The Islamic School as a Sanctuary
Against the Rising Tide of Islamophobia

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Muslims are currently living through one of *the* most challenging periods in their recent history. Islamophobia and hate crimes are at an all-time high. This has been empirically and independently confirmed through studies commissioned by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as well as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). Emblematic of this spike in Islamophobia is that since the beginning of 2017, more than two-dozen Islamic Centers across the US have received bomb threats or have been vandalized. In the early hours of Saturday 28 January 2017, the Islamic Center of Victoria in Texas was burnt to the ground by unknown attackers. A day later, on Sunday 29 January 2017, a lone gunman killed six worshippers and maimed eight others at the Grand Mosque in Québec, Canada.

Never before in recent history has the Muslim commitment to a more peaceful and humane world been challenged as it is at this time.

It is against this backdrop that I would like to provide some modest advice as to how we as conscientious Muslim educators and responsible American citizens should respond to this challenging time. I argue that young learners live at the cutting edge of reality and are not oblivious to, or unaffected by the toxic Islamophobic environment we are currently experiencing. I conclude by making modest proposals as to how Islamic schools could play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of Islamophobia and enable and empower young Muslims to channel their energies into constructive programs aimed at social integration.

It might be expedient to begin by reminding ourselves that our children and youth truly live at the cutting edge of the real and rapidly changing world. They often understand the realities and challenges of the times better than many of their elders. However, while young Muslims who grow up in the United States of America have great opportunities, they also have to face and grapple with many broader social issues that oftentimes come into conflict with their Islamic worldview. This cannot be easy for them. Notwithstanding these challenges, it is my considered view that the vast

majority of our Muslim children and youth are bright, flourishing and have healthy dispositions. Our children and youth are our community's most precious treasures and our future rests with them since they are tomorrow's leaders. We need to empower our young people with the ability to constructively deal with social challenges such as Islamophobia and racism. Furthermore, we must design our Islamic school climate, culture and ethos to be learner-centered and our school curricula should be more meaningful and relevant to reality. More particularly, we need to create conditions where the collective positive morale of our children and youth can thrive, ensure that our beliefs, values and attitudes embraces and celebrates diversity and inclusivity, and most importantly, we must be open to change and improvement.

For the Islamic School to play this enabling and empowering role, I believe that it needs to engage with some of the following critical issues.

First and foremost, Islamic schools should inculcate and nurture a vision and understanding of Islam as a balanced and life-affirming religion. At the center of our Islamic school ethos and curricula should be the core Islamic teaching that righteousness (*birr*) is not only measured by how much you pray, how often you fast, your dress code or your diet, but most importantly, by how you interact with and live alongside fellow humans beings. It is the latter attributes of righteous conduct in Islam that should form the blueprint of our Islamic school ethos and curricula. In such a school culture, learners would be nurtured with the sublime values of mercy and compassion, fairness and justice, honesty and forgiveness and humility and respect. In this regard one suggestion is for educators to create opportunities that instill the values of cosmopolitism, anti-racism and anti-bigotry. Excursions to the places of worship of other religions and historical places such as the African American museum in Washington DC, could play a significant role in inculcating edifying humanistic values.

Second, there is a dire need to educate and make young Muslims aware that Islam is a culture friendly religion and that sound and healthy American values and practices should be adopted and embraced. In this regard I would like to reference the insightful views of Dr. `Umar Faruq Abdullah of Chicago. He is one of a growing number of Muslim scholars who have raised the alarm about the destructive tendency of purging religions from their indigenous cultures and practices. In his instructive essay titled, *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*, published in 2004, Dr. `Umar Faruq Abdullah

argues that people who advocate a so called 'culture-free Islam' lose sight of the fact that culture is integral to the development of a healthy sense of self and community (i.e. identity formation and social cohesion). Culture is what gives a community its distinctive character, and cultivates the social skills through which we interact, both with each other as well as the world around us. Estrangement from one's culture leads to a fractured community life and a concomitant tendency towards self-centered forms of social and spiritual lives.

The advice that Dr. `Umar Faruq Abdullah offers Muslim communities, and I would add Islamic schools, is not to develop reactionary "counter cultures" but rather to acculturate to the local context. Acculturating young Muslims to their local contexts does not constitute compromising Islamic ethics, instead it entails embracing wholesome local cultural norms and practices that are not contrary to Islamic ethics but builds towards a healthy Muslim-American identity. In other words, embracing wholesome local cultural norms and practices would enable young Muslims to fashion a healthy sense of self and to be comfortable with who, where, and what we are. In this perspective the challenge for Islamic schools is to develop a healthy Islamic identity that strikes a wholesome balance between their identities as Muslims and as North Americans, and thereby develop a North American cultural expression of Islam.

In support of his argument `Umar Furuq Abdullah cites a rich array number of evidences including verse 199 of *Surah al-`Araf*, chapter 7, in which Allah, the Sublime proclaims:

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ

He translates the verse as follows:

Accept (from people) what comes naturally (for them).
Command what is customarily good.
And turn away from the ignorant
(without responding in kind) (Q7:199)

According to Dr. 'Umar Faruq, Muslim scholars have historically understood the above Qur'anic verse to mean that Islam is a culture friendly religion and has thus responded to this positive imperative by validating local cultural norms and traditions, which do not violate the Islamic value system. For example, according to Ibn `Atiyya al-Andalusi (d.1147), a classical commentator of the Qur'an, this verse not only upholds the sanctity of indigenous culture but grants widespread validity to sound and beneficial customary practices which are not repudiated by the primary sources of Islam.

My third suggestion relates directly to the current rising tide of Islamophobia. A number of credible research studies have conclusively demonstrated that the phenomenon of Islamophobia in North America and Europe is engendering a fertile ground on which radical extremists thrive. Against this backdrop Islamic schools should become bulwarks and sanctuaries against religious extremism. One of *the* most important tasks of an Islamic school should be to immunize young Muslims against extremist theologies and practices.

A growing number of contemporary scholars, including the French social scientist, Olivier Roy, have argued that some young immigrant Muslims living in North America and Europe experience acute identity crises which arises from the two cultural worlds in which they live - their homes and broader society. The search for identity is further exacerbated by a growing phenomenon of Islamophobia i.e. an antipathy towards Islam that results in exclusion, discrimination, misrepresentation and stereotyping of Muslims. This toxic environment of Islamophobia often renders these young Muslims susceptible to extremist viewpoints of Islam. Demagogues who peddle a puritanical and culture free version of Islam are extremely adept at recruiting vulnerable young Muslims. Under their mentorship these young Muslims become extremely conservative to the point that they condemn members of their own families for not being Muslim enough and fellow Muslims at *masajid* for being guilty of so-called *bid`a* or innovative practices.

In this regard the case of the Tsarnaev brothers who committed the horrific Boston marathon bombing exactly three years ago on 15 April 2013, is instructive. Family members claim that the elder brother, Tamerlan Tsaraev, fell under the influence of a new friend, a Muslim convert, who steered the young man towards a rigid and austere interpretation of Islam. Under the

tutelage and mentorship of his new friend, Tamerlan gave up boxing, stopped studying music, ditched his non-Muslim friends, condemned the celebration of Thanksgiving and other holidays by American Muslims, claimed that the CIA was behind the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 - and believed that Jews controlled the world. Reports from congregants of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center are particularly helpful. According to one of these reports Tamarlan was enraged at an Imam of the Islamic Center for praising Martin Luther King Jr. during his sermon. He apparently shouted out the following words during the Imam's talk "You cannot mention this guy because he's not a Muslim!"

Last but not least, the Islamic school should also serve as a place of refuge from the harsh psychological and emotional trauma our children and youth have to endure as a result of the Islamophobic environments within which we live. There can be no better place for securing comfort and sanctuary for children and youth than from a welcoming, loving and caring Islamic school environment. It is within the school context that we nurture hope, optimism and the zest for life.

In conclusion, Islamic schools have a responsibility to reflect on the problems of broader society and to nurture cosmopolitan Islamic values and socially responsible learners.

Please join me in making a special supplication for the protection and success our children and youth at this challenging time.

O Allah protect our children and our youth
And guide them on every path of goodness.
Grant them sanctuary in your compassionate Care and Mercy,
And distance from them all causes of sorrow and grief.
O Allah, strengthen and empower our young people
and instill in them a natural inclination
towards everything that is beneficial.
Guide them to the most noble of conduct in all their affairs
So they may rise up as worthy leaders.
For indeed in them lies our hope for the future
and our aspirations for reconstruction.
We beseech Thee, O Allah, to realize our dreams,
Thou art truly most Noble and Generous.
Allahumma Amin