

American Muslims: South Asian Contributions to the Mix  
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The three largest groups of Muslims in America are the African Americans, the Arabs, and the South Asians. I have argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> (Leonard 2004) that, reviewing the history and contemporary scene for Muslims in the US with respect to three key areas, constructions of race, religion, and the nation, these three groups have had experiences more similar than different, and experiences that engage them all deeply in processes of religious and political change in America. But in this panel, I am clearly expected to focus on South Asians (Muslims from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh).<sup>2</sup> Let me delineate, then, the special characteristics brought by South Asian Muslims to the American Muslim community and the contributions they are making to both that community and the US.

First, it is little known that it was Muslims from South Asia, Ahmadiyyas from British India in the 1920s, who first reached out to African American Muslims in the US. This is especially important because it was African American Muslims who were the first to organize on the basis of Islam, of the religion, in the US; the Arabs, Christians and Muslims together, were organizing on the basis of national origin, of culture, rather than religion. Those early African American communities had little contact with old world Islam, and it was Ahmadiyya missionaries who reached out to them, as they were struggling to define themselves as different and emphatically separate from the dominant Anglo and Christian culture. The Ahmadis brought English translations of the Quran and published the first English language Muslim magazine in the U.S.; they told the early African American groups about the five pillars of Islam and directed their attention to mainstream Sunni teachings.<sup>3</sup> Today, African American Muslims constitute

from 30 to 42% of the American Muslim population.<sup>4</sup> They are a very important constituency, and they won early legal victories that have broadened the rights of all Muslims in America.<sup>5</sup> Given the importance of race in American history and Islam's promise of racial equality, this early connection between indigenous and immigrant Muslims in the US should be a proud part of American Muslim history. Instead, it is in danger of being suppressed or erased, following political decisions taken in Pakistan to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims. There is also an apparent unwillingness on the part of many immigrant Muslims to acknowledge African American Muslims fully and to work with their historical heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Second, as consciousness of their common interests grew among the diverse Muslims in the US in the 1960s and 70s, and as leaders began to form Islamic and Muslim (religious and political) organizations and coalitions in the 1980s (see the handout), I argue that it was Muslim leaders from South Asia who came forward and led ambitious efforts to unite all Muslims in the US. Of course Arab organizations were there, and fledgling Islamic religious organizations founded by Arab Muslims, the children of earlier immigrants and foreign students coming to the US, in the 1960s and 70s. But the organizations with political goals beyond the community, and even those with religious goals focused primarily within the community of Muslims, have gained greatly from new leaders, new Muslim immigrants from India and Pakistan who have energized the American Muslim community.<sup>7</sup>

Why were the South Asian Muslims able to make such an impact? Let's look at their socioeconomic profile in the US and the political experiences they brought from their homelands. After 1965, when the US Immigration and Naturalization Act redressed the historic discrimination against Asians,<sup>8</sup> increasing numbers of new immigrants have arrived from South

Asia. Some had come in earlier decades, including small numbers of Muslims,<sup>9</sup> but the 1965 US Immigration and Naturalization Act not only vastly increased the numbers of immigrants from all of Asia, it set preferences for well-educated, professional people. The new highly qualified and ambitious South Asian Muslim immigrants contrast with Arab immigrants in a number of ways. The South Asians speak many languages, but most are well-educated in English. Most also share a British colonial heritage and post-independence histories that include some degree of experience with democratic political processes.

These South Asian newcomers represent many religions, and religious diversity has long been an accepted feature of societies in South Asia. The subcontinental historical experience, until 1947, featured religious pluralism, and the numerically dominant group, from India, still brings familiarity with that as well as democracy (immigrants from India include Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, and Parsis or Zoroastrians). Diversity within Islam has been striking as well in South Asia, and South Asian Muslim immigrants represent many strands of Islamic beliefs and practices, many kinds of Sunnis, Shias, and Sufis, especially from India, where Muslims are a minority today.<sup>10</sup>

These post-1965 South Asian immigrants have the means to import and maintain many elements of their cultural and religious traditions. A spurt of mosque-building was initiated by the post-1965 Indian and Pakistani (and now Bangladeshi) Muslims.<sup>11</sup> The Asian Indian 1990 and 2000 census profiles give an idea of the resources of Muslims from India and Pakistan. Those immigrants born in India had the highest median household income, family income, and per capita income of any foreign-born group in the 1990 Census. In the 2000 Census, immigrants born in India had the third highest median household income (behind only South

Africans and Britishers), the second highest median family income (behind South Africans), and the second highest median per capita income (behind Britishers) of the foreign-born groups. In both 1990 and 2000, Asian Indians had the highest percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher and were among the highest percentages in managerial and professional fields.<sup>12</sup> Many skilled South Asian professionals are doctors. One estimate puts Indian doctors at more than 20,000, or nearly 4% of the nation's medical doctors, and the largest ethnic body of doctors in the US is the American Association of Physicians from India; there is also an active Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America.<sup>13</sup> Asian Indians are not clustered in residential areas but dispersed, with a residential profile most like the Euro-American population.

Third, it seems to me that South Asian Muslims offer new and relatively fresh political opportunities for Muslims in America and there is a proud historical precedent (again). Participation in American political life was a goal for the pre-1965 South Asian immigrants, and after the Luce-Celler bill made them eligible for citizenship in 1946, the Punjabi pioneers helped elect Dalip Singh Saund from California's Imperial Valley in 1956, the first Congressman from India (and from Asia, in fact).<sup>14</sup> After some hesitation, the post-1965 immigrants, including Muslims, also are plunging into US politics. Those migrating from South Asia are becoming naturalized US citizens, although Indians must give up their Indian citizenship to do so (India does not allow dual citizenship but Pakistan does). South Asian Muslims are active in both Democratic and Republican party political funding and campaigning, and some, as I have already said, are trying to organize on the basis of religion, Islam, and throw their support to whichever party seems more promising on issues of interest to them.

South Asian Muslims are relatively unstereotyped in American political life. Most Arab

Muslims have taken strong stances in opposition to American policy in the Middle East and are now the targets of abuse and prejudice provoked by 9/11. The African American Muslims, originally separatist in orientation and still often ambivalent toward or critical of the US government, also have a somewhat negative political profile in the public mind, mainly because of Louis Farrakhan's small but high-profile Nation of Islam. South Asian Muslims provide a new group, an intermediary or bridging group, both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>15</sup>

Another point is that while, with globalization, South Asians can certainly maintain links to their homeland as well as Arabs can, they may be less inclined to do so. This is a matter of political priorities, whether to emphasize the transnational networks and politics "back home" or to build strong roots in the US. For Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian Muslims there are reasons, chiefly economic in the former cases and political in the latter, to be less attached to the homelands. There are tensions among South Asian Muslims in the US: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are often at odds with each other in South Asia. Yet the Kashmir issue, for example, while it divides Indian and Pakistani Muslims from each other, has not been a high-profile issue in American Muslim politics.<sup>16</sup> American Muslim politics have been dominated, perhaps harmed, by the longstanding emphasis on the Israel-Palestine conflict. South Asian Muslim politicians have put, or have been able to put, more emphasis upon domestic than foreign policy issues as they enter the American political arena. South Asian Muslims also have the option of joining Asian American political coalitions, pan-ethnic coalitions that are becoming very important in some regions of the US. South Asian Muslims offer less polarization and broader constituencies.

Fourth, one is tempted to argue that South Asian Muslims seem more flexible on certain issues, issues important to American individualism, to concepts of freedom and individual autonomy.<sup>17</sup> Many such issues involve gender concepts shared by African American Muslims, some authors argue.<sup>18</sup> The evidence here is mixed: for example, I see Muslim women of all backgrounds participating in a gender jihad, particularly in the scholarly arena.<sup>19</sup> While young Muslim women of all backgrounds may be veiling or wearing the hijab these days, in my classes most of those who do so are of Arab background. There are indications that South Asian mosques are the strictest in terms in gender segregation,<sup>20</sup> yet when it comes to challenging male leadership and regulations in the mosques,<sup>21</sup> South Asian women are prominent. A woman of Indian origin, Asra Nomani, whose mother ran a boutique in West Virginia and whose father helped start an Islamic Center there, not only has led a mosque walk-in of her family members but a highly publicized one of several other Muslim women leaders (women born in India, Syria, and two American-born women, one Arab and one African American). This latter event, in June, 2004, marked the founding of a new national Muslim women's organization, The Daughters of Hajar, dedicated to gaining greater rights for Muslim women in American Muslim arenas.

South Asians also seem more open, less opposed, to discussion of sexual issues, even homosexuality. Some scholars of Arabs and Arab Americans seem to think this is so, and a few have told me they assumed the young leaders of American Muslim gay and lesbian movements (Al-Fatiha, Queer Jihad, also Trikone) were South Asian.<sup>22</sup> We have an outspoken book by a Pakistani-origin gay man and several articles by young Muslim lesbians, again of Pakistani background.<sup>23</sup> Muslim WakeUp with its feature "Sex and the Umma," HijabMan's Blog, and

other such material on the web seems produced mainly by writers of South Asian origin.<sup>24</sup> But these are speculations on my part, ones that may have more to do with my own selective access to and reading of the still-fragmentary literature in this area.

To conclude, I have tried to show four important areas in which South Asian Muslims contribute to American Muslim, and ultimately to American, politics and social life. First, early missionaries from India established an important linkage with indigenous, African American Muslims. Second, the more recent, post-1965 immigrants brought ambitious new leadership to the developing American Muslim religious and political organizations, leadership well qualified by education and experience with democratic politics to jump into American politics. Third, South Asian Muslims are relatively new on the political scene and can build bridges among Muslims and to the broader American public. They are without the longstanding, negative stereotyping associated with the Israel/Palestine conflict or the more separatist versions of African American Islam. Fourth, I have suggested that South Asian Muslims may offer a middle way when it comes to controversial social issues, that the religious and cultural pluralism historically found in South Asia may contribute to more positive immigrant Muslim engagements with American individualism and the directions in which western societies are moving.

## AMERICAN MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS

Name	Founding date and information	Initial Location
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### I. African American Islam

Moorish Science Temple midwest	1913, Noble Drew Ali	East coast,
Ahmadiyyas midwest Members predominantly African American until 1970s, then Pakistani	1920 Missionaries from Indian (later Pakistani) sect Published 1st English-language Muslim newspaper in US, 1921	East coast,
Nation of Islam Chicago Muhammad reconcile with MAS) renamed 1980s mainstream renamed 2001 Aug. 2003, WD Mohammed steps down	1930, Wallace Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad 1975, leadership assumed by Warith Deen Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad (1977, Louis Farrakhan splits off, NOA; 2000, begins to American Muslim Mission, led by W.D. Muhammad into Sunni renamed 1990s Muslim American Society, W.D. Muhammad American Society of Muslims, WD Mohammed	Detroit, reconcile with MAS) renamed 1980s mainstream renamed 1990s American Society of Muslims, WD Mohammed
MANA: Muslim Alliance of North America others Midwest	Feb. 2001 led by Siraj Wahaj, Ihsan Bagby, African American Sunni leaders, indigenous Muslims	led by Siraj Wahaj, Ihsan Bagby, NY,

### II. Islam in America

FIA: Federation of Islamic Associations Canada	1953, by Lebanese immigrants	Midwest,
MSA: Muslim Students' Association ISNA: Islamic Society of North America Indiana	1963, by Arabic-speaking foreign students in the U.S. 1982, grew out of MSA	Plainfield,
ICNA: Islamic Circle of North America New York	1971, Pakistani Jamaat-i Islami party ties	
MAS: Muslim American Society Va. (Same name as WD Mohammed's group then; joint convention with ICNA July 2002) UMAA: Universal Muslim Ass'n of America Wash. DC	1992, Arabic-speaking leaders	Midwest;

### III. American Muslims



AMA: American Muslim Alliance 1989, by political scientist Agha Saeed Fremont, California

AMC: American Muslim Council 1990, by Arab Americans Washington, D.C.

(AMA & AMC almost merged 2003, AMA pulled out when AMC leader arrested; AMC defunct)

MPAC: Muslim Public Affairs Council 1990s, by Islamic Center of S. Calif. LA, California

CAIR: Council on American-Islamic Relations 1994, by Arab Americans Washington, D.C.

AMPCC: American Muslim Political Coordinating Council, all 4 above 1998  
Youngstown, Ohio

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1. Karen Leonard, "American Muslims: Race, Religion and the Nation," ISIM Newsletter (June 2004), 16-17.

2. The term South Asia is gaining popularity and includes people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and even Afghanistan. Contrasting South Asians to East and Southeast Asians, this category asserts shared cultural characteristics and long-standing traditions of cultural pluralism in the region. While the current census category is "Asian Indian," one should remember that Britain's colonial empire of India included present-day India and Pakistan and Bangladesh (India and Pakistan gained their independence in 1947, and Bangladesh split off from Pakistan in 1971). Thus, before 1947, the East Indian (now Asian Indian) census category covered a wider area in terms of immigrant origins than it does now, and the South Asia term encompasses that wider area again.

3. See Ernest Allen, Jr., "Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam," eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, Muslims on the Americanization Path? (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 201-266.

4. One estimate puts African Americans at 42%, South Asians at 24.4%, and Arabs at 12.4% (with smaller groups of Africans at 6.2%, Iranians at 3.6%, Southeast Asians at 2%, European Americans at 1.6%, and "other" at 5.4%). Another estimate puts "Americans" at 30%, Arabs at 33%, and South Asians at 29%. Estimates of U.S. Muslims range from three to eight million. For the first breakdown, see Fareed H. Nu'man, The Muslim Population in the United States (Washington D.C.: American Muslim Council, 1992), 16; for the second, Ilyas Ba-Yunus and M. Moin Siddiqui, A Report on the Muslim Population in the United States (New York: CAMRI, 1999).

5. Kathleen M. Moore shows that long-standing African American efforts to secure legal rights and access to societal resources are benefitting the immigrant Muslims and helping Muslim identities become part of the range of American mainstream identities: Al-Mughtaribun: American Law and the Transformation of Muslim Life in the United States (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

6. The Ahmadis were regarded as Muslims in the U.S. by both African American and immigrant Muslims well into the 1960s. C. Eric Lincoln found that, in 1960, "the Ahmadiyah were generally accepted as a legitimate sect of Islam": The Black Muslims in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 221. One can point to problems with alleged Ahmadi doctrines and practices (whether the Ahmadis consider their founder a Prophet or not is contested, and there are differences among Ahmadis too). Yet the Ahmadis were only outlawed in Pakistan after the third of three court cases. The two earlier decisions, based on the same body of textual material as the third, did not find

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them unorthodox, and the third decision was reached only under extreme political pressure. Tayyab Mahmud shows the political forces behind all three decisions: "Freedom of Religion and Religious Minorities in Pakistan: a Study of Judicial Practice, Fordham International Law Journal 19:1 (Oct. 1995), 40-100.

7. Karen Leonard, "South Asian Leadership of American Muslims," in ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens: (Oxford: 2002), 233-249.

8. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act took effect in 1968: see Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 145-165.

9. The "old" immigrants, chiefly Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim men from India's Punjab province along the northwestern frontier where the Punjabi language was spoken, were from farming backgrounds and settled in California in the early 1900s, striving to become citizens and acquire land, and establishing families with women of Mexican background. Like others from Asia, they faced discriminatory laws which effectively ended immigration in 1917 and affected their rights to gain citizenship, hold agricultural land, and marry whom they chose. The relevant federal policies and laws are the 1917 Barred Zone Act (barring most Asians from legal immigration), the 1924 National Origins Quota Act (setting a quota of 105 immigrants per year from India), and the 1923 U.S. Supreme Court Third Decision (declaring Indians Caucasians but not "white" and therefore ineligible for U.S. citizenship). State policies and laws included California's Alien Land Laws of 1913, 1920, and 1921 (prohibiting non-citizens from owning and leasing agricultural land, and copied by other states) and various state anti-miscegenation laws (prohibiting marriages between people of different races). Asian Indian immigration opened up again after 1946, when successful lobbying by the Indians in the U.S. secured the passage of the Luce-Celler Bill, giving Asian Indians the right to become naturalized U.S. citizens and use the quota of 105 per year set by the 1924 National Origins Quota Act.

See Karen Isaksen Leonard, Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

10. Muslims are a majority, of course, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Bangladesh have become vulnerable to Islamic factionalism since their independence, Pakistan moving against the Ahmadis and also against Shias and perhaps the Nizari Ismailis or Aga Khanis. Bangladesh seems to be moving against the Ahmadis now too.

11. The infusion of Saudi and Arab money and Arabic-speaking imams may have led to a gradual assumption of control of some South Asian-initiated mosques by Arab Muslims: this needs to be investigated.

12. The high socioeconomic standards were set by the first wave of post-1965 immigrants, while those arriving since the mid-1980s have brought the averages and medians down somewhat. Many

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of these later arrivals come in under the Family Reunification Act and are not so well qualified; there have also been recessions in the US economy. The Immigration Act of 1990 reversed this downward trend, since it sharply increased the numbers of highly-skilled immigrants from India (and Asia generally) at the expense of unskilled workers and non-employed immigrants (parents and spouses of citizens).

13. For the 4% figure, India West, Feb. 26, 1993; for the AAPI, India Today, Aug. 15, 1994, 481. In 1980, of the 400,000 Indians in the U.S., 11% of the men and 8% of the women were physicians, while 17 % of the men were engineers, architects, or surveyors and 7% of the women were nurses: India West, Nov. 27 1992. There are also the Association of Indian Pharmacists in America, an Indo-American Physicians and Dentists Political Association, and many Indian computer professionals working in the U.S. .

14. See Dalip Singh Saund, Congressman From India (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1960).

15. African American Muslims, in justifying their somewhat different beliefs and practices, point to the tensions throughout the Islamic world between asabiyah and ummah, between particular communities of Muslims and an idealized universal community, and Muslims from South Asia are probably better able than Arabs to understand this approach to diversity. Aminah Beverly McCloud, African American Islam (New York: Routledge, 1995), particularly the conclusion and 4-5; Richard Brent Turner outlines and stresses differences from immigrant Muslims: Islam in the African-American Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997).

16. And South Asian Muslims are pushed together by the Hindutva or “Indic civilizational” movements in the US that attack Muslims and Christians as foreigners in India: see Prema Kurien, “To Be Or Not To Be South Asian,” Journal of Asian American Studies 6:3 (October 2003), 261-288.

17. Viewed negatively by many immigrants as immoral egoism and societal breakdown, individualism is a core value in the US; the valorization of individual freedom and choice pervades American culture. Muslim children growing up in the U.S. are being strongly influenced by this, and already we see young Muslims formulating versions of Islam that emphasize individual choices (to put on the hijab or pick a marriage partner).

18. Carolyn Moxley Rouse, Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Robert Dannin, Black Pilgrimage to Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Aminah Beverly McCloud, African American Islam (New York: Routledge, 1995).

19. See Amina Wadud, Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gisela Webb, ed., Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Omar

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Safi, ed., Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003).

20. According to Ihsan Bagby's 2004 survey, A Portrait of Detroit Mosques: Muslim Views on Policy, Politics and Religion (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Clinton Township, Michigan), South Asian mosques are the most restrictive and African American mosques are the most open with respect to women's issues like seating and service on governing boards (20).

21. Laurie Goodstein, "Muslim Women Seeking a Place in the Mosque," New York Times, July 22, 2004, A1, A16. ISNA took a poll in 2003 that showed improving mosque leadership, especially on gender issues, was the members' first priority.

22. Certainly the recent prosecution of gay men in Egypt contrasts with the relative permissiveness toward gays and lesbians in most of South Asia (this note could become an article in itself).

23. See Karen Isaksen Leonard, Muslims in the United States: the State of Research (New York: Russell Sage, 2003), 125, for these references.

24. [Http://muslimwakeup.com](http://muslimwakeup.com), [Http://www.hijabman.com](http://www.hijabman.com).