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Internationalist Islam and the Question of Palestine

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Abstract

Following the al-Qassam Brigade breach of the “Iron Wall” barrier, Muslim Americans participated in protest movements across the United States in support of Palestinian liberation. Many of the Muslim American youth involved in such spaces of have drawn on religion to advance the issue of Palestine in U.S. urban centers, such as Los Angeles. However, instead of invoking those iterations of American Islam emerging from West or South Asian communities, protestors have turned to Black Islam to forge an internationalist politics of solidarity. This essay examines events held in the aftermath of 10/7 in solidarity with Palestine at Islah, a predominantly Black American mosque located in South Central LA, to consider how Muslim Americans engage with Islam as an ethical and political site from which to launch critiques against Zionism and US imperialism. Specifically, it probes how Black Islam can be best understood as Internationalist or Third World Islam, which deems coalition-building with non-Muslims to advocate for the oppressed in the US and the Global South an Islamic virtue. Attending to invocations of Malcolm X, I document how Muslim Americans are increasingly looking to Black radicalisms by way of Islam to establish a revolutionary politics that links the dismantling of policing at home to decolonization abroad, most notably in Palestine.

Keywords: Palestine; Black politics; Muslims; Islam; policing

I. Rebellion

On October 14, 2023, thousands of pro-Palestinian protestors gathered at the Israeli Consulate in West Los Angeles to march toward the FBI office at the Federal Building. Just a week after the al-Qassam Brigade’s breach of the “Iron Wall” barrier and the subsequent U.S.-backed Israeli genocide of Gazans, Angelenos wore keffiyehs and waved Palestinians flags, stopping traffic and closing Wilshire Boulevard in support of a free Palestine. Encircled by the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Special Weapons and Tactics Unit (SWAT), its Air Support Division, and its palm-sized drones, Palestinian and Arab Americans

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from the back of a truck led chants with a megaphone that have by now reverberated throughout the world: “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”; “resistance is justified when people are occupied”; “there is only one solution, intifada revolution.” By and large the mobilization highlighted how a multiracial front stood ready to confront the U.S. government’s unconditional support for the Israeli settler-colonial project in Palestine.

Alongside radical secular organizations, including the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Palestinian Youth Movement, pious Muslim Americans also led the charge and participated in the march in droves. In various corners of the mobilization, there were echoes of “Takbeer! Allahu Akbar!,” which were often sidelined and drowned out by secular protest chants. Several mosques across Southern California, most notably in Orange and San Bernardino Counties, provided buses for local organizers and their families to travel to the march. Even in the sea of thousands, I came across many of the activists that had assisted me in my ethnographic research on histories of anti-Muslim racism and Muslim American responses to the Global War on Terror in LA – what I refer to as the warfare capital of the world. Muslim Americans considered this moment a result not only of decades of organizing for Palestine in Southern California, but also their supplications to God to liberate Palestine and restore Muslim rule over Masjid Al-Aqsa in al-Quds, or Jerusalem.

Toward the end of the demonstration, I ran into Noora, a Palestinian American ethnic studies high school teacher, longtime anti-imperial activist, and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) veteran. I first met Noora while assisting with the Muslim American activist collective Muslim Gamechangers Network (MGN) and the Islamically-informed political education program it hosted in the Little Arabia district of Anaheim. Noora spent much of her childhood accompanying her father, an avowed secularist, to pro-Palestine protests on Wilshire Boulevard since the 1990s. It was not until high school when she began attending a youth group at a local mosque that she came to see Palestine as a Muslim, or more specifically, an Islamic issue. Interestingly, it was not a Palestinian perspective that convinced Noora of this position, but rather when a youth group mentor loaned her a copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). In an interview outside an MGN session Noora shared that it was the life, death, and legacy of Malcolm X that inspired her to read the Qur’an and approach the *sunnah* (reports) of the Prophet Muhammad from a social justice perspective. For Noora, among other Muslim Americans, Black Muslim history and Black Islamic tradition informed her commitment to combatting racism, policing, and war within the United States, as well as Zionism and U.S. imperialism abroad.

In this essay, I query how Black Muslims in LA invite fellow Muslim Americans, including those of immigrant backgrounds, to turn to Black Islam and its traditions of internationalism in response to the ongoing Israeli genocide in Palestine. Following the decline of the Arab American left in the 1970s, Islamic activists emerged at the forefront of pro-Palestine organizing in the United States.¹ Even so, there has been a concerted effort on the left to delink Islam and Palestine,

¹ Pamela Penneck, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s–1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

oftentimes to make the Palestinian cause more palatable to a Western audience. As Muneeza Rizvi argues, this anti-Muslim framing considers invocations like “Allahu Akbar!” a public relations failure.² Not only that, it presents Islam as an anti-political force that masks the *real* issue of Palestine as one of settler-colonialism, apartheid, and imperialism. Such perspectives not only negate how pro-Palestine activism has long drawn on Islam as an ethical framework, but also how it is Islam that inspires internationalist politics today. In forging new radicalisms, Muslim Americans, specifically youth, do not look to Islamic traditions of West and South Asia, nor of their diasporas, but increasingly to Black Islam.

Here, I consider how the religious and political thought of Malik Shabazz, or Malcolm X, informs Muslim American internationalism, particularly on the issue of Palestine. Sohail Daulatzai situates Malcolm X as the foundational figure of “Muslim Internationalism,” or a postwar political formation shaped by the links and overlaps between Black Muslims, Black radicalism, and anticolonialism in the Muslim Third World.³ Extending this discussion, I examine how Malcolm X sustained Muslim Internationalism through his Islamic theology and philosophy – what I call a Third World or Internationalist Islam. In twenty-first-century Muslim America, the Black Islam of Malcolm X serves as an ethical framework for Internationalist Islam and its religiously-mandated ethic of global solidarity, bringing together the struggles of liberation of racialized minorities at home with those in the Global South.

I trace the ethical discourse on the issue of liberating Palestine from the perspective of Internationalist Islam in LA by turning to Islah, a predominantly Black American mosque and Islamic school located at the heart of South Central LA at the cross-streets of Slauson Avenue and Crenshaw Boulevard.⁴ Imam Jihad Saafir established Islah in 2010, alongside members of Masjid Ibadillah, which was founded by his father, Imam Saadiq Saafir, in 1986 when he purchased a storefront property on nearby Jefferson Boulevard. After his father suffered a stroke while delivering a Friday sermon, Imam Jihad sought to incorporate Masjid Ibadillah congregants into a new community oriented toward serving South Central Muslim youth. At Islah, Imam Jihad emphasizes the social justice ethic of Islam, providing access to a food pantry, transitional housing, and medical and psychiatric services for Muslims and non-Muslims in the neighborhood. He also brings Black Muslims, Black Islam, and the perspectives of South Central to bear on the predominantly Arab, West, and South Asian mosques across Southern California, including in Culver City, Anaheim, and Riverside.

Black mosques, such as Islah, have long served as sites of not only religious learning, but also political action and community organizing. Malcolm X founded the first mosque in the city, Muhammad Mosque No. 27, which

² Muneeza Rizvi, “Palestine and the Question of Islam,” *Critical Muslim Studies - ReOrient*, November 15, 2021, <https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/palestine-and-the-question-of-islam/>.

³ Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁴ For a discussion on the role of Islam in bringing about South–South solidarities, see: Soham Patel, “A Cinematic Prayer for the Dispossessed: Race, Surveillance, and the Muslim Refugee Condition in Minneapolis,” *AMSJ* 62.4 (2023): 177–200. Here, I specifically focus on Black Islam in the United States as an ethical framework for Muslim Internationalism.

immediately became a site of LAPD surveillance and police violence resistance.⁵ The legacy of Mosque No. 27 shaped how Black mosques in LA continued to serve as sites of ethical and political action and resistance into the 1990s; it was infamously the Black American imam, Shaykh Mujahid Abdul-Karim, that orchestrated the “Watts Gang Truce” just days before the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion.⁶ By focusing on *Islah*, I consider how the Black Mosque continues to sustain new Muslim American grassroots politics anchored in Internationalist Islam. I show how *Islah*, rather than a predominantly West Asian mosque community, continues to address Muslim American political responsibility at home and abroad in response to the U.S.-facilitated Israeli genocide of Palestinians.⁷ By ethnographically documenting events featured by and at *Islah* in the aftermath of October 7, I probe the purchase of Black radicalism among Muslim Americans in the dual struggle to confront policing in LA and to dismantle Zionism and U.S. imperialism, and how Black religion serves as an important site for thinking through the tactics and strategies of pro-Palestine organizing today.

II. Black Muslims and the Question of Solidarity

On July 4, 2020, Imam Jihad and Islam hosted a “rollout” from South Central to Leimert Park in protest of the murder of George Floyd and the LAPD’s violent response to anti-policing protests. Outside the gates of Leimert Park Plaza, Imam Jihad stood atop an electrical box leading the multiracial crowd of Muslim Americans in the chant, “Alhamdulillah! Allahu Akbar!” While the rest of LA observed U.S. “Independence” Day, Imam Jihad listed those excluded from this celebration: Indigenous peoples and Black Americans. And as those that stand for justice, Muslim Americans must respond to police violence with protest and disruption. It was important for the community to remember that it is not whiteness that is supreme, but rather God and God alone. Imam Jihad and *Islah* guided LA Muslims through the 2020 “Black Spring” of rebellion, reminding them that solidarity with those subject to police violence was not only a political duty, but also a religious one. As the LAPD continued to wage its war on Blacks and browns across Southern California, *Islah* LA emerged as an important ethical and political space for Muslim Americans seeking to bridge religion and politics, and respond to anti-Black racism by engaging traditions of Black protest.

But *Islah* LA did not consider police violence an isolated issue, nor Black traditions of protest solely reserved for addressing anti-Blackness. It was Black radicalism, particularly its tradition of solidarity, that Imam Jihad and *Islah* found indispensable for advocating for Palestinian resistance to Israeli settler colonialism and apartheid. As part of its Black History month programming, the *Majlis* – a

⁵ Garrett Felber, *Those Who Know Don’t Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁶ Abdul-Majid, Narjis Nichole, “Profile: Sheikh Mujahid Abdul-Karim,” *Sapelo Square*, February 22, 2016, <https://sapelosquare.com/2016/02/22/profile-sheikh-mujahid-abdul-karim/>.

⁷ On the case of the Israeli state’s genocide in Gaza and Palestine, see: Darryl Li, “The Charge of Genocide,” *Dissent Magazine*, January 18, 2023. Accessed July 18, 2024. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-charge-of-genocide/.

“third-space” that offers seminary classes taught by Muslim American instructors trained at the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt – invited Imam Jihad to offer a talk titled, “Malcolm X: The Connection of the Black and Palestinian Struggles for Liberation.” In the auditorium of the New Horizon Islamic School in Irvine, California, Imam Jihad emphasized to a multiracial group how Malcolm and his confrontational politics were not domestically oriented, but instead, internationally. He attributed Malcolm’s internationalism to his adherence to Black Islam, shaped by the protest theologies of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Drawing on Malcolm’s trip to Gaza in 1964, Imam Jihad argued, “if I’m going to be concerned about people being oppressed in South Central Los Angeles I have to be concerned about people being oppressed abroad... [through] racism, colonization, and Zionism.”⁸ Imam Jihad ended his talk by imploring Muslim Americans to return to the social justice ethic of Malcolm, the “Muslim Internationalist,” and reengage Black radicalisms in their struggle toward Palestinian liberation. For the Black, Arab, West Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, European, and White Muslims in the audience, this was not a secular call for international solidarity, but a religious one.

What is noteworthy about this internationally-oriented Islam is that it does not derive from West and South Asian Muslim traditions typically presumed to maintain transnational ties with the Muslim World. Prior to the arrival of Arabs and South Asian professionals through the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, Muslims and Islam in the United States were indelibly linked to Blackness.⁹ As has been well-documented, Muslims and Islam arrived in the Americas through the Middle Passage within the holds of the slave ship.¹⁰ Islam was sustained in places of marronage and fugitivity, where enslaved Africans constructed spaces for *salat* in hideaway areas, carved verses of the Qur’an into the trees, and planned rebellions against white plantation owners. These Muslim slaves were seen as particularly insubordinate and a threat to the racial and political order of Portuguese, Spanish, British, and American empires. In the Reconstruction era, the likes of Edward Blyden, Duse Muhammad Ali, and Noble Drew Ali, brought the protest ethic of Black Islam to bear on broader debates about global decolonization, or internationalism, identifying diasporas as colonized populations.¹¹ As

⁸ For a detailed account of Malcolm X and his trip to Gaza see: Hamzah Baig, “‘Spirit in Opposition’: Malcolm X and the Question of Palestine,” *Social Text* 37.3 (2019): 47–71.

⁹ See: Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Carolyn Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Ula Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

¹¹ William Caldwell, “The Fugitive Islamicate: African Muslims and Black Radicalism Across the Atlantic, 1492-1925” (PhD Diss., Northwestern University, 2019), <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/fugitive-islamicate-african-muslims-black/docview/2165932004/se-2>; Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and legacy of African American Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge:

Imam Jihad pointed out, it was this tradition of Black Islam and its commitment to internationalism that gave rise to Malik Shabazz, or Malcolm X. In emphasizing the internationalism of Malcolm, Imam Jihad promoted a Muslim Internationalism. While the Muslim International includes the *ummah* (the global Muslim community), it also exceeds it, insofar as it considers the liberation of the broader Third World as indispensable to the decolonial pursuit of Muslims globally. What Imam Jihad reminds Muslim Americans is that it is religion, specifically Internationalist Islam, that anchors the relationship between Black freedom and decolonization in the Muslim Third World.

The main authority of Internationalist Islam, particularly in the United States, is none other than Malcolm X. According to Talal Asad, Islamic authority is predicated on a set of foundational texts (the Qur'an and hadith), commentaries on them, and the *conduct of exemplary figures*.¹² Among Muslim Americans, Malcolm serves as an exemplary figure: a designated *awwalun* (a pious forefather), a *mujaddid* (renewer of tradition), and the *Sayyid al-Shuhada Amreeka* (The Master of the Martyrs of America). Given his status as an authoritative Muslim American figure, the question – what would Malcolm do? – is foundational to American Islam and the debates within it. A certain type of Muslim Malcolmology looms over the question of political and religious ethics, particularly in relation to the oppression of both Muslims and non-Muslims within and outside the United States. This stems from Malcolm's positioning of the Muslim Third World within the broader "Darker World," and his considering of their liberation indelibly linked.¹³ By bringing religion to bear on politics or forging what Edward Curtis refers to as an ethics of liberation, Malcolm rendered Islamic tradition uniquely generative of internationalist solidarity.¹⁴

This Internationalist Islam challenges the religious and political sensibilities of many South Asian and Arab immigrants, which have dominated American Islam for the last half century. Unlike Black Islam, the American Islam of first- and second- generation Pakistanis and Egyptians, for instance, emphasizes a transnational Islam that does not incorporate Black Muslims, Black America, and their histories of oppression and resistance. Instead, it presupposes the narrative of the United States as exception, deems religion a "cultural inheritance," and promotes programs of neoliberal assimilation.¹⁵ Su'ad Abdul Khabeer argues that this iteration of American Islam has established an "ethnoreligious hegemony"

Cambridge University Press, 2015); Richard Brent Turner, *Soundtrack to a Movement: African American Islam, Jazz, and Black Internationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

¹² Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17.2 (2009): 1–30.

¹³ Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Edward E. Curtis, "'My Heart Is in Cairo': Malcolm X, the Arab Cold War, and the Making of Islamic Liberation Ethics," *The Journal of American History* 102.3 (2015): 775–98.

¹⁵ Sylvia Chan-Malik, "'Common Cause': On the Black-Immigrant Debate in Constructing the Muslim American," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2.8 (2011): 1–39.

of South Asians and Arabs in Muslim American communities.¹⁶ However, the “Black-Immigrant” divide between these communities is not so much about religion, but rather between domestic or global politics.¹⁷ Throughout the twentieth century, federal surveillance programs targeted internationalisms, including Internationalist Islam, to domesticate Black American politics, while rendering Arabs, West Asians, and South Asians forever foreigners, or uniquely susceptible to terror and politically corrupt. Surveillance produced a Black Islam that contained its protest theology to the national sphere, and an Arab and South Asian American Islam that exclusively critiqued foreign policy. This domestic-global divide in Muslim American politics could not be sustained in the Global War on Terror, where the United States not only waged war on Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also Muslims in New York City, Chicago, Minneapolis, Boston, and LA, including Black Muslims.¹⁸ This is most obviously seen in the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) “ancestries of interest” list which sanctioned surveillance of individuals from almost every Muslim-majority country, as well as “American Black Muslims.”¹⁹

The Global War on Terror prompted a renewal of internationalism, most notably among multiracial Muslim youth from generations x, y, and z. In the Global War on Terror, the United States has conjured long-standing racist notions of Muslims and Islam as the antithesis of modernity, liberalism, and freedom to intervene in and regulate Muslim American religious and political life through surveillance.²⁰ In my field site of LA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sought to recruit Muslim Americans to partner with the LAPD, the FBI, and DHS to implement community-oriented antiterrorism programs to curb youth extremism, including LAPD Muslim Mapping, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP).²¹ These programs, championed and facilitated primarily by the policy organization Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), are part of a broader ideological war against “bad” Islamic

¹⁶ Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ For an early account of the targeting of Muslims and Islam in the United States as part of the Global War on Terror, see: Hisham Aidi, “Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror,” *Middle East Report* 224 (January 2002): 36–43.

¹⁹ *Federal Bureau of Investigation v. Fazaga*, 595 U.S. ___ (2022), at pp. 21–25.

²⁰ For recent texts theorizing anti-Muslim racism, see: Evelyn Alsaltany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York: New York University Press, 2022); Sohail Daulatzai, *Fifty Years of ‘The Battle of Algiers’: Past as Prologue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Soham Patel and M. Bilal Nasir, “The Asianist is Muslim: Thinking Through Anti-Muslim Racism with the Muslim Left,” in *Who is the Asianist? The Politics of Representation in Asian Studies*, ed. Will Bridges, Natasha Tamar Sharma, and Marvin D. Sterling (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Junaid Rana, “The Racial Infrastructure of the Terror-Industrial Complex,” *Social Text* 34.4 (2016): 111–38.

²¹ On domestic surveillance programs targeting Muslim Americans, see: M. Bilal Nasir, “Mad Kids, Good City: Counterterrorism, Mental Health, and the Resilient Muslim Subject,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 92.3 (2019): 817–44; Nicole Nguyen, *Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (New York: Verso Books, 2015).

theology.²² In opposition to this liberal counterinsurgency, another group of LA Muslims turned to civil and human rights frameworks to critique reformism – most notably, those associated with the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-LA). Such rights-based activism has led to a reemergence of cross-ethnic and multiracial coalitions, often promoting a politics of religious freedom and racial equality.²³ Included in this contingent group of LA Muslims are those that approach Islam as a political and ethical site from which to critique war and surveillance and advocate for an anti-imperialism which includes the oppressed within and outside the United States. In doing so, they draw on Internationalist Islam as an insurgent or revolutionary tradition from which to forge not only *ummah*-centered solidarities but a solidarity with the Third World and its diasporas.

Islam is the conduit through which Muslim Americans in the Global War on Terror reengage with Black radicalism. Although the internationalist sensibilities of Black Islam were tempered in the late twentieth century, the legacy of Malcolm X endured, producing a generation of Black Muslim and non-Muslim Americans inspired by Internationalist Islam and its ethical commitment to the oppressed. Through Muslim and non-Muslim figures such as Jamil al-Amin (H. Rap Brown), Sekou Odinga, Safiya Bukhari, Assata Shakur, and Dhoruba bin-Wahad, Internationalist Islam shaped late twentieth-century radicalisms and informed an ethics of liberation, leading revolutionaries to link the Black freedom struggle at home with decolonization in the Muslim Third World. It is through these figures that Muslim Americans have returned to Internationalist Islam and sought to reestablish it as the dominant form of American Islam. In Muslim LA, Internationalist Islam has developed into what Maryam Kashani (2023) refers to as an “epistemology for the next,” serving as the ethical foundation for Muslim Internationalism.

The central question for Muslim Americans adhering to Internationalist Islam in the current moment is what is their role in responding to the U.S.-backed and Israeli-led genocide of Palestinians? Specifically, what types of political strategies and tactics should Muslim America employ in their politics? And, what should the relationship between Muslim Americans and non-Muslims in solidarity with the cause of Palestine be? Instead of turning to Arab and South Asian religious leaders and mosques, a growing contingent of LA Muslims have turned to places like *Islah*. This is because the Black Mosque continues to anchor Internationalist Islam by attending to the theology and philosophy of its primary authority, Malcolm, and those Black Muslim radicals that have followed in his footsteps.

²² According to Eqbal Ahmad (1971), “liberal-reformist” counterinsurgency considers the violent production and dissemination of a counter-ideology and counter-cause the primary objective of war. The war on extremist Islam therefore falls within counterinsurgency warfare. For more details on the U.S. counterinsurgency model, see: David Petraeus et al., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xiii–xx, xiv–xlv.

²³ For an ethnographic account of post-9/11 multiracial civil and human rights organizing, see: Sunaina Maira, *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidary in the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

III. The Ballot or the Bullet

In observance of the 2024 Malcolm X Day, Islah invited community organizers, academics, and religious scholars from across the United States to speak on the topic of “The Ballot or the Bullet: Thinking with Malcolm.” The event came on the heels of the “Abandon Biden” movement initially launched during the Democratic presidential primary in Michigan. In an unprecedented outcome, more than 100,000 voters checked the “uncommitted” box, claiming 13% of the overall vote and prompting a national multiracial movement, whereby more than 650,000 registered Democrats voted against another Biden term. In places like California, where an uncommitted option is not offered, Arab and Muslim Americans found ways to make their opposition to the Biden Administration known by encouraging voters to leave the Presidential candidate box blank.²⁴ In 2012, nearly 100% of Democrats voted for Barack Obama’s reelection in LA and San Bernardino Counties, whereas in 2024 only 85% and 89% of Democrats voted for Joe Biden’s reelection.²⁵ The movement promised to continue working within the Democratic establishment to advocate for a ceasefire and reshape policy on Israel and Palestine. Hence, the title of the event sought to conjure Malcolm to assess the effectivity of this strategy and probe whether Islam demanded more of Muslim Americans as the genocide in Gaza continued to rage on.

In his keynote address, Dhoruba al-Mujahid bin-Wahad found the question of the ballot or the bullet just as pertinent to 2024 as it was to 1964.²⁶ Bin-Wahad is a former member of the New York Chapter of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, and part of the infamous “Panther 21” and spent a total of nineteen years in prison. Most notably, bin-Wahad is responsible for the release of more than 300,000 pages from the FBI operation COINTELPRO, which sought to surveil and “neutralize” Black revolutionaries in the United States. Bin-Wahad attributes his survival of the U.S. State’s “carceral warfare” to Malcolm: his tactics, his strategies, and his religion.²⁷ As he shared in his keynote, “I look to Malcolm as being my guiding light.” And while in 1964 Malcolm’s America was about to catch fire, bin-Wahad described 2024 America as already burning.

In his “Ballot or the Bullet” speech, Malcolm launched a critique of liberal politics and its limitation for the racialized underclass, most notably Black America. Delivered in two parts in Cleveland, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan, Malcolm infamously claimed “I’m not a Republican, nor a Democrat, nor an American...[I’m] one of the twenty-two million black people who are victims of Americanism...We haven’t benefited from America’s democracy, we’ve only

²⁴ Sameea Kamal, “How some California voters tried to send Biden a message on Gaza ceasefire,” *CalMatters*, March 14, 2024, <https://calmatters.org/politics/elections/2024/03/gaza-ceasefire-california-election-results/>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For an autobiographical account of the FBI’s targeting of bin-Wahad and the “Panther 21,” see: Dhoruba Bin Wahad, *Still Back, Still Strong: Survivors in the War Against Black Revolutionaries* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1993).

²⁷ Orisanmi Burton, *Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

suffered from America's hypocrisy."²⁸ Throughout the speech, Malcolm alludes to how Black America has been overwhelmingly shut out from the political system, even in cases when it is ostensibly represented and included. When he indicts the hypocrisy of democracy as a white supremacist system of racial domination, Malcolm does not ask Black America to abandon the ballot altogether but to use its block of votes to send a political message. Although this was necessary, it was not sufficient for raising Black consciousness and struggle. Malcolm instead endorsed a turn to street politics as a "politically mature" tactic, or what he referred to as the "bullet."

Akin to Malcolm in 1964, bin-Wahad believed that it was time to abandon the presidential election and the ballot. Moving beyond Biden and Trump, bin-Wahad praised the campaign platforms of three alternative presidential candidates: Cornell West, Jill Stein, and Claudia de la Cruz. All three adopted socialist policies within the United States, while also taking a firm stance on Palestinian liberation. However, bin-Wahad encouraged each of these candidates to drop out, or at the very least deprioritize their presidential bids, to partake in a principled coalition in support of economic justice, abolition of policing, and an end to U.S. imperialism, particularly the genocide in Gaza. For bin-Wahad, the choice of "evil" between "Genocide Joe" and the "Orange Man" should not lead to voting for an alternative slew of candidates, but rather the formation of a new social movement to foment a revolution against racial capitalism and empire.

While he called upon progressives to partake in this movement, bin-Wahad expected Muslim Americans to be at the vanguard, citing the mandate of Islam. He reminded the multiracial crowd in the mosque that it was their duty as Muslims to stand at the forefront of movements for justice, unite peoples of all backgrounds, and lead them against oppression. As bin-Wahad argued:

We enjoin what is right and [forbid] what is wrong. And He [God] urges us to listen; to believe; to stand for those who can't stand for themselves; to fight for those who can't fight oppression and tyranny themselves; to feed the hungry; to house the homeless. In other words, we are the best evolved of humankind, and we enjoin what is right and we know what is wrong.

Here, bin-Wahad invokes *hisbah*, or the collective duty of Muslims and the *ummah* to enjoin good and forbid evil.²⁹ *Hisbah* in this case requires Muslim Americans to intervene in the genocide in Palestine by building coalitions and calling others to enjoin good and forbid evil. Bin-Wahad considers Muslim American isolationism and exclusive commitment to the *ummah* an affront to Islamic sensibilities, which demand solidarity with those broadly struggling against oppression. In this sense, solidarity with Palestine calls for engaging with non-Muslims and uniting different factions of the left to lead an anti-imperialist movement that connects the issues at home to those abroad.

²⁸ Quoted in Junaid Rana, "The Idea of a Global Muslim Left," in *Muslims and U.S. Politics Today*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019), 207–08.

²⁹ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In this call to action to Muslim America, bin-Wahad invokes the notion of Islamic humanity internal to Black Islam as theorized by Malcolm X. In Islam, Malcolm X found an antiracist theology that offered a rejoinder to what Sylvia Wynter defines as Western Man.³⁰ Particularly, through his trip to Mecca and his performance of Hajj, Malcolm came to privilege human rights over civil rights. But this conception of human rights was not secular nor liberal, but instead embedded within a “theistic humanism.” This Islamic humanism offered an alternative ontology based on the equality of all souls as established in the presence of God in the Islamic account of the time of preexistence.³¹ In accordance with the Qur’an, Malcolm argued it was incumbent upon the “Muslim World to take a stand on the side of those whose human rights are being violated... . Islam is a religion which concerns itself with the human rights of all mankind, despite race, color, or creed. It recognizes all as part of one Human Family.”³² By including the entirety of the *mustad’afun fil-’ard*, or the wretched of the earth, within a universal humanity, Malcolm considered Muslim American solidarity with the Third World a practice of enjoining good and forbidding evil, and therefore a virtue. This Islamic ontology anchors Malcolm’s theology and Internationalist Islam, which considers support for struggles against colonial tyranny in the Muslim, as well as the non-Muslim Third World a religious duty (*fard kifayah*) and an act of worship (*’ibadah*).³³ When bin-Wahad deems coalition and solidarity-building with others and struggling against oppression an Islamic mandate, he is drawing on Malcolm’s conception of humanity, where tyranny directed at one individual or population is akin to tyranny directed against all. It is through this ontology internal to Internationalist Islam that compels Muslim Americans to engage in an internationalist politics alongside non-Muslims to advocate for the liberation of Palestine.

Bin-Wahad’s call to action comes amid a battle in Muslim America between its left and right elements. Embroiled in the “culture wars,” Muslim Americans remain divided, particularly on questions of race, gender, and sexuality. The emergence of a Muslim manosphere, or the “Alt-Wallah,” has led to discourses, particularly on the internet, around how the terminal decline of Islamic norms can be attributed to the rise of feminism, which is responsible for a crisis of Muslim masculinity.³⁴ While not in complete agreement, and even sometimes in tension, with the Alt-Wallah, numerous prominent religious leaders signed and released the open-letter, “Navigating Differences” citing the irreconcilability between Islamic values and “LGBTQ ideology.” The letter prompted debates in Muslim America about whether the community can, and should, politically work

³⁰ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 257–337.

³¹ Louis A. DeCaro, *On The Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

³² *Ibid.*, 240–41.

³³ For more on Malcolm’s ontology as informed by Black Islam, see: Michael Sawyer, *Black Minded: The Political Philosophy of Malcolm X* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 2020).

³⁴ Sahar Ghumkhor and Hizer Mir, “A ‘Crisis of Masculinity?’: The West’s Cultural Wars in the Emerging Muslim Manosphere,” *ReOrient* Vol. 7.2 (2022): 135–57.

alongside queer activists. This continues to be discussed as queer organizers have served an important role in pro-Palestine actions and demonstrations, most notably across college campuses. By emphasizing how Muslim Americans must build coalitions with those struggling against patriarchy, bin-Wahad makes a clear case for an American Islam that leans left rather than right. In doing so, he commands Muslim America to recommit to Malcolm's vision for solidarity conceived toward the end of his life when he declared, "I, for one, will join with anyone ... as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on earth."³⁵ In the case of Palestine, Internationalist Islam invites Muslim Americans to build political power with those with whom they might disagree, including queer activists, and forge a formidable Muslim left.

The question of the ballot or the bullet, or more specifically a critique of liberal democracy, remains foundational to Internationalist Islam. Malcolm's conversion to Sunni Islam is often characterized as a vindication of the liberal ideals of freedom and equality.³⁶ However, Malcolm's conversion must not be seen as a rupture, but a continuation of his commitment to Black Islam and its testament to democracy as hypocrisy. Through his ontology of equality, Malcolm challenged liberalism and its national politics, turning instead to a universal Islamic tradition and the internationalist politics it demands. It is this tradition of Internationalist Islam that bin-Wahad invokes to endorse a Muslim American-led front against Zionism. The struggle toward Palestinian liberation must not end at the ballot box, but make its way to the streets, as has been the case across U.S. urban centers and college campuses. By doing so, Muslim America can lead an indictment of not only the U.S. government's role in facilitating the genocide of Palestinians, but also the decline of U.S. empire, the liberal order it has produced, and systems of global white supremacy that shape in contemporary militarism and policing. For bin-Wahad and those at *Islah*, in 2024 the time for the ballot is over and the time for the bullet has arrived. It is up to Muslim America to take up this challenge and live in accordance to the Qur'anic and Prophetic ideals to stand against oppression wherever they see it through a politics of refusal, as did Malcolm X in life and death.

Conclusion

During the 2024 Spring of Palestine Solidarity, students launched one of the largest mass movements on college campuses. Following months of disruptions, walk-outs, and rallies, students across the country erected encampments to promote Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.³⁷ In Southern California, tens of campuses participated in the movement, seeking to pressure

³⁵ Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: A Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 164.

³⁶ Finbarr Curtis, *The Production of American Religious Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

³⁷ For an overview of the 2024 pro-Palestine protests across university campuses and their relationship to the broader Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, see: Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, "Resistance to Repression and Back Again: The Movement for Palestinian Liberation in U.S. Academia," *Middle East Critique* (July 2024): 1–22.

administrators to take steps toward financial disclosure from companies and weapons manufacturers involved in and profiting from the Israeli settler-colonial project in Palestine. College and university officials failed to engage with the demands of these students and targeted them through surveillance, policing, and incarceration. In greater LA, campuses such as UCLA and USC went to war with their students, using trespassing laws and the cover of antisemitism to call in the LAPD to harass and violently remove them. During the LAPD raid on the USC encampment, a WhatsApp group featuring local Muslim American organizers provided a minute-by-minute update and support calls for legal observers and attorneys. Among the urgency, a Palestinian American organizer sent a video on the group from TikTok, featuring an arrested student in zip ties requesting the LAPD officer to untie him so he could perform *salat*, or one of the five obligatory ritual prayers. When the LAPD officer refused, the young man stepped back and began conducting the *salat* with his hands tied, pressing his forehead on the pavement each time as he went into *sujud* (prostration). The group paused and praised the young man for his faith and discipline in the face of one of the most, if not the most, violent police departments in the history of the world. For many pious Muslim Americans, the scene confirmed what many of them already knew and felt – there was no separation between religion and politics in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

As the U.S. federal government, local municipalities, and college administrations increasingly use surveillance and policing tactics to quell pro-Palestine protests, the appeal of Black Islam and its internationalism has only grown. As considered here, Internationalist Islam provides an ethical ground to Muslim Americans from which to build multiracial political coalitions and connect domestic political struggles to global ones. The reliance on police power to repress and punish protests highlights how decolonization in Palestine is indelibly linked to the *abolition* of the prison-industrial complex.³⁸ This is not to say that policing is solely a domestic issue, but that the loci of U.S. police power reside in the urban centers of the imperial core, including the warfare capital of the world, the City of Angels. It is through policing that the United States fabricates a racial order to serve its imperial aims, such as the Zionist settler project in Palestine.³⁹ Internationalist Islam, and its long-standing concern with Black freedom at home and decolonization abroad, is an indispensable ethical and political site from which to launch a politics against empire and toward a free Palestine.

As the struggle for Palestine continues, Muslim Americans must continue to lead the streets, build coalitions, and heighten Internationalist Islam's ideological war against U.S. empire and Zionism. Its continued political strategy must entail exploiting the contradictions and vulnerabilities of the United States and

³⁸ While dismantling the PIC requires the abolition of terror, what pro-Palestine protests highlight is how the abolition of terror also demands dismantling the PIC. For a more detailed analysis of the former position, see: Atiya Husain, "Terror and Abolition," *Boston Review*, accessed July 8, 2024, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/atiya-husain-terror-and-abolition/>. For more on abolition, see: Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (New York: Verso Books, 2023).

³⁹ For more on the nexus between war and policing, see: Mark Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

Israel and isolate them morally.⁴⁰ While the uncommitted movement served this purpose initially, continuing to work within the Democratic party as it moves to nominate Kamala Harris for the presidency will not serve this political aim. In fact, it will provide cover for the hypocrisy of liberal democracies, masking their imperial aspiration and propensity for unrestrained violence that targets the racialized underclass through neoliberal multiculturalism. For this reason, Muslim American politics must not emerge uncritically from within a liberal paradigm, but instead through engagement with other traditions, namely Black Islam. Internationalist Islam provides an ontology and ethics from which to ideologically ambush the United States and Zionism and struggle toward the collective liberation of those targeted by policing and militarism both at home and abroad. In my conversation with the Palestinian American organizer, Noora paraphrased a hadith, or a narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which politically compels her: whoever sees an evil let them change it with their hand; if not that then with their tongue; and if not that then with their heart – and that is the weakest of faith. For Palestine, Muslim Americans require all three: hands, tongues, and hearts. However, in line with the ethos of Internationalist Islam, it is action that is the highest level of faith. As the left continues to suffer from a melancholia, the Muslim left must continue to push for an internationalist street politics that reaches across the religious and secular divide.

⁴⁰ Eqbal Ahmad, “Theories of Counterinsurgency,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3.2 (1971): 76–80; “PLO and ANC: Painful Contrasts” in *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad*, ed. Carole Bengelsdorf et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

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