

## **From Pacifism to Activism: Engaging the Muslim Other in America**

Studies on Islam in American have increasingly focused on political engagement by the American Muslim community. However, most scholars have discussed the political activities by the Sunni community and have focused on the efforts of institutions like the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and the American Muslim Council (AMC). This article will initially examine the impact of events abroad on Muslim political activities in America. It will further argue that the events of 9/11 and alienation from the mainstream Sunni community have been important factors for increased political consciousness and activism within the American Shi'i community.

Voluntary migration to America by members of the Muslim community is said to have begun between 1875 -1912.<sup>1</sup> Among those who migrated to America in the 1880's were Shi'is from what was then called Greater Syria, many of whom settled in Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Between 1900 and 1914 several hundred settlers comprising diverse religious

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Haddad, ed. *The Muslims of America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11. Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27, Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-15. The first identifiable Muslim in America is said to be Estevan, a black Muslim guide and interpreter who came to Florida from Spain in 1527 with the Panfilo de Narvaez expedition. Richard B. Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 19. This was confirmed to me in an interview that I conducted with an informant in Dearborn, Michigan in 1996. She was 67 years old and her mother was born in Michigan at the turn of the century.

backgrounds migrated from the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Many of these migrants were Lebanese Shi'is who settled in Detroit to work in the Ford Motor Company.

Thereafter, migration by members of the Lebanese community increased further between 1918 and 1922.<sup>4</sup> By the 1940s, about 200 Sunni and Shi'i families had settled in Detroit.<sup>5</sup> Khalil Alwan, a member of the Dearborn Shi'i community in Michigan, was born in America in 1930. He recalls that his father migrated from Lebanon in 1914 to work for the railroads in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. By the time Khalil's father moved to Detroit in the 1920s, many Shi'is had settled in that area. In the 1930s, Khalil remembers that Sunnis and Shi'is would arrange joint gatherings. This continued until the late 1930s when the Hashimite Club was established.<sup>6</sup> Hajja Marium 'Uthman, who came to Dearborn in 1949, also remembers that there was a steady influx of her Lebanese neighbors and friends after she and her family had migrated to Dearborn.<sup>7</sup> By the 1950s there were many Shi'i families dispersed in different parts of America.

### **Political Awareness within the American Muslim Community**

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. Some Lebanese migrants settled in Alberta, Canada in the early part of this century. Coming from La-la in Baka valley Ali Hamilton took up fur trade and settled in Lac La Biche, north of Edmonton, Canada. He also served as President of Lac La Biche Chamber of Commerce. See *al-Ilmu Noorun*, Edmonton, Alberta, (June 1995): 4. Subsequently, other Lebanese migrants settled in Lac La Biche.

<sup>6</sup> This was conveyed to me in a personal interview that I conducted in December 1999.

<sup>7</sup> This was conveyed to me in a personal interview conducted in 1996.

Since the early immigrants did not intend to stay in America, they did not invest in any religious or socio-political leadership that could offer an intellectual or political vision to the community. Thus, the early Muslim institutions did not engage in political activity. Rather, most of the early Muslim organizations were social, ethnic, or religious in nature. Societies like the Syrian and Lebanese American Federation of the Eastern States and the National Association of Syrian and Lebanese-American Organizations (formed in 1932) and the National Association of Federations were quite indifferent to American foreign or domestic policies. In 1952, under the leadership of Abdullah Ingram, immigrants from the Middle East formed the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States (FIA). This was meant to be an umbrella body that would unite twenty immigrant associations and provide for the social, cultural, and religious needs of the community. However, it did not raise Arab political consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Until the 1960s, there is little evidence to indicate that the Muslims in America were politically engaged.<sup>9</sup>

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict forced American Muslims to reconsider their apolitical stance. American hostility towards Arabs during the 1967 war and the general ignorance of the American public regarding the Middle East conflict led to the formation of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, (AAUG) in 1967. The AAUG was established by graduate students, professionals, university professors, lawyers,

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<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Its Impact on the Identity of Arab Muslims in the United States," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 225-26.

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Haddad, *Not Quite American? The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 17.

doctors, and veterans of the Organization of Arab Students (OAS).<sup>10</sup> Most of the organizations were formed by American-Arabs who sought to establish a platform where the Arab-Muslim voice could be expressed. They also tried to have an input into the shaping of American foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1970s, other organizations were founded with the intention of informing and educating the American public about the Arab world. In 1971, Lebanese-Americans organized the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA). The leadership sought to educate Arab Americans about the political process as well as arrange for them to meet with members of Congress to discuss issues that concerned the community. The American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) was founded by former Senator James Aburezk and James Zoghby, both of Christian Lebanese origin. The Arab American Institute (AAI) was established in 1984 when James Zoghby split from the ADC. It encourages Arab Americans to participate in the American political system, working to get Arab-Americans to vote and to run for office.<sup>12</sup>

With the establishment of Muslim civic and political institutions in the 1970s and 1980s, Muslims became increasingly aware of the US government's domestic as opposed to foreign policies, especially those which impacted their daily lives. Muslims also realized that political power can be only be enhanced by the politics of engagement between American Muslims and the political system. It was to the advantage of Muslims to seek ways of influencing governance, especially with regards to policy formation. They realized the need to monitor and influence American foreign and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

domestic policies, and that self-denial of voting power would make Muslims more vulnerable.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed increased animosity towards Arabs and Muslims in the United States. In all probability, domestic groups like the conservative wing of the Republican Party, Christian fundamentalist groups, and the pro-Israel lobby were responsible for encouraging the anti-Islamic rhetoric. American hostility toward Islam and Muslims was also precipitated by various events overseas. These included: the six day war in 1967, the Yom Kippur war and oil embargo of 1973, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the hostage crisis in Iran and Lebanon, PLO attacks against Israeli targets, the Rushdie affair of 1989, and the Gulf Wars. Such events precipitated measures that led to the targeting and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims, along with a growing atmosphere of hostility towards Islam. As a matter of fact, a scheme known as Operation Boulder placed Arab-Americans under FBI surveillance in the early 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

As Muslims continued to experience intimidation, discrimination, misunderstanding, and even hatred, they saw the need to educate Americans about Islam, correct some of the anti-Islamic stereotypical images portrayed in the media, and protect the interests of the Muslim community. Hence, more Muslims organizations were established in the 1980s and 1990s. Their aim was not confined to educate Americans about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather, these institutions encouraged Muslims to address political and civil right issues that impacted the rights of the growing community.

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<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in Yvonne Haddad ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 220.

Since the majority of the Muslims in America are Sunnis, most Muslim institutions were formed by them. These include institutes like the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States (FIA)<sup>14</sup> the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Islamic Association of North America (IANA), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the American Muslim Alliance (AMA), the American Muslim Council (AMC) and the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR).<sup>15</sup>

These Muslim public affairs groups have been able to make the stereotyping of Muslims a matter of public debate and have documented many incidents of harassment, discrimination, and defamation against Muslims. They have also monitored and publicized discriminatory measures by government agencies and civic groups and have highlighted the distortion of Islam in the media. They have shifted Muslim political and civil discourse in America to how Muslims could interact with Americans and yet maintain their own distinctive identity. The vision was now on repositioning Islam as an element of American national interest and not as a threat to it.

Muslim political involvement in the United States became a dominant topic in Muslim American discourse during the 1990s. This political awakening of mainstream Islam was fed by the desire to contribute Islamic values and norms to a wider notion of

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<sup>14</sup> On the early history of the FIA see Gutbi Mahdi Ahmed, "Muslim Organizations in the United States," in Yvonne Haddad ed., *The Muslims of America*, 12-14.

<sup>15</sup> For a list of American Muslim organizations see Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 185 ff. For a brief account of some of their activities see Liyakat Takim, "To Vote or not to Vote: The Politicization of American Islam," in John Kelsay, Alec Hargreaves, and Sumner B. Twiss eds., *Politics and Religion in France and the United States* (Lexington: Lexington Publishers, 2007).

American civilization as well as to improve the situation of the Muslim community in the U.S. with lobbying and public relations work. The notion of “empowerment” became the political battle cry of American Muslims in the following years. Practical campaigns aimed foremost at voter registration and at building a higher political awareness. They were fed by the hope that Muslims could form a block of “swing voters” in highly embattled American states, thus gaining crucial influence.<sup>16</sup>

Enhanced political awareness within the Muslim community is corroborated by the following figures. The project MAPS that was initiated under the auspices of Georgetown University conducted a survey in 2000. It indicated that seventy nine per cent of the Muslims registered to vote in 2000; forty per cent voted for Democrats, twenty three per cent Republicans and twenty eight per cent independents. According to Karen Leonard, African Americans are more likely to vote for Democrats, Pakistanis are more inclined towards the Republicans and Arabs are evenly divided.<sup>17</sup>

### **Shi‘is in Sunni Institutions**

It is important to note that the institutions mentioned above have been established by the majority, Sunni community. Although Shi‘is are able to participate in the activities of the institutions, they have, generally speaking, not been allowed to hold leadership positions. Neither have these organizations raised issues which concern the Shi‘i community like the plight of the Shi‘is in Afghanistan, sectarian

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<sup>16</sup> See Christopher Schumann, “A Muslim 'Diaspora' in the United States?” *The Muslim World*, 97 (1): 11-32.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 101.

violence in Pakistan, the Wahhabi influence in America and their denouement of Shi'ism, and increased sectarian tensions in America.

Upto the 1990s, the Shi'i community was either politically inactive or relied on Sunni institutions to represent them. Lack of Shi'i involvement in the American political process can be attributed to the relatively young age of the centers. Most Shi'i centers in America have been established since 1985.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Shi'is have used their limited financial resources to build and consolidate their centers rather than to engage in political activity or make financial contributions to political campaigns. Shi'i political inactivity can also be explained by the fact that, upto 2002, the Shi'is had not formed institutions like CAIR, AMC, or AMA that could enhance the community's political aspirations.

Most immigrant Shi'is migrated to America in the 1980s. Even after their arrival in America, they were more concerned with addressing foreign rather than domestic issues. American issues like those of affirmative action, racism, joblessness, education, housing, and urban violence were overshadowed by foreign issues like Iran, Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and lately Iraq. This emphasis on foreign issues was compounded by the importation of political ideologies whose vision did not encourage participation in the American political culture.

Given America's status as a non-Muslim country, there was a fundamental and widespread belief among Shi'i Muslims that they were religiously banned from embracing, let alone pledging allegiance to America. This position undermined the Shi'is' ability to invest in their American citizenship. Voting, lobbying, and holding

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<sup>18</sup> See Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York Press, forthcoming in 2009).



political office were all frowned upon, if not proscribed. This stance also denied the Shi'is constitutional and other legal protections on the grounds that Muslims themselves did not recognize or respect the very constitution that guarantees such rights and liberties.

Traditional Shi'i aversion to American politics can be discerned from the following anecdote. In 1996, there was a major discussion on the Shi'i-based internet discussion group called the Ahl al-Bayt Discussion Group (ABDG) as to whether Shi'is should support candidates running for federal elections. The majority felt that since they are living in a non-Muslim country, Shi'is should eschew all political involvement. Others even argued that, given American penchant toward Israel, voting for a candidate would be tantamount to supporting the Israeli cause. Therefore, they maintained that it was *haram* (religiously prohibited) to support or vote for a candidate. A small minority disagreed, arguing that voting for a candidate of their choice might help the Shi'i cause in America and perhaps influence American foreign policy.

It was in the late 1990s that Shi'is became aware that Sunni organizations had influenced how Islam in America was presented and perceived. Increased tensions between America and Iran after the Iranian revolution and Israel and Hizbollah made the need for Shi'i self-representation in American public space more imperative. Furthermore, the enhanced Sunni – Shi'i tensions in the 1980s (due to the Wahhabi infiltration in America) made the Shi'is aware that they could not depend on Sunni institutions to represent them or speak on their behalf. In addition, there was one major event which made the Shi'is realize that they could not remain socially invisible or politically neutral.

### **9/11 and Its Impact on the American Shi'i Community**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 revived prejudices of Islam as a religion that promotes violence and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people. Due to the attacks, Islam has been projected in the media as violent and incompatible with Western values and norms. In addition, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have invigorated stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins.

The affects of 9/11 on the Muslim community were far reaching and varied. The United States government implemented a wide range of domestic legislative, administrative, and judicial measures in the name of national security and the war on terror. Most of them were designed and have been carried out by the executive branch of government, with little *a priori* public discussion or debate. These measures have included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention of “material witnesses,” closed hearings and use of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration.

Muslims have also had to endure the USA PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of October 24, 2001. The act sanctions the monitoring of individuals, organizations, and institutions without notification. Its provisions have been protested by American Civil Liberties Union. Several Arab and Muslim organizations have recently sued the American government insisting that the act is unconstitutional. In 2007, disclosures of secret wire-tapping of suspected terrorists and the

federal government's admission that, in search of a terrorist nuclear bomb, it has run a far-reaching, top secret program to monitor radiation levels at over a hundred Muslim homes, businesses, and mosques in the capital region and in other areas, have all augmented Muslim concern regarding their civil rights. In numerous cases, the monitoring required investigators to go on to the property under surveillance, although no search warrants or court orders were ever obtained. During the process, the PATRIOT act has also lifted all legal protection of liberty for Muslims and Arabs in America.<sup>19</sup>

Legal and political measures are augmented by continued public backlash—hate crimes, hate speech and job discrimination—sensationalized media portrayals of Muslims, and strong anti-Muslim/anti-Islamic rhetoric from the political right. Not only do Muslims feel vulnerable in America they also feel as if they are being continuously watched and under the constant threat of arrest.<sup>20</sup>

Like other Muslims, American Shi'is have been held equally responsible for the terrorist attacks even though none of the terrorists were Shi'is. They have had to apologize for acts they did not commit, and to condemn acts that they never condoned. Shi'is feel that they have been found guilty by religious association, drawn into a discourse on terrorism and associated with a group (al-Qa'ida) which would, ironically, exterminate them if it could. Indeed, there is no record of any Shi'i group committing an act of terror in America.

Since 9/11, and especially since 2006, Shi'i organizations have been targeted by the government. The war between Israel and Hizbollah in 2006 was particularly

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<sup>19</sup> Yvonne Haddad, *Not Quite American?* 42.

<sup>20</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 41.

damaging for American Shi'is. The American government declared Hizbollah a terrorist organization, a move that led to several Shi'i non-profit organizations being raided by the FBI. Such raids have been carried out in Detroit, where there is some sympathy for Hizbollah. Since the Bush administration declared Hizbollah a terrorist organization, Iran, Lebanon, and al-Qa'ida have now been grouped together and American Shi'is have come under closer scrutiny.

In response to these measures, there has been a definitive shift in Shi'i political discourse. Increased government surveillance and other measures have forced Shi'is to abandon their traditional ambivalent stance toward political engagement. They have realized that it is only by participation in the American political order that Shi'is can enjoy protection against government agencies that disregard the constitution and violate civil liberties. Integration in American society and the need to voice socio-political concerns necessitated that Shi'is become politically active.

Shi'is also realized that they needed a paradigm shift from a position in which they were defined and controlled by the state and the dominant culture to one where they were self-defined and could exercise enough influence over social and political institutions to be able to protect their interests and self-determination. They also felt the need to voice their concerns against American foreign policies especially those which pertain to Iraq and Iran.

Shi'is have also come to the realization that civic engagement may be the most powerful way to fulfill their political aspirations in America. Vital issues such as civil rights, immigration, foreign policy, education, and social and economic justice can be positively affected by political lobbying. They have become aware that political power

can be only be enhanced by the politics of engagement between American Shi'is and the political system. It was to their advantage to seek ways of influencing governance, especially with regards to policy formation. They have also sensed the need to monitor and influence American foreign and domestic policies, and that self-denial of voting power would make them more vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>

According to Imam Muhammad Ilahi, the Imam of the Islamic House of Wisdom in Dearborn, Michigan, before 9/11, many Shi'is considered it *haram* (forbidden) to vote; now, it is considered a religious obligation (*wajib*) to vote.<sup>22</sup>

The need to be politically engaged was sensed even by Ayatullah Seestani, one of the most eminent religious figures in Shi'i Islam. Seestani commands a huge following throughout the Shi'i world. In a conversation with Imam Hasan al-Qazwini, the Imam of the Islamic Center of America in Detroit, Seestani encouraged Muslims to participate in the elections. He said that Muslims in America should vote for whichever candidate can serve the Muslim causes best. He also issued a *fatwa* (religious proclamation) calling on Muslims to vote in elections provided they have a stake in the outcome.<sup>23</sup>

### **Shi'i Political Activity in America**

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<sup>21</sup> See also Ali Mazrui, "Muslims Between the Jewish Example and the Black Experience: American Policy Implications," in *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square*, Zahid H. Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmad, and John L. Esposito eds. *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>22</sup> This was conveyed to me in a discussion with him in July 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Hasan Qazwini, *American Crescent: A Muslim Cleric on the Power of his Faith, the Struggle against Prejudice and the Future of Islam in America* (New York: Random House, 2007), 203.

The paradigm shift from political pacifism to active engagement with the American political order is evident in different cities where Shi'is have settled. In some cases, Shi'is have participated with Sunnis to build a Muslim voting bloc, which they hope will help unseat the Republicans. Worried by what they see as attacks on their civil liberties under the Bush administration, Muslims are keen to build and enhance political consciousness. In a 2006 survey of 1,000 Muslim registered voters, about 12 percent identified themselves as Shi'is, 36 percent said they were Sunnis, and 40 percent called themselves "just a Muslim," according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

The election of 2004 proved to the Shi'i community that political participation with the Sunnis would benefit both groups. Sunnis and Shi'is cooperated as Muslims registered and voted in record numbers. During the election, several Muslim Political Alliance Committees (PAC) were established and a national Muslim voter database was created by Muslim American Society (MAS) Freedom Foundation. Muslims gained valuable practical political experience by working in campaigns, performing such tasks as working the polls, canvassing, forming logistical teams, voter rights monitoring, and developing phone banks. Exit polls indicate that a majority of Muslims voted for John Kerry in the 2004 elections.<sup>24</sup>

In some areas of America, Shi'i political activity has taken the form of establishing eclectic bodies that transcend sectarian boundaries, co-operating with Sunnis to create a unified and effective challenge for local posts. Shi'i institutions like al-Khu'i Foundation in New York have persuaded their members that their votes and involvement

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 183.

in the political process can make a difference to their lives in America. Thus, some Shi'is co-operate with Sunnis to provide Muslim candidates for school boards, municipal posts, working for the election of Muslim mayors and state legislators. The intent is to get Shi'is to vote for fellow Muslim candidates, planning for a Muslim presence in Congress or the Senate.

In other cases, Shi'is have joined Sunnis so that Muslim voters could make a difference. In 2006, the Muslim American Society (MAS) set up booths in 150 mosques across the country. The booths have a computer monitor with a link to a Web site (<http://www.masvip.org/>) to enable Muslims to register on line during Friday prayers.

In a few isolated cases, some Shi'is have nominated themselves to run for local offices by seeking votes from local Shi'i and Sunni communities. Others have been involved in local posts. However, most of these candidates run independently and are not directly supported by any Shi'i institution. An example of such a candidate is Habib M. Habib, a Shi'i from East Africa. He was appointed to the Washington State Commission on Asian-Pacific American Affairs by the Washington State Governor, Gary Lock. The group started as an advisory council to the governor and the Legislature made it a statutory body to address issues of Asian affairs. It is in this capacity that Habib also addresses issues that affect Muslim interests. Habib aims to be involved in the political system as a Muslim legislator for it is in the legislative rather than executive branch that Muslims can fight for equal rights, education and fair immigration laws while opposing unjust and morally indefensible laws. As Habib says: "As legislators and politicians, Muslims will be able to effectively define themselves and their values. This will prevent

others, who have agendas of their own, from defining Muslims”.<sup>25</sup> Habib frequently lectures to the Muslim community, seeking their support in his political activities.

### **Politicization of the Detroit Shi‘i Community**

The American Shi‘i community is constituted in a different environment in which Shi‘is form a conglomerate of disparate ethnic groups. This confluence of Shi‘is sharing common space has proved to be problematic. Increased immigration from various parts of the world has resulted in the Shi‘i community in America becoming more fragmented as bonds of common faith have been replaced by ties to common origins, ethnicity, and culture.

The Shi‘i community is composed of immigrants from Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, South Asia, East Africa. In addition, there is an increasing number of Black and White American converts. The Shi‘is have settled in major American cities like Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, New York, Washington D.C., Houston, and Los Angeles.

Since it is one of the largest and the oldest Shi‘i group, the Detroit Shi‘i community has played a more active civic and political role than all other Shi‘i communities across America. In all probability this is because as the second generation Shi‘is in America identify with and assimilate in American culture, they develop a sense of patriotism leading to a greater politicization of the community and a sense of American national consciousness.

Increasing political activism in the Detroit community is apparent from the fact that many community members are politically engaged with Arab organizations. The

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<sup>25</sup> See “Muslims in Politics” *Living Islam*, Dallas, (Summer 1998): 34.



Arab American Political Committee (APAC) in Detroit has lobbied for certain political issues. Although many APAC members are Shi'is, they prefer to identify themselves with an Arab rather than an Islamic political entity. In all probability, this is to avoid stereotypical images associated with Islamic organizations. Like many other Imams in Dearborn, Imam Hasan al-Qazwini encourages the community to be more politically active especially in local elections. He asks Muslims to run for school boards, city council, mayor, state congress, and US congress.<sup>26</sup>

When the local school board planned an expansion project that was against the interests of the Muslim community, local Sunni and Shi'i communities rallied together to defeat the scheme. Gradually, Muslims are playing a more active role in the policies adopted by local school boards. The rise of political consciousness within the Detroit Shi'i community has precipitated a concomitant desire for participation within the political system. In the voter registration drive prior to the elections in 2000, Imam Hasan al-Qazwini urged members to register to vote. According to Imam al-Qazwini, the majority of the Muslims in Michigan (at least 70 percent) voted for George Bush in 2000.

The Detroit community was politically involved even before the events of 9/11. An advertisement in the November 1998 issue of the Islamic Center of America's (ICA) newsletter called "*Islamic Insights*" urges its readers to go to the polls to vote against proposal B, a proposal that sought to legalize assisted suicides. As it states: "As Muslims we have a responsibility to the society in which we live....Go to the polls on November 3".

Participation by local mosques and centers in the American political process is not restricted to lobbying. Some mosques are fostering closer ties with local political figures

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<sup>26</sup> Hasan Qazwini, *American Crescent*, 204.

so that their particular concerns are addressed. The October 1999 edition of the Islamic House of Wisdom's (IHW) newsletter "*Salaam*" contains a letter from the Michigan based Senator, Spencer Abraham. The Senator states that he is "sponsoring the first congressional resolution regarding tolerance towards Islam that is aimed at expressing Congress' view of religious tolerance in America today". The resolution further calls upon the Congress to take the lead in condemning anti-Muslim intolerance and discrimination and recognizes the contributions of Islam.

The fact that Senator Abraham informed the Muslim community in Detroit of his pro-Muslim political stance is indicative of the closer ties being fostered by some centers with local politicians. Increasingly, American politicians are acknowledging the need to rely on Muslim support in their constituencies. The March 1999 issue of the "*Islamic Insights*" of the Islamic Center of America carries eid greetings from the State Representative to the local Muslim community. Eid greetings were also sent by Michigan Governor John Engler. The governor had initially sought support from the Michigan Muslim community in running for his post. He attributed his victory in part to the support he received from the local Muslim community.

Even the Shi'i youth in Dearborn have become politically active since 9/11. Every year, during the Arab International festival, a group of young Shi'i volunteers register as many people as possible for local elections. They try to educate people regarding the benefits of voter registration and why it is critical to vote. Increasingly, young Shi'is are participating in changing the American political landscape. These youth, who seek both political and cultural citizenship, join political campaign groups and have urged Shi'is to become political figures – governors, mayors, senators. In a local election in 2007,

seventy percent of the Shi'is in Dearborn voted.<sup>27</sup> This was a great example of political involvement and representation.

By 2007, Dearborn and the surrounding areas had Shi'i councilors, Shi'is on various school boards, and even a Shi'i mayor in the city of Wayne, Michigan. David Turfe, a Shi'i, became a judge in a district court in 2006. He was elected by the people and serves in the people's court. Shirley Elder is another Shi'i judge in Wayne county, Michigan. Increasingly, American politicians are acknowledging the need to rely on Muslim support in their constituencies. They are developing closer relations with local Muslim communities and seek support from the Michigan Muslim community in running for various posts. As the Shi'is settle here, based on the Dearborn experience, it is to be expected that the next generation of Shi'is will exert their political rights as they integrate into American culture and identify with America as their homeland.

### **The Pakistani Shi'i Community**

Increased political activity is evident among different ethnic groups within the Shi'i community. For a long time, the Pakistani community was politically dormant. However, the events of 9/11 spurred them to political activism. This is corroborated by a story which appeared in the Baltimore Sun of November 1, 2004. Journalist Frank Langfitt reports that the Idara-e-Jaferia, a Pakistani-based Shi'i Center in Burtonsville, Maryland, had a daylong "Current Awareness" program to mobilize Muslim political participation in post-9/11 America. In addition to the voter drive, the program included

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<sup>27</sup> This was relayed to me by many Shi'is when I visited Dearborn in July 2007.

seminars on building relationships with non-Muslims, improving the image of Muslims in the news media and balancing Islamic faith with American identity. By the end of the day, organizers said they had registered 275 voters.<sup>28</sup>

The Islamic Information Center (IIC) is based in Maryland and run by Mawlana Rafiq Naqavi, a religious scholar of Pakistani origins. In February 2008, the IIC issued a communiqué stating, “The IIC strongly encourages all Muslims to take part in the Primary elections taking place in Maryland, DC and Virginia tomorrow February 12th, 2008. For those who have already registered it is imperative that they take place in this election process, especially considering how close the candidates are to each other at this point. The outcome of this year’s elections will have a great impact on issues related to the affairs of Muslims domestically as well as internationally, and thus it is our duty to take part in this process.”

The IIC has tried various methods to engage the local Shi‘i community in Maryland. According to its website:

“At IIC we believe that the "Islamic" future of America is subject to the development of indigenous leadership of the Muslims in America, dedicated to integrating Muslims both spiritually and politically into the American mainstream. Integration into the pluralist American society requires Muslims to gain a place in American culture and politics so they can bring the wisdom of Islam to the cutting issues of conscience.”

In 2008, the IIC also organized a ‘Political Awareness day’. It conducted an open forum for members of the Greater Washington Metropolitan Area to learn and understand the political issues that stand at the forefront of communities and its political leaders.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.sunspot.net/news/local/bal-md.muslim11jan11,0,3506779.story>.

Most of the volunteers and participants of IIC are young Shi'is who have opted for political activism. The activities of Shi'i youth have inspired the elders to make Shi'ism a more prominent and vocal feature of the American political landscape. Their activities are catalyzing a transfer of political identification from the national level to the local level. South Asian Shi'i youth in Los Angeles, for example, held a special event in March 2008, to urge the local community to become more politically active. A similar event was held in New York in November 2008. Shi'is all over America are now taking their civil responsibilities more seriously.

Shi'i political activism is also demonstrated within the Iranian community. For a long time, Iranian Americans have remained political outsiders. They blame their lack of political activism to their own politically shy sensibilities, which were formed as they were immigrants from a country where they had no say in the political process. Some Iranian Americans in the Bay Area are running for office. Susan Irene Etezadi campaigned to be a San Mateo County Superior Court Judge. Others have set up a political action committee; a national group has tried to urge Iranian Americans to be more involved by teaching them to write letters to editors and helping to register them to vote.

### **Universal Muslim Association of America**

An important consideration when discussing Shi'i political activity is a recently-established Shi'i national institution, the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMAA). According to an UMAA booklet, after the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) convention in 2002, members within the Shi'i community approached both ISNA

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<sup>29</sup> [www.IslamicInformationCenter.org](http://www.IslamicInformationCenter.org).

and CAIR seeking Shi'i representation in the organizations. They were rebuffed. It was against this background that UMAA was formed in 2002 in Maryland. Leaders of the organization felt that the Shi'i community needed an organization that could represent, speak on behalf of, and unite the Shi'is.

UMAA proclaimed its distinct identity as a Shi'i Muslim national organization of North America. This was the first multi-ethnic Shi'i national movement in America. Its first convention was held over the Memorial Day weekend in 2003.<sup>30</sup> Among its main objectives UMAA also aims to facilitate discussion on social, political, and economic issues affecting the Muslim community. It seeks to encourage Muslims to vote and participate in the political process, coordinate with the media and educate it on issues relating to Islam, and to provide a common platform and forum for Muslim youths.

UMAA has sought to establish connections with some political figures and issued various proclamations urging Shi'is to vote in the 2008 election. At its annual convention held in Washington D.C. during the Memorial Day weekend, UMAA has held lectures and panels encouraging its members to become politically active. However, this nascent organization has yet to formulate any definitive direction for the Shi'i community, nor has it been able to bridge the chasm that has divided different ethnic entities within the community.

### **The Election of 2008**

The election of 2008 was a watershed in Muslim American political history. In August 2008, fifty delegates from the Muslim community registered to attend the

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<sup>30</sup> See the constitution of UMAA.

Democratic National convention in Denver. Almost thirty of them attended the American Muslim caucus.<sup>31</sup> Both Shi'is and Sunnis participated in the event. In the 2008 presidential elections, both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims voted in large numbers especially as Muslims felt victimized by the government's anti-terrorism measures.

Increased politicization of the Muslim community during the November 2008 election can be discerned from a poll undertaken soon after Barack Obama's victory.<sup>32</sup> The American Muslim Taskforce on Civil Rights and Elections (AMT) released the results of a poll indicating that almost 90 percent of American Muslim voters picked Barack Obama in the election. The survey of more than 600 American Muslim voters also indicated that just two percent of respondents cast their ballots for Sen. John McCain. According to this poll:

- Of those who voted, 89 percent cast their ballot for Barack Obama.
- Just two percent of respondents said they voted for John McCain.
- Most of the respondents (78 percent) reside in ten states: Illinois, New York, Virginia, Michigan, California, Texas, New Jersey, Maryland, Florida, and Pennsylvania.
- Ninety-five percent of respondents said they voted in the presidential election, whether at the polls or by absentee ballot. This is the highest American Muslim voter turnout ever reported.
- Of those who voted, almost 14 percent said they did so for the first time.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.muslimsforamerica.us/?emaillink>.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/168062>.

- One-fourth of respondents said they volunteered for or donated money to a political campaign in this election.
- American Muslim voters are increasingly identifying themselves with the Democratic Party. More than two-thirds said they consider themselves Democrats. Most of the rest, or 29 percent, still consider themselves independent. Only four percent said they are Republicans.
- More than two-thirds (63 percent) of respondents said the economy was the most important issue that affected their voting decision. This was followed by 16 percent who said the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were the most important. (In January 2008, a sample of 1000 Muslim voters rated education and civil rights as the top issues.)<sup>33</sup>

## **Conclusion**

For Muslims, it is only by participation in the American constitutional order that they can qualify to enjoy the kinds of rights and protections that make protest and the creation of alternative modalities of Americanness even possible. In fact, it may be these very protections that afford Muslim-Americans the greatest ability to rise to their highest selves.

In the last three decades, through the efforts of Muslim activists and various organizations, Muslim focus has shifted from battling the West to building bridges with it. In the battle for American Islam, Muslims have gradually marginalized their co-religionists who advocated for resistance to and disengagement from American public

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<sup>33</sup> CAIR website, Nov 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008-11-15.



sphere. Gradually, Muslims have become politically engaged and have a presence in the Congress (Keith Ellison).

Shi'i political aspirations in America have yet to crystallize into a concrete body with a properly formulated political agenda. In the absence of such political institutions, political activism manifests itself in public discourse on moral and social issues that impact the community. As the second generation of Shi'is has come to see America as their permanent home, it has appropriated distinctly American values and outlook. Shi'is all over America have opted for voluntary social activism and to identify with American culture, develop a sense of patriotism leading to a greater politicization of the community and a sense of American national consciousness. This is their way to counter marginality, Islamophobia, and social exclusion.