

Being Muslim in America



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The young women pictured on our cover are both Muslim. They live near Detroit, Michigan, in a community with many Arab-American residents. Each expresses her faith in her own way, with a combination of traditional and modern dress. Here, they compete fiercely on the basketball court in a sport that blends individual skills and team effort. They — along with the other men, women, and children in this publication — demonstrate every day what it is like to be Muslim in America.

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DID YOU KNOW?/PERFORMERS MINI-POSTER



"I AM AN AMERICAN WITH A MUSLIM SOUL"

I love America not because I am under the illusion that it is perfect, but because it allows me — the child of Muslim immigrants from India — to participate in its progress, to carve a place in its promise, to play a role in its possibility.



Eboo Patel

John Winthrop, one of the earliest European settlers in America, gave voice to this sense of possibility. He told his compatriots that their society would be like a city upon a hill, a beacon for the world. It was a hope rooted

in Winthrop's Christian faith, and no doubt he imagined his city on a hill with a steeple in the center. Throughout the centuries, America has remained a deeply religious country, while becoming a remarkably plural one.

Indeed, we are the most religiously devout nation in the West and the most religiously diverse country in the world. The steeple at the center of the city on a hill is now surrounded by the minaret of Muslim mosques, the Hebrew script of Jewish synagogues, the chanting of Buddhist sangas, and the statues

of Hindu temples. In fact, there are now more Muslims in America than Episcopalians, the faith professed by many of America's Founding Fathers.

One hundred years ago, the great African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois warned that the problem of the century would be the color line. The 21st century might well be dominated by a different line — the faith line. The most pressing questions for my country (America), my religion (Islam), and all God's people may well be these: How will people who may have different ideas of heaven interact together on Earth? Will the steeple, the minaret, the synagogue, the temple, and the sanga learn to share space in a new city on a hill?

I think the American ethos — mixing tolerance and reverence — may have something special to contribute to this issue.

America is a grand gathering of souls, the vast majority from elsewhere. The American genius lies in allowing these souls to contribute their texture to the American tradition, to add new notes to the American song.

I am an American with a Muslim soul. My soul carries a long history of heroes, movements, and civilizations that sought to submit to the will of God. My soul listened as the Prophet Muhammad preached the central messages of Islam, tazaarqa and tawhid, compassionate justice and the oneness of God. In the Middle

Ages, my soul spread to the East and West, praying in the mosques and studying in the libraries of the great medieval Muslim cities of Cairo, Baghdad, and Cordoba. My soul whirled with Rumi, read Aristotle with Averroes, traveled through Central Asia with Nasir Khusrow. In the colonial era, my Muslim soul was stirred to justice. It marched with Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars in their satyagraha to free India. It stood with Farid Esack, Ebrahim Moosa, Rahid Omar, and the Muslim Youth Movement in their struggle for a multicultural South Africa.

In one eye I carry this ancient Muslim vision on pluralism; in the other eye I carry the American promise. And in my heart, I pray that we make real this possibility: a city on a hill where different religious communities respectfully share space and collectively serve the common good; a world where diverse nations and peoples come to know one another in a spirit of brotherhood and righteousness; a century in which we achieve a common life together.

Author Eboo Patel is executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, Illinois. He is a leader in the interfaith movement.



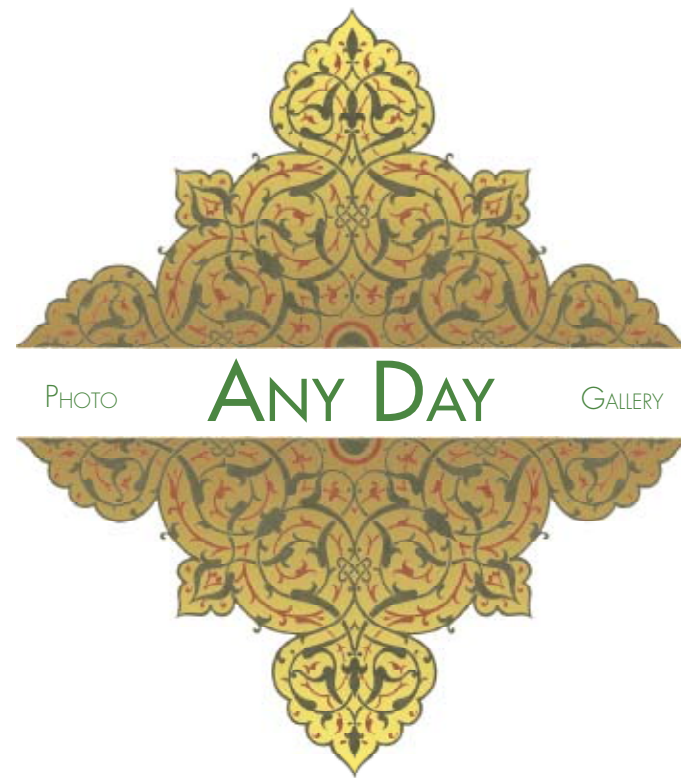


Abdul and Majida Alsaadi shop at a Wal-Mart in Dearborn, Michigan.

Immigrants have come to America from every corner of the globe. The people are diverse but their reasons similar: Some sought to escape an old way of life, others to find a new one. Some were escaping violence, others the shackles of custom, poverty, or simple lack of opportunity. They came largely from Europe in the 19th century and from the rest of the world — Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America — in the 20th and 21st.

They arrived with hope, and often little else.

Their initial reception was frequently mixed. These new Americans found a vast new land hungry for their labor. But some, unfamiliar with these newcomers' customs and religions, treated the new Americans as outsiders and believed they could never be real Americans. They were wrong. With freedom, faith, and hard work, each successive wave of immigrants has added its distinctive contributions to the American story, enriched our society and culture, and shaped the ever-dynamic, always-evolving meaning of the single word that



binds us together: American. And today, this story is the Muslim-American story too.

In 1965, a new immigration law reshaped profoundly the inward flow of new Americans. No longer would national-origin quotas determine who could come. In their place were categories based on family relationships and job skills. With this change, immigration numbers soared, bringing the first significant numbers of Muslims from South Asia and the Middle East to the United States. They



arrived in a nation very different from the one experienced by 19th-century immigrants, but today's new Americans face the old immigrant challenge of defining their place in America's social, economic, and political fabric.

Consider two sisters, Assia and Iman Boundaoui. Their parents are from Algeria, and the girls were raised near Chicago, Illinois, as Muslim Americans. As reported by National Public Radio (NPR), Assia and Imam grew up watching both the



Opposite page: Top left, Sadaf Butt adjusts her hijab; above left, In 2008, Rashida Tlaib is the first Muslim woman to serve in the Michigan legislature. This page: Above, clothing designer Brooke Samad compares fabric swatches; right, Tahqiq Abbasi at his textile shop in Union City, New Jersey.

children's Nickelodeon station and the news channel Al Jazeera. When they got takeout food, they sometimes chose Kentucky Fried Chicken and sometimes their favorite falafel restaurant.

"In America, we would say we're Muslim first, because that's what makes us different, I guess," Assia, age 20, told NPR. "But in another country, like in a Muslim country, we would say we're American."

Their story is both remarkable and not so, for there is nothing more American than new generations — from kaleidoscopic combinations of ethnicity and religion — defining themselves as Americans.

"America has always been the promised land for Muslims and non-Muslims," observes Iranian-American Behzad Yaghmaian, author of *Embracing the Infidel: Stories of Muslim Migrants on the Journey West*. She told the *New York Times*, "They still come here because the United States offers what they're missing at home."

The tales of Muslim Americans track a familiar arc, but individually they add immeasurably to the vibrant diversity of a nation founded not on common ancestry, but on the shared values of freedom, opportunity, and equal rights for all.

"In every era of U.S. history, women and men from around the world have opted for the American experience," writes historian Hasia Diner. "They arrived as foreigners, bearers of languages, cultures, and religions that at times seemed alien to America's essential core. Over time, as ideas about U.S. culture changed, the immigrants and their descendants simultaneously built ethnic communities and participated in American civic life, contributing to the nation as a whole."



Clockwise from left, Abdi Mohamed says evening prayers in his Omaha, Nebraska, grocery store; at home in Brooklyn, New York, a family searches the Internet; Susan Fadlallah prepares the meal to break the Ramadan fast. Center, butcher Nehme Mansour grinds halal meat in Michigan.



Clockwise from left, Dr. Maya Hammoud holds the medical handbook in Arabic that she wrote; Samiul Haque Noor, winner of New York City's annual Vandy Award for best street vender food; Mohamad Atwi's Wal-Mart name tag is in two languages.

Muslim Americans possess a diversity that is extraordinary even by American standards. In sharp contrast to other immigrant groups, Muslim Americans cannot be defined by race or nationality; in this sense, they more closely resemble the Hispanic Americans whose origins lie in Spain, the many nations of Latin America, and the islands of the Caribbean.

Muslim American diversity may be greater still, encompassing origins in South Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe's Balkan region, and Africa, as well as a small but growing group of Hispanic Muslims.

Because the United States does not track population by religion, there is no authoritative count of its Muslim population. Estimates range widely, from 2 million to 7 million or more. Of that number, approximately 34 percent are of Pakistani or South Asian origin and 26 percent are Arab.

Another 25 percent of Muslim Americans are indigenous, largely African American, and this adds still more layers to the rich Muslim-American experience. In other words, the Muslim-American saga is not just one of immigration and Americanization, but part of one of the most powerful themes in American history: the struggle for racial equality.

There are mosques and Muslim social and cultural institutions throughout the country, in urban centers and rural communities alike. Want to visit the International Museum of Muslim Culture — the first Islamic history museum in the United States? Forget about traveling to New York or Washington; instead you must head for the Arts District of Jackson, Mississippi. Dearborn, Michigan, is home to the nation's largest Arab-American population. Muslims from South Asia and Africa form vibrant



and growing communities in the New York-New Jersey area. Somalis have settled in substantial numbers in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, and Southern California is home to the country's largest Iranian-American population.

Yet even these ethnic communities are hardly monolithic. Many of the Arabs living in Dearborn and elsewhere are Christian, not Muslim, and a number of Iranian Americans living in Los Angeles are Jewish.

Generalizing about such a diverse a population can obscure more than it explains. Better, perhaps, to study representative experiences.

"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry," says the noted African-American poet Maya Angelou, "and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter their color; equal in importance no matter their texture."

Iman Boundaoui of Chicago, for example, found that freedom involved her decision to wear a head scarf. She recalls a vivid incident during a high school trip to Paris, France, when her group talked with girls at a private Muslim school founded in response to a French law banning head scarves in public schools: "And me and my friends were

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— Maya Angelou



Clockwise from left, former director of the National Institutes of Health Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni gives a presentation; comedian Maysoon Zayid does her stand-up routine; Sacramento Kings forward Shareef Abdur-Rahim goes up for a jump shot; Staff Sergeant Magda Khalifa in her U.S. Army uniform.





Clockwise from bottom left, A Somali immigrant casts her ballot; Organizer of an Eid festival in Texas speaks to a local television reporter; Farooq Aboelzahab talks about the diversity at his mosque; religious leaders gather to celebrate peace and tolerance; Sarah Eltantawi answers questions at a news conference.

looking at them," Boundaoui told NPR, "and at that moment we were like, 'Thank God we live in America,' that I can walk down the street with my scarf on without having to decide to take it off because I have to go to school."

For Pakistani immigrant Nur Fatima, freedom instead means that after moving to an area of Brooklyn, New York, known as Little Pakistan, she could choose to remove her head scarf, reveling in the fact that Americans generally regard these social and religious choices as private matters. "This is a land of opportunity, there is equality for everyone," Fatima told the *New York Times*. "I came to the United States because I want to improve myself. This is a second birth for me."

Today, in a thousand different circumstances, Americans of Islamic faith embrace their heritage as a crucial part of a self-fashioned identity in which they choose from among all the possibilities of freedom that this land bestows upon all its citizens. As they explore the possibilities, they discover that they, too, have become Americans.

"We stress the American Muslim identity, that home is where my grandchildren are going to be raised, not where my grandfather is buried," Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, told California's *Sacramento Bee* newspaper.

With growing numbers, confidence, and organization, Muslim Americans contribute in every field, from business and scholarship to sports and the arts. Their stories range from Pakistan-born Samiul Haque Noor, whose spicy halal dishes earned him the 2006 award for best food street vendor



Imam Hashim Raza leads the prayers during a funeral at the al-Fatima Islamic Center in Colonie, New York, for Mohsin Naqvi, a U.S. Army officer killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

in New York City, to Dr. Elias Zerhouni, from Algeria, head of the National Institutes of Health from 2002 to 2008; from *Newsweek* commentator and editor Fareed Zakaria, to actor and hip-hop artist Mos Def; from professional basketball star Dikembe Mutombo of the Houston Rockets, to Representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota, the first Muslim member of the U.S. Congress.

A new generation of Muslim Americans enriches American medicine, science, and literature. Obstetrician and gynecologist Nawal Nour, born in Sudan and raised in Egypt, pioneers women's health issues as founder of the African Women's Health Center in Boston, Massachusetts. She received an esteemed MacArthur Fellowship (nicknamed the "genius grant") in 2003 and Stanford University's Muslim Scholar Award in 2008.

Iranian-American scientist Babak Parviz of the University of Washington has made exciting breakthroughs in nanotechnology — ultra-small electronic and biological applications at the cellular and molecular level — including tiny devices that can assemble and reassemble themselves independently.

Writer Mohja Kahf, who came from Syria as a child, has skewered American culture generally and Muslim Americans themselves with gentle irony and razor-sharp observations in her poetry (*E-mails From Scheherazad*) and an autobiographical novel set in Indiana (*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*) — books that have drawn fervent admirers, especially among younger Muslim-American women.

She also writes a frank online column about relationships and sex for younger Muslims and believes that with such works as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* Muslim-American literature can now legitimately be considered a distinct genre.

Fady Joudah, born to Palestinian parents in Texas, grew up to become an emergency-room physician, now working in Houston, and has served with Doctors Without Borders at refugee camps in Zambia and in Darfur, Sudan. He is also a major new poet and winner of the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets competition for his collection *The Earth in the Attic*.

"These are small poems, many of them, but the grandeur of conception inescapable," wrote poet and critic Louise Glück in her introduction to Joudah's book. "Fathers and brothers become prophets, hypothesis becomes dream, simple details of landscape transform themselves into emblems and predictions. The book is varied, coherent, fierce: impossible to put down, impossible to forget."

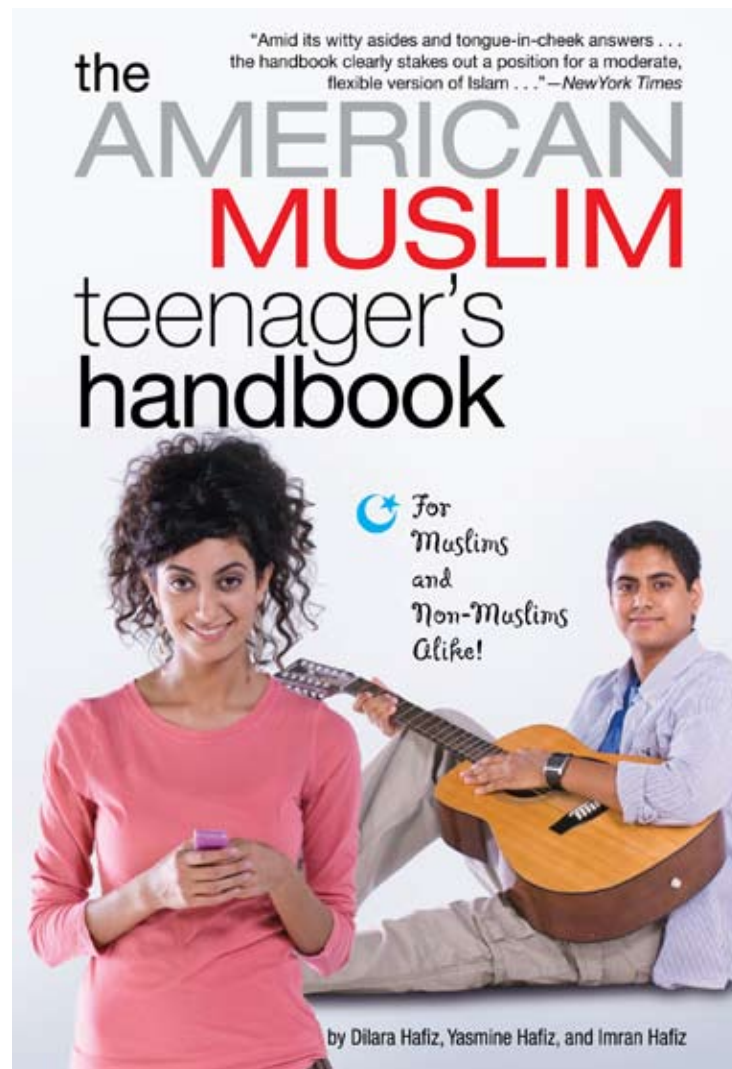
A new, truly American Islam is emerging, shaped by American freedoms, but also by the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Even as surveys by the Pew Research Center and others show that Muslim Americans are better educated and more prosperous than the average, the terrorist attacks — planned and executed by non-Americans — raised suspicions among other Americans whose immediate responses, racial profiling among them, triggered in turn a measure of Muslim-American alienation. Sadly, suspicions of this kind are not uncommon — in the United States or in other nations — during wartime or when outside attack is feared. But 2008 is not 2002, when fears and suspicions were at their height. Context is also important: Every significant immigrant group has in the United States faced, and overcome, a degree of discrimination and resentment.

Nur Fatima, for example, celebrated her new-found freedom in a New York Pakistani communi-



Above, students and advisers paint a mural that recognizes diversity in faith in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Right, A Muslim university student with her son.





This page: Clockwise from left, The cover of a popular 2007 handbook for Muslim teenagers is shown; Dilara Hafiz poses with her children, Imran and Yasmine. All share authorship of the handbook; Adnan Kasseem bows during a class on prayer etiquette in New Mexico. Clockwise from top, high school basketball players prepare for a game in Michigan; A discussion about relations between different American communities, held at Syracuse University in New York; In Syracuse, N.Y., Seham Mere models a dress made especially for Muslim women.



ty where, a few years earlier, fear was high and both businesses and schools closed in the wake of 9/11, according to the *New York Times*. By the time Fatima arrived, Little Pakistan had recovered under the leadership of local businessman Moe Razvi, who helped start English and computer classes, opened a community center, and led community leaders to meet and improve relations with federal authorities.

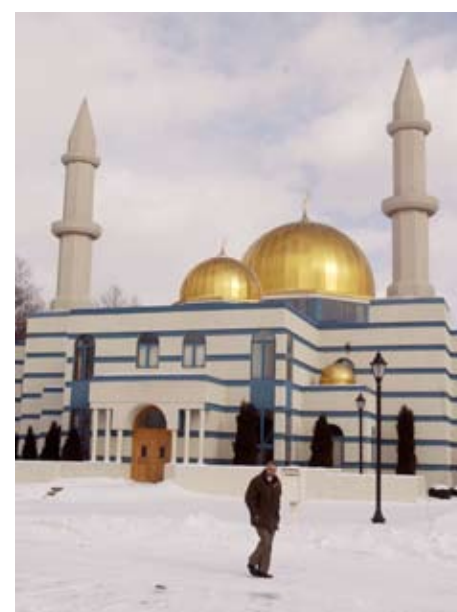
"The annual Pakistan Independence Day parade is awash in American flags," the *Times* reported. "It is a transformation seen in Muslim immigrant com-



munities around the nation."

Among the healthy responses to the tensions triggered by the terrorist attacks is an expansion of the interfaith dialogue in the United States.

"Anytime you share a space with someone of another culture, you are bound to grow as an individual and learn to see things from another perspective," said Kareema Daoud, a doctoral student in Arabic language and literature at Georgetown University who has served as a volunteer citizen ambassador for the Department of State. "There is beauty in diversity," Daoud concludes.



Clockwise from left, Mohamad Hammoud prays at the Islamic Center of America mosque in Dearborn, Michigan; Mariam Motala, at right, prays at the Islamic Center of Hawthorn, California; a young boy hopes to join in on prayers in Brunswick, New Jersey; the Islamic Center of Cleveland, in Parma, Ohio, is home to more than 300 worshippers.



Above, top, children attend evening prayers; above, Playwright Suehyla El-Attar poses on the set of her play, "The Perfect Prayer." Opposite page: Top, Muslims pray in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.; bottom, men gather at a Chicago, Illinois meeting.

The 9/11 attacks also galvanized the Muslim-American community to become more active in civic and political activities — to advocate for issues of concern, to build alliances with non-Muslim organizations — and to confront intolerance and threats of violence.

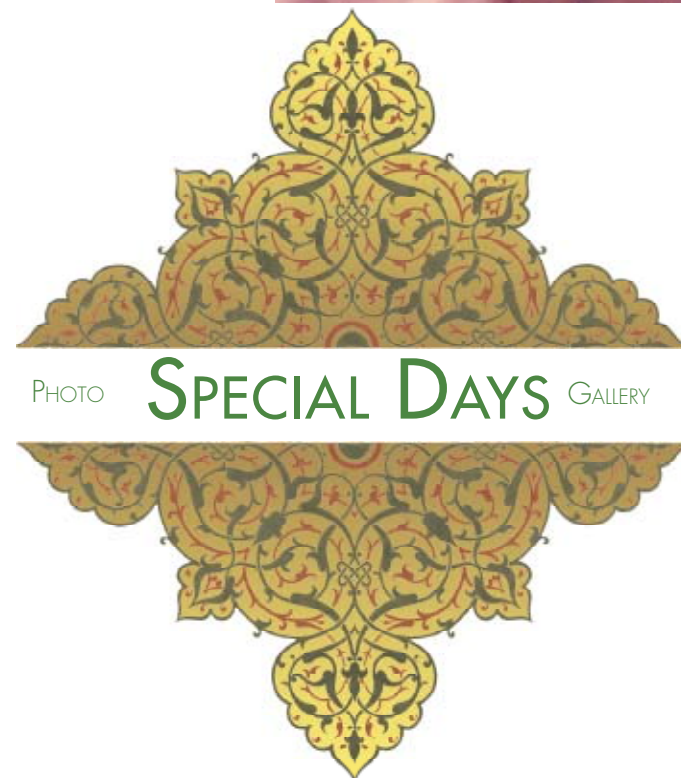
"Active engagement and involvement in politics reflects the fact that American Muslims are part of the social fabric of America, and also reflects their patriotic concern for this country," says editor and writer Nafees Syed of Harvard University in a commentary on the free-wheeling discussion Web site altmuslim.com

Paraphrasing President John F. Kennedy, Syed continues, "The question is not only how taking part in the political process will aid American Muslims, but how American Muslims can help this country."

Like the global population, the majority of American Muslims are Sunni, although there are large numbers of Shia and groups who actively follow Sufi traditions. Despite this diversity, says Paul Barrett, author of the 2007 book *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, "distinctions that possibly loomed larger elsewhere are instead in America 'diluted' in the deep pool of pluralism that characterizes American society. ... Many immigrants have taken the ambitious step of crossing continents and oceans because they want to escape old-world antagonisms, to pursue education, economic betterment, and a more hopeful life for their children."

Progressive forms of belief, a more prominent role for women, even the recent evolution of "mega-mosques" resembling in size the large evangelical Christian churches — are among the characteristics of a rapidly evolving, uniquely American Islam.





"I have found that Muslims in America are melding their faith, ethnic background, and the folkways of their adopted land in many different ways," Barrett said in an interview on altmuslim.com. "There is no one formula, just as there hasn't been a formula for past immigrant groups. ... I'm confident that there won't be one story about how Muslims assimilate. There will be many stories."

Clockwise from above, Nawal Daoud holds the Quran over the heads of girls as they walk underneath it during a Takleef ceremony; Hafiz Azzubair posts a sign urging people to vote; Young Muslim women read a text message on a cell phone at the End of Ramadan Festival in Austin, Texas.



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— Paul Barrett



This page: Clockwise from bottom left, In Brooklyn, N.Y., three generations gather to celebrate Eid ul-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan; At the Miami Book Fair International in Florida, multi-ethnic booksellers exchange greetings; Fawad Yacoob speaks during the Blessing of the Waves ceremony in California; in Tyler, Texas, men embrace during Eid ul-Fitr celebrations. Opposite page: Members of the Malaysian Students Association celebrate their graduation from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

AMERICAN



ARTIST HEBA AMIN

The contemporary artist Heba Amin, 28, has been drawing for as long as she can remember, but pursuing art full-time

did not occur to her until she was a junior in college. At the time, Amin, who now lives in Minneapolis, was a math major and first envisioned herself as an architect.

Amin was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. Her late father was an interior designer; her mother, an administrative worker at the private American school Amin attended from kindergarten through 12th grade.

After high school, Amin traveled to the United States to attend Macalester College, a private, liberal arts school in St. Paul, Minnesota. By her third year, Amin realized that her heart lay in art, not math, and in 2002 she earned a bachelor's degree in studio art, with a concentration in oil painting.

Living in the United States, she told Faye Oweis, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists*, allowed her "to take the role of the outside observer" and opened her eyes

to the richness of Arab and Egyptian culture that she had "previously overlooked or taken for granted."

For several years, Amin's work revolved around portraits of Bedouin women, who, she said, "are known for their embroidered and beaded crafts."

"The European Union had a program designed to preserve these crafts, funding the work and encouraging older women to teach younger ones. I became interested in that and stayed with different tribes to see the process working. I also apprenticed with a Bedouin artist who created sand paintings."

As Amin spent time with different Bedouin tribes, she realized she was even more interested in their way of life than their craft.

"I was struck by how attached they were to their surroundings and the land, and how sad it was that their culture was deteriorating due to urban sprawl and modernization," she recalled.



Amin began painting brightly colored portraits of Bedouin women juxtaposed with urban geometric patterns. "The patterns overwhelm the paintings, representing how the city is taking over the Bedouin culture," she said.

PROFILES



YOUNG MUSLIMS MAKE THEIR MARK

Top row, from left, Imam Khalid Latif; filmmaker Lena Kahn; artist Heba Amin. Bottom row, from left, businessman Moose Scheib; fashion designers Nyla Hashmi and Fatima Monkush; singer Kareem Salama; journalist Kiran Khalid. Opposite page, far right, Bedouin Girl by Heba Amin.

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