

FOR ARABS AND MUSLIMS IN AMERICA, MLK'S LEGACY LOOMS LARGER AFTER 9/11

By: Yousef Al-Yousef

September 11 gave rise to an intellectual Mason-Dixon Line where battles of contrasting values have been fought daily throughout the U.S. in the press, on TV, at airports, on Capitol Hill, etc. The outlook for civil rights, in light of the September 11 tragedy, is still uncertain. As Arabs and Muslims in America, we do appreciate the struggle and the anguish so many before us had to endure to create the safety net of political and social values that, so far, has managed to prevent another tragic chapter from being written for a new American minority. As human beings, we possess the raw material for good and for evil. History demonstrates how humanity is capable of great acts of benevolence and grotesque acts of cruelty. The same people can, on one day, inflict pain and, on a different day, show compassion. Reformers do not create a constituency of conscience from thin air; they seek those with the affliction to help them find within themselves dormant powers of good. Martin Luther King, Jr. did exactly that.

In the wake of the September 11 atrocities, we all watched with horror as the tragic and surreal events unfolded on the silver screen. Arab and Muslim Americans, after the shock of the attacks subsided, experienced a piercing sensation of something about to go terribly wrong and with far-reaching social and political consequences to them and to other minorities. There was an unmistakable air of resignation in the Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S. Yet what transpired in the few days following the terror attacks was equally surreal. Not since the triumph of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Civil Rights movement were the newfound American values of fairness put to the test at such an enormous scale. After the theory collided with the reality of September 11, in a cataclysmic fireball of blood and steel, the outcome was most humbling to Arab and Muslim Americans.

The World Trade Center inhabitants were a cross-section of America; the attackers did not discriminate in their violence. So why should any American take the blame because of his or her faith or ethnicity? The obvious answer to this logical argument still escapes some Americans who contributed to an unprecedented surge in hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., as well as members of other ethnic communities who were mistaken for Arabs. Yet what saved the day was a critical mass of Americans from the media, government, and the public, whose enlightened ideals and values came to the rescue, and thwarted the hateful incitement led by extremist ideologues, such as Michael Savage. Judging from the plight of Japanese Americans, in the wake of Pearl Harbor, there was little reason to believe Arab and Muslim Americans could have escaped a similar fate. The sorry conditions of hundreds of Muslim non-citizens detained incommunicado since September 11, and the thousands ordered deported, is a sufficient reminder of how close we came to losing our liberties as citizens. None of these Muslim non-citizens, we are informed by the FBI, have any terrorist links, with the exception of less than a dozen of them. Months later, the FBI believes it has a strong-enough case to try only one of them. Some constitutional pundits insist we have no reason to worry as citizens; the Constitution, they maintain, would not allow it. However, the Constitution that many allude to in defense of our liberties today, is the same Constitution their WWII-era counterparts ignored when Japanese Americans were deprived of their liberties. It's also the same constitution, which failed to protect African Americans from decades of suffering, until MLK narrowed the gap between theory and practice. MLK did not invent a new Constitution; he invited his fellow Americans to believe in what it stands for. While no society is perfect, some societies reform faster than others. The Civil Rights movement was not only an African American triumph; it was an American success. Few Western or non-Western societies have embraced reformers, who are not from the dominant class, with such swiftness. MLK and his brave followers deserve credit for having the vision and endurance. Equally important is that most Americans had the capacity to embrace a call for justice, even when the price was the dilution of their own political power. We should not remember Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement simply as an abstract history. There is nothing abstract about the loss of liberty. The fact Arab and Muslim Americans have not suffered a catastrophic erosion of their liberties, yet, is a tribute to MLK's legacy and his constituency of conscience that continues to be galvanized by his message of fairness. After September 11, MLK's America delivered again. There is no time to rest; the journey ahead is still long and treacherous. The racially motivated hate crimes, murders, mass "detentions" and deportations, and media distortions aimed at Arabs and Muslims in America are a reminder that the struggle for fairness is non-stop.

From the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement, the constituency of conscience always prevailed; however, the constituency of hate was only held at bay. Even as the battle of values rages at the dividing line between decency and intolerance, one must never lose hope in the human spirit. We must remember that today's adversaries could become tomorrow's friends and allies. There are no zero-sum games when we all belong to the same parcel of land, as MLK taught us. If only MLK were alive today, he would have been proud, but hardly content. Yousef Al-Yousef is the Chairman of the American Muslims for Global Peace and Justice – a Washington DC-based Muslim American advocacy group.

ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America) Resolves to Continue MLK Struggle for Justice

NEW YORK, NY (January 16, 2016) – Today as we remember the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on MLK Day we note that with increasing hateful rhetoric among certain political aspirants, racism continues to be entrenched in American society despite the work of Dr. King and others like him.

In such an environment ICNA calls on all Americans to strive to erase the false lines of division and fight against the evils of religious bigotry, sexism, racism, and economic exploitation.

ICNA President Naeem Baig said “Let us not allow politicians to build their popularity by creating fears through racist and bigoted statements”.

More than half a century later Dr. King continues to be an inspiration in the fight for dignity and equal rights in America.

Under rising Islamophobic oratory and hate crimes, the American Muslim community can emulate Dr. King’s methods of peaceful engagement to overcome hate and intolerance.

As he said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Dr. King recognized that the Civil Rights movement was part of a universal struggle for human rights.

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said, “For every day on which the sun rises, there is a reward for the one who establishes justice among people.” Combating injustice is a moral duty for Muslims, and they can take inspiration from inspiring leaders like Dr. King.

The Islamic Circle of North America is a leading American Muslim organization dedicated to the betterment of society through the application of Islamic values. Since 1968, ICNA has worked to build relations between communities by devoting itself to education, outreach, social services and relief efforts.

E-mail: PR@icna.us Office: (718) 658-1199 <http://www.isna.net/isna-urges-members-to-volunteer-on-mlk-day-of-service.html>

Imam Sammy Aziz statement on MLK for the Muslim Community:

Every Muslim in America should know Martin Luther King Jr, the Christian minister without who's sacrifice most Muslims in America would have to ride on a separate bus, drink from a separate fountain, and go to separate schools. We would not be able to enjoy the white neighborhoods and all the amenities that comes with them that we so desire. Ironically or not MLK's work was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi who was inspired by Prophet Muhammad pbuh. So in honor of this type of Jihad, taught by Prophet Muhammad pbuh, called Jihad of the Pen or Spiritual Jihad, which is a way of the Prophets of standing against injustice through peaceful means, which includes the example of: Prophet Moses when he stood before Pharaoh, Prophet Ibrahim when he stood before Nimrod, Prophet Jesus when he stood before the Pharisees, in honor of my teacher who was also a non-violent civil rights leader, Imam Said Nursi who stood before Mustafa Kemal, and in honor of MLK who stood before American society, I will say a few words today at First Congregational Church in Bloomfield CT. Please pray for my words to affect the hearts positively and for sakina (peace) to descend upon them.

You are invited to join us every Saturday night for an open discussion on Islam/Quran through the exegesis written by civil rights leader Imam Said Nursi at the Bloomfield Muslim Community Center from 7:30-10pm.

For more information on Lighthouse for Humanity : Bloomfield Muslim Community Center please visit www.lh4h.org or email info@lh4h.org or call (860) 269-5444.