

Muslim political activism or political activism by Muslims?
Secular and religious identities amongst Muslim Arab activists
in the United States and United Kingdom

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Introduction

Scholarship on Muslim political mobilization in the West, in general, has developed as an important counterpoint to public discourse, which, through a litany of events (e.g. the Rushdie Affair in Britain, the Danish cartoons controversy, the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, and, the '9/11' attacks in the United States) has cast Muslims as a threat to social cohesion, liberal democracy, and national security. Western public discourse portrays Islam as being in conflict with liberal-democratic values, and so creates fear amongst the public when Muslims do, in fact, participate in national and local politics. Efforts to seek accommodation within existing arrangements between religious bodies and the state, and to position themselves within mainstream narratives of belonging are thus viewed with suspicion. A growing body of academic literature has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Muslims promote the compatibility of Islam with western democratic values and practices (e.g., Cesari, 2004; Kastoryano, 2004; Klausen, 2005; Salvatore, 2004). But even as this literature has shed light on political and civic participation amongst Muslims, it has sidelined the diversity of political identities and values that motivate them. Most, if not all, Muslims in the West find their identities politicized in some way, but the question of whether this

leads to a consensus amongst Muslims about the role of religion in public life often remains unexamined.

In this article, we use the examples of activists who are both Muslim and Arab to challenge the idea that there is some unified category of Muslim activists or a consistent view about the relationship between Islam and politics. In particular, we highlight the diverse ways in which religious and secular identities are enacted and promoted in their activism. We do this by examining the viewpoints and activities of 78 Arab-origin activists in the United States and Britain who identify themselves at least nominally as Muslims. These individuals were interviewed as part of a study, described in greater detail below, on the ways in which activists with immigrant backgrounds articulate citizenship and put ideas about citizenship into practice in their communities. These activists were not associated exclusively with Muslim organizations; rather, they were involved in a wide array of organizations, including hometown associations, Arab immigrant community centres, Islamic centres and organizations, as well as organisations that were not linked to either Arab or Muslim communities. The aim of the research, in this sense, was not to understand 'Muslim minority politics', *per se*, but to understand the ways in which a group of individuals, most of whom were from Muslim backgrounds,² engage with and participate in public life.

While the focus of the research was not on Muslim identities and activism, we found that our conversations with study participants often turned to issues of religion and the role of religion in public life. Many respondents, for instance, spoke about how their faith had guided their activism and inspired them to be 'active citizens'; and almost all of the respondents were

deeply concerned about the misrepresentation of Islam in the West. Respondents, however, were far from unified in their views on religion as a basis for political action and mobilization. Some were keen to place Islam and Muslims squarely in mainstream political spaces; most, however, including some describing themselves as observant Muslims, were insistent that Islam should remain a *private* faith and identity, and that political mobilization should take place under the aegis of Arabness or other 'secular' identities. Emerging from their stories of activism is a sense of the varied ways that their interlocking identities create a range of possibilities for activism and political subjectivities. This complexity is frequently submerged in scholarly literatures, just as it is in public discourse.

Our aim in this article is to bring to light this complexity and to encourage a broader perspective on the ways in which people from Muslim backgrounds participate in public, political life in Western contexts. We begin with a critical overview of current scholarship on political and civic participation by Muslims in the West. This is followed by a more detailed description of the research and the study population. Finally, we examine in detail our respondents' views on religion, identity, and activism, highlighting both the ways they contest religious identities and the ways they situate themselves in a complex array of political agendas and identities.

Muslims and political participation

In this section, we provide a general overview of the growing body of literature on Muslim communities in Western liberal democracies, giving special

attention to the British and American contexts as a means of providing some context for our empirical discussion. In tracing the broad contours of Muslims' involvement in politics, we indicate important components of political mobilization that have been consistently overlooked. Our aim in the subsequent empirical analysis is to highlight the ambivalence that many Muslims feel about the political mobilization of religious identities and to bring into focus the array of political identities and agendas that inform their participation in public life.

Muslim identities in the West

Many scholars note the relative *unimportance* of Muslim identities to post-World War II cohorts of labour migrants from the Arab world, South Asia, and Turkey, for whom a variety of post-colonial secular nationalisms and pan-nationalisms were more salient (Cesari, 2004; Glynn, 2002; Haddad, 1998). Scholars generally agree that this situation has shifted dramatically since the 1980s, and they attribute the growing salience of Muslim identities to several, interrelated factors that speak both to the racialization of Muslim minorities by dominant groups and the construction and negotiation of new identities by Muslim minorities themselves.

In the case of Europe, post-war labour migrants from Muslim countries, who had faced labour market discrimination for decades, began to experience high levels of unemployment by the 1970s as a result of industrial restructuring. Eager to avoid charges of racism, majority groups have often attributed unemployment, low academic achievement, and general social

dislocation in Muslim communities to 'cultural' practices associated with Islam (Bowen, 2007; Modood, 2005). In doing so, they have drawn on an existing lexicon of Western cultural superiority vis-à-vis the Orient (Ewing, 2003; Werbner, 2000). Of particular concern to dominant groups has been the growing visibility Islam, especially in the form of headscarves and purpose-built mosques, both of which are widely regarded as out-of-place and inimical to Western secular norms (Bowen, 2007; Eade, 1996). The continued pull of Muslim world politics on Muslim populations has heightened anxieties and has fanned the flames of far-right politics in France, the Netherlands, Austria, and elsewhere.

In Britain, more specifically, the notion of a 'British Muslim community' came to the fore in the late 1980s, most notably after a groups of Muslims publicly burned copies of Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, in what many commentators read as a response to an Iranian *fatwa* (Asad, 1990). British Muslims, most of whom are from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, face some of the highest levels of social deprivation in Britain—much higher than other 'Asian' groups (Modood, 1994). But since the 1980s, public discourse about Muslims has focused less on the material causes of deprivation than on the supposed cultural shortcomings of Muslims, of which arranged marriages, veiling, and 'self-segregation' are the most potent symbols (see Abbas, 2007; Werbner, 2000). Discourses about Muslim non-integration reached a fevered pitch in the wake of the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005, which involved young British Muslim men. Following this event (and the uncovering of other plots), Muslim neighbourhoods have been portrayed as potential breeding grounds of 'homegrown terrorists'. The

general understanding of Muslims as a ‘problem population’—one that is connected to irretrievably foreign practices and values—has informed the government’s recent back-peddalling on multiculturalism and its initiation of more assimilatory ‘social cohesion’ policies (Phillips, 2006; Kundnani, 2008).

The situation of Muslims in the United States is quite different from that of Muslims in Europe. There are an estimated 2.3 million Muslims in the United States (Djupe and Green, 2007), or less than 1 percent of the population. Muslim organizations tend to have much higher estimates (up to 7 million), but these numbers are still quite small compared to Muslim populations in European countries (an estimated 10 percent of the French population is Muslim, for instance). As in Europe, the majority of Muslims are from immigrant backgrounds³, but Muslim Americans, while not uniformly affluent, are more likely than the population at large to be in professional occupations, and they tend to live in suburban areas (see Djupe and Green, 2007; Haddad, 1998; Lummis and Haddad, 1987; Pew Charitable Trust, 2007). Also in contrast to European Muslims, Muslim Americans have not been central to public debate about integration and cultural change. But despite their class status and their relative political invisibility, Muslim Americans have faced social and political marginalization that stems from common perceptions about Islam as the enemy of America—perceptions formed during the Iranian Revolution and reinforced with the attacks of 11 September 2001 (Joseph, 1999; Naber, 2000). The repercussions of these stereotypes on Muslims in America, from harassment and airport profiling to the deportation of thousands of ‘Middle Eastern’ men in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, have been widely documented (Howell and Shyrock, 2003;

Abdo, 2006). And while the political activism of Muslims and Arabs in the United States may not be discussed in public to any great degree, their identities and difference from the American mainstream has made them a focus of political debate.

The growing prominence of Muslim identities in the West, then, reflects in part the discursive practices through which dominant groups have constructed, stigmatized, and fixated upon Muslim minority categories. But Muslim identities are more than a product of dominant discourses. They also reflect the resurgence of religiosity among Muslims worldwide that has given rise globally to transnational movements, some more politicized than others, seeking societal renewal through Islam (MacLeod, 1991; Woltering, 2002). In Western immigrant-receiving contexts as elsewhere, many Muslims feel a growing sense of membership in a global community of believers (or *ummah*) (Mandaville, 2009). The propensity to identify as Muslim has been especially pronounced among the children and grandchildren of Arab, Turkish, and South Asian immigrants, who are seeking a 'purer' form of Islam than that practiced by their parents—a form of religiosity that is both highly observant and attuned to the imperatives of rational, modern life (Bowen, 2007; Leonard, 2005; Cesari, 2004; Glynn, 2002; Naber, 2005; Kundnani, 2008).

As Muslims have coalesced around their religious identity, they have also articulated political aims with reference to Islam (Leonard, 2003; Haddad, 1998; Cesari, 2004; also Soysal, 1997). Some of the literature has emphasized the transnational components of Muslims' political consciousness and activism (see, for instance, Bowen, 2004; Mandaville, 2001, 2009; Werbner, 2002). Most of the literature, though, has focused on Muslims'

engagement with mainstream institutions at the local and/or national scale (Klausen, 2005; Leonard, 2003; McLoughlin, 2005; Modood, 2003; Roy, 2004). Much of this discussion focuses on the European context, where even in the most 'secular' of contexts, there are often official and informal arrangements between the state and religious organizations and where such arrangements increasingly extend to Muslims (Salvatore, 2004; Soper and Fetzer, 2007). In the British context, for instance, scholars have commented on the role of large Muslim organizations as interlocutors between the British state and the 'British Muslim community' (reference); negotiations between Muslim organizations and the state to secure state funding for Islamic schools (Parker-Jenkins, 2002) and the training of imams (Klausen, 2005); and interactions between Muslim leaders and local planning councils relating to mosque construction (Gale, 2004; Naylor and Ryan, 2002). Some attention has also been given to Muslim participation in electoral politics (Glynn, 2008; also Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002). A key point raised in this literature is that while Muslims remain peripheral to the race-based multicultural system created in the 1970s, they nevertheless are deeply engaged in the politics of recognition and self-representation (see Modood, 2005).

Though given less scholarly attention, relations between Muslim organizations and the state are also relevant to the US context, where religion pervades political discourse and public life despite a constitutional separation between 'church' and state. Muslim organizations have emerged in recent years that aim to give Muslims a legitimate place at America's 'multicultural table' (cf Kurien, 2007; 2001) and to secure for Muslims a voice in the country's pluralistic political system. Large national groups like the Council of

American Islamic Relations and the Muslim Public Affairs Council foster relations with government officials, and mobilize against local and national laws that might discriminate against Muslims and other religious minorities. They also work to have Muslims included in important symbolic occasions, like the annual 'national day of prayer' events and at the opening sessions of state legislatures. Muslim activists have scored some notable symbolic victories in recent years— the postal service, for instance, has issued Eid postage stamps since 2001, and the White House has for several years marked the breaking of the Ramadan fast. And Muslim organizations today conceive of the Muslim population as an important 'ethnic' voting bloc, especially in states like Michigan, which has a sizeable Arab-Muslim population.

The current literature, then, presents a complex view of Muslims and political life that recognizes the interplay between host society political institutions and discourses, social and political trends in the wider Islamic world, and Muslim political agency. Scholars have also pointed to the many debates and differences that exist among Muslims about how they should be engage the broader public, with whom they should be forging alliances, and what distinguishes their agenda and their message as Islamic (Mandaville, 2009; Phillips and Iqbal, 2008; Abdo, 2006; Klausen, 2005; also Kosnick, 2004; Warner and Wenner, 2006). This, in conjunction with an associated literature on the dynamics of gender, class, and generation in the expression of Muslim identities (e.g. Hopkins, 2007; Dwyer, 1999) provides the basis to challenge the image of monolithic, homogenous Muslim communities (see Ehrkamp, 2007).

Yet much of this literature also obscures the fact that many Muslims are participate in politics that are *not* rooted in Islamic principles or beliefs. Muslim identities may have overshadowed secular identities and ideologies embraced by earlier generations of Muslims in the West, but that should not imply that *all* Muslims regard religion to be a valid public identity (Leonard, 2005) or that other, secular identities are irrelevant to their political consciousness. We point here to Ruba Salih's (2004) account of Muslim activists in Italy, whose desire to represent themselves in pluralistic terms is constantly frustrated by the dominant society's tendency to regard all Muslims first and foremost as Muslims (typically categorized either as 'Islamists' or 'moderates'). Salih's analysis suggests that Muslims are often compelled to explain and to defend their religion to members of the majority; in this sense, being politically Muslim is almost inescapable. Yet a sense of Muslimness is not always what motivates them politically, and the 'Muslim community' might not be the public they address or mobilize through their activism. That not all Muslims identify politically as Muslims is frequently mentioned in the current literature (e.g. Modood, 2007; Mandaville, 2009), but rarely is this point given due regard.

Muslim minority politics and the contested public realm

Salih's observations prompt us to look beyond Muslim minority politics and to think more abstractly about the public realm itself. In particular, we wish to consider, the ways in theoretical perspectives on the public realm inform our

understandings of political participation and identity among Muslims in the West.

Such accounts often begin with an account of the public sphere, a communicative realm often imagined as resting on a division between public and private interest (cf, Habermas, 1989). Whether we are looking at Western liberal political theory or at political discourse, the idea of the public sphere speaks to an expectation of egalitarianism, in the sense that all citizens enter the public as equals. But, as feminist theorists note, many social groups are excluded from or marginalized in the public because they are seen to lack the autonomy and rationality necessary for participation in the public sphere or because they are seen as a threat to liberal democratic values (see Kaplan, 2003; Honig, 2001; Young, 1990). This, as we have seen, is certainly the case for Muslim groups. Still, Muslims and other subordinate groups *do* participate in public life, and their participation makes evident that 'the public' is, in fact, constituted by multiple publics, or 'counterpublics'. These publics emerge through activism and other modes of public address to contest the boundaries of, and terms of engagement in, the broader, unmarked public (Warner, 2002).

Recognising the contested nature of the public leads us to explore the complex intersections between publics and individual identities. Individuals embody multiple identities and subject positions that may be aligned with different publics at different times, or simultaneously. Multiple subjectivities, in this sense, create a *range* of possibilities for activism, mobilization, and political identity rather than a single trajectory (Mouffe, 1995). We are led, therefore, to ask how Muslims might be actively situating themselves in a

diversity of publics and participating in public life not only as Muslims, but as women, people of colour, as ethnic or racial minorities, and so on. Without attention to the different political identities and aims that are present among Muslims, efforts to challenge essentialization of Muslim communities remain incomplete.

In the following analysis, we first explore the contested nature of Muslim identities, drawing attention to the lack of agreement among our study respondents about the appropriateness of religion as a basis for political mobilization. Second, we highlight the multiple political subjectivities present among our participants, both those who embrace and those who eschew a public Muslim identity. By situating Muslims in a diverse set of political stances and agendas, this account attempts to destabilize further the idea of a coherent 'Muslim minority politics'. To begin we describe the research on which our analysis is based.

About the research and the study population

The following account is based on semi-structured interviews with Arab American and British Arab activists conducted between 2002 and 2006 as part of a comparative study to evaluate the ways in which Arab Americans and British Arabs construct ideas about citizenship in local, national, and transnational contexts, and the ways in which they act upon these ideas through organizational participation. As we noted previously, however, our conversations almost inevitably turned to the intersectionality of religious, ethnic, and immigrant identities. While we identified our respondents by their

participation in Arab-identified organisations, they reminded us that their identities and subject positions were much more complex. Their political outlooks, goals, and activism were similarly complex, particularly with respect to their ideas about whether their Muslim identity was public and the roles that it might play in their activism. Respondents spoke at length on the ways they understand the connection between being Arab and being Muslim, how they interpret 'secularism', how they conceptualise the role of religion in public life, and how they situate Muslimness within an array of other identities.

National Contexts

The larger study involved a comparison of the experiences of Arab immigrants in the United States and the United Kingdom. The national comparison is not central to our argument in this paper, although there are times in which national contexts are important to the way respondents frame their activism. In both countries, we were interested in the ways that complex identities rooted in immigration status, ethnicity, and religion shape activists' articulations of citizenship and the strategies through which they assert political voice.

In the United States, estimates of the size of the Arab-origin population vary between 1.3 million, according to the 2000 US Census (de la Cruz and Bittingham, 2003) and 3.5 million, according to several large Arab American organizations. Many Arab Americans are the second- and third-generation descendents of Christians from present-day Lebanon. Since the late 1960s, these well-established communities have been joined by growing numbers of

immigrants, many if not most of them Muslim, from Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, and other Arab states. In Britain, there are believed to be 250,000 to 400,000 British Arabs, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are predominantly Muslim. Both Arab Americans and British Arabs tend to be relatively prosperous and well educated, though there are segments that face high levels of deprivation in both countries, including Yemeni and Iraqi refugees in the US, and working-class Moroccan and Yemeni communities in Britain.

Study Population

We spoke with a total of 105 activists for this study, about a quarter of whom—almost all of them Arab Americans—were from Christian Arab backgrounds. The presence of Christian Arabs is central to particular articulations of ‘secular’ identity, as we explain below. But because our aim in this particular article is to disentangle the identities and aims of Muslim people, we deal only with those of our respondents who describe themselves as Muslim. In total, about 60 percent of our respondents are first-generation immigrants; the remaining 40 percent were born and/or raised in Britain or the US. Reflecting the composition of Arab populations in Britain and the United States, most of our British Arab respondents are of Palestinian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Yemeni origin, while the majority of our Arab-American respondents are of Lebanese and Palestinian origin. About one-third of our respondents are female. All of the individuals interviewed for this study are highly educated

and middle to upper-middle class, though a few of our British respondents come from working-class backgrounds.

We recruited most of our respondents through Arab-identified organizations and activities, but we also spoke with sixteen Arab-origin individuals who reported varying degrees of participation in Muslim-oriented organizations. These organizations included three large, high-profile lobbying/public relations organizations, two large Islamic centres (one serving a low-income inner-city community and the other serving a relatively affluent, multicultural suburban community), and two smaller, relatively informal groups that operate through Arab-dominated mosques. Of these sixteen individuals, nine (all of them in the United States) were recruited by directly contacting Muslim organizations that we knew to include people of Arab backgrounds; the others were referred to us by other study participants, or we subsequently learned about their involvement in Muslim organizations (the participation of individual activists in Muslim and non-Muslim groups is an important point to which we will return). The fact that we recruited most of our respondents through Arab-oriented organizations has an obvious effect on our findings: not surprisingly, most of our respondents in the larger study identify themselves as Arabs. As noted previously, this paper is focused only on those respondents who identified themselves as being Muslim.

Given the nature of our sample, and indeed of the ways that identities are constructed and mobilised, we do not wish to suggest that our findings can be generalized to a larger Arab and/or Muslim population. We do suggest, though, that the multiple layers of identity that we found even in this 'unrepresentative' sample give us pause to consider the very different ways

that being Muslim can inform—or not inform—political consciousness and action.

Debating the place of Muslim identity in political activism

It is clear that being a Muslim is an important component of the identities of our respondents. It informs their political consciousness, their sense of morality, and their understanding of social justice. For instance, Badra⁴, a second-generation Arab- American activist and civil rights attorney, describes Islam as having provided the role models—including Khadija, the Prophet Mohammed's first wife—for her political activism. And Huda, a second-generation Arab American involved in immigrant-rights and gay Arab organizations, states that religion has been a 'big part of my politicisation':

I feel like I learned at a pretty young age, through my Muslim education... that that was where I could engage with those questions 'What am I here for?' 'What's life about?' ...And I felt like I was here to question authority, don't take anything for granted, don't take anything at face value, and that was a big part of my spiritual and religious education.

Our respondents are also deeply sensitive to the demonization of Muslims and to misconceptions Islam in public discourse, and they recognize religion to be an issue of public, political concern. Hassan⁷, a young Egyptian-born

man active in a Los Angeles-based Arab American civil rights organization, speaks for many of our respondents when he states,

You look around you and there are two hundred channels and so many newspapers, but it's like there's only one message, there's only one side to this story—and that's that [Muslims] are born somewhat militant, that they live in an inferior culture, that Islam teaches this and that—by people who know nothing about Islam. And they classify us as 'fundamentalist', 'moderates', 'liberals'—you know, if you think a certain way, you're kind of accepted as civil; if you don't think that way, you're extremist or uncivil or backward.

For some of our respondents—mainly a group of younger and second-generation individuals involved in Muslim organizations—this personal commitment to Islam, and the desire to address negative stereotypes, translates into efforts to bring Muslim identities into the public sphere and to make these identities the basis of political mobilization and political claims-making. Consistent with the literature on contemporary Muslim identities, these individuals speak of themselves first and foremost as Muslims and view national and ethnic identities as narrower and more exclusionary than Islam. As one respondent remarks,

I was born in Palestine. I have a great fondness for Palestine, for Jerusalem. [B]ut when I am asked 'What are you?... I

rarely say 'I'm Palestinian'. And not to deny where I came from, but at the end of the day, I define myself as a Muslim.

These activists endeavour to move Islam away from the margins of public life by encouraging mainstream institutions and sectors to acknowledge the Muslim community. They engage in a number of public relations and outreach efforts that attempt to place Islam more squarely in the public eye, including distributing reading material on Islam to public libraries, holding 'open house' events at mosques, participating in interfaith networks and events, and creating advertising material, such as billboards, that project a positive image of Muslims.

For most of our interviewees, though, even for many who describe themselves as observant or as deeply attached to their Muslim faith, Islam does *not* serve as the basis of political claims or political mobilization. Many of these interviewees insist that religion is *personal* to them—that it is essentially part of one's private life. For instance, Ron, a San Francisco activist involved in a group for gay Arab Americans, describes himself as a 'very religious person', but insists that religion is 'a very personal thing'. He states,

For me, my religion, I keep that very separate; that's between me and Allah... It's easier when you talk from an ethnicity standpoint... If somebody asks me, I'll tell them and I'll answer any questions they might have. But I don't walk around with a *kafiyeh* on top of my head every Friday.

For Rafiya, as well, religion is a personal, rather than a public or political, matter. Rafiya, a young woman born in Sheffield, England, to working-class Yemeni parents, is more comfortable with visible markers of Muslimness that Ron is; she wears a hijab, and she places her Muslim identity before her Yemeni-Arab identity, stating, 'I connect more with my religion than I do with my culture because I think that my culture's completely messed up'. She also recognizes that Muslim identity can take on a political dimension 'when you see what goes on' in the British media. Yet she insists that her Muslim identity is a personal matter and that it is not the focus of her activism: 'It's personal for me. This is what I believe in... I've not bothered what other people think and what's going on in the media and everything. It just makes you stronger and closer to your religion'.

Thus, while some of our respondents are eager to bring Muslim identities into the public sphere, most of them envision and uphold a relatively clear boundary between religious belief and public, political life, even as they recognize the politicization of religion in public discourse. The significance of this imagined boundary for activism comes into focus when we look at the ways respondents talk about their goals for their 'communities'. Most of these individuals described here were recruited through Arab-oriented organizations, so, not surprisingly, they often speak about 'community' in terms of an Arab (or British Arab/Arab American) community that includes both Muslims and Christians. This understanding of an inclusive, non-sectarian Arab community has a long history that can be traced to the social and ideological milieu of the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s, in which

many of our first-generation respondents came of age politically. Several first-generation immigrants we interviewed described the influence of secular nationalisms, including the Palestine resistance movement, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism, on their political development. After settling in the US and Britain, these individuals, like many Christian Arabs, created or joined organizations dealing with issues that were generally framed as *Arab* issues, e.g. the occupation of Palestine, the civil war in Lebanon, the Intifada, and the first Gulf War (for a fuller discussion, see Suleiman, 1998). The shared sense of Arabs as a single people despite regional and religious differences, it should be emphasized, remains salient among younger, second-generation activists, who see themselves as serving multi-faith Arab communities and as addressing Arab political issues. On-going sectarian conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and elsewhere have only reinforced their belief in the imperative of unity for Arab populations.

A common refrain in these interviews, therefore, is inclusiveness and non-sectarianism: respondents emphasize that their activities include people from different religious backgrounds, because Arabness encompasses and supersedes religious differences. As first-generation Arab American activist Ramzi states, 'Arab-Americans, whether Muslims or Christians, whether Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqis, have one thing in common; Arab culture... Our value system is in common. It encompasses Muslim and Christian Arabs'. Likewise, Nasir, a Palestinian immigrant who created an annual Arab American festival in California, states of his efforts,

What I wanted to do is to have a holiday for all the Arabs...All religion and all colours. It's open. When you say Arab American Day, you don't say Muslim or Christian or Jew; we say Arab American...Religion is not our case here to sell. What we're selling there is to make peace between all these Arabs and make a union between them...

Yet there are other political considerations lurking beneath the surface in the insistence upon the separation between private religion and public activism. Among our British respondents, in particular, the insistence on secularism also signals an aversion to stigmatized Muslim groups, such as Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, who are generally less prosperous than Arabs. For many of our British respondents, the insistence on the privacy of religion reflects awareness that the term 'British Muslim' has become a public category associated, however unfairly, with isolated, radicalized, inner-city Asian communities (Abbas, 2007). Lotfi, for instance, is an Iraqi-born physician and aspiring lobbyist in Britain who speaks disparagingly of the government's propensity to 'slot Arabs into a religious grouping as Muslims', and blames Asian-controlled organizations, in part, for the government's intransigence in granting Arabs their own census category. British-born Suha is equally vexed by this situation. Arguing that Pakistani Muslims 'have a very rigid approach to their religion,' she contends that 'organizations like the Muslim Council of Britain, definitely do not, by any stretch of the imagination, represent British Arabs. They represent a completely different community'. Indeed, for Suha, 'an Arab Christian and an

Arab Jew and an Arab Muslim together will have a lot more in common than an Arab Muslim and a Pakistani Muslim’.

In sum, our interviews reveal a lack of agreement about the role of religion in the public sphere. While some of our interviewees embrace a Muslim identity and seek to place this identity firmly in public life and in mainstream narratives of belonging, others reject what they see to be the politicization of Islam. For the latter, political mobilization is predicated on placing religion in a personal, private realm, where it will neither disrupt unity among Arabs nor cause them to be associated with stigmatized Muslim groups. The growing attention given to the mobilization of Muslims tends to obscure these politics and the contested nature of religious identities they represent.

Pluralizing Muslims’ political subjectivity

We have, then, an important division among our respondents that revolves around the place of religion in the public sphere. But there is more to the story than this. Whether we are looking at those of our respondents who identify politically as Muslims or those who reject this identity, we can see that they do not confine themselves to any single category of identity. Our respondents who identify as Arabs, in other words, also might identify as members of the ‘ethnic minority community’ or as ‘people of color’; likewise, our respondents who identify as Muslims might identify as progressives or, indeed, as Arabs. This multiple political subjectivity is reflected in the fact that individuals are often involved in a variety of organizations, networks, and

coalitions, and in the fact that they often use an abstract language of human rights and citizenship to connect themselves to various publics, including the public-at-large.

As described above, most of our respondents identify themselves as Arab and are primarily concerned with Arab communities, be they located in the Arab world or in the country of settlement. At the same time, though, these Arab-oriented activists situate their activism in other kinds of political agendas. In the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, for instance, Arab American activists have not only mobilized against US military action in Iraq, but have also become deeply engaged with domestic political issues, including civil rights and immigrant rights. Their opposition to domestic surveillance, mass deportations, and airport profiling has brought Arab activists into working relationships with groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and a number of minority, immigrant, and progressive organizations. Some of our respondents, we should note, are also involved in gay organizations, women's organizations, and 'Black community' forums. Some of our respondents go so far as to insist that their activism is not about Arabness, per se, but about the rights of citizens and/or about human rights. This comes out very clearly in our interview with Asif, a California-based activist who was involved in anti-NAFTA and anti-apartheid organizing in the 1980s and 1990s, and has since been involved in struggles to preserve affirmative action (which does not cover Arab Americans) and to combat anti-immigrant sentiment in his state. When asked to define the community he serves through his activism, he replies,

Can it be specifically identified? My sense is that yes, I am an Arab-American, maybe from one perspective, at least from the perspective of the security apparatus [in the US]; therefore I belong to that identity group. But, [for immigrants], identity tends to be a way of coalescing, as a way to try to find similarity and commonality. For me, that was never an issue. I did not seek a coalescing as a way of trying to affirm my identity and who I am. I serve the community [where there are] issues of injustice that need to be addressed, regardless of who is involved.

This kind of complexity is just as evident among those involved in Muslim organizations, who are also engaged in building coalitions and networks with subordinate groups, including Latinos, Asians, immigrant workers, and other religious minorities. Activists view coalition building as crucial to reducing the isolation experienced by Muslim communities. Thus, Nasiba, a young woman active in a progressive Muslim organization, states,

[Our aim] is really trying to get our communities out of this practice of isolation. Because a lot of times we only associate with ourselves, so it's this idea of really building coalitions, alliances, and not just caring about the Muslim issue or the Arab issue but really caring about all issues that affect the American population.

Similar to what we have seen above with activists like Asif, these activists position Islam within a larger repertoire of values and political stances

relating to human rights, civil rights, and social justice. One young female activist who works with Nasiba, for instance, contends that 'because of the alliances that we're making, slowly but surely, people are realizing that [Muslim activism] is more than just a religious issue; it's far beyond that. It's an issue of oppression and injustice really'. Nasiba expands on this sentiment, saying, 'That's one of the things about [this organization]. Our community isn't just because you have a label as Muslim. Our community is because you share these values and you are working for a similar vision of justice, peace, dignity...' Thus, while Islam is central to the political aims and identities of these respondents, ideas about Islam and about being Muslim become couched in a vocabulary that is intended to connect Muslims to other groups.

If the boundaries of Muslim minority politics become blurred by these linkages and by the ways in which activists discursively position themselves, they are further blurred by the multiple involvements of individual activists. Some of our respondents who are involved in Muslim organizations are also involved in groups concerned with social justice and minority rights; some, indeed, are involved in Arab-based organizations. Rafik, for instance, has been an advocate of Islamic education in state schools in Birmingham, where he lives, but he also has been involved in an organization for inner-city Arab youth in Birmingham, in a Black Community Forum, and in a local group that assists minority groups in forming non-profit organizations. Likewise, Fatih, an active member of a San Francisco-based Islamic centre, participates in state-wide labour union organizing activities and in an Arab-American civil rights organization.

The complex positioning of Muslim activists in the public sphere can also be seen in interviewees' insistence on setting aside their Muslim identities to engage with the 'wider public'. Muslims, they argue, should participate in the public sphere not just as Muslims, but as 'ordinary citizens'. They emphasize the civic responsibilities that Muslims have to the society-at-large—responsibilities that require Muslims to think of themselves as 'average Americans' or as 'British citizens' and to concern themselves with issues affecting the larger community of which they are part. For instance, Jamila, an American-born activist at a Washington, DC-area Islamic centre, states,

There are millions [of Muslims] who are still thinking of issues back home...and they're not thinking of getting involved in or having a conversation about or developing their activities to be involved in the whole range of issues that would affect the average American. I believe that one of the things that helps people develop a sense of identity and [to feel] moored in the place they are living in, is when they are thinking on multiple levels of themselves as part of all those issues that affect everyone, whether it's transportation or the hospitals and the quality of the public schools.

Similarly, Adel, a leader in an Islamic centre in the San Francisco area states, '[While we are Muslims], we are also American, and what goes on in the city affects us and affects our kids, and there are issues like education – you cannot tackle this issues alone as an Islamic institution, you have to tackle it as a community'.

The key point we are making here is that categories like ‘Muslim’ and ‘Arab’ are not freestanding, self-contained entities. Those who identify with these categories operate in a pluralistic public sphere that requires them to address, to engage with, and to find affinities with other groups and with the broader public-at-large. This point is an especially important one with respect to Muslim activists, given the tendency in the literature and in public discourse to fixate on Muslim identities at the expense of others. Through their participation in networks and coalitions, their membership in multiple organizations, and their efforts to explain their aims a language of citizenship, human rights, and civil rights, the Muslim activists with whom we spoke position themselves not only as Muslims, but also (however strategically or partially) as minorities, citizens, Americans/British, ‘people of faith’, Arabs, and so on. The overlapping and intersecting nature of identities and activities indicate that ‘Muslim’ as a political category lacks the clarity and cohesiveness that is attributed to it in the current literature.

Conclusion

Current scholarship on Muslim minorities has examined the highly fraught contexts in which Muslims have sought to carve a political space, and it has brought attention to efforts among Muslims to negotiate the structures of belonging that exist in different national contexts. This literature provides an important counterpoint to public discourse, which persistently questions the ability and willingness of Muslims to participate in the public sphere. But the growing attention given to Muslim minority politics—to the political

mobilization of Muslims as Muslims—also tends to obscure the different ways that members of Muslim minority groups participate (or attempt to participate) in the public sphere.

We have attempted in this paper to give a multilayered understanding of the political subjectivity of Muslims and the different ways they position themselves within the public sphere. In doing so, our aim has been to challenge current scholarship to look beyond ‘Muslimness’ as the sole, defining feature of Muslims’ politics. ‘Muslim’, we have demonstrated, is a highly contested category. Muslims can identify with Islam in very different ways, and there is a lack of consensus about the role of religion and religious identities in the public sphere. At the same time, Muslims, whether or not they identify politically as such, navigate a fluid public sphere that is replete with political identities, agendas, and discourses.

Our aim here is not to downplay the mobilization of Muslim identities. We agree with Modood (2003), who argues that the diversity within social concepts like ‘Muslim minority’ is not reason to abandon these concepts. But we believe that it is equally important to encourage a broader understanding of the political claims and identities put forward by Muslims, and this inevitably leads to a destabilization of the category of ‘Muslim minority’. Muslims, in short, can be Muslims, but they can also be many other things. It is perhaps simple point, but one that has become increasingly important in today’s political climate, in which Muslims—whether labelled as ‘good’ ones or ‘bad’ ones—are regarded as essentially Muslim.

Endnotes

¹ The study on which this article is based was funded jointly by the National Science Foundation (USA) and the Economic and Social Research Council (UK).

² About a quarter of the respondents in this study were from Christian Arab backgrounds. This article, however, focuses solely on our Muslim respondents for reasons explained below.

³ The Muslim population in the US includes a large number of African Americans, whose socio-economic characteristics and theological perspectives often differ dramatically from Muslims whose families migrated to the US in the past 50 years

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

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