

## Engaging American Muslims in policy

BY AMREENA HUSSAIN

March 3, 2009



A new Gallup poll finds that American Muslims consider themselves to be thriving, and yet large numbers say they do not feel content. Is that any wonder, when Muslims traditionally have been excluded, or have excluded themselves, from social and political involvement in this country?

The North East Chapter of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) will bring its annual conference to Baltimore in May. The theme is "What it means to be Muslim in America." As a young Muslim woman who has attended many such conferences, I am quite familiar with the theme. In the ISNA's 50-year history, the subject of "being Muslim in America" has seemed to fluctuate with every change in American foreign policy - and never much else. At least, not until now.

For Muslim Americans, engagement in domestic policy has been marked by mutual disinterest and dissociation. This is not too surprising in a community with a fairly self-sufficient suburbanized citizenry whose primary policy concerns lie beyond American shores - events such as wars in Muslim totalitarian states and American foreign policy concerning Iran, Palestine and Lebanon. Yet this audience is just as concerned with its image in the U.S. as it is with growing unrest in the Muslim world.

The moral dilemma of the American Muslim has grown exponentially in the past few years. We grapple with a sense of responsibility for global terrorism in the name of Islam, while we simultaneously struggle to come to terms with an American attitude that vacillated between anti-terrorism and anti-Islamism through the Bush years. The Muslim community has, for the most part, chosen to face this dilemma with silence and inaction.

Decades ago, community organizing among American Muslims promoted efforts to assimilate and engage in the existing social fabric. However, this soon turned into defensive protectionism of the Muslim lifestyle, manifest in civic disengagement and seclusion. But U.S engagement with the Muslim world in recent years has piqued American interest in Muslims - and Muslim interest in America. Speaking at a recent event at the Johns Hopkins University, Haris Tarin, director of community development at the Muslim Public Affairs Council, addressed the mutual "skirting" of issues between the U.S. government and the American Muslim community. He suggested that the way to melt this silent face-off between the state and an alienated Muslim community would be to revive the attempts at civic engagement by the American Muslim community from half a century ago.

The idea seems to be catching on. During last year's election campaign, I was pleasantly surprised to hear imams during Friday sermons encourage people to campaign and vote. Muslim

student associations across the country are stepping beyond the routine Friday-prayer and Ramadan-dinner schedule to host awareness events. It is heartening to see energy channeled toward making American Muslims more than silent spectators.

America's 2.5 million Muslims are a drop in the ocean of American diversity - and an even tinier drop in a sea of more than a billion Muslims worldwide. But we are also the socially, educationally, financially fit among the world's Muslims. It is time we became involved in policy, both foreign and not. It is time we realized that we have left our monarchies and dictatorships on a different continent and arrived in a land where we can assert ourselves only by engaging in local social and political action.

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