Leadership and Education

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The American Muslim community has a unique experience that requires a special attention by Muslim educationists. This attention, it argued here, must be directed at empowering the new generations of Muslims to relate the formative values of Islam the North American social and culture settings. Muslim Educational institutions are at the for front of the struggle to evolve strong and capable Muslim leaders who are able and willing to lead their generation to new moral and institutional heights. What is the essence of leadership? What are the challenges and opportunities facing the Muslim community? And how can educationists help in overcoming challenges and helping American Muslims to talk advantage of the available opportunities? These questions are the main concerns of the discussion below.

Leadership Defined
Leadership is, arguably, the most important and complex act in human life. Leadership is often perceived as a position of power and authority endowed on particular individuals by organizations and governments.

While power and authority are obvious manifestations of the act of leadership, leadership involves much more than the exercise of power and authority. To lead is essentially to move ahead of others; to guide and to show the way; and to be willing to withstand friction, resistance, and uncertainty, often experienced by those who move ahead of others and advance into higher grounds and uncharted territories.

Although any definition of leadership is bound to reduce the rich concept into some of its salient elements, it is useful when discussing leadership to provide a definition to outline the scope of concept. Leaders are visionaries who have the capacity to communicate their vision with clarity, translate it into a set of concrete actions, and inspire others to follow their lead. Therefore, among the most salient elements of leadership are: vision, communication and persuasion, the capacity to translate ideas into strategies and actions that can inspire others, and the ability to gain trust of others and motivate them to share the vision.

It is obvious that Leadership comprises various capacities that can be developed, built, and refined. It is a process of lifelong learning, and continuous endeavor to develop qualities, skills, and attitudes. Those who are inspired to lead must acquire the qualities, skills, and the vision they need to deal with the various challenges confronting anyone who choose to advance human life and enhance the human condition.

In the last few decades, many theories of leadership have been articulated. Some emphasize leadership traits; others stress leadership skills or styles; still others focus on the position of leaders within the organization. Among the theories that have recently gained following is the contingency theory of leadership. According to this theory,

leadership hinges more on the circumstances surrounding the act of leaders, rather than any specific set of traits or skills, or particular leadership styles. Simply put, contingency theory argues that it is the circumstance in which people find themselves is make particular traits or styles more effective than others. Hence, what might be considered useful traits or styles under certain circumstance may turn out to be unhelpful under another.

Although contingency theory cannot on its own provide us with sufficient insight into the act of leadership, it is particularly useful in shedding light on the "exceptional" circumstances American Muslims found themselves in, and does help us grasp the unique position they occupy, and understand the potential contributions they could make.

American Exceptionalism
American Muslims find themselves today in unique and exceptional circumstances. Their circumstances are pregnant with both mounting challenges and unlimited opportunities. These challenges and opportunities stem from the immigration of a large number of resourceful and well-educated individuals from Muslim countries to North America. Driven by advert political and economic conditions, Muslims braved their way to the land of the free, joining the already flourishing African American Muslims, and raising the number of American Muslims from few hundred thousands in the early sixties to several millions by the turn of the 21st century.

Moving to the new continent, and choosing the United States and Canada as their new adopted home, American Muslims experience today the same social phenomenon experienced by all social groups who made North America their home: American Exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism is a term used by historians to refer to the absence of traditional restrictions rooted in the feudal order of medieval Europe, and the ability of early European immigrants, who fled the persecution of ancient regime of Europe, to found a new society based on modern ethos. The founding fathers of the new nations of North America have been able to establish the freest and most egalitarian society that stemmed out from enlightened Europe. This is because that while the Enlightenment ideals were compromised by the old feudal structure of Europe, Americans enjoyed greater freedom in reconstituting their society in accordance with modern ideals.

American Exceptionalism can, and should, work today to enable American Muslims to reorganize their communities in accordance with their Islamic ideals, uninhabited by the cultural norms and established habits that prevent many in the Muslim World from breaking out of the decadent conditions in which they live, conditions resulting from centuries of complacency and neglect of the very Islamic values that brought about the great Islamic civilization in the first place. American Muslims are blessed with a great opportunity to liberate Islam and Islamic values and principles from the cultural limitations of historical Muslim societies, and to bring the pristine and sublime Islamic values to bear on the modern world.

American Muslims, given their exceptional conditions and strategic positioning, have an historical mission to fulfill. Their historical mission is to reform their inherited conditions and develop an inspiring model in which Islamic values flourish again and contribute to advancing modern life and human civilization into new heights.

To take advantage of this unique opportunity, a fresh thinking and brave attitude, rooted in deep faith, is required. That is, American Muslims must be prepared to provide a vibrant and enlightened leadership to a troubled world.

American Muslims: Strengths and Weaknesses
To fulfill their historical mission, American Muslims should undergo a deep self-examination, and understand both their strengths and weaknesses. Without an honest and penetrating look at their present state of affairs, and a strong desire to overcome shortcomings and to build on strengths, no serious achievements would be possible.

While self-examination requires more elaborate efforts on the part of Muslim intellectuals and scholars, I intend to briefly identify some of the salient elements of strength and weakness.

On the strength side, the American Muslim community is made of diverse and vibrant groups. American Muslims drew their ranks from a greatly diverse ethnic background sharing the cultural heritage of every major ethnic community in North America and the World. American Muslims share the cultural heritage of the Arab, African, European, East and South East Asia, Indo-Pakistani, Persian, Latino, Turkic, and Slavic cultures. Although cultural frictions continue to plague the community, American Muslims have made major strides to maintain a sense of commitment to the Islamic ideals to which they all subscribe.

But regardless of ethnic divisions, American Muslims are, by and large, well educated, resourceful, and have strong sense of purpose and determination. African American Muslims continue to be a source of inspiration in the pursuit of civil liberties and political activism, and in carrying the legacy of the civil liberties movement that brought the United States closer to its declared ideals of liberty, equality, and due process of the law. African American Muslims face, though, more challenging social and economic conditions. Great many of them live in financially deprived areas, with limited access to educational and economic opportunities. African American Muslims, particularly those who live in inner cities, feel more alienated from mainstream America, and are discontent with the eagerness of many immigrants to embrace suburban community.

Immigrant Muslims who form the other main division within the American Muslim community consist mainly of professionals and business people, and fall on the higher end of the socio-economic ladder of the American society. Their education and financial resources have helped build hundreds of Islamic centers, schools, and national organizations. They, however, continue to be more politically passive, and lack deep grounding in American culture and society. Immigrants also tend to have limited understanding of their historical and strategic positioning within the American context.

Rising Challenges
Islam as a social organization and a religious community has made new inroads into American public life over the last few decades. A host of Islamic centers, schools, and national organizations have made local and international impacts. The impacts American Muslims made generated positive responses, and many people of other faiths developed positive relationships with their fellow Muslims, having had he opportunity to interact with them as neighbors, coworkers, volunteers, students, teachers, and concerned citizens. Muslims have also become active politically, using their voting power to influence issues and events.

The rapid increase of Muslim numbers and growing influence of Muslim individuals and organizations have alarmed few small but powerful groups within the American political spectrum. The Religious Right and supporters of Israel's Likud party coalesced to disfranchise Muslims and stop the growth of Islam in the United States. These ultra conservative groups embarked on an anti-Islam campaign that was started in the mid-nineties, and intensified after 9/11. Taking advantage of the misguided and violent acts of Muslim extremists, and of the rampant misunderstanding of Islam in the West, these groups have made wild claims and unfounded allegations against Islam and Muslims.

While the efforts and designs of Islam's detractors present an immediate and clear challenge, the true challenge American Muslims face comes from within. It comes from the cultural quietism—even fatalism—that prevent many Muslim communities from providing an adequate response to happenings that effect their well-being and the future of their children. It comes from the weakness of community spirit, the rivalry and internal frictions, and wasteful competition that prevent meaningful cooperation. It also results from the lack of articulate vision shared by Muslims, and the failure to understand the context in which American Muslims live, and the historical mission they must fulfill.

The real challenge for American Muslims lies, therefore, in articulating their values and faith, and developing the necessary institutions and community structures for the realization of their mission. The challenge is to express Islamic principles of moral integrity, justice, compassion, cooperation, and respect of religious diversity in ways that can help relate those values to the issues and concerns of the time.

Agents of Development
To meet current and future challenges, and to articulate and promote the humane, moral, and forward-looking vision of Islam, American Muslims need to develop their human resources, and nurture their leadership capabilities. American Muslims must respond to happenings at the higher level of competency and performance, and should be able to articulate their values and vision clearly to the lager American society.

To live up to its historical mission, the American Muslim community must invest in nurturing Muslim leaders to become agent of positive change for their communities, the larger American society, and the world at large. Developing Muslim leadership is a must at this critical juncture in the growth of Islam in North America, and could literally spell

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the difference between creating another success story for Islam, America, and the Muslim world, or bringing about a tragic end to developing a vibrant Islamic presence in North America. Education is a key in this process, and Muslim teachers have a tremendous liverage and responsibility to bring about the desired changes by preparing the new generations to overcome the challenges facing them and make use of the opportunities they have.

To do that, teacher must partner with Muslim academician and scholars, as well as with community leaders. The former are essential to develop ideas and teaching materials to meet the need of young Muslims, while the later are crucial from providing the support environment to nurture Muslim education. Teachers would greatly benefit from a concerted efforts to develop curricula and teaching material and tools.

Is important to recognize that Muslim youth in North America encounter novel circumstances, particular to Muslim experience of this part of the world, and would markedly benefit from leadership skills development, and awareness programs designed to address their unique environment.

Islamic Vision and Muslim Education
American Muslims need to contribute towards the betterment of America by advancing the values of family, community, and a compassionate and caring society. Muslim education, is again, a key to achieving the vision of Islam, as it must prepare the new generations to develop their knowledge of Islam and their leadership capacity.

Even though the Muslim community constitutes a small group of the larger American society, they can play a vital role, and become a pivotal force, to reform and develop the social conditions and political practices of their powerful nation. But to do that they must be able to speak with clear voice and address the larger concerns of the American society. Following are several important tasks we need to pursue with determination and vigor, and to help our youth to develop the attitudes and skills necessary for achieving those goals.

- *Articulating the humane and uplifting principles of Islam with clarity and candor*. Islamic values must be expressed in ways that relate them to our current social context. American Muslim positions on major issues facing this society must be articulated and announced. This does not mean that the community must agree in its entirety on specific positions. Rather, there must be an open debate among Muslim scholars to generate ideas and allow for more informed decisions. Muslim organizations and think tanks can then benefit from such a debate to formulate positions and publish positions papers and make them accessible to both Muslim communities and the larger American society. We cannot afford to let Muslim detractors define what Islam is and what stands for.

- *Reforming Muslim practices and speaking against deformed, corrupt, and excessive actions within the Muslim community*. American Muslims must not be complacent and remain silent when fellow Muslims violate Islamic values or are

implicated in actions that distort the humane and noble principles of Islam. Religious solidarity must not be allowed to trump our moral and legal commitments. Justice and good judgment rather than sympathy must guide Muslim positions and actions.

- *Institutionalize Islamic values and practices in ways that will establish the Muslim American community firmly within American Culture and Society.* Mainstream Muslim organizations have come under concerted attacks by persons of influence in government, the religious establishment, and the media. The goal is obvious: to silence Muslims and prevent the development their institutions.

- *Advancing the role of the masjid as the center of moral learning and activities for Muslims.* Muslim Americans have a golden opportunity to redefine the role of the masjid and transform it into a center where the Muslim community get closer to live its Islamic ideals and liberate itself of limiting and distorted cultural practices, borne out of specific historical conditions.

- *Promoting a vision of society where cultural and religious diversity are cherished and celebrated.* While American society proud itself with upholding civil liberties and promoting tolerance, it continues to feel at liberty to encroach on the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. This require a new understanding of diversity in which religious and ethnic minority are not merely tolerated, but rather seen of having an intrinsic and God-given rights to be different in their cultural and religious traditions.

A Catalyst for Leadership Development

Education is undoubtedly a matter of paramount importance for the American Muslim community. It is clearer than ever before that the limitations of the American Muslim community do not stem from any deprivation in financial resources or talents, but from the absence of strong and capable leadership, well equipped to meet the enormous challenges it faces.

The task is enormous and requires the cooperation of Islamic centers, national organizations, and leading community members. But Muslim educationist are at the center of the task of preparing strong and capable Muslim leaders, who can relate Islamic values to social and cultural context of North America.

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