The Link

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About This Issue

When Threasi-Mae Jacobs, an American convert to Islam, applied for a job at Domino's Pizza in Colorado, she was told she could wear her scarf. But when she showed up for work the manager told her to "take off that stupid thing and act like a normal person." Ms. Jacobs, with CAIR's help, lodged a complaint with Domino's national headquarters. The company ruled she could wear a scarf.

Between six and eight million Muslims live in the U.S. African-Americans represent 43%, Asian-Americans 26%, Arab-Americans 14%, Iranian-Americans 4%, Turkish-Americans 3%, European-Americans 3%, with 7% unspecified. Until recently, most lived in well defined Muslim communities. Today, however, Muslims are moving into the mainstream and, like minorities before them, many are facing discrimination, intolerance, even violence.

To counter this bias, Nihad Awad helped to found CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations. How CAIR has negotiated so many positive outcomes, like that of Ms. Jacobs's, is the subject of this issue.

John Mahoney
Executive Director

Muslim-Americans in Mainstream America

By Nihad Awad

"Hello, I am with the Council on American-Islamic Relations here in Washington," I introduced myself to a former diplomat at a Washington reception. "Yes, we need one!" he responded.

When CAIR first opened its cramped, two-person office on K Street in June 1994, we inherited two great challenges. The first was the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the American media, and the multifaceted effect that negative image had on public perception and public policy. More daunting was the second challenge: the lack of interest and motivation among Muslims themselves to do anything about it.

I can still hear the skeptical reaction of those we contacted in the first few days. "Good luck," some unenthusiastically said. "Welcome to the club," said a frustrated D.C. activist when our office opened. "Do we really need another organization?" commented another.

Many believed that a Muslim organization could not work in Washington, D.C. and still maintain its integrity. "It doesn't sound promising," many people said to us. "Tread carefully--you have to fit in." "They'll change you before you even dream of getting your foot in the door," warned another frustrated D.C. activist. It was quite discouraging to realize that those we looked to for support had only predictions of failure for us. We understood their pessimism, born of frustration, but we were determined to move forward and build bridges of understanding.

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SEEING THE OTHER SIDE

In a recent CNN Crossfire interview, Mary Matalin asked me if I had any personal prejudices of the West or of Americans. I said I did, but added that once I came to America and met Americans, I found my prejudices to be just that — prejudices. Which is what I am trying to do now: to help Americans see that prejudices they may have against Muslims are equally false and hurtful.

I came to America from Jordan in 1984 as a student and quickly realized how misunderstood Islam was. Although the anecdotes I relate here are personal, they are typical experiences of thousands of Muslims who came to America from other countries.

On the University of Minnesota campus, our biggest challenge was the ignorance regarding the basics about Islam, now the second largest religion in the world, with a billion-plus adherents. It was generally assumed that Allah was the Arabic deity, something vague and Asian. Didn't He have something to do with those people in India?

Certainly Allah was nothing like the Almighty familiarly worshipped in church, and few realized that Muslims shared any spiritual heritage with Christians. It was rare indeed to find anyone who knew that Allah was simply the Arabic word meaning God with a capital G.

Frequently, as a representative of the Muslim Students' Association, I would receive requests to speak at area schools, especially in times of international political crises. While I appreciated the opportunity to share information, it also brought home the amount of misinformation found even in textbooks. Basic concepts and terms were routinely wrong.

"Mohammedanism" was a common misnomer. This term is wrong because it is based on the assumption that Muslims worship Muhammad as Christians worship Christ. Muslims abhor the term because it implies that Muhammad, a human being, is elevated to the position of godhead, a violation of strict Islamic monotheism.

I always bore in mind that the high school students being educated by poorly researched and poorly conceived textbooks were destined to become America's future leaders. They would rise to positions of responsibility crippled by the cliches that Islam was a primitive, reactionary dogma, spread by the sword by violent fanatics.

It dawned on me that Islam, in the 1980s, was seen in the United States through the myopic lens of the Middle East (more precisely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Its global presence, the history and contributions of its civilization, and its spiritual richness were all completely unknown.

I began to understand the inflammatory images I saw on television, the superficial reports and the attitudes shared by most of the public about Islam and its followers. They were rooted, I realized, in a lack of knowledge.

FIRST TIME IN A CHURCH

One invitation to speak about Islam I remember vividly. It came from a church located in a remote, rural community. As I drove out into the countryside I was moved by the fact that this small community wanted to learn about my religion.

As the brick church with its steeple came into sight and I entered a church for the first time in my life, the warmth of the congregation genuinely touched me.

Nihad Awad is co-founder and executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, headquartered in Washington, D.C.—*CAIR Photo*

My speech started with basics and ended with basics. The audience had many questions. I was the first Muslim to ever address them. To my surprise and pleasure, I found the audience was receptive. Surely we have to share the information we have, I thought! The questions these people had in their minds had been hanging for decades, and we had to answer them.

Many Muslims from my community began to be frequent guest speakers in schools and churches. Yet it soon became apparent that, while individual Muslim volunteers were generous with their time, there was no Muslim institution that we could turn to for resources or support. Other communities had spokespeople to present their views in the public forum, while not a single national voice could be heard giving a Muslim perspective, and not one major Muslim organization existed to monitor the insults and distortions about Islam that appeared in U.S. newspapers, magazines and television coverage.

Big conventions have been held annually for Muslim students and families in the Midwest since the 1960s, but their focus was on internal-spiritual development, community affairs, and the problems of Muslims abroad; they did not devote a lot of time to bridge-building in America.

Some of us suggested holding workshops at the conventions on how to work with the media. "Muslims and the Media" seminars became standard fare at large gatherings. Concerned Muslims in various cities tried to pierce the oppressive atmosphere which smothered them. One of the first coordinated efforts was a "Muslim Media Watch," which issued a newsletter and responded to unfair reporting and television villainization of Arabs, and by extension, Muslims. Islamic communities attempted to protest their stereotyping but their input was largely ignored.

The sense of injustice felt by Muslims at this portrayal of their beloved faith, their source of strength and serenity, mutated into a sense of hopelessness and despair. Many Muslims distrusted the media and assumed that it was ideologically dedicated to defaming Islam and Muslims.

The Gulf War, though tragic for the Middle East, proved catalytic for the Muslim community in America. The public sought out local Muslims and Middle Eastern people to provide insight into the events behind the headlines. Muslim Americans were forced out of their lethargy when they became targets of anti-Arab sentiment. Threatening, vulgar calls appeared on the answering machines of mosques and Islamic centers. Our Muslim Students' Organization received many. Stones were thrown through the windows of immigrants' shops. Reporters, covering stories of harassment and intimidation of local Muslims and Arabs, realized that residents with Middle Eastern ties were being singled out unjustly.

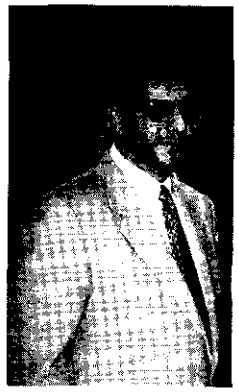
Muslims with the surname Hussein became special targets. One mother, her sons taunted at school, her tires slashed and her home vandalized, was spurred into becoming a leading community activist.

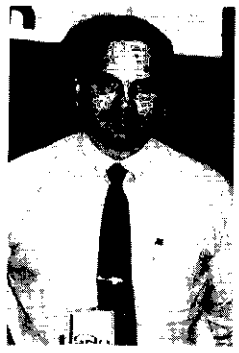
Muslims felt very much marginalized. It was obvious that problems facing the Muslim community were national in scope. They affected not only the Islamic community but also the entire country. Volunteer efforts, no matter how valiant, would not be enough. Local efforts, no matter how sincere, could not encompass a national problem.

CAIR OPENS

My experiences as a newcomer to this country had convinced me that Americans are a fair, open-minded people, but largely uninformed about Islam and Muslims. I also saw that they were being deliberately misled about Middle Eastern affairs. I felt that Muslims needed to take their message about who they were and what they believed directly to the public.

After the Gulf War was over, I was offered a job with the Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP) as their public relations director. Since many Americans had been exposed to only one side of the story, my responsibility was to explain the Palestinian experience to the public and the media. In this effort I worked closely with IAP president Omar Ahmad.





Above: **Omar Ahmad, CAIR Board Chairman.** ***Below:*** **Ibrahim Hooper, CAIR's National Communications Director.—*CAIR Photos***

Omar, however, had the insight to realize that the central issue facing the Muslim community in the United States was not being addressed. The core challenge, that of stereotyping and defamation, was having a devastating effect on our children and paralyzing adults from taking their due roles in civic affairs.

Omar suggested to me that we leave the IAP and concentrate on combating anti-Muslim discrimination nationwide. He proposed that I move to Washington, D.C., where any effective national effort would have to be based, while he tried to raise the seed money for the project.

I contacted my friend Ibrahim Hooper, a professional journalist and communications genius, and tried to persuade him to move to Washington and join the project.

Omar's vision and concern for Muslims in America coincided with Ibrahim's and my desire to take up the task. Ibrahim and I had worked together for years to help our local community reach out to its neighbors and we understood that individual initiatives were essential, but that they would never be as effective as a coordinated national effort.

So the three of us took a chance. We decided to try to bridge the chasm of ignorance between Muslims in America and their neighbors. We knew it was a simple prescription but one that

would not be easy to apply.

In June 1994, we used a modest donation as a starting budget to open the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in Washington, D.C. Ibrahim and I were the two first committed but uncertain staff members. As we prepared our bare, two-room office, we heard of the latest in a long line of insulting Hollywood potboilers. The humiliation was familiar to American Muslims and Arabs: "Delta Force," "Rambo," "Terrorist on Trial...". Here came another public degradation for Muslim families. "I've seen a preview for an upcoming Schwarzenegger movie with Arabs in it – as terrorists, of course," someone told us.

We took on the seemingly futile task of contacting 20th Century Fox to object to the negative stereotyping of Muslims suggested by the images in the movie's trailer: sweaty, swarthy, kuffiyeh-clad Arabs firing wildly into the air; enormous bombs wrapped in the American flag.

CAIR's first action alert, explaining the danger of the stereotypes in "True Lies," reached only a couple of dozen fax machines. But it was a start.

When we called 20th Century Fox, our concerns about stereotyping in the movie fell on deaf ears. For the first time, CAIR took its case to the community. At the film's Washington, D.C., premiere, we held an "informational picketing." The dozen people who stood outside the theater handing out information about Muslim objections to the film did not know that they were turning over a new leaf for Muslims in America. They were joined by Muslims in different cities in a coordinated national effort.

The modest but organized effort of Muslims nationwide generated enough media interest that 20th Century Fox felt compelled to call CAIR and offer a disclaimer on the film. This minor victory planted a badly needed seed of hope in Muslim hearts.

HUMOR YES, BIGOTRY NO

It was the photo of the Islamically-dressed woman on the greeting card that caught the eye of the mother and her sons browsing in the Hallmark store in Reston, Virginia.

The mother picked up the card and opened it. Inside she read: "So you're feeling like Shi'ite. Don't Mecca big deal out of it." The reference was to the holy city of Mekka, the site of pilgrimage for all observant Muslims. But it was the reference to excrement, playing on the spelling of the name of Shi'ite Muslims, that was particularly insulting.

"This has got to stop," she resolved, and she became the first of many Muslim community members to contact CAIR about an offensive anti-Muslim product. We at CAIR responded by picking up the phone to request that the card's manufacturer, Recycled Paper Greetings, recall the offensive card and offer an apology. I remember that no one bothered to return our calls.

When RPG finally deigned to contact us, they informed us that we had no sense of humor. "If we allow that kind of disrespect to go unchallenged," we reasoned, "then more companies, and thousands of consumers, will continue making degrading others into a profitable business."

A one-page action alert bearing a picture of the card was faxed to our list of less than 100 supporters and interested institutions. Some of the recipients circulated the alert in their mosques. Within two weeks, Illinois-based RPG received over 800 complaints, an overwhelming number if one considers that the company typically receives about 300 complaints per year.

Despite the strong response from Muslim community members, RPG was disinterested. They made it clear that they had no intention of withdrawing the card. Chicago newspapers picked up on the controversy when local Muslims, joining those in Virginia, Kansas, Minneapolis and elsewhere, began picketing greeting card stores which stocked the card. Muslim children joined their parents in the protests, carrying signs emblazoned with, "HUMOR YES! BIGOTRY NO!"

Not only Muslims were offended. A Lutheran minister became one of CAIR's earliest Christian allies when he joined in protesting RPG's lack of response by writing to them, "If the calls of our Muslim brothers and sisters fall on deaf ears, we are going to ask our church membership to boycott RPG products." Others joined him. [*See letter on following page from Daniel F. Martensen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chicago to RPG's Acting President Mike Murray. – Editor.*]

When RPG stonewalled, CAIR called for donations to distribute bumper stickers asking all people of conscience to boycott RPG. The community responded and promised to keep up the pressure.

Finally, after three months, RPG's president called CAIR to say he was ready to sign an agreement which included an apology for the insulting nature of the card and its recall from stores. Those who had participated in this national campaign received this news with joy and relief. Their efforts had borne fruit. It also served to encourage those who had stood by watching skeptically to join in future efforts.

The following month, a Texas businessman who had seen the results of the campaign against RPG called CAIR to complain about a software ad placed in a business magazine by Timeslips Corporation, the world's number maker of time and billing software products.. In the ad photo, worshippers prostrated in Muslim prayer toward a box of software. CAIR contacted Timeslips and was told by their marketing manager that the ad was already paid for, that it would appear eleven more times, and that the company had no intention of dropping it.

Then Timeslips found that the news clippings CAIR faxed them about the successful RPG campaign focused their thinking. Half an hour after the faxes were sent, a company representative called, ready to talk. Initially, he offered to brush the prayer rugs out of the photo ad, but in the end he decided to cancel the contract altogether.

It was the impact of the three-month-long RPG campaign that brought this one to a successful conclusion after only a few days.

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