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THE AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY'S OBAMA PROBLEM

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If there was ever a phrase that captured the ruthless nature of campaign politics, being "thrown under the bus" would be a serious contender. Perhaps no other community has felt the indignity of this process in the 2008 election year more than Muslim Americans vis-à-vis their support for Barack Obama.

As Obama captured his party's nomination for president and the imagination of the nation, parts of the American Muslim community are no less overcome by the Illinois Senator's charismatic and overpowering vision for change. It makes sense. He is a man of diverse ethnic background who seeks dialogue over war, who can credibly represent change given his independence from establishment politics, and whose life story suggests an intimate understanding of the Muslim world. While not a Muslim himself, in many ways he represents more than Muslims could have hoped for, given the radioactive nature of Islam in America for the past several years … someone who seemingly has a sympathetic ear and background that

could build bridges. But for many reasons, Muslims are one constituency Obama has gone out of his way not to fully embrace. With a wink and a nod, his Muslim supporters continue to work for a candidate who cannot afford to wink back at them. While Obama is not a Muslim, his family background and the fact that he shares a name with a former Iraqi dictator make it difficult for him, as a candidate, to embrace organized Muslim support. America's negative political and social climate as it relates to the Muslim community cannot be overcome. At a time when endorsements are worn like badges of honor, no major candidate is looking for the Muslim vote.

Muslim as Pariah

As expected, Republican forces continue to emphasize Obama's association with Islam to diminish his attractiveness as a candidate for many Americans. McCain never has to say a word, the "hit job" will be manufactured and executed by his friends on Fox News, via the airwaves with Rush Limbaugh and Sean

Hannity, and through such tabloids as the New York Post or right-wing blogging networks. In fact, it was an obscure blog, the "Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report," that initiated the series of events leading to the resignation of Mazen Asbahi, the Obama campaign's first Muslim outreach director. Asbahi's role was cut short not because of any action on his part, but rather through a convoluted association with others in the community who were accused of holding extreme views.

Vocal Muslim support for Obama, as demonstrated by Asbahi's resignation, will likely be used as subtext for character attacks against his background and to fuel baseless rumors that he is actually a stealth Islamist who will subvert the establishment after taking power. As Don Imus can attest, racism and bigotry against African Americans is now largely unacceptable in public discourse. However, the same cannot be said of vitriol against Muslims. Attacking Obama for his pseudo-association with Islam is a far safer and more acceptable strategy for right-wing zealots than attacking him for being black. Serious public support or defense of Muslims from the Obama campaign is not likely. For Muslims to demand or expect more from him simply demonstrates a misunderstanding of reality. Muslim support for Obama is akin to George W. Bush's support for democracy in the Middle East – the mere

association with the former will undercut the credibility of the latter. This is an analogy that Muslims should understand.

Obama's lack of a public defense of Islam is not so much an indictment against him as it is an exposé of the infantile state of Muslim political participation in America. While it is impossible to tell, it would be reasonable to assume that if Obama could reach out more openly to Muslim voters, he would do so because as a candidate he will accept votes from any and all Americans. Muslims also fit squarely into the demographic that he appeals to most: professional and educated Americans. The only reason why Obama will not reach out to Muslims openly is because he is making a clear political calculation: the votes he would gain from Muslims are far fewer than the votes he would lose from his association with Muslims.

This should be startling. Unfortunately, it has not initiated the kind of discussion within the Muslim community that is necessary to change the political calculus of future candidates. To be fair, other candidates have lost votes based on their religious affiliation. Mitt Romney, a practicing Mormon, probably diminished his appeal to large parts of the Republican party by openly embracing his faith. But in terms of public perception, Muslims belong to a whole other category of disrepute. In the case

of Obama, the criticism is not of his faith, as he professes to be a practicing Christian, but of his merely perceived association with Islam.

Muslims in America must face this political reality, which presents them with yet another truth: the collective effort of Muslim institution building over the last twenty years has largely failed to make any real progress when it comes to impacting the American political process, at least at the national level. Muslims have found the perfect candidate, but cannot vocally support him for fear that if they do, they may be the reason why he loses. What Muslims have yet to realize that their disenfranchisement is more a socio-cultural phenomenon than it is a political one. Organizing and establishing the necessary institutions that empower Muslims to create their own public image gets to the root of what inhibits the community's full political participation.

Public Perceptions
At the core of the problem is the public perception of Islam in America. Global events, and of course 9/11, play an undeniable role in shaping Americans' image of Islam. However, Muslims are not the first community in America whose image has become beholden to political circumstances outside its control. It is certainly not possible to go back in time and change history; however, the narrative produced from that

history can be written by anyone. As it now stands, *Muslims have allowed their narrative in America to be written by the very elements within the political process that seek to marginalize them.* What it means to be a Muslim in America is largely defined by individuals, institutions, and interests that not only have little or no connection to the community, but actually seek to benefit politically by its marginalization. Muslims have allowed all sorts of wolves to oversee their sheep.

Islam's American Narrative

Political, social, and cultural narratives provide the foundation for how the general public perceives a community.[i] Few Americans have either the inclination or the time to engage Islam and the Muslim world at the level needed to understand all of its nuances and realities. And yet this has been the Muslims' primary complaint for the better part of two decades; that Americans' ignorance of Islam leads to misunderstandings and misperceptions. The tacit implication of this line of thinking is that Americans should take some time and learn about Islam, the "real" Islam, and get over their misconceptions.

For better or worse, this will never happen. The vast majority of Americans will allow prevailing narratives to fill the gaps in their knowledge about Islam in order to provide a framework for understanding who Muslims are and how they

should relate to them. Once the framework has been established, individuals can easily evaluate and digest information without necessarily analyzing or scrutinizing its actual veracity. For example, if the prevailing narrative depicts Islam and Muslims as violent, then a news item or bulletin that implicates a Muslim in a violent act becomes easily believable to the casual viewer. The narrative provides the foundation for the larger story arc, and specific news items are articulated within that overarching narrative and serve to reinforce the fundamental premise and further entrench the narrative.

Public narratives are created over long periods of time and incorporate attitudes, perceptions, and images from a wide array of sources. The mainstream media plays a critical role in this process; however, it is by no means the primary or only source. Hollywood, think tanks, television, the Internet, and other information venues are all important factors in establishing and enforcing the narrative.

The problem Muslims face is that their narrative is increasingly associated with violence, foreign turmoil, and extremism. While every community contains members who commit violent acts, Muslim communities are defined by such individuals. As a result, the Muslim identity in America has not been able to achieve a level of cultural normalcy. Being Muslim remains

an entirely foreign experience to most Americans. The politics of oil and the Middle East define both Islam and Muslims for many people. The foreign-ness and other-ness associated with this general reaction allows those who seek to marginalize the Muslim community ample opportunity to do so.

Connecting Narratives to Policy

The so called "holy grail" of political enfranchisement for minorities is often perceived to be the election of public officials from their ranks. We have recently witnessed the election of the first two Muslim congressmen in this country's history. While this is certainly an encouraging sign for the country and the Muslim community, political power in the form of elected officials is only one part of the larger policy-making puzzle that must be addressed before real enfranchisement takes root. Politicians are only free to do what their respective political contexts allow. *They are largely constrained by what people perceive to be true, regardless of whether this perception is based on fact.* True enfranchisement comes when a community is able to expand the range of options available to politicians and policy makers when advocating for their interests. This means creating a social and cultural climate friendly to particular needs of their potential advocates.

At the core of expanding this range of options is developing a

narrative that creates space for political empowerment. Politicians like Obama and others cannot take Muslim concerns seriously when articulating their various policy platforms because the prevailing narrative about Muslims in America would contextualize that effort in a negative way. As the Muslim narrative is largely equated with extremism, suspicion, violence, and a sense of foreboding mystery, any effort by Obama to reach out to the Muslim community would be couched in similar terms by his political opponents. The most obvious example of this so far is Asbahi's immediate dismissal when the first sign of trouble appeared. Keith Ellison, an African American convert to Islam and the first Muslim Congressman, found that his efforts to campaign on behalf of Obama were less than warmly embraced.

In order to expand the range of options for politicians like Obama or others who may come along in the future, Muslims must think of how to change the general public's perception of their community before expecting elected officials to respond to their concerns. Politicians will always speak to the general public's concerns and be beholden to its prejudices, misunderstandings, and misconceptions. Populist rhetoric will never go out of style as long as there are candidates seeking votes. *The political enfranchisement of Muslims in America is a function of the community's ability to change the larger public narrative about who it is and what it is about;* it is not a function of which politician(s) Muslim groups can develop relationships with. The power to empower rests with Muslims.

The Need for Strategic Thinking

American Muslims have generally ignored establishing some of the most basic institutions necessary for forging a narrative. They have restricted the options available to those policy makers who might be "persuaded" to move closer to addressing their concerns. In many ways, Muslims have put the cart before the horse. For example, they seek widespread political enfranchisement before achieving cultural normalcy. Viable political enfranchisement for Muslims is not possible without achieving a level of cultural normalcy in the eyes of the broader American public. Muslims will begin to see politicians respond to their concerns when Americans no longer see them as suspicious, foreign people.

Muslims often criticize the media for promoting stereotypes, misunderstandings, and misinformation about Islam. While this may be true, the media is comprised of individuals and institutions that can be influenced if approached properly. Anyone is free to interact, engage with, or create media. Despite this, by and large Muslims choose to avoid building media institutions that show a level of sophistication when it comes to communicating and presenting ideas.

Muslims must consider two general audiences when formulating a strategy for creating a new narrative for Islam in America: (1) the thought leaders, which includes journalists, academics, policymakers, businessmen and women and others interested in understanding Muslims for a variety of professional reasons; and (2) the general public, which may not have any inclination to undertake study of Islam but will readily adopt a perspective on Muslims to provide context for understanding local and global events.

The thought leaders create the narratives, and the general public absorbs them. In turn, politicians are beholden to the general public's perspectives, informed or otherwise, when making political decisions for elected office. *Until Muslims influence the narratives produced by thought leaders and consumed by the general public, they should expect no change in how politicians marginalize them in the political process.*

The Muslim community lacks an institutional infrastructure that can communicate effectively with both of these audiences. The following areas require investment, attention, and

resources to address both audiences:

Mainstream Publications: There are no widely circulated national publications that explain Muslim perspectives. While there are a number of important efforts, for the most part Muslims have no credible print-media entry into contemporary public discourse. A sophisticated series of publications that provide the broader community with a mechanism to understand what Muslims are thinking and how they can engage with them is a fundamental building block for acquiring and maintaining a presence in the media. The community's lack of a periodical infrastructure also makes it difficult for Muslims to promote their own public intellectuals, as there are few venues for them to develop their ideas and solicit reaction and feedback from larger audiences. Such periodicals as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers*, *The New Yorker*, and others have defined Islam for a generation of thinking Americans; Muslims have yet to produce their own publications that evaluate, contextualize, or contest the offered narratives. One need only trace the origins of the phrase "clash of civilizations" to realize how influential periodical literature is in shaping narratives. The phrase was first uttered in an essay by Bernard Lewis in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and later expounded upon by Samuel Huntington in *Foreign Affairs*.

Think Tanks: Think tanks create the intellectual justification for lawmakers and politicians to rationalize particular policy positions. Most think tanks consider a particular worldview when formulating their research and articulating their positions on various arguments. Muslims have made some strides in this area, but have yet to build institutions that regularly receive national recognition in policy circles. In addition, these institutions can demonstrate a depth of analysis and thought on various subjects and provide support and resources to thinkers and scholars who may not otherwise have the opportunity to explore particular social, historical, political, or policy-related issues.

Public Intellectuals: While Muslims have succeeded in producing scores of respected academics and scholars in the fields of Islamic studies, Middle Eastern history and religion, few have achieved mainstream recognition in representing Muslim viewpoints for the larger community. Public intellectuals are influential in formulating narratives for the larger community. Individuals like Irshad Manji, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and similar figures are capable of garnering widespread praise and significant media attention to promote their ideas. These individuals are both media savvy and have large public-relations infrastructures behind them to promote their books and appearances. They have become

popular because various interests, institutions, and individuals are vigorously promoting them.

In order for mainstream Muslim thinkers with actual roots in the Muslim American community to achieve similar levels of recognition and public acceptance, the community must take basic steps to support them. These include establishing fellowships so that academics can take time off from their regular writing responsibilities to write books that address issues for a larger public audience. It also requires think tanks that provide institutional support for writers, journalists, and others to have dedicated time and resources to focus on communicating with the larger public. Investments must be made in working with public relations firms and other media specialists to get an individual's name on the national radar.

Journalism: Perhaps the most astounding paradox of the last twenty-five or so years of Muslim American institution building is the community's general indifference to supporting young Muslims who want to enter print and broadcast journalism. Muslims have been highly critical of how mainstream sources have presented, and often distorted, their faith, history, and culture. There is a widespread perception that the media is biased against Islam. While this may be the case, the bias exists only because actual Muslims are nowhere to

be seen in the mainstream media. For whatever reason, Muslims have not seriously invested in promoting journalism as an important profession within their community.

The argument for building Muslim-focused institutions should not be confused with encouraging Muslims to work exclusively with other Muslims. Through building these basic organizations, younger Muslim scholars, thinkers, journalists, and writers will have more opportunities and a greater potential for mentorship. They will refine their skills and build their resumes in order to become more attractive candidates for mainstream publications and programs in the future. Furthermore, these institutions are all inherently synergistic, each creating additional opportunities and amplifying the voice of the other. Investments in one area can easily reap benefits in another.

Other similar-sized minority communities already understand this process and have multiple inventories in each category listed above. What Muslims have are a number of smaller efforts that lack support, funding, and human resources. If Muslims have failed in all these arenas, it is not due to any lack of talent; rather, it is due to the lack of a collective vision.

Beware the Pitfalls of Advocacy

One area in which Muslims do invest resources advocacy groups, among them the Council on American-Islamic Relations (www.cair.com) and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (www.mpac.org). These organizations have had some success in presenting alternative perspectives and ensuring that basic political rights are secured. While advocacy groups are a necessary part of a community's overall path to political empowerment, they are not, in themselves, sufficient to reach this goal. In fact, the degree to which Muslims are publicly represented by their advocacy groups is inversely related to the general public's positive perception of them, for advocacy groups are inherently divisive. The NAACP (www.naacp.org) and the ACLU (www.aclu.org), for example, play important roles in American democracy; however, they are also polarizing organizations because the topics and issues they address are often controversial and contentious.

If advocacy groups define the Muslim community's public face, then average Americans will hear about Islam from Muslims only in the context of controversy and associate them and their faith even more with negative events. Advocacy groups are far more effective when their constituencies have a diverse presence in the public sphere, one that is mostly unrelated to their work. This is

where arts and entertainment play a critical role in allowing the average Americans to identify with Muslims at large, meaning outside the context of divisive political issues. Such pioneering efforts as Unity Productions Foundation (www.upf.tv), a Muslim production company; "Little Mosque on the Prairie," a Muslim-themed Canadian sitcom; and a number of increasingly successful Muslim comedians are welcome in this regard. However, they represent the beginning of a process that requires more attention and resources.

Building Social Capital

It is not uncommon to hear in the media that Islam has been "hijacked" by extremism. In fact, many Muslims lament that their faith has been appropriated by a few extremist individuals who claim to be acting on behalf of Islam. While it is true that some Muslims do hold extreme views and that some of them even commit acts of violence based on those views, this is hardly the reason why the Muslim community in general is suffering from such negative public perceptions. Every faith and ethnic community has its share of extremists who use violence to achieve certain political ends. One could think of the bombing of abortion clinics, the Irish Republican Army's violent resistance to British rule, or even neo-Nazi groups that espouse white supremacy. In all cases, the larger group is not summarily associated with the

actions of these few extremists. This begs the question: why is it that in the case of Muslims, the general public views the majority as having taken on the characteristics of a small minority of people who happen to belong to their faith?

The problem is not the "insufficient" number of Muslims condemning terrorism. In fact, most major Muslim institutions in America are vociferous in their condemnation of terror. Such proclamations do little to sway the sentiments of the American public at large, however, for many Americans remain suspicious of Islam and the Muslim community. The problem here is that these condemnations do not fit within the larger narrative offered about Muslims in the media and, therefore, have little impact on public perceptions. Muslims have misunderstood the process of building social capital with the American people. What Muslims need are entryways into the public discourse that are entirely unrelated to the politics of extremism and terrorism. As long as the only images of Muslims in the public space are associated with engaging in terror, combating terror, or complaining about being accused of terror, the general perception among average Americans will always be negative. *The problem is the only time Americans see or hear about Muslims is when something bad happens.*

Muslims must enter the public consciousness through popular media in such a way that their identity as Muslims is not restricted to the politics of the Middle East or the needs of homeland security. As long as the only cultural reference for Islam in America is related to extremism and terror, those who seek to marginalize Muslims will forever be able to deny the American-ness of Muslim Americans. Bigotry toward Muslims will be acceptable in the public discourse until the fear of Islam is countered with a new articulation of who Muslims are and what they believe. Don't expect Don Imus to lose his job over prejudiced comments about Islam until this happens.

America has a long history of accepting foreigners into its ranks. Muslims are no different. But in order to be perceived as American, Muslims must start creating narratives that focus on their common humanity with others, as opposed to the politics of why they are being marginalized. This reformulation of Muslim identity is not nearly as difficult as it could be, given the diversity within the Muslim community. In fact, as Dr. Sherman Jackson and others have argued, there is a large segment of the Muslim community in America whose American-ness is an undeniable fact: BlackamericanMuslims.[ii] In many ways, this group has defined what it means to be American. One need only listen

to the iPods of suburban white American youths to realize this.

Blackamerican Muslims have been civically, politically, and socially engaged in America for centuries. The rest of the Muslim community discovered this consciousness a few years after 9/11. If all Muslims did was to change the public perception of Islam in America by identifying more with Blackamerican Islam than with Arab or Pakistani Islam, the community would move forward by leaps and bounds. It is no accident that the first two Muslim congressmen are black. It is unfortunate that the Muslim community's internal politics marginalizes Blackamerican Muslim voices in the public discourse. Their lack of a public presence and association with Islam has hindered the cultural acceptance of Islam in America and given those who seek to marginalize Islam the perfect context to politicize the faith.

The Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent will remain powder kegs for decades to come. As long as the politics of these two regions are allowed to dominate the identity of Islam in America, the cultural normalcy and social capital that Muslims require to write their own narrative will be difficult to achieve. The larger African American community has already invested centuries in their struggle for civil rights and human dignity. If they position themselves properly, Muslims can benefit from and support

these efforts. The Blackamerican Muslim narrative is far more compelling, understandable, and easily digestible for Americans at this point in time. To not place it front and center in a campaign to gain broad cultural acceptance of Islam in America is a decision born either of thoughtlessness or prejudice.

Conclusion

Policy and political decision making in America is not decided entirely on Capitol Hill. It is also decided in the complex interaction of think tanks, academic institutions, book stands, radio shows, the evening news, newspapers, op-ed pages, opinion polls, Hollywood blockbusters, and much more. It is the confluence and interaction of all these institutions that inform how politicians behave, not the other way around. Politicians are simply seeking votes, and votes are determined by people's inclinations, perceptions, prejudices, and perspectives. If a community wants to win politicians, it has to build constituencies by changing the way people think.

If Muslims do not want to suffer the indignation of political irrelevance for many elections to come, instead of giving money to politicians they should start investing in journalism scholarships. They should establish fellowships for Muslim academics to take a year off and write a book for a general audience. They should invest in publications that demonstrate a breadth and depth of thinking on a range of issues. They should invest in think tanks that analyze public issues and present actual value to the overall public discussion. All of these institutions exist right now for Muslims in America. But for the most part they are underfunded, underappreciated, undervalued, and, because the community in general has not rallied around them, mostly invisible. Given this invisibility, Muslims are effectively invisible when it comes to Obama or any other serious political candidate.

Muslims largely misunderstand the process by which minority communities in this country acquire their proverbial "seat at the table." It is not acquired through campaign donations and political posturing, but through understanding and executing a collective vision that nurtures real, active social, economic, and political participation designed to improve both one's own community and the broader community surrounding it. It is acquired through understanding that public perception is not entirely devised by a select few, but is earned through hard work and sacrifice. It is acquired when a community actually adds some value to the society from which it benefits.

Members of the Muslim community in America must develop a strategic understanding of how to create political capital. If such an understanding existed, Obama would not have to rebuke his Muslim supporters. The proof is in the pudding. Either Muslims recognize and properly address these social, cultural and political realities, or continue doing what they have done for the last twenty-five years: blame the media. ◆

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i Dr. Umar F. Abd-Allah of the Nawawi Foundation speaks extensively on cognitive frames and the role they play in creating the environment for particular narratives to be accepted or rejected by the mainstream public.

ii Dr. Sherman Jackson discusses the relationship between Blackamerican Muslims and their relationships to immigrant Muslim communities in his book: *Islam and Blackamerican: Looking Towards the Third Resurrection* (Oxford, 2005).

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