Issue Brief Draft: African American and Middle Eastern Coalition through Islam

**Key Words:** Islam, coalition, islamaphobia, racial profiling, 9/11 tragedy

**Description:** As African American and Middle Eastern peoples established and developed their communities in America, there was much tension between them. However, there has been a movement of coalition between the two groups, as they have both been perceived of as villains, but even more so, sharing in a common religion – Islam. This issue brief explores the tensions and successes of developing a coalition between the two groups, with Islam being a major unifying factor.

**Key Points:**
1. African American and Middle Eastern communities have always been divided from each other due to cultural rifts and class prejudices.
2. Both African Americans and Middle Eastern Americans are portrayed and perceived as villains, especially since the 9/11 tragedy.
   a. Thus, “Black Muslims” are the most feared members of the US population.
3. Leaders from both groups are promoting a coalition between the two groups, based on a shared Islamic religion.
4. There are mutual benefits where Middle Eastern Muslims offer substantial monetary support and African American Muslims offer a history of knowledge in navigating American society as an oppressed and criminalized group of people.
5. Practical ways of building this coalition include preaching at and visiting each other’s mosques, and organizing and attending social events on mutual grounds.

**Brief:**
Since the 9/11 tragedy, Middle Eastern Americans have constantly experienced racial profiling as “terrorists”. They needed support, and thus, they have turned to the African American community, who have had a hundred years’ worth of experiences of oppression. However, for a coalition to be successful between these two vilified communities, they need a stronger foundation than being racial profiled, and that solidifying factor is a shared Islamic religion.
Data shows levels of satisfaction and feelings of inclusion of different racial groups of American Muslims.

Today, there are about 6 million American Muslims, in which about 25% are African American and 26% are Arab American. The other majority Muslim group is South Asians at about 34%. The roots of the African American muslims trace back to the arrival of the slaves from Africa in the 17th century. There are also documents from African American Muslim slaves who were involved in the Abolitionist movement and were Union soldiers.

A significant amount of Middle Eastern Muslims did not arrive until the mid-19th Century. Two of the notable cities in which they settled are Detroit and New York City. They established communities right alongside African American communities. In Detroit, only a road separates them. In New York City, there is a
African American mosque in Harlem, and a Middle Eastern one in the suburbs. However, while they may be relatively close in proximity to each other, there are vast class prejudices and cultural rifts. In New York, the African American mosque is surrounded by the sounds of sirens and the sight of the projects, and the Middle Eastern one is lined with sedans and S.U.V.’s and clean cul-de-sacs. Many of the Middle Eastern immigrants are also coming from the Middle East, where black Muslims are still explicitly viewed as racially inferior. Furthermore, each group had different goals – while African Americans sought empowerment and racial equality, Middle Easterners mainly sought economic opportunities and assimilation. African Americans also sought economic opportunities, but in order to achieve those, they knew they had to battle de facto discrimination first. African American Muslims thought Middle Eastern Muslims were prideful, and Middle Eastern Muslims thought African American Muslims were “too angry”, always actively proclaiming and fighting for equality and rights when they could simply assimilate.

Then when the 9/11 tragedy occurred, and there was a growing islamaphobia and racial profiling against Middle Easterners, they finally began to understand why the African Americans were “too angry”. Dr. Faroque Khan of the Middle Eastern mosque reached out to Imam Al-Hajj Talib ‘Abdur-Rashid of the Harlem mosque. In 2005, Khan invited ‘Abdur-Rashid to speak at his mosque, and there was an atmosphere of nervousness and tension on both sides.
‘Abdur-Rashid preached from the Qur’an within the civil rights context, but he was also asking for monetary support to improve the conditions of their mosque and to provide for African American Muslims in prisons. During the historical period of slavery, African American Muslims had to hide and suppress their religion. So African American Muslims also saw a coalition with Middle Eastern Muslims as an opportunity to even further learn about and revive their Islamic faith. In turn, the Middle Eastern Muslims began valuing the “cultural and historical fluency” (Elliot, 2007) the African American Muslims possessed. They were familiar with how to effectively organize protests, demand changes, and respond against such acts as racial profiling, discrimination in the airports and criminalization in the media.

The coalition has begun through the invitation of leaders to preach at each other’s mosques. Khan also would like some of their youth to visit the Harlem mosque. However, elders, as well as youth, should visit each other’s mosques because they are the current leaders who their communities will follow. There
should be formal conferences and retreats having open and safe discussions to break down the prejudices between the groups, and also more informal and relaxed social events at the parks or other such mutual grounds.

The roots of the coalition has been sown, especially in New York City, but for there to be true solidarity to combat the nation's prejudices against American Muslims, there needs to be a continuing authentic coalition based upon mutual understanding and respect.

Works Cited

