

A Young Imam in the American Midwest (B)

On December 19, 2015, like most days, Hassan Selim woke up early. After prayers and breakfast with his family, Selim hosted a large church group at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids (ICCR). After the visit, the group left for their choir practice, and Selim rushed across town to the Veteran’s Memorial Coliseum, where Donald Trump was scheduled to speak. There, he would join the rally in support of Muslims and refugees just across the street—although he didn’t even like to use the word “rally” and hoped it would be more like the peaceful gathering his friends at the Inter-Religious Council of Linn County (IRC) suggested. Driving across the Cedar River, he felt mixed emotions: love and pride for his adopted city of Cedar Rapids and the friends and neighbors who were showing their support, but also nervousness: “It had this feeling of excitement, and I’m not really sure what is going to happen.”¹

As he approached the rally, Selim wondered to himself: Would any members of his congregation be there? He had decided against reaching out to the congregation to promote the event; he didn’t want to bring politics into his *qutbah* during Friday prayers. “I just didn’t want to be the person inviting people to go there. I’m always very nervous, very careful about inviting others to be politically active in a certain way.” While he wouldn’t hesitate to encourage his congregation to vote and to participate in community affairs, he was concerned that this event might cross a line; also, he wasn’t sure what to expect from the gathering. When Selim arrived, he saw more than 100 people bundled up in the cold, carrying signs: “Love Trumps Hate,” “You disrespect one, you disrespect all,” “I Stand with Muslims,” and “America Was Built by Refugees.” His own handmade sign read: “I am American, I am Muslim, I am proud.”

Selim was elated to witness the crowd that had gathered on that cold December day: young and old, familiar friends and new faces, and, to his relief, many members of his congregation. He was thrilled to see young Muslims participating and was most surprised to see one of the more conservative members of his congregation attending the rally: Karim,² with his long beard, kufi, and inward manner, was known to be very religious, and perhaps somewhat isolated from the American mainstream. Karim attended the gathering with his wife and children, standing side by side with people of different faiths.

To Selim’s relief, the event was nothing like the protests in Egypt: “This was like, the most peaceful, chill, really fun protest, with lots of great people.” Local media covered the event, but Selim was more focused on the positive spirit of the crowd. With temperatures below freezing, everyone was bundled up, and stood close together. Selim wore a large fuzzy hat with long earflaps to guard against the cold: the hat was passed down to him from his wife’s Norwegian grandfather. Karim brought a large container of coffee to share, and when Selim went to a nearby store to buy cups, the shopkeeper gave them for free after learning it was for the peaceful rally. On the other side of the street, Trump and his supporters began to gather inside the Coliseum; outside, vendors sold flags, t-shirts, and buttons, many in the red, white, and blue colors of the campaign. Some of the merchandise was emblazoned with the slogan “Make America Great Again.”

Selim watched, amazed, as Karim, together with his family, crossed the street to the Veteran’s Memorial Coliseum. While they didn’t enter the building, they carried cups of coffee to offer to the vendors huddled in the cold outside. Selim appreciated Karim’s spontaneous act of generosity but felt sure that they would be rejected. He said: “They won’t take the coffee; they will tell him to go back.” But the vendors accepted the coffee and engaged in conversation with Karim and his family. Soon, others crossed the street as well.

Looking back, Selim reflects: “This moment moved me and also taught me a lesson that I needed to learn at this point. With my feelings being intense... I thought they won't accept the coffee.” He continues, “I should not let language being used by this group of afraid, angry Americans who want to... 'take their country back' or 'make America great again'-- I should not let my fear, and my feelings, get in the way, and do the same thing: judge them, or think of them the same way maybe they are thinking of me.”

Selim observes, “People are always afraid of doing things, being in relations with people, because they think--- they *think*--they are different from them and they are not allowed, religiously, to do so.” For Selim, the offer of coffee symbolizes his hope for the Muslim-American community: “That people will cross the street of fear, of anxiousness, of being trapped within our mosques and centers. We'll get out, and we'll cross this road. And hopefully this will be healthy for everyone.”

After the Rally: 2016 and Beyond

After the rally, Selim began to recognize the ways his congregation was increasingly participating in the wider community. At Christmas time, members of the congregation brought baked goods to the police; high school students from the Islamic Center regularly engage in a public service project outside of the mosque each month, and during Ramadan, they participate in a home revitalization program through a local Christian organization. Yet the challenges continued: the politician who proposed the Muslim ban was moving ahead in the polls; incidents of anti-Muslim activity were on the rise in other parts of the U.S.; and --most troubling for Selim-- the month of Ramadan in 2016 was blighted by more terror. ISIS was linked to attacks in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Bangladesh and Turkey, and to the largest mass shooting in the U.S., when 49 people were killed at a gay nightclub in Orlando.

Awash in grief, Selim didn't have the luxury to feel exhausted, even as he fasted during Ramadan. He drafted a statement on behalf of the Islamic Center, which he reviewed with the board. Shortly after, he received an invitation to participate in a candlelight vigil for the victims in Orlando, and he readily agreed. He knew that many in his congregation might argue “that Islam does not approve of LGBT” and others might cite verses from the Qur'an, “...which are very few, and very specific and should be understood in the light of our times, our modern reality, and not taken out of context.” He reflects, “Stories are fine. But how do we understand and apply the stories is what requires what we call *ijtihad*.”

He adds, “...living in an American reality, in a time where there has been so much progress done on this issue; living in Iowa, one of the first states to grant rights for gay and lesbian rights to marry, I think our reality and our response should be more open and more welcoming.” He continues: “Our mosques should be safe and welcoming and open and friendly for the LGBTQ+ community. Rejecting people and kind of looking down at them, or saying they are less religious or whatever the terminology may be because of their identity, is not the right response. I don't think that is what Islam teaches.” When he learned that the candlelight vigil would take place at a local gay nightclub, he discussed the matter with his wife. He knew that, to some, this might cross a line. Selim explained to his wife: “...if I don't go there, this would be a scar on my conscience for the rest of my life. And, I have to be there.”

When he arrived at the candlelight vigil, Selim recognized many of the same people from the peaceful rally across from the Trump event. Looking back, he notes: “...seeing familiar faces from this rally in December, I was 100 percent sure that I did the right thing.” He knew that he would face questions from his community

after they saw their imam on the evening news surrounded by rainbow flags at the local gay bar. That evening, after the vigil, Selim went to the mosque for nightly prayers at the ICCR. Because it was Ramadan, the mosque was crowded with many community members. One member of the youth group approached Selim to say that she also attended the candlelight vigil and was “happy and proud” to see her imam there. He explains, “And honestly, I was very happy and proud that she was there.”

Selim reflects:

So, good things are happening. It might be tough, and there is so much pressure and uncertainty in the air. We're all not really sure what's going to happen next. But I think it's good. It's making changes; it's forcing people to change to the best, hopefully, to a place where we are faced with challenges ...and we have to come up with solutions and answers.

One day, Selim imagines creating new institutions, uniquely American, that will be vehicles for *ijtihad* and intellectual activism in the Muslim community. First, he must complete his schooling, with the goal of earning a Ph.D.; he must also continue his exhausting but rewarding schedule as a young imam. When Selim thinks of the future, it is often in terms of his own daughters, born into a historic American Muslim community, but living in uncertain times. While he knows that one day, they will hear the language of exclusion and intolerance, and perhaps the calls for isolation or retreat, Selim maintains his optimism. His elder daughter, Ruqayyah, is only four years old, but he regularly tells her that, one day, she could be president. Selim explains: “This is my way of talking to her about this issue. Instead of saying that there is a problem and that we're going to solve it, I just tell her: 'One day, if you ever wanted to be the President of the United States, the Constitution grants you the right to do so, and you can totally do that.'”

He will also teach his daughters to memorize the Qur'an and to study their faith. He adds, “Just so that no one fools them, no one ... misguides them about what their religion is. I want them to be able to make decisions on their own, for themselves.” He continues: “I want them to be able to stand up for their rights, I want them to be like the women who stood up to Umar and told him in his face that he was wrong. I want them to be like Aisha who always argued with the Prophet. ... To have the knowledge, to have the courage, to speak out their minds, and to be leaders in the Muslim community of America.”

Endnotes

¹ 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.

² “Karim” is a pseudonym.