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Tom Pidgeon for The New York Times

Hassan Qazwini  
By RASHID KHALIDI  
Published: January 6, 2008

This book is many things. It is, first, a personal chronicle of Imam Hassan Qazwini's own trajectory from Karbala, Iraq, where he was born in 1964, to exile in Kuwait and Iran, to Dearborn, Mich., where he currently heads the Islamic Center of America. Second, it is an argument for Qazwini's variety of Shia Islam, rooted in Iraq and Iran and adapted for America. Finally, it is a political statement — in fact, two of them — a plea for Muslim Americans to immerse themselves in the life of the United States while simultaneously deepening their identification as Muslims, and also for a particular outcome in Iraq, where Qazwini's father, a leading ayatollah, is imam of the mosque of Imam Hussein in Karbala.

**AMERICAN CRESCENT**  
**A Muslim Cleric on the Power of His Faith, the Struggle Against Prejudice, and the Future of Islam and America.**

By Hassan Qazwini.  
Illustrated. 282 pp. Random House. \$26.95.

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[First Chapter: 'American Crescent'](#) (January 6, 2008)

"American Crescent" introduces non-Muslim American readers to the world of Iraqi Shiism into which Qazwini was born (and which he left in 1971 at the age of 6), and of the daily oppression Iraqis, especially clerics, endured under [Saddam Hussein](#). It is, as well, an introduction to the world of Iranian religious students and clerics, in which Qazwini lived for many years, and to the world of Muslims in the United States, where he has lived since 1992. Qazwini's account of all these worlds is well drawn and dramatic. It is striking, moreover, how easily he glides from the personal to the religious, from accounts of his life and his family to those of the lives of the Prophet and the Shiite imams. This approach links the different elements of his book, and also illustrates the close connection between the present and the formative era of Islam for someone of

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Qazwini's background, training and outlook.

Qazwini draws on his rich knowledge of Islam and of Shiism, along with his 15 years of experience of American life, to explain his faith to readers who do not share it. This feature of the book bears comparison with Tariq Ramadan's "In the Footsteps of the Prophet," a strikingly liberal account of the life of the Prophet Muhammad meant for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers. Qazwini not only explains basic facts about Islam, but also usefully delineates where Shiite interpretations differ from those of Sunnis.

Some mainstream Sunnis may quibble with Qazwini's accounts of various doctrinal disputes. But it is worth noting as well that some of Qazwini's views will jar the sensibilities of those who might be called, for want of a better term, secular Muslims, who live in the United States and throughout the Islamic world. For them, being a Muslim does not necessarily involve the prescriptions Qazwini lays down, however well he argues that these can be integrated with life in a secular world. As for those non-Muslims for whom Islam is an object of suspicion, if not hatred, Qazwini's learned and patient expositions are unlikely to cause them to cease their prejudice or to slake their hostility.

It is the political part of "American Crescent" that is both strongest and weakest. It is strongest in making the case for American Muslims to become more involved in national life, following the example of other immigrant communities in developing political power first at the local level, and eventually at the national one. From his vantage point in the Detroit metropolitan area, which he describes as "the Muslim capital of the West," Qazwini is well placed to observe the slow growth in self-confidence, involvement and political clout of Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans. And he vigorously assails those in his own community who argue that there is no point in entering American politics to contest those with an inveterate hostility to Muslims and Arabs.

Here, history is probably on Qazwini's side. A vast majority of his community arrived in this country after restrictive immigration laws were loosened in 1965 and have only now begun to assimilate fully into American life. As more and more Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans speak English as their native language, attend American schools and colleges, gain professional training, go on to successful jobs and careers and achieve prosperity and greater integration into the life of their communities, they will inevitably shed their virtual invisibility in the politics of the United States. (Whether they follow Qazwini's prescriptions for a separate educational path up to and possibly through the university level is another matter.)

It is with regard to Iraq that Qazwini's approach is weakest. He is certainly right to argue against the murderous hostility toward Shiites on the part of extreme Salafis and jihadis in Iraq, against the bigotry and narrow-mindedness of Wahhabi doctrine regarding the Shiites (and many others) and against the cruel persecution of Iraq's Shiites in the past — not to mention the discrimination they have been facing in Saudi Arabia right up to the present. In Iraq the Shiites fully deserve the representation that their large numbers entitle them to. But to suggest that the aspirations of this formerly downtrodden segment of the population can be represented only by essentially sectarian political formations (like those that were put into power in Baghdad by the American occupation) closes off options that might be desired by millions of Iraqis who do not necessarily wish to mix their religion with their politics. It is also to fall into the trap of assuming the inevitability and the desirability of a sectarian (and ethnic) framework for Iraqi politics that was in large measure the creation of the American occupation of Iraq.

Moreover, Qazwini's depiction of the actions and attitudes of Iraq's Sunni Arabs — whom he seems to characterize as being dominated either by fanatically anti-

Shiite Salafis led by foreigners or by equally ruthless Baathists — is highly selective and partisan. It does not allow for the possibility that most Sunnis simply want to play an appropriate role in the politics of their country, from which they have been largely shut out since 2003, and to end the American occupation and its intrusive intervention in every important aspect of Iraqi life, something also desired by most Shiites.

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These flaws notwithstanding, "American Crescent" is a useful book, especially for American readers who are unfamiliar with Islam or who wonder how Muslim Americans and Arab-Americans can be integrated into American life. It does not chart the only possible path to such integration, but it illustrates well the one that many have embarked on.

Rashid Khalidi is the Edward Said professor of Arab studies at Columbia. His most recent book is "The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood."

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