

Locating the Silent Muslim Majority:

Policy recommendations for improving Jewish-Muslim relations in the United States

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Précis

This paper highlights the imbalance between Jewish attention to militant Islam and to non-militant Muslims, and proposes solutions to addressing this deficiency. Given the importance of improving Muslim-Jewish relations, I recommend a significant increase in resources and energy for developing a web of alliances between different sectors of the Jewish and Muslim communities. To facilitate contacts with potential Muslim partners, the Jewish community needs to reconsider the criteria it uses to identify credible partners. While the Jewish community has the *right* to delineate a primary and secondary boycott of Muslims it regards as controversial, I argue that it is not in the Jewish community's *interest* to maintain such broad restrictions. The Jewish community should shift from rejecting Muslim partners who espouse positions it opposes to excluding only those who uphold positions that are untenable. Drawing on the findings of my recent study of contemporary American Muslims, the Jewish community should first focus on developing educational and collaborative projects with young American born/educated Muslim professionals and with Muslim academics of the humanities/social sciences. Members of these two groups have demonstrated a pragmatic attitude towards American civic life and a willingness to engage in inter-cultural exchange. Jewish scholars and students of Arabic and Islam are a viable resource for locating Muslim partners to jointly develop these projects.

Introduction

Since the breakdown of the Oslo Accords in the late nineties, relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities in many parts of the world have significantly deteriorated. Although numerous prominent Jewish leaders, such as Rabbi Michael Melchior and Rabbi David Rosen in

Israel and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in England, have argued for the pressing need to improve Muslim-Jewish relations worldwide, few concrete plans have been developed to address this deficiency. This policy paper, focusing on Muslim-Jewish relations in the United States, presents an initial step at addressing this gap.

Over the past decade, the organized Jewish community in America has struggled to come to terms with recent events in the Middle East and emanating from the Muslim world. National Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Anti-Defamation League (ADL), have been in the forefront of identifying and exposing militant Muslim groups in America; they also have been active in researching Islamic extremism and anti-Semitism in the Arab world.¹ Almost without exception, these research reports begin with the premise that militant Muslims represent a distinct, albeit active, minority and that the Muslim world is extraordinarily diverse in its approaches to religion, politics and culture. However, relative to the attention paid to militant Islam, scant research has been dedicated to exploring how to reach this Muslim majority.

The current work pursued by these American Jewish organizations on militant Islam is vital to protecting Jewish and American interests. However, the development of contacts and connections with other parts of the Muslim community is

1. A brief survey of AJC and ADL's websites demonstrates the degree to which these organizations regard the threat of Islamic extremism as a priority of Jewish concern [www.ajc.org; www.adl.org]. In a *Forward* opinion piece, AJC director, David Harris, described this work as the duty of Americans and Jews, when he said: "the fact is that as Americans and as Jews we have been forced to become ever more vigilant." [David Harris, "Facing the Challenge of Muslim Activism." *The Forward*, September, 6, 2002.]

equally important to American, Jewish and Israeli interests. This paper recommends a serious increase in the investment of resources for, and attention to, learning about and reaching out to non-militant Muslims. As the Muslim population of America is extraordinarily diverse - ethnically, religiously, politically and culturally, the Jewish community needs to develop a web of alliances with as many different ethnic, religious and generational sub-groups as possible.

Background: Why the U.S. and Why Now?

The prosperity and security of the American Jewish and Muslim communities renders the United States a uniquely-suited locus for positive Jewish-Muslim engagement. The U.S., along with Western Europe, presents the rare historical phenomenon of Jews and Muslims living as fellow minorities in a relatively secure Christian country. But unlike in Western Europe, the two communities share a similarly high socio-economic position: the American Jewish and Muslim communities are prosperous, with a large percentage of highly educated and professional members. Also, without exact population estimates, and unlike Western Europe where Muslims are much larger in number, it is clear that both communities have a small but significant presence in the U.S.; if the populations are not of similar size, they are heading in that direction.² There are clear differences

2. For the current range of Muslim population estimates, see my accompanying report. In a recent article, Jonathan Sarna drew the same conclusion: "Islam is reputedly the nation's fastest-growing religion. In the twenty-first century, there is every likelihood that there will be more Muslims than Jews in this country, and some would say that has already happened." "American Jews in the New Millennium," in *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish and Muslim experiences in the United States*, Yvonne Y. Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and John L. Esposito, eds. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003):120.

between the two communities, and the most contentious debates occur over U.S. foreign policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The inter-communal competition in Washington, D.C., will likely continue, but it should not detract from the strategic benefits to be gained from better Jewish links to the more progressive elements within the Muslim community.

Drawing on the findings of my recent study of contemporary American Muslims, I argue that the Jewish community should take advantage of the current window of opportunity created in the aftermath of 9/11. First, the Jewish community is significantly more powerful both politically and culturally in America and thus can afford to reach out to the less established Muslim community. While the Jewish population is stable, the Muslim population continues to grow through conversion and (perhaps) immigration. Second-generation Muslims have demonstrated their interest and skill in political activism. As they grow into leadership positions, this generation will enhance the Muslim community's political and cultural presence and capacity to promote Muslim political interests. Second, American Muslims post-9/11 have realized the existential danger of isolationism and have begun to reach out to other communities. The United States in the beginning of the new millennium presents highly conducive elements for improving Muslim-Jewish relations.

Given proper investment of resources and creative thinking, the U.S. could prove ultimately to be a laboratory for constructive Jewish-Muslim interactions. For example, these interactions could be a model for a global effort to decrease anti-Semitism. As joint members of the American superpower, positive Muslim-Jewish relations could have a spillover effect onto other communities worldwide. In the long term, these positive relations might enhance Israel's ability to interact with its neighbors.

Recommendations:

I. It is in the interest of the Jewish community to redefine current restrictive policies regarding how major Jewish organizations have defined credible Muslim partners.

The paradox: Where are the moderates?

Given the consensus of experts on the importance of improving Muslim-Jewish relations and the window of opportunity that exists, why has there been so little movement and attention to this issue? Jewish leaders who have attempted dialogue with Muslims have often expressed frustration at the difficulty of locating potential partners. In an interview with the *Forward*, AJC Director, David Harris summarized this sentiment:

No organization has more energetically pursued Muslim-Jewish dialogue in this country over the last decade than the American Jewish Committee. But truth be told, it's been incredibly tough because finding credible dialogue partners is an ongoing challenge. Even so, we will not give up. Too much hangs in the balance.³

Moderate Muslims are reputed to constitute the majority of Muslim society yet they are so difficult to find. Part of the difficulty stems from the lack of centralization of many Muslim sub-communities, rendering the process of reaching out to Muslims more time-consuming and strenuous. Others

3. David Harris, "Facing the Challenge of Muslim Activism," *Forward*, September 6, 2002.

have argued that radical Muslim groups intimidate moderates from speaking out in public. Although both explanations may be valid, neither sufficiently explains the lack of partners. A key part of the problem lies in the way that Jewish groups have defined who is a credible or moderate partner. This issue deserves significant consideration.

For the past few years, major national Jewish organizations have tacitly maintained a series of restrictive guidelines regarding who can be defined as a credible Muslim partner. Developed in response to American Muslim support for the second Intifada, these policies were reconfirmed and strengthened in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The guidelines function as a two-tiered boycott against:

- (1) Organizations and their leadership as well as individuals who actively endorse violence against noncombatants to further religious and/or political ends in general, and who promote international organizations committed to the destruction of Israel in particular; and
- (2) Muslim individuals or organizations who are or have been affiliated/in contact with the above organizations or individuals.

According to certain Jewish organizations, Muslim individuals or organizations must officially declare their opposition to suicide bombing and violence in the name of Islam in order to be considered appropriate partners. For example, the ADL has actively worked to prevent CAIR and AMC, among other Muslim organizations, from appearing on interfaith panels or from endorsing political candidates. Furthermore, Jewish organizations have refused to sit on committees and coalitions that included individuals and organizational representatives who do not fit this definition of moderate.

These restrictive guidelines are motivated by two sound principles:

- (1) The Jewish community must remain strongly loyal to the State of Israel and must reject any relations with those that seek to destroy her; and
- (2) The Jewish organizations, by sitting with certain Muslim organizations, lend them credibility and give license to other organizations and state/federal agencies to reach out to these organizations.

By all accounts, the first-tier of the boycott reflects an appropriate application of these principles. However, the application of the second tier has led to a boycott of most prominent Muslims through guilt-by-association. This broader application impedes the furthering of another strategic goal, namely, improving Muslim-Jewish relations. Two examples highlight the main problems here:

- Professor Sulayman Nyang of Howard University is the co-director of Project MAPS (Muslims in the American Public Square), a three-year project sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trust and housed at Georgetown University to explore and identify patterns of Muslim participation within American civic life. Nyang is known for his work in improving Muslim-Jewish relations and is widely respected as a pragmatist and a committed worker to promote Muslim civic responsibility. However, as co-director of Project MAPS, Nyang often invites the leadership of CAIR, AMC, MPAC and other organizations that are deemed controversial by the Jewish community to attend workshops, and is a regular attendee at their conferences.

- Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl of UCLA Law School is perhaps the most outspoken critic of Saudi-imported Muslim extremist tendencies in parts of the American Muslim community. His polemics against violence in the name of Islam both internationally and domestically and his attacks on particular Muslim organizations and individuals have rendered him *persona non-grata* at most of the annual Muslim conventions throughout the country. And yet, Abou El Fadl published articles for years in *The Minaret*, a journal that routinely publishes anti-Zionist articles and is connected to MPAC. Abou El Fadl has also earned the ire of some Jewish groups for his harsh criticism of Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza and in its treatment of Palestinians.⁴

These two cases demonstrate two crucial flaws in the current Jewish policy. First, there is significant interaction between and among Muslim leaders, even among those who disagree about basic positions. In other words, restricting interactions with Professor Nyang because he associates with controversial organizations prevents the development of a potentially fruitful relationship.

Second, the example of Professor Abou El Fadl underscores the reality that the overwhelming majority of Muslims from progressive to extremist are highly critical of Israel and highly sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle.⁵ Muslims who embrace a pluralistic and democratic approach to Islam

4. See Gary Rosenblatt, editor of the *Jewish Week*, in his interview with Khaled Abou El Fadl, in "Jews in Search of Moderate Muslims," *Jewish Week*, January 15, 2003.

5. For a more detailed analysis, see my accompanying report.

have little if any sympathy for Zionism, but recognize the reality of Israel and the need for a diplomatic solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The current boycott allows the Jewish community to ignore this position by blurring it with extremist positions advocating Israel's destruction. If the Jewish community restricted its conversation partners to those Muslims who ideologically support the state of Israel, it would have almost no one to talk to.

One of the clearest consequences of this current policy is the tendency to idealize Muslim leaders or organizations that are not mainstream. An example is the constant positive referencing by Jewish organizations of Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, Sufi leader and head of the Islamic Supreme Council, as a model Muslim partner. Consider AJC Director David Harris' remark:

Moderate groups that have sought to emerge have been kept at bay by the more extreme groups, which, improbable as it may seem, have actually been aided, however unwittingly, by the American government and media. The Islamic Supreme Council of America is a good example...⁶

Shaykh Kabbani is indeed to be admired for his clear rejection of Islamic extremism and tireless work to promote peace and tolerance. However, Shaykh Kabbani leads a Sufi order that espouses a spiritualized and de-politicized approach to Islam and is highly marginalized within the American Muslim community.⁷ Upholding Shaykh Kabbani

6. David Harris, *idem*. *Forward*, September 6, 2002.

7. Jewish support of Shaykh Kabbani is not unlike Muslim support for the highly marginalized Neturei Karta sect, which maintains a similarly spiritualized and depoliticized form of Judaism and decries what they call Zionist political abuses of others in the name of Judaism.

as the Muslim model allows the Jewish community to construct its ideal other and ignore the mainstream Muslim community.

The Jewish community and its member organizations have the *right* to dictate the criteria for determining appropriate conversation partners. But the Jewish community should rethink whether it is in the Jewish community's *interest* to maintain such restrictive guidelines, and whether the first and second tiers of this effective boycott must go hand-in-hand. As these and other examples show, the guilt-by-association litmus test undermines Jewish interests by rendering communication and contacts between the two communities severely limited. On this issue, the Israeli government might be in a position to exert a constructive pressure on the Jewish community to loosen up its secondary boycott and encourage American Jews to seek out Muslim partners. Just as the Israeli government meets with Palestinians who uphold oppositional and, at times, untenable, political stances, perhaps the Israeli government can give the organized Jewish community permission to meet Muslims who are strongly critical of Israel.

II. We need to develop a more nuanced way to identify Muslim partners. The first step is to develop a distinction between Muslim positions that are untenable - e.g., "Israel has no right to exist," and Muslim positions that the Jewish community opposes but can agree to disagree - e.g., "we oppose Israeli policies in the territories." The second step is to expand the definition of "moderate" to more effectively gauge who indeed are worthwhile conversation partners.

If the goal is to reach out to the mainstream Muslim community, the Jewish community needs to distinguish

between positions that it regards as untenable and those that many in the Jewish community oppose. For example, advocating the destruction of Israel is untenable, whereas criticizing Israeli policies is not untenable even if it is to be opposed by Jewish voices. Or, voicing anti-Semitic views is untenable, but criticizing the Jewish community for a particular political or social position is tenable if oppositional. A proper litmus test to distinguish between oppositional and untenable positions might be whether a sizeable contingent within the mainstream Jewish community upholds that particular viewpoint. I am by no means advocating that the Jewish community accept and ignore Muslim criticisms of Israel or the Jewish community. Rather, I am urging the organizational leadership to broaden the universe of potential Muslim partners by excluding *at the outset* only those who uphold positions that it regards as immoral or untenable, rather than those whose positions do not follow Jewish consensus.

Within these outer limits, American Jews should evaluate potential Muslim conversation partners and allies according to a broader understanding of what constitutes moderation. The search for the "moderate"[Muslim has occupied the headlines of most Jewish articles on Muslim-Jewish relations, but is often reduced to Muslim positions on violence and suicide bombing.⁸ However, moderate can and should be defined in several ways. Without ignoring Muslim positions on religious violence, the Jewish community should be also concerned with Muslim attitudes towards social, political and religious issues that directly bear on the domestic arena. Within the Muslim community, debates on issues such as gender or participation in American civic life

8. In addition to Gary Rosenblatt's article above, see, for example, Lauren Gelfond, "In Search of Moderation" in *Hadassah* 83/9 (May 2002).

have serious ramifications for the evolving definition of American Islam. Using these debates as a springboard for thinking about moderation, the Jewish community might want to look for those Muslims who *inter alia*

- Advocate broad participation in American civic and political life
- Espouse the principles of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism
- Develop broadminded/nonsectarian approaches to domestic issues, such as health care, economic distribution, or the state of public education
- Urge fellow Muslims to reach out to and learn from other cultures, including the Jewish community
- Engage in the application of modern critical tools to analyze and interpret religious texts to respond to contemporary challenges
- Promote increased roles for women both within the community and within public life
- Maintain a willingness to criticize tendencies and policies within their own communities

As I argue in my accompanying report, there is a clear correlation between those who articulate a need to develop an American Muslim identity and those who actively advocate responsible civic leadership and better inter-communal relations. By expanding the definition of a moderate, Jewish groups can seek out relevant partners on particular causes and agenda items.

III. We need to develop short, medium and long-term goals for Muslim-Jewish relations, beginning with domestic issues and agreeing to disagree over foreign policy wherever necessary. The community's first priority is to establish relationships with young leadership and academics, two groups that have demonstrated pragmatism and awareness of the importance of entering into American civic life.

If the long-term goal of the American Jewish community is to develop a web of alliances with different aspects of the Muslim community, it is vital to begin with Muslims who have demonstrated similar concerns and interests. As my accompanying report demonstrates, the two Muslim groups that have most consistently identified with a large number of the above positions are American born/educated young professionals and Muslim academics. In the short term, I recommend focusing on these two groups for local pilot projects with the goals of mutual education and, eventually, collaborative projects wherever possible.

Young leadership: The leadership crisis following the attacks of 9/11 created space for young, American-born or educated Muslims to speak out against militant Islam and to present a more pragmatic approach to Muslim participation in American life. Relative to their parents, second and third generation Muslims are much more inclined to accept principles of religious pluralism and tolerance as givens, and to engage in inter-cultural learning. As my report indicates, this generation is also more sophisticated politically. However, the affinity of values between Jewish and Muslim young professionals that stems from shared educational and cultural experiences allows for the possibility of dialogue and a civil exchange of views on a level that has been less feasible by the previous generation. These groups of young Muslim and Jewish professionals can be gathered according

to field (e.g., doctors, lawyers, businesspeople) or interest (the environment, campaign reform, etc.) These pilot projects have two goals: first, to educate and break down barriers between and among the participants; and second, to develop teams of young Muslim and Jewish leaders who are willing to return to their communities and facilitate educational or cultural workshops about the two traditions.

Academics: Although academics are often seen as peripheral to mainstream religious and communal life, Muslim academics in the humanities and social sciences have become one of the most important sources for progressive elements within the Muslim community. Numerous Muslim academics became prominent both within their communities and in American public life in the aftermath of 9/11. Similar to their Jewish colleagues, Muslim academics often become mentors for Muslim college students seeking answers to their existential and religious questions. As much as possible, young academics and even graduate students should be invited to participate, for similar reasons mentioned above with young professionals. These groups can be gathered according to field of study or area of interest, with an emphasis on educating Muslims about Jewish history and traditions, and vice versa.⁹ The goal of these projects would be to encourage the production of literature about the other tradition and stimulate debates within Muslim elite circles and Jewish ones.

Thus, contrary to most interfaith programs that have focused on bringing together religious leaders, I recom-

9. From my interviews, I found that even those who seek greater inter-community relations have a poor background in Judaism and are sometimes prone to stereotypes and simplistic analyses of Jewish issues. Hence the need for educating even Muslim and Jewish academics about each other's traditions and concerns.

mend emphasizing the establishment of links between the above two groups. I would also encourage further research regarding the effectiveness of local/grass-roots efforts to improve Muslim-Jewish relations, in order to most effectively gauge the efficacy of bringing teams of trained Jewish and Muslim facilitators into local communities. It is unclear whether local Jewish groups have adhered to the restrictive guidelines issued by the national organizations, and it would be worthwhile to examine if and where there have been successful engagements in the past few years.

IV. In the medium term, diverse elements within the Jewish community should seek out their counterparts within the Muslim community. The Jewish community should aim for a web of alliances with different sectors of the Muslim community.

In taking advantage of the diversity within the Muslim community, the Jewish community should seek to broaden its contacts with various Muslim ethnic groups and work more intelligently to set up encounters between Jewish and Muslim groups of similar orientations. Greater efforts should be expended on contacts with non-Arab Muslims, and in particular, with African-American Muslims (many of whom identify with the thoughtful American Muslim leader, W.D. Mohammed), as well as Muslims from more liberal countries, such as Turkey or Indonesia. Moreover, meetings might be more fruitful if progressive Jews sit down with progressive Muslims, and traditional Jews with traditional Muslims. In many encounters, liberal Jews attempt to dialogue with conservative Muslims, but lack a common language or value system.

V. As a medium term goal, the organized Jewish community should periodically revisit its policy towards mainstream Muslim organizations, to respond positively as specific Muslim organizations moderate their stances and professionalize their methods.

Regardless of how representative or misrepresentative they are, national Muslim organizations such as CAIR, AMC and MPAC have survived the crises following 9/11 and likely will not disappear from the public arena. There is evidence of internal criticism regarding professional accountability and organizational stances, and certain Muslim organizations have taken small steps towards professionalizing their organizations.¹⁰ For example, in June 2002, MPAC was the first Muslim organization to issue a clear position paper on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is true that MPAC faulted Israel unilaterally for the situation but it explicitly condemned violence against noncombatants and Palestinian suicide bombing against Israelis. This was the first time that a national Muslim organization issued a clear condemnation of

10. As an example of preliminary steps that merit a "wait and see" response, AMC president Dr. Yahya Basha described the gap between his personal and professional stances on controversial issues. Basha said that his organization is strongly supporting the American-led campaign against terror and that it had fired certain old-timers, because they were not able to express their "moderation." He cautioned that this kind of change would take time, but that the American-born generation of activists would slowly moderate the more extreme members. In the meantime, Dr. Basha will confine his condemnation of terrorists. When in a private conversation he called certain acts of Hamas and Islamic Jihad "criminal," he was scolded by a couple of his Muslim peers. "I will do it in the community as an individual but to put it on AMC paper will take time," he said. "It's a sensitive issue." [Lauren Gelfond, "In Search of Moderation," *Hadassah* 83/9 (May 2002).]

suicide bombing – one that led to other declarations from different parts of the Muslim community. Yet this step has yet to be publicly recognized by the national Jewish community. As younger Muslims enter into leadership positions in these organizations, there is room for cautious optimism that these organizations' mandates will evolve and grow in more responsible directions. It is important that the Jewish community allow this slow process of improvement to occur by welcoming positive steps as it condemns untenable ones.

VI. The Jewish community should utilize the growing cadre of Jewish students and scholars trained in Islam and Arabic studies as resources for locating Muslim partners and for building programs well-suited for Jewish-Muslim exchange.

Jews involved in assessing Jewish-Muslim relations have generally come from two kinds of backgrounds: Jewish-Christian relations and political researchers on Islamic extremism. In the domain of interfaith work, Muslims have recently been invited into Jewish-Christian interfaith gathering to create dialogues. Since the main similarities and historical interactions between Jews and Muslims do not involve Christians, the dialogue structure has thus far proved counterproductive for substantively exploring what links Jews and Muslims.

Jews who are learned and experienced from twenty years of Jewish-Christian dialogue have also attempted to reach out to Muslims. While some of the methods are adaptable, the very paradigms and modes of communication are quite different. Whereas Jews and Christians can begin their discussions over the interpretation of the Bible, Jews and Muslims can begin their discussions based on the extraordinary parallels between their two legal and values

systems. More importantly, the impetus for Jewish-Christian dialogue was the Christian acknowledgement of the prejudice and injustices of the Church throughout history. This created a clear structure for dialogue and generally has given Jewish participants the moral high ground. In contrast, the structure and dynamic of Jewish-Muslim dialogue should not unfold in this manner; neither side occupies a clearly superior moral position (though both sides often believe they do). Thus, the orientations and required skill sets are quite different.

Jewish-Muslim relations could be dramatically enhanced by the involvement of Jews who are familiar with Islam (and vice versa). It is here that the Jewish community should make use of an untapped resource, namely the growing ranks of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students who study Arabic and Islam. Not only do these young Jewish leaders have considerable knowledge of Islamic history and traditions, but they are generally familiar with the variety of Muslim perspectives on Judaism and Middle Eastern politics. It would be ideal for these Jewish students to take roles in shaping the curriculum of Jewish-Muslim educational programs, hopefully involving Muslim peers to work together on developing this process.

Conclusion

We need to invest as much energy in reaching out to Muslim organizations and groups as in exposing Muslim militancy. Although the latter poses clear short-term benefits, it is in the medium and long-term interest of the American Jewish community to build extensive contacts throughout the diverse communities of American Muslims. The Jewish community should take advantage of its political and civic influence to initiate this process, in the hopes of improving relations with the next generation of Muslim leaders.