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Introduction: Young American Muslim Identities

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This issue of *The Muslim World* explores the multiple identities of young Muslim Americans. Together, they show that young American Muslims are understanding and practicing Islam in ways strongly shaped by the American historical context. This picture of emerging American versions of Islam has been sharpened and clarified by the traumatic events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath. Since that day, Muslims in America have found themselves under greater scrutiny by others and are undertaking more self-scrutiny as well. Although not all Muslims see their religion as their most salient characteristic, non-Muslims may make that identification. This encourages young people of Muslim ancestry to examine how their religion relates to other aspects of their identity as Americans, for people are multi-faceted beings with hybrid and flexible identities.

Muslim identities are discussed here in the plural to unsettle the perception that there is only one Muslim identity and that it is essentially and always a religious one, much as Stuart Hall discusses cultural identities, emphasizing instability, construction in context, and reinterpretations of the past in the present. "All identity is constructed across difference," Hall says,¹ and the societal configurations of sameness and difference with which Muslims have lived and worked since Islam's origins in seventh century Arabia have varied greatly. Identity is based on interactions, perceptions that one is the same or not the same as others, and elements of one's personal or collective identity, including not only religion, but gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and generation.

Overview

The United States is a country with a long-established Judeo-Christian tradition; it also has an indigenous and long-standing African American Muslim population with somewhat different understandings and practices of Islam. Immigrants work hard to define religious identity for their descendants, particularly where religion is increasingly viewed as a form of cultural

difference.² Tensions among national, ethnic, “authentic,” and “new” forms of Muslim identity,³ the latter shaped by a strong American experiential component, are quite visible. Identity politics often has strong transnational components, but there is no single “diasporic orientation” because the indigenous population is so large (at least a third of the whole) and the national-origin groups differ so greatly.⁴

The three major groups of Muslims in the U.S. are African American, Arab, and South Asian, and young American Muslims, while keenly aware of the differences inherited from the past, often try to bridge these separate histories. The first Muslim “immigrants” were African Muslim slaves, and the first Muslims to organize as Muslims in the U.S. were also, arguably, African Americans in the early twentieth century. Strongly rooted in American economic, social, and religious history, African American Muslim communities remain distinctive. The two biggest immigrant groups, Arab and South Asian Muslims, contrast with each other as well as with the African American Muslims. Arab immigrants began arriving in the late nineteenth century; most were from Lebanon and Syria and most were Christian in the early decades. Arabic-speaking Muslims have become increasingly numerous since the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act and are now very diverse in terms of national histories and colonial pasts. South Asian Muslims also have come in great numbers after 1965, chiefly from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; they have a largely shared subcontinental history of British colonial rule and independence in 1947.

As more and more Muslim immigrants came from around the world, Muslim Americans organized along both religious and political lines in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁵ South Asian Muslims have become important to the building of national religious and political Muslim coalitions in the United States, although Arabic-speaking immigrants play a major role in mosques and Islamic educational settings because of their command of the Arabic language.⁶ The push for a wider role and mainstream audience for Islam in America is reflected in the reinvigoration of Islamic discourse by new kinds of spokespeople and new media, including print, radio, TV, video cassettes, DVDs, and the Internet. Many of the new spokespeople and Islamic scholars alike envision not only a rethinking of Islam but a rethinking that can best be accomplished in the West.⁷ The role of young American Muslims will be crucial.

Young American Muslims share the experience of socialization and education in the United States. Religion is taught to the youngsters in North America primarily through texts, not through everyday immersion in Arab or South Asian or other homeland contexts. While this produces greater standardization, many of the new texts strongly reflect the new location.

Members of the second and subsequent generations lose competence in their parents' languages and there are signs of integration in the dominant culture, of fusion or crossover culture. The politics of contemporary globalization, the events of September 11, 2001, and U.S. identity politics have produced heightened concerns among young Muslims on America's campuses. Ethnic, national origin, and religious identities offer alternative and sometimes competing opportunities for coalition-building among young Muslims.

Contributions of this Issue

How do young Muslims understand themselves and their places in the American landscape? Our contributors share the premise that Islam in America is a dynamic, growing religion that increasingly reflects its American context. Our first author, Nadine Naber, reproduces the voices of second-generation Arab men and women who see themselves as Muslim first and Arab second.⁸ Based in a strategic politics of race and gender in San Francisco, most of these young people also see Islam as empowering to women. Jamillah Karim writes about one of the most vigorous African American Islamic movements, the American Society of Muslims led by Warith Deen Mohammed (his father, Elijah Muhammad, led the Nation of Islam before his death in 1975; since Warith Deen's assumption of the leadership, this main branch of the movement has moved into the Sunni mainstream). Karim draws on interviews and personal participation to show young African American Muslim interactions with "immigrant" (or "Old World") ways of being Muslim.⁹ The next three articles focus on young Arab and South Asian immigrant or second-generation Muslims. Syed Ali and Lubna Nazir Chaudhry give us glimpses of Muslim students on American campuses. Syed Ali paints a larger picture of American society and second-generation Muslim immigrants to explain why increasing numbers of young Muslim women decide to put on the *ḥijāb* or headscarf. His work reinforces Naber's conclusions about the sense of empowerment provided by religious identity, this time for a group of primarily South Asian immigrant youth. Lubna Nazir Chaudhry gives us a vivid portrait of a young Pakistani American woman, using Aisha's own words and accounts of her own interactions with Aisha to explore multiply-hyphenated identities. Her broader points concern the American educational process and Muslim women's experiences with it. Denise Al-Johar's close study of emerging patterns of marriage-making among young Muslims from many ethnic backgrounds in Houston, Texas, finds clearly-delineated and significant movements beyond national origin and ethnic groups to a broader range of potential spouses, movements often justified by individual understandings of Islam.

The final two articles highlight religious and political activism among American Muslim youth and beyond. Garbi Schmidt shows the impact of

Islamic activism emanating from the United States in Scandinavia, an impact brought about by the burgeoning Islamic educational materials industry in the U.S., the dominance of Islamic English-language materials on the Internet, and, she argues, an emphasis on an “ummatic” vision rather than on its implementation. Nabeel Abraham addresses young Muslims’ responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the war with Iraq. The views he reports of Arab Muslim youth in Detroit, including young Iraqi Shi’i students, again call attention to the array of identities among young American Muslims.

Given the diversity of national-origin, race, class, gender, and generational identities among young American Muslims written about by Naber, Karim, Ali, Chaudhry, al-Johar, Schmidt, and Abraham, “Muslim American” might be thought of as an emerging panethnic label among young Muslims, perhaps analogous to the Asian American label. Certainly we see here the shaping of creative new identities and coalitions by young American Muslims.

Endnotes

1. Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” 45, in ed. Homi Bhabha, *Identity* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987).
2. Gauri Viswanathan argues that religious difference now signifies primarily cultural difference for many in Western democracies: *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).
3. Hamid Naficy, “Popular Culture of Iranian Exiles in Los Angeles,” in *Iranegales: Iranians in Los Angeles*, Ron Kelley and Jonathan Friedlander, eds. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 360.
4. The “Muslim community” in the United States numbers between two and eight million people. One breakdown put African Americans at 42%, South Asians at 24.4%, Arabs at 12.4%, Africans at 6.2%, Iranians at 3.6%, Southeast Asians at 2%, European Americans at 1.6%, and “other” at 5.4%. Another breakdown put “Americans” at 30%, Arabs at 33%, and South Asians at 29%. See Fareed H. Nu’man, *The Muslim Population in the United States* (Washington D.C.: American Muslim Council, 1992), 16, and Ilyas Ba-Yunus and M. Moin Siddiqui, *A Report on the Muslim Population in the United States* (New York: CAMRI, 1999), respectively. For more on statistics, see Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: the State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage, 2003), 147 note 1.
5. Four significant shifts have reduced the differences among American Muslims. First came the gradual evolution of a “Muslim” category from within the “Arab” one. Then, in the 1980s, immigrant leaders began advocating citizenship and participation in mainstream politics, moving beyond national origin communities to unite Muslims. The third shift, in the 1990s, saw newly organized political coalitions and the expansion of goals and audiences to the American public. Fourth, beginning in the late 1990s and intensifying after September 11, 2001, American Muslims have distanced themselves from non-American influences and sources of funding.
6. Early Arab organizations emphasized national origin instead of religion and this profile continues; also, South Asians have higher incomes and levels of education in the Census than Arabs and are more experienced in democratic politics: Karen Leonard, “South

Asian Leadership of American Muslims," in *Muslims in the West: Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford, 2001), 233–249.

7. Recent developments include the founding of the Progressive Muslims Union, the website Muslimwakeup.com, and American Muslim women's requests for fuller participation in mosques, including leading prayers and functioning as *imams*. See Karen Leonard, "American Muslims and Authority: Competing Discourses in a non-Muslim State," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25:1 (forthcoming fall 2005), for conflicts among political and religious leaders.

8. The reverse may be true for young people in Detroit, the early and still-leading center for America Arabs of both Muslim and Christian background: Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, eds., *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

9. Scarred by slavery, exclusion, and prejudice, many African American Muslim groups hold ambivalent or antagonistic views of the U.S. government, Christianity, and other racial or ethnic groups, including Muslim immigrants. Louis Farrakhan's small but conspicuous Nation of Islam (he split off after 1975) exemplifies this; Farrakhan supposedly reconciled with W.D. Mohammed in 2000, but the Nation still stands organizationally and doctrinally outside mainstream Sunni Islam.