

## Strengthening the competitive edge of Muslim students in the Islamophobic environment

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### **50 words summery:**

This paper suggests strategies to enhance the competitive edge of Muslim students to achieve their preferred career paths. The paper asserts that it will gradually become more difficult for young Muslims to pursue their American dream in an Islamophobic environment fueled by the terrorism-war nexus, demographic shifts and a weaker economy.

### **Paper**

Although no major terrorist attack has taken place since September 11, 2001, Islamophobia continues to increase and Muslim Americans continue to lose the favor of their neighbors. In a November 2001 PEW survey, 59 percent of all Americans had a positive opinion of Islam. However, in August 2010 PEW survey, this positive opinion had declined to an all-time low of 30 percent.<sup>1</sup> Muslim Americans are the least liked group in the United States today.

The question is, why are Muslims continuing to lose in the public opinion area when they have done more Dawa, outreach, and interfaith work in the last ten years than probably in the last fifty?

There are five variables, which might be responsible for this continued Islamophobia:

- Organized Islamophobic propaganda
- A war-terrorism nexus which requires demonization of the “other”
- Fear of diversity as projected in future demographic shifts
- Low levels of Muslim civic engagement
- Economic blues and declining socio-political power

It would be prudent to understand these variables in detail before attempting some predictions and insights for the future.

### **Organized Islamophobic propaganda**

The bestselling books on Islam available on Amazon.com, which updates its bestsellers list every hour, are mostly anti-Muslim books written by extremely well-funded Islamophobes like Robert Spencer or their seemingly sophisticated professors like Bernard Lewis. Often, almost all of the top ten books in this category are anti-Muslim.

At this writing, I found seven of the top ten bestsellers to be extremely anti-Muslim,

including two books by Robert Spencer:

Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't  
The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)

The same is true of the top two pages of search results on Google when it comes to words like “Sharia”, “Mohammad”, and “Jihad.”

The dominance of this organized propaganda in public space will continue to fuel Islamophobia in public discourse as well as in public policy. Anti-Sharia legal moves like the one implemented in Oklahoma are now being considered by six other states.

Islamophobia is no longer the agenda of extremists. It has gone mainstream as Time magazine puts it:

*To be a Muslim in America now is to endure slings and arrows against your faith—not just in the schoolyard and the office but also outside your place of worship and in the public square, where some of the country’s most powerful mainstream religious and political leaders unthinkingly (or worse, deliberately) conflate Islam with terrorism and savagery.<sup>ii</sup>*

### **War-terrorism nexus requires demonization of the “other”**

It’s not easy for a human being to kill another human being. Therefore since time immemorial, demonization of the enemy has always been a part of warfare.

Although the U.S. government has taken pains to repeatedly stress that their war is not with Islam, the media continues to demonize Muslims. Initially, it was just the right-wing media and Fox News. Now, it is the mainstream media as well. It is unfortunately what Bin Laden & Co. also continue to do with the demonization of America and everything American. This war-terrorism nexus is resulting in regular waves of an Islamophobic campaign. For example:

- the Park 51 controversy
- Quran-burning episode
- Sharia ban referendum of Oklahoma
- Six other states discussing Sharia ban
- Congressman Peter King’s hearings targeting Muslims

The war is not just dividing and polarizing society in general, but it is also alienating Muslim youth and affecting their mental health in particular.

### **Fear of diversity as projected in the demographic population shifts**

About 44% of all children under five today are non-white. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the minorities in the nation are expected to become the majority.

By 2042, minorities, collectively, are projected to make up more than 50 percent of the U.S. population. Among the nation’s children, the trend is even more pronounced: by 2023, more than half will belong to a minority racial or ethnic

group, the Census Bureau said. By 2050, this will jump to 62 percent (compared to 44 percent today)<sup>iii</sup>.

Fear of the diverse future is behind the fear mongering of right-wing extremists when different Tea Party organizations should the mantra: "I Want My Country Back."<sup>iv</sup>

This fear of diversity has given rise to a substantial amount of hate and extremism in the country. The Secret Service says that President Barack Obama is receiving 400% more death threats than President Bush did.<sup>v</sup> Armed militias have doubled in the United States and worsened in their rhetoric.<sup>vi</sup> Gun sales have increased by 2.5 million last year.<sup>vii</sup>

Xenophobic hate is no longer limited to talk shows and extremists; it is influencing moderates, as well as public policy. It has moved from Minutemen to the infamous Arizona racial profiling law. In April 2010, Arizona enacted two laws addressing immigration, SB 1070 and HB 2162. Now, more than 20 more states are considering similar draconian laws. The federal government is not behind in anti-immigrant actions. It has deported almost 400,000 undocumented workers, an all-time U.S. record.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Disempowerment of Muslims in the USA**

Muslim Americans are probably the least engaged of any community when it comes to civic and political participation. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in its findings of its independent task force on the civic and political integration of Muslim Americans, calls for creating full and equal opportunities for Muslim Americans to participate in American civic and political life. The report, *Strengthening America: The Civic and Political Integration of Muslim Americans*, was developed by thirty-two distinguished Muslim and non-Muslim leaders.

Muslims are a well-educated, young and diverse group. Their civic and political engagement can help America in a unique way.

*There are opportunities for Muslim Americans to expand their contributions to national security and continue to take the lead in encouraging greater civic participation, leadership development, and institution building within their community. Non-Muslim groups and government leaders can work to better recognize Muslim American contributions to national security, improve collaborations with Muslim American institutions, and provide greater opportunities for young Muslim Americans.<sup>ix</sup>*

### **Economic blues and declining U.S. power**

London has replaced New York as the financial capital of the world, a far lesser known fact compared to fear of the US losing to China. The U.S. economy is still the largest in the world. Our ideal types of democracy, human rights, and equal opportunity symbolized by the term "American Dream" have no parallel in

totalitarian China. However, fear of America's decline and chronic problems of debt, trade deficits, and questionable capacity to innovate and lead in the future are contributing to an environment which facilitates a xenophobic conversation blaming immigrants, minorities and the "other" for our woes.

### **The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American life**

Islamophobia has a serious impact on the well-being of Muslims in America. The wages of Muslims went down by 10 percent after September 11, 2001, according to a collaborative study by Columbia University and University of Illinois.<sup>x</sup> It never went back to that level again. There is also anecdotal evidence of Muslims facing challenges in acquiring or retaining jobs in this Islamophobic environment. Those with jobs have the highest level of dissatisfaction in comparison to other faith communities.

Here are some other effects of Islamophobia on Muslim life:

- 700,000 Muslims interviewed by the FBI
- 30,000+ detained & Masjids checked for nuclear bombs
- 50% of Arab-Americans surveyed had clinical signs of depression (Yale University study)
- 28% of Muslim students in New York report being stopped by police as a result of profiling. 7% said they have been physically assaulted (Columbia University Study)
- Muslim social service agencies report higher levels of domestic violence and divorces
- Marginalization of American Muslims in society

## **Predications about the future:**

### **Possible future scenarios young Muslims might face**

While this author is not a futurologist and is not aware of any Muslim scholars who have written about this topic, it is only logical to conclude that in the foreseeable future, all the above outlined variables, God forbid, will continue to play a significant role in shaping the future.

While this author subscribes to Fareed Zakaria's "rise of the others" thesis<sup>xi</sup> as compared to any doomsday scenario for the U.S., there are not many signs of any extra-ordinary consensus in the society which will be a pre-requisite to arrest the declining US power. Coupled with demographic trends in society, the fear of diversity will continue to strengthen xenophobia in the society.

Muslim organizations regularly react to Islamophobic events and condemn terrorism through press statements. However., there seems to be no resource allocation for properly strategizing and methodologically countering Islamophobia via substantial Muslim civic and political engagement or challenging and dismantling the well-organized Islamophobic propaganda machine which benefits

from the ongoing war-terrorism nexus.

Based on the above-mentioned unfortunate possibilities of continued negative trends the following scenarios might also be correct:

- Graduating Muslim highschoolers might face more difficulties in gaining admission into preferred schools
- Muslims will have difficulty securing good career paths and advancing in their fields
- The wages of Muslim Americans may not recover to pre-911 levels in the future
- Visible Muslims might have even more difficulties than other Muslims
- These societal pressures might also increase the cost of being a Muslim, forcing more to avoid profiling by not looking or behaving “Muslim.”
- It is likely that the Muslim mental health situation will further worsen
- In consideration of a well-established frustration-aggression nexus in the literature of violence, it is likely that some young Muslim Americans, God forbid, might resort to terrorism, hurting themselves and their neighbors, as well as fueling Islamophobia

### **What can the Muslim community do to enhance young Muslims’ access to the “American Dream”?**

There are many steps parents, Muslim schools, and Islamic organizations can take to enhance the competitive advantage of young Muslims, despite the above-mentioned scenarios. Even if they do not come true, these suggestions will help community growth.

#### **Knowledge of the challenge: Islamophobia**

Unless we know the challenges we cannot possibility plan to meet them. One of the major difficulties is that students, parents, teachers, and the Muslim leadership are, by and large, neither aware of the full magnitude and the depth of the problems the Muslim community is facing regarding Islamophobia, nor are they actually used to using the term Islamophobia. It is therefore of utmost importance that the community media, magazines, journals, newsletters and Friday Khutabas address these issues thoroughly, generate discussion on these topics, and share experiences and success stories among all stakeholders. This should not just be one casual article or so, but a consistent flow of information to create an information regime on this topic.

Here are some proposed topics that can help us achieve this goal:

- What is Islamophobia
  - Definition
  - Comparison with other forms of racism
  - Events of 9/11 & Muslim Americans
  - War-terrorism nexus and its contribution to Islamophobia

- Who are the leading Islamophobes
- Why reporting discrimination and profiling will help fight Islamophobia
- Expressions of self-hate and low self-esteem
- Insist on using the name of the problem: Islamophobia
- History of racism in the United States
- Minority strategies and experiences of struggle against prejudice
  - Japanese-Americans
  - Catholic-Americans
  - African-Americans
  - Jewish-Americans
- Poor peoples' movement in the U.S.
- Civil rights movement and its contribution to civil liberties and non-racial immigration policies
- Right-wing extremism in society

*Books which can help prepare material on these topics:*

Teaching Against Islamophobia (Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education) (2010)

Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy by Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg (2007)

Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism: Causes and Remedies by Mohamed Nimer (2007)

Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail by Richard Cloward (1978)

### **Developing Knowledge of the future:**

No one knows the future, right? Not quite! While only God knows the ultimate outcome of things and what exactly the future holds, He has blessed human beings with brains, which we regularly engage in to predict the future from the weatherperson to the planning departments of corporations and governments. Human predictions may not be perfect, but they are by and large helpful, as they study current trends and directions in technology, the marketplace, demographics, the supply and demand situation in different professions etc.

All stakeholders for the future of our children should enhance their knowledge based on these future directions.

Here are some questions for which stakeholders should look for answers:

- Where is America heading in terms of economy and power?
- What professions provide a risky, but more rewarding opportunity to serve our nation in critical areas to restore America's competitiveness?
- What will the future global job market be like?
- What types of jobs will have better income prospects in the next ten years?
- What type of preparedness will place Muslim students on track to achieve a

desired career path?

The knowledge of where America and the world is heading will help us determine opportunities to serve our nation with distinction.

*Resources that can help prepare on these topics:*

The Post-American World by Fareed Zakaria (2010)

Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH), 2010-11: <http://www.bls.gov/emp/>

Fast Company or [fastcompany.com](http://fastcompany.com)

World Future Society or [wfs.org](http://wfs.org)

### **Don't just graduate, equip them for leadership**

Three hundred or so full-time Muslim schools consume about \$600 million a year and probably graduate 3,000 students a year. Considering that 95% of Muslim students are in public schools and have no access to Islamic education, our goals with these 3,000 graduates a year should not be just limited to providing an Islamic environment and good education. They must include the goal of preparing them as leaders for America and the Muslim community.

The vision and goals of these schools should be rewritten for this purpose and should be taken far more seriously in terms of the overall educational program.

Muslims are by and large absent from public service, boards, commissions, and the government. Public services pay less, but offer the opportunity to earn higher rewards from God and a level of satisfaction that cannot be purchased with money. There is a crisis of confidence in the U.S. when it comes to the corporate<sup>xii</sup> and national leadership.<sup>xiii</sup> This crisis provides opportunities for those who like to serve with sacrifice.

Unfortunately there is trust deficit in Muslim institutions in the United States, as well. Younger generations are very skeptical of the culture, the systems and the processes of Islamic centers, organizations, and institutions. On the other hand, the generation running these institutions complains about the absence of commitment and capacity of the younger Muslims to run these institutions. It would be an utter failure on the part of Muslim America, which boasts at least 5,000 Muslim organizations, institutions and Islamic centers, to fail to develop some of their own products to serve these institutions. As Islamophobia has brought Muslim immigration to a complete halt, the existing leadership of the immigrant-led institutions will not have a ready supply of another wave of immigrants. They have no choice but to invest in the leadership skills of those born and raised here.

Leadership skills are not only needed to serve in public sector and non-for profit organizations, these skills can actually help no matter what profession one selects.

Here is a list of leadership skills, which our parents, schools, and Islamic centers should incorporate through extra classes, and extra curricular learning

opportunities, school and interschool competitions, clubs, Khutbas, lectures, prizes, rewards, and recognition.

- *Conceptual preparedness for leadership:* Unfortunately many Muslims don't understand service as a required duty in Islam. The twin tests of faith which God has given us in the Quran's chapter of Al-Ma'oon emphasize this point:
  - The first test in this chapter is a serving connection with God's creation
  - The second test is a contemplative connection with the Creator in worship

These twin connections not only complete our faith but define us as well. It is important to emphasize for Muslim students that public service is essential in Islam whether that is through the not-profit or through public sector.

- *Better communication skills:* No matter what profession students plan to pursue, there is no replacement of better communication skills to set them on the leadership path. This author serves on many boards and has regularly noticed that between two candidates of equal qualifications and experience, the one with better communication skills is always preferred. Better communication skills not only results in a better job, it helps one achieve faster growth within all professions. Better communication skills are also good for family life as well as for Dawa/outreach, which Muslims need so much of. Here are some of the communication skills which will be important to teach in schools:
  - Better writing skills
  - Better Speaking skills
  - Higher levels of generative skills to produce
  - Better reading skills
  - Interpersonal communication skills
    - Listening skills
    - Learning to deflect negative approaches by others
    - The art of negotiation and compromise
- *Relationship and networking skills:* The human touch has always been a winning skill. Relationships go a long way in opening doors and building bridges of understanding. Despite systematic anti-Muslim propaganda and an Islamophobic environment, there are 100 million Americans who still have a positive opinion of Islam, according to surveys.<sup>xiv</sup> Developing better relationship skills is bound to enhance the competitive edge of Muslim students.
- *Conflict management and conflict resolution skills*
- *Anger Management skills*
- *Managerial and organizational skills*



- *Goal-setting and planning process*
- *Time-management skills*
- *Supervisory skills*
- *Consensus building skills*
- *Robert's rules of order*

### **Training stakeholders to prepare children for the future**

Parents, teachers, Imams and other community leaders need to learn how to incorporate the recommendations in this article to reequip themselves for a better future:

- Teachers' training opportunities need to be enhanced in the following ways:
  - Knowledge of the challenges graduates will be facing
  - How to incorporate the additional recommended skill sets within the existing teaching program
  - Supporting teachers through monetary and non-monetary rewards for their innovation in these areas
  - Sharing their success stories throughout the Muslim teachers' circuit through the Muslim Teachers' newsletter<sup>xv</sup>
- Learning parents: Parental responsibilities are routinely emphasized by principals and teachers in the development of students. However, we propose that schools take a step forward in offering the following assistance to parents to enhance parental abilities and assist their children in becoming more competitive:
  - Offer parenting workshops on these topics on a quarterly basis
  - Make a book selection on this topic available at cost to parents or through libraries
  - Through the school paper and newsletters, offer parents tips in this regard
  - Principals should issue a quarterly letter to parents in this regard
- Imams & Muslim leadership can help: Imam and Masjid leadership is crucial in setting the community agenda
  - Masjids need to allocate funds in their budget for the following programs:
    - Youth development committee of the Masjid
    - MSA assistance fund: Hillel, which helps the Jewish student body on campuses, in Chicago has thirty-plus staff guiding, counseling, mentoring, and providing rabbinical services to Jewish students. As compared to that, MSAs in the Chicago-area have no full-time or part-time staff. We propose that Masjids adopt an MSA and fund its growth. Initially, each Masjid can hire youth counselors who can advise Masjid youth committees, provide career guidance, and serve as staff to the local MSA.

- A free newsletter, “Masjid Today” can become a vehicle of this conversation and share success stories in this regard<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Enhance counseling programs at schools**

Each full-time Muslim high school must have at least one certified college and career counselor to help students make more informed and better educational and career choices; to point out the academic and occupational training needed to succeed in the workplace, and to modify school programs to be more responsive to strengthening the competitive edge of the students.

If funding does not allow hiring full-time counselors, it can be a part-time employee. Alternatively, schools may reduce some teachers’ workload so that they can learn and assist students for future paths of success. If there is more than one Muslim school in a city, they can hire one counselor and have a time-sharing arrangement between schools.

In large cities these Muslim career counselors can regularly meet with each other in workshops to enhance their knowledge base about career guidance and resource sharing.

### **Mental well-being of young Muslims:**

The competitive edge of young Muslims will be substantially diminished if they are not comfortable with themselves. It is unfortunate that there are hardly any known steps taken by Muslim educators or Muslims leaders despite the very alarming mental health problems in the Muslim community. First came the Yale University research study that 50% of Arab-Americans have clinical signs of depression.<sup>xvii</sup> Then came the second alarming report. The Gallup Center reported that Muslim youth aged 18 to 28 are the least happy and the angriest compared to the youth of other faith groups in America. Twenty-six percent of young Muslims, compared with 14% each of young Protestants and Mormons, say they experienced anger.<sup>xviii</sup> Another alarming report was by PEW, which asserted that 26% of young Muslim Americans support suicide bombing of civilian targets to defend Islam.<sup>xix</sup>

Here are some suggestions for what Muslim educators should urgently consider doing:

- Muslim schools must hire professional and spiritual counselors, which will offer students a way to share their stress or concerns with qualified personnel who can help them
- Muslim psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors in the community should step forward and volunteer their services, even if this is on a part-time basis
- In addition, teachers should be trained in a special seminar or workshop on recognizing the signs of stress, depression and other mental health challenges in their classrooms
- Schools should incorporate short lectures in their morning assemblies on themes like Tawakkul, Sabr, mercy and forgiveness.
- Administrators and teachers should work together to develop lesson plans on how to deal with anger, stress and other issues.
- Teachers should also be trained to know the signs when parents need to be advised to seek

professional assistance

### **Business and self-employment options**

While 30 percent Muslim Americans report working in a professional job, which is similar to Protestants in the US, Muslim Americans have the largest number of self-employed people as compared to any other community. Twenty-five percent of Muslim Americans are self-employed. In view of the fact that Muslim Americans who say they have a job report lower ratings of overall job satisfaction compared with their peers in other religious groups,<sup>xx</sup> and the fact that the wages of Muslims went down by 10% after 9/11 and did not return to normal levels,<sup>xxi</sup> as well as the Prophetic preference for commerce and that so many Muslims are self-employed, it is prudent to provide educational options for students in the form of entrepreneurial training, mentorship and business clubs etc.

### **Answers to objections on Islam**

The Islam which we teach our children currently does not prepare them to deal with objections on Islam which have turned into a movement of hate. Amazon's bestsellers on Islam are most often hate books written against Islam. Islamic Studies programs at the high school level must be modified to discuss objections on Islam and diverse Muslim responses. Many parents don't know how to handle the barrage of semi-informed, semi-intellectual objections on Islam.

Some of the suitable books to handle these objections:

- Being Muslim, Haroon Siddiqui (2008)
- Gender Equity in Islam, Jamal Badawi (1995)
- Jihad vs. Terrorism, Dr. Maher Hathout, MVI, (2002)

### **Challenges of Implementation**

A major challenge for implementing all of these suggestion is the development cost. Islamic schools are fiscally struggling institutions, while teachers are over-worked and under-paid.

The answer perhaps lies in the better use of new media. While students are benefiting tremendously from the Internet for their homework, teachers are relatively behind in using the Internet to enhance their supplemental material and lesson plans, which can incorporate the preparedness needed for enhancing the competitive edge of students. It is also important to note that non-institutionalized classes are taking more advantage of the new media than the brick and mortar schools. According to one report, Muslim Americans have spent about \$25 million in these non-institutionalized classes.

Some good, thoughtful strategic thinking utilizing new media to develop collaboration among Muslim teachers, counselors and school administrators can come up with shared material needed to meet this added challenge.

If one person, Selman Khan of KhanAcademy.org, can make Bill Gates and his

children learn math and science through him, why can't another Muslim do the same for what is needed now to enhance the competitive edge of young Muslims in the marketplace?

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<sup>i</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/647/>

<sup>ii</sup> Time Magazine's cover story Aug. 30. 2010 issue, "Is America Islamophobic?"

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.america.gov/st/diversity-english/2008/August/20080815140005xlrennef0.1078106.html#ixzz0fbsugaIM>

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-j-elisberg/the-noble-i-want-my-count\\_b\\_741606.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-j-elisberg/the-noble-i-want-my-count_b_741606.html)

<sup>v</sup>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/5967942/Barack-Obama-faces-30-death-threats-a-day-stretching-US-Secret-Service.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2022516,00.html>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.ammoland.com/2010/01/13/gun-owners-buy-14-million-plus-guns-in-2009/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/us/07immig.html>

<sup>ix</sup>

[http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Studies\\_Publications/TaskForcesandStudies/MuslimAmericans2007.aspx](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Studies_Publications/TaskForcesandStudies/MuslimAmericans2007.aspx)

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/news/aug06/kaushal911.html>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.fareedzakaria.com/home/Author.html>

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.bizjournals.com/southflorida/stories/2009/01/26/daily22.html>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1698>

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/647/>

<sup>xv</sup> Muslim Teacher is the first free newsletter for Muslim Teachers published monthly by the Sound Vision Foundation

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<sup>xvi</sup> A free monthly eLetter by Sound Vision Foundation

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.soundvision.com/Info/life/StateOfMuslimMentalHealth.asp>

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116260/muslim-americans-exemplify-diversity-potential.aspx>

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/05/22/us-usa-muslims-poll-idUSN2244293620070522>

<sup>xx</sup> "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait" includes findings from the first-ever nationwide representative random sample of Muslim Americans (in the Gallup Daily Poll), as well as from Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, and Gallup World Poll.

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/news/aug06/kaushal911.html>