-khan-donald-trump-read-full-transcript-father-muslim-soldier-a7161616.html>

⁶⁸ Daniel Burke. "Khizr Khan, and the moment American Muslims have been waiting for." *CNN Politics*, July 29, 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/29/politics/muslims-moment-khan/index.html>

While the rise of Trump undoubtedly served to accelerate this process, the pressure to demonstrate belonging within an atmosphere of intolerance had been a longstanding feature of the American Muslim experience. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the “American Medina” narrative confronted that challenge by constructing a more powerful ideal upon which to project an entire community’s spiritual aspirations. But insofar as it fails to account for the ethical limits and the exclusionism inherent to the exceptionalist mythology, the American Muslim version will continue to face trials that token representation alone cannot overcome. In his DNC speech in 2016, Bill Clinton addressed America’s Muslims saying, “if you’re Muslim and you love America and freedom and you hate terror, stay here and help us win and make a future together. We want you.” In an environment in which even the supposed political allies of the American Muslim community can continually reduce its status to that of a securitized minority and subject it to the language of conditional citizenship, it is little wonder that a recent study revealed that American Muslims have internalized Islamophobic discourses to an alarming degree.⁶⁹

Moreover, the community leaderships’ abandonment of a more critical outlook in favor of the acceptance that comes with expedient politics is likely to have the added consequence of alienating American Muslims as a community from allies in other communities. In contrast to the Movement for Black Lives, for instance, American Muslim institutions have avoided framing their critiques of government policies as a consequence of structural inequality embedded in state institutions and practices. In fact, American Muslim leaders have remained largely silent on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) struggle, and the largest community organization only broke its silence to condemn protests in

⁶⁹ Rowaida Abdelaziz "Muslims Are Internalizing Islamophobia, And Negative Media Coverage Is To Blame." *Huffpost*, May 1, 2018.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/muslims-islamophobia-media-coverage_us_5ae73150e4b04aa23f2598d5

Baltimore following the 2015 killing of Freddie Grey by police.⁷⁰ Nor have they been particularly engaged in opposing the unprecedented levels of deportation of undocumented Latino immigrants, a policy that has served as the precedent for calls for the mass deportation of Muslims.⁷¹

To be sure, American Muslim organizations remain actively engaged on many issues of material concern to their community, including discriminatory practices emanating from the Trump administration such as the infamous Muslim ban.⁷² But in advancing an agenda that reflects a narrow understanding of politics and is insufficiently critical of structural issues, American Muslims have been left woefully unprepared for the deeper challenges that preceded the rise of a white supremacist president and for which a belief in exceptionalism offers no relief.

⁷⁰ Manal Omar. "Baltimore Protests: Muslims Must Say and Do the Right Thing." *The Islamic Monthly*, April, 30, 2015. <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/baltimore-protests-muslims-must-say-the-right-thing/>

⁷¹ David A. Graham. "Gingrich's Outrageous Call to Deport All Practicing U.S. Muslims." *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2016

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/newt-gingrich-sharia-nice/491474/>

⁷² "CAIR-CA Releases Report on Impact of Muslim Ban." *Council on American-Islamic Relations*, January 25, 2018.

<https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/14942-cair-ca-releases-report-on-impact-of-muslim-ban.html>

II. What Is “Muslim” About the Muslim Leadership Initiative?

Hafsah Kanjwal

In the summer of 2014, Palestinians and members of the American Muslim community alike were stunned to hear of the creation of the Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), an all-expense paid program that sends between fifteen and twenty “emerging religious and intellectual Muslim leaders” to Israel to explore how “Jews understand Judaism, Israel, and Jewish peoplehood.”⁷³ The program is hosted by the Shalom Hartman Institute (SHI), a research and education institute based in Jerusalem that seeks to “deepen and elevate the quality of Jewish life in Israel and around the world.” After a number of individuals went public with their participation in MLI’s program in 2014, they were met with immediate public criticism for normalizing Zionism and violating the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement—a Palestinian-led call to withdraw support for cultural, academic, and political organizations that are complicit with the Israeli occupation.

As tensions between MLI participants, supporters, and critics rose, the issue became one of the most controversial and divisive topics within the American Muslim community. Nevertheless, the program continues today, although on a much more discreet level. Little information is revealed about the “Muslim leaders” who participate in MLI, and even less is known about the program’s outcomes and how they have benefited the American Muslim community. At the same time, MLI has received praise not just from pro-Israeli and Zionist institutions, but from the most rightwing and Islamophobic organizations in the United States as well, including the Clarion Project and Campus Watch.

⁷³ “Programs.” Shalom Hartman Institute, May 8, 2020.

https://hartman.org.il/Programs_View.asp?Program_Id=110&Cat_Id=517&Cat_Type=Programs

For these reasons, MLI raises a number of important questions about the relationship between American Islam and liberal influences. For starters, who gets to be an “American Muslim leader?” How should American Muslims engage with the political establishment? What role do Islamic ethics and liberal tenets play in the cultivation of an “American Muslim identity?” Most importantly, what precisely is “Muslim” about the Muslim Leadership Initiative? The answers to these questions situate two very opposing trends in the American Muslim community.

What Is the Shalom Hartman Institute?

Although SHI claims to adhere to liberal notions of “religious pluralism” and “building new foundations of understanding and cooperation” with leaders of other faiths, by all standards, it is still a Zionist institution, and one that is politically right-of-center. As evidenced by its mission statement, SHI seeks to “ensure Israel’s foundations as the democratic homeland of the Jewish people committed to equal rights and religious freedom for all.” The first half of SHI’s statement inevitably invalidates the second. As Omri Boehm has argued in *The New York Times*, “Whereas liberalism depends on the idea that states must remain neutral on matters of religion and race, Zionism consists in the idea that the State of Israel is not Israeli, but Jewish.”⁷⁴ As far as SHI is concerned, Israel will always (and only) be a “homeland for the Jewish people”—a core tenet of Zionist belief. The second half of SHI’s mission statement, then, is simply meant to entice support from other religious groups—especially American Muslims—through its (contradictory) liberalizing Zionist agenda.

Indeed, on issues concerning Israel, the narrative of SHI is no different from centrist and hardliner state positions. It is certainly further “right” than its liberal Zionist counterpart, J Street, a “pro-Israel and pro-

⁷⁴ Omri Boehm. “Liberal Zionism in the Age of Trump.” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/opinion/liberal-zionism-in-the-age-of-trump.html>

peace” policy organization that was formed to counter the influence of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) amongst American Jews. J Street has spoken out against Israeli settlement expansion and condemned the state’s illegal policies in East Jerusalem. By comparison, SHI’s most senior members affirm Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and work with AIPAC and other rightwing groups.⁷⁵ SHI’s prevailing narrative is all too familiar: the Palestinians are to blame for the disruption in the peace process and for their plight, and Israel must act to secure its foundational interests. What really sets SHI apart, however, is its strong desire to bring into the fold those who are skeptical about the Israeli state’s official narrative, including leaders of other faith backgrounds.

One of the more controversial yet seldom-discussed ways SHI accomplishes this goal is through iENGAGE, a program which seeks to “respond to growing feelings of disenchantment and disinterest toward Israel among an ever-increasing number of Jews worldwide by creating a new narrative regarding the significance of Israel for Jewish life.”⁷⁶ This program responds to a number of polls that show how support for Israel is declining steadily among young American Jews and Americans in general.⁷⁷ In essence, the program seeks to renew allegiances to the “Jewish State” of Israel, seeking to counter the hard work of a number of Jewish progressive organizations, including Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)—an organization that has put forth alternative, more just visions for the future of the state.

⁷⁵Yehuda Kurtzer, Rick Jacobs. "What Does The Jerusalem Decision Mean For U.S. Jews?" Interviewed by Michel Martin. *National Public Radio*, December 10, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/10/569767152/what-does-recognizing-jerusalem-as-israels-capital-mean-for-u-s-jews>

⁷⁶“Programs.” Shalom Hartman Institute. https://hartman.org.il/Programs_Landing_Page.asp?Cat_Id=295

⁷⁷Dana Goldstein. "Why Fewer Young American Jews Share Their Parents’ View of Israel." *Time*, September 29, 2011. ideas.time.com/2011/09/29/why-fewer-young-american-jews-share-their-parents-view-of-israel/

How exactly does MLI come into all of this? MLI was initiated in coordination with SHI at the request of Imam Abdullah Antepli, the Muslim chaplain at Duke University, who says he reached out to SHI in a bid to address what he believes is the “rise of anti-Semitism in Muslim communities,” and improve Jewish-Muslim relations.⁷⁸ SHI agreed to cooperate, and unsurprisingly so, since MLI intends on “forging deeper and more nuanced relationships between the Muslim and Jewish communities in North America”—a clear fit with the institute’s aims. In fact, MLI allows SHI to situate itself as a liberal, tolerant, “pluralistic” Zionist organization that seeks to listen to and engage with diverse voices, while still maintaining its core commitment to Israel’s distinctly Jewish identity. It also fulfills a secondary goal, complementary to the iENGAGE program: to find pockets where resistance to the Israeli narrative is high, and to counter the efforts put forth by Palestinians and their supporters, who, in recent years, have made significant gains through BDS.

MLI and Hasbara

Undoubtedly, the Israeli state and its institutional allies, including SHI, are involved in hasbara, a form of propaganda that is aimed particularly at international audiences. The function of hasbara is to portray the policies and actions of Israel in a positive light, and to undermine the Palestinians at every turn. MLI, then, it would seem, fits squarely within hasbara campaigns, especially those that aim to undermine BDS.

There have been a number of important criticisms leveraged against MLI’s role in perpetuating hasbara, including crucial analyses that have pointed to how the initiative amounts to “faithwashing,” a term Sana Saeed defines in an article for *The Islamic Monthly* as “changing the cause

⁷⁸ Abdullah Antepli. "After Abraham, Before Peace – Navigating the Divides." *The Islamic Monthly*, July 9, 2014. www.theislamicmonthly.com/after-abraham-before-peace-navigating-the-divides/

of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (or, rather, Israeli occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine) from a mid-20th century Euro-American settler-colonialist project (that brought anti-Semitism to the Muslim world) to a non-existent centuries long enmity between Jews and Muslims.”⁷⁹ Others have pointed out that MLI has included primarily non-Palestinian and predominantly South Asian Muslim Americans—those who are mostly disconnected from the occupation yet are made representatives of a cause they have no inherently personal investment toward.

Notably, the sole Palestinian invited to MLI, Kamal Abu-Shamsieh, renounced the program shortly after its completion. In his words, which were published in an article for the Huffington Post, “MLI proved incapable of either challenging injustice or changing Israeli/Jewish attitudes towards the Palestinians. I asked Rabbi Donniel Hartman to address the 2014 Gaza war. My cohort listened as he passionately defended and justified Israeli actions, ignoring the slaughter of hundreds of innocent Palestinian civilians.”⁸⁰

Even after the completion of a number of MLI cohorts, SHI has neither acknowledged Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands, nor condemned the expansion of illegal settlements, nor criticized the ongoing repression, siege, and violence against the Palestinians. Instead, to buttress Israel’s claims to its Jewish identity, SHI trains “senior Israel Defense Forces officers in developing a strong, positive, Jewish-Israeli identity that will inform and guide the style of their military leadership and service.”⁸¹

⁷⁹Sana Saeed. "Apartheid and Occupation." *The Islamic Monthly*, July 1, 2014.

<https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/an-interfaith-trojan-horse-faithwashing-apartheid-and-occupation/>

⁸⁰Kamal Abu-Shamsieh. "A Palestinian's Journey Towards Healing." *Huffpost*, May 22, 2015. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kamal-abushamsieh/a-palestinians-journey-to_b_7339586.html

⁸¹“Programs.” Shalom Hartman Institute.

In defense of the program, MLI participants, including Imam Abdullah Antepli, have provided a number of vague, contradictory reasons for their participation, and have been unable to truly articulate what purpose it ultimately serves. Antepli and others have been unable to explain, for example, how exactly the program benefits the broader American Muslim community, and whether MLI's "engagement" with a rightwing Zionist organization—in open defiance of BDS—has actually shifted the manner in which Zionists view the Israel-Palestine conflict. MLI participants have also failed to explain why they continue to strengthen their relationship with SHI, despite revelations of many disquieting activities which, according to American Muslims for Palestine, include "receiv[ing] millions of dollars from some of the leading funders of extreme Islamophobic groups (such as the Russell Berrie Foundation) in North America and [being] a major contractor for the Israeli military."⁸² Perhaps most disconcerting is their blatant disregard and disingenuous silence towards the aforementioned criticisms.

Although Antepli claims he initiated MLI in order to address the supposed toxicity that exists between American Muslims and Jews, using his own personal experience of anti-Semitism as a stand-in for the experiences of the broader American Muslim community, how he determined that such toxicity is, in fact, a real problem is unclear.⁸³ Indeed, there is no credible study that has polled negative attitudes of

https://hartman.org.il/Programs_View.asp?Program_Id=19&Cat_Id=299&Cat_Type=Programs

⁸²Hatem Bazian. "American Muslims must not become tools of Israeli propaganda." *American Muslims for Palestine*, December 5, 2016

<https://www.ampalestine.org/newsroom/american-muslims-must-not-become-tools-of-israeli-propaganda>

⁸³Abdullah Antepli. "After Abraham, Before Peace – Navigating the Divides." *The Islamic Monthly*, July 9, 2014

www.theislamicmonthly.com/after-abraham-before-peace-navigating-the-divides/

American Muslims towards Jews or documented a barrage of anti-Semitic crimes committed by Muslims in the United States. This is not to say anti-Semitism does not exist in the American Muslim community, but there is certainly no statistical basis to isolate American Muslims' alleged "anti-Semitism" from the larger reality of American anti-Semitism. Moreover, Antepi willfully and purposefully conflates anti-Israel or anti-Zionist sentiment—which are both definite rallying calls within the American Muslim community—with anti-Semitism.

It is these types of misinformed and dangerous connotations that shadow many of the arguments made by MLI participants. One participant, reflecting in the Huffington Post on his experience, vacuously described MLI as an attempt to understand the other side in order to "search for peace."⁸⁴ Another believed it is more about Muslim-Jewish relations in the United States, as Israel/Palestine is the ultimate "elephant in the room." As reflected in a piece in Patheos, the participant states that "By understanding the impact of Israel on various American Jewish identities, I hoped I could better understand and have more meaningful conversations with many of my Jewish dialogue partners. I strongly believe that poor relations between Jews and Muslims in the West contributes to anti-Muslim sentiment worldwide as well as anti-Palestinian policies in both the US and Israel."⁸⁵

Astonishingly, another participant who also published in Patheos presented MLI as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of American Muslim "group think," stating that "Consensus is a funny thing to impose

⁸⁴ Saud Anwar. "Moving Beyond Our Comfort Zones: Seeking Signs of Peace in Israel and Palestine." *Huffpost*, August 26, 2015.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-saud-anwar/moving-beyond-our-comfort_b_8045372.html

⁸⁵ Maggie Siddiqi. "Forging New Muslim-Jewish Engagement: Reflections on MLI." *Patheos*, January 28, 2015.

www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2015/01/forging-new-muslim-jewish-engagement-reflections-on-mli/

on complexity...Enforcing broad uniformity on complicated, often politically-charged issues is ill-advised.”⁸⁶ This statement, which situates the conflict as “complex and complicated,” utilizes Zionist talking points by situating the Palestine solidarity movement as an “echo-chamber,” despite its vociferous international support.

To chart a new path in the peace process, improve Jewish-Muslim relations in the United States, decrease Islamophobia, stop anti-Semitism in the Muslim community, “understand” the other side of a “complex” conflict, and put forth a multi-pronged political strategy are among the various explanations given in MLI’s defense. The program’s participants have largely avoided the concerns that have been raised by its critics, ironically using life-long Zionist tactics concerning “civility” to distract the conversation into one of *adab*, or prescribed Islamic etiquette, and the need for diversity of thought.

How exactly does an MLI pedigree impact the Muslim leaders that are a part of it? The answer is perhaps clearest in a recent piece in *The Atlantic*, by American Muslim journalist and writer, Wajahat Ali, who was part of MLI’s first cohort, and remains one of its most vociferous defenders.⁸⁷

In his article, entitled “A Muslim Among Israeli Settlers? What happens when a Pakistani American writer goes deep in the West Bank,” Ali immediately sets the tone of the story in religious terms. He describes how he, as a Muslim, is seen amongst Jewish settlers. We, as readers, are meant to assume that the Jewish-Muslim dichotomy is a natural one, and that Ali’s presence in Palestine as a Pakistani American Muslim is

⁸⁶ Samar Kaukab. "Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI): Love Me or Hate Me." *Patheos*, January 29, 2015.

www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2015/01/muslim-leadership-initiative-mli-love-me-or-hate-me/

⁸⁷Wajahat Ali. "A Muslim Among Israeli Settlers." *The Atlantic*, June, 2018

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/a-muslim-among-the-settlers/559145/>

somehow equivalent to that of a Palestinian. He situates the equivalence of “both sides” of the conflict by narrating both the Jewish and Palestinian perspectives on the events of 1948 (and the subsequent occupation). In Ali’s words, “lives are lost on both sides...Israelis fear their Palestinian neighbors, and Palestinians are suffocated and immiserated by the Israeli occupation.” Indeed, Ali goes to painful lengths to equate the two sides: the Israeli settlers are equated with Palestinian “hard-liners” (what constitutes the latter is never made clear), and those Palestinians who advocate a one-state solution are labeled “extremist,” just as the Israelis who seek to conquer the Temple Mount. He flippantly reframes Israeli apartheid as a “real-estate dispute...with a profound religious complexity.”

Instead of making a call for solidarity against all forms of oppression, Ali attempts to undermine Palestine solidarity by stating that in his own mosque community back home, Palestine “superseded all other Muslim suffering, including the ongoing occupation of Kashmir, the repression of Chechen Muslims, and the daily racism experienced by many African-American Muslim.” This “whataboutery” is of course a standard Zionist tactic. When speaking of Israeli state violence and apartheid, the Zionist response is, “What about Hamas? What about the violence of Arab states against their citizens?” Similarly, in demanding solidarity with Palestine, the derisive response from MLI’s members has been “What about issues X, Y, and Z?”—instead of actually acknowledging how critical the state of Israel has been to the promulgation of modern-day imperial domination.

The remainder of Ali’s article continues to situate the two narratives—that of the Israeli settlers and the West Bank’s Palestinian residents—side by side, both as equally compelling and conceptually flawed. The article makes every attempt to equate the oppressor and the oppressed, and in so doing, reveals a fundamental insight to MLI’s approach.

Although Imam Antepi argues that MLI is “about learning the other’s positions in order to create more informed and thoughtful engagement” (on what precisely is yet unclear), it is the explanation provided by one participant that hints to the real potential boon of being part of MLI: an opportunity to be “in the room” when important decisions are made on a policy level.⁸⁸

Professionalizing Islam

How does MLI fit into increasingly dominant trends within the American Muslim community’s political engagement? There are two main answers to this question. The first is that MLI enables an emerging group of professional Muslims to enter the American liberal political mainstream. The second is that MLI showcases how this group of “professional Muslims” utilizes vague adaptations of “Islamic ethics” to justify their participation, leading to a liberalization of Islam in America. The term “professional Muslims” is employed loosely in this context—the term does not imply any level of adherence to the religion. Rather, these are individuals whose career trajectory in an atmosphere of Islamophobia and the War on Terror largely relies on the utilization and profession of some part of their Muslim identity.

MLI has emerged in a unique political moment in which the Zionist campaign to undermine the increasingly successful Palestinian solidarity movement coincides with a desire for “professional Muslims” to enter into the American political mainstream. By situating themselves as more rational, open-minded, and tolerant of the “other side” than their more close-minded, echo-chambered religious brethren, these professional Muslims become the “good Muslims” with which the broader American political establishment can simultaneously engage.

⁸⁸ Haroon Moghul. "Why I Went to Israel." *Huffpost*, January 21, 2015. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/haroon-moghul/why-i-went-to-israel_b_6507540.html

It is unsurprising the issue that allows them to do this concerns Israel-Palestine. Support for the official Israeli narrative in American politics has always been a track to respectability for a number of political actors (including civil rights activists and African American political leaders). That Israel has become a prime issue for bringing out these “Muslim leaders” may reveal something about MLI’s ultimate aims, as well as the objectives of some members of the American Muslim community.

The desire to be in the political mainstream has been an increasing trend amongst professional Muslims since 9/11, as the Muslim community’s political marginalization in the aftermath of the attacks led a number of organizations and individuals to seek greater acceptance within the corridors of power (often at the expense and to the detriment of long-held community issues).⁸⁹ MLI is, as such, far from removed from other trends, including the articulation of an “exceptional” American Islam (which is allegedly more “enlightened” than its variations abroad), participation within the American security state, and the rise of Muslims as a “model minority.” All of these play upon the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy, and show how Islamophobia can be internalized by the very people it targets.

Indeed, since 9/11, there have been various initiatives that seek to reform Islamic ethics and politics to fit the needs of the neoliberal Western state, and depoliticize Muslims from positions that are seen as politically “fringe” or too “radical” (anti-war, anti-empire, anti-capitalist) in order to re-politicize them into positions that fit neatly into the American liberal political mold (of the Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama variety). This mode, with its emphasis on “individual freedoms” and “individual liberties,” allows professional Muslims to instrumentalize and

⁸⁹Abdullah Al-Arian and Hafsa Kanjwal. "The Perils of American Muslim Politics." *Jadaliyya*, July 10, 2014.

www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18475/the-perils-of-american-muslim-politics

leverage their *individual* “Muslim” identity in favor of the demands of the neoliberal state. In this liberal, relativist mold, individuals are empowered to make their own claims on Islam, highlighting one of the primary challenges that liberalism posits for the religion and its adherents.

One clear example of this is the growing number of professional Muslims (a substantial number of whom are MLI members) who are vocal proponents of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs, which give grants to community organizations, government offices, mosque communities, and police departments to “derail people at risk of engaging in terrorism.”⁹⁰ CVE has been proven to be ineffective in predicting those who are at risk; instead, civil rights groups have argued that it is a means of “strengthening...investigative [and] intelligence gathering abilities.”

Another example is the Concordia Forum, an exclusive, invitation-only, elitist initiative that brings together professional Muslims from Europe, North America, and the Muslim World, to network and “synergize their talents.”⁹¹ The Forum, which is in its ninth year, and has involved nearly 1,000 leaders, is held in “secluded resorts” in places such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Participants come from major media outlets, government and international bodies, multi-national corporations, and grassroots Muslim organizations. The reports and findings of the forum are not made public (the program also prohibits social media engagement to protect privacy and minimize security risks). The Forum promotes a self-selected leadership model of professional Muslims—one gets to be a leader depending on their network and how much social (and financial) capital they can leverage. One wonders why the self-professed leaders of

⁹⁰ Emma Green. “What Lies Ahead for Obama’s Countering Violent Extremism Program?” *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/countering-violent-extremism/519822/>

⁹¹The Concordia Forum. Available at: <https://concordiaforum.org/> (Accessed: November 4, 2022)

the Muslim world are so secretive and private—why are the masses they are supposedly working for not privy to their grand plans for their betterment?

MLI, then, is part of a growing number of initiatives that allows American Muslim leaders to utilize their Muslim identity to further their career interests and leverage the liberal political mainstream. This trend, inevitably, leads to a number of questions that have thus far been ignored. Can one self-profess to be a “Muslim leader?” What makes someone a “Muslim leader?” Who gets to represent Islam and why? What representations are accepted into the liberal political mainstream over others? While professional Muslims may differ in their religious ideology or practice, this coterie of like-minded individuals agrees upon one thing: the insatiable desire for political “relevance,” and ultimately, power itself, at any cost.

Islamic Justifications

While the title of the program itself suggests there is something “Muslim” about it, initially, MLI participants did not clearly delineate any Islamic justification for the organization, focusing more on the need for dialogue and political strategy. Yet after receiving significant criticism, MLI advocates increasingly began to defend the program as deriving from an Islamic ethics of political engagement. Imam Abdullah Antepli has claimed that the program is for the “sake of Islam.” In a profile on Antepli, the *Times of Israel* described the Imam as standing for “authentic Islam. For an Islam of tolerance and equality. For an Islam whose American adherents seek constructive integration into mainstream American society. And if this decent Islam is to be accepted in an America scarred by Islamic extremism, he believes one of the central paths to that acceptance runs via the US Jewish community, which itself so successfully integrated into America.”⁹² The call for assimilation, rather

⁹²David Horowitz. “The partnership: How a bold American imam and his skeptical Israeli host bridged the Muslim-Jewish chasm.” *The Times of Israel*, September 8, 2015.

than any kind of Islamic ethical engagement, rings more soundly from MLI—and one remains confounded by what an “authentic Islam” or a “decent Islam” looks like. Does “decent Islam” call one to completely overrun the wishes of Palestinians in favor of their oppressors?

In another essay for *The Islamic Monthly*, Antepi again conflated anti-Semitism with criticism of Israel, saying that as a faithful Muslim, “I couldn’t reconcile my intense anger and hate with Qur’anic teachings, nor with the example of the beloved Prophet of Islam. I began to see the dangerous consequences of allowing your religion, ethics and morals to be led by absolutist, political ideologies and sentiments.”⁹³ In fact, invoking the Prophet Muhammad’s name in defense of MLI has become standard practice for many. In a Patheos article about MLI, for example, Maggie Siddiqi, a disciple of Antepi’s, states: “I feel that spiritual remedies are needed for the traumas of the occupation and its reverberations around the world. And this starts with the hard work that our Prophet (peace be upon him) called us to do when he commanded us to help those on both sides of a conflict, whether they are oppressors or the oppressed, by helping to stop the oppression.”⁹⁴ One remains confused, however, as to how MLI will “stop the oppression.”

Even if one does situate the Israel-Palestine conflict as a religious one (which it resoundingly is not), what exactly are the Quranic teachings towards oppressors? How did the Prophet deal with those who repeatedly oppressed the Muslim community and broke their treaties with the Muslims, as the Israelis have done time and again by undermining every

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-partnership-how-a-bold-american-imam-and-his-skeptical-israeli-host-bridged-the-muslim-jewish-chasm/>

⁹³Abdullah Antepi. "After Abraham, Before Peace – Navigating the Divides." July 9, 2014. <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/after-abraham-before-peace-navigating-the-divides/>

⁹⁴ Maggie Siddiqi. "Forging New Muslim-Jewish Engagement: Reflections on MLI." *Patheos*, January 28, 2015. www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2015/01/forging-new-muslim-jewish-engagement-reflections-on-mli/

international treaty? The answers to these questions will, to be sure, make “professional Muslims” uncomfortable, as they do not seamlessly fit into the narrative of the Prophet which is palatable for Western audiences. Nonetheless, BDS—a consistently non-violent call to resistance—is far from a militant response to oppression. And yet, it is still seen as “absolutist” and “ineffective.”

The Islamic justifications for MLI are half-baked and completely ill thought out, signaling once more that the core of the program is not based on “Islamic ethics” at all. Instead, the program highlights the liberalization of Islam in America. It focuses on individuals over the broader community, and vague notions of “dialogue” and “getting to know the other side,” over justice. It reveals the agency of individual community actors in shifting the moral center of Muslim identity into one that assimilates into the American liberal mainstream. It highlights the instrumentalization of Muslim identity for certain political ends. Any individual or group can do what they want, and claim they are “Islamic” just because they are doing it as “Muslims.” There is no attempt to achieve community consensus, or listen to the wishes of the primary stakeholders (Palestinians).

MLI and programs like it commodify Muslim identity to fit a liberal political agenda—this ultimately is the power of liberalism itself. Ironically, however, this liberalization is self-defeating. By only bolstering one particular group of Muslims over others, MLI is deliberately countering liberalism’s mandate to be neutral on matters of religion.

Unravelling MLI

Ultimately, MLI reveals the dark underbelly of the American Muslim project. It reveals the tensions of this “liberal” initiative, one in which self-professed individuals can seamlessly claim to represent American Muslims without any credibility. Whether out of political naiveté or personal ambition, the American Muslim project reflects a

desire amongst some Muslims to fit into the American mainstream so desperately that Islamic ethics and religious identity are used to score political points, all the while undermining the Palestinian solidarity movement and dividing the community. Under the leadership of these professional Muslims, American Islam is in deep jeopardy.

It took MLI's stark violation of the Palestinian-led call to BDS for a number of these trends to come to the fore; most American Muslims were simply unaware of these concurrent trends previously. For decades, if there was one issue that united a diverse group of ethnicities, religious ideologies, and sects within the American Muslim community, it was Palestine. For this to unravel shows that we are entering a new phase where moral boundaries are fluid, political alliances are made for strategic purposes instead of principled stances, and those, whose plight does not coincide with the interests of the American security state, will increasingly be thrown under the bus, or misrepresented by American Muslims "leaders."

MLI has provided access to particular political circles for a number of its participants. While the secrecy of the program does not allow for a thorough investigation into the post-MLI activities of its participants, a number of its most visible members have since published books, gained access to prominent writing gigs with media houses like *The New York Times*, and obtained fellowships with leading neoliberal political think tanks, like the New America Foundation. One participant has secured a position with SHI itself, serving as a fellow in Jewish-Muslim relations, and giving lectures to Muslim communities throughout the country.

Yet, it remains unclear whether the MLI program has delivered on its supposed aims of creating improved relations between American Muslims and Jews. Instead, it appears that its professional Muslim members have doubled down on compromising on political issues in order to maintain access to power. One thing above all is crystal clear:

MLI has contributed to a grievous split within the American Muslim community, between those who support the Palestinian cause and call for BDS and those who do not (or do so disingenuously). It has also underscored a shifting trend within the American Muslim project toward a framework that relies more on political strategy and mainstream acceptance over and above Islamic ethics.

III. American Culture and the Liberalization of Hijab

Butheina Hamdah

In her book, *Inside the Greater Jihad*, the American scholar of Islam, Amina Wadud, states: “If you think the difference between heaven and hell is 45 inches of material, boy will you be surprised.”⁹⁵ Wadud’s statement refers to the idea that hijab—or the Islamic headscarf—is not the sole marker of a woman’s personal piety. It also reflects an argument that is increasingly familiar in the American context: that hijab is nothing more than a piece of cloth. Indeed, this sentiment is frequently invoked by American liberals and Muslims alike when advocating for the right of women to dress freely. Getting caught up on what a woman (Muslim or non-Muslim) chooses to wear, we are told, is both senseless and inappropriate.

But while deliberately provocative statements, like Wadud’s, aim to diffuse arguments which target Muslim women for their appearance, such perspectives often neglect the deeper theological dimensions of hijab, as well as the cultural, political, social, and even economic factors which influence it and are influenced by it. Whether in the context of the global “re-veiling” movement catalyzed by resistance to “Westernizing trends” in the Middle East (as in Egypt during the late 1970s and into the 1990s), or in post 9/11 America, hijab has always interacted uniquely with time and place, and has never been “just a piece of cloth.” So why is this reductive perspective now so pervasive, especially among American Muslims?

One of the greatest and arguably most obvious contributors is the increasing prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. In some ways, the 2016 U.S. presidential election invited a new wave of negative feelings toward Muslims, with Donald Trump openly claiming

⁹⁵ Wadud, Amina. *Inside The Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (London, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 219.

during his campaign that “I think Islam hates us,”⁹⁶ and rallying his supporters by calling for a Muslim ban “until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.”⁹⁷ This antipathy impelled a new wave of responses from American Muslims, premised on “humanizing” themselves and dispelling false stereotypes about Islam’s place in American society. While these responses have succeeded on many fronts, they have also failed in certain crucial respects.

In particular, American Muslims have largely relied on, and appealed to, “authentic” liberal tenets (such as feminist notions of “bodily autonomy” and the precedence of “individual choice”) when defending themselves against Islamophobic rhetoric. While this may have won American Muslims some public support, and helped them better assimilate as “Americans,” it came at the cost of liberalizing, secularizing, and even commodifying Muslim identity. The hijab has been the clearest and most visible example of this. The challenge, then, is how to talk seriously about hijab, without confining the debate to tired and rudimentary tropes about its presumed status as “just a piece of cloth.”

Commodifying Hijab

Hijab is an Arabic word found in the Quran, meaning partition or barrier. Rather than revisiting the never-ending debate on differentiating between the use and context of the specific term “hijab” and its relation to the broader notion of modesty (as it is presented in the Quran), it is sufficient to acknowledge that hijab is a normative term denoting the

⁹⁶ Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner “‘I think Islam hates us’: A timeline of Trump’s comments about Islam and Muslims” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>

⁹⁷Jenna Johnson. “Trump calls for ‘total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States’” *The Washington Post*, December, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/?utm_term=.8769df3905f0

practice of covering. Disproportionate attention is often directed toward the semantics of hijab in order to dispute its requirement (the scholarly consensus within both Sunni and Shia schools of thought maintains that it is obligatory). For our purposes here, it is sufficient to conclude that hijab's function in Islam is primarily one of self-discipline—to strive toward God. Aside from its pietistic foundations, however, hijab has also become one of the most prominent (and thus, most contested) physical markers of Muslim identity.

Notably, wider celebrations of hijab (and American Muslim women more generally) in mainstream media have become more apparent in recent years. Hijab has, for example, become pervasive in social media, with platforms, such as Instagram, awash with “hijabi fashion bloggers” posting photos and videos for “outfit inspiration.” This is linked, in part, to profound growth in modest fashion worldwide, and the hijab's greater visibility in public consciousness.⁹⁸ Large mainstream brands, like Macy's and Nike, are now incorporating hijab-friendly fashion into their product lines. As a result, Islamic fashion businesses have grown exponentially. Haute Hijab, for example, recently launched a luxury collection selling at upwards of \$300 per hijab.

Hijab has also been prominent outside the fashion industry. In November 2017, for example, the popular children's toy company, Mattel, introduced the first hijabi barbie modeled after U.S. Olympian, Ibtihaj Muhammad. Another clear example is the release of Mona Haydar's song “Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab),” which was dubbed a top twenty protest song of 2017.⁹⁹ As Muslim Girl magazine stated in an article titled “18 Muslim Women to Watch in 2018,” Haydar's objective

⁹⁸ Remona Aly. "Got it covered: fashion wakes up to Muslim women's style" *The Guardian*, March 11, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/mar/11/got-it-covered-fashion-wakes-up-to-muslim-womens-style>

⁹⁹ Allison Stubblebine. "The 20 Best Protest Songs of 2017: Critics' Picks." *Billboard*, December 26, 2017 <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/8063598/best-protest-songs-of-2017-top-20>

is to normalize hijab to public audiences.¹⁰⁰ Modesty, it seems, is now “cool,” and therefore marketable.

While it is certainly appealing to get behind these popular trends seeking inclusivity for hijabi women (for the sake of promoting better understandings of Islam, at the very least), the hijab’s growing commodification ought to give us pause. We cannot ignore how the hijab’s positive representations in popular culture, and the burgeoning hijab fashion industry, are redefining (and in fact reducing) hijab from a religious symbol to a cultural marker of identity. This is perhaps most evident in the “trendy” and “sexy” ways hijab is talked about and visually portrayed. It is precisely within this profound shift in discourse that an increasingly liberal and secular iteration of Muslim identity is emerging.

As scholars and imams like Sherman Jackson and Mikaeel Smith have argued, we are now witnessing a new wave of American Muslim activism that, ironically, relies almost exclusively on liberal principles such as individualism, autonomy, and public reason in order to reclaim and defend Muslim identity. In this way, an inherently religious symbol, such as hijab, is being discussed largely in terms that are non-religious, political, and “socially relevant”—all at the expense of hijab’s fundamental theological essence.

Consider the example of a recent MTV video titled, “Do All Muslim Women Wear a Hijab?” The jocularly-toned, witty video features a non-hijabi, self-proclaimed “cultural” Muslim host who attempts to make hijab more accessible to general audiences, while also informing us that not all Muslim women are, in fact, hijabis. As the host notes, “to say that all Muslim women wear hijab is like saying all Brooklyn hipsters drink fancy coffee while riding unicycles.” The host emphasizes the various kinds of hijab that exist, and the many reasons Muslim women choose to wear them. Many women, according to her, wear hijab as an

¹⁰⁰MG Staff. “18 Muslim Women to Watch in 2018.” *Muslim Girl*, March 27, 2022. <https://muslimgirl.com/muslim-women-18/>. muslimgirl.com/46516/muslim-women-18/

expression of their cultural identity, and therefore “no one interpretation [of hijab] is the correct interpretation.”

Although well-intentioned, this is at best a shallow, if not misleading, explanation of hijab. Viewers walk away with no substantive understanding of either Islam or hijab in a theological sense. Rather, it retains a mildly apologetic tone, following in the footsteps of other lighthearted videos which attempt to liberalize and “humanize” Muslims.¹⁰¹

It is understandable why many American Muslims are seeking to discuss their tradition in “neutralizing” terms, and treating Islam as a feature of liberalism and American culture. Yet, as Riad Alarian argues, appeasing liberal fears of Islam and its practices can be “problematic because it involves throwing conservative Muslims under the proverbial bus.”¹⁰² In the case of the MTV video, fears of hijab’s “oppressive” or “foreign” nature are appeased by neutralizing its conservative theological foundation and re-imagining Islam as little more than a cultural heritage.

The Individualism of Self-Authenticity

In *The Malaise of Modernity*, philosopher Charles Taylor describes what he calls the “malaises of modernity.”¹⁰³ Of these malaises, perhaps the most important is modern individualism, or individualism based exclusively in self-fulfillment and being “true to oneself.” This sense of individualism, Taylor argues, causes people to feel unbounded by social or moral restrictions, except insofar as they corroborate personal

¹⁰¹Sadar, Claire, Oscar Jarzmik, Dr. Jamil Khader, and Sarah Moawad. "How Attempts to Humanize Muslims Often Do the Exact Opposite." *Muftah*, August 14, 2016. <https://muftah.org/attempts-humanize-muslims-often-exact-opposite..>

¹⁰²Mhmd, Evelyn Crunden, and Bina Shah. "Liberal Fascination with ‘Islam-Lite’ and the Humanizing Muslims Industry." *Muftah*, December 21, 2018. <https://muftah.org/liberal-fascination-islam-lite-humanizing-muslims-industry/>

¹⁰³Taylor, Charles. "Malaise of Modernity. 1991." Amazon. Amazon, 1991. <https://www.amazon.com/Malaise-Modernity-Cbc-Massey-Lectures/dp/0887845207>.

desires. What drives this, according to Taylor, is “the moral force of the ideal of authenticity”—a moral relativism in which everyone’s individual values and opinions are respected rather than challenged.¹⁰⁴

In its effects, this culture of “being true to oneself” (the “culture of authenticity,” as Taylor describes it) feeds into what Taylor calls a “liberalism of neutrality,” or a liberalism that is “neutral on questions of what constitutes the good life.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, moral questions about the ultimate good and bad, or right and wrong, are off-limits for public debate, because they have a subjective value to be found in the experience of the individual.

Taylor’s insights may help inform discussions about how Muslims absorb (or uncritically endorse) liberal positions, like the individualism of “self-expression,” especially when it comes to hijab and Islamic belief in practice. Many American Muslim women today, for example, express their religious identities through “liberal individualism,” especially when defending their choice to dress how they choose. In the name of greater inclusivity for American Muslims, however, the “culture of authenticity” also drowns out religious voices—particularly those considered “too dogmatic” in practice or belief.

One well-known example is an interview by Newsy’s Noor Tagouri in *Playboy Magazine*.¹⁰⁶ The 2016 interview described the then-twenty-two-year-old Tagouri as a “risk-taker and rule-breaker,” and included her profile in the magazine’s “Renegades” series. The piece, which was titled “Media Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty,” presents Tagouri:

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 32.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 33

¹⁰⁶ Anna Del Gaizo Media. “Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty” *Playboy*, September 22, 2016. www.playboy.com/articles/renegades-noor-tagouri

As a badass activist with a passion for demanding change and asking the right questions, accompanied by beauty-ad campaign looks, Tagouri forces us to ask ourselves why we have such a hard time wrapping our minds around a young woman who consciously covers her head and won't take no for an answer.

Amid the resulting backlash from the Muslim community, Asma Uddin and Inas Younis penned an Op-Ed in *The Washington Post*, stating:

[T]he Playboy interview is a step too far. It represents Muslim women, as purportedly represented by Tagouri, not on their own terms but in Playboy's terms—and, in the process, mocks the very ethics and morals the hijab is religiously intended to reflect. The hijab, though politicized in a variety of contexts, is at its religious core a symbol of chastity and spiritual connection to God. As one prominent Islamic scholar has explained, the hijab is “essentially a mode of living” that reflects the sanctity of privacy and private spaces. In other words, it is a repudiation of the voyeurism Playboy is fundamentally about.¹⁰⁷

In a subsequent Huffington Post Live interview, Tagouri responded to a question about whether posing for *Playboy* was in tension with her embrace of modesty.¹⁰⁸ In her own defense, Tagouri explained that modesty goes beyond clothing and is reflected, first and foremost, in

¹⁰⁷Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis. "Playboy's interview with a Muslim woman mocks modesty and offends women." *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/28/playboys-interview-with-a-muslim-woman-mocks-modesty-and-offends-women/?utm_term=.ff5b6e8fedad

¹⁰⁸Jessica Carro. "Noor Tagouri Explains Why She Chose To Wear A Hijab In Playboy." *Huffpost*, n.d. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/noor-tagouri-hijab-playboy_us_57f40dabe4b032545261f7df

one's character. She also shifted the conversation back to the importance of presenting her personal narrative to a wider audience, which she considered to be of predominant importance.

During a CNN interview in which a similar question was raised regarding hijab and what it embodies, Tagouri stated, "The thing with that statement is that it makes it seem like everybody's connection to God should be the same. Everyone has their own interpretation and practice of the religion, of how they wear the hijab, of what it means to them."¹⁰⁹ Tagouri then added, "I constantly am talking about the objectification of women, combating the sexualization of women in media today, but me being absolutely myself, wearing what I want, being authentically myself, on the front lines of a publication that's known to objectify women, that's breaking that barrier."

These statements from Tagouri are some of the clearest examples of the "culture of authenticity" at play. The manner in which Tagouri justified her *Playboy* interview, including the language she adopted, signifies a shift in hijab's understanding and what it means to wear hijab as a Muslim woman. For many, it has been transformed from a mere symbol of modesty and spiritual devotion (as traditionally interpreted), to one of defiance, self-expression, and "individual authenticity"—very much in line with Taylor's insights on the individualism of self-fulfillment. Tagouri, like many other American Muslim women, assumes a neutrality of sorts when it comes to the "correct" adherence to Islam and its normative prescriptions. Through this "neutrality," it is impermissible to question, let alone challenge, the meaning and function of hijab in Islam. Such is the emerging social expression of Islamic identity in America today.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pL0UXkz7TUQ>

¹¹⁰ Hamdah, Butheina. "Liberalism and the Impact on Religious Identity: Hijab Culture in the American Muslim Context," (Master's thesis, University of Toledo, 2017).

Tagouri is ultimately a small part of a much broader phenomenon in the United States. Many others, including well-known Muslim personalities, have also taken to discussing hijab almost exclusively (if not entirely) in cultural language, and have justified it through the lens of “individualism.”¹¹¹ More recently, writers at The Huffington Post launched the hashtag campaign #HijabToMe “to show how beautifully diverse the hijab can be” and to combat Islamophobic stereotypes of Muslims.¹¹² The campaign asked Muslim women to post a photo of themselves to social media and share their narratives for the world to see. One submission of a hijabi Muslim woman in soccer gear read, “#HijabToMe I support choice. I support an (un)veiled woman’s right to body autonomy. Also, men need to step back.” Another wrote, “I am posting to support @huffingtonpost’s #HijabtoMe on their great initiative to introduce diversity in hijab. Hijab to me reflects personal identity, and not where you stand in your religion...Freedom is all in the heart and mind and not in the body. We are not tied down by hijab, but by people’s conception of how a hijabi should look and act like.”

One of the more interesting entries states:

#Hijabtome is the freedom to choose my lifestyle in a world that’s constantly trying to get you to be someone else. Wearing the Hijab at the age of 8 was a choice based out of love and beauty because I wanted to emulate my single mom who struggled to raise three girls alone. I developed my American Identity before I even understood the religious obligation that came with wearing the Hijab. Hijab to me is beauty, sincerity,

¹¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7ftKMnDFg>

¹¹² Yasmin Nouh. "The Beautiful Reasons Why These Women Love Wearing A Hijab" *Huffpost*, May 11, 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-beautiful-reasons-why-these-women-love-wearing-a-hijab_us_57320575e4b0bc9cb0482225

struggle, identity, strength, challenge, meaning, purpose,
and most importantly my choice!

The vast majority of submissions in the Huffington Post article echo these themes of liberation, rebellion, personal choice, and body autonomy—themes mostly revolving around the identity of the individual. It is yet another packaging of hijab which overlooks, and in certain ways traduces, its theological substance.

More recently, Muslim Girl magazine’s founder, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, and Minnesota State Representative, Ilhan Omar, both appeared in the Maroon 5 music video “Girls Like You,” ostensibly as a way of representing Muslim women and giving them greater mainstream visibility. In response to the controversy inevitably stirred by their appearance in the music video, Al-Khatahtbeh published a response, titled “The Public Hijabi Syndrome.” In her words:

[There is an] emerging profile of a Muslim woman, usually identifiable by her hijab, in the mainstream landscape, often tokenized to represent Islam or Muslim women. Long neglected from mainstream inclusion except through largely negative portrayals, the Public Hijabi marks a new age in the role we play and level of visibility we receive in society, and it’s one that comes with newfound potential, rewards, risks and challenges.¹¹³

Al-Khatahtbeh argues that one must not get caught up in what she downplays as a “temporary moment of tokenization.” She regards her appearance in the Maroon 5 video as a stepping stone or strategy toward greater access and inclusion. The “temporary tokenization” of her Muslim identity is, therefore, seemingly justifiable. But, while Al-Khatahtbeh is

¹¹³Amani. “The Public Hijabi Syndrome” *Muslim Girl*, May 5, 2018.
<https://muslimgirl.com/the-public-hijabi-syndrome/>

right to say that Muslim women face the burden of public representation as a minority group within a “pluralist,” non-Muslim majority society, the question remains as to whether short-term “strategies of inclusion,” like her’s, bear harmful long-term consequences, especially when they involve capitulation to public appearances based on the terms of the dominant liberal culture.

These attitudes raise questions about the blurred boundaries between American Muslim strategies of inclusion and the negative pressures of liberalism on Islamic belief and basic theological literacy. It is not clear to what extent we, as Muslim women, are willing to champion liberalism and employ “individualism” and “autonomy” in order to normalize our presence and align with so-called “American values.” While Muslim women are celebrating the victories of greater media visibility and representation, they have failed to reckon with this important question, and they have failed to ask themselves whose interests this liberalized conception of hijab ultimately serves.

A Better Way Forward

At the risk of reinforcing an Orientalist notion of an inherent incompatibility between Islam and liberal (i.e. “Western”) values, it is important to state that notions of individualism, autonomy, and reason are not at their core directly in contradiction with Islam. Indeed, Islam upholds its own understanding of individualism and autonomy; individuals can be both self-directing as well as part of a collective community. The tension, is therefore, not in these principles per se, but in allowing these principles to become ends in themselves, as opposed to being a means to the end of submitting to a higher authority (i.e. God) which transcends and morally directs individual desire and whim. Simply, the problem lies in constructing an understanding of hijab by appealing to liberal doctrine independently of religious edicts.

For better or worse, hijab in America was not widely accepted or represented in popular culture until it was defined exclusively in

terms of the language of individual choice. The irony is that many women decided to put on hijab in defiance of hyper-commodification, but now it is being hyper-commodified. This is not to say that Muslim women should not be active in dismantling stereotypes about the hijab and Islam in general. Rather, it is a question of whether it is in the long-term interests of American Muslim women to represent themselves and the hijab through the exclusive lens of a liberalism devoid of any spiritual or theological meaning. Redefining hijab so that it is “decoupled” from its religious essence results in mere custom, elasticized for further distortion.

Biographies of Contributors



Abdullah Al-Arian is an associate professor of history at Georgetown University in Qatar. He is the author of *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt* (Oxford University Press) and the editor of *Football in the Middle East: State, Society, and the Beautiful Game* (Hurst/Oxford University Press). He is editor of the "Critical Currents in Islam" page on the *Jadaliyya* e-zine. Previously, he was the Carnegie Centennial Visiting Fellow at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. His writing has appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *Middle East Eye*, *MERIP*, *Muftah*, and Al-Jazeera. He received his doctorate in history from Georgetown University. He also holds a master's degree in sociology of religion from the London School of Economics and received his BA in political science from Duke University. Professor Al-Arian teaches introductory courses on the history of the Middle East, as well as advanced topics courses covering the history of modern Egypt, Islamic social movements, the Arab uprisings, and the history of US policy towards the Middle East.



Hafsa Kanjwal is an assistant professor of South Asian History in the Department of History at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses on the history of the modern world, South Asian history, and Islam in the Modern World. A historian of modern Kashmir, she is the author of *Colonizing Kashmir: State-building Under Indian Occupation* (Stanford University Press, 2023). Hafsa has written and spoken on her research for a variety of news outlets including *The*

Washington Post, *Al Jazeera English*, and the *BBC*. She received her Ph.D. in History and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan and a Bachelors in Regional Studies of the Muslim World from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.



Butheina Hamdah is a project assistant with the Ummatics Institute and a non-resident senior research associate at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs. She previously worked as a development associate at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and has served in other consulting capacities for several non-profit organizations. Butheina received her Master of Arts in Sociology and Master of Arts in Political Science from the University of Toledo in Ohio. Her writing has been featured in outlets including the *New York Times*, the *American Conservative*, and *Christian Science Monitor*.



Riad Alarian is a non-resident senior research associate at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA) and a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toledo. He previously served as a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University and was co-editor of *Muftah Magazine*. Riad obtained his MA in philosophy from the University of Toledo, his MSc in political theory from the University of Edinburgh, and his BA in philosophy from the George Washington University.

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