Muslim advocacy in America

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**Introduction**

The first months of 2011 gave the American public a sense of how deep-seeded Islamophobia may be and how it can be used in the rough and tumble world of electoral politics to dishonor one’s opponents. Upon becoming the new Chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security in January, US Representative Peter King (R-NY) launched a congressional inquiry into the radicalization of Muslim Americans. This climaxed in March in a public hearing on Capitol Hill. The event generated a lot of heat as people objected to King’s rationale for the inquiry. Standing by remarks he made in 2004—that the vast majority of Muslim American community leaders are “an enemy living amongst us”—and in 2007—there are “too many” mosques in America—King cautioned the media not to give too much credence to what Muslim American organizations had to say about the extent of radicalization within their own community. After the hearings were over, King said in a CNN interview that “the only reason there’s any chance for propaganda coming out of the hearing” can be attributed solely to the “many professional hard-core Muslim organizations attacking” him and the congressional committee (CNN 2011).

It is not surprising to find such rhetorical jousting in almost any partisan discussion of Islam in the last ten years. There are certain moral categories that political leaders and ordinary citizens apply to themselves and the social world they occupy which command our attention. Warnings about the dangers presented by “Islamofascism,” “sleeper cells,” and “creeping Shari’a” have become commonplace—and are generally unchallenged—in current political communication. In depicting his critics as “professional hard-core” Muslim organizations, as King does, he suggests strongly that they are menacing, perhaps even pathological, and attached to an extreme (“hard-core”) ideology. By asserting they are the sole source of rumors, propaganda, and attacks, King not only discredits Muslim American advocacy; he maps his interpretation of the world around him and his overt belief that Islam plays a intrinsic part in the creation of extremist ideologies. For these and other reasons, in light of our present political landscape, the need to know about the diversity, number, and scope of Muslim American groups organizing for Islam in Washington, DC, has never been greater.

Against this background of mounting anxiety in the general political culture, religious diversity and in particular the presence of Muslims in the United States are seen as a significant challenge. The link in the social imaginary between Islam and terrorism predates 9/11 but it has been heightened by the attacks on the United States in 2001 and the climate of increased suspicion of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam. A *Newsweek* poll in the summer of 2008, at the height of the presidential election campaign, showed that nearly half the American public would not vote for a Muslim for president (Gilbert and Harder 2008). This leaves us to ask the question, what role is religion, and in particular Islam, permitted to play in government-civil society relations? This chapter is about organizing for Muslim advocacy in America.
examines the emergence of an American Muslim civic engagement at a critical historical moment when we find the dominant American political culture plagued by security fears. In what follows I relate how important American Muslim organizations have grown, built capacities, and advocated for their constituencies in the public policy field, all while living under exceptional circumstances (Moore 2010). The chapter is arranged into three parts, covering in turn the politics of organized religious groups; the growth of Muslim American associational life; and contemporary Muslim American advocacy organizations in Washington, DC. What key cultural codes and rules become internalized or contested in the process of organizing for Islam in America?

**The evolution of national religious advocacy in politics**

When sociologists refer to the “management” of religion in public life they are addressing the modern state’s response to the so-called “depersonalization” of religious practice (Casanova 1994). In this instance, the specific issues surrounding

*Image 17.1 Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf during a rally in Times Square against the House of Representatives hearings on “Radicalization of American Muslims” chaired by Peter King (New York, March 2011). Demonstrators and religious leaders who spoke to the crowd saw the hearings as divisive and racist. Courtesy of Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images.*
Peter King’s congressional hearing can be seen as an illustration of the larger problem of state and religion in late modernity. In spite of the constitutional separation of Church and state, the government finds itself formulating policies relating to religion, however implicit, in order to deal with the tensions and anxieties endemic to a religiously and culturally diverse society.

Furthermore, American political culture is accepting of the political activism of religious individuals and groups. Religious activism is as old as the Republic, and although at first this was restricted to the state and local levels, religious activists were drawn more and more into national campaigns regarding issues important to religious people, such as slavery, child welfare, poverty, illiteracy, and prohibition. The common pattern from the nineteenth through the beginning of the twentieth century was for religious groups to form temporary coalitions to shape public policy on religion-related issues when these issues arose, whether in the local, state, or national arena.

Religious activism and advocacy in political channels is constantly evolving. It has grown dramatically over time, with the appearance of more and different kinds of groups as the nation has become more diverse. Early groups included the United Methodist Church, which established a Washington office in 1916 to promote prohibition; the National Catholic Welfare Conference, established in 1919; and the Quakers, who opened the first full-time registered religious lobby in 1943 to protect conscientious objector status (Fowler et al 2010: 121). By the mid-century, Jewish and Baptist organizations joined the scene, primarily to litigate Church-state issues. A study released in 1950 showed that at least 16 national religious groups had offices in Washington, DC, representing Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish constituencies (Fowler et al 2010).

Since 1950 that number grew dramatically. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a study in 2011 that identified more than 200 national religious organizations engaging in public policy advocacy at least occasionally if not often. Among these are several mainline Protestant, evangelical, African American Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish interest groups. But also included in this number are many organizations from other religious communities, including Muslims, Baha’is, Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists, Sikhs, and so on. As a whole, currently religious advocacy organizations employ at least 1,000 people in the Washington, DC, area and spend over $390 million a year on influencing national public policy (Pew 2011).

Additionally, as the reach and prominence of the federal government increased over the course of the twentieth century, so to have the policy areas in which religious advocacy organizations are involved. There are many reasons for this. First, the changing modern role of federal government, with its size and scope of responsibility expanding, has acted as a catalyst for the growth of religious advocacy organizations. Many groups have been set up to monitor the impact of public policy on their religious freedom generally and, more specifically, their institutions, such as hospitals, schools, charities, and social service agencies. Second, the growth in religious pluralism and

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (arranged alphabetically)</th>
<th>D.C. Arrival Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, USA</td>
<td>1948</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Islamic Congress</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for Islamic Pluralism</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy</td>
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<td>Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>Free Muslims Coalition</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Quranic Center</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISNA, Office for Interfaith and Community Alliance</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<td>Kashmiri American Council</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>Minaret of Freedom Institute</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim American Society</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Committee of Women for a Democratic Iran</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uyghur American Association</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Organization for Resource Development &amp; Education</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In late 2011, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a major study of religious advocacy organizations in Washington, DC—who they are, what they do, and how they do it. It charts the growth in diversity of groups. Of the 212 organizations identified in the study, 17 self-report as Muslim. A list of these organizations is provided with the date each set up offices in the Washington, DC, area.

Note: This list is limited to those organizations the IRS considers lobbyists, strictly defined as attempting to influence, or urging the public to influence, specific legislation, whether the legislation is before a legislative body, such as the US Congress or any state legislature, or before the public as a referendum, a ballot initiative, a constitutional amendment, or a similar measure. It also includes those organizations that aim their efforts at the White House, federal agencies, the courts, or educating and/or mobilizing religious constituencies on particular issues.

Source: The study may be found on the Pew Forum’s website, www.pewforum.org.
the associated sense that such pluralism leads to greater competition among religious
groups to promote their collective interests has created an imperative for religious
groups to organize (Fowler et al 2010). Some watch one another as, for instance, in the
case of groups, including but not limited to Muslims, who wish to respond to the
impact that Jewish groups conventionally have had on decisions regarding US
assistance in the Middle East. Third, for one reason or another, an increasing number
of people of faith have determined that it is time to get organized and enter the
political fray in order to defend or promote traditional values that are important to
them. This finding is consistent with the greater emphasis on moral values since the
1960s, when religious activism in the civil rights movement and against the Vietnam
War was pivotal; it is also consistent with the phenomenon of the “values voter”—
hyped in the analysis of the 2004 national elections—who turned out to vote in record
number in states and regions where issues of gay rights or abortion were on the ballot.
Fourth, the changing global role of the United States as a superpower after World War
II encouraged advocacy organizations to address questions of foreign aid and military
intervention. To take just one small example, the national Kashmiri organization, the
Kashmiri-American Council, has regularly petitioned lawmakers on Capitol Hill to
support the Kashmiri people in their struggle for self-determination, and to encourage
the US government to take an active role in the peace process. Other groups seek
American support for their persecuted co-religionists abroad.

These are at least some of the explanations for the recent growth in religious
advocacy in American politics. For theorists of modernity—as opposed to the activists
and advocates on the contemporary political scene—religion is not so much about
personal expressions of piety, or even about a religion’s theology, as it is an important
marker of individual and group identity in the public sphere. Seen through the prism
of the public, then, religion has increasing salience in the general hierarchy of value.
Increasingly it is understood as a symbol of identity and an arbiter of status, or in
other words, as an important variable in the politics of recognition in which claims
are asserted for a place at the table for distinctive perspectives in a “difference-
friendly” world. These are the sort of claims that some political philosophers have
placed at the center of a new paradigm for justice (e.g., Kymlicka and Banting 2006;
Appiah 2005). This salience of religion in identity politics is true no more for Muslims
than for Christian evangelicals and other religious actors who work hard to mobilize
their membership lists and shape public opinion, influence lawmakers, and litigate
key issues of the day.

Landmark studies of prominent advocacy organizations of the mid-twentieth
century—the NAACP (Vose 1973 [1959]), the American Indian Movement (Nagel 1996),
and La Raza (Delgado and Stefancic 1998), to name just a few—have indicated the ways
in which racial identities are fluid and can change. Racial identities have been created
and re-created as activists have struggled to gain official recognition for their
constituencies and to achieve the redistribution of resources in a way that would alleviate their marginalization. Many of these same studies show us that advocacy through formal organizations has been met with suspicion in the public policy arena, because it is considered to be disruptive of the social, cultural, economic, and political interests of other constituencies or groups. Thus by its very nature, the political process through which interest groups define their mission and hone their skills can be expected to draw them more than their fair share of criticism and hyperbole.

At the heart of the legislative process, whether in Congress or state houses, lies the art of compromise. While compromise might seem a dubious prospect for religious activists, legislators view it as the key to action, and advocates must accept it as a necessity (Fowler et al 2010: 127). Coalition-building is essential to reaching political goals. While religious advocacy organizations have grown in number and size, they are still miniscule when compared to the giants of the major secular lobbies, such as the National Educational Association, the American Association of Retired Persons, and a multitude of political action committees (PACS). With more than 17,000 lobbyists registered to operate in the district of Columbia alone, religious advocacy organizations are a mere drop in the bucket. That said, however, even modest political influence on Capitol Hill counts heavily on specific issues, and coalitions can be effective because of their array of expertise. In other words, a coalition of advocacy groups can be effective in an issue area because of their credibility or special expertise in that area. For instance, Quakers might lead a coalition on nuclear proliferaion because of their doctrine of non-violence but Baptists would do so on religious liberty issues. Sometimes temporary coalitions develop around a single issue, such that organizations sharing a position on a particular bill in Congress might make common cause even if they tend to disagree on other matters. Or on other issues, long-time allies might part ways over particular policies. For example, liberal mainline Protestant groups have parted ways at times with their Jewish counterparts over Israeli policies regarding Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories because the Protestants see these as unjust to Palestinians (Fowler et al 2010: 128).

Religious advocacy can be a formidable factor in politics when groups across the theological and ideological spectrum cooperate. Examples of this are evident in judicial politics. When organizations sign onto an amicus brief in a lawsuit bearing on someone’s rights and freedoms, they coalesce to stake a position on constitutional values. This can be very powerful in the context of a modern pluralist America.

This overview would be incomplete without a discussion of the impact of the rapidly advancing changes in the ways we communicate, which is changing the world of political advocacy in unexpected ways. Virtually all religious advocacy groups are using new media to mobilize constituents, pressure lawmakers, and generally get their message out. Email communications with thousands of supporters, lobbying software that can monitor which constituents send emails to which members of
Congress, and social networking modalities such as Twitter and Facebook connect advocates, lay members, and politicians in an increasingly interactive web. Thus the most effective communications are those that “go viral,” where, for example, not just Muslims but friends of Muslims who are removed from Muslim American advocacy organizations by two or three degrees of separation, are activated by a national campaign. We can see how this has occurred dozens if not hundreds of times since 9/11 when non-Muslim supporters have felt compelled to respond to something noxious. As this is being written, founder of the hip-hop record label Def Jam, Russell Simmons, has stepped forward in response to the decision by Lowe’s Home Improvement Stores to pull advertising from the Learning Channel’s reality TV show *All American Muslim* after the Florida Family Association—an evangelical organization that, according to the *New York Times*, is run by a single individual, David Caton—urged its members to email the show’s advertisers (Freedman 2011). Simmons met the shortfall created by pulled advertisements by purchasing the remaining advertising spots on the show. Thus we can see the power of the internet to amplify the voice of one man (Caton) to tap into a significant groundswell of anti-Muslim bigotry, as well as the success of another individual (Simmons) to counteract the deleterious effect of Caton’s actions because of what he had read about the controversy on Twitter. The most astute leaders of religious advocacy organizations will need to ride the wave of this new media, to great effect, for their communities.

**Associational life**

The public representation of Muslims in the United States has undergone a major transformation since the 1990s. As Table 17.1 demonstrates, most of the Muslim American advocacy organizations in our nation’s capital have arrived there since the 1990s. The rising level of civic engagement and associational life among Muslims in the United States is an indication of rapid change and requires explanation. Some organizations have been around for a long time, performing services and providing community networks for their members, and staking a position on political issues from time to time but not defining themselves primarily as interest groups or lobbyists. Others are of more recent vintage. Nearly all by now have included collective political advocacy in their repertoire, in large part as a result of the more general protest movement activism (e.g., civil rights, antiwar movements) in the United States at mid-twentieth century. That is, organizations that existed prior to the “protest cycle” of the 1960s were typically service-oriented, performing important lifecycle functions such as marriages and burials, and providing members with specific types of information and education as well as a platform from which to socialize and form a base for solidarity. In contrast, political advocacy objectives became more important from the second half of the 1960s onward, once advocacy in general became an
accepted part of associational life in the United States. The move toward collective political advocacy—staging events to garner public attention for claims and concerns, working political channels, and coalescing with other groups—is also explained in part by the trajectory of the development of Muslim American life from consisting of relatively small, ethnically defined and detached enclaves into a maturing, nationally networked constituency.

Early years

In the early years associational life revolved around the mosque or masjid, the house of worship for Muslim Americans. Many Muslims who immigrated to the United States early in the twentieth century showed little overt interest in participating in Islamic functions or even in identifying primarily with Islam rather than ethnicity or national origins. From what little data we have (from court records, immigration reports, etc.), we can surmise that in the period between the two world wars, ethnicity or national origins was given salience over religious modes of self-identification (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 171; Moore 1995). According to Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, aside from a small number of foreign-sponsored missionaries and Black Muslim movements, few Muslims prior to World War II thought about establishing Islam nationally in the United States. Rather, the practice of Islam was either individualistic or limited to one’s immediate community (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 178). But because of the frustration in not finding social acceptance from other Americans, and the satisfaction gained by sharing experiences they had in common with other Muslims, over the years progressively more were drawn to participate more openly in religiously-based activities. These Muslims created forums for collective worship, to observe Friday prayer, and other activities that facilitated their performance of Islam.

The earliest mosques were built in the 1920s and 1930s and the mosque movement gained momentum by the mid-century. The founders of the mosque built in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1934 called themselves a “league,” resembling the numerous fraternal orders and benevolent societies of the day whose purpose was to perform “benevolent duties” (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 184). In Cedar Rapids, most grocery stores owned by Muslims could not afford to lose business by closing at noon for jumu‘ah prayer on Fridays, so they held their congregational prayers on Thursday nights, and followed it with some socializing and a lecture or reading from the Qur’an (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 184). In 1936, an article in the Cedar Rapids Gazette reported that two sons of the community’s founding families, Abdallah Igram and Hussein Sheronick, were said to be “the first in the United States to achieve a reading knowledge of the Koran in a temple class, practically all study of this type having been heretofore conducted privately” (cited in GhaneaBassiri 2010: 190). According to ethnographers of the first half of the twentieth century, mosques were built as places to socialize. When the
Cedar Rapids mosque was opened, it was suggested it be called a nadi (or club) so that its use would not be restricted to prayer. Other forms of associational life took hold as well; for instance in 1918 Syrian and Turkish Muslims formed the Association of Islamic Union of Cleveland (Ohio) in order to “foster social relations and solidarity among Moslems” (cited in GhaneaBassiri 2010: 185) and, in 1919, South Asian Muslims in the Sacramento area formed the Moslem Association of America in order to establish proper burial grounds in California (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 186). The Muslim community in Michigan City, Indiana, reportedly numbered 200 families in 1925 when it founded the Society of the New Era and bought a cemetery and two buildings—one for World War I veterans and the other for social gatherings. Then in 1934 the association bought another building to use as a mosque, and divided it in two, using one half for prayers and the other for socializing.

Before the establishment of mosques in America, many early immigrants felt simultaneously isolated and empowered to practice their religion as they saw fit. If at all, they prayed in their homes and improvised ways to keep their observances. Aspects of the religion were selectively observed; many would avoid alcohol and pig products but would not perform ritual activities such as daily prayer or the fast of Ramadan. An observant member of the early Palestinian Muslim community in Chicago had this to say about his largely non-observant co-religionists:

The Arabs in Chicago behave more like Kafir [sic] [or non-believers] rather than Muslims. They don’t make the salat [or ritual prayer], they have forgotten the shahada [the confession of faith], drink like they were from Dublin, and eat ham sandwiches as if they were food from paradise. All they have on their minds is women. *(Cited in GhaneaBassiri 2010: 188)*

More than anything, the frustration expressed in this anecdote attests to how lonely it must have been to be an observant Muslim in the 1920s and 1930s. Generally Muslims of a wide range of ethnic backgrounds tended to downplay the differences performed through rituals and emphasized what they held in common with Americans, whether Muslim or not.

When the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, opened in 1957, it signaled that Islam was being recognized by Islamic countries as a permanent presence in the American religious landscape. The Islamic Center was built as a cooperative venture between the American Muslims and Islamic governments. The idea for building this mosque was to serve the growing number of diplomats and their families from Muslim countries, and reportedly dates back as early as 1944 when the Turkish ambassador passed away in Washington, DC, and there was no suitable site to hold a memorial service. Following this, American Muslims cooperated with a number of diplomats to raise money to build the mosque and 14 Muslim countries contributed. According to
GhaneaBassiri, it was the first of its kind to be built in the “architectural vocabulary” of the mosques in the Muslim world, incorporating motifs from various Islamic civilizations (2010: 255). President Eisenhower spoke at its opening ceremony, saying that “thousands of Americans” live, work, “and grow in understanding” among Muslim people in the United States, and that “under the American Constitution, this Center, this place of worship, is as welcome as any similar edifice of any religion” (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 256). This official endorsement of the Islamic Center not only brought national attention, it rhetorically named religion—aspirationally—as the medium for understanding and cooperation.

Later years

There have been significant changes in the demographics of the Muslim American population in five decades since the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, opened, which help to explain the pronounced changes we see in the collective representation of Muslim American interests. To understand this, we need to take into account that the immigration history of Muslim Americans is divided into three waves, the last of which brought the overwhelming majority of Muslims to the United States beginning in the mid-1960s, when US immigration policy changed. Until the 1960s, the size of Muslim communities in the United States was limited, and communication among them, even more so. In 1965, the US Congress passed an immigration reform law that removed national origins quotas that had been an obstacle to extensive immigration from non-European countries including those in the Islamic world, and replaced them with specific preferences for family reunification, professional and occupational skills, and humanitarian ends. With this turning point in immigration policy, a steady upward trend in the number of immigrants admitted from the so-called “Third World” sending countries meant that hundreds of thousands of new arrivals from Arab, African, South Asian, and East Asian countries (many of them Muslim majority) came to the United States. While earlier waves of Muslim skilled laborers had found jobs in industry (such as automobile manufacturing) and agriculture, this new wave contained many professionals and graduate students bound for graduate schools across the United States. Students were not confined by immigration provisions, since they came to the United States on non-immigrant student visas. Many began to arrive in the United States under the auspices of the Fulbright Program established by Congress in 1946. Between 1948 and 1965 the number of students from Muslim countries increased fivefold; some belonged to Islamist movements, inspired by ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb (Egypt) and Ala’ al-Mawdudi (India/Pakistan). Thus inspired, these students had a significant impact on the subsequent organizing for Islam in America. In 1963, they founded a national organization, the Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada (MSA), at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, to
serve the needs of this new wave of sojourners. Within five years of its founding, the Muslim Student Association assumed the responsibility of coordinating annual conventions and various other community events including the two Eid holidays and the observance of Ramadan, the month of fasting (Haddad 1986).

In the following two decades, the MSA became the most successful national organization of Muslim Americans founded by immigrants. When it formed in 1963 it had ten affiliates at various colleges and universities. By 1968, it already had 105 local associations across the US and Canada, and began printing books and pamphlets on Islam for both Muslims and non-Muslims. It published a magazine called Al-Ittihad; established a charitable fund; gave lectures on Islam to local Muslim and non-Muslim organizations; and made prison visits. It had no center for its operations until 1973 when it founded its headquarters in Gary, Indiana. Later this was relocated to its permanent headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana. The students who founded the MSA did so in part because they were dispersed throughout the country, and the organization sought to strengthen “fraternal bonds” among Muslim students (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 266). For MSA activists, adherence to Islamic beliefs was not only a religious duty but a means to practice a comprehensive way of life in the modern world that would transcend ethnic and racial barriers. In many of the MSA publications, Sayyid Qutb is cited to affirm that the faith of Islam is “divinely ordained” and to propagate a utopian understanding that soon became emblematic of the MSA: “Islam is the solution” for humanity’s problems (cited in GhaneaBassiri 2010: 267). Within the pluralistic context of the United States, the MSA realized the unique opportunity to advocate a pan-Islamic, complete way of life that displaces cultural, ethnic, or linguistic specificity. In other words, the novelty of the MSA was in the normative vision of its leadership that Islam is the universal bond among a diverse population of Muslims in the United States.

Social scientists have indicated the way new organizational practices reconstitute both the objects and the subjects of practice. In various domains, major shifts in practice are tied to ontological changes in the meaning of particular objects as well as creating and being carried by new subject positions closely associated with those practices (Friedland 2009: 53). In the domain of associational life, the meaning assigned to Islam—whether normative or descriptive, individualistic or communitarian—does not solely produce the specific patterns of social life but combines with the larger institutional environment to structure collective action. Within that larger environment, there are practical consequences; associations provide substantive guides for collective action and are durable to the extent that they are reinforced through interaction or legitimation. The interactive process between an association and its larger institutional environment is one in which “the moral becomes factual” and the question of how social arrangements and beliefs come to be taken for granted resonates with political theorists’ conception of a “third
level” of power: “the means through which power influences, shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict” (Clemens and Cook 1999: 446). Regular patterns of social action may be constrained by external forces, produced by internalized beliefs, or a combination of the two. But what is most clear is that with respect to religious associations, the regularity of these patterns will be strengthened when the two (external and internal) sources coincide and reinforce each other. This we will see in the following section, when we look at how contemporary Muslim American advocacy organizations are building a reasonable degree of political effectiveness.

Contemporary Muslim American organizations

Currently approximately eight in ten young Muslim Americans, between the ages of 18 and 29, say that religion plays an important part in their daily lives, and this translates into increased civic engagement and support for Muslim American organizations (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies 2011). The local mosque remains the central institution of religious and cultural life for Muslim Americans, young and old. But a relatively recent phenomenon, the rise of political organizations to advocate for Muslim American interests, is also notable. In this section I provide brief profiles of selected Muslim American organizations in the United States representing the diverse histories, orientations, and missions found among these organizations. These provide a basic history of the organizations’ origins and purposes. I do not try to cover the full spectrum of Muslim American organizations. For instance, I do not include any of the several social service providers or the governing councils of masjids or Islamic centers. These types of organizations tend to be local institutions that deliver their services to a local constituency and interact with other agencies within their specific locations and areas of expertise. Additionally, the vastly important area of African American Islam is beyond the scope of this chapter, which concentrates on the advocacy organizations established by immigrants and their children, which to some degree may also represent African American Muslims but are not established or run by them. Rather, here the primary focus is on organizations claiming a national constituency dealing with matters that affect national policy or potentially impact Muslim Americans across the country. This is not to say that the national organizations that are discussed here do not help Muslim communities with day-to-day religious issues, improving education, and encouraging personal piety. They pursue these goals as well, in particular, through their regional chapters. But primarily these organizations strive to determine which concerns receive attention as a “Muslim issue” in the media, in government circles, and in the broader public debates in the United States. In recent years, these organizations have become proficient at responding to negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam in local and national media outlets, and have
developed political channels to pursue a range of policy agendas. For instance, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Center for Global Understanding, and the Muslim Public Service Network are just a few examples of organizations that offer Washington, DC, internship programs for college students with the objective of encouraging career paths in public, non-profit, and government institutions. They advocate working within the civic, legal and political institutions across the nation and build coalitions with other non-Muslim organizations and grassroots efforts to address pressing issues in their regional and national communities.

Several Muslim American organizations embrace the tools provided by new media to reach their members. Social networking through Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and online videos is common. Web destinations such as YouTube are filled with content from Muslim American organizations. Increasingly these organizations’ messages are designed to appeal to young Muslims raised in the United States. Thus the internet and other new technologies have made it easier for Muslim organizations in the United States to reach a younger generation of Muslims and is now a permanent feature.

Several government agencies have played a pivotal role in classifying advocacy organizations from several disparate communities as a unified whole and, in the process of securitizing the nation-state against future terrorism, have effectively given a singular, racialized identity to all Muslims and those who resemble Muslims (Love 2011a). For instance, the US Department of Justice has convened “Middle Eastern American” meetings with representatives from a range of advocacy organizations in order to address problems of national security and civil liberties.

Surprisingly few women have served as top executives of Muslim American organizations, especially given that when many of these organizations came into being, civil rights laws had already been enacted to promote non-discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origins, and creed (Love 2011b). Notable exceptions include Ingrid Mattson, the president of the Islamic Society of North America from 2006 to 2010; Hadia Mubarak, the former president of the Muslim Student Association, and the first US-born person to be elected to that position; Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, the founding executive director of the organization Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights; and Farhana Khera, the founding Executive Director of Muslim Advocates.

Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), founded in 1983 as an outgrowth of the Muslim Student Association (established 1963), functions as a broad-based organization that holds annual conventions attended by Muslims of a wide range of backgrounds and orientations. It is an umbrella organization representing more than
Table 17.2: Major Muslim American advocacy organizations and the dates they were founded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Student Association</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Muslim Alliance/American Muslim Taskforce</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<td>Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>National Association of Muslim Lawyers (NAML)</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>South Asian Americans Leading Together</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>Institute for Social Policy Understanding (ISPU)</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim Advocates</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assembly of Turkic American Federations (ATAA)</td>
<td>2011</td>
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Note: This list of organizations is different from the one provided by the Pew Forum in Table 17.1, and in some instances, the founding dates are different from those provided by the Pew Forum. This is because the information provided here pertains to the life of each organization, whether or not they advocate on public policy or try to influence public opinion on a political matter. In contrast, the Pew Forum study provides information about the registration of organizations as bona fide political lobbyists, according to criteria established by the IRS.

2,000 mosques and Islamic centers in the United States and Canada. Recently much attention has been paid to tracing the origins of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and its predecessor, the Muslim Student Association (MSA)—as well as the Muslim American Society (MAS) and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), organizations founded in the 1990s—to the Muslim Brotherhood (Pew 2010). However, regardless of any (unfounded) past affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the current leadership of all three organizations have renounced any ties and have concentrated their activities on advocacy and civil rights and educational issues within the United States.

The ISNA has long been a service organization that has periodically taken a position on policy. More recently, in the past decade, it has established a lobbying arm in Washington, DC, which it calls ISNA, Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances. On
February 19, 2011, in light of the congressional inquiry into the radicalization of Muslim Americans conducted by Congressman Peter King, ISNA held an Interfaith and Government Forum in Crystal City, Virginia, to strategize what Americans can do to counteract anti-Muslim bigotry.

The Fiqh Council of North America, an affiliate of ISNA, is a prominent network of religious scholars from the United States and Canada which offers Islamic legal advice on the application of religious principles.

The Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) is also sponsored by ISNA and plays an important role in staging conferences and events with an Islamic focus. Divided into four regions covering Canada and the eastern, central, and western United States, MYNA provides occasions for young people to talk about issues of common concern and to develop leadership skills.

**Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)**

Founded in 1988 by the Islamic Center of Southern California, MPAC quickly became a national organization that aims to inform and shape public opinion regarding issues of importance to the nation. It also places considerable resources behind a multifaceted program of education for young leaders to encourage careers in public service, and works with law enforcement agencies to insure the protection of Muslim Americans’ civil liberties. This organization has an affiliate, the Muslim Women’s League, which promotes women’s rights.

**Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)**

Founded in 1994, CAIR emerged at a time when certain pundits were bringing public attention to the problem of “militant Islam.” In the same year, PBS aired a Steve Emerson documentary called *Jihad in America*, which advanced the idea that some ill-defined Islamist ideologies and organizations represented a credible threat to “the West,” which was similar to what the communist threat had been during the Cold War. CAIR’s mission is to educate the American public about Islam, to challenge defamatory representations of Islam and Muslims, to protect the civil liberties of Muslim Americans, and to lobby on behalf of Muslim American interests. Soon after its founding, CAIR was baptized by fire, gaining national attention for its advocacy for Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. It published a report, *A Rush to Judgment*, which documented more than 200 incidents of harassment and hate crimes against Muslim Americans in the days following the bombing. Since then CAIR has regularly published reports about backlash discrimination, and is considered by many to be the premier Muslim American advocacy group.
National Association of Muslim Lawyers/Muslim Advocates

The National Association of Muslim Lawyers (NAML), founded in 2000, and joined by its sister organization, Muslim Advocates, in 2005, is a national legal advocacy and educational organization that promotes the protection of freedom, justice, and equality regardless of faith. It uses the tools of legal advocacy, policy engagement, and education to meet its aims. In its mission statement this organization states that it endorses the founding principles of American constitutionalism, and believes that these principles can be fulfilled without compromising the nation’s security. Since its founding in 2005, Muslim Advocates has established itself as a networking agent among the nation’s leading lawyers, community and mosque leaders, government officials, the media, and allies in the human rights and national security fields. In addition to its advocacy efforts, Muslim Advocates has provided technical assistance to Muslim charities to help them be in legal compliance.

Assembly of Turkic American Federations (ATAF)

The Assembly of Turkic American Federations (ATAF) opened in 2011 in Washington, DC, to serve as an umbrella organization to coordinate the various activities of six regional “dialogue” associations of the Hizmet Movement in the United States (Hendrick 2012). The Hizmet Movement—associated with the retired Turkish Islamic preacher and writer, M. Fethullah Gulen, living in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since 1998—also funds several Gulen-inspired private schools in the United States, including the Pinnacle Academy in suburban Washington, DC, aimed primarily at Turkish-American communities. Additionally, members of the Hizmet Movement have opened several dozen public charter schools that cater to non-Muslims, offering a rigorous science- and technology-based curriculum primarily in low-income neighborhoods. They also run a satellite cable television station called Ebru TV, which broadcasts a range of family-oriented educational and lifestyle programs.

Conclusion

Civil society, a seedbed for civic virtues and competence, consists of the myriad associations and institutions that point citizens away from isolation and toward their shared interests with others. Religious institutions as a whole, including places of worship, faith based institutions such as hospitals, schools, and service organizations as well as advocacy organizations, represent the single largest component of civil society. Historically, religious institutions have played an important role in generating civic engagement. More than half of the volunteer activity in the United States takes place within religious settings, nearly 60 percent of Americans are members of a house of
worship, and more than one third are associated with religious groups other than houses of worship. Thus religious institutions are bound to have a significant impact on the civic life and, in turn, on the abilities of American Muslim leaders to influence politics.

Associations themselves become conduits of moral and behavioral codes, rules of conduct and ritual guidelines. The argument is that people are more likely to participate in politics, and to be more effective participants, when they have experience doing a variety of things that occur frequently in their places of worship, such as organizing meetings, electing governing boards, writing letters, and speaking in public. The assumption is that basic civic skills are transferable, and what is learned in one venue can be put to use in another. Houses of worship and other religious associations are important for building skills because they provide opportunities that participants might not otherwise have.

The time period covered in this chapter has witnessed an ever greater diversity of voices competing to be heard and to get their agenda on the table of the national discussion. Instances like the congressional hearing on the “radicalization of American Muslims” have led to what many consider a confusion of the tongues. What are we to believe from all of the bombast? Many Muslim American groups have emerged with the purpose of providing reliable and accurate information, and this has led to increased coalition building among religious groups and between political parties and religious groups. We can reasonably expect this pattern to continue.

Another inescapable conclusion is the resilience and adaptability of pluralism in the United States. For all its diversity, the nation appears to be in a strong position to allow both religious and political perspectives to coexist. Of course, it is inevitable that viewpoints will clash, and that is why the legal relationship between religion and politics is so important.

**Summary**

- Generally, political activism by religious individuals and groups has been a longstanding tradition in the United States, notwithstanding the principle of separation of Church and state.
- In the case of Muslim Americans, civic engagement and associational life have grown dramatically since the 1960s.
- Much of this growth has happened in a political landscape characterized by reductionist generalizations about alleged connections between terrorism and Islam.

**Discussion points**

- Discuss religious activism in American politics, and how moral values can motivate individuals and groups to become involved in political causes.
• What events of the 1960s were of particular importance for the relationship of politics and religion?
• Discuss the role of religion in the early mosque movement in the United States.
• What impact did the arrival of foreign students have in the organization of Islam in the United States? What impact did changes in immigration law in the 1960s have on the growth of Muslim American communities and their representative advocacy organizations?
• How do events such as the Peter King congressional inquiry into the “radicalization” of Muslim Americans present a particular challenge?

Further reading


This book represents the diversity of Muslim women in the United States and the roles of Muslim American women in public and private lives.


Based on the giving habits of Pakistani-Americans, this book studies the history, demography, and institutional geography of Pakistani-Americans and looks at how charitable giving and volunteerism are tools to navigate multiple identities.


This book provides a synthesis of Muslim values and institutions in the two countries and contains a directory of schools, mosques, and other organizations.


This book provides personal narratives of Muslim American men and women who experience discrimination before and after 9/11 and the ways they have adapted since the terrorist attacks.


This collection of papers examine questions of political representation, identity politics, civil liberties, immigration, and security issues in North American and Western European societies.

References


Vose, Clement E. (1973 [1959]) Caucasians Only: The Supreme Court, the NAACP, and Restrictive Covenants, Berkeley: University of California Press.