



MECCA

*and*

MAIN STREET

MUSLIM LIFE IN AMERICA AFTER 9/11

GENEIVE ABDO

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**Mecca and Main Street:  
Muslim Life in America  
After 9/11**

*GENEIVE ABDO*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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*Contents*



*Acknowledgments*

vii

*Prologue: Beginnings*

i

1

*Imams for a New Generation*

ii

2

*The Child-Bride of the Dix Mosque*

37

v

## 3

*The Roots of Islam in America*

61

## 4

*Taking It to the Streets*

87

## 5

*Muslim Voices*

111

## 6

*Women in the Changing Mosque*

137

## 7

*Heeding the Call*

165

## 8

*The Future of the Faith*

187

*Bibliography*

203

*Index*

209



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## *Prologue: Beginnings*



I first thought about writing this book, often with mixed emotions, during the days following September 11, 2001. My ambivalence turned to conviction one chilly afternoon in 2003 as I strolled through a San Francisco neighborhood with Maad Abu Ghazalah. Maad was running for a seat in the U.S. Congress, and I had asked if I could campaign door-to-door with him. I wanted to see how one of America's most liberal cities might respond to a Muslim and an Arab seeking public office. I had never been to San Francisco until that day, but I believed the stereotype of a city with open-minded, tolerant citizens. Certainly this enlightened thinking would apply to Maad, especially because there are no immediate physical clues that he is an Arab. With his light skin, green eyes, and sandy brown hair, he could be Italian or Greek or French.

The neighborhood overlooked San Francisco Bay, giving homeowners a spectacular view of the clear, deep blue water. When we walked up the hill to the first set of houses and rang the doorbells, no one seemed to be at home. But after a few minutes, we found our first couple willing to open their door for a chat.

"Hello, my name is Maad Abu Ghazalah and I am running for Congress in your district," Maad told the couple, extending his hand past the front-door screen to offer them his campaign literature.

There were a few moments of silence. Then the man blurted out, as if Maad were nowhere in sight, “With this name, I would say this guy doesn’t have a chance. M-a-a-ad Abu Ghazalah. Not a chance.”

While I tried to keep my jaw from dropping, Maad did not flinch. He was apparently used to this kind of reaction. “I was born in Palestine. I live in San Francisco and graduated from Notre Dame. I am running for Congress because I’m concerned about our foreign policy,” he replied, deadpan.

The woman tried to take the edge off her husband’s remark. “We need to know where you stand,” she told Maad, “because many people will just see your name and think, ‘I don’t want to go down that road.’”

Where Maad stood was beside the point. He was against the Iraq war. He favored bringing the troops home—views the couple said they shared. But that was obviously not enough for them.

As we continued walking along the street, I wondered why Maad put himself through such unnecessary humiliation. I couldn’t understand it. Here was a successful lawyer who certainly did not need to subject himself to bigotry and ignorance. We walked a bit more, but had little success persuading voters that Maad was their man for Congress. Only one person reacted favorably.

The cool breeze and the human chill from the San Franciscans, whom I thought would be free thinkers, made me want to end the campaigning. Maad agreed, somewhat reluctantly, after we had visited nearly every house along the street. I was curious to know how he felt, but we had just met that morning and I didn’t feel comfortable asking him personal questions. I posed my question delicately: “So Maad, do you think you will continue campaigning? Do you think you are doing the right thing?”

He grinned a bit. “I have one vote and one hundred thousand to go,” he said, referring to the one positive response. “I am not running to win. I am running so the next generation of Muslims might have a chance.”

Later that day, on the plane out of San Francisco, I realized that the contemporary Muslim American experience should be documented. Life had changed dramatically for the country’s six million Muslims. But because America was focused on Muslims living nearly everywhere else but at home—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Pakistan—the story of their changing lives had been left untold.

For more than a century Muslims had lived in America in peace, blending into the ethnically diverse landscape. But suddenly, they were no longer in the shadows as an all but invisible minority. From now on, their every word would be noted, their every action seized upon by a nation gripped

with fear and inflamed by political manipulation. The event that launched America's "War on Terrorism"—a war that many Muslims at home and abroad understand as directed at Islam itself—created for them a new American reality. Like the couple who greeted Maad Abu Ghazalah, much of America had embraced a black-and-white view: Muslims are terrorists; Islam is a religion of violence; Muslims are backward; Muslims are vengeful toward the West.

*Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11* details the search by a diverse group of Muslims to find a way to live with dignity in this country. While many Muslims shared a growing desire to become more involved and educated about their faith long before September 11, in the wake of the attacks on Washington and New York, they felt an urgent need to embrace their beliefs and establish an Islamic identity as a unified community. A glance at the American horizon confirms this. A decade ago, it was unusual to spot a minaret. But now they can be seen in most major cities and many smaller ones, as well. Women in headscarves are an increasingly common sight in the nation's shopping malls, offices, schools and even health clubs. Employers are now asked to allow Muslim workers to take time off for daily prayers.

After living and working in the Islamic world for almost a decade as an author and journalist, I became interested in the Muslim American community when I returned to the United States shortly before September 11. I realized that some of the trends I had observed and documented in the Islamic world were also apparent here, especially among younger Muslims. After the attacks, it seemed vital for Americans to understand the Muslims living in their midst. Yet, much of the information available in the media has failed to inform or educate the public. My growing frustration led me to write this book.

The narratives I present are possible only because many generous Muslims were willing to tell me their stories. They welcomed me into their schools, mosques, Islamic centers, weddings, radio stations, and homes, even though I am an outsider to their community. Sometimes, telling me their stories was a form of catharsis; I was there with an open mind, well versed in their religion and culture, and willing to listen. Other times, they spoke out of desperation to get the word out. They live in the heart of America, but they are often defined solely by Americans' perceptions of Muslims abroad, whether they are insurgents in Iraq or Saudi oil tycoons in Riyadh. I have tried to tell their stories through their eyes, but with my voice.

In my travels, from New York to California, Texas, Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan, I discovered that September 11 has dramatically altered the way Muslims live in this country. These changes largely defy decades of history in a nation of immigrants, and they challenge the American ideal of diverse cultures linked by a shared attachment to common goals and dreams. Unlike other ethnic and religious groups who seek to become fully Americanized, many Muslim Americans, particularly the expanding younger generation of practicing Muslims, are involved in what their imams are calling a rejectionist movement. While gaining economic prosperity as members of the American workforce, they are trying to create their own world where they can find comfort in their faith and their communities. They are combining a desire to embrace Islam with negotiating the rigors of daily life in modern America.

Many Muslim Americans, the second generation in particular, are placing their Islamic identity first. (Throughout this book, I refer to second-generation Muslims as those whose immigrant parents were the first generation in their family to live in the United States.) Young Muslims born or raised in the United States are often more observant of Islamic practice than their parents. Many young women are wearing headscarves, even if their mothers didn't cover. And, unlike their parents, they believe their spiritual journey is also an intellectual one. This younger generation is not interested in blindly following the teachings of an imam simply because he is a religious figure; they carefully study the Koran and the Sunnah, the two sources of Islamic jurisprudence, to find rationality in religious practice. If an imam tells them, for example, that playing music is against Islamic teaching, they are likely to ask the imam to justify his opinion with a citation from the religious texts. These young Muslims are searching for purity in the faith while tailoring religious practice to their lives in America.

Their experience differs from that of their parents. The older generation began arriving from Islamic countries in great numbers almost a half century ago, after America's restrictive immigration laws were eased in the 1960s. But mentally these Muslims never left the Old Country behind. When they joined mosques in America, they wanted to observe the faith as they had back home, with aging imams citing Koranic verses that had little relevance to daily life in America.

One summer afternoon in 2004 at a gathering of young Muslims in Chicago, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, an imam who is leading this new generation, accurately contrasted the past Muslim American experience with what the future should hold. His thinking had undergone many changes since he studied Islamic science and theology in the Middle East where he will-



ingly accepted traditional interpretations of Islamic doctrine despite their lack of relevance to modern life. Once back in the United States, Sheikh Hamza realized that these readings of the faith were counterproductive in contemporary America. He shifted his ideas and refined the advice he gave his followers. “We have a crisis in faith. I sit in a *khutba* [Friday sermon] that violates the faith. . . . And I know we have to support the mosque, but if you go to a mosque and it is impossible to be there, you need to find another one. . . . I cringe when I think about the things I said ten years ago.”

The men and women profiled in the following pages are all practicing Muslims, mosque-goers, most born in America as the children of recent immigrants. I chose these particular people not because they claim to represent all Muslim Americans but because they are the activists, journalists, imams, and human rights advocates who are shaping both the broader Muslim community’s standing in America and Americans’ views of the Islamic world. Islam is spreading rapidly around the globe, and the United States is no different; it is the fastest growing religion and, by some estimates, has already outpaced Judaism as the country’s second faith.

The impulse within the young generation toward a well-defined Islamic identity is inspired by two developments. Devout Muslim Americans, much like their co-religionists across the Islamic world from Pakistan to Egypt, are experiencing a spiritual awakening. Many of the trends indicating an increase in piety among second-generation Muslim Americans are also visible in Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan and among young Muslims in Western Europe, as well. Over the last thirty years, an Islamic resurgence has spread throughout much of the world.

Then there is September 11, and the fallout from this tragic day in American history. After the attacks, a generation of believers who were already becoming more spiritual than their parents rose up to defend their faith. They felt under siege, with FBI agents raiding their mosques and homes, suspicious neighbors assuming every Muslim is suspect, and television news programs portraying Muslims as the new enemy of the West. Part of their defense was to adopt Islamic symbols—the *hijab*, the headscarf for women, and the *kufi*, the cap for men—in greater numbers. Many Muslims told me they felt impelled to learn more about their religion in order to explain the *true* Islam to America. Their future in this country depended upon it. They also felt a need for comfort that was unavailable in mainstream American society. They turned to their mosques, Islamic centers, Muslim Students’ Associations on university campuses, and Islamic schools to ease the pain of increasing bigotry, stereotyping, and hate

crimes. The role of the mosque was changing, and it changed even more after September 11. As in much of the Islamic world, in the 1970s and 1980s the mosque in America had been strictly a house of worship. But as Muslim Americans became more interested in developing their Islamic identity, the mosque became the center of social activity for those who prayed there.

After a brief period immediately following the attacks when Americans expressed an outpouring of support and tolerance for Muslims and Islam, surveys taken since September 11 show that public opinion has grown increasingly negative toward them. Data compiled by the respected Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in the summer of 2004 demonstrated that almost half of Americans believe that Islam is more likely than other religions to promote violence, up from one quarter of Americans two years earlier. Pew also found 37 percent of those surveyed had an unfavorable view of Islam in 2004, an increase over the same period in 2003.

These feelings are acted out in ways small and large. Statistics compiled by the largest Islamic organization in the country, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, show an increase in anti-Muslim vandalism and other hate crimes over the last four years. During the years I spent researching this book, I had countless experiences with Americans who held negative opinions about Muslims, but who knew virtually nothing about Islam and had never met a Muslim. Some people talked about Muslims as if they were an alien species. Few Americans know the central tenets of Islam, its emphasis on social justice, or its acceptance of the Jewish and Christian prophets who came before the Prophet Muhammad. Few Americans know that world-class Muslim scientists, philosophers, and other scholars produced significant works during the Middle Ages, when Christian Europe was shrouded in darkness, disease, and ignorance. And how many Americans stop to consider the continuing impact of centuries of Western colonial occupation and domination on Muslim societies?

Most of the time, Americans' negative views focus on Islamic militancy. I am often asked: "If Islam does not promote violence, then why don't Muslims in this country condemn the September 11 attacks? Why don't they condemn the beheadings in Iraq? Why don't they disavow the militants acting in the name of Islam?" The truth is that nearly every Islamic organization in America condemned the events of 9/11 and other forms of violence, but the media rarely captures their voices and they go virtually unheard. Other times they are dismissed as disingenuous. And even as Islamic organizations have become more visible in the years since Sep-

tember 11, they have learned that visibility brings vulnerability. In effect, they lose if they remain silent, and are still targeted if they try to defend their true faith.

Much of the hostility toward Muslims reflects the lack of knowledge about Islam that has persisted since the first Muslims arrived in America more than three hundred years ago. As early as 1893, Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, a former newspaperman and one of the earliest white converts to Islam, bewailed his fellow Americans' ignorance of the faith and the Prophet Muhammad. Sadly, little has changed since then. Instead of making an effort to understand Islam and the factors and history that have shaped its many modern forms and expressions, America's politicians and the media remain obsessed with any and all signs of extremism. The overriding question has been, "Are there militants on American soil?" Over the three years that I traveled to Islamic communities across America, I found no evidence of militancy. Are there strident voices critical of U.S. foreign policies? Without doubt. But these voices, at least for now, have not made the leap, as some European Muslims have done, toward violent radicalism.

Muslim Americans' successful creation of a strong Islamic identity is a departure from history. America had three historical encounters with Islam, none of which led to the creation of a true Islamic identity. The first Muslims to arrive in any number, beginning in the 1700s, were slaves from West Africa, and they never really had a chance. In the Deep South, where most black Muslims were sold, their enslavement, their forced conversions to Christianity, and other obstacles to practicing the faith made it impossible for them to create any real Islamic community.

The gradual collapse of the Ottoman Empire set off the next wave of immigrants, dating from around 1870 to the start of World War I. Many were Christians from Syria and Lebanon, like my own Maronite ancestors who eventually settled in San Antonio, Texas. There was also a significant number of Muslims, but they were more focused on preserving the religious and ethnic traditions of their homelands than on unifying into one Muslim American community. It was common for each ethnic group to have its own mosque, and various ethnic groups tended to settle in isolated pockets around the country, particularly in the Midwest, and remained cut off from each other.

The first attempt to carve out a national identity came from the African American community, when Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. Ali preached that African

Americans were a “Moorish” people and historically Muslim in culture and heritage. Two decades later, Wallace D. Fard, a silk peddler, claimed God sent him from the Muslim holy city of Mecca to save black America. His movement spawned the contemporary Nation of Islam, officially established in 1934 by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Like Nobel Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam was rich in Islamic symbols and terminology but offered little actual theology. The practice of the faith borrowed heavily from the services commonly conducted at black churches. Members sat on benches, sang, and listened to sermons on religious and social themes that did not address any aspect of Islam. What’s more, Elijah Muhammad embraced ideas that openly violated basic Islamic principles. He declared that white people were the descendants of the Devil, and that he was a messenger of God, an idea heretical to Muslims who believe that the Prophet Muhammad was God’s last messenger.

But, by putting Islam forward as an answer to racial oppression, the Nation of Islam effectively appealed to blacks who were searching for social justice and a new identity that would elevate them from imposed degradation. In the absence of a well-developed Islamic community with experiences in the Muslim world, there was virtually no one with religious authority to challenge such distortions of the faith. Eventually the challenge came from within the Nation itself.

Malcolm X, once the charismatic voice of the Nation of Islam, began publicly to challenge the movement’s ideas after he returned in 1964 from a life-transforming pilgrimage to Mecca. Already, he had begun to question privately some aspects of the group’s teachings. Similarly, and nearly at the same time, Elijah Muhammad’s son Wallace Deen Muhammad, who was well versed in the Islamic holy texts, questioned his father’s racist doctrine. In 1975, upon the death of his father, Wallace Deen began to discredit many of the separatist ideas upon which the Nation was built. He formed an alternative to the Nation, an organization eventually called the American Society of Muslims, but the results of Wallace Deen Muhammad’s efforts were uneven.

Meanwhile, the liberalization of America’s immigration laws in 1965 eased restrictions against immigrants from the Muslim world. Almost immediately, the face of Islam in America began to change. Now the immigrant community was growing alongside black Islam; in fact, immigrant Muslims soon outnumbered converts among African Americans. At the time, a global Islamic revival was taking root, sparked by the 1979 Islamic

revolution in Iran and the Islamic triumph over Soviet rule in Afghanistan. These events influenced Muslims from Pakistan to Egypt, and many of the immigrants who arrived in America from these countries beginning in the 1970s wanted to practice their faith diligently. They began building mosques and Islamic schools across the country, though they were initially few in number.

A clash between the immigrant and African American Muslims was bound to happen. African Americans saw immigrant Muslims as hijackers of a faith in which they themselves had established roots more than two hundred years earlier. The newly arrived Muslims raised a question that has come to dominate Islamic history in the United States: who is a *real* Muslim? In the eye of the immigrants, the Nation of Islam and the American Society of Muslims, which Wallace Deen was determined to bring into conformity with mainstream Sunni Islam, were mere imitations of the true faith.

By the 1990s, the Nation of Islam had lost its luster and Wallace Deen had become disillusioned. He told me in 2003 that he was stepping down as leader of the American Society of Muslims because many of his prayer leaders in mosques around the country had refused to follow his example and master Arabic and embrace the teachings of the Koran. They were, he said, too locked into the separatist message of his father, Elijah Muhammad. Some prominent African American Muslims, such as the scholar Sherman A. Jackson, argue that the excessive focus on race among today's African American Muslims threatens to reduce their influence within the broader community of believers.

With the decline of organized African American Islam, the post-1965 generation has stepped in to offer the best hope to resolve once and for all what it means to be a Muslim in America. Many are working hard to create a multicultural Islamic community, one that is color blind. They are inspiring African American youth to join their schools and organizations, breaking with their parents' tradition of praying, marrying, and associating only with Muslims from their same ethnic background.

The creation of a distinct Muslim American identity has become more urgent than it was in the past. After September 11, Muslims were put on the defensive. Others were constantly defining their identity and their religion. Many Muslims told me that September 11 was a wake-up call: either embrace and explain the true faith or be lumped together with the suicide bomber in the Gaza Strip or the insurgent in the rutted streets of Baghdad.

As an Arab American who also woke up on September 11 to a new, imposed identity that is more Arab and less American, this work is also a personal journey. *Mecca and Main Street* takes a look at Muslim life, quite different from the perceptions, stereotypes, and clichés that have captured the American imagination.

*New York*

*February 2006*

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ONE

*Imams for a New Generation*



In a moment he had never imagined, in a house he had never admired, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf was singing “God Bless America.” It was a momentous occasion, so important that he had altered nearly everything about his appearance and demeanor. He had left his traditional tunics and skull-caps at home in California and packed a bundle of neatly pressed dark trousers and button-down white shirts. He had trimmed his minimalist goatee and tamed his tongue, trading his intellectual, introspective rhetoric for the simplistic language of television sound bites. And to stress that he was American, as well as Muslim, he introduced himself as Hamza Yusuf Hanson, using the surname that was his before he converted to Islam. The occasion demanded it; he was standing in the Oval Office, next to President George W. Bush, under the glare of television lights, with cameras capturing his every move. It was September 20, 2001, nine days after Muslim extremists had attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The president chose Sheikh Hamza to be the Muslim cleric photographed at the White House to show the world that America was not at war with Islam.

At the very moment that Sheikh Hamza was chatting with the president, the FBI was banging on the front door of his house in California and warning his wife, Umm Yahya, that he, and other well-known Muslims,

could become targets of retaliatory attacks from Americans wanting to even the score. The agents were flabbergasted when Umm Yahya told them that Sheikh Hamza was at the White House.

As he posed for the cameras, Sheikh Hamza was worrying about a different kind of backlash, not from mainstream Americans, but from his own people. Some people in the Islamic community were angry that he had accepted this invitation to Washington. It was clear to Muslims that the president's intentions were less than sincere. Why, they wondered, was Sheikh Hamza helping the White House in a propaganda campaign designed to show America's tolerance for Muslims? Hamza knew his critics had a point, especially when he was asked to wear his Islamic cap, the one he had pointedly left behind in California, to a dinner hosted by First Lady Laura Bush that evening. The White House staff wanted to make sure the world would see a Muslim in the room when the cameras scanned the crowd.

Sheikh Hamza had his own reasons for accepting President Bush's invitation, an offer he surely would have shunned just weeks before. He knew that because of the events of September 11, life was going to be different for Muslims in America, and Muslims everywhere. Until this moment, he had been leading the scholarly life of an imam, speaking where he was invited and making his religious lessons and commentaries available on cassettes and videotapes. But that was over now. He had a forty-five-minute chat with the president, which the White House had arranged to avoid any impression that the retaliation America was planning against the Islamic world was directed at Muslims in general. Sheikh Hamza pre-



Sheikh Hamza Yusuf. (Courtesy of Aaron Haroon Sellers)



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