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Citation

Yavari, N. (2002). Muslim Communities in New York City. *Isim Newsletter*, 10(1), 35-35.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16787>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

North America
NEGUIN YAVARI

Muslim Communities in New York City

The lives of Muslims in America changed on 11 September 2001. The initial reactions of panic, guilt, defiance, and confusion, were accompanied in subsequent days with physical threats and hostile acts against Muslims. An opinion piece in the *New York Times* arguing that Muslims hate us not for what we do but for what we are was widely quoted in the media. Veiled women did not appear in public, several students on our campus left theirs at home. A great number of scholars of the Middle East and the Islamic world shouted themselves hoarse insisting that there existed a direct correlation between US foreign policy and the events of 11 September, and others reiterated their anti-liberal stance by pointing an accusing finger at what they regarded as their fellow academics' failure to warn the public about inevitable threats from the outside. Vigilance became the prescriptive word aimed at both New York landlords and college professors.

From the mundane to the existential, and almost nine months after 11 September, Muslims in New York are grappling with fundamental dilemmas. Muslim communities turned inward, and what followed was a resurfacing of the same isolationist trend that was visible in the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombings. In response to the concomitant hostile rhetoric and the increased hostility, what are Muslim communities doing to alleviate the immediate threats in the short run, and to promote tolerance and respect for their traditions in the future?

Several Muslim associations in and around New York produced a statement¹ condemning the attacks, and expressed solidarity with the families of victims, their 'fellow Americans' as they called them. Apart from university campuses, the most visible and successful support for Muslim communities in this city is generated by religious organizations, justified along religious lines, and expressed in religious discourse. Healing is promoted in church gatherings, and anti-violence messages are conveyed from pulpits in churches, synagogues, and mosques. The essential political message is universalized along religious lines: all religions are susceptible to hijacking by fanatical fringe groups; all religions are prone to misrepresentation; the majority of the adherents of all major religions shun violence and extremism; and Islam, as opposed to the essentially un-Islamic dogma of Usama bin Laden and his supporters, is no exception.

This inherently religious response to the events of 11 September is indicative of several trends. First among them is the steady chiselling at the separation of church and state, evidenced throughout the American political landscape since the 1980s. From the pro-life movement to the appointment of staunchly religious officials to various governmental positions, the religious right in the United States is on the ascendancy. In the meantime Muslim communities in America have capitalized on existing patterns of religious participation in civic life to foster the development of religious networks and organizations to channel the articulation of Muslim identity. In her study on the transformation of Muslim life in the United States in its multivalent encounter with the American legal system, Kathleen Moore has focused on the evolution of Muslim identity in the US as communities settle into a visible and self-conscious religious minority, depending on the American state for protection. 'By virtue of the legislation of federal hate crimes statutes, the interests and rights of Muslims, including the security of religious property, have become a protected category. Presumably, the state is empowered to safeguard mosques and

Muslim practices from the inherent risks raised by their increased visibility, in becoming targets of animus directed toward the Islamic world, and Muslims who report the incidence of such crimes acquiesce in the recognition of the capability of the state to do so. Similarly, increased contact with neighborhood groups and municipal politics has been part of the Muslim experience in establishing mosques, and has brought out the human factor in the social processes of determining important spatial relationships. Such legal practices, deciding how things get done, serve as a mediating and transformative link.²

Filling gaps in research

Scholarly interest in American Muslim communities intensified in the 1990s, and the consensus of the field tilted in the direction of increased integration and participation in civic life. But this surge of interest, with its prescriptive implications, found itself at once lacking in essential demographic data and in-depth field studies based on close contact with the concentrations of Muslim communities in various states.

The 'Muslims in New York City Project'³ – a collaborative research project conducted by the Middle East Institute and the Center for Urban Research and Policy at Columbia University – to which the rest of this article is dedicated, was a major response to this need. It set out to identify and map Muslim communities in New York City and collect data on the attitudes of Muslim New Yorkers toward the social, civic and political life of the city, and their participation in New York public space. Between 1998 and 1999, a research team of graduate students canvassed nearly every neighbourhood in the city's five boroughs to record the location of mosques, Muslim-owned stores, professional offices, and service and cultural centres. With this information, researchers forged networks to recruit community members for interviews. They observed the patterns by which immigrant Muslims have joined a small but well-established and active community of African American Muslims whose presence in the city dates back at least 70 years. Twenty years ago there were fewer than 20 mosques in New York. Today, there are at least 80 mosques in Brooklyn and Queens alone, a world-renowned Islamic centre in Manhattan, and a major philanthropic organization headquartered in Jamaica, Queens.⁴

In the summer of 2000, the project convened 27 focus groups with over 200 Muslim New Yorkers to ascertain their attitudes toward community and civic engagement, and to probe the processes by which minority identities are formed. Muslim New Yorkers are grappling with problems of assimilation to the mainstream secular American culture while attempting to ensure continuity of tradition through the creation of philanthropic and educational institutions to transmit culture and tradition to younger generations. At the same time, they are learning to 'manage' in New York through interfaith dialogue, political coalition-building and cooperation with their neighbours

of all faiths and backgrounds in order to improve the quality of life in the city. The initial findings of the focus groups were presented in a panel at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in San Francisco in November 2001. In March 2002, the Muslim Communities of New York Project co-sponsored a conference organized by The Muslim Women's Institute for Research Development on 'Contextualizing Islam in the United States: A Charge for Muslim Women Scholar-Activists', identifying their target audience as 'Muslim women willing to engage in the discipline of Islamic scholarship that motivates to action'.

The challenges confronting the project organizers since its inception were a microcosm of the dilemmas facing the Muslim communities of New York. As mentioned at the outset, in conceptualizing the project, the conveners decided to map Muslim communities, and not simply ethnic minorities whose worldviews are informed, in radically diverging ways, within the cultural confines of multiple permutations of Islam. In so doing, however, the project has had to grapple with the underlying tensions between spiritually religious Muslims and culturally religious ones, assuming that the latter also wish to be represented within the rubric of Islam. Participants in this project are acutely aware of the misleading lopsidedness such an appellation might produce. Another important consideration is that of segregated focus groups, which brings us to the question of American, or perhaps democratic political discourse. An overwhelming majority of the participants in these focus groups did not choose to articulate political demands in local terms. Loyal to the language of politics in their homelands, their concern if at all political, was with overarching, macro-level issues, foreign policy, prejudice, and bigotry.

Silent women: further research questions

On taxes, social security benefits, pension plans, mortgage and interest rates, fiscal policy, educational initiatives, budgetary concerns, on all those wide ranges of issues that define local politics and safeguard democracy in America, our Muslim women fall silent. Are they silent women, are they silent Muslims, are they Muslims and therefore silent, or are they highly politicized Muslim citizens who reveal in their responses more the organizational shortcomings of the focus group than an organic Muslim self? Are women who are willing to identify themselves as harbouring Muslim proclivities, by definition therefore etching their autobiographical horizons along norms and metaphors that in their own minds echo those of their Islam? In narrating their selves, pasts, and ambitions, are they emulating an imagined Muslim ideal?

These and related questions form the crux of my area of research in this project, still in its preliminary stages. I am focusing on the religious and spiritual organization and activities of Iranian Muslim women in New York City. The majority of Iranian women in

this city who were born outside the United States left Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and most of them did not choose to cooperate with the focus groups organized by this project. Their personal and professional lives disrupted by a religious revolution, these women nonetheless express affinity with myriad religious and spiritual organizations in the city; this in spite of their reluctance to regard Islam as a defining component of their identity. How do these women participate in such activities, and how do they articulate their religious affiliation? Even at this preliminary stage I have found conflicting voices and contradictory descriptions of how women define their identity and how they relate their everyday conduct to the principles espoused by organizations and communities to which they belong or towards which they feel a sense of affinity and loyalty. By focusing on a small community in some detail, bearing in mind the artificial and at times ad hoc taxonomies and dividing lines imposed from the outside, I hope my report will reflect the changing attitudes and outlook of these women, many of whom lived through almost two years of revolutionary turmoil in their country of origin and, just over two decades later, a calamitous day in their adopted city.

Notes

1. The full text of this declaration is found on the website of the Islamic Circle of North America, www.icna.org.
2. Kathleen Moore, *Al-Mughtaribun: American Law and the Transformation of Muslim Life in the United States* (Albany: State University of Albany Press, 1995), 139.
3. The presentation of the aims of this project is taken from the Newsletter of the Middle East Institute of Columbia University (June 2001); see <http://sipa.columbia.edu/REGIONAL/mei/>
4. See e.g., Abdelhamid Lotfi, 'Creating Muslim Space in the USA: Masjid and Islamic Centers', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 12/2 (2001): 236–54; and Jerrilynn D. Dodds & Edward Grazda, *New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York City* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2002).

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