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## U.S. Muslim Clerics Seek a Modern Middle Ground



Imam Zaid Shakir tutoring a student.

By **LAURIE GOODSTEIN**

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Every seat in the auditorium at the [University of Houston](#) was taken, and the crowd was standing in the back and spilling out into the lobby, straining to hear. The two men onstage began to speak to the crowd in Arabic, with such flawless accents and rarefied Koranic grammar that some audience members gaped when they heard the Arabic equivalent of the king's English coming from the mouths of two Americans.

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Sheik Hamza Yusuf, in a groomed goatee and sports jacket, looked more like a hip white college professor than a Middle Eastern sheik. Imam Zaid Shakir, a lanky African-American in a long brown tunic, looked as if he would fit in just fine on the streets of Damascus.

Both men are converts to Islam who spent years in the Middle East and North Africa being mentored by formidable Muslim scholars. They have since become leading intellectual lights for a new generation of American Muslims looking for homegrown leaders who can help them learn how to live their faith without succumbing to American materialism or Islamic extremism.

"This is the wealthiest Muslim community on earth," Mr. Shakir told the crowd, quickly adding that "the wealth here has been earned" — unlike, he said, in the oil-rich Middle East. As the audience laughed at Mr. Shakir's flattery, he chided them for buying Lexuses — with heated leather seats they would never need in Houston — and Jaguars, and made them laugh again by pronouncing it "Jaguoooaah," like a stuffy Anglophile.

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Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times  
Sheik Hamza Yusuf spoke at a symposium in New Jersey.

And then he issued a challenge: "Where are the Muslim [Doctors Without Borders](#)? Spend six months here, six months in the Congo. Form it!"

Most American mosques import their clerics from overseas — some who preach extremism, some who cannot speak English, and most who cannot begin to speak to young American Muslims growing up on hip-hop and in mixed-sex chat rooms. Mr. Yusuf, 48, and Mr. Shakir, 50, are using their clout to create the first Islamic seminary in the United States, where they hope to train a new generation of imams and scholars who can reconcile Islam and American culture.

The seminary is still in its fledgling stages, but Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Shakir have gained a large following by being equally at home in Islamic tradition and modern American culture. Mr. Yusuf dazzles his audiences by weaving into one of his typical half-hour talks quotations from St. Augustine, Patton, Eric Erikson, Jung, Solzhenitsyn, Auden, Robert Bly, Gen. William C. Westmoreland and the Bible. He is the host of a TV reality show that is popular in the Middle East, in which he takes a vanload of Arabs on a road trip across the United States to visit people who might challenge Arab stereotypes about Americans, like the antiwar protesters demonstrating outside the [Republican National Convention](#).

Mr. Shakir mixes passages from the Koran with a few lines of rap, and channels accents from ghetto to Valley Girl. Some of his students call him the next [Malcolm X](#) — out of his earshot, because he so often preaches the importance of humility.

Both men draw overflow crowds in theaters, mosques and university auditoriums that seat thousands. Their books and CD's are pored over by young Muslims in study groups. As scholars and proselytizers of the faith, they have a much higher profile than most imams, as Muslim clerics who are usually in charge of mosques are known. Their message is that both Islam and America have gone seriously astray, and that American Muslims have a responsibility to harness their growing numbers and economic power to help set them straight.

They say that Islam must be rescued from extremists who selectively cite Islamic scripture to justify terrorism. Though Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Shakir do not denounce particular scholars or schools of thought, their students say the two are challenging the influence of Islam's more reactionary sects, like Wahhabism and Salafism, which has been spread to American mosques and schools by clerics trained in Saudi Arabia. Where Wahhabism and Salafism are often intolerant of other religions — even of other streams within Islam — Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Shakir teach that Islam is open to a diversity of interpretations honed by centuries of scholars.

Mr. Yusuf told the audience in Houston to beware of "fanatics" who pluck Islamic scripture out of context and say, "We're going to tell you what God says on every single issue."

"That's not Islam," Mr. Yusuf said. "That's psychopathy."

He asked the audience to pray for the victims of kidnappers in Iraq, saying that kidnapping is just as bad as American bombings in which the military dismisses the civilians killed as "collateral damage."

"They're both sinister, as far as I'm concerned," he said. "One is efficient, the other is pathetic."

Both Mr. Shakir and Mr. Yusuf have a history of anti-American rhetoric, but with age, they have tempered their views. Mr. Shakir told the Houston audience that they are blessed to live in a country that is stable and safe, and in which they have thrived.

When it came time for questions, one young man stepped to the microphone and asked: "You said we have an obligation to humanity. Did you mean to Muslims, or to everyone?"

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Mr. Shakir responded: "The obligation is to everyone. All of the people are the dependents of Allah."

When Mr. Shakir and Mr. Yusuf stepped off the stage, they were mobbed by a crowd that personified the breadth of their following. There were students in college sweatshirts, doctors and limousine drivers in suits. There were immigrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and the grown children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the immigrant generation. There were plenty of African-Americans (as many as a third of American Muslims are black), and a sprinkling of white and Hispanic converts. There were women in all kinds of head scarves, and women without.

Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Shakir posed for pictures and signed their CD's, books and DVD's — the two men combined have more than 80 items on the market. A young couple thanked Mr. Yusuf for his CD set on Muslim marriage, saying it had saved theirs. A family from Indonesia asked him to interpret a dream. An older woman from Iraq begged him to contact Muslim scholars in her homeland and correct their misguided teaching.

After waiting for more than an hour to greet the scholars, Sohail Ansari, an information technology specialist originally from India, marveled, "I was born a Muslim, and these guys are so far ahead of us."

#### Encouraging Tolerance

Mr. Yusuf lives on a cul-de-sac in Danville, a Northern California suburb, in a house with a three-car garage. The living room is spread with Persian rugs; it is mostly bare of furniture. He held a dinner with guests in traditional Arab style — on the floor, while the smallest of his five sons curled up in the rugs and fell asleep. His wife, Liliana, tired from a day of home-schooling and driving the boys to karate lessons, passed around take-out curry. She converted to Islam after meeting Mr. Yusuf in college, to the chagrin of her Catholic Hispanic parents. The couple married outdoors, in a redwood grove.

Mr. Yusuf received the Arabic title of sheik from his teachers in Mauritania, in West Africa. There the honorific is usually given to old men with a deep knowledge of Islam who serve their communities as wise oracles, but Mr. Yusuf was only 28. His given name was Mark Hanson, and he was raised Greek Orthodox in a bohemian but affluent part of Marin County, just north of San Francisco.

He converted to Islam after a near-fatal car accident in high school sent him on an existential journey. He said that the simplicity of "no God but Allah" made far more sense to him than the Trinity, and he found the five daily prayers a constant call to awe about everything from the sun to his capillaries.

The American seminary was Mr. Yusuf's idea. His diagnosis of the problem with Islam today is that its followers lack "religious knowledge." Islam, like Judaism, is based in scripture and law that has been interpreted, reinterpreted and debated for centuries by scholars who inspired four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Mr. Yusuf laments that many of the seminaries that once flourished in the Muslim world are now either gone or intellectually dead. Now, he said, the sharpest Muslim students go into technical fields like engineering, not religion.

He said he believed that if more Muslims were schooled in their faith's diverse intellectual streams and had a holistic understanding of their religion, they would not be so susceptible to the Osama bin Ladens who tell them that suicide bombers are martyrs.

"Where you don't have people who have strong intellectual capacity, you get demagoguery," he said.

Mr. Yusuf once was a source of the kind of zealous rhetoric he now denounces. He said in 1995 that Judaism was based on the belief that "God has this bias to this small little tribe in the middle of the desert," which makes it "a most racist religion." On Sept. 9, 2001, he said the United States "stands condemned" for invading Muslim lands.

He has since changed his tune — not for spin, he says, but on principle. "Our community has

failed, and I include myself in that," he told an audience in a downtown theater in Elizabeth, N.J., this year. "When I started speaking in the early 90's, our discourse was not balanced.

"We were focused so often on what was negative about this country," he said. "We ended up alienating some people. I've said some things about other religions that I regret now. I think they were incorrect."

He added: "A tree grows. If you're staying the same, something is wrong. You're not alive."

#### An Enthusiastic Following

Mr. Yusuf named his school the Zaytuna Institute — Arabic for olive tree, and also the name of a renowned Islamic university in Tunisia. The site, adjacent to a busy boulevard in Hayward, Calif., is an unlikely oasis, the air scented by jasmine bushes and flowering vines.

Five times a day, starting around 5 a.m., a teacher or a student stands outside the prayer hall and warbles the call to prayer. In the mornings, few respond, but by evening, the hall is filled with the rustling of men and women dropping to their knees, divided by a wooden screen.

The prayer hall was once a church. There is also a yurt and a high backboard used as a target for archery, because the Prophet Muhammad recommended it as an athletic activity. (The backboard will soon come down to avoid alarming neighbors who might balk at seeing Muslims with bows and arrows).

On a sunny day, one student, Ousmane Bah, sat outside the yurt, washing the ink off a polished wooden slate on which he had written his lesson for the past week, which he had committed to memory. The lesson, written in Arabic poetry, was about what makes a fair trade. Near the yurt, BART trains sped by.

"The United States is the capital of modernity," Mr. Bah said, "and you have this very traditional Islam, which is 1,400 years old, being taught in this modern world."

Many American universities have Islamic studies departments, and a program at Hartford Seminary accredits Muslim chaplains. But there is no program in the United States like Zaytuna.

Hundreds of Muslims come to Zaytuna for evening and weekend classes on the Prophet Muhammad, the Koran and the Arabic language. The institute's full-time seminary program is in the pilot phase, with only six students. It is expected to double its enrollment next fall.

Besides Mr. Bah, there are two women — one a former software engineer, the other a former prenatal genetic counselor — and three men — a former jazz musician from Maryland, a motorcycle mechanic from Atlanta and a son of Bangladeshi immigrants in New York City who chose Zaytuna over the [Ivy League](#).

"Sheik Hamza and Imam Zaid have grown up here after having studied abroad, and you can really connect with them," said the New Yorker, Ebadur Rahman, who is 19. "The scholars who come from abroad, they can't connect with the people. They're ignorant of life here."

Islamic studies experts say that what Mr. Yusuf and Mr. Shakir are teaching is traditional orthodox Islam, and that it is impossible to characterize their theology as either conservative or liberal. They encourage but do not require women in class to cover their heads. They have hired a female scholar, who teaches only women. Last year, Mr. Shakir published a rebuttal to a group of progressive American Muslims who argue that Islamic law allows women to lead men in prayer.

Mr. Yusuf says he has become too busy to teach regularly at his own school. He writes books, translates Arabic poetry, records CD's, tapes his television show. He meets with rabbis, ministers and the [Dalai Lama](#), and travels annually to the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland.

Mr. Yusuf's fame grew after he was invited to the White House nine days after the Sept. 11 attacks, making him the only Muslim leader along with five other religious leaders who were called to meet with President Bush. He suggested that Mr. Bush change the name of the

military's impending operation in Afghanistan, "Infinite Justice," because it would offend Muslims, who believe the only source of infinite justice is God. Mr. Bush responded by changing the operation's name to "Operation Enduring Freedom," and in the news media Mr. Yusuf gained a title other than sheik: "adviser to the president."

Mr. Yusuf, however, said that Mr. Bush since then "hasn't taken any of my advice."

#### Persuasion Over Violence

Three years ago, Mr. Yusuf invited Mr. Shakir to teach at Zaytuna as a scholar in residence. Mr. Shakir had recently returned from his second stint of studying Islam abroad — a total of seven years in Syria and Morocco.

One recent Sunday afternoon, Mr. Shakir had 50 students in his Zaytuna class on marriage and family. The women brought their babies and their knitting, and everyone munched on homemade cookies brought for a cookie-baking contest.

"It's going to be hard to beat this oatmeal raisin," Mr. Shakir said between swigs of organic milk.

The real topic at hand was whether polygamy, which is permitted in Islam, is appropriate in the modern context. Mr. Shakir mediated a heated debate between the men and women who sparred across the wooden divider that separated them.

One man said that having more than one wife was good because some women are so "career orientated" that "they don't want to be cleaning up all the time behind the man." At that, one woman shouted out, "Get a maid!" and everyone dissolved in laughter.

Mr. Shakir told the students that Islam allows polygamy because it was a "practical" and "compassionate" solution in some cases, as when women are widowed in war. But in the modern context, he said, "a lot of harm ensues."

Mr. Shakir said afterward that he still had trouble believing how a boy from the projects could have become an Islamic scholar with students who are willing to move across the country to study with him.

He and his wife, Saliha, became Muslims in the Air Force. He had joined the military as a teenager in the lull after Vietnam because his mother had died and he had no means. His name was Ricky Mitchell, and his mother had raised him and his siblings in housing projects in Georgia — where he remembers going to his grandparents' farm and picking cotton — and in New Britain, Conn.

#### A Goal for America

While leading a mosque in New Haven in 1992, Mr. Shakir wrote a pamphlet that cautioned Muslims not to be co-opted by American politics. He wrote, "Islam presents an absolutist political agenda, or one which doesn't lend itself to compromise, nor to coalition building."

While he did not denounce Muslims who take part in politics, he pointed out the effectiveness of "extrasystemic political action" — like the "armed struggle" that brought about the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan. A copy of the pamphlet was found in the apartment of a suspect in the first World Trade Center bombing, in 1993. Mr. Shakir says he was questioned by the F.B.I., but had no link to the man, and that was the end of it.

While studying in Syria a few years later, he visited Hama, a city that had tried to revolt against the Syrian ruler, Hafez al-Assad. Mr. Shakir said he saw mass graves and bulldozed neighborhoods, and talked with widows of those killed. He gave up on the idea of armed struggle, he said, "just seeing the reality of where revolution can end."

Asked now about his past, he said, "To be perfectly honest, I don't regret anything I've done or said."

He added, "I had to go through that stage to become the person that I am, and I'm not willing to negate my past."

He said he still hoped that one day the United States would be a Muslim country ruled by Islamic law, "not by violent means, but by persuasion."

"Every Muslim who is honest would say, I would like to see America become a Muslim country," he said. "I think it would help people, and if I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be a Muslim. Because Islam helped me as a person, and it's helped a lot of people in my community."

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