My Generation: Muslim Millennials on the Future of Islam

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Fordham University | Lincoln Center Campus
Pope Auditorium | 113 West 60th Street

**Moderator**
Linda Sarsour
*Director, Arab American Association of New York*

**Panelists**
Reza Aslan
*Author, No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam; Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in the Age of Globalization*

Musa Syeed
*Screenwriter and Director, Valley of Saints; A Son’s Sacrifice*

Khalid Latif
*Executive Director and Chaplain, Islamic Center at New York University*

Nadia Roumani
*Co-founder and Director, American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute*

**JAMES McCARTIN:** Good evening and a very warm welcome to Fordham University. I’m Jim McCartin of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, and I want first of all to thank you all for joining us.

Before we begin, please allow me to make three brief announcements.

First, everyone please, please be sure to sign up for our mailing list. Even if you’ve received word from us about this event, we want to be sure that you are permanently on our list. You can sign up at the table on your way out.

Second, as a matter of courtesy to one another and to our panelists and moderator, please silence all of your electronic devices.

Third, you will find on your seats cards on which you may write questions for our panelists tonight. Write briefly and legibly. Hold up your card, at which point one of our students will grab it from you and bring it up front.

Now, tonight’s forum grew out of a conversation I had several months ago with one of our panelists, Imam Khalid Latif. In the course of our back and forth, it occurred to me that in the United States we talk a great deal about the place of Islam in our world and, either tacitly or explicitly, we also express a good deal of curiosity in the United States about the place of young Muslims in the world. But at the same time, these young Muslims are seldom asked for their own views, their own vision of the future, especially when it comes to the future of Islam.

So this evening we hope to remedy that situation by drawing together a best-selling author, a leader in the world of philanthropy and public policy, an award-winning
filmmaker, an accomplished spiritual leader, and a well-known civil rights advocate and social service provider. All of them are young Americans, but each has relationships with Muslim communities around the globe that make them into well-informed and critical voices of their generation.

What transpires among them tonight promises to be wide-ranging, enlightening, and provocative. In this I hope it represents the best of what the Center on Religion and Culture is all about.

Tonight’s event takes place as part of the kickoff of what we at Fordham call Ignation Week, an annual celebration and affirmation of our identity and mission as a Catholic Jesuit university. For us, this means, in part, that Fordham is a welcome home for all people of faith, for all people of goodwill, who acknowledge the compatibility, the affinity, between our intellectual development and our spiritual growth.

Last week marked the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which called upon Catholics to pursue meaningful engagement with people of other faith traditions. Specifically, the Council encouraged a dialogue between Catholics and Muslims that would enable them “to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare as well as peace and freedom around the world.” It is my hope that this Forum, held at a Catholic Jesuit university, helps to encourage in its own small way the kind of cooperation imagined at Vatican II.

Our moderator this evening is a woman known to many of you in the audience. Linda Sarsour is Director of the Arab American Association of New York, a social service agency and advocacy organization serving the Arab immigrant community of New York. She has served in leadership positions in the National Network of Arab Communities, the New York Immigration Coalition, in the YWCA Brooklyn. A former COROS New American Leaders fellow, she is also a graduate of the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute. For her work she has been honored with the Brooklyn Do Gooder Award conferred by the Brooklyn Community Foundation. And she has been designated an Outstanding Community Leader both by Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hines and by the White House, where she was honored as a Champion of Change.

Please welcome Linda Sarsour.

LINDA SARSOUR: Thank you, James, thank you very much to Fordham University for having me, and thank you to all who came out tonight.

I am your Candy Crowley of the evening. [Laughter] I’ll try as hard as possible not to Jim Lehrer you guys tonight, but, all rules having been explained to our panelists, I’m hoping that our panelists follow the rules tonight.

So call us what you want — Millennials, Generation Y, Generation We — there are many things you can call us — it doesn’t change the reality that most of us grew up just as one era ended and another began.

I’m old enough to remember what life was like before high-speed Internet but young enough to lead the digital revolution. That’s a plug for following many of us on the panel on Twitter, but we can talk about that later.

Many years from now, we will bore our grandchildren with stories about ancient things like dial-up modems and books. Do you guys remember books? Okay.
In the meantime, we are dealing with your shortened attention spans, student debt, and our smartphone obsession. I’m all worried about being on the panel and not being able to Tweet — but that’s a whole other situation.

What’s interesting about this — I was like, “Please, God, let me make sure that I’ve met the criteria to be a MillenniaI.” I looked it up just to make sure. I barely made the cut. I’m still proud to say I was born in the early 1980s, so technically I got the right position here.

I think that this specific panel, Muslim Millennials, is a very important one, because one of the challenges that Muslim Millennials have is that it’s not often that you see people in our age group who are representing Islam in America or Islam in the world, representing the views and perspectives of our communities. It is with great honor that I get to moderate this evening with people I consider to be superstars in the Muslim-American community here.

Without further ado, I’d like to introduce to you our first panelist, definitely celebrity status — if you all didn’t know, you’ll figure that out after he does his little presentation. It is my honor to introduce to you Reza Aslan. He is the Wallerstein Distinguished Visiting Professor at Drew University and a member of the University of California at Riverside’s creative writing faculty. He has written and edited a number of best-selling books, including How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror; Muslims and Jews in America: Commonalities, Contentions, and Complexities, edited with Aaron Hahn Tapper; and No god But God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam, now available around the world in nine languages. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a frequent commentator on The Daily Show with John Stewart — I want that position, I want it [Laughter] — as well as a wide range of television and print media sources, he also co-founded BoomGen Studios, a production company focused on creating entertainment related to the Middle East and Middle Eastern diaspora communities.

Without further ado, please give a round of applause to Mr. Reza Aslan.

REZA ASLAN: Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Linda. There’s a chair here, which I will put over here, and then debate. [Laughter]

It is a great pleasure to be here at Fordham. I myself am a product of a Jesuit Education. I graduated from Santa Clara University. I feel like most of not just what I know about the world but how I view the world has been shaped by the great Jesuits who taught me my values and who taught me about the world. So I’m grateful especially to be here. Thank you.

I’m also grateful to be on a panel with my fellow savages. I’m excited about that. [Laughter]

Still, people are going to be filtering in. We have some brothers in the back praying — by which I mean planning the takeover of America. [Laughter]

I’m pretty sure Robert Spencer is here. If you are, you’d better waddle back there right away and figure out what’s going on.

My job is to get us started. I’m here to talk about the trends, the stats, the predictions, about Muslim Millennials, what are some of the issues that we can take away from demographic shifts, and then also perhaps a little bit about the kinds of predictions that
we can make based on those shifts.

Now, the biggest trend, of course, is obvious. It’s one that we are all familiar with. If you have been paying attention to the news at all, you will understand the biggest trend. It’s the demographic trend that I was talking about.

Particularly when it comes to the greater Middle East, this is a region in which 75 percent of the population is under the age of thirty-five; 50 percent of the population is under the age of twenty-five.

As remarkable as those numbers are, they are even more remarkable when you start boring down on some of the major nation-states of the region. The median age in Egypt, for instance, is twenty-four. The median age in Jordan is twenty-two. In Syria, the median age is twenty-one. In Yemen, the median age is eighteen. Just to put that in perspective, the median age in the United States is thirty-seven.

These demographic shifts, as we all know, have utterly transformed the very physical landscape of the Middle East. It created a completely new kind of Middle East that we are, obviously, still talking about today.

This is also a highly literate population, very well-educated, as a result of the post-colonial efforts to create a highly educated class.

They are globalized.

They are plugged in, as we all obviously know. We like to talk often about the Arab Spring revolutions as a “Twitter revolution” or a “Facebook revolution.” This is a problematic term for a whole host of reasons. In many ways, it sort of reflects the tendency that we have in the United States to corporatize everything, as though we’re talking about “Arab democracy brought to you by Starbucks.” [Laughter] But let’s be honest, these social media tools were absolutely instrumental in the rapid political changes that we saw in the region. And indeed, I would go so far as to say that those changes would have been impossible without these social media tools, not only because they allowed these young people to break the monopoly over the levers of communication that these autocratic regimes had, but, far, far more importantly, they allowed these people to communicate with the outside world and break the monopoly that our mainstream media has on narrative formation. In other words, they were able to communicate directly with us about their values, their aspirations, their ambitions, their hopes and dreams, taking away the power of the media gatekeepers to form a media narrative themselves about what was going on.

In fact, the statistics I think bear this out. Arabic, as many of you know, is the seventh-largest language on the Internet. It’s larger than French, it’s larger than Russian. Iran is the fifth-largest consumer of paid mobile apps, if you can believe that. It’s quite shocking. Iran is the fifth-largest consumer of paid mobile apps.

All of this is to say that the principal divide in this part of the world — and, indeed, among Muslims in general — is not what we often hear it is. It is not a divide of sectarianism; it’s not Shia vs. Sunni. The principal divide is not between so-called extremists and moderates, traditionalists and reformers. This is not the principal divide in the Muslim world, regardless of what you’ve heard. The principal divide in the Muslim world is generational. What we’re talking about is a new mass population of young people — call them Millennials, call them whatever you want.
By the way, I am grateful to be put into the category of Millennials. I used to be called Generation X, if you can remember that far back, kids. I'll explain later.

The principal divide is generational. This is a new generation, a new mass movement, that, frankly, does not share either the values or the principal concerns of their parents' generation. You have to understand that their parents' generation's concerns were born primarily of the independent movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the Middle East.

As a result, their — and, yes, I'm generalizing — the primary philosophical/theological concern for many of this older generation was what I like to call the recreation of the ummah — you hear this all the time — the sort of obsession with the fracturing, the breakup, of the global body of Muslims, the global Muslim community, and the attempts to recreate it in some fashion or other, either as a nationalist movement or as a transnationalist movement. And indeed, many of the new transnational movements of the latter part of the 20th century, be it the Muslim Brotherhood on one side or al-Qaeda on the other side, have as their principal goal this conception of recreating the ummah.

The problem with that, by the way — let me just clarify, if I may, for a second — is that that obsession comes with certain preoccupations that have resulted in the lack of socioeconomic and political development that has plagued so much of this particular region in the world.

Whether it's the lack of cultural confidence that comes in the face of Western cultural hegemony, Western imperialism; whether it's the political paranoia that one sees so often in the region; whether it's identity issues, gender issues — frankly, these are just not the concern of this new generation, what I like to call the Boom Generation.

This is a generation that has already redefined what the ummah means, they have recreated the ummah already, except that what they have done is they have created a virtual ummah, which is actually kind of a poetic and beautiful thing, considering that the ummah was always a virtual idea anyway. Now it's literally a virtual thing.

The social media tools that I was referring to before have created a wholly new definition of community — by the way, not just for Muslims. In fact, just to break it down in the simplest way possible, what social media has done is that it has redefined the very concept of community.

Think about it this way. From the dawn of time to about ten years ago, the definition of community was the people around you. The definition of community was utterly contingent upon geography. Whether it's your clan or your tribe or your neighborhood or your city or your state or your nation, community was geographically defined.

Now of course, thanks to these new social media tools, community is not based on geography; it's based on what sociologists like to call post-materialist values. What do we mean by this? What we mean is that your sense of collective identity is no longer based on issues like security and sustenance and shelter. Those things are not what define you as a collective any longer. What define you as a collective now are self-expression, autonomy, and most of all individualism.

What does this mean in the real world? It means that a kid in New York can have more in common, can feel a closer sense of community and collective identity, with a kid in Jakarta — because they like the same music, because they share the same tastes, and in all these post-materialist ways, because they define themselves in the same way — than either of those two kids would have in common with anyone in their actual physical community.
This is a global transformation, but it has obviously had a huge effect on the Muslim youth population. This is what I mean, first of all, when I say “the virtual ummah.” The ummah exists online and it exists based on these post-materialist values. The fact that we both like hip hop, that’s my ummah. We both like Obama, that’s my ummah now. It has less to do with faith and practice, and certainly theology and dogma, than it does with values, world views, those kinds of things. That’s what we mean by post-materialism.

By the way, just because I was asked to talk about this very, very, very briefly, this is what I mean when I write about the Islamic reformation. This is a term that has been totally misunderstood. The Islamic reformation doesn’t mean that there was something wrong with Islam and now it’s better. That’s not what that means. Reformation in all religions, in all aspects of time, means the conflict between individuals and institutions over the authority to define faith. That is what reformation means.

The Islamic reformation, what we have been seeing over the last century, is, precisely as a result of these demographic shifts that I’m talking about, a radical sense of individualism that has taken hold in this once quintessentially communal faith. That individualism is tied, inextricably so, to a widespread sense of anti-institutionalism that, more than anything else, more than economic or cultural or religious or political issues, was at the heart of the revolutions that we have seen across the region.

Why do I say all this? Because these statistics that I am throwing around here are indicative not just of an internal demographic shift, but they have global connotations. Yes, it’s true that I’ve spent the last ten minutes talking specifically about one region of the world, and that is a mistake. That is a mistake that a lot of my colleagues make, that a lot of us make.

We associate Islam with the Middle East, we associate Islam with the Arab world. But of course that is no longer the case. Of the top ten most populous Muslim countries in the world, three are Arab. Of the top five, one is. And in about fifteen years all of those numbers will shift, and neither Algeria nor Morocco will remain the top ten most populous Muslim countries in the world, though Egypt still will. So give us about a decade and we’re talking about one Arab country that exists in the top ten most populous countries.

The global migration patterns of Muslims have utterly transformed what we now call “the Muslim world.” In the same way that global Christianity, scholars will tell you, has moved eastward and southward, global Islam has moved northward and westward.

When we talk about the future of Islam, we are not talking about the Middle East any longer. We’re talking about Central Asia; we’re talking about South Asia and South East Asia; we’re talking about Western Europe; and, yes indeed, we’re talking about the United States.

All of these facts and figures that I’ve been talking about point to one incontrovertible truth, which is that the future of Islam is right here in the United States. This is, after all, the place where all of those values, the post-materialist values that I was referencing earlier, are an inherent part of the very cultural fabric of this country. It’s part of the national identity that makes America what it is.

Let’s talk about American Muslims for a second here.

The numbers are small: 3.5-to-5 million is the usual number that is given, about 1–1.5 percent of the population. But listen, once we double that, the White House is ours for sure. [Laughter]
But here are the more important figures. Forget about the numbers: 63 percent of that 1–1.5 percent is first generation. Sixty-three percent of America’s Muslims are first-generation immigrants, myself included.

Forty-five percent of all Muslims in the United States came here since 1990, almost half since 1990. This is remarkable.

American Muslims have as an immigrant community the absolute highest levels of citizenship of any other immigrant community. Seventy percent of Muslim immigrants in the United States are American citizens. So the next time some Islamophobe tells you that “American Muslims are not really part of America, they separate themselves,” tell them that statistic.

Highest rates of literacy of any immigrant community in the United States, highest rates of education of any immigrant community in the United States. And here's the one that actually matters: the highest income rates of any immigrant community in America. As a matter of fact, the median income for a Muslim household in the United States is larger than for a non-Muslim household in America, despite that 1-1.5 percent. In fact, the great advertising giant JWT issued a report in 2008 in which they said that the combined buying power of the American Muslim community, all 1.5 percent of us, is $170 billion.

Now, why am I harping on this? Not to be grotesque and talk about money, but I'm harping on this because this is the United States of America, and all that matters in America is money. [Laughter]

Money in the United States is your voice. I mean that quite literally. The Supreme Court has now said that your money is your voice. If you want to know how despicable and grotesque that decision is, the absolute connotation, the consequences of that belief, necessitates that some Americans have more voice than other Americans, which is about as anti-constitutional as you could possibly get. It’s utterly grotesque. And yet that’s the fact — your money is your voice in this country. If that’s true, our voice is $170 billion. [Laughter]

This is the question that I am going to lob to the panel as I close here: If your money is your voice and if your voice is power, let’s stop talking about whether we have power or not and let’s discuss what we are going to do with all the power that we have. How are we going to wield this enormous power that we have in this country?

Thank you.

LINDA SARSOUR: One more time for Mr. Aslan.

[Applause]

You look good enough to have been — I would have just let it slide, but since you want to be all honest and tell us that you’re not a Millennial — but that’s on you.

I’d like to welcome our next panelists to join me here on the stage. Please take your seats by your names. I’d like to introduce our next group of panelists, whom I am very fortunate to be connected to in personal ways.

Nadia Roumani — I will read her bio in a second — I am a graduate of the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute (AMCLI), which Nadia is the director of. I am also best friends with Aliya Latif, who is the sister of Imam Khalid Latif. He’s like my friend too, but he’s not like my best friend; his sister’s my best friend. And then, I am very fortunate to have organized and worked with Musa Syeed’s wife, Aklam [phonetic]. It’s a
woman thing. Women are always connected in some way. I just wanted to put that out there. It gives me great pleasure to moderate this panel with this group of folks.

Nadia Roumani is a program officer for the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, aiming to improve Americans’ understanding of Muslim societies through arts and media. She is also the co-founder and director of the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute, an organization that trains young adult Muslims for leadership in the work of building better communities in a diverse society. Nadia is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She has served in various positions at the World Bank, the United Nations Development Fund, the Carnegie Council on Ethics in International Affairs, and the Initiative for Policy Dialogue. She is currently a fellow at Stanford Design School for the 2012–2013 academic year.

I’m going to introduce also the rest of them.

Next to her is Mr. Musa Syeed. He is an independent filmmaker and writer. His first narrative feature, Valley of Saints, premiered this year at Sundance, winning both an Audience Award for World Cinema and the Alfred P. Sloan Film Prize. Since then Valley of Saints has played at festivals in Milan, Rome, Berlin, Vancouver, New York, and elsewhere. Syeed has also been awarded prizes at the Tribeca Film Festival and the Big Sky Film Festival for his other films, which include Bronx Princess, A Son’s Sacrifice, and The Calling, a documentary miniseries broadcast on PBS about young Americans training to become religious leaders. He has taught at Williams College and served as a Fulbright Fellow in Cairo.

Last but certainly not least, and when asked sometimes in the community who we think of as leaders in our community, many people take it to be about age fifty-five and older — but definitely a man who is part of the team for me here in New York, and a definite true leader in our community, he is the first Muslim chaplain appointed at New York University, where he is Executive Director of the NYU Islamic Center. He has been a campus minister at Princeton University and is currently a chaplain to the New York City Police Department, having been nominated for that position by Mayor Michael Bloomberg — not really for Michael Bloomberg, but that is a very big accomplishment for also being the youngest, I believe, appointed to being the chaplain to the New York Police Department.

In his work, Latif has emphasized dialogue and conflict resolution between Sunni and Shia communities, as well as reconciliation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. A highly regarded preacher, he has also been formally recognized by international organizations as among the most influential young Muslims in the world, and I can definitely attest to that.

So please, a round of applause for all of our panelists, including Mr. Aslan.

[Nadja Roumani: Hello. Thank you. I’m very excited to be here.

Yesterday was my birthday. So I’m going to say I’m a Millennial still. Even if I’m not and even if I’m on the border, I’m just going to extend my birthday into a week-long birthday wish and say I’m in that category.

I’m also excited to be back in New York. I’m now in California. Although it’s lovely and
it’s green and it’s beautiful, it’s nice to come back to New York. I spent about seven years here in grad school and then afterwards.

Who are Muslim Millennials and what do they want?

In some ways, Muslim Millennials are like any — and I’m specifically going to focus on those in the U.S., but we can extend the conversation later globally as well. In some ways, they’re like any other Millennial. They want to feel relevant in this world. They are trying to find life partners. They are trying to make sense of finding a job or their place in their family. They are almost like any other Millennial.

Except that in the U.S. Muslim Millennials are also somewhat unique. I’ll specifically say — as Reza was talking about, it’s like a generational thing — within Muslim Millennials there are also two experiences that happen in the U.S.

There are Muslim Millennials, like me, who grew up earlier, before 9/11 — not before 9/11, but the majority of our early years were before 9/11. So we actually were able to define our identities not under the scrutiny that those who are growing up after 9/11 are being forced to define themselves continually under the spotlight, who don’t know what an unsecured America in which Muslims are seen as terrorists is like. They don’t have a memory of that.

I did grow up in L.A., going to high school, and I defined my identity as a Muslim. I was a child of immigrants as well. But it wasn’t that same kind of having to define who you are all the time and explain what Islam is to everybody. It’s just a different experience from those who are dealing with that now and growing up in this culture and had a chance to do that outside of that.

I also want to talk about what they are starting to build. I’m trying to connect it also to what Reza said.

I don’t know if Millennials, especially Muslim Millennials, here are anti-institution. I think it’s that they aren’t necessarily being represented — they don’t feel they are being represented by the institutions that are out there. They don’t feel like their voice is being represented by those institutions, and there is a desire to build new institutions that more represent who they are and what they care about. That’s what I’m going to talk about today: who’s building what and why.

What they have done is a lot of these Muslim Millennials — I’ll add Khalid in there — somebody who has defined a need, who understood there was a need within their community, and then began to identify the resources, the people, and address those resources to building up institutions. Those examples are all throughout the country. That’s what we ended up launching this American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute to support.

There was a need for a think-tank, more data about Muslims that are by Muslims, so they launched the ISP think-tank in Michigan.

You have an organization being launched in L.A. for victims of sexual abuse in the Muslim Community, and they started the Rakhma [phonetic] Network.

You have a lot of institutions that are starting to address needs that are defined by Muslim Millennials for their communities, and you are starting to see that happen all across the country.
But what we did find when we were talking to a lot of these people — started by doing research back in 2008 — is that many of these young leaders, because it’s such a young network, they don’t have the infrastructure to support them. They don’t have mentors, they don’t have resources. And because, as Reza was saying, they are very young, they also don’t have models of what these institutions look like.

So what we heard from them over and over again was the need to bring them together and that they were working in isolation and, most importantly, that under this spotlight they were burning out, because they were trying to respond to this work over and over again, and they were burning out at a really high rate. We really needed these people who were pioneering in these spaces. So we launched this institute to try and support them, including people like Linda.

What’s important for this is that these are people who weren’t just criticizing the status quo, but they were actually trying to do something about it.

I want to address two more things in this talk.

One is, if we have the launch of all these institutions, why aren’t we seeing that visibly? Where are they? So non-Muslims will ask, “Where are the moderate Muslims and why don’t we see them more often?” And then Muslims will say, “Where are these institutions? Why don’t I see my own institutions represented?” So I’m going to speak about why they haven’t necessarily reached that level of visibility.

Then I am going to end with actually just advice to especially the Muslim Millennials who have come, who are in this room, who are thinking about an issue and want to launch something, and just give a little advice to those Muslim Millennials.

Why are they not more visible? There are a couple reasons.

One — Reza talked about it — is that it’s a young community, it’s a very young community. Most of the institutions that were founded within the Muslim community were founded in the last twenty years, and most of those institutions have staff of less than five people. So you’re talking about very young, nascent organizations that are trying to really move the needle on some issues.

You also have the problem that a lot of the issues they are working on — rebuilding the community, talking about Islam, doing public speaker circuits, doing data — are not that sexy to the media. They don’t get the kind of visibility when it comes to doing stories that the media wants to cover. So their voices don’t usually get heard when they are trying to speak about these issues.

We also have our flaws. Although these are pioneering leaders, there are some challenges that we have seen.

Many people are going it alone. They’re not actually building the kinds of environments and the kinds of partnerships they need to launch these institutions.
And one of the biggest things I think we’re forgetting and we’re missing out on is we’re not leveraging the stories and the issues that came before us as Muslims. There are many communities that have been in hard positions and have gone through different situations, whether it’s the African-American community or the Jewish community.

There are many histories. There are decades of issues that have happened. Muslims
aren’t necessarily leveraging those experiences. A lot of what they’re dealing with is in a bubble, and it’s being seen as a uniquely Muslim experience, when in reality it’s part of a history of communities that are trying to take root in this country and trying to be a part of this country. So one of the things we need to look at is how do we address that, how do we bring that into our communities.

And then also, I think some institutions — not to be critical, but I think some institutions are also using fear, both using Muslims as a way to generate fear, and a lot of Muslims are using fear also as a paralysis mechanism, to try and say that they’re defending Muslims in a way without empowering them to defend themselves. I think it’s important to start to figure out how we are empowering Muslims to defend themselves.

I don’t think I have much more time. I’m just going to end with a few pieces of advice. For those Muslims who have addressed a need and have a burning desire to address it and to do something about it, how do you turn your idea into something longer, how do you turn your idea into an institution and probably into a legacy, how do you actually turn a need or a pain into a solution?

Here’s what I would recommend. I have ten points. For the sake of time, I’m just going to share a quick five.

First, don’t wait for permission. I think a lot of Muslims often are waiting for permission, someone to say, “It’s okay to do this.” Don’t wait for permission. But at the same time make sure you are paying respect to those that came before and understand what has come before and what’s happening around you so that you can learn from those experiences.

The second is build your team. Build a team of people you want to launch something with and address an issue, and build that team in a way that — it doesn’t have to be the team with the most accolades or a team with the most awards, but a team that knows how to sustain it for the long haul, how to deal with hardship and build trust in that process, because if you have the right team, that will help you launch something that has true authenticity and that can go for the long haul, and that will help you learn.

Decide who your end-users are. If you’re going to address a need, don’t just sit in a room and decide who you’re going to do this for. Go out and figure out who you’re doing it for and how they frame their own need. Oftentimes you try and solve other people’s needs in a way that you’re not actually tapping into what it is that you actually want to test for. I can talk about that. It’s part of what I’m doing at the Design School at the moment.

Number 4, if money is standing in your way of doing something, then you haven’t spent enough time defining the problem. Money is usually never the issue. I know a lot of communities are cashed out, but money is not the issue. Money is just a tool to help you mobilize toward that issue. But first decide what you’re going to do, build that team to build that support, and then move that.

And then finally — and again, there are several more of these that we essentially work the Institute around — think creative. Yes, it is God’s work, [Islamic phrase], things that people want to do to serve your community. But it can be fun. I think that’s important for people to remember. And just because it hasn’t been done before doesn’t mean that it shouldn’t be done. So figuring out how you do that is just as important as what you do. That’s it. Thanks.

LINDA SARSOUR: Thank you, Nadia.
There are cards that were put on your chairs. Feel free as you’re listening to the panelists, if you’re thinking of any questions you’d like to ask, to start writing those down and start thinking about them.

Please welcome to the stage Musa Syeed, who’s going to be talking to us on major cultural currents at work among the young Muslims around the world.

**MUSA SYEED:** I’m used to being behind the camera, so I’m going to stick to my script here.

Since I was a child, a black cube-like structure was the center of my life and the lives of millions of people around the world. The time spent in its presence is said to be transformative. This black cube was the spring of our imagination. Even the furniture in our living room was arranged in such a way that we could more easily face it. Several times a day we kneel towards it. It represented a connection to the ethereal, to other worlds we could not yet experience. Yet, at the same time, it was a reflection of us and our humanity.

Does anybody know what I’m talking about? I’m actually talking about television. [Laughter]

Like the *Kaaba* and Mecca, the television to me illustrates the centrality of American mass culture in Muslim life.

It’s hard to dispute that America has cultural authority in the world today. I know that used to be the place of Muslim societies. Today young people throughout the Muslim world are eager to watch American movies, eat American food, wear American clothes, and live supposedly carefree American lives. Many other young Muslims refuse the American culture, often creating their entire identity from that refusal.

In both cases, American mass culture is increasingly becoming the way Muslims see, have been seen, and see how they have been seen. Whether we like it or not, we are all in conversation with American mass culture.

While I’m not an expert on cultural currents among young Muslim Millennials, if that’s what the title of what I was supposed to talk about is, perhaps my experience as a filmmaker who is Muslim in America has some resonance in the discussion of the challenges and opportunities that Muslim cultures face at this time. So I’m going to share a few moments from my life. I was going to try to pretend like I knew what I was talking about in a bigger picture, but I knew that if I just repeated things from Wikipedia you would probably know what I was talking about. [Laughter] So I will just illustrate with a few moments from my life, three moments, I guess in three acts.

Moment one: Though today I make films, there was a time when I actually protested them. Throughout my childhood, several films were released that demonized Muslims, films that our community felt the need to respond to.

In particular, I remember going to the local movie theater in my small town in Indiana where the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *True Lies* was playing. As moviegoers watched Arnold kill Muslim terrorists in the film, we put pamphlets on their cars in the parking lot outside trying to explain the true nature of Islam. So it was our Xeroxed 8-1/2 x 11 black-and-white pamphlet against a $120 million Hollywood movie.

While we were being encouraged to be ambassadors of Islam, which in itself is
problematic, we were actually becoming enthusiastic PR agents for Islam, which is even worse. A lot of times, there were actual talking points that we were made to rehearse or thought of and repeated back to friends and people that we met in the community.

We thought that if we stayed on message, told the right stories about the right people, we would change the world. That objective was so deeply ingrained in my mind that when my Sunday school teacher asked me why cleanliness is such an important part of Islam, my response was, “So that non-Muslims would see that we’re clean.” [Laughter]

Obviously, beneath my strong commitment there was a deep insecurity. Everything I believed was in direct response to someone else. That type of insecurity is not healthy in the production of culture, yet it is still very much present today.

I recently judged a high school competition for Muslim students who were making short films. I think every one of the seven films was all about being Muslim.

When we express ourselves like PR agents, we aren’t able to be honest and we aren’t able to show our humanity, and therefore we don’t tell good stories. When we don’t tell good stories, no one gets connected, and culture stagnates. We have to understand and appreciate the craft of storytelling as its own art and not as something that can be manipulated to win favor.

Also, with a PR mindset we are always worried about our presentation being representative. But what that usually means is only exposing the parts of our lives that are most palatable, the ones that speak to the lowest common denominator, and the parts of our lives that are probably not the most interesting.

No one story will be representative of us all, so we must recognize, appreciate, and weave together the diverse stories of our community into a culture that is dynamic and vibrant.

Moment two: In America, I didn’t have any filmmaking peers who were Muslims, so I expected that I could find filmmakers in the Muslim world who would welcome me as their brother and not complain about my taste in movies. I actually went to college with Khalid. I think I might have dragged you to one movie or two, but you usually didn’t like it.

So I traveled to Egypt, one of the largest film-producing countries in the world. But the filmmakers I met in Egypt were largely not so concerned with their Muslim identity. Living in a Muslim society was nothing new to them, and the artsy intellectual circles they ran in were, like in most places, secular, even if they themselves were not.

Like the filmmakers I met, I found myself in places where I didn’t have to define myself in opposition to the mainstream. I began to realize that much of my Muslim identity had been formed around race theory, cultural relativism, and my own youthful “stick it to the man” attitude instead of anything spiritual. My identity as a Muslim had a political and cultural reality, but not a spiritual one.

My preoccupation with identity politics began to end there. Instead of seeing the world as a series of topics that could be explained away, I started to embrace a sense of mystery and awe, which informed my approach to storytelling.

While my earlier films dealt with questions of identity, which are important, I wanted to get deeper into more human universal stories that brought my perspective into conversations with topics beyond religious identity. I found that I sit more comfortably with my Muslim faith when the stories I tell don’t rely on trying to prove something about
Similarly, I think that there are a lot of young people who come from Muslim families, who identify with Islamic culture but who don’t ascribe to the religion. While this trend does seem to be growing, and is maybe even supported as the proper model for assimilation or interaction with modernity, I think religion will continue to play an important part of developing Islamic culture. Religion can provide continuity, groundedness, and creative tension, all of which can be negative but can also be channeled into positive culture production, as it has been done for hundreds of years in the Muslim world.

Finally, I used to be very critical of Facebook, until it led me to be able to stalk and then marry my wife. [Laughter] So I have to acknowledge the power of social media and the future.

Growing up, our engagement with culture was very reactive, partly because the structure of distribution of cultural content was all top-down and all we could do was respond once it reached us. Lucky for me and for all of us, the cultural production landscape is changing.

The old rules that dominated before, that cultural production was difficult, that content was scarce, and that control was completely centralized, have altogether shifted. Social media, filmmaking, and interactive online experiences are completely changing the way we tell and share stories, and thereby changing the structure of our culture.

Despite being a technophobe, over the past year I have been drawn to experimenting with new media and interactive technologies to tell stories. These technologies not only allow us to more easily create our own content, but to totally change the way people view and consume it. We are moving away from stories that are being told and shared by one to many and towards stories that are being shared by many to many.

Crowd sourcing is taking away the authority of the single author and giving that authority to groups of authors. Instead of the usual back-and-forth that made up the Muslim community’s relationship with the larger culture, we now have the opportunity to be truly interactive and to start engaging in immersive conversations.

In films, I never wanted to get caught up in explaining Islam and therefore losing my audience in an onslaught of information. But that information has to get out there now in some way.

Again, interactive storytelling has greater potential to make sharing that information compelling and creative. And, since this new medium is really wide open right now, Muslims have the opportunity to be part of it at its very foundation.

In closing, though America still has the cultural authority of today, Muslim cultures can continue to be bright, as long as we are willing to be honest, engage outside our community, respect our diversity, hold high creative standards, make mistakes, adapt to new technologies, and tell good stories.

Thanks.

LINDA SARSOEUR: Please welcome to the stage Imam Khalid Latif, who will be talking to us about young Muslims’ perceptions of tradition and innovation in the practice of Islam.
KHALID LATIF: Good evening. Just because everybody made a comment on their age, my birthday is actually tomorrow. I think for the purpose of the trend that we’ve been going on, to not really comment on our actual ages, that makes me two days younger than Nadia Roumani, and then I am a Millennial as well.

In the work that I do, I get to interact with a lot of young people through a lens and a frame that many who would work in roles that parallel mine within the Muslim community don’t necessarily get to engage in.

Through our center at NYU, we see a lot of different Muslims coming from different lived realities, different cultural backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds. What we try to do when we build our programming is do so with an understanding that our model should have multiple entry points whereby we can engage the diversity of our population, as opposed to forcing someone to fit into a very rigid archetype of what we deem subjectively a good practitioner of this faith should be.

Much of the time when we’re trying to build out programs, we sit and ask people to share their personal narrative with us — What is your story? What is your experience like? How is it being you in the world that you live in, in the society that surrounds you? We then take that to analyze it for trends and themes that we can build programs and services out of.

When we did this with our undergrad population, our grad student population — we have a population of professionals that are not affiliated to the university, but they either live or work in Manhattan — that we’re seeking to provide community space for in the absence of structures similar to it, the one trend that we really found across every single group was that a lot of Muslims just don’t know where to go to find people who are like-minded to them.

They don’t know where they fit in, not in kind of a broader sense, but just, “Where do I go where I’m understood and I’m not feeling as if I’m by myself?” I think this is an important point for us to be able to understand when we’re dealing with the idea of how a younger generation of Muslims is attracted to their tradition, how they’re engaging it in creative or innovative ways, or how they’re able to engage it in a way where they’re understanding principles of continuity and change that are built into the tradition. We don’t see so much of that today because so many young Muslims don’t have a space to turn towards. And then, in turn, they don’t have individuals to turn towards who can empower the tradition in such a way that they have the confidence to be creative with it. They don’t know how to turn it into a tool or a mechanism by which they are not looking at it as something that is purely ritualistic, something that I am doing without an understanding of why I’m doing it. Then, in turn, it doesn’t really move beyond “this is something that is simply for me,” rather than “this is something that I can use to benefit the society around me.”

What do I mean by this? When I was about twelve years old, my brother and I went to visit my grandmother in Pakistan. At twelve years of age, I didn’t really look the way that I look right now, which is a good thing. But I’m a Millennial, so I’m real young. [Laughter]

I had really long, Pantene Pro-V hair. I didn’t have a beard, which is really good because no twelve-year-old should have a beard. You’d be surprised at how many South Asian young men at the age of ten have beards and goatees. [Laughter]
I was wearing my Timberland boots. I had on some baggy jeans. I was wearing a baseball hat backwards. My brother and I were walking down the streets. We came upon a young boy who was wearing a more cultural attire, what we call a shivarkamese [phonetic], that was of a mint-green tea kind of color.

As I got closer to him, his gaze kind of just fixated itself upon me. He started to look me up and down. When I got close enough to him, he arched his head backwards and screamed at the top of his lungs in Urdu to anybody who could hear him, “Michael Jackson is here.” [Laughter] Then he and his friends started to chase me up and down the street because they thought I was Michael Jackson.

When I think back to this instance, it’s definitely something that makes me laugh. But it also makes me understand I didn’t fit in there. The place where my parents came from, the country of my cultural origin so to speak, was a place that I didn’t necessarily belong. But when I was twelve I didn’t have anybody that was telling me that I belonged here as well. So if I didn’t fit in there and I didn’t know how to fit in here, then where am I supposed to go? If I don’t know where to go, I’m not going to engage my tradition in a creative or innovative way. I’m going to engage it in a very timid way, a very reserved way, a way that I don’t know how to have a relationship with it, because nobody is speaking to me in such a way that they can help me navigate through the realities of the world that I’m in to a point where I can confidently say, “This is something I have ownership over.”

You can contrast that today, though, to the existence of institutions that are building themselves up to be these spaces that are neither purely religious nor purely secular, but something that exists in the middle where people come as they are and we let Islam be what it is. We’re not trying to define or exclude, but cultivate and nourish an understanding that you can be empowered by your Muslim identity and you don’t have to take a step away from it.

What it does is it lets the best and brightest of the silent majority that is not engaged by most Muslim communities go out and understand that they have a voice that can speak on behalf of Islam. They’re not the ones standing at the pulpits or delivering the sermons, but they will enact more effective and efficient change than pretty much any religious figure would have the ability to do.

At the very least, what they’re finding is that at times when they’re alone, they don’t have to go through things by themselves. I think that’s a big deal.

I had a young man who came to see me in my office the day after Osama bin Laden was killed. He had gone down to the World Trade Center site just to see what was going on. He found people cheering and chanting and there was a lot of commotion and celebration. You heard over and over, “We killed Osama,” “Death to Osama,” “We got Osama,” “Osama, Osama, Osama.”

This young man, who is about twenty-one years old, was sitting on my couch with tears pouring down his face. “My name is Osama. What do they understand of me? How do I fit in and belong here? Is being Muslim really that bad?” The difference for him versus for me was that when I didn’t know where to go, I really didn’t know where to go, and when he was confused and trying to understand, there was a space where he could go to find an answer to his question.

When he is going down the line ten years, twenty years, in his field, he’s not going to think of his religion as something that is a deficiency, something that holds him back, but
he’s going to be able to be engaged by it, he’s going to be able to feel empowered by it, and he’s going to be one of those people who ten years ago we weren’t giving a sense of empowerment to, saying that, “You are going to be the one who really brings a different kind of understanding to how people perceive this faith and this religion.” Rather, we were relying on those who looked a certain way, dressed a certain way, were the ones who were standing in the houses of worship.

So I’m excited to see what the next five to ten years will bring, and even beyond that, if I get to that point in my life, which is a very morbid thought, so I won’t end on that. We have spaces in Manhattan, in Chicago, in Boston, in California, where you see the development of an institution called the Ta’leef Collective — place where Muslims are going, but people who are not Muslim are going as well so that they really start to feel engaged and they feel like they have an access point into this important thing that’s called community that so many of our institutions have been devoid of.

On that note, if any of you who are in this audience ever want to come down to our Islamic center, which is at New York University, we’d be happy to host you. You would have an open invite to any of our programs or events — unless you’re somebody who wants to write something nasty about us; then please just stay away. [Laughter] It would be great to see any of you there. If I can be a resource to you in any way, feel free to please reach out to me and I will do my best to help out.

Thanks so much.

LINDA SARSOUR: Please one more round of applause for our panelists, all of them. [Applause]

I’m going to moderate from here because it just makes me feel a little more important. I’m going to set the rules again. First of all, please, panelists, speak into the microphone when you’re answering a question, and please try to keep the answers brief so that we can try to get as many questions from the audience as possible.

For those of you who are in the audience and have questions, I see students walking around, if you can pass those down.

But I will take the moderator’s privilege and ask two questions that I’m curious about. The first one is to Reza. We’re in a Jesuit institution. You talked about graduating from one. Do you believe a Jesuit institution can play a greater role in defeating Islamophobia; and, if so, how?

REZA ASLAN: I think all peoples of faith have an instrumental role. I believe that all peoples of faith are responsible for defeating bigotry in any form, whether it’s anti-Semitism or Islamophobia or homophobia. The very core of your religious faith, regardless of where you pray or how you pray, is the worth of all human beings. Certainly the Jesuits have had a long tradition of dedication to human rights. I always joke with my Jesuit friends that it’s karma for the Inquisition — but whatever. [Laughter] So the Jesuits have been at the forefront of human rights issues for generations, particularly in Latin America.

But, in general, it’s not just a Jesuit thing, it’s not just a Catholic thing. I think that if we are going to defeat any kind of bigotry in this country, it’s going to take people of faith to come together to do so.

LINDA SARSOUR: While both Nadia and Imam Latif were speaking, I was having like
a counter-transference moment and I was almost like about to get re-traumatized. Nadia said don’t ask for permission but at the same time respect elders and knowing that there were people before us, this idea that if it wasn’t for them we wouldn’t be here right now. I need help in that area.

My question is more about as a person like myself, who’s a young — not only am I young, but I’m also a woman, still seeing that there aren’t always many opportunities and there isn’t always that embrace from the “elders” in our community or the “leaders” in our community. Saying not to take permission but at the same time saying respect your elders, I feel like that still is not working in our community. I’m sure that you know that and that’s why you created AMCLI. But how do we work around that, especially here in New York? I’d also love to hear Imam Latif’s point of view about that, about being able to work in a framework of a community where we do have inter-generational issues, whether people want to tell me it’s not true or not. So I’d like to hear your advice around that.

NADIA ROUMANI: It’s definitely a huge issue, I think, especially when it comes to starting institutions.

I think what I said was don’t wait for permission but respect what came before. What I mean by that is oftentimes people will start and not take into account all the effort that has been placed on an issue, or somebody has been trying to create spaces and they won’t take into account all the spaces that have been created.

I think what I was saying was you may not agree with the style, you may not agree with the approach, but respect that at that moment in time somebody created something to fill a need, the same way that you are trying to create something to fill a need.

I think there’s a difference between people who are passive and people who are active. But people who are trying to build things are trying to move things in a certain direction. You may not agree with it, which is completely fine.

I think the first step is to reach out and try to engage and see if there is an opening. Sometimes I think people also assume, just because there’s a generational difference, that there is a divide. Sometimes that’s not true. Sometimes the people who are the most supportive are those who are ready to hand over the baton and just are waiting for somebody to hand it over to and they just don’t see anybody who is actually stepping up. And some people want to shut the door and they don’t want to hand it over.

I think it’s just about try and open that door, be somebody who is trying to reach out, as a way of just simply learning what came before, and then, if there is an opening to engage, take it and run with it and see these people as pioneers just a couple decades earlier.

LINDA SARSOUR: We’re still looking for the baton passers. Plenty of catchers around, but any baton passers over here — just kidding. Imam Latif?

KHALID LATIF: I think, that being said, a lot of the time what we wrestle with internally is an absence of self-esteem and confidence, and we’re constantly looking for validation from those around us in so many different frames. Sometimes I have to govern myself through this air of respect and understanding institutional memory of things that have been taking place around me. But in the same vein, I have to be able to move forward despite what those around me might be offering or choosing not to offer that would add to a sense of validation because I know that there is a need there that has to be met. It doesn’t always have to be looked at in an either/or kind of frame.
Legitimacy establishes itself in a few different ways. You know, I can gain legitimacy through credentials, through books and texts and articles that I've written. I can sit on a panel in front of an audience who has never met me before but, because somebody decided to invite me, they will think that I'm authoritative in something.

I can build legitimacy through consistency, and I can be patient with it, and as days turn into weeks, into months and years, I then start to see the fruits of my effort. If some individuals are not going to jump on the bandwagon, that doesn't really make a difference. I have to stay focused on what my mission statement and vision is and allow for it to flourish into something that’s good.

With our Islamic Center at NYU, when we first started it, we had a lot of individuals who said, “You’re too progressive, you’re too liberal.” Those are the same people who are now sitting in the front rows at all of our events.

It just takes a little bit of time for people to be able to accept change in a certain way. They might not necessarily be hesitant in handing over a baton. It’s just that they're not familiar with the process that you’re trying to implement.

LINDA SARSOUR: Absolutely. My next question is to Musa. In the Muslim community, God forbid our son tells us he wants to be a filmmaker or a documentarian or he wants to be a hip-hop artist. This idea that there’s so much pressure on young Muslims to be doctors and engineers — how do we get our community to start understanding that telling our stories and making that a living is actually something that’s very productive not just to individuals’ growth but also the growth of the Muslim community?

MUSA SYEED: I think being able to tell these stories and develop an American Muslim culture or Muslim culture wherever it may be is very important, in the same way that they’re talking about in terms of carving out space and people feeling comfortable with themselves.

I don’t think I identified as a South Asian American until there was a growing canon of South Asian American literature, like Jhumpa Lahiri’s literature and stuff like that, that made me feel, “Oh wow, there’s people that are writing intelligently about experiences that are close to me, that actually appeal to me and appeal to other people, that are making that identity something that I can feel proud of.” I think that’s the same for a lot of American Muslim kids.

When I was growing up, I guess Hakeem Olajuwon, who played for the Rockets, was a hero of mine. But they’re kind of few and far between, I guess. And he has been retired for a while and I don’t follow sports anymore.

But I think the more that we are able to tell these stories and carve out these spaces for people — and what Reza was saying about how much money is in the community now, this is one area that I think really the community needs to put money towards — I know he has been doing a lot of work towards that — producing culture and producing films, music, theater, whatever it may be. As much as physical space, having the cultural space is really important.

LINDA SARSOUR: In the past couple of months, I found myself debating on Twitter a lot. And I’m not talking about the Robert Spencer’s, I’m talking about debates within our own community, amongst Millennials, even the next generation — Z, whatever they’re called, the next people who come after the Millennials — and the debates have been
around what I would consider — they’re very conservative in faith but they’re very left in politics. So they’re basically the people that are like “democracy sucks,” “don’t vote in this two-party system, this flawed democracy.” I’m getting very concerned with that kind of rhetoric in our community, especially among this next generation, who were born yesterday, they haven’t invested time in the process to say that the process is flawed and sucks — not that I don’t think it does, but I feel at least hopeful that I can help change that.

So what do we respond to these young folks who are disparaged and apathetic and think that we shouldn’t even be engaging in politics?

REZA ASLAN: Well, I think that’s what all young people say. I don’t think that’s necessarily by definition — I mean when I was in my twenties, I hated everybody, I hated everything, I thought everything sucked, and especially politicians. I just think back to those days like, “Wow, those were great days politically speaking.” [Laughter] So in some sense I think that’s just the youthful perspective.

It is different, however — you’re right, Linda, that it is different — because in our particular community we have become a lightning rod in the political realm. When you have political candidates who are forming their entire platform on explicit and unapologetic anti-Muslim sentiment, when you have someone like Newt Gingrich vowing that as president he would never allow a Muslim to serve in his cabinet, and then, when asked to explain that, saying, “Well, if this were World War II, I wouldn’t allow a Nazi to serve in my cabinet” — catch that? Not “if this were World War II, I wouldn’t allow a German to serve in my cabinet,” but, “I wouldn’t allow a Nazi to serve in my cabinet, and that’s why I would not now allow a Muslim to serve in my cabinet.” That’s mainstream political rhetoric. That’s not the fringes. That’s not the crazies on the margins of society. Those are the people who are actually getting rewarded for that kind of rhetoric.

So again, we are blessed to live in a democracy in which our voice actually matters. I give this message a lot. I have to say it often falls on deaf ears. But I get a little bit annoyed when people complain about, say, Michele Bachmann or Peter King.

You don’t like Peter King? You’re rich. You have the ability to punish him for the things that he says.

LINDA SARSOUR: Absolutely.

REZA ASLAN: We have the ability to punish Michele Bachmann, politically speaking, for the things that she says, because that’s how politics works in this country. It’s about using your money as your voice. I don’t know when we’re going to figure it out, honestly, I really don’t. But it’s depressing to hear it from the youth.

NADIA ROUMANI: Can I respond to that? I also think — you know, I totally get the money argument. But I don’t think it’s just about money. I think it’s about we also need to help American Muslims understand what it means to be a part of the political process. I think there are some Muslims who are serving in political office — and not just the few who are in national roles, but there are a lot more working at the state and local level. What we need to do is raise that visibility of those in the Muslim community to help them understand what changes when you put a Muslim at a table that’s talking about budgetary issues, they’re talking about a local school, whatever it is.
I think what’s happening is — I think there’s two things. We’re not raising the profile of those civic leaders who are actually doing the day-to-day work and can talk about the actual changes that happen when you are part of the process.

The second is I think we need to also teach our institutions that are doing advocacy work to not over-promise and under-deliver, because what ends up happening is they promise something or a process that doesn’t meet the promise. So one organization goes and says, “We want to go work on Israel-Palestine,” and then they’ll go to the mayor of a city and lobby the mayor to work on that. What ends up happening with the Muslim community is they say, “Oh, we went through the political process and it didn’t give us anything.”

The problem is the organizations are promising things that are not deliverable through the mechanisms they are using. So if we start to get our organizations to be more attuned and sophisticated about what political change really means — partly it’s definitely money, but it’s also about who is at the tables, who is a part of the process, whose aides are helping who decide what on these different committees. That has huge power that goes beyond money because it goes to who is crafting the frame and the question.

That needs to move our community to a whole other level, and that's why we need more people doing film, but also in politics, going into local politics, and understanding why being on the board of education is powerful work in trying to change what happens at the local level, just as powerful also as somebody going for Congress.

LINDA SARSOUR: That’s why you should all move to Bay Ridge, because I’m going to run for city council, so you all can vote for me.

My next question — I’m going to start with Imam Latif. We talk about creating new spaces and, again, not taking permission. I think folks from New York know how we do it here — “If you can’t beat us, join us.” A lot of times people have joined us, and other times people haven’t. My question to you is: How do we also, as a community that is not that large and that has everything at stake, not just on a political level, how do we then not be perceived by others as having people looking like they’re working against each other in a time when we can’t really afford that? And what do we do about it? What is the advice when we’re working on an issue that’s city-wide, or even nationwide, and we have two loud camps that seem to be in conflict around an issue, and at the end of the day the ramifications there actually come back to our communities? So what’s some advice around how we are able to navigate that?

KHALID LATIF: I’m just trying to think what a city council meeting will look like with you sitting in it. [Laughter]

LINDA SARSOUR: It would be the best city council they’ve ever had.

KHALID LATIF: It will be amazing.

I think it’s interesting, the point that you bring up. I would premise it by the idea that as much as you might have argumentation that takes place internally with the Muslim community, because the power dynamic is not necessarily in our favor, for whatever reason, I don’t think it really makes a difference if we’re arguing with each other.

I think the idea of how wealth is relevant to power and how ethnicity and race and privilege are relevant to power are not conversations that we’re engaging in as best as we can.

But I think also at the same time we’re not necessarily dealing with the reality of the given situations as best as we can. For those who are on either side of an argument that we’re
engaging on a theoretical level right now so as to not choose sides, their advantage would not be to cater to the Muslim group that is in opposition to them, but to reach out to those who are beyond the Muslim community that they could build coalitions with so that their voice would be further amplified and strengthened.

But I keep turning back to the same people over and over for validation. I need to turn to those who I know are always against me, because somehow I have to be able to prove that their coming to my side is going to legitimize me in some way.

If someone is going to disagree with you, then disagree with them, let them disagree with you. Why are you enabling yourself to only react to what they are saying? I have to start crafting a message that is very, very explicitly saying, “This is what I am,” as opposed to focusing on, “This is what I am not.” In focusing on what I am, I have to start reaching out to those who share certain things in common with me, regardless of what their faith-based background is, if they have no faith at all, and really see how do I bring the power dynamic into my favor.

You have somebody who’s going to staunchly disagree with you, he doesn’t understand the big picture. To speak to this point, I’ll give you an example. I’m really good friends with a rabbi at New York University. A few years ago, he asked me one day when we were hanging out, “What are you doing in a couple weeks?” I said, “Not anything really.” He said, “Benjamin Netanyahu is coming to speak at our center.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “Are you okay leading a discussion group after he talks?” I’m like, “What?” He’s like, “If you’re not okay with it, it’s totally fine.” It’s one of those things — like what am I going to really say, like, “No, I’m not going to come”?

We’re sitting in this lecture. There are a thousand people who are in the audience. Somebody asked Netanyahu a question about an opposition party. We’re in Manhattan. He responds by saying, “Regardless of what my policy stance is on this issue, I would never speak out against somebody who was in the opposition party within the state of Israel because to speak out against someone who is from my community with people who are not from my community would just weaken my community. It’s more important to me to strengthen my community rather than doing something that might further my own agenda but in turn would bring all of us collectively down.”

In the absence of sound leadership in the Muslim community, we have individuals who are just being individuals, they’re not thinking of the collective. In the absence of us thinking of the collective, we have to broaden what we understand the collective to be and start engaging with people who, for whatever reason, share a lot in common with us. But we are, unfortunately, just kind of looking over them and glossing them.

LINDA SARSOUR: I saw this question multiple times, actually in the first three that I looked at. I still don’t understand it: “Mr. Reza [sic], can you explain to me what the heck is Islamism; what’s the difference between Islamism, and who made up that word; what is jihad versus jihadism?” Like what is the ism that gets out of there? What does that mean? I think just a clarification of terminology would be helpful.

REZA ASLAN: Wow! Yes. Islamism is a political ideology. It’s religious nationalism, the Islamic variety of it. Religious nationalism, of course, is not unique to Islam. Religious nationalism is a growing phenomenon of the latter half of the 20th century for a lot of reasons — for globalization, as a result of what many refer to as the failure of secular nationalism to live up to their promises of peace and prosperity that it put forth in the 19th century.
So there is Hindu religious nationalism. BJP and their policy of Hindutva is a very apt example of this.

There is Jewish religious nationalism. You have organizations like Gush Emunim, the “price tag” folks. Sometimes it’s referred to as “religious Zionism” or “messianic Zionism,” to differentiate it from the secular Zionism that gave birth to the state of Israel. We obviously have Christian nationalism. Religion scholars refer to it as “Dominionism.” If their numbers are correct, nearly a third of the population of the United States — that’s about 100 million of us — fall into the category of Dominionist. These are the people who talk about the United States as a Christian nation founded upon Christian principles and it has to abide by those ideals.

The Islamic version of all of these different religious nationalisms is called Islamism. It’s not a religious ideology. It’s a political ideology. It’s Islamic religious nationalism. It comes in a whole host of flavors.

The Taliban are Islamists. But so is the AKP in Turkey, certainly the most democratic governing body that country has ever seen. That’s what that is.

The opposite of Islamism, which is a nationalist ideology, is jihadism, which is a trans-nationalist ideology. Jihadists are those who have no nationalist political — in fact, they’re anti-nationalist; they are the ones who I was mentioning earlier are obsessed with the conception of the re-creation of the ummah. Their ultimate goal is to break down all nation-states — Muslim, non-Muslim, Jewish, Christian, it doesn’t matter — all nation-states, all borders, to remove all ethnic, racial, and nationalist identities and to recreate the globe as a single unit, which they refer to as the “global caliphate.”

So Islam is to Islamism as jihad is to jihadism. One is a religious ideology or definition, and the other is a political one.

LINDA SARSOUR: This question is for Musa: “Can you speak from your own personal experience about how we in the community, or maybe within families, or whatever you consider your Muslim community, deal with the tensions sometimes between the Muslim kind of very traditional family traditions and the ‘freedom’ that’s expounded by Muslim Millennials?”

MUSA SYEED: It’s kind of like a theological question or something. I don’t know if you want to answer that. I don’t know. I think there are ways to be creative in every circumstance.

Can you repeat the question again? I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to say.

LINDA SARSOUR: I interpret the question as — you know, some of us come from very traditional families, so not necessarily spiritual or Islamic, but very traditional, like no boyfriend — all that kind of tradition. I started there. I’m sorry. That’s my life story. How those types of traditions within the family — sometimes there’s a tension between that and the kind of freedom that these young Muslim Millennials are bringing into the fold or introducing to the family.

MUSA SYEED: From my experience, I never really — my youthful rebellion was directed towards — I grew up in a very small town in Indiana, so my youthful rebellion was directed towards my ignorant classmates. That was wrong, I guess, at the time, but it helped me establish my identity and made me who I am to some extent.

But for me, I didn’t grow up in a very restrictive environment, so it wasn’t hard for me to
go towards filmmaking. But at the same time, what I think is important for artists or filmmakers like myself is that we maintain attachment to the community even as we’re making whatever we’re making for the mainstream.

I think there are a lot of people who come from Muslim backgrounds who are working in these various fields but who, for various reasons, don’t maintain relationships with their community. I think it’s important again that we do that, because the work that I produce, I want it to be in conversation with the community, I want their feedback.

A lot of people I think are afraid of being told that what they’re making is not correct in some way or is not helping the community in some way. I am trying to hear that from people. I like to hear whatever their reaction is because I want my work to be part of the conversation and that it’s not just me throwing it out there but it’s also me receiving back from the audience. I think that’s something that a lot of people are afraid to do. We need more people to be able to maintain those relationships.

LINDA SARSOUR: I’d just like to add to that. I think that we are obviously progressing as a community, but I will say that Musa is also a male, and a lot of the restrictive traditional values that come from some Muslim families that are not necessarily related to Islam — but as a young woman who was born and raised in a Palestinian family here in Brooklyn, I felt those restrictions more on myself as a young woman than I did see on my cousins who were male.

I think there is that conversation of — for example, I have two daughters and a son. I have this conversation all the time, that I would love for my children to marry Muslims but I don’t care what kind of Muslim they marry, which is not what my parents told me or did for me, which is they wanted me to marry a Palestinian. That was very important to them.

These discussions are happening. It just takes one or two or three — and there’s many now, hundreds — of young Arab women who are marrying Muslims or other ethnicities. It becomes something that our community will embrace in the future. But there are definitely very difficult conversations that happen in our community about that.

I think this next question is also talking about a very important issue. There are some folks in the Shia American Muslim community who sometimes are not feeling like they are being represented in the Muslim institutions and the narrative of the Muslim American community, and also creating their own spaces where they are having their own discussions, almost in silos in our community, while we’re watching things that are happening on the other side of the world and we are seeing sectarianism and how that is kind of spilling over here into the U.S.

The question is: “Don’t we need to have spaces in our own community here, and isn’t this one of the few places in the world where we can create a pluralistic Muslim community, still keeping our individual intellectual and spiritual identities intact, but more about intra-community spaces?”

I’d love anyone who would like to respond.

NADIA ROUMANI: I’m happy to speak to that briefly, just building on building amicably. The idea, the premise, of the Institute that we founded was that all these communities are siloed and we need to bring them together in the same space, into a safe space. There are two things that did.

One is I think what it’s forcing organizations to do is to be clear on who they represent. A
lot of times, Muslim organizations will say, “We represent Muslims,” and then, by putting other Muslims at the table who they don't represent, it forces them to say who they represent and who they don't.

For instance, by putting a Shia at the table where an organization is saying, “We represent Muslims,” and then that Shia says, “No, actually none of my community feels comfortable going to your organization” — by doing that in a safe space, you are actually getting a healthier conversation where people recognize who they are seeing. But more importantly, what we often don't recognize is who we’re not seeing. We only actually see who's coming in our door; we're not seeing all the people that aren't coming. I think that needs to happen.

But the only reason, I think, we were able to do that, though, to have those conversations starting out, was because we’re early, in a safe space, meaning they're not forced to wear their hat. They’re all off-the-record conversations. The reason why that’s important is that they don’t have to perform or demonstrate their community on a stage.

Often, if you are on a stage and you are “the Shia” or “the woman” or “the whatever,” you have to represent that whole community. But by taking that responsibility off your shoulders and letting you just be a Muslim that talks about your experience and then talks about how it’s related to other communities, it just creates a more fluid conversation. Unfortunately, right now we have to actually facilitate that. It's not happening naturally. So the more spaces we can create to do that and the more leaders recognize who's not coming to their table, not just who they can claim they are bringing, the better we’ll have a fruitful conversation.

I’d just add one last thing, going to the original question. One of those things that needs to happen is people need to understand conflict is not a bad thing; it just needs to be facilitated to make it constructive.

Often in our communities, if we find conflict, what ends up happening is everybody walks out the door — like, “If the table is not set the way we want it, we’ll leave” — versus, “How do we sit at a table we might not be totally comfortable at, but then figure out how to have a conversation and everybody leave intact?” — but have that conversation versus everybody going to their own spaces.

LINDA SARSOUR: Do you want to respond?

KHALID LATIF: I think also in that sense, though, community development has to be understood as not something that’s based off of just personal whims and desires but there is a science to it and there has to be a strategy to it. When you’re dealing with a population that is as diverse as the Muslim population — you know, by no means is it the homogeneous, monolithic kind of stereotype that people apply to it — you can’t just all at once do everything for everybody.

Along the way, it is going to necessitate trying to really think about, “Okay, what is it that we’ll be able to add in a year from now or two years from now or five years from now?” There is a value in being able to remove certain components to one's identity so that they're not dealing with the burden or the kind of overwhelmingness of, “I represent this entire constituency.”

But at the same time now, when I am dealing with my individual practice, I don’t want to stop being the skin color that I am, I don’t want to stop being the practitioner that I am or have the convictions that I have or the theology that I believe in, and I have to be able to
have that comfortable space that enables me to be able to really foster that.

When you’re dealing with community, I think this is where our institutions have to learn from our counterpart institutions in other religious communities. Where for most Masjids the main entry point to it is the imam and you then embody kind of what the imam espouses in terms of belief around theology and law and dogma, etc., that becomes really problematic. I think if you look at a lot of churches and a lot of synagogues, their priests and their rabbis are not the main entry point and you have many different access points that enable different types of individuals to come into the fray, so to speak.

LINDA SARSOUR: I have an issue sometimes when you go to presentations about Muslims in America — and this has happened across the country, even across the world — where I have been in the audience. While these are very important things for you to know about Muslims, I don’t think they show the whole picture of the Muslim community. So things like, “Muslims, we have the highest per capita income, more than the average American, this is how much” — no offense to Reza’s presentation — “we cost this many billions of dollars, our education level is a lot higher than other communities” — which potentially could be true, but at the same time we know and everyone knows that in every community that’s not all Muslims.

This is a really great question that made me think about that: “How can we avoid becoming a ‘model’ community, wealth-oriented community, that loses the class consciousness that is at the core of our tradition?”

I’d love for Reza to potentially start by giving us his opinion about that.

REZA ASLAN: I’d rather hear what Khalid has to say about that.

But I will say that the question is correct, that the absolute core, the heart and soul, of Islam, and the message of the Prophet Muhammad, was social justice — and, by the way, in particular, economic justice.

So if you want to call yourself a Muslim — and I don’t care whether you do or not — but if you do want to call yourself a Muslim, then what you are saying, by definition, is that social justice is your chief cause, is your chief preoccupation. If you say that you walk in the footsteps of the Prophet, then what you’re saying is that what you care about more than almost anything else is the equality of peoples regardless of their race or color or ethnicity or gender, and especially regardless of their economics, which is why Mitt Romney makes such a great Muslim. Did I say Muslim? I’m sorry. [Laughter]

LINDA SARSOUR: Go ahead, Nadia.

NADIA ROUMANI: Can I say something about that? I think one of the ways to get that is to get the idea that the Muslim community is a model community completely out of our minds.

I grew up in L.A., going to a mosque in downtown L.A. It was almost all children of immigrants. That was this community. Literally within five miles, there were two African-American communities in the inner city of L.A. we never interacted with, ever, until launching AMCLI, until reaching out and meeting those communities.

Once you put those community members at the table and the people recognize there is in our backyard communities we’re not even paying attention to and we’re claiming we’re this model community, when issues of dropout rates and — name it, economics, a lot of recidivism — are all issues within our own communities, all of a sudden it’s a very uncomfortable moment for immigrant communities, because all of a sudden they’re like,
“But that’s not my community.”

But the children of Muslim immigrants — not all — are also starting to see that and it’s starting to be a conversation where people are coming to the same table. But again, it’s one of those issues where it’s such a segmented experience people are having that I don’t think they’re seeing each other until they sit at the same table and they recognize that it’s more porous and we need to figure out how those communities come together.

LINDA SARSOUR: On this next question, I have to ask it because I feel like it is a question that gets put always in the back or it’s just never asked. I’d like to break the rules and start by trying to provide an answer.

The question is: “Is there a place in the Millennial Muslim community for LGBTQ members of our community?”

It’s cute that the person spelled out LGBTQ — told me that there were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer — that’s great.

Yes, they are also starting to create their own spaces, because it is a conversation that is starting to happen in some parts of our community but is not happening as often as we probably should be having it. It’s still a conversation that is evolving.

For example, in AMCLI we’ve had outed members who have talked about their struggles of feeling accepted in Islamic institutions in the country and coming to spaces. As people don’t know — that whole like “don’t ask, don’t tell” — that has kind of been the way it is in the Muslim community.

I think the Muslim Millennials, because I feel that in general we are a much more tolerant generation, and we have obviously been exposed to so much living in the United States, I think that there is a different conversation that is probably happening here than is probably happening in Pakistan or in other parts of the Muslim world.

There have been actual organizations. For example, I know that in New York there is an organization called GLAS, the Gay and Lesbian Arab Society. It’s not just for Muslims, but many of those that are part of GLAS are Muslim. They are creating their own spaces in hopes that there comes a time when they are welcomed into spaces as fellow Muslims. The teachings of Islam have not been judgmental of people in that, in terms of their having a relationship with the God, that has nothing to do with this.

I wanted to start there because I have friends who have this conversation with me all the time. I’m only one person in the Muslim community with one opinion. I’d love to hear from Imam Khalid if he has had those experiences and how do we create open, honest dialogues and spaces for these members of our community.

KHALID LATIF: Our Islamic Center is at New York University, in the West Village. We definitely have LBGT [sic] Muslims in our Center.

I think what we’ve seen as we’ve grown in terms of our community base over the years is a different kind of comfortability [sic], where those who identify through their lens of sexual identity as LBGT are more comfortable in engaging leadership in our community, the initial step being one of validation: “I’m having this conversation and it’s a tough conversation, and how you respond to me is going to be really important in terms of where I find my place within this broader community.”
The way we run our center is not through a framework that says, “We don’t want to stereotype and archetype individuals, but we want to empower people through their individual narratives.”

So when someone comes to speak to me, I try to understand them in terms of who they are holistically, not through one variable of their identity, even if that’s the primary identity by which they identify themselves or it’s the thing that’s most prevalent on their mind — you know, “Let me know you as a person, as opposed to a preconceived idea or notion that keeps me from being able to really serve you as best as I can.”

Are there discussions and dialogues that need to take place within the Muslim community? Yes, definitely. In my opinion, though, are we as a community ready to have those conversations? No. I think that’s an important point to understand, because we don’t want to go down the route where we are having kind of a sensationalized attitude. We want to have sustainable solutions. If that means I have to wait a year or two before I can talk to something more concretely, then I have to wait a year or two, because we are working within a broader setting, not in this bubble that doesn’t have some kind of repercussions that could set us back rather than pushing us forward.

LINDA SARSOUR: The last question that I’m going to put out there — and anyone feel free — is: “Does what happens in the American Muslim community really have any impact on larger discussions happening within Islam, obviously nations with large Muslim populations, or among major and influential Muslim religious world leaders?”

REZA ASLAN: Yes. I’ve been asked this question for a very long time. I used to say no. But that was before Facebook and before Twitter — seriously. Now, because the free flow of information and ideas is at such an unprecedented place, and because of the fact that these new communication technologies — including satellite television, which everybody has in large parts of the underdeveloped Muslim-majority states — there is no longer a barrier that restricts these new sources or these new modes of knowledge.

What is required, of course, is for those sources to exist. But I think about some of our imams here in the U.S. and the amazing work that they are doing, including Imam Khalid.

I’ve actually been abroad when — some of you know Sheikh Hamza, who’s like the Bono of Islam — I’ve been abroad when Sheikh Hamza has showed up. It’s unbelievable. He’s treated like he’s some sort of rock star.

Part of that has to do with the fact that he’s in a situation, being a very well-respected American Muslim leader whose credentials are immaculate but who is not afraid to put his voice out there in controversial matters and to allow that voice to be exported outside of the boundaries of just his particular community, his particular congregation. So I think that the audience is definitely out there. What is a little bit lacking, although it’s getting better, is the voice itself.

LINDA SARSOUR: We want to get everyone out on time. There was a question that I’m not going to ask but I’m going to put out there for the person who asked it. The question was about NYPD informants on college campuses and what we as a community need to do to address this issue.

I just wanted to make the plug that you should feel free to come talk to me. I’d love to create an entire panel on your campus about that topic and bring you in on the work that we’re doing around NYPD accountability.
Thank you, everyone, for being here. Thank you to our panelists — Mr. Reza Aslan, Nadia Roumani, Musa Syeed, and Imam Khalid Latif — and thank you to Fordham University for hosting us tonight.

Here's James McCartin.

**JAMES McCARTIN:** Very briefly, thanks again to all of our panelists and to Linda, a terrific moderator.

I think we should also acknowledge the chair for not having any profanity-laced outbursts tonight. You better hope that the chair is your competition, Linda, in the city council race.

**LINDA SARSOEUR:** Or for my John Stewart spot.

**JAMES McCARTIN:** I want to thank Patricia Bellucci of the Center on Religion and Culture and Nusrat Jahan of the Fordham MSA [Muslim Students Association] for their efforts in making tonight happen.

Before we adjourn, please note that our next event will be here on December 11th. It's called, “Call and Response: How American Catholic Sisters Shaped the Church Since Vatican II,” December 11th, 6:00 p.m., here. Please come.

Again let me encourage everyone to sign up for our mailing list.

Please take flyers about this week’s Ignation Week events and about Father Patrick Ryan’s upcoming lecture on “Jews’, Muslims’, and Christians’ Views of the Afterlife.” Again, thanks to you all for coming. Have a great night.