

## **A Young Imam in the American Midwest (A)**

Each Friday, Hassan Selim arrives for Jum’uah prayers in jeans and a tie before covering his head with a kufi and putting on a knee-length jacket. Not yet thirty years old, the young imam possesses the gravity of a man who has experienced far more than his age might suggest but with the flashes of levity of one who has learned to keep things in perspective. Though soft spoken, as he moves to the microphone before the crowded room, he displays a calm confidence. In the minutes before prayers begin, the prayer room at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids, Iowa suddenly fills to capacity: standing shoulder to shoulder, some worshippers spill out into the hallway near the racks of shoes. Of some two hundred people who have gathered, many have come directly from work and will quickly return: one is in scrubs, another in traditional African dress, and a few seem to have come directly from the golf course. Here, in the heartland of America, Selim serves a diverse, growing, and historic Muslim community.

Selim’s days begin early -- sometimes before 4:30, depending on the time of the year -- when he rises for reflection and study before going to the Islamic Center to lead sunrise prayers (*Fajr*). He goes home for breakfast with his wife and their two young daughters, returns for midday office hours, and, later, for sunset prayers (*Maghrib*). The rest of his day is taken up by volunteer work, interfaith activities, and speaking engagements. “I look at it as part of my job. I’m not just here to preach to people. I am here to lead by example, and when people in the congregation know about what I do, they take a good example.”<sup>1</sup> Whether volunteering at the library or speaking at a church, Selim enjoys this work; however, increasingly, he felt “exhausted,” as each day he is called upon to defend and explain his faith. Yet Selim strongly resists any tendency to view himself, or the other members of the Muslim community, as victims. He explains:

I don’t feel like I’m a victim. At least I don’t act like one. And it takes a lot. Even though there is lots of pressure on us to defend ourselves all the time, to explain ourselves all the time. And to say, ‘Oh, ISIS isn’t the mainstream Islam, and they don’t represent us.’ And ‘This is the true Islam.’ You kind of get caught in the web of defending yourself, and you end up, at the end of the day, you don’t have time to practice your faith itself. To show people Islam, what it really is.

At the same time, Selim stays sharply focused on the education of his own community, whether connecting with the youth, assisting new converts or guarding against more restrictive interpretations. He emphasizes: “The deeper you understand Islam, the deeper you go into the knowledge of Islam, the more flexible you have an understanding. You can live Islam literally anywhere, you can adapt to different ways, and different cultures.”

Selim observes that many members of the American Muslim community – in Iowa and elsewhere – choose to retreat, to isolate. He regularly explains to his congregation that this is not in keeping with the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, nor the example provided by the first generations of Muslims in Cedar Rapids. For more than 100 years, the Muslim community has enjoyed a vital presence in America’s heartland. “It gives a lot of responsibility on us to play a very important role in the American life. We are one of the oldest, if not the oldest Muslim communities in America. ... We should be doing more, definitely. Participating in the American narrative.”

Yet in late 2015, the tenor of the American narrative seemed to be shifting, with rising rhetoric against Muslims, immigrants, and refugees. In November 2015, the Governor of Iowa signed an order for state agencies to cease Syrian refugee resettlement. For Selim, the leader of a community founded by Syrian-Lebanese and a new American citizen himself, the issue was not merely political, but personal. And in early December, a presidential candidate proposed a “total and complete shutdown”<sup>2</sup> of Muslims coming to the U.S. With attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Baghdad and Beirut, all committed in the name of Islam, the need to defend and explain was only increasing. As Selim mourned the losses and continued his outreach and education, he knew more challenges were ahead. It was election season in Iowa, and the candidate who proposed a ban on Muslims would soon be coming to Cedar Rapids for a rally. Selim’s colleagues and friends at the local Inter-Religious Council were eager to help but wondered how: Another letter to the editor or protest? Would it only bring more attention to the divisive messages?

### **Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

Although Cedar Rapids is one of the least ethnically diverse cities in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>, and Iowa, a largely agricultural state in the nation’s “heartland” is predominantly white, Christian, and conservative, it is home to five generations of Muslim Americans. In the late 1800s, immigrants from Syria and Lebanon – both Christian and Muslim – often made their living as pack-peddlers, selling their goods to local farmers; they later established small stores, and settled in Cedar Rapids. These early Syrian-Lebanese immigrants slowly grew in number as family members joined them; once they began having families, they recognized the need for places of worship and gathering. The early Muslim and Christian immigrant families were close-knit and supportive of each other: after the completion of St. George’s Orthodox Church, the Muslim community purchased a cross for the new building; shortly after, the two communities would celebrate the establishment of the mosque in 1934.

In addition to the mosque, early generations of Muslims in Cedar Rapids helped establish the first Muslim cemetery and the first Islamic organization in America. Selim is proud of these accomplishments but stresses that these “pioneers” were also engaged with the wider community: they were prominent businesspeople, active in civic affairs, charity, and interfaith relations. One of the city’s oldest Muslim families, the Igrams, helped establish the city’s first YMCA; later, in the 1970s, Mohammad Igram served as the president of the YMCA board. Abdallah Igram, a World War II veteran, was instrumental in having “M” for “Muslim” added as an option for U.S. dog tags; locally, he was known for his interfaith and charity work.

Today, the city of Cedar Rapids is home to a thriving and diverse Muslim community with three mosques, the newest of which is downtown. The first mosque, the “Mother Mosque of America,” is on the National Register of Historic Places. This small, simple structure is an unassuming landmark, surrounded by a chain link fence, tucked into a modest neighborhood of Cedar Rapids. The green awning, dome, and crescent announce its presence as a mosque; the one-story building evokes a prairie schoolhouse. Today, it serves primarily as a cultural center. The city’s largest mosque, the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids (ICCR), established in 1972, is a vital and growing community with over 200 families. Selim explains that while Syrian-Americans continue to represent one of the largest groups, the community is now a reflection of the global Muslim community (*ummah*), including Bosnians, Lebanese, African-American converts, Sudanese, Egyptians, Indo-Pakistanis, and others. Selim emphasizes that, although they are of diverse origins, most are American citizens.

## **From Cairo to Cedar Rapids**

Hassan Selim became an American citizen in November 2015, after five years of living in Cedar Rapids. Born in Egypt, he trained at the premier center of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar University, in Cairo. Selim's formal education focused on Shariah and civil law, yet he explains, "I've always imagined myself preaching to a non-Muslim audience." His parents prepared him and his five siblings with early religious education; they also insisted that each child learn a different language. Selim expanded his study of English through two scholarships in the U.K., one of which included a homestay with a Jewish family. Shortly after he returned to Cairo, he met his future wife, Alida, during an English-Arabic language exchange program. Selim smiles as he described their "love at first sight" and their decision to get married one week after meeting. He laughs, "Everyone thinks we are crazy, and still people think that we are, but, we've been married [six] years, we have two children, and I think it's going very well for us."

Selim remembers one of his first conversations with his Minnesota-born wife, as they walked through the old Cairo district, past beautiful old mosques, madrasas, schools, and hospitals. Together, they discussed the critical need for *ijtihad*, which he translates as "to exhaust your intellectual means to understand what the scripture means to you and how to apply it in your life." At one point in Muslim history, such intellectual exercise was discouraged, often referred to as "closing the gate of *ijtihad*." Instead, Muslims were encouraged to imitate the decisions from the past. He added, "Unfortunately, a lot of people know the word *jihad*... But they don't know *ijtihad*, which comes from the same roots." Together, as the two young, idealistic people walked through ancient alleyways, they wondered why fellow Muslims didn't ask more questions or seek to understand their faith "in the light of our times, our modern reality." He recalls: "This is the conversation that made me think, 'Yes, this is my wife.' Since that time, he regularly turns to his wife Alida – not just for support and encouragement – but to help him examine a problem and offer criticism when needed.

Soon after they married, Selim was called to join the Egyptian Revolution. His demeanor darkens as he describes the struggle, and the losses: Selim worked in the field hospital in Tahrir Square documenting the injuries and deaths. "I have seen people being killed just because they wanted to express their political views." After the revolution, Selim and his wife Alida decided to move to America: "It was difficult at that time to start a family there. Maybe if we already had children things would be different.... It was going to be very tough on everyone." They decided to move to Iowa, where her family lived. Within a year of their arrival, there was an opening for an imam at the local mosque, the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids.

The transition to Cedar Rapids from Cairo proved to be profoundly difficult for Selim. At just 25 years old, he was leading a large, diverse community, but felt displaced and lonely. Although he had a loving wife and family, he missed the activity and energy of Cairo and the friends and family left behind. He remembers one particularly low moment shortly after he arrived in Iowa as he sat in his mini-van in the parking lot of the Islamic Center, with tears rolling down his face. In that moment of despair, 6,000 miles from home, he experienced "a new awareness of God."<sup>4</sup> He explains, "Maybe that's why God was introduced to my life in the first place, for a moment like this ... I really did not have this strong feeling of God's presence until now, even though I can lead prayers and read the scripture and I teach people and I guide people. But it was not really real until this moment of feeling vulnerable, weak."<sup>5</sup>

A few years later, Selim explains that he is still adjusting to the quiet of Iowa, but he is finding his way. He cherishes his time with his wife and young daughters and enjoys how each day is different: he might spend time in a skate park or a café with some of the young adults from the congregation or he might fish and play

golf with some of the elders. Often, he has a formal interfaith event or speaking engagement, representing the Muslim community. As often as he can, he volunteers at the local library. “The library is the best place to be, and my family’s favorite place to be.” He explains, “I am there just as Hassan, Cedar Rapids resident. Not really as Imam Hassan from the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids.” He adds, “It almost feels like I’m in disguise, like an undercover imam or something like this. I always love being there.”

### **An American Medina**

For Selim, the Muslim “pioneers” in Cedar Rapids, and the American Muslim community more broadly, have much in common with the first Muslim community in Medina. He explains that while the Prophet and his companions faced oppression in Mecca, their place of origin, when they moved to Medina, the local community welcomed them. “They lived with Jewish tribes and with Christian tribes, and even some Pagan tribes that lived in Medina... and [The Prophet] had a covenant with them that everyone should be treated equally. “Together, they lived in peace, Selim notes, adding: “I think, if this doesn’t resemble the American community, I don’t know what other communities in the world it would resemble.”

He regularly explains to his congregation that America is a modern-day Medina and offers a perfect environment to practice Islam: “[R]egardless of what many people try to disseminate on Fox News and others, we are welcomed. We were welcomed from the very beginning.” By contrast, “You go to *quote unquote* Muslim countries and they don’t accept the diversity, they don’t accept the difference.” He describes the oppression faced by religious minorities in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and emphasizes that, in America, there is religious freedom. Selim notes: “Freedom of Religion, this is exactly what the Prophet says. We have one small Surah in the Qur’an that every child memorizes: ‘You have your religion, I have my religion.’ If this isn’t the freedom of religion that the Constitution states, I don’t know what is.”

When the Prophet and his companions came to Medina, Selim explains, “...He just had room to grow, to practice, to preach. The first thing he did, when he moved, he went to the marketplace and he told the people that they need to start work right away. ... No one is going to be persecuting you for praying, no one is going to be persecuting you for reading the Qur’an, no one is going to be persecuting you for practicing your rituals. And now it is time for you to go out there and live your normal life.” That “normal life,” he adds, is what the pioneers of the Cedar Rapids Muslim community practiced as active, involved members: they were not only building some of the first Muslim institutions but also contributing to, and engaging with, the wider community. Today, Selim is “disappointed” by the retreat and isolation of many members of the Muslim community in Cedar Rapids and elsewhere in America.

He explains, “There are so much pressures... in this time, on us, that kind of push us towards defending and explaining ourselves. But we shouldn’t fall into this trap, into this corner, of always explaining ourselves, apologizing all the time, all the time, all the time. And again, this comes from our retreat from the society.” He believes that the more Muslims are “out there,” the less they will have to explain. “Because you know me. I live by you, I live with you, I work with you; we’re friends.” When Selim is out speaking and volunteering, he’ll often hear stories from church members or civic leaders about some of the elders in the Muslim community. They will say, “Oh, I know Joe, I know Bill, I know Al, we used to be together, we used to play together.” Yet Selim worries that today, there isn’t the same level of interaction between Muslims and the wider community.

Selim emphasizes:

My main focus is to just keep educating the people. Keep educating the people, especially the young ones, but everyone included. To get out of the masjid, or the mosque. It may sound funny that I'm asking people to get out, but people use this place as a refugee center. They come to this country, they work, and they spend most of their time here [at the Islamic Center]. I don't want people to spend their time here. They are here maybe to learn, to pray, but otherwise they need to be outside with the community.

Part of the tendency to isolate, Selim believes, comes from the “new wave” of Muslims “that want to kind of enforce their ideas on others.” He adds, “They think that their Islam is the right form of Islam, and their practices are the right form of practices.” Selim explains that, in Islam, there are more than four schools of thought. “[The] new wave of Muslims that I've been talking about, they kind of choose the most strict of these schools, and they try to apply it in the American context. Which is not the right way of doing things. I always teach my congregation, whenever the Prophet had a choice between two things, he always chose the easiest one. And in America, this is possible. We have the option of doing things the easiest way.”

Within the Islamic Center, Selim works to bridge the divide between the diverse points of view and to give the younger generation a “good command of their religion and their faith so that no one can come and tell them they are wrong.” Yet he is concerned for the future of the broader American Muslim community. He notes, “Before coming to America, I studied Islam for 20 years. From the birth of Islam, it has blended in and found its way. When I looked around at mosques in America, that's not the Islam that I have studied. It's not the Islam I want my children to practice. It isn't the mosque I want them to attend.” If the community doesn't adapt to the American context and address their internal challenges – whether integrating the youth, engaging women's leadership or cultivating civic and interfaith ties – Selim worries that mosques may sit empty in just a few generations.

### **Interfaith Activity and the Young Imam**

When Selim first moved to Cedar Rapids, he was relieved to find a well-developed infrastructure for interfaith activity. The Inter-Religious Council of Linn County (IRC) has a long and rich history, and one deeply connected with the Muslim community. Imam Taha Tawil, who once served at the ICCR and now leads the Mother Mosque, helped to establish the group in 1990. Before that, Tawil participated in an interfaith task force of an organization called “Churches United”; however, when he and Rabbi Ed Chessman were denied full participation as non-Christians, they joined forces to establish an organization that would be open to all. Together with Rev. Cedric Lofdahl, a Lutheran minister who is still active in the organization today, the IRC developed a range of educational programs, commemorations, and services. After more than 25 years, the IRC is still thriving while Churches United slowly faded away and is now defunct.

Selim, who participated in interfaith activity in Egypt, welcomed the opportunity to join the IRC when he arrived in Cedar Rapids. He explains: “These are my foundations. This is what I was taught from a very early age.” He continues:

The Prophet received many Christian delegations in the mosque. He allowed them to pray when the prayer times come. He would allow them to pray inside the mosque. Many people don't want to know this. They want to hide this. They don't want to regard it; they don't want to see it. When I teach people here, I had a few comments from people who would say 'But this was...' They would start

making excuses. I would say ‘Don't make an excuse.’ The Prophet let Christians pray in his mosque. What we do now in interfaith dialogue is nothing but continuing the Prophetic tradition, the Prophetic teachings.

Selim welcomes any opportunities to engage in interfaith outreach, whether speaking at a church, a Masonic Temple or an alternative “Spiritual Awareness Day.” He notes: “...If I’m not there, how do I expect these people to know about me? How do I expect them to know about my community?” At the Spiritual Awareness Day, where he presented after a Pagan Circle and before sessions on Unitarian Universalism, Buddhism, and Eco-Spirituality, Selim recalls, “It was around the time that ISIS was on the news every day. And we have a sign that says ‘Islamic Center,’ and my concern was always if people drive by this place, as soon as they see the word ‘Islamic’ the first thing they think to their mind before they see ‘Center’ is the Islamic State.” He continues, “When I was invited, I didn’t even think twice about it. To me ... this was an opportunity to explain myself.” Selim adds: “I try to never turn down any invitations to be out.”

### **A Thanksgiving Service**

On November 23, 2015, over two hundred people gathered at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids (ICCR) to celebrate the most American of holidays, Thanksgiving. The social hall, which often hosted community dinners and gatherings, is simply decorated: on one wall, a black and white photo of the Mother Mosque from the 1930s sits just below a metallic image of the Ka’aba. Nearby, a framed verse from the Qur’an in Arabic and English translation reads: “And hold tight to the rope of God and be not divided among yourselves.” (Surah 3:103) For the first time in the IRC’s 25-year history, the annual Thanksgiving service would be held at an Islamic Center. Rabbi Todd Thalblum, who led Cedar Rapids’ only synagogue, was one of the key planners. One year before, they couldn’t have predicted the way the national conversation about Muslims would shift: for Selim, the gathering was a welcome event after an exhausting few months. Whether reaching into his own community, or outside of it, it seemed he was constantly explaining what Islam was, and what it was not. But tonight would be a time for prayer and celebration: the event, “Gratitude and Hope in Violent Times,” included the seven member faith communities of the IRC and benefited a local food bank.

Selim opened the service with a recitation of *al-Fatiha* in Arabic; he invited the secretary of the ICCR board and member of one of the founding families of the local Muslim community to provide the English translation. Fatima (“Tima”) Igram Smejkal, with her short, uncovered hair and strong Midwestern accent, recited from memory: “In the name of God, most merciful, master of the day of judgment, you alone do we worship, and your aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those you have favored, not of those who have gone astray. Amen.”<sup>6</sup> Shortly after, Selim offered a welcome message:

.... More than any time before, this service is very important to have right now, today. With the rise of ISIS in the recent years and all too frequent and despicable atrocities committed in the name of Islam ... it has become essential that we work together to create a counter-narrative. A narrative of peace, coexistence, tolerance, gratitude, and hope.<sup>7</sup>

While Selim made no mention of the anti-Muslim climate, one representative from the Christian community described the rise of hate groups and attacks against Muslims. “We have just heard a leading presidential candidate say that this country has absolutely no choice but to close some mosques, and a recent poll of citizens in North Carolina, 40% said they thought the practice of the Muslim faith should be made illegal in this country and 72% said that a Muslim should not be elected president.”<sup>8</sup> Yet most of the event was focused

on reflection and celebration, as Christians and Hindus, Native Americans and Buddhists, Muslims and Jews all offered prayers of thanksgiving at the mosque.

As the event concluded, Selim asked the crowd for a favor: Would they pose with him for a group selfie? With laughter, they happily complied, as the young imam, buoyed by the successful evening, climbed a chair and posed with the crowd. He remembers, “We had a great turnout, a lot of people showed up. ... More than we ever expected.” The crowd, they later learned, was bigger than any in the history of IRC. While Selim was thrilled with the service, and proud of the ways his congregation had welcomed the wider community, the local newspaper didn’t cover the event. Why, he wondered, was this story of understanding and mutual respect not newsworthy? “It was a great story.”

### **Uncertain Times**

In late 2015, the news was often bleak: horrifying acts of terror; violence and vandalism against American Muslims; political rhetoric about building walls and banning Muslims. Although events like the Interfaith Thanksgiving were hopeful, for Selim and others in the Muslim community, there was a growing feeling of uncertainty. At times, he couldn’t help but wonder: “Are we really unwelcome?” “Are we really going to be treated differently?” He notes, “Feelings were getting much more intense.” Presidential candidate Donald Trump’s upcoming visit to Cedar Rapids on December 19, 2015 was, for Selim, “very real... This person who spoke and proposed a ban on Muslims is in the city where I live, where my children live.”

Two days before the candidate arrived, the IRC held their annual meeting. After reviewing the year’s many accomplishments, one long-time member stood and made a suggestion for the IRC to come together for a peaceful gathering near the Veteran’s Memorial Coliseum, the site of the upcoming Trump rally. Selim recalls, “It was very powerful when he said, ‘I stand with my friend Hassan and with my Muslim friends and Muslim congregation and community here in Cedar Rapids. And then other people stood, and it was really amazing.’” The event, they decided, would not be a rally or a protest, but a signal that the IRC “stands in solidarity with Muslims, refugees, immigrants, and all minorities.”<sup>9</sup>

Selim was deeply appreciative, but also worried: while it was intended to be a peaceful event, the climate was charged. He hoped it would be different in America, but his only experience with protest was during the Egyptian Revolution. There, he witnessed arrests, detainment, torture, and death, yet he felt little was achieved. His own experiences left him disillusioned and doubtful that protest was an effective method for change. He felt a growing fear, not just of the protest, but about what language like “take America back” really meant; it was a fear “...for my family, for my congregation; for my people, our future.”

As much as Selim wanted his congregation to experience the support of their friends and neighbors, he hesitated to speak about it during his Friday *qutbah*. “Standing on the pulpit, I try my very best to reserve this place for purely spiritual and religious messages.” Further, he knew that some members of the congregation were Republicans, and Selim didn’t want to appear that he was steering the congregation against a certain candidate. He wanted to bring intellectual activism, *ijtihad*, to his community, not promote a particular form of political activism. He also knew that many members of his congregation hesitated to engage with the broader society. Part of what left him feeling exhausted, beyond his busy schedule, was feeling like a “middle man” between his congregation and the broader American community. “I didn’t really want to be there representing the Muslim community. I just wanted to be there as a Muslim living in Cedar Rapids.”

He asked himself: “‘ OK, do I really tell my people there is a rally, there's a peaceful gathering, and ‘you need to be there because there will be people there showing support to you’? Or do I not mention it at all, and just go myself? I wasn't sure, honestly, what to do.”

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Hassan Selim: Hassan Selim, interviews by author, by phone and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 16, 2015, July 31, 2015, and July 27, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration,” Donald J. Trump Web site, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-statement-on-preventing-muslim-immigration>, accessed July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “2015’s Most & Least Ethno-Racially Diverse Cities,” Wallethub Web site, <https://wallethub.com/edu/cities-with-the-most-and-least-ethno-racial-and-linguistic-diversity/10264/#city-size>, accessed July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Courtney Ball, “Imam Hassan Selim,” Corridor Characters, 2015, <http://corridorcharacters.com/2015/04/imam-hassan-selim/>, accessed July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Interfaith Thanksgiving Service.” YouTube video, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ANvd29erxI>, accessed July 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Inter-Religious Council of Linn County, 2015 Annual Meeting Minutes, December 17, 2015, <http://nebula.wsimg.com/43f2aa2fa7eeb841367d684f7bbccdaf?AccessKeyId=68695E2BD6D07AEFAB84&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>, accessed July 2015.