

# American Muslims and the Use of Cultural Diplomacy

Hafsa Kanjwal

One of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century will be to address the growing mutual suspicion, fear, and misunderstanding between Western and Muslim societies. Within the United States, in particular, there is an increase in Islamophobia, which seeks to dominate the discussion surrounding Islam and Muslims by linking it to the actions and views of an extremist minority. Within this tense environment, a number of organizations and initiatives have taken steps to urge greater dialogue between the West and the Muslim world on an international level. Oftentimes, this is done with the underlying understanding that there is a bifurcation between “the West” and the “Muslim” and/or “Islamic world.” As such, the primary focus is not placed on changing negative perceptions of Islam in the West, but rather, to improve the image of the West in the Muslim world. The fact that Islam exists within the West, and, for the purposes of this article, in America, is often overlooked. Nonetheless, there are an estimated three to seven million Muslims living in America and a greater number of them are second or third generation Americans.<sup>1</sup> The American Muslim community, especially its youth, is at a unique position in history because they actively engage in the process of reconciling its Muslim as well as American identities in the

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public sphere. Young American Muslims have the capacity to decrease the negative views that some Americans may have towards Islam. This article explores the specific role that the younger generation of American Muslims plays in using cultural expression to bridge the gap between Western and Muslim societies.

There has been a growing tendency to define and articulate the “American Muslim” experience and identity, in which culture plays a great role. I believe that the American Muslim community must take on a non-traditional diplomatic role to represent Islam to the greater American community. There are two different conceptions of how this diplomatic role can be played out. One, termed “public relations diplomacy,” is a more direct, and often reactionary, engagement with society that comes out of a need to bring awareness of and dispel prejudices of Islam and Muslims. The second concept, cultural diplomacy, incorporates nuanced involvement with culture and society that does not always stem from a need to serve as an “Ambas-

While U.S. diplomacy is mainly approached from an inter-state rather than an intra-state perspective, I believe American Muslims have a unique historical opportunity to constructively situate the relationship between Islam and the West through a more micro-level diplomacy. With a better general understanding of Islam, U.S. policies can be made more sensitive, understanding, and relevant to the Muslim context, whether domestically or internationally.

**Demography of American Muslims.** Islam in America has a long history with multi-faceted demographics. While the earliest Muslims came into America as African slaves, droves of Muslims emigrated from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, as immigration laws became more relaxed in the 1970s. Over a quarter of Muslims in America are African-American, as many converted through the initial influence of the Nation of Islam and later through mainstream Sunni Islam. Meanwhile, in comparison to Muslims living in Europe,

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sador of Islam.” Cultural diplomacy, rather, uses the importance of art and its creators to serve as an intermediary between two cultures even when the individual does not necessarily practice the faith. Artists are automatically categorized and assigned as such ambassadors based on perceptions of the artists’ biases by those operating within and outside of the artists’ perspective.

immigrant Muslims in America are mainly middle-class, highly educated, and highly assimilated into American society.<sup>2</sup> Although diversity defines the American Muslim experience and is one of its strengths, diversity has also led to divisions, especially in regard to relations between different ethnic groups. For example, there is a wide rift between the immigrant and the African-American

Muslim communities.<sup>3</sup> Many of the challenges surrounding the future of the Muslim community in America will pertain to how it addresses the heterogeneity within its backgrounds, ideologies, and experiences. The solution primarily lies in how it approaches the creation of one or several American Muslim culture(s).

### **Towards Cultivating an American Muslim Identity: Theoretical Contributions.**

Perhaps the most relevant scholar of the cultural formation of the American Muslim community is Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, Director of the Nawawi Foundation. In a groundbreaking work entitled "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," Dr. Abd-Allah argues that for centuries, "Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law... [In] China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African."<sup>4</sup> Thus, in America, Islam must look "American."

He examines the history of Islam in other parts of the world and gives examples of how Islam allowed for the engagement with local customs and traditions, as long as such practices did not directly go against any Islamic teachings or principles. Broad application of the law allowed for an even broader accommodation of local norms. This syncretism allowed Islam to flourish in diverse societies as it allowed for the creation of "stable indigenous Muslim identities and [allowed] Muslims to put down deep roots and make lasting contributions wherever they went."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, as Dr. Abd-Allah states, contemporary Islamist rhetoric chooses to ignore or remains ignorant of this ancient wisdom, and views culture in a more predatory fashion, placing it as a

"toxic pollutant that must necessarily be purged, since Islam and culture are mutually exclusive in their minds."<sup>6</sup> He links this mindset with the greater political and social ills plaguing the Muslim world and states that this view is a "by-product of the grave cultural dislocation and dysfunction of the contemporary Muslim world... Culture—Islamic or otherwise—provides the basis of social stability but, paradoxically, can itself only flourish in stable societies and will inevitably break down in the confusion of social disruption and turmoil."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Abd-Allah recognizes the unique position of the American Muslim community, and cites the need for the continued cultivation of a distinct Muslim community in America that normatively would transcend its immigrant backgrounds. However, he does acknowledge that there are a few deterring factors. He states that much of this cultural production has been feckless without clear understanding of Islam as a counter-cultural identity religion.<sup>8</sup> As such, American Muslims engage with their surroundings within the context of public relations diplomacy, perceiving the need to assert identity within what they see as a hostile environment.

Dr. Abd-Allah summarizes his work by stating that the development of a "sound Muslim American cultural identity must be resolutely undertaken as a conscious pursuit and one of our community's vital priorities."<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Dr. Abd-Allah does not focus on how the creation of this culture will better improve Islam's image in America, but rather that it will provide for a constructive unified sense of identity for the American Muslim community. There is a recognition here that solely focusing on improving Islam's image in

America is superficial and does not engage with the diverse talents and viewpoints of the American Muslim constituency. Thus, this culture should not be reactive but rather, proactive.

**American Muslims as “Ambassadors of Islam.”** With increasing levels of Islamophobia pervading the United States, American Muslim organizations are constantly working to counter the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the media as well as on the international and domestic political scenes. In a sense, they are working full-time in the realm of public relations diplomacy, striving to represent “pure” Islam to the general American public. Although these organizations differ in their goals and objectives, they are unified in the sense that they strive to create long-term means for American Muslims to be active in American civic life. However, they are often placed in the awkward position of having to defend Islam or Muslims when a problematic incident occurs nationally or internationally, continually going on talk shows or radio shows to explain the causes of terrorism, the role of women in Islam, or the conflict between Sunnis and Shi’as. They do not necessarily change or shape the discourse, but rather, respond to it. While these responses are motivated from American Muslim leadership onward, the negative image of Muslims nonetheless remains in the United States. Hence, one must ask whether such groups’ efforts are truly improving the image of Islam. Perhaps presenting the material in a defensive and reactionary way may in fact be doing more damage than good to perceptions of Islam.

Oftentimes, this “public relations” framework translates into similar mani-

festations when it comes to American Muslim culture. It appears that sometimes cultural expressions are geared more towards ensuring that Americans have a better impression of Islam. This approach is problematic because genuine artistic expression is being manipulated to fit a certain agenda. Artists feel compelled to be the token “Ambassadors of Islam” and represent Islam or Muslims on a highly normative level, even when reality is otherwise. The role of 9/11 on the American Muslim psyche cannot be underestimated; the need to emphasize “moderate” Islam in public and cultural discourse has been heightened. Furthermore, American Muslim organizations may even shy away from cultural production that is not necessarily focused primarily on correcting the Muslim image.

**Case Studies.** As Dr. Abd-Allah mentions in “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” American Muslims have significantly contributed to a number of diverse avenues in arts and culture. Not necessarily molded to fit the “public relations” framework, this work has been extremely constructive as it seeks to “tell stories” and speak directly to and out of people’s experiences.

**Musa Syeed.** Musa Syeed is a young American Muslim filmmaker who recently produced an award-winning documentary called “A Son’s Sacrifice,” “which follows the journey of Imran, a young American Muslim who struggles to take over his father’s *halal* slaughterhouse in New York City.”<sup>10</sup> In his work, Syeed seeks to explore the immigrant experience in America, especially how it relates to the notion of the spiritual value of a journey. He is interested in providing a human dimension and connection to

broader theoretical issues such as the clash between modernity and tradition or political conflict. Although he recognizes that he is one of few American Muslims in the film industry, he doesn't wish to be "pigeon-holed" into the token American Muslim filmmaker.<sup>11</sup> He believes this is very limiting and self-defeating.

He acknowledges that this problem exists in terms of how the American Muslim community perceives the arts and culture. The community "values representation in the media, but in a certain way—they don't see the arts as important—there is a certain level of mistrust of those who get involved with mainstream media. They wish to create an image of the Muslim community that is immaculate and doesn't necessarily represent three-dimensional characters."<sup>12</sup> This observation is highly relevant as the American Muslim community is focusing too much on "doing good PR." The community needs to tell its specific stories, but do it in a meaningful way that is applicable to universal themes. Through his work, Syeed brings to his audience the human stories behind normally homogenized communities, and in that sense broadens perspectives and bridges divides.

**Haroon Moghal.** Haroon Moghal is a writer based in New York and is well-known in the American Muslim cultural scene for his award-winning blog as well as his first novel, *The Order of Light*. Moghal acknowledges the problematic tendencies of how American Muslims view culture. Many Muslims have alienated an audience that they could have had influence on because they have been so "inward" looking. He mentions the case of Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens), who went in a very specifically Islamic direction at a certain point in his career.

With his talent, he could have done much more universally for Islam and the image of Muslims, but instead he was making Islamic music tapes for the younger generation.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the role Islam should play in a Muslim author's work, Moghal says that it should not be explicit. He mentions a powerful scene in *The Kite Runner* in which the narrator at the end of the novel is praying in a mosque in hopes that the young boy who has disappeared will return to him. Although the ritual he is performing is distinctively "Islamic," the way the author Khalad Hosseini portrays it is very subtle and universal in terms of its intention of turning to a higher power for solace. The reaction to *The Kite Runner* has been very positive because the author focused on themes that have universal resonance, but posited the novel in a distinctively Afghan manner. People react to the human experience, which is what culture narrates. By successfully adding the "human universalizing" element to his art, one can serve as an indirect diplomat of Islam to the greater community through one's writing being explicitly Islamic.

**Ausma Khan.** Ausma Khan is the editor-in-chief of *MuslimGirl Magazine*, a bi-monthly magazine that reaches out to Muslim girls growing up in North America. The magazine aims to "tell life-affirming stories of Muslim girls in North America, be a voice for these girls, and bring them together, and show them that they can make positive contributions to their societies as Muslims."<sup>14</sup> The magazine also seeks to take away perceptions of Muslims being aliens, and to counter stereotypes of the "submissive, oppressed Muslim woman." The magazine faces challenges in terms of advertising, and

Khan mentions that it is difficult to get sponsorships given that potential funders are still skeptical of whether or not the magazine can be a positive representation of American Muslims. The magazine has

IMAN also has a strong arts and cultural component to their work, and Jafri himself is a DJ who works with national hip hop groups. IMAN hosts "Takin' It to the Streets," a day of music and service that

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also made a deliberate decision to include all girls in their pages, including those who may not necessarily wear the traditional headscarf, which has received some negative feedback.

*MuslimGirl Magazine* is an innovative approach to showcasing the American Muslim experience. It is an excellent model of cultural diplomacy as it seeks to "humanize" American Muslim girls, and in doing so, allows people to get an introduction to Islam and Muslims through a familiar means. By allowing itself to be an open venue to the diverse segments of Muslim girls living in North America, the magazine can play the dual role of both furthering the cultural cultivation of the American Muslim community and serving as a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims.

**Asad Jafri.** Asad Jafri works as the Youth Coordinator for IMAN, the Inner-city Muslim Action Network based in Chicago. IMAN is a non-profit organization that serves marginalized communities in the Chicago area. They run a grassroots direct services initiative which includes health clinics, food pantries, and professional development training.

brought together over 10,000 people in Chicago last summer. IMAN also organizes monthly community cafes that bring together artists, rappers, poets, and academics to share their work. Currently, IMAN is working to transform its arts and cultural initiative to include visual arts, theater, and film.

Jafri says that IMAN's work is inspired by the call to social justice that is at the root of Islam. Although the members of IMAN recognize problems existing in other parts of the Muslim world, they are very adamant about being involved in the society in which they live. Tackling the problems facing the urban communities in Chicago is an example of social action that is encouraged by Islam. The arts and cultural component of their work was created out of a need to better represent Muslims in America, but also out of a need to create an authentic American Muslim culture.<sup>15</sup> By including non-Muslims in the creation of a space for this culture to flourish, IMAN takes a progressive approach to cultural diplomacy. By "living out" their beliefs as Muslims creatively and in the spirit of social justice, the members of IMAN serve as "diplomats" of Islam in America.

**Conclusion.** The case studies presented above represent a fraction of the cultural material being produced by the American Muslim community. These individuals or organizations serve as ideal representatives of Islam to the general American public, by humanizing Islam and Muslims.

Involvement in the arts and culture could serve a few additional benefits to the American Muslim community. One primarily associates the term, "American Muslim community" with the small percentage of Muslims, or the "core," in the country that visibly identifies with Islam and is involved with the different Islamic-based institutions in the country, be it the local mosque or the National Muslim Students Association. There is a large percentage of Americans who are Muslim, but have been left out of the "core" because oftentimes, it appears that the "core" is too focused on issues relating to theological matters. The cultivation of an American Muslim culture that looks beyond this will be beneficial as this allows those individuals who previously disassociated themselves from the community to get interested in the more "cultural" aspects of Muslim identity in the United States. They, in turn, could contribute to

this identity and this inclusiveness would be valuable because the expressions of art and culture would not be monolithic or directly representational from only a small segment of the demography.

Looking into the future, and especially in terms of what the American Muslim community and additional funding sources could focus their efforts on, this article argues that cultural diplomacy should take precedence over public relations diplomacy. An indigenous American Muslim culture must be cultivated and supported. It should not be reactionary or defensive, but rather self-critical, nuanced, and universal. By exploring the "humanizing" aspects of Islam, culture can play a great role in bridging the divide between the West and the Muslim world. Furthermore, I believe that in order for the American Muslim community to be engaged in America civically and politically, it needs to truly be reflective of its identity, goals, and aspirations. Thus, it needs to develop a sophisticated cultural presence before it can be coherent on a civic or political level. In this way, the formation of a cultural identity will allow there to be more consensus on what the political platforms of the American Muslim community should be.

#### NOTES

1 "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, ed. 22 May 2007, Internet, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans> (date accessed: 8 December 2007).

2 Ibid.

3 Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4 Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," Nawawi Foundation, 2004 (1)

5 Abd-Allah 2.

6 Abd-Allah 2.

7 Abd-Allah 2.

8 Abd-Allah 2.

9 Abd-Allah 2.

10 "About," A Son's Sacrifice, ed. 2007, Internet, <http://www.sonsacrifice.com/about.html> (date accessed: 8 December 2007).

11 Musa Syeed, interview by author, 5 December 2007.

12 Ibid.

13 Haroon Moghal, interview with author, 5 December 2007.

14 Ausma Khan, interview with author, 6 December 2007.

15 Asad Jafri, interview with author, 7 November 2007.