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SEEKING TO AVOID RACIALIZATION:
THE AMERICAN MUSLIM CONSTITUENCY IN
PUBLIC POLICY

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It may seem like a paradox, but most studies conclude in the increasing visibility of the American Muslim population since 9/11. In fact, the community has grown in size and is also racially or ethnically more diverse. In addition, many claim that the community is one of the fastest growing religious minorities in the country¹. At the same time, scholars have also documented a higher level of political participation among American Muslims². Islamic centers and mosques, in particular, have become the center of community life. And yet, the Muslim community in the US still finds itself in a particular hostile environment. The shooting death of three students, in March 2015, on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus, demonstrates the subsistence, 14 years after the tragic attacks of 9/11, of anti-Muslim racism and violence. Within the American Muslim community, the sense of being besieged brought upon by hate crimes and negative media images have all but encouraged the uniting of its members. Fighting against discrimination and bias against Muslims has been central to the activities of many associations. However, finding common ground to define the scope of Muslim participation in the public square has turned out to be more difficult. Indeed, defining a common agenda entails engaging with various generations of immigrants but also with different ethnic groups that do not share the same history. So, the broad question I wish to address in this paper is, “How do the different generations and ethnic groups interact to define Muslim life in the American context?” More specifically, I would like to examine how, in breaking down stereotypes and seeking a more effective political participation, American Muslims manage -or do not manage- to transcend the generational and national divisions.

In his classic 2000 work on contemporary American civil society, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert D. Putnam, theorized the relationship between social connections and collective civic action. In particular, Putnam identified two kinds of social capital: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding occurs when citizens are socializing with people who are like them: same national origin, same culture, and same language. But in order to create a collective identity in a multi-ethnic community, one needs to have a second kind of social capital: bridging. Bridging is what happens when people reach out to other nationals or ethnicities.

Using Putnam’s framework, I will first provide a brief analysis of the issues raised by the bonding of native-born Muslims with first generation immigrants. How do they conceive

¹ See Toni Johnson.

² See Bagby (2004) or Jamal (2005).

Muslimhood in a non-Muslim and pluralistic environment? In a second part, I will investigate the challenges of bridging with out-group members. In other words, do Arab Muslims and Muslims from other ethnic or cultural groups agree on common strategies to promote their political interest? The city of Dearborn Michigan being the most densely populated Muslim/Arab community in the US, I will be referring regularly to this case study to illustrate my points. Overall, my purpose is to present here a summary of future research which aims to investigate the intersection of class and race in voting practices among Muslim Americans.

Out of many generations, one community?

What role do native-born Muslims play in the political and civic engagement of foreign-born residents? To start with, it should be pointed out that more than 60% of U.S. Muslims were born abroad, and of those, more than 70% are U.S. citizens³. As many scholars have observed, the civic engagement within immigrant communities is usually lower than is the case with the native born⁴. It is common for recent immigrants to focus upon family and work, and to stay away from the public sphere. Sometimes because of poor language skills, they do not fully grasp the issues, the means of political expression, or the proper procedures for action. Also, loyalty to the home culture and values remains a necessity for many immigrants in a new environment. In other words retaining a collective sense of identity is often a core issue. However, as demonstrated by Yoshi Shain, the experience of displacement inevitably leads to delineating new sources of communal identity, a role which is often assigned to community leaders⁵. Local elected officials, for example, will be expected to safeguard the values and best interests of their constituents.

In the city of Dearborn Michigan, which has the largest proportion of Arab-Americans in the US, four out of the seven council members are now of Arab descent. In addition the top-vote getter in the November 2013 election was attorney Susan Dabaja who consequently became the first Muslim Arab-American elected as president of the Dearborn city council. During each council meeting, a public hearing is held so that council members may hear what the citizens of the community have to say about matters the council will vote on. At a public hearing, anyone may voice opinions, concerns, or suggestions to the council. Since 2009, all Dearborn city council meetings are broadcast live on a local network and available for

³ According to a survey released by the Pew Research Center in 2007.

⁴ See for example Jonathan Fox and Xóchitl Bada.

⁵ *Marketing the US Creed Abroad: Diasporas in the U.S. and their Homelands*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

viewing on the city's website. After watching several of these public hearings, I have found many instances when native-born elected officials are confronted with some of their immigrant fellow-citizens struggling to maintain the traditional or sometimes religiously-inspired norms of the old country. For example, in February 2014, during the public comment time, a foreign-born citizen named Hassan stood to demand that the city institute police patrols to keep young people out of parks because they allegedly used them for sexual activities⁶. After quoting from the Quran, Mr. Hassan also stated that there were magazines and newspapers at the public library that were not appropriate reading selections for young adults, thus asking the city to review and monitor literature before they were distributed. The answer provided to the first issue by the President of the council, Ms Dabaja, was: "That goes to freedom of speech and freedom of expression. From what you've shown, I don't think there are any serious concerns"; to which she added that the parents, not the city, should monitor what their children read. Regarding the second issue, Dabaja responded that if there was indecent exposure, Mr. Hassan should have contacted the authorities right away. In substance, the President's intention was to underline the supremacy of constitutional law, while at same time reminding her constituents of their legal requirements. Quite typically, President Dabaja, as an American-reared second-generation immigrant, immediately invoked one of the most highly treasured and respected texts of law; the First Amendment to the US Constitution which, as we all know, protects freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

As this example illustrates, native born Muslims, particularly when they are elected officials, may help their immigrant constituents reconcile the sometimes dissonant attitudes and behaviors demanded by the community of origin and the host society. In fact, like the rest of the native-born community, public officials assist the sociocultural adjustment of newcomers. Also, it is quite clear that second-generation immigrants holding public office perpetuate the idea of American exceptionalism -that the US creates opportunities for all newcomers whatever their creed or nationality. The reference to the almost sacred Bill of Rights contributes to the promotion of what sociologist Robert Bellah famously called "American civil religion", that is to say the intertwining of religion and patriotism⁷.

That being said, there are other forms of political engagement and other contexts when native-born Muslims play a totally different role and adopt a more critical attitude towards their family's inherited traditions and narratives. This particular mode of dealing with one's own

⁶ See transcript of meeting on the City of Dearborn Website.

⁷ Bellah, 2.

ethnic identity is the main topic of Nadine Naber's book *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism* (2012) in which she examines the complex cultural and political processes through which Arabness, and to a lesser degree, Muslimhood are forged in the United States. In this very stimulating study, Naber analyzes the strategies developed by Muslim political activists to get rid of the stereotypes that essentialize identities and hinder the political participation of American Muslims. She observes that some second or third generation Muslim activists (mainly young female feminists) accuse traditional or homeland discourse of reifying cultural differences, a process she calls "reverse Orientalism"⁸. The Arab/Muslim activists under scrutiny feel that the experience of displacement provides them with the unique opportunity to get rid of inherited inequalities, such as, for example, the masculinist nationalist models or the heteropatriarchal structure of Islamic societies. Perhaps not as radical as the San Francisco Bay area activists that Nader describes, female elected officials in Michigan, like Susan Dabaja or Rashida Tlaib (who became the first Muslim-American woman to serve in the state legislature) are paving the way for future generation female leaders to look beyond the narrow circle of domestic duties. Let me quote Susan Dabaja from a speech delivered at the Arab Student Union of the University of Michigan: "What I want to tell our young females, if you are interested in pursuing a career or some sort of profession that you are very passionate about, there is nothing that should stop you. Not marriage, not the thoughts of having a family"⁹. Hence, the promotion of gender equality may be endorsed by second generation immigrants who act like role models inspiring female immigrants to be politically engaged.

Overall, it appears that the bonding of various generations may, as Putnam has argued, reinforce homogeneity. Indeed newcomers are encouraged to shed their particular customs and integrate with the host population. However, the coming together of native born and immigrant Muslims may also result in the formulation of new common priorities which seek to dismantle the stereotypes that perpetuate, for example, the image of Muslim womanhood as monolithically oppressed.

However, as explained in the introduction, defining a common agenda serving all constituents also requires bridging with cultural or ethnic groups that do not share the same heritage or history in America.

⁸ Naber, 12.

⁹ Quoted in Fakhreddine, 1.

Ethnicity: The American Ummah’s greatest challenge¹⁰

One of the most important characteristics of the American Muslim community is its diversity. American Muslims represent a rich mosaic of ethnic, racial, linguistic and national identities that stretch from North Africa to South East Asia. Overall, 30% describe themselves as white, 23% as African American and 21% as Asian (see chart below). The majority of American Muslims are of the Sunni tradition but every Islamic sect is represented in the U.S., including Shi’ites, Sufis (adherents of a mystical form of Islam) and also Baha'is (a syncretic religion of Iranian origin). Economically, American Muslims fare comparably to the total population. However, while more foreign born citizens or residents report household incomes of more than \$100,000, 45% of all Muslim Americans report a household income of \$30,000 or less, compared to 36% of the general public¹¹. Yet, despite these multi-racial and multi-cultural differences, American Muslims are often portrayed as a homogenous bloc, a phenomenon which arguably participates in the racialization of US Muslims.

Racial Composition of the U.S. Muslim Population

	U.S. Muslims			General public
	Total	Foreign born	Native born	
	%	%	%	%
White	30	38	18	68
Black	23	14	40	12
Asian	21	28	10	5
Other/Mixed	19	16	21	2
Hispanic	<u>6</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100	100	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2011 Muslim American Survey.
RACE, HISP. General public results from June 2011 Current
Population Survey. Figures may not add to 100% because of
rounding.

However, when it comes to politics, this inter-ethnic heritage does become a particular vexing challenge for community leaders. As John Esposito, professor of Islamic studies at Georgetown University, explains: “Despite the shared beliefs and rituals that unite Muslims, the transnational unity of Islam disintegrates in [...] the differences and conflicts”¹². The same observation was already made in 1997 by Dr Agha Saeed of the American Muslim Alliance: “I’ve become aware that there is no internal cohesion or clarity within the American Muslim

¹⁰ “Ummah” is an Arabic word which can be translated as “the community of believers”.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, 18.

¹² Esposito, 12.

Community”¹³. What does the situation in Dearborn Michigan tell us of the relationships between the various Muslim subgroups?

There is about a dozen Islamic institutes or mosques in Dearborn. One of the oldest Sunni mosques in the US, the Dearborn Mosque, was founded in 1938. The nation’s largest mosque is also in Dearborn, the Islamic Center of America, which is also the oldest Shi’ite Mosque in the US. Of course, no Muslim leader will ever admit that mosques or Islamic centers are racist in their practices. On the contrary, most will say that Islam is a color-blind religion that shows solidarity with other communities of color. However, if you look at the composition of the various boards of trustees or if you watch the videos that are available on the Internet, you will find that mosques, in Dearborn and in the larger Detroit metropolitan area, are often divided along ethnic or racial lines. Immigrants from the Middle East have their mosques, immigrants from South East Asia have their own and African Americans have their own. For example, the Islamic Center of America (the nation’s largest mosque) has no African American on its board. Also, when the American Muslim Bekka Center, also in Dearborn, was founded, its members selected a name which specifically reflects the group’s regional roots in the Bekka Valley of Lebanon. Moreover, local newspapers will sometimes feature news stories that disclose cases of great animosity between subgroups. In February 2015, for instance, Imam Hassan Al-Qazwini announced during Friday prayers that he would give up his position at the Islamic Center of America if the board did not dissolve and organize new elections. In letters, some board members had accused him of financial irregularities, charges he strongly denied. When asked to explain his decision, Qazwini, of Iraqi descent, claimed that anti-Iraqi bias from some board members of Lebanese descent were in fact driving some of the attacks against him. Obviously, the coexistence of different Arab national groups within the Dearborn community has led to tensions and conflicts. However many observers agree that the thorniest issue to be resolved is the antagonism between native-born African American Muslims and immigrants from the Middle East¹⁴. It has been extensively demonstrated that, despite their acceptance of mainstream Islam, many African Americans still feel a sense of exclusion from the immigrant Muslim community. Black Muslim scholars, such as Beverly Aminah McCloud, professor of religious studies at De Paul University, accuse the immigrant community of shunning the Islamic ideals of equality: “There is no racism in Islam, but there is plenty among Muslims”¹⁵. Also, because American society has

¹³ Quoted in Amaney Jamal and Liali Albana, 104.

¹⁴ See below.

¹⁵ Quoted in Esposito and Haddad, 32.

institutionalized racism towards African Americans in general, many immigrants tend to adopt these racist tendencies. In her book, *American Muslim Women*, Jamillah Karim writes, “The pursuit for acceptance causes immigrants to differentiate themselves from blacks and also drives them to perceive and treat blacks with a scorn taught by the dominant racial discourse”¹⁶. How do these racial problems affect the way each subgroup vote in the city of Dearborn? Do voting trends divide along racial lines?

As reported above, the City Council of Dearborn is now presided over by Susan Dabaja, a second generation citizen of Palestinian descent and an adherent to the Muslim faith. When contacted to inquire whether Ms. Dabaja had, during the municipal election received any endorsement from leaders of the African American Muslim subgroup, her answer was; “I have never received endorsement from the organization you asked about”¹⁷. But, on her website, one can read that during the city council race, candidate Dabaja received official endorsement from the Arab American Political Action Committee (AAPAC), a political organization which has long supported the secular principles of Pan-Arabism. Apparently, the president of the council privileges her ethnicity over her religious affiliation. Hence, it seems that the recent history of local politics in Dearborn corroborates the common observation that racial polarization continues to be rather high in the Detroit Metropolitan area, and that forming a collective Ummah, associating all subgroups, has obviously not yet been achieved¹⁸.

And yet, as many studies have shown, religious institutions play a very significant role in the political mobilization of citizens. This phenomenon, which Ruiters and De Graaf call the “spill-over effect”, suggests that religious volunteering often leads to more political engagement¹⁹. According to Ihsan Bagby’s 2004 survey, “A Portrait of Detroit Mosques: Muslim Views on Policy, Politics and Religion”, Arab and African American mosques show contrast in the way their congregants engage in local political activities. The survey shows that, although the overwhelming majority of American Muslims feel that they should be involved in politics, Black Muslims are less likely to share that feeling: 74% of Arab Muslims agree with the statement that mosques should be involved in politics compared to 62% for Black Muslims²⁰. Another study by Amaney Jamal from Princeton University concludes that:

¹⁶ Quoted in Karim, page 28.

¹⁷ Private correspondence with the author of this article.

¹⁸ See for example Darden *et. al.*, 259

¹⁹ National Context, Religiosity, and Volunteering: Results from 53 Countries Page 1

²⁰ Bagby (2004), 41.

“The African American mosque participation is not channeled to political ends”²¹. Various explanations have been proposed to account for the fact that African American Muslims are apparently reluctant to engage in politics. Amaney Jamal, for example, claims that the long history of discrimination against Blacks has marginalized the community²².

Be that as it may, some answers provided by African American congregants indicate that the issue is far more complex. For example, when asked whether they felt that their mosque “is working for social justice”, 87% of African American Muslims answered positively compared to 71% of all mosques²³. Similarly, another study by Bagby Ihsan confirms that African Americans are the least likely to chose civil rights as a top priority (51%), but give a higher priority to providing services to the congregants: services to Muslims are ranked fifth among Black participants as opposed to seventh for Arabs²⁴. Furthermore, other indicators concerning the African American group as a whole show, for example, that the rate of union membership is much higher among Blacks than among the immigrant group, thus showing that Blacks are not only concerned with “bread and butter” issues but also with a much broader political debate that includes increasing wages and reducing inequalities.

Then one can make the inference that structured inequalities and economic hardship appear to be the main focus of African American’s activism. Being mostly first generation immigrants, Middle-Eastern Muslims are primarily concerned with obtaining the same constitutional rights and social privileges afforded to all Americans. As members of a community that has experienced both prejudice and discrimination, they also seek to dispel existing stereotypes and misperceptions. However, because they tend to have a higher average income, recent immigrants (Middle-eastern or Asian) are more likely to express satisfaction with the state of the nation. In the end, what comes to light is that the definition of “politics” varies according to one’s interests and experience in America. Hence, further research needs to be undertaken to assess and to explore how class divisions affect each subgroup’s political agenda.

Conclusion

As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed: “In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or more unsparingly applied to a

²¹ Jamal (2005), 536.

²² Jamal (2005), 537.

²³ Bagby (2012)

²⁴ Bagby (2004), 32.

multitude of different objects, than in America”²⁵. What was true then is still true today; Americans still have a strong penchant for forming groups and associations. Second-generation immigrants follow suit and create associations and places of worship to ease the integration of newcomers into American society.

However, the preliminary findings of my research seem to indicate that, for the American Muslim group, pushing a common agenda remains a constant struggle. The use of Putnam’s framework to analyze the political engagement and bonds of solidarity between the various subgroups reveals that, in the first place, the bridging of the various generations may produce counter-narratives that cover a broader spectrum of political activism. In the second place, we observed that American Muslims have been unable to overcome the divide that continues to separate communities; ethnicity or faith being two alternative and overlapping markers of identity. Ironically, it appears that the racialization of Muslims as a monolithic “Other” is both undesired and desired. It is a development that perpetuates prejudices but also challenges the commonality of political activism.

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²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, 204.

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