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# Are Muslims at Home in America?



Muslims gather for the Eid al-Adha prayer at the Diyanet Center of America in Lanham, Md., June 28, 2023. (Celal Gunes/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

By **PETER SKERRY**

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At the nation's largest annual Islamic gathering, the question also arises whether America is at home with itself

**O**N Saturday morning of the recent Labor Day weekend, I found myself waiting in a long, slow line at the Starbucks inside the mammoth Donald E. Stephens Convention Center, adjacent to Chicago's O'Hare Airport. I was there for the 60th annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America. It had convened the previous day, right after midday prayers (*jummah*), when observant Muslims around the world crowd into mosques and prayer spaces to worship "shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet." Overseas in Muslim-majority countries, weekly *jummah* prayers have spawned political demonstrations and riots that threatened, even toppled, vulnerable regimes. But on this occasion, Friday afternoon's events celebrating the largest and oldest Muslim organization in America began with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by greetings from the Biden White House in the person of Mazen Basrawi, senior adviser and liaison

to American Muslim communities, and by opening remarks from ISNA president Safaa Zarzour, a practicing attorney and former principal of a Chicago-area Islamic school.

Zarzour highlighted ISNA's commitment to interfaith dialogue and also its program to train Muslim chaplains for the U.S. military. Although he stressed the organization's role in "adding to the mosaic of this beautiful country of ours," he acknowledged that, "while we're not going to agree with everyone on everything, we will look for what we have in common." More than 20 years after 9/11, many non-Muslims might be surprised by what they now share with their Muslim neighbors, colleagues, and fellow citizens.

After two sessions on topics dealing with faith and family, Friday ended with a late-night comedy show, "Muslim Comedians Stand Up against Gun Violence," featuring five performers, including one non-Muslim man and two Muslim women, one of whom did not wear a hijab, or headscarf. The best line of the evening belonged to the emcee, Preacher Moss, an African American born and raised in Washington, D.C. "I want Trump to be in prison long enough to come out a Black Muslim!" he quipped.

Saturday's program began early, at 5:30 A.M., with the first of Sunni Islam's five daily prayers, which I did not attend — though I would have been welcome, even as a non-Muslim. I had a hard enough time making it to the first general session, at 10 A.M. — "Education in the Digital Age: Empowering Minds, Shaping Careers." Arriving with about 30 minutes to spare, I zeroed in on that Starbucks.

**T**HE line was long, so I had time to observe three teenage girls who, like thousands of other young people, were attending the conference with their families. Part of the small but visible contingent of females not wearing any kind of head covering, these teenagers were just as smartly (if more modestly) dressed as the students I am used to seeing on my university campus. They were also equally fixated on their phones, texting one another, giggling, scanning the hall, and scrolling through their messages. When they finally reached the head of the line, they had no idea what to order. After much back-and-forth with the patient but harried young barista, they each managed to come up with precise, detailed specifications for their individually crafted hot beverages and food choices. Their presence illustrated the striking diversity of the thousands of Muslims attending this convention. They were a distinct minority, given their uncovered heads, but they did not seem to be the focus of any discernible disapproval.

The overwhelming majority of women at the convention covered their heads. Some were elegantly outfitted in long, flowing dresses (abayas) and loosely wrapped headscarves. Others were more severely outfitted in drab, shift-like garb with snug hijabs. A few were in black niqabs, covering the entire visage except for the eyes. A very few were completely shrouded in burkas that obscured even — indeed, especially — their eyes.

So, too, were the men dressed in a variety of styles defying any simple stereotype. Suits and ties as well as more-casual sports jackets and slacks were much in evidence, especially among leaders of the many organizations and businesses represented at the convention. But there were also plenty of men in slacks and sport shirts, just as I was. There were even a couple of young men sporting shorts, which are rarely worn by Muslims. On the other hand, there were many males, young and old, in traditional long-sleeved, ankle-length *thobes* and brimless kufi caps.

The latter garb was popular with the many African-American men in attendance. Yet they too evidenced a variety of attire and orientation toward Islam. After listening and talking to many of them, I was reminded that the conversion of African Americans to orthodox Sunni Islam — as opposed to the ersatz, racist concoction propagated by Elijah Muhammad under the banner of the Nation of Islam, now barely surviving under Louis Farrakhan — has on balance been one of the most heartening and successful paths to social advancement and self-respect undertaken by the legatees of slavery and Jim Crow.

Yet African Americans were just one part of the striking ethnic and racial diversity of Muslim America on full display that weekend. These included a smattering of white American converts to Islam, typically the now middle-aged and elderly wives of immigrant Muslim men. (My impression is that this phenomenon is much less evident among younger cohorts of American women.)

A tiny number of East Asian Muslims were also present at the ISNA convention, reflecting the broader demographic profile of Muslim America but also perhaps deeper religious and cultural currents that distance such groups from the inevitable Arab inflection of Islam. And while there have been similarly salient points of divergence between Arab Muslims and their South Asian brothers and sisters, these have been transcended with relative ease, certainly here in America. This was demonstrated by the huge presence of South Asians at the convention. That presence included a booth of the Indian American Muslim Council, whose leaders and panelists were prepared to engage with lengthy reports and well-produced videos on the scourge of Hindu nationalism back in India as well as on its manifestations here, especially in light of the possibility of a Hindu becoming vice president of the United States. At another booth, Indian Muslim Relief & Charities solicited support for its philanthropic efforts among their beleaguered brothers and sisters in that country.

At one session, two Crimean Tatar women in hijabs entreated their Muslim brothers and sisters to support their struggle against “the Russian terrorist state.” And another booth featured Palestinian relief efforts, which, 22 years after 9/11, ISNA and federal authorities have presumably vetted to ensure against any ties to terrorists. Still other booths were staffed by organizations focused on the plight of displaced and threatened Muslims in Syria and Sudan. Elsewhere, the U.S. Navy and the Air Force sought to recruit Muslims to serve as military chaplains, while U.S. Customs and Border Patrol had a booth staffed by Muslims seeking to recruit their brothers and sisters.

Also much in evidence were religious institutes of varied orientations, offering in-person and online courses. Among them were extremely conservative outfits such as the Salafi-oriented AlMaghrib Institute, many of whose faculty were trained at the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia. But also represented was the more moderate, Sufi-oriented Zaytuna College, whose founder — Hamza Yusuf (Hanson), a native-born American who as a teenager converted to Islam from Catholicism — served on Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s Commission on Unalienable Rights. Sheikh Hamza attended the conference and spoke at several events over the course of the weekend.

Among the hundreds of other booths at the ISNA bazaar were nonprofits and businesses offering a variety of goods and services of specific interest to Muslims. These included non-interest-accruing home loans and investments, personal and professional counseling services, religious pamphlets and books, Arabic-language programs and courses, and halal home remedies and food items. Scores of racks of modest, sharia-compliant

clothing and accessories for men and especially women filled out the scene. Overhearing some women deliberate about what did or did not fit or look good, I was reminded of the chaos in the original, now-defunct, Filene's Basement in downtown Boston, where as a young boy accompanying my mother and aunts I got to observe ladies trying on skirts and dresses without any of the discretion or modesty exercised by Muslim women.

ISNA's annual conventions have long presented opportunities for a kind of shopping unimagined in Filene's Basement — namely, shopping for spouses. Indeed, ISNA offers “a platform for single Muslims to network and find the right choices . . . in a safe and Islamic way.” Earlier in its history, this meant ISNA-sponsored “matrimonial banquets,” and while these undoubtedly played a more prominent role then, when there were fewer Muslims in America, this year's convention did have more than 400 Muslim singles sign up for various get-togethers.

Young members of the families there could join a basketball clinic or participate in basketball tournaments — one for boys and one for girls. Older youth and interested adults could look into a robotics show and workshops. In addition to the comedy show on Friday night were evening performances by hip-hop singer and songwriter Mo Sabri, raised by Pakistani immigrant parents in Johnson City, Tenn., and by Native Deen, a singing group from Washington, D.C., that combines hip-hop and R & B with lyrics grounded in Islam.

Muslims of various ethnic and racial backgrounds are becoming part of American society — sometimes in ways that would have troubled the Muslims who began arriving here in substantial numbers in the 1960s but that today would surprise and perhaps gratify those many non-Muslim Americans who would not have thought such developments possible. Nonetheless, many Americans still look past these changes to focus on the problematic milieu from which ISNA and similar Muslim organizations have emerged. For while ISNA's origins in, and lingering ties to, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations were never explicitly mentioned at the O'Hare convention center, they were evident to anyone with a modicum of historical memory or curiosity.

**I**N 1963, students from various Muslim-majority societies who were attending U.S. colleges and universities came together to found the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Some were seeking merely to escape isolation and loneliness, which is antithetical to Islam's emphasis on communal cohesion and group prayer. Others harbored Islamist political aspirations to change, indeed to overthrow, the secular regimes that ruled their homelands. Over time, they began to dream, as they put it to one another, of “the crescent flag one day flying over the U.S. Capitol.” Not surprisingly, many of these MSA founders belonged to, or had ties to, the Muslim Brotherhood. In any event, ISNA emerged as a separate organization from MSA by the early 1980s, as the Islamists began to focus on a more holistic approach to their life in America, and MSA devolved back into an exclusively student organization, which it remains today.

Like their comrades back home, many of whom were targeted by authoritarian regimes, the U.S.-based Islamists operated underground. Former leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have told me that the wives of many of their colleagues had no idea of their husbands' efforts on behalf of the Brotherhood here. Yet the connection was acknowledged in other ways. For example, as recently as the late 1990s, *Islamic Horizons*, an

ISNA periodical, ran laudatory articles about the Muslim Brotherhood. Not atypical was a piece about Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Brotherhood in Egypt early in the 20th century, by a prominent American Muslim leader, born and raised in Egypt, who acknowledged his debt to al-Banna as “his teacher” and “the person who most influenced my life.”

Whatever transparency the Brotherhood permitted itself here in the United States disappeared along with the Twin Towers on 9/11. Yet the breadth and depth of its renown in the Muslim world are such that most of its affiliates and offshoots in America have ties, however remote or attenuated, to Islamist terrorism in the sense that virtually all such violent extremists have passed through the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood at some point. This does not mean that it promotes Islamist terrorism, but neither has it — depending on the specific circumstances — always forcefully or straightforwardly condemned it. Depending on one’s perspective, the ambivalence, ambiguity, or cowardice shown by Brotherhood members toward terrorism do not necessarily amount to active support. Yet this tortuous history does explain how and why various individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, have gained notoriety by unfairly denouncing just about all Muslim-American leaders and organizations as apologists for or even sponsors of violent extremism.

ISNA has hardly escaped this fate. In 2007 the organization was named an unindicted co-conspirator in the federal government’s successful prosecution of the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation for providing \$12.4 million, from 1995 to 2001, to individuals and organizations linked to Hamas (the Palestinian arm of the Muslim Brotherhood). ISNA challenged this designation in court and demanded, unsuccessfully, that it be lifted. Yet federal authorities have never charged ISNA with supporting terrorists, which in the fraught aftermath of 9/11 they surely would have done had there been grounds to do so.

Not surprisingly, none of this history was mentioned during the two and a half days of the ISNA convention, even though many of the individuals so involved, now much older and presumably wiser, were much in evidence on the weekend’s program. The closest anyone came to acknowledging the organization’s origins was by fleeting allusions to early financial support from the Saudis and funding from Qatar, assistance that made possible the purchase of the parcel of land 14 miles southwest of Indianapolis and adjacent to the international airport, where ISNA’s headquarters and striking redbrick, box-like mosque — lacking any visible minaret or dome — have stood above the cornfields since 1981.

Among the best-attended, most intense sessions of the weekend were those focused on two rather divergent topics — Islamophobia and transgenderism. The former loomed large in the remarks of Mazen Basrawi, the young Muslim representing the Biden White House. So, too, was Islamophobia emphasized in a presentation by another Muslim and Biden appointee, Sara Minkara, special adviser on international disability rights at the Department of State.

Islamophobia is hardly unimportant to Muslim Americans, yet in recent years it has figured less and less prominently. Indeed, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Muslim-sponsored research institute, reports in its Islamophobia Index that anti-Muslim sentiment has steadily declined among non-Muslim Americans over the past six years. While this trend received scant attention during the weekend’s events, particularly those featuring the Biden appointees and their allies, it helps to explain why those speakers who did address Islamophobia tended to emphasize its prevalence overseas, especially in Western

Europe.

**W**ITHOUT doubt, the topic that generated the most intense and well-attended sessions at ISNA were those focused on LGBTQ+ and specifically transgenderism. The undisputed star there was Yasir Qadhi, a middle-aged, youthfully energetic Muslim American who was born in Houston and raised by Pakistani parents, primarily in Saudi Arabia. After earning a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the University of Houston, Qadhi returned to Saudi Arabia to earn degrees in Arabic and theology from the Islamic University of Madinah. Then a decade later he returned to America to pursue a doctorate in theology at Yale. He became a professor at Rhodes College in Memphis and taught at the Salafi-oriented AlMaghrib Institute. He is now the dean of the recently established Islamic Seminary of America (TISA) outside of Dallas, whose first graduate is a young Muslim-American woman who spoke — without a head covering — to a couple of hundred people attending a TISA-sponsored brunch on the last day of the convention.

Qadhi is a controversialist with a vituperative personality. He has been accused of (and apologized for) antisemitic views and critiques of feminists and gay-rights advocates. He also has been accused of defending al-Qaeda supporters and the Taliban, while at the same time being denounced and declared an apostate by ISIS for criticizing the attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris.

Many books could be written on the twists, turns, and apparent evolution of Qadhi's worldview. Yet over the course of the ISNA weekend, his views on LGBTQ+ issues were clear, consistent, and tolerant. While condemning those cultural trends and ideologies as un-Islamic, he also emphasized the necessity of getting along with one's fellow workers and colleagues who either approve of or pursue such lifestyles. "You need to demonstrate your awkwardness to homosexual colleagues *in the gentlest manner*," he advised. But he indicated that it would not be appropriate for an observant Muslim to attend a gay colleague's marriage ceremony.

One must "hate the sin, not the sinner," Qadhi stressed, emphasizing that relations with blood relatives must, if possible, *not* be severed. Such matters are fundamentally psychological challenges, not religious questions, he insisted. Referring to himself as a "forward-thinking traditionalist," he maintained that "we are having arguments that nobody has had before" and that "we're not going to find the answers in the writings of the past."


However one might quibble, doubt, or disagree with such pronouncements, they do reflect one deeply rooted Islamic value that Qadhi did not explicitly invoke but that I believe he would claim. That is the importance of avoiding *fitnah*, dissension and strife that weaken the bonds that are so critical to a faith rooted in familial ties that extend to the *ummah*, the wider community of one's Muslim brothers and sisters — and that are reinforced each week at the mosque where they pray "shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet."

Qadhi noted the importance of distinguishing between personal religious choices and prudential political choices. For example, he stressed that Islam does not support or require that Muslim business owners discriminate against or refuse service to LGBTQ+ individuals. In the same vein, an observant, believing Muslim might have defensible reasons for supporting a political candidate who is aligned with the LGBTQ+

agenda.

At various points over the weekend, Qadhi shared the platform with Ieasha Prime, an outspoken African-American woman who is the director of women’s programming at Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Virginia and the founder of the D.C. Muslim Women’s Conference. From where I sat, her verbal virtuosity seemed both a blessing and a curse. Her words and her rhythm came a bit too easily, sometimes bordering on glibness. Yet she made one point that struck home with me and has lingered ever since: “What we have is exactly what humanity needs now . . . exactly the medicine for America.”

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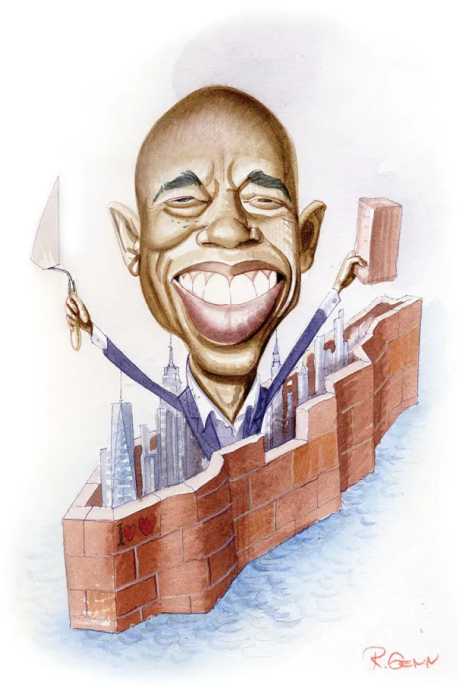
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