

The role of Imam in crafting future youth leaders

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Importance

- It's related to the future of our community
- It's the main concern of parents & educators
- Alarming signals!
- Collective action required
- Muslim youth represent the picture of Islam

The Muslim Community in America

- **Background & Origin:**
 1. Pre-Columbus era
 2. Two waves of migration: forced (slavery) & voluntary (the beginning of the last century)
- **Areas of concern:** Establishing institutions, balanced integration, positive contribution...
- **Future perspectives:** Establishing Islam as part of the nation's components & Muslims as part the social fabric...

The Muslim Community's Need for Imams and Islamic Centers

- Masjid, the most important institution for Muslims
- Place of gathering for early Muslims (students)
- Rented homes, spaces in shopping centers...
- Reasons for growing # of masajid/I.C among immigrants:
 1. Committed Muslims/preserving identity
 2. New environment
 3. Providing an Islamic environment for youth
 4. Establishing a good base for Islamic activism

Muslim Youth: An Important Part of the Community

- Why the youth?
- The importance of youth in Islam
- Bearers of the torch of Islam
- Our main concern
- Different categories of Muslim youth in America:
 1. Constantly committed/active youth
 2. Occasionally committed/active youth
 3. Disconnected youth

Challenges Facing M.Y in America

- **A non-friendly/corrupted environment:**
 - Encourages immorality
 - Negative individualism
 - Peer pressure
 - "...because they are busy hanging out in the hookah bars on Brookhurst."
 - **Generation gap:**
 - Miscommunication/misunderstanding
 - Islam vs. culture
 - Lack of adapting the modern ways of education...
 - **Identity crisis:**
 - Faith vs. nationality/ethnicity
 - Confusion of belonging (fiqh differences & family impact).
- Result:** political & civic disengagement, social instability...

Challenges Facing M.Y in America

(continue)

■ Lack of advisors vs. Plenty of complainers:

- Failure to adopt/embrace our youth
- Fleeing the Islamic Centers

■ Unavailability of the Imam & lack of understanding youth concerns!

- Overwhelmed Imam
- Lack of interest in working w/ youth (impatience of Imam, cultural gap, disconnection...)

■ “Not yet, you’re still young!” (lack of trust)

- 66% of youth are not involved in I.C

Islamic Centers & Muslim Youth

■ Are I.C's the favorite place for our youth?

- "The mosque also seems intimidating to many youth, a place where they will get judged..."

■ I.C's can't compete other attractions! Why?

- a) Parents' resignation – lack of motivation
- b) Not an exciting place
 - a) "Masjid is 'boring'"
 - b) "The masjid isn't COOL enough"
 - c) "It's not welcoming to the youth"
- c) Feeling of exclusion
 - a) "I think more youth would attend the masjid if they were given a sense of ownership in the community..."
- d) Lack of youth-oriented programs and activities
 - a) "There are no real programs addressing their interests or concerns..."

Islamic Centers & Muslim Youth

(continue)

- e) **Generation clash** "lots of youth cannot connect with elders, and need homegrown youth leaders".
- f) **Ethnic based IC's** "For Afghans especially I know many of my friends that don't come to the masjid feel unwelcome because they are not Arabs...".
- g) **Political based conflicts** "Elders of the masjid are too busy with their in-fighting politics going on in or outside the masjid...".
- h) **Lack of space for the youth** "When we do go to the mosque, we are forced to sit in tiny, ugly rooms that are out of sight and sound of the rest of the beautiful mosque. It is often a room sealed off next to a bathroom or upstairs, where we feel cut off...".

How to make an I.C youth friendly?

- **Variety of youth-oriented programs & activities**
 - Spiritual, Islamic knowledge, activism, comm. service, etc
- **Tackling real youth issues**
 - Gender relations, drug addiction, crime related activities, extremism
- **Open discussion style sessions**
 - Not a weekend school, avoiding one way lectures and teacher-student format
- **More involvement of Imam w/ youth** (Yes 65%,No 35%)
 - Planning, lecturing, advising, etc. (Requires skills improvement...)
- **Flexibility & open mindedness required from the I.C's leadership**
- **Including youth leaders in management & decision making**

How to make an I.C youth friendly? (continue)

- **Hiring a "Youth Coordinator" to be in charge of the youth program** (including the youth in the decision)
- **No youth education without "entertainment"!**
- **Let the youth select their space of activity at I.C**
- **Inviting youth oriented speakers & educators**
- **Seminars & workshops for adults on youth matters according to the Islamic values & recent youth research**

MAS Youth Centers: Inland Empire Model

- **MAS National project implemented throughout U.S**
- **Sense of ownership: planning, executing, creativity**
- **Cooperation w/ neighboring I.C: additional venue for youth - supplying w/ leadership & curriculum**
- **Programs for all ages (1yr old – post-college)**
 - Boy & Girl Scouts
- **Variety of programs:**
 - Qiyam program (MY Revive) – field trips – after school tutoring – sports tournaments – workshops & seminars...

Muslim Youth running an Islamic Center (example of IC of IE)

The Imam & Muslim Youth

The Imam I want...

1. Speak my language (cultural language)
(Yes 75%, No 25%)
2. Understand my concerns (Yes 65%, No 35%)
3. Available when I need him (Yes 64%, No 36%)
4. Spend time with the youth (Yes 48%, No 52%)
5. My role model (Yes 58%, No 42%)
6. Easily approachable
7. Closer age group

Sharing Thoughts

- Facing the facts...
- Let's be realistic (entertaining education, improving our skills, live their world, ...)
- Home education comes first (IC is not an alternative)
- Role of Islamic Schools: preparing youth for the next stage
- Spending time with the youth...
- Muslim youth deserve our trust
- Give them a chance to show their ability
