

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

MUSLIM AMERICANS IN THE MEDIA: FROM ISLAMOPHOBIA TO POWER

LAURA FLANDERS: Dangerous stereotypes around Muslim Americans continue to persist in this country with very real consequences for the Muslim community, and American democracy at large. Muslim representatives, Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota; and Rashida Tlaib, Democrat of Michigan, have been the targets of a lot of it in Congress, as was Keith Ellison who preceded them. But times are changing. Ellison, the nation's first Muslim American congressperson, is now Attorney General of Minnesota. The United Nations this March celebrated the first ever international day to combat Islamophobia. And just this April, the Minneapolis city council passed an ordinance allowing public broadcast of the Islamic call to prayer five times a day. Clearly we are seeing some movement, but more is needed. What difference can good reporting make? Especially when it's reporting by Muslim Americans? Our guests today are Hibah Ansari, a reporter from the Sahan Journal in the Twin Cities, which is dedicated to reporting on communities of color throughout the state of Minnesota; and Dalia Mogahed, who is on the cutting edge of research at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding in Washington DC. Joining me for this conversation once again is our partner in these episodes, Mitra Kalita of Epicenter NYC, who, with Sarah Lomax, is the co-founder of URL Media. A network of independently owned and operated Black and Brown media outlets of which the Sahan Journal is one. Mitra, so glad to have you back.

S. MITRA KALITA: Thanks, Laura. Great to see you.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've got a great group of guests here. Where do you want to start? Perhaps with the nature of this community for people who are unaware? I don't know who wants to start with that. Dalia?

DALIA MOGAHED: Thank you so much for having me and for this important conversation. I mean, it's hard to know where to start when you want to talk about the nature of the American Muslim community. I mean, we're the most diverse faith community in the United States. No one race makes up our majority. We're about a third Black, white, Arab, and I guess Asian, that's four. Not a third, but these four groups pretty much make up about equal portions of the community. And we also have a growing percentage of our community that is Latino, 1% of our community is Native American. We just came out with a big study on Native American Muslims. So it is an incredibly diverse, dynamic community. It's also the youngest community, meaning the average age

of American Muslims is a full 20 years below the average age of the general public. It's a very entrepreneurial community, and it's also a community that faces a number of challenges.

LAURA FLANDERS: There are so many persisting stereotypes. You want to talk about some of them, Hibah, that you confront perhaps in your reporting?

HIBAH ANSARI: I grew up sort of, you know, immediately post 9/11 in an internet world where oftentimes the only people I was seeing on TV or on TV news that might have looked a little bit like me or people in my family were usually, you know, victims of war. And growing up with that perception, of course I'm not the only one seeing that, right? The people around me are seeing that too, and that's all they really would see of Muslims, and that can perpetuate really harmful stereotypes about Muslim women especially. But I've been really excited and grateful to also kind of be coming up as a journalist during a time where we have people who are visible, who are visibly Muslim, such as Congresswoman Ilhan Omar in Minnesota and, you know, seeing people in leadership positions that come from backgrounds like mine. And that's not only at the congressional level in Minnesota, that's locally as well. So having people in leadership positions and being able to report on them and report on the issues that they're working on has really I think helped Sahan Journal challenge a lot of the stereotypes that mainstream media has perpetuated about this community. And we do it in a really like targeted and nuanced way that I think really resonates with not just our Muslim readers, but our readers in general.

S. MITRA KALITA: In some ways, the Muslim experience in America has actually been a very uniting factor for the URL Media Network, and that might be surprising to see Islam as something that actually unites our very disparate Black and Brown communities. We've been at it for more than two years, and our founding is really connected to the moment after the murder of George Floyd, and I just wondered if that commonality and conversation that we've experienced whether both of you could react to that. Does that feel familiar? And also in this reckoning post George Floyd, or the reckoning that might still be going on, where do Muslims fit into that conversation?

HIBAH ANSARI: So I started reporting at Sahan Journal almost immediately after sort of the height of the protest surrounding the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And since then, I feel like reporting on policing and public safety, I have found a lot of similarities in sort of the experience that Muslims face when it comes to kind of like, law enforcement and surveillance that the larger Black community has been facing for many years as well. And not only that, I think in Minnesota, you see a really interesting intersection in that a lot of the Black community here are Black immigrant Muslims. So the way that they're experiencing law enforcement, or kind of facing the

law enforcement and criminal justice system, as well as other systems as well, is a lot more complex. And so reporting on that has been extremely important because a lot of our readers come from those communities. I would say six months after the killing of George Floyd, I started reporting on a story on the first person that was killed by Minneapolis Police since George Floyd, and he was a young Somali American man named Dolal Idd. And, you know, as journalists know, a lot of what's in the public record is really, you know, criminal history, court cases, jail bookings, things like that, and that was the only information we had about Dolal. But our organization as a whole really made an effort to connect with his family early on so that we could write a fuller picture about who he was as a person, and the types of things that he was struggling with. Mental health issues, in particular. Not to mention that those are things that are taboo to talk about in our communities in general, but it was a really important part of his story.

S. MITRA KALITA: It's similar to what Hibah mentions in Minneapolis. There's been a journey for certainly immigrant Muslims in New York City to, especially if they're Black Muslim, to kind of have this not just affinity with the Black community, but unity with the Black community around some of these issues. Now, I do feel like today in 2023, there's more alliances among communities than compared to 10 years ago when I first started covering some of this. We're coming off of Ramadan. I have never been invited to more iftars where politicians feel like they have to be there.

LAURA FLANDERS: Iftar being the meal at the end of Ramadan.

S. MITRA KALITA: That's right. Iftar is the breaking of fast. So for the month long fast that Muslims do during Ramadan, there's a celebration of that breaking of fast every day, and so I have literally been invited to dozens of Iftars and you see, you know, the mayor of New York City there, Senator Chuck Schumer, you know, every city councilperson. And so I've, again, I've been covering the Muslim community in New York City pretty much since after 9/11. Like, this has been my whole trajectory of my career, but I have never seen a moment like this.

LAURA FLANDERS: Dalia and Hibah, you're both nodding in agreement. Dalia, do you want to add anything?

DALIA MOGAHED: No, I completely agree. I think that American Muslims have really grown in their civic engagement and their voting. We've been measuring that throughout the past, you know, five, six years, and we've definitely seen a huge surge in voter registration, in volunteering for campaigns, and being involved in, you know, town hall meetings. So they're incredibly engaged

much more than 10 years, way more than 20 years ago, and I think that representatives and public servants are taking notice.

LAURA FLANDERS: It sounds like you're feeling that too, Hibah.

HIBAH ANSARI: Yeah, I think it's funny, I feel like when you think about maybe restoration or reparation for our community and what that looks like, I feel like a lot of what I've seen is being done, you know, by the Muslim community. And for us, you mentioned at the beginning that Minneapolis just passed an ordinance to allow the broadcast of the call to prayer five times a day. And that decision actually first came about a year ago when the city council in Minneapolis first declared sort of declared a recognition of Ramadan in the city. And not only that, we have the school district offering the day off for Eid for all students, not just Muslim students. So these are like little things happening at the local level that really have national significance, and international significance. I think for a lot of people who come from immigrant backgrounds, hearing the call to prayer, for example, really reminds them of being home. I know it's one of the most beautiful things to witness when you visit a Muslim majority country. And to be able to hear that in Minneapolis where their kids are growing up, where their kids are going to school, is really, really important for people, and to see those decisions happening in, you know, a city council where we have now, I believe, three Muslim American members, and the most diversity council in Minneapolis ever. It really just speaks to the kind of work that we're involved in, and that growing sense of civic engagement that Dalia had mentioned as well.

S. MITRA KALITA: I love these examples of, you know, literally the call to prayer being in the air, or the ability for school children to take off because there's a real practice it feels like of mainstreaming Muslims. I just wonder if we could pivot the conversation to what that looks like, Dalia, is mainstreaming and inclusion the goal? You yourself have said, you know, I don't know that I consider myself an outsider in the community. I am more of a co-builder. Could you tell us what you mean by that, and tell us whether inclusion is the goal?

DALIA MOGAHED: Yeah, no, thank you so much. I do see myself as a co builder of this project called America. And what I mean by that is I'm not, you know, people will say, you know, we don't feel welcomed in this country. And my response is like, why would you wait for someone to welcome you in your own home? If we don't feel like this is ours and ours to build, and ours to fight for, we'll never be truly equal in this country. And so I sometimes feel like maybe the framing of what, you know, what progress looks like needs to be rethought, re-imagined. I think American Muslims have been a part of America since its inception and even before. This is not a community

when we just talk about, you know, Muslims in America, this is not a community that is new to this country. This is a community that helped build this country, and just like other communities that are still fighting for their full, you know, enfranchisement and their full inclusion, that doesn't make them any less American. It doesn't make them any less of a co-builder of this country, but America just needs to keep growing to realize it's, you know, to fully come into its promise to itself.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is there anyone from that history that you'd like to lift up, Dalia, for the audience who might be less familiar?

DALIA MOGAHED: Well, I mean, I think there are names that we all know. People like Malcolm X, Malik Abdul Shabazz, and Muhammad Ali. These are iconic figures that have formed America, that have made America who she is. And I think the Civil Rights Movement is something that is very unique to the United States. I don't know if we all truly, you know, take stock of how unique this is when you compare the Civil Rights Movement, and what happened here to things in Europe. American Muslims are able to point to the Civil Rights Movement for our rights. Whereas, you know, European Muslims who are fighting some of the same battles, we are here, don't have this kind of a national story to point to. Muslims in France don't have it. Muslims in Britain don't have it. In fact, many of them point to our Civil Rights Movement to call for their rights, and so I think it's incredibly important that we understand that there's never been an America without Islam.

S. MITRA KALITA: We've talked a lot in the URL Media Network about the need for us to kind of preserve our history while it's still feeling very recent, and yet in a moment that it feels like the last thing this country wants to do is to remember its history. And so I just, I want to thank you for mentioning Malcolm X and also just wanted to give a shout out to, you know, the Black community in Queens that's, you know, like it's one of these situations where as we're going about routine coverage, it comes back to Black Muslims who might have been here in the 1960s and '70s, and there's like a through line to this present day.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thinking of Malcolm X in a sense, thinking about mutual aid, and how do you create an economy? Is that still a big piece of the Muslim community, that sense of we need to create economic strength?

HIBAH ANSARI: Yeah, I definitely think so, and I wanted to also note that, you know, to Mitra's point, I think it really does start at home. For example, I never read Malcolm X's autobiography because it was assigned in school for me. I did it because my older brother made me and I'm so glad he did. You know, growing up in the Midwest, there's a lot of civil rights history that's erased from

our textbooks, and I think as Muslims we can also often look to our own history to really see that there is so much tied between our religion and social justice. Even in the time of the prophet, you know, just for example seeing the prophet banished from his hometown because of what he was preaching, and then seeing the communities that did welcome him and how they sort of built this life for themselves. I think there's a lot there that we can really emulate in our own lives whether it's within our family units, or within our community. And as we know Muslims, we're very community oriented. I think Mutual aid is a great example. It's something that I know a lot of us, you know, growing up Muslim probably saw forms of mutual aid at our mosque that we didn't really understand as mutual aid, right? Like, you know, all the moms at the mosque fundraising for a single mom who's struggling to work and provide for her kids, while also caring for them and providing food for them. You know, cooking dinners for people because they, you know, they don't have access to food themselves or because they're a new refugee. These are all examples of things that I think Muslims really grew up with. Not really fully understanding them as something called mutual aid, but just as a part of our religion, and our culture, and our upbringing.

S. MITRA KALITA: So speaking of uplift, at the URL Network, we certainly talk also about centering joy, and our communities and entertainment has been one manifestation of this. You know, I started out covering the Muslim community after 9/11 and it was a certain type of story that we would have to tell over and over and over again that was largely rooted in the terror attacks. One heartening thing now, at least for me is, you know, there are shows like Ramy, and Mo, and standup specials by Hasan Minhaj and I mean, it just feels like there is a moment, at least a moment compared to what used to be. I'm wondering if either of you consume those shows, what you think of them, is this something to be celebrated? What are your thoughts? Dalia? Hibah?

DALIA MOGAHED: I have not consumed many of those shows. I find Hasan Minhaj hilarious so I love listening to him. I think that representation is important. I will never take away from that. We're still doing studies though on if it really changes people's opinion of policies, and so I always go back to if it makes you laugh and it makes you think, you know, you have a good Muslim friend but you're still okay with the Muslim ban, then that's not success. I guess I just I really want to make sure that we understand that much of Islamophobia is systemic and institutionalized.

HIBAH ANSARI: Yeah, that comes up a lot in my reporting because I cover immigration specifically and from a local standpoint and, you know, a lot of when we think about immigration, obviously the issues that drive people to leave their home countries are international, and then the decisions that are being made in the immigration system are federal. But what does that look like at a local level? So for example, in Minnesota, we have a a sizable East African population particularly from

Somalia. Somalia was one of the countries included in Trump's ban on immigration from Muslim majority countries, and that ban created a systemic backlog of family reunification cases. One that I had just written about recently. A man has been separated from his wife and three kids for seven years, and has not even met his youngest child and they're sitting in a refugee camp in Ethiopia right now. That's just one example. There's a whole backlog of cases like these, and when it comes to, you know, as Dalia mentioned, looking at sort of the political and the policy effects of Islamophobia, that's a clear example of that, and that's something that even though we have a new president, we are still experiencing the effects of in our larger immigration system.

LAURA FLANDERS: I was hoping that we could move into, before we close, sort of prospects for 2024, and maybe sort of any information we have about — we've talked about voting, but not about voting demographics exactly, about partisan voting. Can you give us any insights into how this community that you cover votes, and what might be expected or what you're looking for in 2024 in terms of interesting stories? Hibah.

HIBAH ANSARI: I think when it comes to the demographic breakdown, Dalia might have better insight, but I can tell you from sort of anecdotal. Anecdotal, when I've covered elections and Muslim candidates for office, we really do cover a spectrum surprisingly, especially in Minneapolis, in Minnesota in general. Of course we are a very progressive state, but what does progressive mean is something that we're always grappling with every election in the Twin Cities, and I think, you know, Muslims who are a part of this space are no exception of that. But we do have like I said before, incredible civic engagement, we have organizations dedicated to training young women who want to work in politics to help them potentially develop a campaign in the future. And, you know, a lot of Muslim women who have come through that program have been elected to office. We recently actually elected our first Black woman to the state senate. It was three of them, but the first one to actually whose election was actually called was a young Somali woman named Zaynab Mohamed, and she's already been heading a lot of really important policies at the state level, and she's just one of many. So yeah, but I'd love to hear more about how we're going to vote.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do we know, Dalia?

DALIA MOGAHED: Muslim Americans are more likely to be Democrats than Republicans. So I don't know if that's a surprise but, you know, about 54% identify as either Democrat or leaning Democrat. The one thing about Muslims that is somewhat unique is that we're the most likely faith community to identify as independents. So there's a large segment of the community that doesn't kind of align with either party, and votes based on policies, based on who the candidate is. So it's

not a community that you can ever just put in your pocket and think is going to vote one way or the other. And there is a small but significant percentage of Muslims who are, you know, who identify as Republicans or lean Republican, about 15%. And some research shows that a full third of Muslims voted for Trump, believe it or not. So it's not a homogeneous community, it's not a monolith, and it's going to be a community that anyone running for office has to really go after and never take for granted.

LAURA FLANDERS: More of those iftar dinners.

DALIA MOGAHED: Absolutely, and it has good food. It's an easy-

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a win-win.

DALIA MOGAHED: It's a win-win. Absolutely.

LAURA FLANDERS: Any closing thoughts, Mitra? This has been a fascinating conversation. Thank you.

S. MITRA KALITA: I'm just really grateful for the time to dive into this. I feel like at the URL Media Network, we really try to make sure that the coverage of these issues is nuanced. And I left with at least three story ideas from the two of you, so that's a good day really.

LAURA FLANDERS: That's what we aim to please here with our monthly Meet the BIPOC Press media segments, and I look forward to having you join us again next month. You or Sara, it's always a pleasure to have you, Mitra. Thank you all of our guests. It's been great to have you with us. We'll be back next week for another episode of "The Laura Flanders Show." Thanks for joining us.

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