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DOI 10.1007/s12115-016-0062-0

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Christmas with the Brotherhood

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Keywords Muslim-Americans · Politics and Muslims · Immigrants · Sharia law · Israel-Palestine conflict

Over the weekend following Christmas 2015, as many as 10,000 Muslims convened at Chicago's McCormick Place for the 14th annual Muslim American Society-Islamic Circle of North America (MAS-ICNA) Convention. Neatly bearded men, typically in casual western clothes were much in evidence, along with a few in business suits and some in traditional, billowing cotton tunics and pants. As for the women, the overwhelming majority, including adolescents, wore modest, lose-fitting clothes and headscarves (or hijab). A few, roughly equal in number, stood out, either because a niqab covered their faces, except their eyes; or because their lack of any head-covering typically revealed long, dark – even voluptuous – hair. A non-Muslim visitor was reminded that the headscarf hardly inhibits female vanity, which on this occasion asserted itself with eye make-up, colorful prints, stylish footwear, and painted toenails.

While the majority of attendees were immigrants of Arab origin and had mostly American-born children in tow, not a few South Asian families were evident. So, too, was a small but noticeable number of blacks, typically African Americans but inevitably a few Africans.

Encountering any one of these types would by itself hardly be a surprise in any major American city. But the unfamiliarity of such an array gathered together in one place was evident as I walked through the convention's huge bazaar, featuring scores and scores of vendors touting all variety of goods, services, organizations, and causes. On sale were exotic honeys, sweets, and other Middle Eastern foodstuffs; traditional and not-so-traditional men's and women's clothing and fashions, all conforming to Islamic standards of modesty; the inevitable arrays of religious and non-religious books; and Qur'an recitation and study-guide software. Also present were various disaster relief efforts soliciting funds for projects directed both domestically and overseas, especially in Syria; publications about interest-free, Sharia-compliant home mortgages; guides to establishing Boy Scout troops for Muslims; information about weekend seminars conducted by the Salafist Al-Maghreb Institute; recruiters for Hizb'ut-Tahrir, an extremist group out to reestablish the caliphate through reputedly non-violent means; and finally, orthodox rebbes with Jews United Against Zionism, whose biggest problem at their booth appeared to be keeping their bowl of kosher candy filled.

Lectures and speeches in the main assembly hall accommodated several thousand attendees at a sitting, while smaller break-out sessions – mostly in English but also in Arabic and Spanish, with simultaneous translations – addressed topics ranging from Islamic religious practices and piety, domestic politics and foreign policy, media relations, breaking into Hollywood filmmaking, and dealing with marital and family problems. In addition to a Qur'an recitation competition, there was an inflatable playground for young kids, a basketball tournament for teens and up, a matrimonial banquet for prescreened singles in search of a mate, and an interfaith lunch and panel discussion (which presumably explains why, unlike in previous years, the convention began the day *after* Christmas, not the day before!). Finally, at the end of each day, around 11 PM in the main auditorium, a few thousand well-behaved, mostly young fans responded enthusiastically

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Published online: 30 August 2016

to Islamic singers and pop groups, performing with sophisticated audio-visual equipment, including smoke machines and roving spotlights – not unlike any dance club in America, except *no dancing!*

Make no mistake. This was the annual gathering of the American affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Islamist brothers and sisters were ousted from power in Egypt by a military coup in 2013. In this country, within the last ten years or so MAS literature explicitly highlighted the goal of reviving the caliphate! (Though to be perfectly fair, the idea was almost certainly to do so overseas in Muslim majority societies, not here.)

But today in 2016, what insights about this reviled and feared organization can be gleaned from such a convocation? Does MAS pose a serious threat to our democratic way of life? If not, why not? Does it pose any challenges at all? Or does it constitute, as some commentators believe, a relatively benign, even helpful voice for Muslims in America?

Longtime Islamist Presence in the United States

Before addressing such questions, it must be acknowledged that some will regard them as unnecessary, inappropriate, or even counter-productive. Certainly our media, think-tank, academic, and political elites have almost unanimously decided either that there is no connection between MAS and the Brotherhood, or that this is a question best avoided. Many law enforcement professionals certainly know the facts, but have similarly decided to avoid the issue out of concern not to alienate potential interlocutors, informants, and partners in the Muslim-American community.

Yet before 9/11, outside observers as well as Muslims themselves routinely acknowledged the Islamist origins and continuing ties of this as well as other Muslim organizations. Perversely, after 9/11 any mention of a tie between MAS and the Brotherhood came to be frowned on and avoided by our elites. In any event, Ikhwan (as the Brotherhood is known in Arabic) activists themselves have seldom been aboveboard, even with their fellow Muslims, and have consequently sown distrust and dissension in mosques, Islamic schools, and other institutions across the United States that they have typically attempted to colonize.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the aisle, conservative pundits and policy entrepreneurs have built up a cottage industry that can seemingly sustain itself on relentless "exposes" of "Islamists and terrorists" (making no distinction whatsoever between them) infiltrating the media, think tanks, Congress, and even the White House. In the continuing cacophony, the few remaining honest voices have been overlooked. For example, in 2011, Leila Ahmed, professor of religious studies at Harvard Divinity School, published *A Quiet Revolution*, in which she acknowledges the important role of the Brotherhood in popularizing the headscarf in her native Egypt in the 1970's and 1980's and, more generally, in establishing during that same period the organizations – including MAS – whose leaders and progeny now dominate Muslim-American civic and political life.

Yet at the recent Chicago convention, speakers repeatedly asserted that Muslims are "good, honest, hard-working Americans" worthy of "equal treatment" and "fairness," all the while obfuscating or denying outright their individual and collective ties, as well as their on-going relationships, with the Brotherhood. Indeed, most Muslim-American leaders today, many if not most of whom have had some tie to the Brotherhood, routinely evade or simply deny the truth. One might even refer to this as the original sin of Islam in America. No wonder so many Americans are so suspicious of both Muslims and our political elites!

Nevertheless, the full implications of the Brotherhood's presence here in the U.S. remain unclear. Was I schmoozing with thousands of "Islamist terrorists" in Chicago over Christmas weekend? Or would it perhaps be more accurate to say "terrorist sympathizers"? If one has ISIS in mind, then the answer to either version of the question is a resounding "no," as I will clarify in a moment. But if Hamas is the focus, then that's another matter. For without a doubt, many, probably most, of those at McCormick Place were sympathetic to Hamas, however ambivalently or reluctantly.

Getting Past the Israeli-Palestinian Issue

Worth noting here is that this Chicago conference was co-sponsored by the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), a South Asian-immigrant organization with an Islamist history and ideological orientation akin to MAS's. As mentioned, this was the fourteenth such event co-sponsored by these two organizations. Yet over that period, despite their ideological affinities, the two have proved unable to overcome ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences to combine forces in a single, American Islamist organization.

Even more striking, over the weekend there was little said about Israeli-Palestinian issues, though admittedly more than I had heard at previous such gatherings in the post-9/11 era. One reason why surfaced in a session entitled "The Palestinian Cause in the Wake of the Arab Spring Decline." As the speaker (widely regarded as a Hamas apologist) lamented, virtually all of the Arab regimes have abandoned the Palestinian cause. Judging by the poor attendance, Muslims in America – preoccupied either with their lives here or their relatives' travails back in the Middle East – have similarly lost interest in the Palestinian issue (unless of course they are Palestinians!). Perhaps more accurately, Muslims here just don't know what to do about the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. They certainly have no more insights than the professionals who have spent their careers attempting to resolve it. As a result, one hears denunciations of Arab governments, of Israel, and of U.S. support for Israel. And though "Israelis" and "Jews" get used interchangeably in such discussions, when the topic shifts to Jews in the United States, Muslim leaders invariably speak of them as an impressive, even admirable – albeit daunting – example of what a once-reviled religious minority can achieve in this country.

But to repeat, there is much less anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian rhetoric at events such as this than one might assume. Indeed, in the post-9/11 era almost none. In part this is because, in the period immediately prior to that fateful day, Muslim Americans got caught up in the emotions stirred by the Second Intifada. At a large rally in Lafayette Square in front of the White House on October 28, 2000, days before the presidential election, several speakers voiced support for Hamas, which proved particularly embarrassing and problematic when played back in the aftermath of 9/11.

Yet that was then, and this is now. Their basic perspective has almost certainly not changed, but Muslim Americans, especially their leaders, have simply come to understand that the Palestinian-Israeli issue is not one they can win on – and that in fact, it comes with substantial liabilities, not the least of which is antagonizing Jewish defense organizations. Some critics may regard such discretion as another example of Islamist deception. But it might be more fairly characterized as political prudence.

Then, too, Muslim leaders have realized that the Israeli-Palestinian as well as other foreign policy issues pertaining to their diverse homelands mainly serve to fragment their already minimal political impact here. Particularly after 9/11, when the necessity of explaining and defending themselves to non-Muslims became so urgent, immigrant leaders came to see that their instinctive preoccupation with politics back home – where many either had family or to which they thought perhaps one day to return – had contributed to their failure to become more integrated into American politics and society. Changing this orientation meant refocusing the attention of their fellow Muslims onto domestic politics and policy issues. To be sure, these leaders also anticipated that in the process of working on issues of common concern with other Americans, they would develop allies who might eventually help with foreign policy concerns.

The Political Uses of Islamophobia

Precisely this perspective was on display at the MAS-ICNA convention I attended. To be sure, many of the sessions dealt with religious themes verging on matters of personal piety: "Dignified by the Divine," "So Why Do We Pray?," "Discovering the Light Within," and "Inspirations from Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) Journey of Ascension." Such topics are somewhat surprising, since Islamists have long regarded apolitical, privatized traditionalism as a major cause of Islam's decline vis-à-vis the West. But then not all those attending such conventions are as politically oriented as the Islamist organizers and activists.

In any event, most of the sessions focused on the intersection of Islam, civic affairs, and politics: "Curbing Youth Extremism and ISIS Recruitment," "2016 Elections and the American Muslim Vote," "The American Muslim Community Between Extremism, Bigotry, and Islamophobia," "Black Lives Matter: Standing for Justice," and "Civic Engagement and How We Can Change the Stereotype." And more to the point, the messages conveyed by all the speakers throughout the weekend were remarkably consistent and disciplined, as one would expect from a cadre organization modeled, however indirectly and imperfectly, after a Leninist party.

One such message was the moral equivalence of ISIS with "Islamophobes" here in the United States. Indeed, numerous speakers went out of their way to denounce ISIS and make it clear that the organization's strategy was to provoke attacks on Muslims in the West that would then force them to radicalize. Yet with nearly equal frequency and vehemence, Islamophobes – frequently unnamed, but invariably tied to Fox News – were denounced as racist xenophobes seeking to deny Muslims their political and religious rights as American citizens.

Another version of moral equivalence surfaced in conversations with individuals who condemned with equal fervor the collateral deaths of innocent Muslims by Obama's drones and ISIS's killing of Muslims resisting the imposition of their caliphate. Strikingly, such ethical contortions coexist for many Muslims with a triumphalist view of Islam as the one true religion, echoed in the convention theme "Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him): Mercy to Mankind." Or as one speaker explained, "Islam belongs not just to Muslims – but also to every Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and atheist neighbor."

However contorted or misguided such moral gymnastics may be, I have no reason to question the criticism and rejection of ISIS expressed by these Muslim activists. On the other hand, their preoccupation – even obsession – with Islamophobia is definitely worthy of scrutiny.

To be sure, the idea of Islamophobia speaks to some genuine concerns of ordinary Muslims struggling to adapt and make a life for themselves and their children in America. For quite aside from understandable fears about radical Islamist terrorism, Muslims here must also contend with the persistent paranoia evident among not insignificant segments of the public that believe that less than 1 % of the population is somehow going to impose its faith on the rest of us.

Yet increasingly for Muslims in America, Islamophobia has become the political-moral equivalent of racism for African Americans – a way of explaining away and delegitimizing all sources of opposition and criticism of one's group. For Muslim leaders, Islamophobia serves a critical purpose: it is virtually the only available means of both mobilizing their substantially politically inert immigrant-origin coreligionists and at the same time overcoming their fragmentation along diverse sectarian, ideological, ethnic, linguistic, and racial fault lines. Indeed, it is not clear that the primary source of identity for most Muslims here is in fact their religion – as opposed to regarding themselves primarily as Pakistanis, Egyptians, and so forth.

Nor is it evident how religiously observant Muslims in the United States are. For while Muslim immigrants tend to be more observant here than back in their home countries, survey data indicate that most do not attend mosque regularly, one of their faith's primary obligations. Islamophobia, then, is one of the few available, means of fostering a religious identity among Muslims in the United States, arguably the most diverse agglomeration of them in any country.

To be sure, this preoccupation with Islamophobia has been evident at least since 9/11. What was striking at the MAS-ICNA convention was how vigorously attendees were encouraged to identify with other minorities facing discrimination and racism in America. Indeed, they were urged to mobilize politically not simply to advance their own self-interest as Muslims, but to demonstrate civic commitment by helping to advance the interests of Hispanics and African Americans specifically. But then, too, convention attendees were repeatedly reminded that the racism and bigotry experienced by these other minorities are identical to what Muslims experience.

All of which explains the Spanish-language sessions as well as various Hispanic converts speaking about their turning to Islam. Several Muslims also emphasized the importance of "comprehensive immigration reform" to Hispanics and urged their listeners to support it. In this same vein, MAS has for several years sponsored an Immigrant Justice Center.

More noteworthy are the efforts of these Islamists to reach out to African Americans. Yet this is just the latest chapter in an old story about the affinity black Americans have long had with Islam. It could be traced back to Africa, but certainly begins in our era with the strange currents that came together around the Nation of Islam. So-called Black Muslims were followers of Elijah Mohammed, whose cult taught self-respect to poor urban blacks based on hatred of whites. In any event, it had little or no basis in any globally acknowledged version of Islam. Thus, it was Malcolm X who began the process by which Black Muslims and African Americans more generally came to embrace orthodox Islam. And today, more than a fifth of the approximately 3 million Muslims here are African Americans.

Still, something new was in evidence at the Chicago convention. Throughout the weekend, the Black Lives Matter Movement was repeatedly highlighted and praised. Various speakers reminded audiences that Black Lives Matter because that movement is fighting the same bigotry and racism that fuels Islamophobia. Or as one popular t-shirt seen at the McCormick Place put it simply in big letters against a black background: "Muslim Lives Matter."

Such rhetoric morphed easily into the anti-corporate, anti-capitalist rhetoric of today's left, which in any event comes easily to a faith so focused on communal values. A prominent British Islamist decried the fact that "no one went to prison for causing the Great Recession," while "white policemen" have gotten away with killing black youth. His remarks prompted one of the few spontaneous outbursts of applause that weekend.

The ironic upshot of all this was repeated calls for Muslims to overcome any lingering qualms about involvement in American civic and political life. Indeed, attendees were admonished to embrace their responsibilities as American citizens, not least in local communities where their non-Muslim neighbors and fellow citizens might get to know them and witness their commitment.

Overarching such exhortation was a broader argument that the future of Muslims in America depends fundamentally on their rights as American citizens, especially their First Amendment right to worship freely. As one speaker with clear ties to the Muslim Brotherhood put it: "We will defend the Constitution because it protects us and other minorities. .. in this country we practice our religion much more freely than any other country in the world. .. and therefore we must protect the Constitution of the United States."

Given how antithetical any such notion of individual rights is to the historical teachings of Islam, non-Muslims must at least acknowledge how much these particular Islamists are prepared – albeit in the service of a simplistic, leftist agenda – to stretch their beliefs and traditions almost beyond recognition. To be sure, underlying such assertions is the inevitable Islamist conviction that the faith of the Prophet has much to teach America and will one day prevail here. And while such triumphalism understandably alarms many Americans, I can tell you that – as someone raised in a pre-Vatican II Irish Catholic milieu marked by similarly fervent but naïve convictions – such views should not today be our primary cause of concern.

After all, such leaders are urging their fellow Muslim Americans to embrace a curious, albeit familiarly self-serving version of citizenship. As tends to be true of other such Muslim gatherings, there was virtually no representation or even stylized logo of an American flag to be seen anywhere, all weekend. Nor were there any calls to citizen service

that were not clearly instrumental or directly tied to the perceived interests of Muslims. Not only was every recommended act of citizenship narrowly tailored to gratify presumed allies among minorities and a broader liberal-left coalition, there was no mention in any meaningful sense of sacrifice for the fundamental good of the nation in any meaningful sense – for example, through military service.

In concrete, practical terms, it should be pointed out that even though Muslims and Hispanics will both almost certainly vote heavily Democratic in 2016, they actually have few interests in common. To be sure, they both tend to favor high levels of immigration, especially family-based visas. Even so, as a relatively highly educated and affluent group, Muslims are more likely to benefit from expanded high-skilled immigration than low-skilled, poorly educated Hispanics.

More complicated and freighted is the relationship between African Americans (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and immigrant-origin Muslims. The basic class differences between these two groups may be self-evident, but as I have already pointed out, they also share long-standing ties and affinities. Thus, as the principal of one of the nation's largest Islamic schools once explained to me, "You've never met a more disgruntled person than an African American who has been drawn to Islam's message of the equality of all those who follow the teachings of the Prophet and then encounters the racism that many immigrant Muslims either bring with them from overseas or pick up a here."

The point is that African Americans tend to migrate toward Islam out of a sense alienation from mainstream America, while immigrant-origin Muslims, despite many obstacles and problems, tend to migrate toward that same mainstream. Yet Muslim leaders, including those at this convention, are directing their people down a political path that, while not sympathetic to Islamist terrorists like ISIS, reflects a contorted, ill-fitting understanding of America. However understandable or tempting for some black Americans, this alliance is particularly problematic and needlessly marginalizing for immigrant-origin Muslims.

Meanwhile on the Cultural Front

The lone exception to this perspective was the remarks of a Muslim-American woman who presided over several panel sessions. Suzy Ismail is a wife and mother of three young children, a family and marriage counselor, and author of books with titles like *When Muslim Marriage Fails* and *Nine to Five: Muslims in the Western Workplace*. Based in New Jersey, she is a frequent speaker at conferences sponsored by various Islamist organizations. She has also spoken at the Witherspoon Institute (headed by Princeton's Robert George) and at the Anscombe Society at Harvard (a student organization endorsing premarital abstinence and traditional family and marriage values).

One of Ismail's sessions that weekend – "Raising Teens in a World of Pornography, Drugs, and Premarital Sex" – was particularly intense. Unlike most, it drew a standing-room-only crowd, with several hundred attendees, mostly women, who despite being distracted by young children remained riveted to their seats and then unleashed a barrage of questions. These ranged from relations between spouses to the topics listed on the program.

A topic not on the agenda was raised by one woman: How to deal with a young person who believes he or she is "homosexual"? Seizing on the somewhat furtively asked question, Ismail calmly and straightforwardly explained how "being gay, an identity" had come to replace "homosexuality, an act" – with the result that "the LGBT agenda" has come to be accepted by the broader culture as inevitable. Speaking without rancor but nevertheless expressing her concern, she cited the example of youth in her clinic confessing discomfort that they "must be gay." As one early teen declared, "I'm a guy and I like pink." Or as an adolescent girl put it, "I only wear jeans. So I must be a lesbian." Ismail then reported that when asked if they had in fact "experienced intimacy," such youth typically did not even know what the phrase meant!

Unlike most presenters at such gatherings, Ismail speaks in commonsense terms, drawing from her experiences as a parent and a clinician. In particular, she avoids the frequent practice of continually and repeatedly invoking the Qur'an or Hadith (sayings and practices of the Prophet). Though clearly arguing from the perspective of a socially conservative Muslim, she speaks with the voice of moral reasoning and without bitterness or judgmentalism.

When questions about pornography – whether indulged by young people or by married couples – were raised, Ismail was equally low-key and straightforward. She urged her listeners to "educate yourselves about pornography," especially its addictive aspects. She went on to express her concerns about how the loss of modesty has come to pervade our culture such that we are accustomed to viewing images that "reduce human beings to their animal drives."

Still more striking, particularly in light of the weekend's overall political drift, was Ismail's observation that when it comes to pornography, Muslims ought to realize that "we are not the only religious community troubled by these trends." She specifically mentioned "conservative Catholics" (including Robert George) who have worked with Muslims on such issues.

Ismail's remarks are curious in several respects. First, while her overall perspective on homosexuality and pornography is hardly out of step with the views of most Muslims, such topics received scant mention from the weekend's many other speakers. Indeed, it is striking how little attention was devoted to social and cultural issues at a convention organized around

the theme that Islam has much to offer an ailing America. Moreover, Ismail's notion of working with like-minded Catholics was a sharp departure from the weekend's mantra urging Muslims to identify and work with Hispanics and blacks.

Yet once posed, this puzzle solves itself. The social and cultural conservatism that characterize Muslims, even as they struggle to adapt and assimilate to American pluralism, is totally out of place in the left-liberal, multicultural coalition that their leaders, including the Islamists at this convention, have been successfully promoting.

Sticking with the Democrats for Now

This coalition, which has endured for more than a decade and shows no signs of weakening, is not only improbable, it is also counterproductive with regard to America's battle to protect itself against al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their progeny. For one thing, this coalition puts politically unsophisticated immigrants and their naïve but entitled youth under the tutelage of savvy, politically correct liberals. For another, it brings immigrant Muslims under the influence of alienated African Americans whose relationship to mainstream institutions is, at best, adversarial. If this continues to be the political path that Muslim Americans walk down, our nation's efforts to counter terrorist threats here at home will not be any easier.

This troubling dynamic has largely escaped scrutiny because commentators preoccupied with these Muslim organizations invariably focus on two unsettling but ultimately distracting issues. The first is the undeniable practice of Islamist activists such as those who organized this convention to deny – in fact, lie about – their ties to Islamists overseas, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood. To be fair, this reflects organizational habits built up over years of operating underground in politically repressive regimes, and in most cases with the continuing reality of repression. Nevertheless, Muslim Americans have grown too complacent about the dishonest basis on which they have been introducing and explaining themselves to their fellow citizens.

The second distraction involves the fraught topic of terrorism. Indeed, Islamists with organizations like MAS and ICNA are routinely dismissed by their critics as "terrorists," or perhaps as "terrorist sympathizers." As already indicated, I have no reason to doubt or second-guess the denunciations of ISIS, or of al-Qaeda, that I heard repeatedly over Christmas weekend in Chicago. On the other hand, as I have also suggested, I have no doubt that, if asked, those present would have expressed broad sympathy, ranging from ambivalence to enthusiasm, for Hamas.

Now, as U.S. authorities have made very clear in recent years, the translation of such sympathy into active support for Hamas is not only reprehensible, it is also criminally illegal. Nevertheless, sympathy for Hamas persists, and as long as not acted upon, it is not illegal. At the same time, most Americans regard such sentiments as reprehensible. This difference in views must be engaged, not allowed to fester in silence. But if such a dialogue is to be undertaken with any hope of success, we must endeavor to understand how precisely our fellow citizens who are Muslims do (or do not) differentiate between Hamas and organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. If we fail to grapple with this intellectually and politically fraught topic, the risk is not so much that Muslims will turn toward terrorism as toward political alienation and obstructionism. In so doing, we will have failed to enlist their help in the fight against genuine threats to the homeland.

At this juncture, it is worth recalling that our options have not always been this stark. In 2000, all Muslim-American leaders and organizations – with the exception of those representing African-American Muslims – actively supported George W. Bush's presidential candidacy. Indeed, their endorsement was pursued as part of Karl Rove's bid to expand the base of the Republican Party. And by all accounts, the majority of Muslim Americans accepted their leaders' recommendation and voted for Bush in 2000.

Thus, President Bush's efforts to reach out to Muslim Americans in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 reflected not only his own instinctive fairness, but also his long-term electoral strategy. But of course all this changed with the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and by 2004 it was difficult to find a Muslim leader – or indeed any Muslims – who supported Bush for re-election. Muslims were then further alienated from Bush and the GOP by continuing controversy over the treatment of Guantanamo detainees, implementation of various aspects of the Patriot Act, airport screening and no-fly lists, and surveillance of Muslim communities. Accordingly, the Muslim turn to the Democrats, both nationally as well as at the state and local levels, held through 2008 and 2012 and will persist through 2016.

Nevertheless, the scenario is hardly uniformly rosy for the Democrats. My weekend in Chicago made it clear that Muslims are hardly enamored with President Obama, even though they enthusiastically supported him in 2008 – and again, with less zeal, in 2012. Despite his much-vaunted Cairo speech and his calculated snubs of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Muslim Americans have hardly forgotten that Obama – unlike Bush – has avoided being photographed with Muslim women wearing hijab and failed to visit a single American mosque until the very last months of his eight years in the White House. Nor do they overlook that Obama has – certainly in their view – turned his back on the Syrian people and killed scores of innocent Muslims in drone attacks.

Then, too, during the recent presidential primaries, Muslim Americans demonstrated much greater enthusiasm for Bernie Sanders than for Hillary Clinton. Nevertheless, for the

foreseeable future Muslims will cast their lot with Democrats, up and down ballots and across the nation.

Yet the story does not necessarily end there. Muslim Americans are long-suffering and quite accustomed to having little or no influence on U.S. policy, especially foreign affairs. And although their leaders are working hard to model the moralistic outrage of their liberal allies, ordinary Muslims do not take readily to such political high-mindedness. Especially among the more than three-fifths of them who were born overseas, they are mostly political realists, outright cynics, or disappointed idealists. In other words, they understand the limited options available to them and do not expect much from politics or politicians.

The impediment, for Republicans, is a failure to understand that immigrant Muslims here bear the imprint of the honor-based cultures of their homelands, where deference and demonstrated respect are critical. This failure, including by many in the Bush administration, has been egregious. Conservatives have gone out of their way to insult ordinary Muslim Americans and their proud, if troubled, religion. Recall Attorney General Ashcroft's observation several weeks after 9/11: "Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for Him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you." Less visible but more notorious were the remarks of Army General Jerry Boykin, who as Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence under Donald Rumsfeld, traveled around the country denouncing Islam, for which he was not rebuked but promoted. Then, too, there was the Bush administration's decision to bar Tariq Ramadan from entering the United States. Ramadan, the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and the son of a Brotherhood activist, is a respected, if highly controversial Swiss academic who was thus unable to accept an endowed professorship at Notre Dame.

Perhaps the most egregious insult occurred during the 2012 Republican presidential primary in Florida. During a nationally televised debate, this question was put to the candidates: "How would a Republican administration help bring peace to Palestine and Israel when most candidates barely recognize the existence of Palestine or its people? As a Palestinian-American Republican, I'm here to tell you we do exist." The questioner then stood calmly and politely, first while Mitt Romney equated Palestinian political aspirations exclusively with Hamas terrorism; then while Newt Gingrich told him that the Palestinians are "an invented people" dating from some time in the late 1970s.

As it turns out, the questioner, Abraham Hassan, is a Christian Palestinian. Romney and Gingrich had no way of knowing this, but one can safely assume that, at such moments, all Arabs begin to identify with all Muslims, and all Muslims with all Palestinians. Surely, a more respectful way of explaining to this man that our alliance with Israel is unique and unshakeable could have been found, if the candidates had been able to summon a grain of empathy and political creativity. Make no mistake. Much more than policy defeats, which Muslims – just as the questioner at the debate – have come to expect and endure, such dismissive, disrespectful treatment is what has been driving Muslims into the arms of liberal advocacy groups and Democratic politicians. In the wake of the recent Bastille Day attack in Nice, Gingrich's call for the deportation of Muslims who are found to subscribe to Sharia law will of course only exacerbate this dynamic.

But my point here is not about electoral strategies. Given the broader polarizing trends in our politics, it is hardly likely that Muslim Americans will soon be voting heavily for Republicans or conservatives. Nevertheless, they must adopt a more responsible, civic posture toward Muslim Americans, one that creates the possibility, at least, of mutual engagement and minimizes the real possibility of the complete alienation and political marginalization of Muslims. Such a posture would recognize that, while problematic, the Islamist origins and orientation of many, indeed most, Muslim-American organizations does not mean that they seek to terrorize their neighbors, colleagues, and coworkers. It does mean that they, and Muslims generally, harbor very different and to most of us objectionable views about the Middle East.

The status quo threatens not only to push socially and culturally conservative Muslims into the awkward embrace of liberals and Democrats, but also to alienate these new, ill-at-ease citizens from the fight to secure our homeland against terrorists. If Muslim Americans are to mature civically and play a more responsible role in our political life, Republicans and conservatives will themselves need to play a more responsible role. For starters, they need to back off the facile and mean-spirited anti-Muslim rhetoric that fuels the paranoia too much in evidence among sectors of the American public and that in turn reinforces the already engrained Islamist practice of dissembling and subterfuge.

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