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On ballots this Nov: More Muslim American women

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MIAMI -- Many things have changed for Muslim Americans in the seven years since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks: Interrogations from FBI and immigration officials. Additional screenings from airport security. The feeling of being targeted by the contentious Patriot Act.

And then there's this: More Muslims, particularly women, are running for political office, spurred by the perceived erosions of their civil liberties.

The soul searching that followed 9/11 prompted more women to step into leadership roles, a trend encouraged by the community, said Agha Saeed, founder of the American Muslim Alliance, which has been tracking Muslim candidates since 1996. Before Sept. 11, less than 5 percent were women, Saeed said. Now about one in three are.

Dozens of Muslim Americans of both genders have seats on city councils and work on Capitol Hill, Saeed said, though few hold statewide office. Only two Muslims _ Democrats Keith Ellison of Minnesota and Andre Carson of Indiana _ serve in Congress.

"9/11 had a big impact," Ellison said. "We kind of came to the conclusion that sitting on the sidelines ... was not going to be a successful strategy, and that people needed to get involved."

Jamilah Nasheed, an African-American convert to Islam and Missouri Democratic state representative, is one of just nine Muslim Americans in state legislatures nationwide, and the only woman, according to the alliance. She is almost certain to win re-election this year, and Muslim American women in California, Michigan and Minnesota are vying to join her.

Among them is Democrat Ferial Masry, who faces a tough race in her bid to represent a heavily Republican general assembly district near Los Angeles. The 59-year-old high school government and history teacher was born in Mecca but moved to Egypt when she was 10 so she could attend school, not an option for girls in Saudi Arabia at the time. She was a write-in candidate for the seat four years ago after the Democratic Party approached her.

She said no one expected the unknown "woman from Saudi Arabia with an accent" to do well, but she got almost 35 percent of the vote.

No matter how she does this time, she believes she's already won by challenging stereotypes about her faith.

"They have this perception of Muslim women _ veiled, oppressed and depressed," says Masry, who doesn't don a scarf. "I'm giving a different picture."

Farheen Hakeem, a 32-year-old activist and Green Party candidate for an open seat representing Minneapolis, first ran for mayor in 2005, then for a county commissioner seat. She lost both times.

"I was asked every question under the book," says Hakeem, who wears a head scarf and is of South Asian descent. People would grill her about Islam's treatment of women.

"If I'm so oppressed, how am I running for mayor? I'm still Muslim," she'd tell them. Now, she says, "People are like, 'Yeah, so what, she's Muslim.'"

Rashida Tlaib, an immigration lawyer from Michigan, never thought about running for office until after the terrorist attacks, when she said she saw the immigration system being used to target people of Middle Eastern descent and felt a responsibility to get involved.

After she worked on immigration reform, Tlaib was approached by the Michigan House floor leader, who wanted her to work for him, then later urged her to run for his seat. Tlaib was also recently tapped to be Barack Obama campaign's liaison to the Arab American and Muslim American communities.

"I think this is fate, what in Arabic we call 'naseeb,'" says Tlaib, 32, who was born to Palestinian parents and raised in southwest Detroit. She was the first in her family to graduate from high school, and earned a law degree while working full-time and helping raise 13 younger siblings.

Having won the primary in her heavily Democratic, majority Latino district, Tlaib will likely join lawmakers in Lansing next session, and she looks forward to exposing them to Muslim holidays and traditions like fasting the month of Ramadan.

But Tlaib is quick to emphasize that she didn't run because she's Muslim American; it's just part of who she is. When she walked her district's neighborhoods, people were more interested in talking about crime and foreclosures than her unfamiliar name.

Still, Tlaib's victory has excited the local Muslim community, where men have brought their daughters to meet her.

"They are just completely proud and feeling like this is the reason they came to this country," Tlaib said, "so their children could get opportunities like this."

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