

## **Summary Report: Meeting on Islam, Carnegie Corporation of New York**

A group of distinguished scholars gathered at the invitation of the Carnegie Corporation on June 28, 2001 to help define the state of Islam in America and the complex range of concerns the Muslim community confronts as the fastest growing religion in the United States. Moderated by Carnegie Academic Fellow Shireen T. Hunter, director of Islamic Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the event offered insights into the challenges Muslims faced integrating into American society before the additional pressures brought to bear by the September 11 terrorist attacks against the Pentagon and World Trade Towers.

The day's presentations provided a broad ethnic and socioeconomic profile of Muslims in America and an overview of the connection between American Muslims and the Islamic world beyond the U.S. Presentations and discussions included the relationship between African-American Muslims and the immigrant community; between Muslims, Christians and Jews; generational differences; and political integration. The meeting was also an opportunity for the assembled experts to highlight the contributions made by American Muslims as they began to help the Carnegie Corporation determine priorities and potential funding opportunities.

Carnegie Corporation President Vartan Gregorian opened the discussion by expressing his surprise at how little real knowledge there is about the emergence of Islam as a major religion in America. He went on to explain how understanding Muslims in America, as well as the broader world of Islam, is critical to strengthening America's pluralistic society. And both President Gregorian and Dr. Hunter emphasized the necessity of exploring the challenges that confront immigrant Muslims within the context of having left majority status in their homelands to become a minority in a new country.

The following pages are an effort to summarize and synthesize presentations that were made and the rich discussions they generated, combining interpretation and opinion, anecdotes and facts for a portrait of Muslim life on the cusp of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

### **A Profile of the Muslim Community: Who Is A Muslim?**

The question of whether there is such a thing as a single Muslim community in America, or several communities each with their own dynamic, is the subject of discussion both among American Muslims and those who study and observe them. The most important component of this debate relates to the definition of religious, political and cultural and community affiliation. Although fundamentally, a Muslim is someone who proclaims his or her faith in Islam, to some, the distinction between who is a Muslim and who is not lies with degrees of obser-

vance and non-observance. To others, especially those who are well-integrated well integrated into American society, religious ritual is of lesser importance compared to political affiliation and contributions to or participation in the Muslim community and culture.

The estimated seven million Muslims who live in the United States represent a highly diverse group with different racial, ethnic, linguistic, sectarian and national identities. In fact, people from over 56 Islamic nation states are represented in the community. This said, the use in this report of the term “Muslim community” implicitly acknowledges this diversity.

“When it comes to Islam, the thinking is that it is all monolithic,” explained one participant. “It’s not sheer numbers, but alleged unity, uniformity and conformity, without dissention, with one voice and one character. The world does not recognize the variety of Islam, which is a strength in many ways, allowing it to adapt and move forward.”

### **Categories of Muslims**

Muslims who are either affiliated with the mosque movement or remain outside it can be divided into three groups.

- Immigrants and their families who have arrived in the United States over the last 120 years;
- African-American Muslims;
- Students attending colleges and universities as well as emigres, political and religious refugees living in the U.S. on a temporary basis.

### **Ethnic and Sectarian Diversity**

Muslims make up an estimated eight percent of immigrants coming to the United States. The largest groups are represented by those coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan and Iran. Those coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan and Iran represent the largest groups. More recent arrivals include those from the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia and Somalia. Although half of all Muslim immigrants are women, the level of women’s participation in the religious and organizational life of the mosque is highly limited. Women are better represented in the 300-400 full-time Islamic schools and Sunday schools. In the African-American Muslim community, women tend to be more influential than men, a fact that the immigrant community has yet to fully appreciate.

Today, many immigrant Muslims, like the previous generation of Muslims who arrived during the Cold War, are studying and working multiple jobs in order to become professionals and improve their economic and social status.

Even before the September 11 terrorist attacks, Islam was, at best, misunderstood—and, at worst, demonize. Misguided views of Islam as a monolithic movement responsible for individual behavior, instead of a community characterized by its diversity, continue to exacerbate negative stereotyping and fears of fundamentalist extremism.

Participants were also concerned that inadequate representation in the news media, where fact and opinion are often confused, has served to perpetuate accusations, allusions and misrepresentations. Now more than ever, it is increasingly important to recognize and communicate to the American public that, just as there are many Muslims in the Islamic world, there are many Muslims in the Muslim Diaspora. This also means that the Muslim community in America should define itself rather than allow outsiders to speak for it.

## **Challenges to Integration in the U.S.**

### **Immigrants and African-American Muslims**

“The Muslim community is unique in America in the sense that it is the only community historically in this country where you have indigenous people who come from the inner city embracing Islam and you have immigrants coming with Islam,” noted one participant: “Other groups didn’t have that.”

African-American Muslims, who have been in the process of community building for more than 90 years, confront what was characterized as a “triple quandary”—as minorities within a predominantly white society, within the Muslim community and within the black Christian community.

The discussion of African-American Muslims, or “indigenous” Muslims, underscored the differences between this group and their immigrant counterparts. It also highlighted how, when talking about the Muslim community, the concerns of African-American Muslims are often overlooked.

One participant explained that “the conversation posits that Islam in America begins with immigrants. I think African-Americans and some Hispanic-Americans and Native Americans would hear things very differently.” A fundamental distinction between the two groups lies with how, and whether, they identify themselves as Americans. African-American Muslims tend to see themselves as products of America and are involved with the social, political and cultural issues of their community in ways not often supported by the immigrant population.

Despite their involvement and identification with both Muslim and American concerns, African-American Muslims frequently find themselves marginalized by those in the immigrant Muslim community who see themselves as the only “true” Muslims.

Conversely, some in the African-American Muslim community believe that many immigrants who are not well versed in the Koran are merely cultural and not truly Muslim. This ambivalence on the part of African-American Muslims is defined by their sense of having been discounted and ignored by the immigrant Muslim community as it begins to break down barriers and gain power in the white majority society. These tensions are causing many African-American Muslims to pull away from supporting immigrant causes and intensify their tendency to interpret their version of Islam as a fundamentally American phenomenon, primarily through its connection to Muslim slaves brought to this country from Africa.

Class is also a factor in understanding the African-American Muslim community. Islam is a magnet for the disenfranchised from the inner cities as well as for those in the U.S military and in prisons. There are also those African-American Muslims who invest their resources to study overseas and become well educated in the Koran. This group often becomes highly influenced by the culture in which it studies, returning ethnicized and nationalized.

Within the mosque, African-American Muslims also differ from immigrants in their relationship to their Imam. In African-American Muslim mosques, the Imam holds great authority as leader, facilitator and counselor. By contrast, the Imam in the immigrant community, who is usually also an immigrant, serves as an employee who can be hired or fired by mosque executives. This is beginning to change, however, as more immigrant mosques seek more highly educated Imams. African-American Muslims also find themselves challenged by African-American Christian churches, which realize they are losing followers to Islam.

### **The Relationship of Muslims to Christians and Jews**

One participant pointed out that Muslims often tend to be defined by different criteria than Christians or Jews. “If you look at the American situation, Christians have the diversity that President Gregorian identified in his opening remarks and Jews can be Jewish by ethnicity or by observance. But there is a tendency to conflate Islamic identity with ethnicity.”

Regarding the nature of the relationship among Muslims, Christians and Jews, it was noted that there have been positive advances as well as negative trends.

Advances include:

- Increasing opportunities to engage in various forms of communication with Christians and Jews (sometimes referred to as Abrahamic dialogues);
- Recognition of common ancestors;
- Islamic centers taking increasing initiative to invite others for exchanges and to set agendas;
- Younger members joining interfaith social efforts and community action projects;
- Christians and Jews working to offset misinformation and prejudice about Islam;
- Inclusion in the National Council, once called the National Council of Christians and Jews;
- Fledgling attempts to discuss the situation in the Middle East and work on political issues.

But some of these advances also raise concerns, frustrations and apprehensions that impede progress and result in:

- Conversations without real agendas;
- Fears of hidden agendas in conversations;
- Concern that the search for commonalities is leading to a blurring of distinctions among religions, especially for the younger generation;
- Pain and lack of trust over the situation in the Middle East.

### **Differences Between Generations**

In many ways, the immigrant Muslim experience of integration is similar to the path traveled by earlier immigrant groups. As with each successive immigrant generation, the new generation of Muslims is constructing an identity that is different from, and challenging to, the Islamic identity forged by its elders. Perhaps the most significant difference is that members of the older generation still identify primarily with their native countries, despite the fact that they have spent most of their adult lives in the U.S. In contrast, their children are struggling to forge an identity that combines their sense of themselves both as Americans and as Muslims living with other Muslims.

“The newer generation is now interpreting Islam very widely and very aggressively,” explained a participant. “It is not suffering from the cultural inferiority complex that the senior generation felt and that sometimes immigrant Muslims feel toward Arabic speaking Muslims.”

The contemporary struggle to be American and Muslim is reflected in the growing number of Islamic schools. These new schools are the products of a generation which has had an American education, but which wants to instill Islamic values in their children. Discussions characterized this generation of Muslims as confident interpreters of Islam whom, unlike earlier generations, are not hampered by a cultural inferiority complex. And they are trying to seize the community's leadership from their parents' generation while the elders try to retain the patriarchal system of authority.

There is also an emerging divide within the activist Muslim community based on their vision of America. If deepened, this divide could have a significant effect on the institutional and sociopolitical development of the American Muslim community. On one side are those Muslims who focus on American foreign policy. Regardless of how well established they are in the U.S., they see the country as little more than a colonial power. On the other side there are those who and recognize the advantages of America's democratic system, including the opportunity it affords them to practice Islam, do research and establish mosques more freely than they could anywhere in the Muslim world.

Sociological issues, which are foreign to their parents, also affect the younger generation of Muslims including: Inter-religious marriages and an increasing divorce rate which rate, which are viewed as weakening the Islamic community.

## **Political Integration**

“Muslims have been really very good at obeying the laws and paying taxes, but they haven't got representation, and they've been shy of demanding it,” said one participant.

When members of the Muslim community established the American Muslim Council in 1990, they brought an internal political debate—that of Muslims' relationship to the U.S. and to each other—to the forefront. Although the goals and strategies were still undefined, the Muslim community made a conscious decision to participate in mainstream American politics, to seek representation within the established political system as well as gain the international political. This convergence brought about both a unity of purpose and division of labor between ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) and AMC, and by 1998, three central issues were identified: the status of Jerusalem, the Secret Evidence Act of 1996 and elections.

In 1999, there was a broad consensus among many of the larger, more established Muslim groups to support George W. Bush in his bid for the presidency. Many, however, felt the process was exclusionary. In particular, it overlooked the interests and political traditions of African-American Muslims, contributions by Muslim women,

as well as the concerns of the younger generation of Muslims who are more attracted to the Democratic Party. “I think we have to realize,” a participant ventured, “that although tremendous strides have been made, it’s going to take a long time before the political process takes root and is internalized.”

## **American Muslims and the Muslim World**

Muslim immigrants have always maintained strong ties to their homelands and to the rest of the Islamic world for religious guidance, information, leadership, training and financial aid. But in contrast to the past—when the Muslim world was the source of all influence, authority and training for immigrants in America and Europe—in the last decade or so, a whole generation of Muslim immigrants has produced a body of work that is known, understood and accepted overseas. This first generation has also trained another generation of Muslim thinkers and scholars, thus generating a two-way flow of ideas, financial resources and influence.

This two-way flow has generated substantial discussion of such critical issues as faith and practice, religious leadership and authority, religious and political pluralism, tolerance and the rights of Muslim and non-Muslim minorities. But it is also creating a tension because, although the debate is often defined in terms of religious authority, cultural identity and authenticity, it is in reality more about power and prestige.

This exchange of information, which is viewed by some as the Americanization of Islam, was characterized in both passive and active terms. In its passive form, it is influence exerted by those living in the West through a variety of connections with their homelands—regular visits, sending money and acting as informal ambassadors. The more active form of influence is exercised by those who have formed Political Action Committees and Think Tanks in an effort to influence U.S. foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Middle East, the Balkans, Kashmir and Chechnya. Those who have formed Political Action Committees and Think Tanks in an effort to influence U.S. foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Middle East, the Balkans, Kashmir and Chechnya, exercise the more active form of influence.

As the population of American Muslims increases, with ties abroad and increasingly institutionalized politics in the U.S., so do fears of illegitimate connections to extremist organizations and concerns over the erosion of American Muslim civil rights and liberties. “As the American Muslim community begins to institutionalize, it’s going to be accused of having illegitimate linkages, of being connected to Hamas, Hezbollah and others,” a presenter suggested.

At the same time, the community must manage internal reform regarding youth, the rights of women and minorities and interfaith marriages, as well as stimulate involvement in social service issues. All of these issues com-

pound the difficulties of integrating into American society without sacrificing identity—faith, culture and education—or succumbing to portrayal as a monolithic, rather than a diverse, population. Perceptions both within and outside the community are also skewed by a disproportionate and selective emphasis on issues of religious freedom abroad. And all of these issues are intensified by the compressed time frame of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the effects, for better and worse, of communications, politics and economies that are increasingly interdependent and global in nature.

## **What Funders Can Do**

Conference participants were invited to offer their thoughts, ideas and advice as a basis for determining approaches the Carnegie Corporation can take to help improve the situation of Muslims in America, as well as disseminate understanding of the Islamic experience throughout the larger society. President Gregorian suggested three possible funding approaches:

- Forming a consortium of foundations for a cooperative effort
- Funding a less popular political or religious project
- Filling a gap in funding of an on-going project

Based on their own experiences and deep understanding of the issues facing the Muslim community, participants offered insights, ideas and described successful projects and initiatives as a basis from which to move forward.

One participant offered her view of an approach to take: “I think there are social service issues in this country, such as domestic violence, housing for the elderly, drug rehabilitation programs, refugee child foster care and after school mentoring, that Muslims can very easily get involved in. If we moved with the same vigor and energy into those issues as we are trying to move into politics, I think you would see changes.”

Other suggestions for further exploration include:

- **Becoming an American Muslim.** Scholars have documented the experiences of Catholics, Jews, African-Americans and Latino as they assimilate into American society. Could the same be done for the American Muslim experience?

- **Coming of age as Americans.** What is the relationship of second and third generation immigrant Muslims relate to their countries of origin? Are immigrant Muslims perceived as independent and equal or as still in need of spiritual guidance?

- **The American Muslim struggle for civil rights, American pluralism and democracy.** What is America's response to Muslims as they gain power and begin to participate in American politics? What does this response say about the state of American democracy and pluralism?

- **Muslim integration into the American workplace.** Like the larger society, American businesses have learned to accommodate Judeo-Christian values, rituals and holidays in a variety of ways. How are various workplaces responding to the needs of practicing Muslims?

- **Healthcare and physician education.** From euthanasia to emergency room treatment, such issues as communication and patient care are affected when Muslims are patients or care providers. What healthcare issues do Muslims face and how can they be addressed?

## **Conclusion**

In his closing remarks, President Gregorian stated “the Islamic Diaspora is a permanent situation; there is no going back. In many ways America is a nation of nations and a microcosm of the world and how pluralism works in here, within ourselves and vis-à-vis the outside world, is going to determine whether this country succeeds as a role model or not. It's a tremendously difficult thing.”

Although this understanding—or the lack of it—it is still to be explored, it affects how Muslims in the U.S. approach every facet of the challenge of becoming an integral part of American society. Conversely, America must overcome the demonization of Islam, and study, understand and accommodate the reality of Islam to set an example of contemporary pluralism for the rest of the world.

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