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Muslims in Maine:

Eid Mubarak!

by Reza Jalali

To God belongs the east and the west; wherever you go there will be the presence of God.—Qur'an 2:115

Islam is a part of America.—U.S. President Barak Obama in a speech addressing the Muslim world in Cairo in 2009

The neon sign display mounted outside the Portland Exposition Building, the well-known sport venue in Portland, Maine, flashed the message: “Eid Al-Fitr 2010. Welcome,” as police officers wearing orange vests directed the early morning traffic, letting the vehicles stop at the curbside in front of the building to unload passengers. Maine’s Muslims arrived individually and in groups, shaking hands and embracing one another and wishing each other, “*Eid Mubarak*, Happy Eid.” African women in colorful dresses followed the elders inside the building as South Asian women in *Shalwar kameez* that were embroidered with *zardozi* and sequins, laughed with joy on meeting friends they had not seen in months. The festive air inside the lobby of Expo, as the facility is known locally, resembled a large wedding reception where the attendees included most of Maine’s Muslims: Men in white long robes, bearing a resemblance to the early Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula, hugged and kissed each other on cheeks. “*Eid Mubarak*,” said an elderly African man, pressing a crisp dollar bill into the tiny hand of a shy boy, as a gift, *eid*.

“Please go inside and find a place to sit. We plan to start the prayer soon,” a young volunteer said in English, repeating the same in Somali and Arabic. The crowd moved toward the double doors—the women going to the far end of the cavernous hall and the men to the front. “Sit tightly to make room for others,” the middle-aged Afghan man said in English and Farsi. “Look at the size of the crowd, *Masha’allah*, God be Praised!” the man added. In no time, as if by magic, neat rows of men and women were formed, with the worshippers facing east, in the direction of Mecca, the spiritual magnet and the birthplace of Islam, located in today’s Saudi Arabia.

“*Allah O Akbar*, God is Great,” the imam sang into the microphone. In unison, the nearly 2,000 worshippers repeated the Arabic words, sacred to Muslims everywhere. “*Allah O Akbar*,” the imam repeated. Soon, the segregated rows of men and women, bowed, kneeled down, prostrated to bring their foreheads to the floor as a sign of humility. Thus the annual *Eid Al-Fitr* (Festival of Ramadan) communal prayer, marking the end of Holy Month of Ramadan, was held on September 10, 2010, in Portland. Across Maine on the same day, similar communal prayers, though smaller in size, took place in Lewiston, home to a thousand or so Muslims mostly from Somalia, and Augusta and Orono, a college town located outside of Bangor.

For American Muslims, whether born and raised for generations here in the United States or having arrived in recent times as immigrants, attending the communal prayer to celebrate *Eid-Al Fitr*, can be a norm and no longer a new phenomenon in most larger urban centers across the country. However, the gathering of a few thousand Muslims in different cities in Maine can be news, given that Maine is one of the whitest and least diverse states in the country.

THE SILENT MUSLIMS

The irony of the 2010 Eid falling so close to the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks was not lost on those Mainers who are biased against Muslims. The front-page story in the September 11 edition of the *Portland Press Herald* covered the Eid prayer held at Expo. The article was entitled “A Show of Faith and Forgiveness” and featured accompanying photos showing smiling Muslims celebrating one of the two most important religious holidays in Islam. It did not please some of the newspaper’s readers. Their comments, which appeared with the online version of the story, included confrontational language and negative remarks directed at the Maine Muslims and the newspaper’s publisher. In the Sunday edition of the same newspaper

(*Maine Sunday Telegram*, September 19, 2010), the publisher offered a written apology to the public:

We made a news decision on Friday that offended many readers and we sincerely apologize for it. Many saw Saturday's front-page story and photo regarding the local observance of the end of Ramadan as offensive, particularly on the day, September 11, when our nation and the world were paying tribute to those who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks nine years ago.

The public apology by the newspaper's publisher and editor, in turn angered many of Maine's non-Muslim residents, newspaper's subscribers or not. For instance:

I was angered and offended by the letter of apology written by Richard Connor on the front page of the Sunday paper. What was the horrible offense for which Mr. Connor saw fit to apologize? The publication of an article about a large (and peaceful) celebration of the end of Ramadan on the front page of the newspaper while 9/11 anniversary coverage was inside the paper.

All we hear from critics of Islam is that it is a warlike religion that is a threat to the United States. Maybe the offense was the presentation of all of the peaceful Muslims who live among us, with lives no different than our own.¹

The publisher, Richard Connor, in response to the mounting public displeasure offered another apology to counter the first one. Throughout the ordeal and the media coverage that followed, Maine's few thousand Muslims remained silent. For the following week, Muslims in Maine celebrated the 2010 Eid by visiting each other, having dinner parties, and attending the Eid receptions at local colleges—Bates and Colby, and the University of Southern Maine for instance—and getting together at rented halls, school cafeterias, and each other's homes to break bread, offer gifts to children, and find security in each other's company.

THE PATELS IN PORTLAND

The same evening, in a hall at Wilkinson Park, a middle-class residential neighborhood in South Portland, a few families of Indian origin came together to celebrate the Eid. Once again, when the time for the evening prayer came, the men in the group formed a

row facing Mecca to pray. Most present were of Gujarati origin, a community and a province in India that is home to many Muslims. Most shared the same last name, Patel, even though only a few were related to each other.

An elderly gentleman, led the evening *salat*, prayer, standing in front of the congregation, which was made up of Muslim doctors, engineers, and academics, employed in local hospital, banks, insurance companies, and universities. "*la ilaha ila llah*, there is no God but God," he recited, quoting a verse from the holy Qur'an. We stood on mats spread over the floor, facing a wall with the framed black-and-white pictures of somber-looking mustached men—the founding members of the club that rented the hall. A cloth had been thrown over the framed photos as an afterthought since displaying images in a place of worship is forbidden in Islam.

In the kitchen, the caterer, a young Bengali Muslim man, was putting the final touches to the *halal* Indian dinner. At the back of the hall, the children were getting restless. Once the buffet-style dinner was served, the women lined up to fill paper plates, first for the elderly and the young children in the room, before helping themselves to the spicy dishes.

In the post-dinner conversation, I learned the Indian Muslims, arriving in Maine as professionals or university students, had better chances of overcoming the usual barriers that immigrants from Muslim countries face as they start a new life in the United States. For instance, unlike those who arrived in the United States from Muslim-majority countries, Indian Muslims, Gujarati or otherwise, having lived as minorities in the Hindu-majority India, were skilled and better-prepared to live as a member of a religious minority in a place such as Maine.

I asked Hanif, an IT engineer, about his previous life as a Muslim in India.

"I experienced no problem. In [the state of] Orissa, we got along well with our Hindu neighbors," he said. "Of course, it helped that majority of the city's population where I lived was Muslims. There was total harmony. When the Hindus organized noisy and joyous religious processions passing through the town's streets, the drummers accompanying the procession were all Muslims." Hanif added. According to him, at times the town's Hindus respected their Muslim neighbors' fasting during Ramadan by not eating in their presence.

"All that changed in 1992 when the BJP activists showed up in our neighborhood one day. I could hear them from our apartment on the third floor. They were yelling at Muslims, 'if you want to live in India, say

Rama, Rama,” Hanif said, referring to the rise of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India and the beginning of the contemporary Muslim-Hindu sectarian tension.

For Muslim immigrants, most arriving in Maine as refugees fleeing wars, political conflicts, and religious and political persecution, America can promise safety, better economic opportunity, and a greater chance to succeed, just as it offered the same in the past centuries to the Catholic, Jewish, Armenian, Greek, and Russian Orthodox immigrants and millions of others who came to start a new life in America. Ironically, today’s Muslim immigrants face the same level of suspicion, mistrust, and occasional covert hostility to which past immigrants who belonged to nonmainstream religions were subjected.

AMERICAN PLURALISM

By most accounts, Islam has been present in the Americas in one form or another, going back to the period before the birth of the republic. Contrary to the common belief that Islam came to the United States with the arrival of refugees and immigrants from Muslim countries, Islam has been part of the American narrative for a long time. Muslims came to the Americas in four different waves: first the explorers; then those escaping the Spanish Inquisition, which took place after the Muslim rulers of Spain were defeated and Spain was ruled by Christians; as slaves; and by immigration starting in the mid- to late-1870s and continuing to the present time.

It is estimated there are five to seven million Muslims living in the United States. In addition to immigrant Muslims from Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe, America has always had a large indigenous Muslim population, most of them African Americans: some the descendants of Africans who were brought to this country as slaves, and others being new converts.

There are 2,300 mosques, Islamic schools, and organizations in the United States. Though Muslims live in every corner of the country, New York, Chicago, Detroit/Dearborn, and Los Angeles, have the largest concentration of Muslim-Americans. Accordingly, California, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland are the states with the largest Muslim population in the country.²

American Muslims have integrated well into American society. One explanation can be that the American Muslims are the most educated of all Muslims in the world (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans>). A higher percentage of U.S.

Muslims have a college degree compared to other Americans as a whole, which helps them to earn higher incomes. There is also a strong concentration of Muslims in professional, managerial, and technical fields, especially in information technology, education, medicine, law, and the corporate world (Haddad 1987).

It is estimated that in a few years, Islam would become the second largest religion in the United States after Christianity. The story of immigrants bringing their faith traditions with them to their new home is as old as America itself. Thanks to immigration, America, once a Christian nation, and still a Judeo-Christian society, is now home to millions of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others. It can be argued that the American story draws its magic and beauty from its religious pluralism and the ease and freedom with which the hyphenated communities live, for most part, in harmony. Seemingly, the magic continues.

MUSLIMS IN MAINE: SAMOSA OR SAMBOSA?

The first group of Muslims arrived in Maine in the 1900s. Mostly from Albania, they were recruited by Pepperell Textile in Biddeford. The “Turks,” as they were known, numbered a few hundred. Some claim their mosque in Biddeford was the first one established in North America (<http://pluralism.org/>). The community of the Albanian Muslims was mostly wiped out by the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918. Two dozen gravestones in the city-owned cemetery in Biddeford that bear Islamic names and signs is all that remains of this community. In some cases, the names of the towns where the immigrants were born or came from are etched in the stone.

The current Muslim population of Maine, estimated to total between 5,000 and 6,000, falls mainly into four groups: refugees and asylum seekers; immigrants lured to Maine for its colleges, safety, quality of life, and recruited by the state’s largest employers in need of skilled and highly qualified foreign-born professionals; local converts; and indigenous African-American Muslims who have moved to Maine from the other parts of the United States.

The majority of Maine Muslims are refugees and secondary migrants who have come to Maine to begin a new life. Most are from Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Ghana, Afghanistan, Iran, Kenya, Bosnia, Kosovo—countries that have been, and continue to be, in the headlines because of conflicts. The immigrants, who have left their homelands to come to Maine for jobs, higher education,

family ties, love, and other reasons, represent some 35 countries that include Turkey, Russia, Malaysia, Libya, Indonesia, Syria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Morocco, India, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Jordan. Muslim converts and African-American Muslims make up the smaller share of Maine's growing Muslim community.

Most Maine Muslims are Sunni Muslims, with a small Shias community, mainly from Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. In Portland, Lewiston, and Westbrook, food stores owned and managed by Muslim Mainers cater to the needs of the local Muslim community members. The stores sell teas, mango pickles, date and fig jams, nuts, spices, herbs, falafel powder, Turkish delight, Basmati rice, prayer rugs, feta cheese, olives, phone cards, satellite dishes, *halal* samosa, a triangle-shaped snack popular in the Indian subcontinent (or sambosa as it is called by African immigrants), and *halal* chicken nuggets. A practicing Muslim can find *halal* meat in such stores, as Muslims obey certain strict dietary requirements that detail practices for how the animal is slaughtered and how the food is handled. There are also bakeries and restaurants making and marketing *halal* food.

One of the first barriers that Muslim children attending schools in Portland faced was the presence of pork and pork products in the school lunch menus. This posed a problem for Muslim and Jewish parents, whose school-aged children were served food items that violated religious dietary restrictions. Once the parents protested, the local schools began to offer alternative menu items on the days when pork was being served. In some cases, more religiously conservative parents, distrustful of the school's menu, encourage their children to take home-made food to school. At times, this could cause tension between the younger students who want to fit in with their peers and their parents who struggle to raise children in accordance with their religious and traditional constraints.

HOMESICK MOSQUES

There are eight mosques in Maine: four in Portland, two in Lewiston, one in Augusta, and one in Orono. The mosques, with the exception of one or two, are best described as makeshift, since prior to being purchased or leased to be turned into a house of worship, they were used as retail spaces or warehouses. Because Muslims are forbidden to receive and pay interest, the community has to raise funds or borrow interest-free funds from fellow Muslims to purchase or remodel a building that would house the mosque. According to leaders of

the local mosques, no public financing or large-sum grants or external funding have been received by any of Maine's mosques.

The locations of the mosques has been a function of availability, zoning convenience, and cost. Though the mosques in Maine have been established with little public opposition, the Portland Masjid located on Washington Avenue, or Afghan Mosque, called so because it is visited mostly by members of the local Afghan community, faced zoning difficulties initiated by the city's Planning Board. The office of the Maine Civil Liberty Union supported the Muslim community in their search for a compromise to stay open until zoning issues could be addressed (*Portland Press Herald*, July 28, 2010).

Attendance at Maine's mosques varies from month to month, with the highest number of attendees visiting during the Holy Month of Ramadan, or on Fridays, when practicing Muslims are encouraged to visit a mosque to participate in the communal Friday prayer, or *joma*, and listen to the Friday sermon, delivered by the mosque's imam or a guest speaker.

Community members visit mosques where their fellow countrymen and -women go; Afghans, most South Asian, and some Arabic-speaking Muslims go the Portland Masjid. Most Somalis, depending on their tribal and linguistic affinity, plus Arabs, pray at the other three mosques in Portland. The mosques in Orono and Augusta are frequented by the smaller Muslim communities there, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, or language differences. Lewiston's two mosques are visited by the African residents of the city and surrounding areas.

With the exception of the Holy Month of Ramadan, few Muslim women go to mosques to pray on a regular basis, as Muslims women most often pray at home due to their family obligations,

MUSLIM STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS (MSA)

With the arrival of early Muslim exchange students at Maine's colleges and universities, particularly at the University of Maine in Orono, Muslim students have formed student groups in campuses across the state. Such student associations have made it possible for Muslim students to gather, socialize, meet their spiritual needs, advocate for *halal* food in the cafeterias, create prayer spaces for Friday prayers, bring Muslim speakers to the campus, and organize Eid receptions. Currently, there are a dozen of such student associations, some

more active than others, at the University of Maine in Orono, Bates, Bowdoin, and Colby colleges, and the University of Southern Maine.

MAINE MUSLIMS IN POST-SEPTEMBER 11 AMERICA

In the days and weeks following September 11, 2001, Maine's Muslim community experienced some level of hostilities. Maine's Muslims seem to have fared better than Muslims living in other parts of the United States, however. In a few cases reported to law enforcement agencies, Muslim women wearing veils were spat on and called names. Muslim children and those presumed to be Muslims or Middle Eastern were harassed by non-Muslim Americans. In addition, offensive, anti-Muslim graffiti was spray painted on the wall of a mosque and *halal* market in Portland.

Agents from the FBI visited some Muslims, particularly those from Afghanistan, or required them to go to their offices for interviews. None were detained, but a Somali man, suspected of transferring funds illegally came under close scrutiny. He was engaged in a practice known as *havalah*, common among many immigrant communities, whereby a person residing in the United States sends money to friends and families in overseas by handing over the funds plus a fee to have it delivered. In post-September 11 America, such a practice, with its potential for use to transfer of funds to terrorists, has come under close scrutiny by the FBI and other government agencies. FBI agents met with Muslim community leaders to assure them of legal protection against potential hate crimes. At the same time, the agents asked local Muslims to report any suspicious activities or unusual behavior by their fellow Muslims.

CONCLUSION

As part of their outreach to the larger community, Maine's Muslims have organized mosque open houses, Ramadan *iftar* (the evening meal that breaks the fast) inside a mosque, Eid receptions, and educational workshops and conferences. In reaction to natural and human-caused disasters at home and abroad, Maine's Muslim community has organized public events to raise funds for the victims.

The new leaders of Maine's mosques are involved in community projects including outreach to schools and libraries as ways to educated the non-Muslim communities

about Islam. Needless to say, such efforts have become more urgent since September 11 terrorist attacks in this country. In terms of civic engagement, Maine's Muslims have done well. A few have run for political office, including the mayor's office, with two noteworthy examples of success: a school board member elected in Portland and another in Lewiston. The relationship between Muslim community members and members of other faiths who call Maine home is positive and free of tension.

Looking ahead, there seems to be questions that could determine the sustainability and the future of the somewhat *invisible* Muslim Mainers. Though time only will tell, they are significant enough to be thought about: Will Islam, as a religion of Maine's newer residents, change and undergo reforms just as religions of past immigrants did? How will Maine, as a white state, make room for the followers of Islam? Will conflicts and acts of terror committed by fanatics in the name of Islam affect the well-being and integration of Muslim immigrants in Maine? Finally, will attendance in the annual Eid celebrations in years and decades to come be larger, or will it shrink, as a result of loss of interest in part of the future generations? 🐼

ENDNOTES

- 1 http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/letters/same-day-different-views-eid-and-sept-_11_2010-09-16.html
- 2 <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2008/12/20081222090246jmnamdeirf0.4547083.html#axzz3ZOnxJ44w>

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Reza Jalali is a writer, educator, and a community activist who has taught at the Bangor Theological Seminary and the University of Southern Maine (USM). He coordinates the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs at USM and advises Muslim students at Bowdoin College. Jalali wrote the Foreword to *New Mainers*, and has also published a short story collection and a play. His children's book, *Moon Watchers*, received a Skipping Stones Honor Award for Multicultural Books in 2011.