



Two Muslims, Playing Against Stereotype

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Zeba Khan was born and raised in a middle-class home in Toledo, Ohio, and for nine years attended the local Jewish day school, The Hebrew Academy, going to morning minyan every day. She graduated in 1993.

She says she would have continued on with her Jewish education but the school only went through sixth grade.

“I knew Hebrew better than most of my classmates,” she recalled in a recent interview, “and I wanted a bat mitzvah.”

She didn’t have one, though. Her parents, who sent all three of their children to the day school, didn’t think it would be proper since they were a family of religious Muslims who attended mosque every Sunday.

An advocate for Muslim-American engagement, Khan says her Jewish education and home environment taught her the respect Muslims should have for “our Abrahamic brothers and sisters in faith,” and to realize that “our different perspectives did not negate the validity or the truth in the other faith.”

She says her parents sought a private school education for their children and felt the Christian academies’ emphasis on the Trinity would be problematic, so they opted for the Jewish school and its focus on monotheism.

“My parents said it’s the same God. I prayed one way in school and our way at home,” she said, adding, “I was never confused about whether or not I was a Muslim. My Muslim identity was foundational, and I think the strength of that foundation allowed me to explore and learn about my friends’ faith with genuine curiosity and respect.”

Khan notes that she grew up with an appreciation of the Jewish community’ closeness, and was impressed with how local Jews took in and looked after Soviet Jewish immigrants.

Before I continue with Khan’s story, let me tell you about the Israeli diplomat who came to my office several weeks ago, a political adviser for Avigdor Lieberman, the polarizing Israeli foreign minister accused of having anti-Arab racist beliefs.

The visiting diplomat defended the controversial, recently proposed loyalty oath that would be required of all Israeli citizens, saying it was neither illegal nor undemocratic, and perfectly reasonable for a state to request. He also said American Jews have misperceptions about Israeli Arabs, often not realizing they have the right to vote.

The fact that these sentiments came from Ismail Khaldi, 39, an Arab Muslim and the first Bedouin to graduate from Israel's Foreign Service course, made them more compelling.

The third of 11 children in a family living in northern Israel, Khaldi slept in a tent without electricity or running water as a child and, like most Bedouins, grew up shepherding the family flock of sheep and goats.

He's written a book about his experiences, "A Shepherd's Journey," describing how he went from a nomadic life to representing the state of Israel, and including the strong criticism his diplomatic appointments have received from his own community and from Jewish groups. Some Muslims say he is a traitor, and there are Jews who oppose giving an Arab a key role as an emissary for the state.

But Khaldi is upbeat by nature, and as the foreign minister's adviser on Arab affairs, he asserts that most "young Israeli Arabs want to join Israeli society, go to university" and be part of the social fabric of the state.

Ismail Khaldi and Zeba Khan represent two Muslims whose remarkable biographies caution against stereotyping, and projecting our fears or biases on others. Their stories may be unique, but their message of hope is compelling.

I first encountered Khan in October when she took part in a high-powered, national debate here, sponsored and broadcast by Intelligence Squared on NPR and Bloomberg TV. She argued for the motion, "Islam Is a Religion of Peace," and was teamed with Maajid Nawaz, a self-described radical Muslim as a youth who, during his 12-year imprisonment in Egypt, reversed his beliefs.

Their opponents were Douglas Murray, a British author who says his study of the Koran made him an atheist, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the well-known and outspoken Somalian-born critic of Islam who denounced her faith as anti-women and later became a member of the Dutch Parliament before fleeing to the U.S. when her life was threatened.

Khan, at 29 the youngest debater in the Intelligence Squared series, told the audience that in attending a Jewish day school, she and her siblings were encouraged by their parents "to have critical minds, and to doubt," as well as learn about other faiths while adhering to Islamic belief.

She asserted that the overwhelming majority of the more than one billion Muslims in the world are peace loving and law-abiding, and that the very few militants who make the headlines are driven to violent acts by "politics, not piety."

When I caught up with her by phone several weeks later, she said the debate was "a good experience, but I could have done much better."

(In comparing the pre and post-debate polls taken of the audience, Intelligence Squared found that many people appeared to have switched from Undecided to Opposed to the motion, which was defeated.)

Khan said she has not personally experienced anti-Muslim behavior, but that she and her family were "terrified" in the aftermath of 9/11, "locked up in the house" for several days. And their mosque was shot at, she said. But when a local Christian radio station reported the incident and called for listeners to come to the mosque as a sign of solidarity, "nearly 2,000 people showed up, circling the mosque and praying for our protection," Khan recalled. She said "moments like those give me hope for a more peaceful future."

Now working as an independent consultant in the field of social media, she says she favors a "more inclusive and pluralistic" form of Islam, and would like to see more American-born and trained imams.

"There is a real need for contemporary scholarship that can interpret the Koran and Hadith [writings on the Koran] in ways that are faithful, but relevant to modern society. But that will take some time," she said.

Perhaps as a result of foreign-born imams, some of whom do not relate easily with young Muslims here, Khan observed that the majority of American Muslims do not attend mosque regularly. (She says she has problems with mosques that seat women in the back.)

Concerned that polls show more than 30 percent of Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam, Khan says “the only way to move forward is if we talk openly with each other. We have to talk honestly about the tough stuff if we ever want to get past the fear.”

Ismail Khaldi, 39, is also an advocate for more honest dialogue, particularly in defending Israel against accusations that it is a racist state, uncaring about its minorities. In his memoir, he writes of the difficulties he faced representing Israel as deputy consul general in the San Francisco area, where enmity toward Israel is commonplace.

“It was extremely difficult to face the rage I encountered on the Arab side, and the ignorance on the Jewish side — all of which compounded my feelings of isolation.”

But he persevered. “I did not come to America merely to paint a rosy picture of Israel,” he wrote. “Israel is and always will be a Jewish State. It has problems, which I readily acknowledge. But it also has strengths, the most important of which is its attempt to provide equality and freedom to all of its citizens regardless of their backgrounds.”

During our talk, he noted that there are differences in the way Jews and Arabs are treated in Israel, and that the resulting imbalances need to be addressed.

“But Israeli Arabs are treated far better than minorities in Arab countries, and at the end of the day, they are Israeli citizens.” They want to maintain that identity and remain in Israel, he said, even if and when a Palestinian state is created.

Khaldi said Israel is “ready and open” to peace negotiations, and would like to see the Arab states, not just the Palestinian authority, involved in the talks. He cautions against pushing to end the conflict in a matter of months, and calls for a “long interim agreement to build trust and support economic growth” in Palestinian areas.

Personally, he would love to be posted in New York to continue his mission of defending the state he believes in and supports. But he is ready to serve wherever he is needed.

Of course the lives and experiences of Zeba Khan and Ismail Khaldi are highly unusual. But their stories remind us that we each have a contribution to make toward improving the world by better understanding and appreciating those around us, who oftentimes are not quite who we make them out to be.

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