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Introducing the Muslim Rolodex: The Hiring of Us Imams

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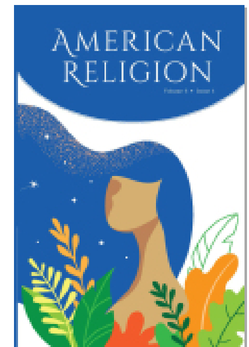

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INTRODUCING THE MUSLIM ROLODEX

THE HIRING OF US IMAMS

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Abstract

This article argues that as the profession of the imam continues to evolve and grow in the US, American Muslims utilize trusted Muslim networks and contacts, referred to here as a Muslim Rolodex, *as an indispensable component of evaluating and hiring imams. To illustrate this, we put qualitative coding and analysis of resumes for an imam search at a Boston mosque in conversation with its job announcement, promotional material, and a case study conducted by a third party on this imam hiring process. We examine all of this submitted material to understand what US Muslims and institutions value and expect when choosing a leader to represent their congregations. Our findings indicate that the* Rolodex *is commonly leveraged by Muslims across the country to assess potential imams, who largely continue to prioritize and emphasize their believed traditional Islamic values in their job applications and styles of pastoral leadership.*

Keywords: Imam, networks, mosques, neoliberalism

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LES PRESENTAMOS EL ARCHIVO ROTATIVO MUSULMÁN

LA CONTRATACIÓN DE IMANES ESTADOUNIDENSES

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que a medida que la profesión del imán continúa evolucionando y creciendo en los EE. UU., los musulmanes estadounidenses utilizan redes y contactos musulmanes confiables, denominados aquí archivo rotativo musulmán, como un componente indispensable para evaluar y contratar imanes. Para ilustrar esto, comparamos la codificación y el análisis cualitativo de los currículums de una búsqueda de imán en una mezquita de Boston con su anuncio de trabajo, material promocional y un estudio de caso realizado por un tercero sobre este proceso de contratación de imanes. Examinamos todo el material presentado para comprender qué valoran y esperan los musulmanes y las instituciones estadounidenses al elegir un líder para representar a sus congregaciones. Nuestros hallazgos indican que los musulmanes de todo el país suelen utilizar el archivo rotativo para evaluar a los imanes potenciales, quienes en gran medida continúan priorizando y enfatizando los valores islámicos tradicionales que creen en sus solicitudes de empleo y estilos de liderazgo pastoral.

Palabras clave: imán, redes, mezquitas, neoliberalismo

BACKGROUND OF IMAMS IN A US CONTEXT

The title *imam* is one of notable ambiguity, and who uses this title is a topic of much debate among US Muslims. That recognized, one application of the title gaining traction among US Muslims, particularly within predominantly post-1965 Sunni immigrant communities,[1] is imam as a pastoral leader of

1 In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, legislation that had far-reaching consequences for the state of US immigration. This act, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, overturned a previous quota policy based on national origin and ethnicity, paving the way for large-scale, merit-based immigration from nations historically excluded from standard entry, including many with a Muslim majority. On arriving in the US post-1965, these immigrants quickly contributed to a proliferation of Muslim institutions. This does not mean that members, attendees, staff, or even leaders of these institutions strictly fall under this demographic. Depending on the mosque or institution, they can also include African-American Muslims, Indigenous Muslims, Latino/a Muslims, White Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, etc. Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

a mosque.[2] Historically, houses of worship in the US are not simply sites of worship but also community centers that offer a multitude of social and civic services including charity, social events, entertainment, life celebrations, and educational programming.[3] Many US mosques assume a parallel form. As a result, qualifications for a leader of this space are not limited to a person versed only in religious knowledge, but to a leader expected to serve pastorally, providing a breadth of services and catering to a variety of types of congregants. We see this emphasis in the language of job calls for imam positions and the resulting resume responses. They do not talk strictly about training, education, and level of knowledge, but include experience in a variety of other position-related duties. In this article, we analyze a particular Boston-based imam search at a US mosque, examining the resumes submitted, the search process, and the materials disseminated by the mosque to solicit applicants and guide the search. We argue that as the profession of the imam in the US becomes legible and recognizable to a spectrum of stakeholders, including US Muslims, other religious leaders, politicians, and law enforcement, one thing remains clear: Muslims around the US continue to rely on trusted Muslim networks and contacts, coined in this article as a Muslim Rolodex *as the primary metric of recruitment and assessment of imams to serve in mosques*.[4]

INTRODUCING THE MUSLIM ROLODEX

In post-1965 Sunni immigrant US Muslim communities, it is almost always the case that a Muslim Rolodex plays a part in the process of hiring imams.[5] In the

2 In this article, the terms *mosque* and *Islamic center* are used interchangeably because most Muslims use them interchangeably in daily discourse. Although when pressed, some do articulate differences between the two: *Islamic center* is used more typically to describe larger institutions that offer a host of other services besides prayers and social events, and the types of sites that would employ more than one imam to meet the needs of their communities are often ones that would also be called Islamic centers. A mosque can be an Islamic center, but it can also be a smaller establishment (that some call "musallah") and is used mainly for prayer and some light social events and programs.

3 Harvey Stark and Timur Yuskaev, "The American Ulama and the Public Sphere" in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (London: Routledge, 2022).

4 Rolodex was a brand name for a now outdated circular index, typically kept on a desktop, that contains removable cards that store contacts' names, phone numbers, and addresses. It was a popular mechanism to store contact information for people one knows, and it was also often a way for one to jog their memory of known contacts by flipping through the Rolodex.

5 Celene Ibrahim and Nancy Khalil, "From the Madrasa to the Seminary: Training Programs for Aspiring American Muslim Professionals," *Maydan*, August 8, 2018, https://themaydan.com/2018/08/madrassa-seminary-training-programs-aspiring-american-muslim-professionals/.

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absence of a central US Muslim regulatory authority, an informal one exists that is actively leveraged by Muslims across the country.[6] Someone knows someone they trust, and they know someone who qualifies. There may be one or several "someones" in the lineage of a Rolodex contact reached, but if there are none, it is highly unlikely the imam will be hired. Such networks of trust are essential in the absence of formal authoritative structures. A Muslim Rolodex acts as a gatekeeping mechanism that allows Muslims to retain their understanding of a genuine Islamic ethos while still being legible and functional within a larger pluralistic US context. Although US Muslims emphasize the importance of adhering to traditional Islamic practice, they are not immune to the structures and institutions around them. A Rolodex therefore typifies a lived reality of the US Muslim community: the desire to retain authentic belief is negotiated through the frameworks of the majoritarian context. As a gatekeeper of a believed authentic tradition, what Tazeen Ali calls "neo-traditional," the Muslim Rolodex can also perpetuate exclusions based on race, gender, and education.[7] Still, as Ali shows, it also does not preclude some communities from transcending these exclusions.

Members of a Muslim Rolodex can be obvious and expected, including imams with a strong local or national presence, founders of Islamic educational institutions, board members of large mosques, and staff of large Muslim organizations. Not all members are necessarily obvious, however, a Rolodex is neither bounded, nor officially categorized, nor necessarily problematic. There is no official path to entry, and it is not flawless nor is it yet dispensable. It functions like a reference resource absent any bona fide institutional affiliation or credential a person would otherwise have to be able to provide a reference. We distinguish a Rolodex from traditional references or recommendations because the information relayed through a Rolodex may not necessarily come from someone who directly worked with the potential candidate. It is an alternate layer of assurance about their ideological leanings, their training, and their vision for Muslims and Islam in the US.

To understand how a Muslim Rolodex may work, let us consider for instance a Muslim man who immigrated to the US in 1969 whom we will call Hakim.[8]

6 Nancy Khalil, "Without a Profession: The Politics of Being and Becoming an American Imam," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 2, no. 1, (July 2019): 126, https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/JIFP/article/view/23279.

7 Tazeen Ali, *The Women's Mosque of America: Authority and Community in Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 32.

8 While Hakim is non-fictional, he is also a character. We borrow this approach from Zareena Grewal's dissertation where she uses light fictionalization of inessential details to protect the privacy and security of her interlocutors. There is no person named Hakim who fits this precise description, but there are many people who share many elements of

Professionally he could be many things, and for our purposes, he will be a physical therapist. He studied the Qur'an as a young boy and has personally attended a number of programs to learn more about Islam. He loves to read Islamic texts, and when he came to the US, he felt even more of a responsibility to read and learn to help preserve his Muslim identity and build a Muslim presence. Hakim donated money to help establish several mosques in his state. He volunteered on a variety of mosque committees and regularly was seen at mosque events and at the mosque closest to his home twice a day for daily prayers. He also regularly attends annual Muslim conventions and is connected to other Muslim physical therapists around the US. Many of them attended the same foreign university to study physical therapy. He may even be a local khateeb—a member of a necessary rotation of sermon givers for the congregational Friday prayer needed for the pop-up Friday prayer halls that surface in hospitals, universities, churches, and elsewhere to supplement mosques around the country and address the demand for the obligatory ritual in the middle of hectic US workday. Hakim has no official title in a Muslim organizational sense that qualifies him to make a reference for anyone, but that does not mean he is not qualified. When a young man from his community travels overseas to study at an Islamic university and returns seeking out a job as an imam, it would be no surprise if a board member from a mosque across the country called Hakim for a reference. How does he find out about Hakim? Why does he trust him? One of Hakim's physical therapist friends who lives across the country told the board member about his trusted friend Hakim from the mosque the candidate grew up in. This exemplifies how a Muslim Rolodex *works*, and Hakim, his physical therapist friend, the mosque board member, and soon the rising imam, are all in it by virtue of these extended networks. As institutions become recognized by multiple members of a Muslim Rolodex, they too can be entered into a Muslim Rolodex as institutions, not only the known leaders belonging to the institution, as can other networks, like that of Muslim physical therapists in the US.

A Muslim Rolodex has strengths and limitations. Built primarily as a network bound by shared trust of all who actively participate and use it to guide

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him. They may not be physical therapists, or may have immigrated in another year. They may not like to read but instead like to listen to lectures. They may pray occasionally at their mosque or attend every prayer there. All of these details are minor differences and very real attributes that can signal to a cadre of Muslims in a Rolodex while intentionally descriptive of no single person. Zareena Grewal, "Imagined Cartographies: Crisis, Displacement, and Islam in America" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006).

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decision-making, its primary contribution is its role in filling a regulatory gap for Muslim leadership in the US.[9] Zareena Grewal writes of a crisis of authority and argues that Muslims in the US are struggling to recover what they believe is the Islamic tradition.[10] This tradition is a blend of imagined ideological purity and identity preservation in a minority context. Grewal demonstrates that even Muslims themselves cannot unify on a singular understanding of what constitutes authoritative tradition. The crisis isn't in establishing such tradition; it's in locating it. Justine Howe argues that the Chicago Muslim community she writes about in *Suburban Islam* wants to "recuperate an authentic Islam."[11] Howe states that those Chicago Muslims believe that they can recover such an authentic Islam in the US and do not need foreign travel like the journeys taken by the Muslims in Grewal's book. Grewal argues that travel to study and learn in foreign networks guarded by what she names "custodians of knowledge" was a failed enterprise as an authorizing mechanism. Studying abroad with other custodians could not alone elevate US travelers and learners into custodianship of knowledge, no matter how much they learned.

Almost three decades have passed since Grewal began her research, and the gatekeeping of "custodians of knowledge" is arguably shifting as a critical mass of Islamic scholars in the US institutionalize through seminaries of higher learning.[12] This development shifts both who can now be recognized as a custodian of knowledge and the level of interest by US Muslims in even achieving custodianship, particularly after polemical debates about its value that emerged with the Arab uprisings beginning in 2010.[13] Conversely, networks like a Muslim Rolodex that are bounded by shared trust necessarily entail gatekeepers. Gatekeepers determine who is allowed in, and also who is excluded. Criticisms of models built on gatekeeping include concerns of gender and racial equity, the sustenance of

9 The intention of this article is to illuminate how the US structure shapes Muslim leadership and Muslim authoritative mechanisms locally. The authors acknowledge that this context may extend to other religious groups with informal authoritative structures and may differ according to geographic and political contexts. Further scholarship is needed to put this article in conversation with research on other communities.

10 Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

11 Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

12 Celene Ibrahim and Nancy Khalil, "From the Madrasa to the Seminary: Training Programs for Aspiring American Muslim Professionals," *Maydan*, August 8, 2018, https://themaydan.com/2018/08/madrassa-seminary-training-programs-aspiring-american-muslim-professionals/; Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*.

13 David Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2021).

patriarchal norms, and protection of some harmful members of the Rolodex at the cost of the broader community's safety or the safety of survivors of their harm. Whether or not these criticisms render a Muslim Rolodex irreparable and warrant boycotting the Rolodex or dismantling it is a critical conversation US Muslims need to have—and to do so, the Muslim Rolodex must first be acknowledged.

Such a Rolodex is not only used by mosques, nor only in the hiring of imams, but attention to that hiring process can illuminate the other spheres in which it works. Beyond mosques, relief organizations, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions including seminaries and Islamic schools often hire imams. They can also serve in chaplaincy positions, particularly at universities and prisons where there can be no explicit type of training required for a Muslim chaplain.[14] This is in contrast to military and hospital chaplaincies that require the equivalent of a divinity degree and/or some sort of endorsement, or a certification in clinical pastoral education, respectively.[15] Independent work is also a potential path, one chosen in particular by *itinerant imams*[16] with large followings who are regularly solicited for public speaking engagements. Additionally, imams with local supporters are often empowered to oversee institutions of their own, whether in the form of mosques or centers identified not as mosques but as "third spaces" that offer services beyond ritual worship.

Despite the breadth of establishments imams may find employment in, the mosque remains the primary institution for imams to work within the public consciousness. With over 3,000 mosques in the US, about half of them have a

14 Some prison chaplaincies, like in the military, can require an endorsement from a recognized Muslim institution that certifies the training of the leader as qualifying and from their tradition, but not all prisons do. For US Muslims, this endorsement role is played by local mosques with leaders who have established relationships with local law enforcement and are known to them. It has also been played by some central organizations, like the Islamic Society of North America. There have also been attempts to establish institutions specialized specifically in endorsement and aim to create necessary criteria for it in an attempt to disrupt challenges Muslim Rolodex can perpetuate. One such example is the Muslim Endorsement Council, and another is a service within the Association of Muslim Chaplains.

15 Jaye Starr, Sondos Kholaki, Muhammad A. Ali, and Omer Bajwa, *Mantle of Mercy: Islam Chaplaincy in North America* (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2022).

16 "Itinerant imam" is a term from Nancy A. Khalil's forthcoming book on the profession of US imams. The term refers to individuals recognized as imams that, rather than being employed full-time in a mosque or another institution, work independently. They travel to different cities and serve in short-term positions and/or rely primarily on public speaking and their community work. Their work is often based on brief encounters with individuals as opposed to deeper, long-term relationships that imams rooted in local communities can form.

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full-time paid imam. Those that lack an imam include some that are searching for one, but many do not have the desire or capacity to employ someone full-time. Nearly 20% of mosques have part-time imams who have other jobs or work for multiple institutions. Others have volunteer imams, typically community members with some learning or training that can perform some of the expected imam duties, though they are rarely able to recognize, never mind perform, the breadth of expectations of imams today.[17]

US mosques are typically governed as incorporated religious non-profits administered by boards of trustees. The mosque's governing procedures, including employment processes and conditions, are dictated by the non-profit's constitution or by-laws.[18] Historically, when a mosque seeks to hire a full-time imam, they typically turn first to a Muslim Rolodex. One popular institution in a Rolodex for the Sunni post-1965 immigrant community is the Islamic Society of North America.[19] Surveying their monthly magazine, *Islamic Horizons*, over the last 30 years, we find hundreds of paid ads by Islamic Centers looking for imams.[20] Along with paid ads, mosque board members may also (or only) contact individuals they know within a Muslim Rolodex to ask for recommendations and suggestions. Historically, US board members began consulting the overseas members of a Rolodex, including scholars they know personally or institutions that train scholars, such as Al-Azhar university in Cairo, Egypt or the University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia.[21] However, increasingly US mosque boards are soliciting hires solely through national networks in the US. As the

17 Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving, Report 1 of the US Mosque Survey 2020: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque," *Institute of Social Policy and Understanding*, June 2, 2020, https://www.ispu.org/report-1-mosque-survey-2020/; Ismaiil Qayyim, "Imams, State Agencies, and Law Enforcement," *Islamic Horizons*, (March/April, 2018): 52–53.; and Lisa Wangness, "New England's Largest Mosque Seeks New Imam—Again," *Boston Globe*, December 4, 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/12/04/new-england-largest-mosque-seeks-imam-again/UTBvYLowHfy42G6PYxasLO/story.html.

18 Some are more sophisticated than others. Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020."

19 The Islamic Society of North America is one of the largest and most well-established organizations that serve post-1965 Sunni Muslims in North America through a wide variety of services and programming. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Nazir Nader Harb, "Post 9/11: Making Islam an American Religion," *Religions* 5 no. 2 (June 2014): 477–501.

20 A selection of accessible *Islamic Horizons* issues dating from the early 1980s through 2000 and available online ones from the last two decades were surveyed to find job abs.

21 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, no. 3 (Dec 2015): 775–98; and Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

US Muslim community continues to grow and establishes its own local training institutions, domestic imam searches will only continue to focus more on domestic networks.[22]

The most divergence among the mosques is found in the process of assessing and evaluating applicants, particularly when several applicants come verified through a Muslim Rolodex. Depending on the mosque Board members' own professional experiences, whether or not the Islamic center may have other senior staff who facilitate the job search formally, the size of the congregation, and the quality and quantity of the potential imam candidates, a mosque can have an extremely formal or completely informal structure to their imam hiring process.

CASE STUDY AND JOB MATERIAL ANALYSIS

The Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Boston (ISBCC) provides a helpful example for understanding imam job hiring processes. In 2014, the ISBCC sought to hire what they called a senior imam.[23] At the time, they had several paid staff, including a full-time executive director of their large 20,000+ sqft purpose-built center built in downtown Boston, with traditionally Bostonian red-brick architectural elements as well as the dome and minaret motifs found in mosques around the world. Having an executive director meant they had a qualified and experienced staff member to oversee the search process. In fact, before the need to search for an imam emerged, this executive director had already hired an external consulting firm to assess his congregation through surveys, focus groups, and organizational evaluation in order to discern the needs and hopes of ISBCC congregants. One of the first steps he took to launch the imam search was to assemble a committee of seventeen community members from across the ISBCC's broad demographic. He also held an open house, co-led with search committee members, to hear from the broader congregation on their needs and expectations of an imam. The hiring process felt extremely successful to the community, so much so that other mosques from around the country began contacting the executive director to guide them on how to replicate the hiring process.[24] To

22 Ibrahim and Khalil, "From the Madrassa to the Seminary."

23 A senior imam would predominantly oversee educational and intellectual duties at an Islamic center while another imam is hired to help carry some of the remaining pastoral workload.

24 Further explanatory details of this process can be found in the case study: Faiqa Mahmood, "A Community-Led Imam Search Process | ISBCC: A Case Study," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, June 14, 2017, https://www.ispu.org/a-community-led-imam-search-process-isbcc-a-case-study/.

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address this need, the executive director joined forces with the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding and their "Reimagining Muslim Spaces" project to produce a case study that details the steps the ISBCC took to hire their imam.[25] This article looks at this case study in addition to the resumes submitted by candidates for this position to demonstrate that while there may be elements in the process found in other industries, the imam hiring process cannot be properly understood without nuanced knowledge of congregational needs that ethnographic research can provide. It demonstrates through a discursive analysis of the job call and resumes submitted, along with the use of a Muslim Rolodex, that at its core, US Sunni post-1965 communities strongly adhere to their perceived Islamic traditions and authenticity primarily when seeking out an imam and simultaneously are co-constituting a US Islamic tradition in the process. To illustrate this, we analyze the ISBCC job call along with nineteen finalists' resumes submitted for the position to understand what US Muslims and institutions value and expect when choosing a leader to represent their congregations.

To offer a nuanced analysis of imam resumes, we leveraged personal knowledge of the ISBCC job search process to analyze resumes submitted and approved for review by the search committee for the position.[26] While the total number of applicants was higher, the resumes were narrowed down to nineteen by subcommittees to determine the most competitive applicants for review by the entire committee. We were able to analyze the content, structure, and rhetoric of these nineteen resumes. Additionally, the resumes collected for ISBCC's vacancy are well suited to analysis: since the job ad was known and consistent across all resumes, we reduce confounding variables. Through coding and qualitative analysis of major themes, we were able to examine the frequencies and rhetoric used. In addition to Khalil's years of ethnographic research with the community, we employed qualitative content analysis tools to apply codes to resume excerpts and then conducted various rounds of coding to structure these codes according to themes.

This systemic analysis revealed key commonalities among the nineteen resumes. The resumes followed the same approximate structure: they began with a brief description of professional experiences and goals and then transitioned into descriptions that emphasize traditional Islamic learning and processes.

25 The Institute of Social Policy and Understanding is a research organization that provides research on US Muslim demographics, community needs, and politics. They disseminate their findings among policymakers, elected officials, and community leaders to support informed decision-making.

26 During her fieldwork, Khalil joined the imam search committee as the "imam research/academia" representative, one of the seventeen demographics ISBCC staff sought to include in the search process.

Applicants enumerated their expertise in core competencies that were rooted in Islamic traditions: Qur'an memorization, the study of seminal Islamic scholarship, and experience in assisting Muslim congregants as they navigate issues of faith in the United States. Candidate mission statements articulated a dedication to the spiritual needs of the community they serve and a willingness to manage mosques, teach, and provide counseling services for their communities.

In "Imams Wanted," Ahmed Elbasyouny and Ilana Gershon ask how imams demonstrate employability through resumes and analyze what insights can be gleaned from some resumes on the evolving role of the US imam.[27] Elbasyouny and Gershon argue that contemporary imams grapple with secularization and the need to render spiritual experience legible within a neoliberal discourse. Through the analysis of ten imam resumes collected online, the authors conclude that imams are increasingly influenced by neoliberal corporate trends—a shift they argue affects factors ranging from the language employed to the formatting of resumes. They identify key skill-sets that imams increasingly highlight in resumes to showcase their ability to lead in diverse and multiethnic Muslim communities.

Our data set of 19 resumes supports the prevalence of certain themes identified as the most common by the article, and they also demonstrate completely different potential reasoning. For example, interfaith dialogue, a skill the authors identified as increasingly widespread and an indicator of neoliberal language, appeared in 10 of the 19 resumes we analyzed. The job call for the ISBCC also explicitly spoke to this. It outlined three main areas of responsibility for prospective imams, including the category "Represent ISBCC Publicly," a responsibility that included interfaith outreach. The ISBCC job call demanded that candidates be comfortable and adept at representing the mosque "at critical interfaith, intrafaith, political and media settings" and to "build strong relationships with leaders, interfaith/intrafaith leaders, and public officials where appropriate." Taken holistically, it is arguably the case that interfaith dialogue is not necessarily an indication of imams adopting "neoliberal corporate trends," but responds to mosque expectations in job calls. While mosque ads themselves might use language that seems neoliberal and corporate, their reasons may be motivated by alternate frameworks. For example, mosque ads may stress the importance of interfaith dialogue to build community, as protection from bias and discrimination, all drawing on prophetic Islamic traditions of interfaith allyship. The remaining two categories of responsibility listed in the ISBCC job call included "Grow the Community Spiritually and Religiously" and "Build and Manage

27 Ahmed Elbasyouney and Ilana Gershon, "Imam Wanted," *American Religion*, "accessed October 2, 2024," https://www.american-religion.org/fields-essays/imam-wanted.

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Religious Programs Team & Plan Programs." These areas concur with another common skill set identified by the article, interpersonal adeptness, which was also present in eleven of our resumes.

The sample size of resumes utilized by Elbasyouny and Gershon was small, and they analyzed disparate job ads, complicating meaningful comparisons of the resumes. While some of the article's conclusions have merit, small sample sizes can make themes appear conflated or exaggerated. Importantly, it does not clearly articulate a specific definition for neoliberal in the context of the article.[28] Given the capacious use of the term, it makes it difficult to fully understand its utility in this context. Additionally, it highlights challenges holistic and ethnographic research aim to mitigate. Ethnographic methods, especially participant-observation, entail deep immersion and extended fieldwork time that expose layers to a topic otherwise lost when examined microscopically through anonymous data. As indicated earlier, US imams apply for a range of jobs and it is unclear if the ten sampled resumes were even for similar positions or for entirely different industries. An imam applying for a position at an Islamic seminary will highlight a different skill set and use different terminology than an imam applying for a chaplaincy position at a major hospital. A number of examples used by Elbasyouny and Gershon to defend their interpretation collapse once ethnographic nuance of the quotidian expectations of the US mosque imam is taken into account. One example given by them as a neoliberal tendency is a reference to a resume quoted as "responding to requests for assistance during emergencies or crises." It is common for US imams to articulate such willingness because of the round-the-clock expectations of imams. The ISBCC job corroborates this view of an imam's duties. Their job call described a leader embedded in his community who is "accessible to the community through spending time after prayers and holding office hours to answer community's questions; who visits community members during important life events." Tellingly, the ad also includes a section explaining the preferred character of the imam, a section difficult to envision in a corporate framework. It describes the ideal candidate as someone who upholds Islamic ideals and is "accessible, genuinely invested in community, and dedicated to congregants."[29] The emphasis here is honoring and uplifting how the community self-describes and the motivation behind the duties drawing on understandings of Islamic values and ideals as opposed to corporate

28 The term has multiple definitions, as described in James Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism," *Antipode* 41 (2010): 166–184.

29 Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, Position Announcement, 2014, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OhTvBYHYGvjWq2rd_4IK17Ae0QhOA1glJWv7kvXDSLU/edit?usp=sharing.

mentalities. As with the ISBCC and the focus of Grewal and Howe's work, many mosques and Muslims emphasize an interest in, and search for, "Islamic ideals." While one can choose to use a neoliberal lens as an analysis, its effectiveness in understanding communities weakens when in direct contradiction to stated community objectives and interests.

There is also a paradox in how "Imams Wanted" positions senior imams. For instance, the article states that "no resume discussed mentoring other imams, which would be an explicit marker of seniority." This erases the reality that seniority can often signal more experience or knowledge; these are different skills to teaching and mentorship. Khalil's ethnographic research at scores of mosques, collection of over one hundred imam job ads, and interviews with hundreds of imams verify that the more senior an imam, the prayers they are asked to lead in the mosque. In a support video the ISBCC released announcing their search for an imam, based on the aforementioned community-wide research assessment, they proposed dividing the diverse responsibilities and expectations of an imam into three distinct roles: a senior imam, junior imam, and Qari. The video indicated that the latter two were responsible for leading the daily prayers. The emerging professionalization of imams in the US has been accompanied by shifts in their hierarchies and how they position themselves in relation to one another. Increasingly, seniority level is linked to depth of knowledge. In that situation, the senior imam role has evolved to center on being a spiritual and intellectual leader instead of a pastoral leader. However, many mosques have identified a need for and thus value pastoral elevation instead of the scholarly. These pastorally experienced imams, often called junior imams if hired alongside someone with more theological scholarly study, can always go to more trained scholars, even outside their center, for knowledge when needed (and when they are the sole hired imam, the "junior" descriptor, limited as it is, drops).

WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE IMAM RESUMES

Looking further for indications of Islamic orientation, we analyzed the ISBCC resumes to discern whether or not imams signaled a relationship with God in the discursive choices they made in constructing their resume. The ISBCC job call specifically stated it wanted applicants who "work for the sake of Allah." Consequently, the resumes we analyzed included the prevalence of religious language: eleven of the nineteen resumes contained such terminology. It is apparent that for these imams, professionalism does not preclude mentions of God or Islam. Religious language is often invoked in these resumes. Candidates do in fact describe religious texts with exalting terms such as the "Holy Quran." They also included resumes with a common Islamic refrain used to ensure auspicious beginnings, "In the Name of God, the Most Beneficial, the Most Merciful."

[76.20.158.103] Project MUSE (2024-12-03 15:51 GMT)

These imams also deploy another common indicator of religious sentiment: mentions of the Prophet are immediately followed by the phrase, "Peace Be Upon Him," a distinctly religious expression meant to bestow divine praise upon the Prophet. Candidates also refer to Islam as the "universal religion" and to the Qur'an as a text to be "loved and appreciated." In addition, the job ad used by ISBCC articulated the primary objective of the imam search: to foster leadership "committed to American ideals" but "rooted in the Islamic tradition." The two are positioned together, pointing to the value that mosque leadership places upon Islamic tradition and convention, likely also motivating savvy applicants to reflect both as well.

The set of resumes also included language that signaled a commitment to traditional Islamic modes of education, scholarship, and leadership. Ten of the nineteen applicants specifically mentioned their experience studying at esteemed institutions that are widely recognized for their prestige and long history in Islamic education. For instance, candidates mentioned their degrees from Al-Azhar University, a highly notable Egyptian school of Islamic learning and an educational pedigree intended to demonstrate adherence to reputable schools of thought. For such schools, candidates also described classroom teaching strategies, with one candidate specifying that his institution "employed traditional methods of teaching such as *halaqas*."[30] In addition to details about educational institutions, seven applicants also mentioned celebrated teachers they had studied and trained under, using language such as "studied on the hands of most prominent Scholar." Mentions of well-known teachers are used as subtle indicators of an applicant's ideological alignment and what kind of leader they can expect to be. Finally, several applicants also listed examples of lectures they had delivered with titles such as "Islam and Modern Society in the Light of Islamic History" and "Muhammad in Western Eyes." Such lectures reflect both an awareness of the uneasiness among American Muslims about departures from traditional values and assurance that the applicant is equipped to address these community concerns.

However, searching for explicit statements about God, Arabic, or transliterated statements typically found in religious writings alone would not suffice to answer our questions fully. Some devout imams intentionally avoid explicitly adding God or religious scripture into resumes so they do not become documents that some believe would then need particular, jurisprudentially approved handling.[31] Absence of such terminology in a resume is not necessarily indicative

30 *Halaqa* is an Arabic word that refers to a gathering where matters of Islam are discussed and studied.

31 Documents that include the name of God and verses from the Qur'an are considered sacred and therefore must be treated and disposed of with appropriate respect. For example, such documents are not allowed to make contact with the floor. Additionally, instead

of absence of spirituality in the imams' self-description, in particular when it is unclear for what position the resume was constructed.

An important distinction we want to draw is between a profession for imams and a profession for chaplains. We draw here on Winnifred Sullivan's *A Ministry of Presence*, where she uses analysis of chaplaincy to make broader claims about the relationship between religion and the law, in particular its increasing regulation and bounded understanding of the category of religion.[32] She argues that both law and those invested in religion need to acknowledge the fluidity of the category of religion in their work. To do this, she looks particularly at the work of chaplains, acknowledging how chaplains can serve spiritually without drawing on any particular formalized religious category, as well as serve a breadth of individuals from those who embrace a particular religion to those who embrace none. Sullivan's work helps bring to light how a field for Muslim chaplains necessarily differs from that of a Muslim imam. Nancy Khalil and Celene Ibrahim explain that imams are hired by Muslims to serve Muslims whereas chaplains are most often hired by non-Muslims and can serve a range of constituents, as Sullivan's work discusses, so broad that chaplain work can include secular, areligious, and spiritual needs.[33] It is in fact the case that imams distinguish their profession from Muslim chaplains not because their work does not in part overlap, nor because their training and skill set do not overlap either, but because this overlap is partial, and most imams do not acknowledge drawing on other traditions and intentionally present a specifically and solely Islamic identity and conviction in their work and for those they serve.

While Elbasyouny and Gershon interpret imams' use of resumes to signal imams' capitulation to neoliberal norms and "secular demands" of US institutions, they do not explicitly define how they understand the term neoliberal. As such, interpreting it in its most generic sense to refer to ideas and strategies that promote capitalism and privatization of markets, our research demonstrates that an additional set of norms and criteria beyond neoliberal corporate models animate the profession. We argue that imams use resumes as introductory means of beginning a conversation rooted in Islamic tradition *despite* the fact that they can be seen as symbols of a neoliberal, bureaucratic context. Resumes are almost a forced element, foisted on imams by boards composed of working professionals who often know no other entry point with which to assess potential hires. The

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of throwing these items away, Muslims are advised to burn or shred them. Ahmed Kutty, "Disposing of Papers with Sacred Text: What is the Procedure?," *About Islam*, September 25, 2019, https://aboutislam.net/counseling/ask-the-scholar/miscellaneous-ask-the-scholar/dispose-papers-sacred-texts/).

32 Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014).

33 Celene Ibrahim and Nancy Khalil, "From the Madrasa to the Seminary."

imams themselves rely more on a Rolodex than on job calls. They receive no training or guidance on constructing resumes and rarely have one ready before being asked to produce one.

Resumes are most often conversation starters because Muslims still heavily rely on a Muslim Rolodex to establish confidence and assurance before hiring an imam. As such, there is an incorrect assumption underlying the article: that resume sharing is the predominant means by which imams seek out new positions. Instead, word of mouth and direct references are dominant; resumes are commonly just a formality and many times only constructed upon request. A case in point for this is found in the winning candidate in the ISBCC imam search. The imam ultimately hired did not, in fact, submit a resume. He was informed about the position through a Muslim Rolodex and entered consideration, including competing against three other highly qualified applicants in a multi-day interview and site visit, without ever submitting a resume.

CONCLUSION

Many mosques in the US are deeply concerned with retaining religious practices and traditions, and this desire finds expression in the utilization of a Muslim Rolodex of contacts. The successful imam search at the ISBCC Boston mosque acts as a case study that demonstrates the utility and effectiveness of a Rolodex as a tool for Muslim communities seeking to strengthen and expand. It is not a surprise to anyone that one case from one mosque cannot speak to a broad group like US Muslims, who are heterogenous across theological, ideological, economical, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, nor can a disparate collection of ten resumes culled from the internet. Even if a thorough statistical study could be conducted of US imam searches, being able to find shared constants to anchor collected data in such a diverse and decentralized community is nearly impossible.

This article aims to demonstrate that despite these limitations, there still emerge mechanisms like a Muslim Rolodex that are built on perceived tradition, trust, and network that contribute to building a broader US Muslim culture with its own recognizable norms. Through immersion, extended study, and the learning of and from scholars conducting ethnographic fieldwork, ethnography helps us to locate important nuances to better understand norms and sustained values like those in the imam job search processes. The resources and data available from the imam hiring at the ISBCC demonstrate the strong currency a Muslim Rolodex continues to have in US mosque communities and the importance of a Rolodex in sustaining a perceived Islamic tradition.