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# Islam in New York

Photographs & Text by Richard Falco

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Over the last two decades the Muslim community has grown significantly in New York. Islam has now become another intriguing tile that fits within the mosaic that defines the New York Metropolitan Area. That said, it is not the same culture that we do often associate with the Middle East. New York has always thrived on diversity. Islam has now become another component in that ever-changing landscape.

“New York is a mini-United Nations, people from all over the world, you name the race, you name the culture, you name the ethnicity, you can find a person living here in New York,” says Agha Mohamed Saleh, a businessman and Pakistani immigrant who settled in New York City with his wife in 1997.

These words resonated uniquely when we consider that New York was in epicenter of the September 11th tragedy. No city in the United States has carried the impact of that day more painfully and more heroically. However, what has evolved is not the reaction that most people would expect. This is due mostly to the fact that New York has had a long-term relationship with new immigrant populations. Throughout its history, New York has been the destination for new arrivals. “New York is a city that always received immigrants, whether they’re Muslims or not. And New York, for basically all of its existence, has always known how to deal with people,” says Sandra W., who converted to Islam. “East meets West has always been in New York City. When you think of the U.S., you don’t think of Washington D.C., you don’t think of Miami, you think of New York. This is a city that represents the U.S.”



Street Scene - Jackson Heights, NY



Grocery Store - Jackson Heights, NY



Islamic Cultural Center worshippers at Friday services



Grocery - Jackson Heights, NY



Family outing - Queens, NY

This is not say that there have not been problems and issues related to the integration of Moslems within the larger community. Though prejudice and mistrust of “the new” is a function of human behavior, on a whole, the process in New York has been far more positive than negative. This is due to New Yorker’s greater openness and the actions of leaders inside and out of the Islamic Community. “The 9/11 tragedy was a landmark in the relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world,” says Imam Omar Salem Abu-Namous, the former Imam of the Islamic Cultural Center. “Many people thought it was Islam which produced that attack ... many took a hostile stand towards Muslims and Islam. I wouldn’t like the West to understand Islam through Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, or other terrorist groups. Islam is an enemy of terrorism, injustice, and unfairness.”

Over the years, the Imam and other New Yorkers have initiated a number of steps to overcome these problems. They have organized a number of interfaith dialogues with churches and synagogues, have established ongoing



Street Merchants - Jackson Heights, NY



meetings with community organizations, government officials, and even the police. “We face a number of challenges. One of them is the ignorance of the American society to Islam,” says Imam. “So many people have fears. What we call Islamophobia ... they think that if Islam pervades in this country it would be very risky or dangerous.” The goal of these community initiatives has been to eliminate misconceptions, while at the same time, build trust and partnerships.

In 2007 and 2011, The Pew Research Center conducted a nationwide



Muslim worshippers read from the Holy Koran before the Friday services begin at the main mosque in Manhattan. It is not uncommon to find men quietly sitting by themselves reading, praying or mediating throughout the day.



survey of Muslim-Americans probing questions into their views, lifestyles and challenges in daily life both in general and since September 11th. Demographic data paints a picture of an ethnic group that has embraced the “American Dream” and continues to balance between assimilation and cultural loyalty. According to a report, almost two-thirds of Muslim immigrants view life in the U.S. as better than in most Muslim countries.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism, Pew Research Center, 2011



A Muslim student from West Africa does her midday prayers during her lunch break in an empty classroom, while a non-Muslim student reads.

Popular opinion and poll ratings suggest that a majority of Muslim-Americans are very satisfied with their life in the United States. The study found six in ten Muslims reported that it easy to be devout to their religion within U.S. culture. Many also seek to adopt American cultural practices rather than remain distinctive from society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Overall, Muslim-Americans rate slightly above the general U.S. public in lifestyle satisfaction and their ability to embrace their ethnicity and new home. Almost two-thirds of Muslim-Americans are first-generation immigrants to the U.S. Of that number, approximately 45% of those immigrants arrived since 1990.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism, Pew Research Center, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Ibid



Friday worship

## Some National Statistics from The Pew Research Report

- 1) 81% of Muslim Americans say suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians is never justified in order to defend Islam
- 2) Muslim Americans say that the greatest problems they face are based on negative views of Islam that leads to discrimination & prejudice.
- 3) Nearly three quarter of U.S. Muslims express faith in the American Dream, saying that most people can get ahead if they work hard
- 4) Foreign-born Muslim Americans come from over 77 different countries
- 5) 81% of Muslim Americans are citizens
- 6) Most American Muslims identify or lean toward the Democratic party
- 7) Muslims Americans are racially diverse: 30% white, 23% Black, 23% Asian, 19% Hispanic or other race
- 8) The native-born Muslim population contains a higher proportion of Blacks.
- 9) 69% of Muslim Americans say religion is important to them
- 10) 6 out 10 Muslims do not see a conflict between being a devout Muslim and modern society
- 11) Among American Muslims, 20% are converts from another religion
- 12) Among native-born Muslims, 69% are converts from another religion
- 13) 47% report attending the mosque weekly for prayer
- 14) 48% say they make the five salah prayers daily
- 15) Another 18% report making at least some daily salah



Entrance to the Islamic Cultural Center Mosque



A family arrives for Ramadan services at the Islamic Cultural Center.

The mosque has always been a central component within the Muslim community. In the United States, the number of mosques has grown dramatically in the decade since the September 11th attacks and despite protests against their construction and allegations that promote radicalism. New York is no exception to this growth. Controversy and rallies against the building of a Muslim Cultural Center in downtown Manhattan were very

The Islamic Cultural Center in Manhattan contains the largest mosque in the New York Metropolitan area. It opened in 1991. The Center also has a school and offers interfaith dialogues and other cultural events.



Ramadan Services held at the Grand Mosque at the Islamic Cultural Center in Manhattan.

vocal. A survey sponsored by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Islamic Society of North America, and other groups in conjunction with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that there are 257 mosques in New York State, over 100 for the city, and more in the surrounding areas of New Jersey and Connecticut. Nationwide, the increase of mosques is 74 percent since 2000.





Prayers begin at the Islamic Cultural Center's Mosque. Often over 1500 people attend the Friday services. As tradition dictates for all Islamic services, women and men worship in separate areas.



Imam Omar Salem Abu-Namous speaks with a fellow worshipper after the Friday service.



The New York metropolitan area also has one of the largest Muslim communities in the United States. The New York City Community Affairs Bureau estimates that there are between 800,000 – 1,000,000 Muslims living in New York. Other sources claim that number to be 1.4 million. Adana Bah, a Muslim woman, finds the differences, tolerance, and diversity of New York to be a safe haven. “When I’m in New York, I’m myself. I’m

not worried about anything. I’m not worried about anyone hurting me,” she says. Another Muslim woman, Jamilah Abdul-Majid, an American native from Ohio, moved to New York City for a new experience that would be enriching to herself and her culture. “Everyone said ‘you’re still in your country,’ but no. New York is a totally different beast,” she says. “There are more differences than you ever noticed. It’s not a challenge to be in New York, it’s just a different.”







Worshippers at the Islamic Cultural Center Mosque.



The sheer size of New York can be intimidating to anyone. For this reason, the mosque has become an important center, and at times a refuge for many Muslim families. With the culture of New York City varied in every way possible, it is common for native New Yorkers and “transplants” alike to seek something familiar and comforting. With a lifestyle and religious practice so rich on its own, Muslims find the assimilation more reassuring surrounded by those who share in their similar beliefs and practices. “When people come from abroad, emigrating from their countries to the United States, they come with their culture, their traditions, their customs. The first thing they experience is a big gap between the Americans and the traditions of their own people. So there is a shock. That’s why they rally to an Islamic Center,” says Imam Omar Salem Abu-Namous. The centers serve to bridge the gaps of culture shock between old customs and new. “The mosque is one of the few places that Muslim women are able to come and have fellowship, which is very important in Islam,” says Jamilah Abdul-Majid.

Many Muslim immigrants come from the Middle East and North Africa. They make up 41-45% of this immigrant population. Another 25% comes from the nations of the Indian sub-continent, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, the remainder from Europe, Iran, and various other countries.<sup>4</sup> There is also a large community of Muslims who were always residents of the city. Their roots lay in their connection with the teachings of American Muslims, such as Malcolm X and others.

New York has always had ethnic communities. There are now large sections of the city which over the last decade have become predominantly Muslim. Here the distinct cultural elements, particularly of the Middle East, resonate. Food, dress, and language permeate the air. Jackson Heights is one example. The streets are lined with restaurants, specialty shops, and businesses catering to this population. There are many signs in both English and Arabic. Most important however is that the area is surrounded by other ethnic neighborhoods -- Latin Americans and Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, and whites from almost every background. A visit to

<sup>4</sup> Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism, Pew Research Center, 2011



A man reads an Arabic newspaper in Diversity Plaza - Jackson Heights, NY

the area will quickly testify to the fact that there is no hostility between the differing groups. Harmony and integration are the norm and not the exception. One of the main intersections is known as Diversity Plaza. The cultural richness of the area contributes greatly to the city. It can serve as an example of how people from different backgrounds can get along and work together.

As a young woman, Shazia Kauser dreamed of coming to the United States. She and her husband, Mohamed, have chosen to settle in New York because of its unique diversity. For them the transition is complete. “I feel that the U.S. is my home now,” says Shazia. “If I go back to my old country, I am a visitor; in the U.S. and NY, I am home and I feel very proud and comfortable.” Shazia wanted her children to be born here. As a family, Islam is very important to them, yet it is equally important to her that the children are raised as Americans. Her husband, Mohamed, feels the same. Though his transition was slower and emotionally more difficult, he feels that as an American Muslim it is his responsibility to step forward and be a part of the mainstream.



The unique and distinctive flavors of food from the Middle East are much in evidence in restaurants throughout Jackson Heights.



The key to acceptance and conflict resolution can only be found through education. As with all cultures transplanted into a new land, the greatest difficulty usually lies in the process of assimilation. How much of the old culture do you hold onto to, while at the same time feeling the need and pressure to be apart of the new? On a whole, the Muslim community is sensitive to walking the fine line between embracing American culture and keeping true to the Muslim lifestyle they intrinsically understand. Many view their present community as an extension of the old community. Others hold to the past. There are also differences within the sequential generations. Muslims change in terms of progress, education, and success, but their faith and ties to their culture appear to remain strong. “Muslims are learning to become more incorporated in the American society,” say Imam Omar Salem Abu-Namous. “When Muslims come to this country from abroad, the first generation ... maintains their culture and tradition. It takes a long time



Dana Mattar, a Muslim student from Saudi Arabia (foreground), shares a moment with her non-Muslim American classmates.



A family outing to an Islamic Culture Exhibit. White Plains, NY

for them to change. The second generation is the one that starts to form the linkage between the Muslim community and the American society. So you'll find the second generation is very useful because they understand both parties ... because they are educated in American schools, colleges, and universities ... they can act like a catalyst and can push forward and promote ... a closer relationship between Muslims and the American society.” Jamilah Abdul-Majid, who is a teacher at the Islamic Center school, says “I really want my students to understand that we do not live in a bubble ... everyone you meet will not understand who you are and what you value. If you don't make an attempt to understand what they value, why should they care about the way you live your life? Why should they make any attempt to learn about you if you don't want to learn about them? There has to be that exchange.”

As time continues to pass, Americans have begun to accept and become curious about Islam. Many seek to understand the meanings behind certain religious celebrations and practices. Muslim holidays, such as Ramadan, have become better known across Western culture and credit is given to



second generation Muslims for embracing their past and educating their peers. The reverse is also true as Muslim students mix with their American counterparts and bring home Western ideas and influences to their parents and extended family members.

Are there issues to be resolved between the Muslim Community and other New Yorkers? Certainly. “Until both sides make every effort to come together you will always have that misunderstanding,” says Jamilah Abdul-Majid. However, careful observation appears to show that both groups feel that, as people, they have more similarities than differences. “I really don’t see how being Muslim is indistinguishable from being an American. They parallel from each other in so many ways,” says Sandra W. “People need to be educated. In the end we all want the same thing ... so I don’t see how being a Muslim, New Yorker, or American are any different.” This is the ever-evolving process of assimilation. Though there will always be bumps in the road and differences, the process does not stop.



Street scenes - Jackson Heights, NY







Islamic Cultural Center  
New York, NY

This project is a production of

## **VISION PROJECT Inc.**

### **Richard Falco**

Richard Falco, is President of Vision Project/Photographer/Filmmaker. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back The Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome*.

Mr. Falco has twenty-five years of teaching experience. He has taught and lectured at a number of universities and institutions, notably, The New School for Social Research, the State University of New York at Purchase College, New York Film Academy, and the School of Visual Arts. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University and the director of all of Vision Project's educational programming.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, video, design, and education.

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