

Immigration, Groups and Problems of Muslim Diaspora in America

Manzoor Ahmad¹, PhD and Jehangir Khan², PhD

^{1,2}Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan

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Abstract

The incident of 9/11 has proved to be a scar on the image of the Muslims all around the world and specially in America, as Muslims were regarded as responsible for the terror attack and were under the wall both politically and socially. The first amendment in the American constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all American citizens. The Muslims in America are becoming more American, establishing their presence with their groups and organizations and projecting their interests. The aim of this paper is to analyze the history of Muslim immigration, the factors behind immigration, their interests, their groups and organization, their activities and their problems especially after 9/11.

Keywords: Muslim immigration, indigenous groups, immigrant groups, Afro-Americans

1. Introduction

Muslim population in America varies between two to nine million and the huge discrepancy in Muslims strength is due to disagreement on who can be rightly called a Muslim (Westerlund and Svanberg 1999). Many scholars give a middle ground for Muslim identity. Taking these complications of Muslim identity into account, a statistical picture emerges that points to a total number of Muslim population in America to be about 3 million, out of which immigrants make up two-third to three-fourth. Accepting that this figure is rough, the immigrant from about 2 million of the total Muslim population in America and about one percent of the total American population (Pipes and Duran 2004). There are about 1300 mosques and about 70 percent of the Muslim population is scattered in ten states; California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio and Maryland (Westerlund and Svanberg 1999). The largest number of immigrants is from South Asia, Iran and Arab countries. The largest group being from South Asia followed by perhaps 500,000 Iranians and 400,000 Arabs (Pipes and Duran 2004). As far as the Islamic institutions are concerned, by 1992, there were about 2300

Islamic institutions in North America, including mosques, schools, community centers, publishing houses and media programming units (Pipes and Duran 2004).

The clustering of Muslim immigrants in the ten states is because of the fact these immigrants follow their friends, families and relatives and thereby establish themselves with them. About 30 percent of the Muslims in America have settled in New York City, Illinois and California. The Muslim expansion in America is mainly due to immigration but there is a significant number of converts in the Afro-American community forming about 20,000 to 50,000 Muslim Afro-American population which is about 30-40 percent of the total number of Muslims in America (Smith 1999). Amongst the non-Afro-Americans, the most significant impact in conversion has been played by the Sufi order of Islam in America.

The role of Muslims in America has been analyzed by various scholars. Westerlund and Svanberg (1999) in their edited book examined the spread of Islam and its nature in many non-Arab countries focusing particularly on the contemporary situation and the complexities that

characterizes Islam outside the Arab world, including Sufism and the growing significance of Islamism which challenges secularism and Sufi form of Islam. Similarly another edited work by Haddad and Smith (1994) deals with the sampling of the range and variety of Muslim immigrants, their organizations and activities. Suleman (1999) and Smith (1999) shed light on the statistics of Muslims and their activities and role in American society while Pipes and Durani (2002) highlight the various factors responsible for Muslim migration and their social conditions, focusing on education and religion and religious practices. They also pay attention to inter-Muslim tensions and conflicts. The Black Muslims, an organization of Negroes, preaching black autonomy, supremacy and union against the white has been discussed in details by Lincoln. He closely examines the background and rationale of the movement, its ceremonies, legends, economy, laws, ideals and leadership (Lincoln 1961).

2. Muslim Immigration to America

For long time, little was known about America in the Muslim world. The 8th century voyage of discovery rose some interests about America in the Muslim lands. The only surviving copy of Christopher Columbus' own map of America which is still preserved in Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul is a Turkish translation and adaptation (Bernard 2003).

The earliest Muslim immigration came as slaves from Africa as early as the beginning of sixteenth century, but there is substantial disagreement about their number. The first free Muslim immigrants may date back to later sixteenth century when captured Muslim soldiers were deposited on the coast of North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. If this argument is true then the Melungeons, swarthy whites, living on the Cumberland Plateau may be their descendants (Haddad and Smith 1994).

The Sultan of Morocco signed a treaty of friendship with United States in 1787 and thereafter United States had a number of friendly and hostile but commercial dealings with Muslim

countries. The first recorded mention of the America as political symbol in Islamic world came in Istanbul on July 14, 1793, when a newly arrived ambassador of French Republic held a public celebration declaring that "they have hoisted the colors of Ottoman Empire, of French and the American republics and those of few other powers who had not soiled their arms in the impious league of the tyrants" (Bernard 2003).

Muslim's immigration to America began in the late 1800s, primarily from Middle East, usually young men with no intension of setting in America but hoping to earn enough money and to be able to return to their countries of origin and establish homes and families there (Haddad and Smith 1994). However, with the passage of time, they began to establish permanent business, like groceries, coffee houses and restaurants. They also formed communities, schools and mosques for religious purposes. The Second World War also brought new waves of immigrants, first in the form of students and then as teachers and businessmen and visitors. The reasons for Muslim immigration were ethnic and religious persecution, Islamism and anti-Islamism, civil and trans-national wars, education and Islamization of America (Haddad and Smith 1994).

3. Organizations of Muslims

The Muslim communities and groups drive their strength and support at the grass-root level from its membership, which is composed of Muslims from many countries speaking many languages. Their main objective is to invite both Muslims and non-Muslims to Islam and develop Islamic character and values among Muslims of all ages, provide services to the Muslim communities in the fulfillment of their religious, cultural, social, educational and welfare needs and to promote and strengthen cooperation among different Muslim groups and organizations pursuing similar objectives (Westerlund and Svanberg 1999).

The groups of Muslims in America can be classified into two broader categories; indigenous Muslims and immigrant Muslims. The majority

of immigrant Muslims came from sixty different countries as students and their number increased especially after 1965 when the immigration rules were relaxed.

3.1. Organizations of Immigrant Muslims

The immigrant Muslims have established a number of organizations, but the main organizations that most of the people come in contact with are the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Islamic Society of Northern America (ISNA).

The MSA was founded in 1963 by the students of North America and South Asia, who were influenced by the Islamic Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami. In the latter half of 20th century, several factors have been influential in determining the character of Muslim life in America. In 1960s, there was significant influx of Muslim students to America, committed to the new Islamic ideology of Egypt and Pakistan. These students had a significant impact on the Islamization of the Muslim communities, representing organizations as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and the Jamaat-Islami of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. These students brought with them a different concept of community that has developed among the Muslim Immigrants of America, namely the concept of Ummah as articulated by Sayed Qutb and Maudoodi (Haddad and Smith 1994). The MSA grew after the Arab-Israel war of 1967 and 1973. In 1975, MSA formed a head quarter with a fulltime secretariat and was more than mere a student organization. MSA brought most of the Muslim students into its folds and most of the Islamic centers established thereafter were the creations of MSA.

The ISNA was established in 1970s as a federation of the Muslim's associations. ISNA carries out publications and also organize conferences and educational programs for the American Muslims. The Shiites separated from this organization in 1979.

3.2. Organizations of Indigenous Muslims

The largest grouping of the indigenous American Muslims is the Afro-Americans, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, although there are small Shiite groups and other Afro-American Muslim sects. The most important among these are the "Nation of Islam" headed by Louis Farakhan and the American Muslim Society (MSS) headed by Warithuddin Muhammad. Historically these groups appear to have their origin in the early part of 1900s and often being very heterodox from the orthodox Muslim point of view, developed as the "Black Theologies of Liberation" (Westerlund and Svanberg 1999). One early group was the Moorish Science Temple which also maintained a heterodox ideology even decades after the death of its leader in 1929 and its subsequent division into smaller sections which also exist today. This group emphasized love towards their Christian brothers and taught that they were the members of Moabite Tribe of North Africa before they were brought to America as slaves (Haddad and Smith 1994). They claimed that Moabites were part of the Moorish race and were all Muslims. They worshiped on Friday and Sunday and on January 8 of each year and exchanged gifts in the temple in the commemoration of their American prophet Noble Drew Ali.

The Nation of Islam was established as "The Lost Found Nation of Islam" in 1930 by Master Wali Farad and was the first major group of indigenous Muslims. Its doctrines incorporated elements of Islam, Christianity and Black Nationalism in a manner that proved remarkably successful in ensuring the future of the movement and paved the way for the subsequent acceptance of orthodox Islam by thousands of Afro-Americans. Elijah Muhammad, one of Farad's original followers, became the leader of the organization when Farad disappeared in 1934. Elijah declared Farad as God and himself as prophet of God on earth and shortened the name of group to be called the "Nation of Islam". Nation of Islam became very large and powerful under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. Upon his death

in mid 1970s, his son Warithuddin Muhammad began to transform the organization into mainstream Sunni movement, ensuring Sunni Islam and its practice in the member mosques (Smith 1999). One sect of this movement headed by Louis Farakhan rejected this transformation to Sunni Islam and followed and maintained the heterodox teachings of Elijah (Smith 1999).

Nation of Islam widely disseminated voice in the Afro-American community and under Louis Farakhan grew in power and access. It managed to organize a “Million Man March”, the largest demonstration in the American history and has been advocating measures for reducing crimes in Afro-American communities. The Nation of Islam is currently a “Black Power” movement dedicated to the separatist ideals of a separate nation for the Black Americans.

Imam Warithuddin Muhammad, a progressive Muslim leader had received honors, praises and recognition in the American society for spreading Islam in America. In 1986, he was elected to the Supreme Council of Masajid of Muslim World League. He had sharply criticized Farakhan and his “Black Islam” for advocating racism. He even forbade his followers from keeping contacts with Farakhan and his movement (Smith 1999). He rejected the merger of Islam with Black Nationalism and maintained that true Islam is the universal religion, meant for all people and not racial. He tried to counter anti-Muslim sentiments in America by claiming Islam’s compatibility with basic American values. The Nation of Islam and the American Muslim Society kept tense relationship due to lack of interaction and mutual resentment.

3.3. Non-Afro- American Groups

The number of white Americans who have accepted Islam is still very small, perhaps 20-50 thousand in all, and mostly are the Latino converts in the Latin American community and Native American Muslims. Inter-marriages between the immigrant Muslims and the Americans is the major source of these Anglo-converts. Many of the white Americans who have

accepted Islam seem to have some contacts with Sufism. American Sufism has been ignored in the past, but it deserves much attention as this is one sources which drives the Americans to Islam.

Instrumental in this history is the “Sufi Order of the West”, “Fellowship” and the “Five Percenters”. The “Sufi Order of the West” founded in 1910 by the Indian Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan and was then revived by his son Vilayat Khan and his early American disciple Sufi Ahmad Murad (Sam Lewis) in 1960s. Among the many achievements of the “Sufi Order of the West” is the Omega Institute, a major vehicle for the New Age Community in America and abroad. On its annual gathering, Omega attracts a large number of leading New Age propagandists and turns into an outstanding forum for the exchange and development of the movement’s ideas (Westerlund and Svanberg 1999).

The “Fellowship” was founded as community in 1971 by a Sri Lankan Sufi teacher Bawa Mahaiyaddeen. The Fellowship consisted of 1000 members, a handful of whom lived in the premises of the mosques built by the members themselves in 1984. Fellowship is an extremely heterodox community, with members from a wide variety of racial and cultural backgrounds, ages and professions. It has scheduled daily prayers, classes on Quran and Arabic language, resources for all stages of community life, books and schedule talks.

“The Five Percenters” is the group of the people who broke away and separated from the Nation of Islam in 1964 under the leadership of Clarence Pudding. The name “Five Percenters” is based on their belief that they are the chosen five percent of the humanity who live on the righteous Islamic life and thereby have manifested the true divine nature of the Black man who is God (Haddad and Smith 1994). This group was responsible for discriminating, popularizing and re-interpreting the lessons of Elijah Muhammad among the adolescent generation of 1960s in New York, the center of the movement (Haddad and Smith 1994).

4. Problems of Muslim Diaspora

First problem being faced by Muslims in America is the identity problem. The Muslims have migrated to America as traders, students or slaves from Africa and are attracted towards sectarian and separatist groups in the country claiming identity based on religion. They are motivated by economic factors, justice of identity and culture and the harsh experiences of slavery. Muslims who wanted to come together for religious observance in the early part of the century found themselves leaderless. They look towards the educated people in the community and form groups and communities and mosques. America constitutes a microcosm of the Muslim world with multiple nationalities and elements of Islam's cultural, racial and sectarian diversity having differences in their faith which are not only religious like Shia-Sunni conflicts but also due to political animosity and rivalries among their countries of origin like Iran and Iraq and Iraq and Kuwait (Suleman 1999).

Secondly, there is a growing anti-Muslimism across the globe and especially in United States after the 9/11 terror incident. The Zionist diatribe coupled with the actions of Bush administration and the propaganda of western media is responsible for underpinning and manifesting American attitude towards the Muslims and Arabs (Khabbaz 2004, Ahmad 2004). This diverse attitude towards Muslims in America and the west and among the Muslims towards the west and America has caused much confusion and misunderstanding between the two sides (Saikal 2003).

Thirdly, Muslim immigrants perceive the range of American family customs and the position of women in the American society as morally corrupt and endangering the Muslim's way of life including fear about family honor, divorce, intermarriages and abandonment of faith. Children of Muslim immigrants are specifically subject to intense peer group pressures, women becoming increasingly independent and

autonomous which creates a threat to men's patriarchal authority.

Fourthly, the language problem, particularly with immigrants above the age of 65 have limited speaking and listening skills, though they can manage the day to day living situation by acquiring enough English skills but majority face difficulty in dealing with medical care, social services and recreation etc. (Haddad and Smith 1994).

Finally, the Muslim immigrants especially the elders fearing the American way of life and failing to accept their children being accustomed with the American customs, fail to avail the facilities like housing and medical and live in isolation from the rest of the society.

5. Conclusion

The number of Muslim population vis-à-vis the rest of the United States is quite less and they don't have the cohesion to cope with the challenges and cooperate on the issues of common interests. Muslims must learn to achieve this cohesion and together with the main streams Americans, Muslims must work to promote Islamization targeted at the main stream American society. This must be coupled with actions directed towards creating an American Ummah by establishing small groups of Dawa and Taleem. The Muslims in America are divided along ethnic, sectarian and community line. The Muslims must deal with sectarianism and all other cleavages and combine on single platform of Muslim brotherhood.

It is envisioned that the Muslim population in America will increase and there will be no family, racial or national ties and they will gain enough mass to support their organizations, practice their religion and play a vital role in the American politics, economy and society.

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