


# When American Values Unite Jews and Muslim in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

America had a big reputation as a melting pot for many nations with various backgrounds to live together in the country since it could unite those peoples as one nation, including different religious groups or races. American Jews and Muslims belong to an American society that has co-existed for centuries. The twin towers collapse on September 11, 2011 has opened a very intensive dialog space between Muslim scholars and non-Muslims in America. In that situation, various scholarly Muslim forms of appreciation arise slowly towards other religious communities including the Jews. The commonalities between Jews and Muslims contribute significantly in making harmony among their followers. However, this paper insists that American values were the main factor in uniting Jews and Muslims in the United States

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## Introduction

For many people, a country's coexistence between the Islamic and Jewish groups does not make sense. There have been many stories indicating a strong sentiment among both of them. Its friction may escalate to verbal and physical violence and edify the suspicion that the hostility among the two groups seems to take longer. Anti-Jewish sentiments occur in many Muslim countries worldwide, including the Muslims in the United States. Thus, Islamophobia has spread among various Jewish communities. No one was happy with these sentiments. Certainly, both parts do not receive sentimentally. The Jews must be offended if their religion and nation are insulted, and vice versa. Such sentiments manifesting include hate speech that spreads in the mass or social media and often results in physical disputes. Since Israel was established in 1948 as a Jewish state, Jewish sentiment in Muslim countries has flared worldwide (Ma'oz, 2014: 66).

After fighting more than eight times, the Arabs and the Jews seemed to be two brothers who could not be reconciled. The Arabs considered Islam representations a persecuted nation, but the same feeling occurred in the Jews. For the Jews, the victims are their people who suffered from the hatred of Muslims around the world, especially in Arabia (Palestine). Both Arab and Jewish leaders have legitimized this hatred referred to many sacred verses in Islam and Judaism. Aslan (2011: 1) described the situation: "For Jewish Israelis, the separation is necessary to keep Israel's citizens safe from Palestinian terrorists. For Muslim and Christian Palestinians, the divide is merely the most physical manifestation of what they view as Israel's policy of ethnic and religious segregation." Since a long time ago, the Arab was seen as the disruptor of Israel's presence, or, as a conquerable obstacle's formation in 1948. At most horrible, the Arab has been regarded as "a bloody-minded shadow that dogs the Jew" and that intrudes the smooth "democracy" of Israeli life (Said, 1974: 4).

Despite the fact Arabs constitute just roughly 20% of the Muslim population in the United States (2015 Pew Research Center report), Islam has been generally perceived and represented through an Arab image. It is an effect of Arabization, a process of adopting the elements of the Arab religious culture as a way of Muslim religious practices (Rabasa, et. al., 2004: xviii). The bias of Islam with Arabs also shaped American prejudice on this religion, which is worst labeled as terrorism. Ibish and Stewart (2003) from American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee recorded that Arab Americans agonized a stern hostile response after September 11, 2001 and continue to face heightened levels of discrimination from their fellow citizens in various professions. Another case showed that the officers interrogated passengers whose Islamic names and Arabic at the airport entrance.

On the other side, the Arabic Muslims in the United States were also convinced that the Jews were the people who robbed their land in Palestine. Many scholars and religious activists have mentioned the Washington administration's support for Israel as the big trigger to a sentiment of America among many Muslims worldwide. For example, Stephen Zunes (2002) noted that Washington had pledged massive military, financial, and diplomatic backing for Israel's illegal occupation, which violated international law and human rights. This decision is not primarily driven by objective security needs or a strong moral commitment to the country. Rather, as elsewhere, the United States foreign policy is motivated principally by the advancement of its perceived strategic interests.

Therefore, according to Muslims in America, Israel is a great project for the United States to prove the American dream. American Jews, also known as Jewish Americans, have played a significant role in designing America as their Hope Land. According to Mitchell G. Bard (2012), "The enormous effect of Jewish tradition on the American Founding Fathers can be seen in the Constitution. Such influence should come as no surprise considering John Adams' assertion in a

letter to Thomas Jefferson that he would insist the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation." According to Rabasa (2004: ix), the political aspects of American foreign policy has enforced anti-Americanism among Muslims. Without political tensions, Muslims and Americans have no reasons to hate each other. Many researchers explored the relationship between Jews and Arabs (Muslims) in America. However, none of them goes to the conclusion that it is the American values that unite both in a peaceful life and in mutual understanding.

According to the assumptions above, will there be a possibility for Jews and Muslims in the United States to unite? Explaining the relationship between these two communities in the United States is important and interesting. Unfortunately, almost no article looks at this relationship in a more positive and optimistic spirit. On the contrary, the mainstream media seem to strengthen the tension between both communities. The sentiment towards Jews and Arabs (Islam) continues to surface so that the peace gate seems close tightly. Anyway, Prof. Mark R. Cohen (2013) from Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University reminded us that Jews and Muslims were ever being in harmony in a "Golden Age" in the Middle Ages. It is called as *la convivencia*, "wherein the values of mutual tolerance, intellectual acumen, wisdom, and moderation were not only cultivated but reigned supreme par excellence"(Yaqin, 2016).

This paper attempts to answer this question by inviting readers to consider American values as a primary variable in uniting these two religious groups. Many people may neglect the possibility of this variable or distrust it, but the author will show how American values work as a main factor in doing so. It tries to show that the American Values has united Muslims and Jews in the United States and ensured both communities exist in harmony as long as they practice the American values. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, at the Islamic Society of North America Convention on August 31, 2007, stated: "Surely here, in this land, we cannot permit fanaticism to grow or prejudice to harden. Surely, as Muslims and Jew in America, we have a unique opportunity to reclaim our common heritage and find a new way and a common path." He also added a touching question, "The challenge that we face is this: Will we, Jews and Muslims, import the conflicts of the Middle East into America, or will we join together and send a message of peace to that troubled land?" (Syeed and Pelavin, 2011: 124).

## Discussion

### The Americanization of Jews and Muslims in America

In the context of Jews, Americanized means 'Jewish-Americanized' (Friesel, 1994: 322). It means that when the Jews become Americanized, they adopt their unprecedented identities to be both American and Jewish (Rauf, 2011: 63). The Americanization of Judaism affecting all 'denominations' in the American synagogue was described by Will Herberg (1989). He showed that the process of the Americanization was the same as in the major Protestant churches. The

Americanization of Judaism "was characterized by a far-reaching accommodation to the American pattern of religious life which affected all 'denominations' in the American synagogue," said Herberg.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most American Jews were of German people and those having Central European backgrounds. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially from 1880 to the mid-1920s, there was a massive wave of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. In this period of peak immigration, Italians were the largest immigrant group to enter America, and Jews from Eastern Europe were the second largest (Waxman, 1999: 7). Approximately one-third of the world's fifteen million Jews live in the United States, 80 percent of whom identify as Ashkenazi. Therefore, compared to the Muslim community, the American Jewish community is much more ethnically and ideologically homogenous (Tapper, 2011:77).

The institutional system was virtually the same as in the major Protestant churches (Herberg, 1960: 191). Moore and Troen (2001: 3) reinforced Herberg's statement by saying that Jews have developed a Christian ethos in the United States that awards individualism and self-reliance. In short, the openness of American society established a threat to Jewish identity (Scult, 1995:339). However, the host country in which the Jews reside has always influenced Jews greatly. In the context of America, the Jews view the wealthiest society as the ultimate end. It meets with what most American people think about the American dream. In this case, there is no need to replace some basic Jewish elements to be Americanized (Warner and Srole, 1945: 202). This is why Leon Jick ((1976: 6) insisted that the Americanization of Jews succeeded only when their aspirations correlated with wealth and not with Calvin or Luther. At this point, the Americanization of Jews could be seen as accepting the American Protestant life (Prell, 2002: 16).

In the context of Muslims, the post 9/11/ 2011 situation made matters more difficult for Muslims. The anti-Islamic stigma in the form of Islamophobia develops on a broader scale, a condition that forces all Muslim community leaders and ulemas or clerics to join hands to defend themselves. These leaders and scholars were aware that they had to improve the image of religion and followers of Islam who had already been battered. A 'blessing in disguise takes place here: the effort to improve the image of Islam as a peaceful religion and in harmony with American values has resulted in sympathetic support from community leaders and Judaism.

With the definition given by Rebhun and Waxman (2000: 65), the Americanization of Jews and Muslims is the act, or the process, of conforming Jewish and Muslim culture, ideologies, and material goods to America's ones. American Jews and American Muslims are obliged to accept American values that reward humanity and religious freedom as citizens of the United States. In a survey by Pew Research Center in 2019, many Americans tolerated religious freedom as long as it was out of

politics. We can also see that the majorities of both faiths recognize their similarities. From PSB Research, we know that fifty-four percent of Jews and 65% of Muslims surveyed in a Foundation of Ethnic Understanding responded that “Judaism and Islam are more similar to each other than they are different.” Jews who had frequent exposure to Muslims said Islam is more inclusive, evolving, and modern than those exposed to it more infrequently.

### **The Role of American Values**

To prove that American values are a working ideology, we can test it by asking one principle question: will the American people be Americanized without being Americanized? This question implies that American Jews or Muslims cannot be Americanized if they only grow up with their own values. Instead, they can be Americanized only in their involvement in Americanization.

There have been some ways to define what Americanization is: mystically, legally, linguistically, loosely, biologically, anthropologically, and socio-psychologically; while the most popular is the common or identical psychological characteristics that is a habit-forming and habit-modification process on the side of the immigrant. In order to guarantee the process runs successfully, the immigrant needs to have the will to modify his habits to become Americanized through imitation, repetition, emotion, and reasoning techniques (Speek, 1926: 240-246). In short, Americanization is “the act, or the process, of conforming to America’s culture, ideologies, and material goods” (Rebhun and Waxman, 2000: 65).

In one sense, Americanization can be understood as a process to make a group of people be true American or 100 percent American. On the contrary, those who cannot be Americanised are considered ‘the un-American’. The un-American is seen as the person who fails to meet the criteria for membership in the mythic community from which the modern nation is assumed to have been founded – usually defined in racial, ethnic and gendered terms; through religious affiliation; or by assertions of culture and character (Goodall, 2013: 925). As Stanciu (2015: 13) illustrated that Anglo-Americans saw the people who had just arrived in America land first as “dirty, unkempt, unskilled and decidedly ‘foreign’.

The issue of how Americanization works well among American immigrants emerged in public speech, newspapers, and books many years ago. Scholars and journalists have written numerous articles to explain or define this process in some big questions, such as “...What does Americanization signify? What is American nationality? When is an immigrant Americanized? What process has he to undergo in order to become Americanized? Is it or should it be a conscious effort on the part of the immigrants and their teachers, or is it an unconscious process as implied in the ancient “melting pot” story?” (Speek, 1926: 237).

## Conclusion

American Muslims and Jews find many commonalities in their values and lifestyles, such as the importance of family, making the world a better place, and respecting others are priorities for both faiths. In contrast, other tenets – like daily prayer and specific holy texts – are generally more important to Muslims than Jews. The more American Jews and American Muslims interact with each other, the more likely they are to see the two faiths as more similar than different, a comprehensive study of Muslim-Jewish relations in America has found. However, the commonalities are not enough for the two groups of religion to coexist in mutual respect in America since their stigma can worsen the perception against others. Nevertheless, American values can unite the two groups to live in harmony in the United States. Let us say that commonalities between Jews and Muslims can unite the two without American values. However, if many members of these two groups are not religious or even secular, we can ask what value can unite the two except American values. Thus, Americanization is the clearest avenue for including American values in Jewish and Muslim societies. Through this process, American values shape characters that may match the original character of the individuals in both groups.

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