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A CONVERSATION WITH SAMIRA HUSSEIN

by Danny Alexander



With president-elect Barack Obama having been caricatured in Muslim garb, with people playing with the similarity of his name and Osama and emphasizing his middle name as reasons he shouldn't be fit for the presidency, we knew we needed to hear the perspective of

our Diversity Fellow, Associate Professor of Business Administration Samira Hussein. Having first come to the United States as a college student during the Iran hostage crisis, she's given a great deal of thought to the issues surrounding Islam in America. Her expertise and passion have earned her numerous awards including a Fulbright Scholarship and, most recently, the Distinguished Alumni Award presented by the Crescent Peace Society at its annual dinner. Her own journey offers crucial insights into the obstacles we face and the ways we might move forward.

"I can recall vividly, walking with my younger brother, when somebody threw dirty snow at us, yelling 'Iranian Go Home!' We realized that they didn't have a clue about who we were. In our minds we are such distinct

groups. The four provinces in Pakistan each think of themselves as distinct groups; I'm from the province of Sindh. You can imagine my surprise that they didn't know the difference between Iranians and Pakistanis.

"I always made the assumption that the United States would have superior school systems where they would be taught something about world cultures. But university students asked me, 'Do you have currency or do you still have a barter system?' They'd ask whether we had houses or lived in huts and shacks, if we had transportation or if we were still





using camels. They were perfectly sincere in wanting to know, but I could not believe they were lacking in such basic information.

"There is very little taught about the six million Muslims that live in the United States, one of the fastest growing populations, which includes both African-Americans and Latinos. Before 9/11, there was almost no consciousness of Muslims who might be next door neighbors. People were now wondering 'who they are, what do they do, what do they believe in, are they plotting conspiracies in these mosques where they meet?' The curiosity was based in fear.

"Muslims were *the other* that has invaded my country. By the anthrax scare, our psyche had totally shifted from thinking about people like the Unabomber or Timothy McVeigh to thinking Muslims in the United States were to blame. In truth, Muslims in the United States are more educated and make better incomes than their counterparts in Europe; they are not marginalized populations that would logically be a threat.

"We need to have an honest dialogue if something is troublesome. I can pick any verse out of the Bible and make it problematic if I do not understand the context of that verse. Jesus spoke in parables. Similarly, the verses in the Koran come at different times during different historical events. Because we don't understand each other, many Americans associate our parochial schools, madrasas, just like parochial schools in this country, with fundamentalist indoctrination, although it is only in a very small minority of such places that

any of this sort of indoctrination takes place.

"We have to have an interfaith dialogue about these concepts, and that's why the Festival of Faiths is so important. That's why I admire JCCC's Director of International Education Carolyn Kadel, who applied for a Title VI grant and created 14 new modules and courses, and Sociology Professor Bob Perry, who painstakingly arranged our Fulbright Scholarship to Morocco.

"As a result of the Fulbright, I now have a project in which my International Business class studies importing goods from Morocco. During that project, students have to learn how being a French Protectorate altered Morocco (as compared to how Pakistan was altered by British colonization). They can see how Islam is affected by being in Northern Africa, at the crossroads of Spain and France, a very different cultural mindset than say Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, which are much more landlocked. When they compare Morocco's indigenous population, the Amazigh, they will see a different dynamic than that of the indigenous population in Tajikistan, for instance, a former Soviet Republic. We need to understand how these dynamics are different.

"We need to have a healthy dose of curiosity around Islam. For the past two years, I have been arranging an iftaar meal to break the fast of Ramadan and inviting non-Muslim friends because I think the Muslim community needs to be more open. Organizations like the Heartland Muslim Council, the Crescent Peace Society and the different mosques have started to do serious bridge building because that is the only way they know that their children and they themselves can remain safe and feel comfortable.

"So, I think the onus is on both sides. I'd like to have some faculty come forward and initiate a conversation, as difficult as the initial dialogue may be. If they are harboring some resentment, or maybe they lost a loved one in the Iraq war, I'd like them to come forward and ask me and other Muslims on campus to talk about it. I'd welcome these opportunities. We do have roundtables on Fridays in Carolyn Kadel's office at 2 p.m., which is a start. Dr. Calaway has created a climate where we can talk about these issues. And we have to remember that we can disagree without being disagreeable. I'm a human being; I'm sensitive, and if you ask me in the spirit of an attack, we will probably not have a dialogue, but if you ask me in the spirit of knowing more, I'll be more than willing to share what I know."