

Emerging Islamic Infrastructure

***Summary:** Increasing internal diversity of Muslims in the United States after 1965 led to the creation of national organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the North American Shi'a Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO). Since then, a variety of organizations and institutions have developed—including social, educational, financial, legal, and charitable efforts—that contribute solutions to wider social issues and build and sustain indigenous American Muslim communities from the ground up.*

Since the late 1960s, the American Muslim community has experienced exponential growth and incredible diversification and integration. The number of mosques in 1960 were 230. Today, there are over 2,100. The 1970s were a time of increased immigration of Muslims from all parts of the world, as well as a period marked by a transition to orthodox Islam among African American Muslims and the embracing of Islam by as many as 80,000 Euro-Americans.

By the early 1980s, the changing demographics of the American Muslim community required the creation of national organizations beyond the Muslim Students Association (MSA). The most significant of these was the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which was established by the MSA in 1982 to serve as an umbrella organization for Sunni Muslim groups across the country. ISNA was one of many outgrowths of the MSA; others include the Islamic Medical Association, founded in 1967, the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers, founded in 1969, and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, founded in 1972. ISNA publishes the magazine *Islamic Horizons* and sponsors both national and regional conferences. This period also saw the establishment of the North American Shi'a Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO) and the national council of the Ismaili community, His Highness Prince Aga Khan Shia Imami Ismaili Council for the U.S.A. These being examples of American Shi'i organizations, although ISNA and ICNA do not exclude Shi'i participation.

In the 1990s, ISNA also participated in the Islamic Shura Council of North America, which coordinated among four of the most important national Muslim organizations: ISNA, Ministry of Imam W. Deen Mohammed, the community under the leadership of Imam Jamil Al-Amin, and the Islamic Circle of

North America (ICNA). The formation of this council was a potent signifier of the merging of indigenous and immigrant streams of Islam in the American context. On a practical level, this council founded the Bosnia Task Force and facilitated the first joint observance of Ramadan in America. In 1993, all of these national organizations coordinated the sightings of the moon which begin and end this observance. The Islamic Shura Council of North America has since disbanded, to be replaced by other organizations that similarly unite American Muslims of all backgrounds.

Muslims in America have been building a community from the ground up: over the past several decades, many American Muslims did not have the option simply to go to the local mosque; they had to establish one. Muslim parents could not always just send their children to the local Qur'anic school; they had to found one. This community has, therefore, created an elaborate Islamic infrastructure in America, with over 200 Islamic schools, over 2,100 Islamic centers and mosques, and a myriad of other organizations, institutions, non-profits, and committees. Through these efforts, nearly five million American Muslims are educating their children, gathering to pray, working to educate their neighbors and their government, fighting against poverty and crime, and building a stronger, more diverse Muslim community (*ummah*) in America. The American Muslim community strives to carry faithfully the message of Islam in a challenging environment.

American Muslim infrastructure today includes a variety of organizations that extend into many sectors of society. Political-action committees like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) aim to combat discrimination, Islamophobia, and unfair practices in education, politics, workplaces, and other public domains. Ultimately, through research and advocacy, their aim is to create a more inclusive and diverse America. Islamic financial services, also known as “sharia-compliant”, offer American Muslims alternatives to investing, saving for retirement, and buying a home that aligns with Islamic ethical values and principles; some of these include Guidance Residential, and AMANA Mutual Funds. While *fatwa* councils, such as the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) and the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of American (AMJA), aim to guide American Muslims on implementing and adapting Islamic law to the American context, through,

for example, establishing Ramadan and Eid dates and engaging in creative problem solving related to dietary, medical, financial, and other related issues.

Social activism and charitable organizations continue to be a key contribution of the American Muslim community. Many of these groups have an international focus, providing aid to Muslims throughout the world; organizations such as the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) and Islamic Relief also provide aid to the needy in the United States. Muslim health clinics have also been established across the U.S., providing free medical care to those in need, such as the Halim Clinic in Toledo, Ohio or the MASS Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida. Other Muslim communities reach out directly into their neighborhoods and to their non-Muslim neighbors: members of New York's Masjid al-Taqwa worked with police and community organizations to close down some fifteen crack houses in the 1990s; leaders of Masjid al-Rasool in Los Angeles helped to arrange a truce between rival gangs. Since 9/11, many Muslim organizations and mosques have collaborated and cooperated with government officials in various ways, looking out for the interests and safety of all Americans.

Academic institutions which aim to strengthen the leadership of American Muslims, and thereby enhance the infrastructure of the faith, have also arisen in the early years of the 21st century. The American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute, part of the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture, has been at the forefront of educating young Muslim professionals in the skills and tools they need to be more effective community leaders.

Zaytuna College, in Berkeley, CA, is another institute dedicated to the future of Muslims in America. The college aims to create an intellectual community whereby American Muslims can learn about their intellectual inheritance from both Islam and the West, ultimately producing scholarship that speaks to their own context. This scholarship, believe the founders of the college, will strengthen the Muslim experience in America by producing scholars and intellectuals who are well-versed in Islam and its relationship to non-Islamic traditions of thought.

Another leadership institute is the Macdonald Center at the Hartford Seminary, which offers the first accredited Muslim chaplaincy program in America. At the seminary, students are trained in both the

academic discourses of Islam and in the skills and methodology of serving the Muslim population from a spiritual standpoint. This wedding of academic and practical aspects of Islam is yet another way in which Muslim infrastructure is being strengthened through education. Other seminaries which aim to produce chaplains, imams, intellectuals, and faith leaders include Bayan Claremont in Claremont, California, and The Islamic Seminary of America in Richardson, Texas.

In America, Muslims from all parts of the world are claiming a common identity based on religious, not ethnic, grounds. As one prominent Muslim educator put it, “Enabling Muslims to explore the roots of their faith more freely is, in my mind, America’s gift to Muslims.” Through the infrastructure that has taken shape in America, Muslims are able to consider and apply their faith in a way that is both distinctly Muslim and American.