

The Role of the Mosques in Promoting Cohesion in the American Community

دور المساجد في تعزيز تماسك المجتمع الأمريكي

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Abstract

Since the 9/11 attacks that targeted the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the American government adopted nationally anti-terrorism policies to maintain domestic security. Some of the measures implemented put mosques under scrutiny. The latter institutions have been considered as places where radicalization that leads to terrorism is taking root and where terrorist attacks on the United States of America are encouraged. This article aims to assess the proper role of mosques for the Muslim community residing in the United States but also for the American society. To this end, it studies the religious teachings and the activities provided by the mosques. It analyzes tenets of Islam as well as survey data and interviews conducted in the United States mosques. Our findings show that mosques are beneficial not only for the Muslim group but also for the American society as a whole by enhancing community cohesion.

Keywords : *Community, Cohesion, Muslims, Mosques, Imams.*

ملخص

منذ هجمات 11/9 على مركز التجارة العالمي و البنتاغون في عام 2001، انتهجت الحكومة الأمريكية سياسات واسعة لمكافحة الإرهاب على الصعيد الوطني للحفاظ على الأمن الداخلي. و وضعت المساجد والمراكز الإسلامية تحت المجهر معتبرة إياها أماكن تدريس العداء لأمريكا وتشجيع الهجمات الإرهابية ضدها. في محاولة لتبديد هذه المفاهيم الخاطئة، يلقي هذا المقال الضوء على الدور الفعلي الذي تقوم به المساجد والمراكز الإسلامية ليس فقط بالنسبة للمسلمين المقيمين بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية ولكن أيضا بالنسبة للمجتمع الأمريكي ككل، و تحقيقا لهذه الغاية تدرس التعاليم الدينية و الأنشطة داخل هذه المساجد، و تعطي تحليل لمبادئ الاسلام و مسح للبيانات و المقابلات التي تجرى بمساجد الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية . تظهر النتائج التي توصلنا إليها أن المساجد والمراكز الإسلامية تساهم في تعزيز التماسك الاجتماعي بين مختلف فئات المجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات الدالة: التماسك، المجتمع، المسلمين، المساجد، إمام.

1. Introduction

From the colonial period, the United States of America has been a religiously diverse nation. The traditional separation of Church and State, the different waves of immigration especially following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the rise of various new religious movements have intensified this religious diversity. In such a multi-faith context, the United States of America is facing the challenge of community cohesion in its religious dimension.

An issue interesting to deal with is the way religious groups and their religious organizations are interacting in such a multi-faith context and whether they are hindering or encouraging community cohesion. One of these religious groups is the Muslims and one of their religious organizations is the mosque, their place of worship.

In the American Islamophobic environment, Muslims and their organizations are subject to nationwide anti-Muslim reactions. As one of the symbols of Islam, the mosques have undergone such reactions. Some mosques have been targeted for vandalism and constructions of new ones have encountered opposition. The Pew Research Center carried a study to evaluate opposition at building Muslims' places of worship. It elaborated an interactive map showing 53 proposed mosques and Islamic centers that faced opposition⁽¹⁾. In addition, many claims have been made regarding mosques in the United States, including the one which pretends that they are sources of radicalization among American Muslims and that they are led by extremists. The House Homeland Security Committee has publicized these suspicions during a series of hearings on Muslim radicalization⁽²⁾. Moreover, the federal and local law enforcements put the mosques under serious scrutiny. Documents obtained by civil rights groups revealed law enforcements practices that most of the time violated Muslims' rights and freedoms⁽³⁾.

Accordingly, findings of some scholars present an incompatibility between the mosques and the American society. This incompatibility would hinder community cohesion. A first argument that supports this idea of incompatibility is the values conveyed by Islam. Political scientist Samuel Huntington saw a

"Clash of Civilizations" between Islam and the West. He argued that Islamic principles are inconsistent with liberal democratic values⁽⁴⁾. According to this viewpoint, since the mosques are conveying the values of Islam and as the latter values are considered incompatible with American values, mosques would rather encourage marginalization and segregation, not community cohesion. A second argument is the literature available in mosques. According to the Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom report, Saudi publications conveying extremist ideology are used as reading and educational materials in some American mosques⁽⁵⁾. A third argument is the rhetoric in the mosques. In "Incitement in the Mosques: Testing the Limits of Free Speech and Religious Liberty," Professor of Law Kenneth Lasson argued that there was incitement in mosques even in the USA through inflammatory rhetoric and speech⁽⁶⁾.

However, when looking at other findings we notice that mosques play a positive role in the American society. For instance, a nationally representative survey carried by researchers Karam Dana, Matt A. Barreto and Kassra A.R. Oskooii in 2008 suggests that an association exists between higher levels of involvement in mosque-related activities, on the one side, and civic engagement and participation in American politics, on the other side. According to the writers, the mosques are "catalysts to social, civic and political integration"⁽⁷⁾. The purpose of this article is to go further and to show that mosques are promoting community cohesion in the United States.

1.1. Methods

We use the descriptive and analytical methods. Data are collected from Islamic tenets and teachings and from the surveys of mosques in the USA carried in 2000 and in 2011. The first one entitled "The Mosque in America: A National Portrait" was carried by Doctors Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl and Bryan T. Froehle⁽⁸⁾. The second conducted by Ihsan Bagby was published in two reports entitled respectively "The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque Attitudes of the Mosque Leaders", and "The American Mosque 2011: Activities, Administration and Vitality of the American Mosque"⁽⁹⁾. Both surveys

consisted in counting all the mosques, taking a sample from the list of those mosques and interviewing by telephone a mosque leader (the Imam, the president or board member). In the 2000 survey, 1, 209 mosques were counted and interviews were conducted successfully in 416 of the mosques from the list. In the 2011 survey, 2,106 mosques were counted and interviews were completed in 524 of the mosques from the list. For the translation of the Holy Qur'an, we use the one of Al-Hilâlî, Muhammad Taqî-ud-Dîn and Muhammad Muhsin Khân ⁽¹⁰⁾.

We analyze and use the data collected to assess whether mosques in the United States are promoting community cohesion. Community cohesion is a rather recent concept. It has been coined in the aftermath of the riots that occurred in England in 2001. According to the 2007 definition accepted by the UK Commission on Integration and Cohesion, community cohesion enables "different groups of people to get on well together." Integration is considered as a "key contributor" to community cohesion ⁽¹¹⁾. For the purpose of this paper, community cohesion is defined as the process by which members of a group or a society yearn for a community with mutual respect, trust and a sense of belonging and provide efforts to achieve this end.

1.2. Structure

Since community cohesion with the American society cannot be achieved if community cohesion among the Muslim group is not primarily guaranteed, we provide facts about ways mosques are promoting community cohesion among the Muslim group, first. Then, we show how the mosques have a very productive role in building bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims in the USA and how they participate in community cohesion in the American society.

2. The Mosque as Cohesive Agent for the Muslim Group

The Muslim group living in the USA is characterized by diversity in its composition. To refer to such diverse group, Professor Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad used the expression "Muslim mosaic" ⁽¹²⁾. In this part, we show that American mosques are enhancing community cohesion and strengthening the bonds of

brotherhood within this diverse group through the religious teachings and the activities they provide.

2.1. Religious Teachings

To grasp fully the role of religious teachings, we have to acknowledge first the role of religion in any society. According to the functionalists, religion along with its norms and values creates cohesion and unity. The functionalist approach copes with the etymology of the word religion: the latter comes from the Latin 'religare' which means 'to bind'.

Concerning Islam, it works even more as a unifying force because its principles themselves are in favour of community building. The mosque is the vehicle of this unifying message. To begin with, Islam preaches for a connection in a transnational sense. Society in Islam is described and characterized as the Ummah (or Islamic nation). This concept transcends national borders, colour and race and assumes a common identity and a level of solidarity among all Muslims regardless of where they live. This led some scholars like Sulayman S. Nyang, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Lori Peek to support the view that a "transcendent identity" has developed among the Muslims in the United States ⁽¹³⁾. Thus, Muslims living in the United States are referred as Muslim Americans or American Muslims despite the ethnic, cultural and linguistic varieties that exist among them.

Then, as the major source of inspiration in the development of ideas and practices in Islam, the Qur'an, the Muslims' holy book, promotes great unity among the followers of Islam. The surat Al-Mu'minûn says "[a]nd verily this your religion (of Islamic Monotheism) is one religion, and I am your Lord, so fear (keep your duty to) Me" (23:52). So, because they follow the same religion, Muslims must be united and submit to God.

In addition, Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) set up a tradition of unity through his sayings and deeds. He talked frequently about the importance of one united community. Several hadiths - narrations of the sayings, the deeds and the teachings of the prophet (pbuh) - reflect this willingness at unifying the Muslims. Nu'man bin Bashir (May Allah be pleased with them) reported: Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said,

“The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever” ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Similarly, Ibn’Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) reported: the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said,

A Muslim is a brother of (another) Muslim, he neither wrongs him nor does hand him over to one who does him wrong. If anyone fulfills his brother’s needs, Allah will fulfill his needs; if one relieves a Muslim of his troubles, Allah will relieve his troubles on the Day of Resurrection; and if anyone covers up a Muslim (his sins), Allah will cover him up (his sins) on the Resurrection Day. ⁽¹⁵⁾.

In these ways, the commonality of Islam and its preaching of unity for the Muslim group play a role in the process of community cohesion within this group. This strong message is transmitted by imams and resonates within the mosques.

2.2. Activities in Mosques

In addition to the religious teachings, the activities provided by the mosques contribute to form a close-knit community. One of those activities is the holding of the salat (daily prayers) – which is the very purpose of the mosque. Among the 524 mosques interviewed by I. Bagby in 2011, more than three quarters (77 percent) of mosques conduct all five daily prayers ⁽¹⁶⁾. Moreover, the fact that in Islam, it is considered meritorious for Muslims to pray together and that group prayer is mandatory at least on Fridays enables to attain a sense of belongingness for Muslims even if they do not personally know anyone in their congregation.

Moreover, prayers on Fridays play a role in community cohesion because of the use of the English language in the Jum’ah Khutbah (the speech held on Friday prayer). Indeed, 70 percent of the 524 mosques interviewed in 2011 use English as the main language for the message of the Jum’ah Khutbah ⁽¹⁷⁾. Therefore, instead of creating tensions among language groups and between generations of immigrants, mosques in USA have found an alternative for unity in the Muslim group through the use of a common language.

Furthermore, thanks to the other various services they provide throughout the United States, mosques serve as a pole around which the Muslim group is galvanized. For instance, 93 percent of the 524 mosques interviewed in 2011 have some type of “regular community gatherings.” The gatherings can be a monthly or weekly “pot luck or a quarterly gathering to discuss particular issues” ⁽¹⁸⁾. Moreover, other services like women programmes, youth activities, team sports and community services activities are offered by the interviewed mosques ⁽¹⁹⁾.

In addition, mosques provide education, a key factor for community cohesion within the Muslim group. Approximately 19 percent of the 524 mosques interviewed in 2011 indicate that they have a full-time school ⁽²⁰⁾. Among the other educational programmes are weekend schools for children, Islamic studies and Arabic language classes, Qur’an memorization classes and regular khatirahs (short religious talks, usually given immediately after a prayer) ⁽²¹⁾.

We can conclude that the US mosques participate in community cohesion among Muslims. In the following part, we show that they contributed highly to community cohesion with the American society.

3. The Mosque as Cohesive Agent within the American Society as a Whole

In this part, we show that the religious teachings and activities provided by the mosques in US promote community cohesion with the American society, as a whole.

3.1. Religious Teachings

Through the teachings of Islam, mosques preach tolerance. First, the Qur’an supports and acknowledges differences between people but the latter differences are neither used to judge human worth nor to divide between people. For example, one of the verses of the surat Al-Hujurât is as follows:

O Mankind! We have created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allâh is that (believer) who has At-Taqwâ. (49:13)

Moreover, the Qur’an stresses dialogue and

moderation and not violence and radicalism. It prohibits aggression and allows fighting only in self-defense. Several Quranic verses expound this clearly. For example, the surat Al-Anfâl gives the directions how to interact with the enemy or unbelievers. One of the verses says “if they inclines toward peace, you also incline to it, and (put your) trust in Allâh. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Knower” (8:61). Another example is the surat Al-Mumtahanah. One of the verses is as follows:

Allâh does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who thought not against you on account of religion nor drove you out of your home. Verily, Allâh loves those who deal with equity. (60:8)

Futhermore, through the message of the mosque leaders, mosques are open to the idea of involvement in the American society. Indeed, there is a strong willingness on the part of these mosque leaders to encourage worshippers to engage in American society, including in its politics. Most of them express the view that Muslims should participate in American public life. Already in 2000, when 416 mosques were interviewed, 77 percent of the mosque leaders “strongly agree” that Muslims should participate in American “institutions,” and 72 percent “strongly agree” that Muslims should participate in the “political process”⁽²²⁾. Ten years later, when 524 mosques were interviewed, over 98 percent of mosque leaders agreed that Muslims should be involved in American institutions; and 91 percent agreed that Muslims should be involved in politics⁽²³⁾

The messages delivered in the mosques are even more contributing to community cohesion as they use for the most part the English language, especially during the Khutbah as we have already mentioned before. In the previous section, we have shown how through the messages delivered in English, the mosques foster community cohesion within the Muslim group by preventing potential conflicts between different linguistic groups from arising. Through the messages delivered in English, mosques foster community cohesion with the American society as well. Indeed, the use of the English language is a clear sign of a willingness and readiness to build bridges with the

American society. Moreover, a typical pattern in mosques where Arabic is used (the other language most used) is that one part of the Khutbah is given in Arabic and in the second part an English translation is presented⁽²⁴⁾.

3.2. Activities in Mosques

Regarding the activities provided, various interfaith services favour better interfaith understanding, a key element for community cohesion. Many mosques organize and allocate some budget for such activities as open houses, education about Islamic beliefs and practices in the schools and other public contexts. Already, during the year 2000 a majority of the 416 mosques interviewed have done each of the following activities: visit a school or church to present Islam, contact the media, contact a political leader and participate in interfaith dialogue. Some have had a politician visit the mosque, wrote or called a political leader, or participated in an interfaith social service project⁽²⁵⁾. Ten years later, almost two-thirds of the 524 mosques interviewed conducted an open house for their non-Muslim neighbours. Moreover, over 79 percent of them have been involved in an interfaith programme⁽²⁶⁾.

Furthermore, voter registration activities have also increased significantly. In 2000 only 24 percent of the 416 mosques interviewed conducted a voter registration or voter education programme but in 2011 the percentage was up to 36 percent of the 524 mosques interviewed. Also, mosques allowed more organizations to come in to do voter registration drives – in 2000 only 8 percent of the 416 mosques allowed other groups to conduct voter registration”⁽²⁷⁾, and in 2011, 12 percent of the 524 mosques opened their doors to other organizations⁽²⁸⁾. These activities reflect Muslims’ willingness at civic and political integration and so at community cohesion.

4. Conclusion

An analysis of the data shows that mosques in the USA are not hampering the community cohesion process but rather promoting it. Through the religious teachings given in the mosques and the activities organized there, the mosques work as cohesive agents with the Muslim group and with the American society as a

whole. They benefit local communities, irrespective of faith. In fact, obstacles to community cohesion may stem from the host society. The American society is at a very considerable distance from the aspiration of community cohesion and reluctant at the inclusion of Muslims. The reason has to do with politics, more than with ethnicity, religion or race. The nation tended to mark out of the boundaries of inclusion, of who can 'belong' to the nation. The American nation should adopt an inclusive sense of American identity. It must fight to be faithful to its national motto, namely "out of many, one."

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