

Detroit Muslim Responses to the Iranian Revolution

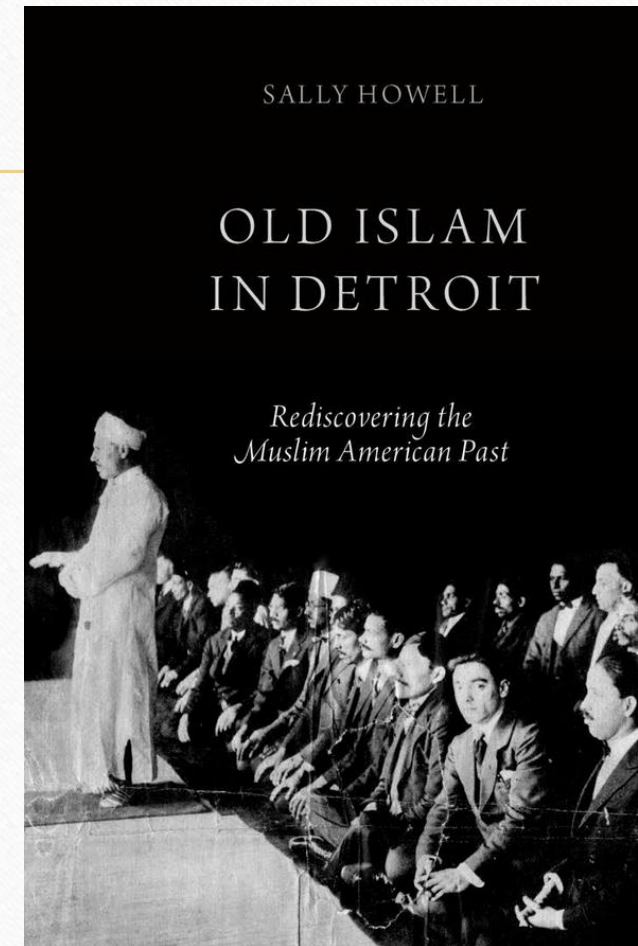
Katie Glupker, July 2017

Washtenaw Technical Middle College, Ann Arbor, MI

Why Detroit?

Lots of reasons, including:

- The first purpose-built mosque in America was constructed here in 1921 (Highland Park)
- The Nation of Islam was founded here in 1930
- The largest mosque in North America is here (Dearborn)
- Muslims are 2.75 percent of Michigan's population



“Finding the Straight Path: A Conversation with Mohsen and Lila Amen about Faith, Life, and Family in Dearborn.”

Historian Sally Howell conducted this interview in 1998.

It was published in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (2000) and anthologized in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (2008), from which this excerpt appears.

LILA: My name is Lila Amen, and I was born and raised in Dearborn, Michigan. I've been married for twenty-three years to Hajj Mohsen al-Amen, and I've got four children, Suehaila, nineteen, Shadia, eighteen, Bilal, sixteen, and Samira, who is going on fifteen. They're a product of the Dearborn public schools, where I'm currently working.

SALLY: Tell me about your family background. Where is your family from? What neighborhood did you grow up in?

LILA: Mom and Dad both came from Lebanon fifty years ago, around 1948. I was raised, in the first years of my life, on Roulo and Amazon Streets in Dearborn's Southend, and later on Evergreen in Detroit. Then we moved back into Dearborn and I graduated from Fordson High School in 1972. My dad worked at Ford Motor, at the Rouge Plant, steel division. He retired after almost thirty-six years. Mom was a housewife. They raised eight children.

SALLY: Would you fill me in a bit on your history as well, Mohsen?

MOHSEN: My name is Mohsen Amen. I came to the United States in 1970 when I was nineteen years old. I came to change my life and working in the factory, just like everybody else.

SALLY: Where did you come from?

MOHSEN: I came from southern Lebanon, from Ayat al Jabal.

SALLY: Well, tell me about growing up here. I'm especially interested in the religious life of your family. Which mosque were you a part of? How did you mature into the Muslim you are today?



Julia Haragely's Michigan City, Indiana congregation: "Celebration of the New Generation Islamic Congregation," c. 1920s. Source: Bentley Library, University of Michigan.

Dearborn Muslim interviews

Dearborn residents interviewed by historian Sally Howell
and anthropologist Linda Walbridge

Hajj Youssef, a Dearborn Lebanese Shi'a, follows Khomeini. His serious endeavor to follow the laws of Islam exactly in no way implies that he wishes to impose an Islamic regime on Lebanon or anywhere else. While he admires what Khomeini did for Iran, he still expresses a great affection for America, finding nothing about it that meets with his disapproval: "Khomeini said that if you have made a country your home, do not bad-mouth it."

Mona, a widow who has been struggling for years to provide for her children, came to America [from South Lebanon] wearing the *hijab*. Though she only wore the *hijab* for a few years after she came to the United States, she finally abandoned it, claiming that someone had assaulted her because he thought she was Iranian and blamed her for the hostage situation in Tehran. But her decision to abandon the scarf probably has more to do with the fact that the *hijab* would interfere with her aspirations to work as a cosmetologist and that she wanted acceptance from American society. It does not appear to reflect a diminishing concern for her religion.

Fadwa, is a woman about thirty years of age... She regrets that communism has lost ground among her generation of Lebanese and that Khomeini's Islam has taken its place....Fadwa was so aware of the 'oddness' of her views that she sought me out so that her opinions could be represented. She did not want me to think that all Lebanese in the Dearborn area were religious.

Julia Haragely began to describe herself as a "secular Muslim" in the 1980s to fend off the constant barrage of questions she heard from newly arrived immigrants who wondered why her hair was uncovered, whether she had made hajj, and if she considered herself to be Sunni or Shi'a. She said:

"They came out after the rise of Khomeini. That's when the fundamentalists came out. We would go to the mosque, and we sat in the lecture room, men and women together. No one said anything about it. If you went in the prayer room to pray, you covered your hair.

All of a sudden, I understand somebody sent to the Najaf. That's the university, you know [Imam Chirri's alma mater]. Somebody said that he wasn't following the faith. The women wore lipstick and makeup and stuff like that...

Anyways they started to pressure you to cover your hair. Well, I balked. I tell you, I refused. I refused."

Mahmoud did not consider himself religious until he was "born again" after the Iranian Revolution. Before this point, he describes his life as being "boring." His life now revolves around his religious activities, and he considers it of utmost importance to "worry only about pleasing God" and to follow all the rules of religion.

Ahmad is working toward his master's degree in engineering. Very serious about his religion and enamored of the 'New Islam' of Iran, he considers himself a rationalist and would like to see the mosques serve as "a place of dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims." At the mosque, "there should be discussion which can lead one or the other parties to change his mind." But he made it clear that he believes everything about Islam is true and correct because intellectually it can be proven.



Supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini hold a demonstration in Iran during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Source: Wikipedia.

Imam Mohammad Jawad Chirri (1905-1994)

About him:

A Shi'a cleric originally from South Lebanon and a graduate of the Islamic Institute of Najaf (Iraq), Chirri was hired to lead a congregation of American Muslims in Detroit. When he arrived in 1949, he was unable to speak, read, or write in English. Chirri left Detroit to serve a Muslim community in Michigan City, Indiana, in late 1949 but returned to Detroit in 1955 — and by this time he was able to communicate fully in English.

Chirri traveled to Egypt, Jordan, and Sierra Leone in 1959 to raise money for a new mosque in Dearborn. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser contributed to the effort, and the Islamic Center of Detroit was completed in 1963. In its current location on Ford Road in Dearborn, the Islamic Center of America (re-named and opened in 2005) is the largest mosque in North America.

Source: *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim American Past* by Sally Howell (2014).



Photo: Detroit Free Press, 1979

Dearborn during the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis

"Shortly after the Shah was forced into exile in 1979, a large four-by-six-foot portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini was placed inside the social hall at the ICA with the accompanying caption, 'I have come to perfect your religion.' This image created tremendous anxiety among Sunni members of the congregation, the remainder of whom dropped off the board. Many stopped attending the mosque's functions altogether." (Howell 265-266)

"The hostage crisis was an event that Imam Chirri took very personally. He was thrilled and awed by the revolution, and he was distressed to see his own country taking such a hard line on the new regime. He traveled to the White House and met with President Jimmy Carter about the hostage situation. He offered his services to the government to negotiate on behalf of the United States for the release of the Americans." (Howell 266)

"The Iranian revolution invigorated, albeit briefly, the American Muslim community, just as it did many Muslim communities across the globe. It created a sense of Islamic solidarity among the United States' diverse Muslim population. Many American Muslims of varying backgrounds began to adopt a more Islamic lifestyle and to support Islamic resistance movements all over the world. The unexpected success of Iran's Islamic revolution signaled to many Muslims that providence and divine justice were at work." (Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, p. 321)

Chirri in the news: 1979-1981

November 22, 1979: "Of course it is regrettable our American boys are in custody, but nothing has happened to them. We are worried about what may be... Wouldn't it be nicer to remember that that nation (Iran) was in prison (under the Shah) for so many years and now we (the United States) embrace the jailer... We [Muslims] are deeply in love with the United States. A good Moslem can be a good American."
Thomas BeVier, "Detroit Muslims cautious as crises continue," *Detroit Free Press*

December 6, 1979: White House spokesman Jerrold Schecter said the president [Carter] told the Islamic leaders that there was no conflict

February 8, 1980: "If we Americans had been more receptive to the revolution of the Iranian people, things would be better. Iran is the most valuable country in the free world to the United States — it is the shield of the free world against communism."
Harry Cook, "Imam sees hostages going free," *Detroit Free Press*

Early 1980: "We ought not to treat the Islamic revolution in Iran as a problem, we should rather consider it a blessing. The religious zeal which was kindled by the Iranian revolution is a shield to the Muslim world and

Detroit Free Press, January 20, 1981

Detroit Muslims relieved, hopeful after accord

By HARRY COOK

Free Press Staff Writer

Several leaders of Detroit's 100,000-member Islamic community reacted with relief and optimism Monday to the news that Iran and the U.S. had agreed on terms for the release of the 52 American hostages.

The Imam Mohamad Jawad Chirri, director of the Islamic Center of Detroit, said the agreement is "a triumph for brotherhood in the world" and ended the awkwardness that Muslims who are American citizens have felt since Nov. 4, 1979, when militant Muslims took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

"We are American citizens," the imam said. "But we are Muslims and have understood something of the frustration with the West that our Muslim brothers in Iran felt. I praise God that the conflict is resolved."

The imam characterized the agreement as consistent with the Islamic tenets of peace and liberty. He pointed out that the agreement was initiated "as the Muslim world was celebrating the 1,452nd birthday of the holy prophet Mohammed. This, you see, is very significant because Islam teaches that the curtailment of human freedom is not pleasing to God."

Despite their holding of the 52 Americans for more than a year, the Iranians, Imam Chirri said, have shown mercy as required by the Koran (the Islamic scriptures) by not mistreating the hostages.

The holy prophet Mohammed treated his enemies with mercy when he could have had them killed," the imam said.

HOWEVER, JACOB LASSNER, head of the

department of Near Eastern and Asian Studies at Wayne State University, said the Iranians' treatment of the hostages and their impending release Monday had nothing to do with religion.

"However the hostages were treated had more to do with the concerns and interests of their captors than with any religious principle," Lassner said.

Islamic law, in fact, prohibits the captivity of other human beings.

DETROIT ATTORNEY Abdeen Jabara, a Muslim who has studied in Arab countries, said that

"religion permeates everything in Iran. There is no separation of religion and government for Muslims, especially those of the Shi'ite variety in that country."

"What so many in this country cannot understand is that the Iranians were incensed beyond belief at our (the United States') complicity with the late shah in importing Western values into Iran, which also meant, of course, the pushing of traditional Islam into the background," he said.

And, in fact, the shah seemed to be returning to pre-Islamic times when he claimed to be a descendant of Cyrus, who lived nearly 1,000 years before the birth of Mohammed."

Yellow ribbon for the Spirit of Detroit

By GERALD VOLGENAU

Free Press Staff Writer

The Spirit of Detroit, the greening statue outside the City-County Building which holds a family in one hand, wore a spanking new yellow ribbon tied to its wrist Monday.

Across Woodward Avenue in Hart Plaza, a yellow ribbon also bedecked the 120-foot-tall steel pylons.

These are among the first festive indications of the city's welcome-home celebrations being planned for the returning hostages from Iran.

In addition, Joyce Garrett, city director of public information, said, "We are making tentative plans for a very special reception, hopefully at Manoojian Mansion, for the two Detroit hostages, Charles Jones and Joseph Subic (of Redford).

Further, she said, city officials have been talking about a possible large-scale event at Joe Louis Arena.

No plans have been finalized for either the Manoojian reception or the Joe Louis event, said Garrett, because the mayor was out of town on Monday and because "obviously cost is a factor... and the issue has to be, what can we pay for?"

In Redford, the township has acceded to the request of the Subic family "to be left alone."

However, the town is planning to put up a welcome-home sign and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have tied yellow ribbons to trees all along Beech-Daly Road, Redford's main street.

If the family gives its OK, the township will also send out several of its patrol cars to the airport for a police escort home for Subic.

Detroit Free Press, December 6, 1979

Carter meeting reassures Detroit Moslem leader

WASHINGTON — (AP) — An American Moslem leader said Wednesday after meeting with President Carter that he felt "almost assured" no military action would be taken against Iran.

The statement came from Imam Mohamad Jawad Chirri, director of the Islamic Center of Detroit. He was among a group of American Moslems Carter summoned to the White House to give his personal assurances that the United States is not hostile toward the Islamic faith.

"I hate very much to see that the United States, the biggest power in the world, (would) come to take a military action, and I am almost assured that this would not be the choice of the government," Chirri said.

Asked directly if Carter had promised not to take military action against Iran, Chirri said, "I'm not going to quote the president... But my impression is we have a great presi-

dent and I think he would do anything possible to avoid any hostilities."

Chirri said any kind of U.S. military action would have "very deep repercussions throughout the Moslem world. This will leave a very great scar on the hearts of the generations of the Moslem world. They would read in their books that one time this great country attacked Islam."

White House spokesman Jerrold Schecter said the president told the Islamic leaders that there was no conflict between the United States and their religion, and pleaded with them to support his calls for immediate release of the 50 Americans being held hostage in Tehran.

Chirri, however, refused to condemn Iran's revolutionary leaders for seizing the hostages, saying there might be some yet unknown reasons that would justify the taking of the hostages under Islamic law. "I'm not in a position really to judge," he said.

“This I Believe” Essay Examples

Name: _____

Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces

William Wissemann - Hastings on Hudson, New York

I carry a Rubik’s Cube in my backpack. Solving it quickly is a terrific conversation starter and surprisingly impressive to girls. I’ve been asked to solve the cube on the New York City subway, at a track meet in Westchester and at a café in Paris. I usually ask people to try it first. They turn the cube over in their hands, half-heartedly they make a few moves and then sheepishly hand it back. They don’t even know where to begin. That’s exactly what it was like for me to learn how to read. Letters and words were scrambled and out of sequence. Nothing made sense because I’m dyslexic.

Solving the Rubik’s Cube has made me believe that sometimes you have to take a few steps back to move forward. This was a mirror of my own life when I had to leave public school after the fourth grade. It’s embarrassing to admit, but I still couldn’t consistently spell my full name correctly.

As a fifth-grader at a new school, specializing in what’s called language processing disorder, I had to start over. Memorizing symbols for letters, I learned the pieces of the puzzle of language, the phonemes that make up words. I spent the next four years learning how to learn and finding strategies that allowed me to return to my district’s high school with the ability to communicate my ideas and express my intelligence.

This I Believe

A Shared Moment of Trust

Warren Christopher - Los Angeles, California
As heard on *All Things Considered*, January 23, 2006

One night recently, I was driving down a two-lane highway at about 60 miles an hour. A car approached from the opposite direction at about the same speed. As we passed each other, I caught the other driver's eye for only a second.

I wondered whether he might be thinking, as I was, how dependent we were on each other at that moment. I was relying on him not to fall asleep, not to be distracted by a cell phone conversation, not to cross over into my lane and bring my life suddenly to an end. And though we had never spoken a word to one another, he relied upon me in just the same way.

Multiplied a million times over, I believe that is the way the world works. At some level, we all depend upon one another. Sometimes that dependence requires us simply to refrain from doing something like crossing over the double yellow line. And sometimes it requires us to act cooperatively, with allies or even with strangers.

Back in 1980, I was negotiating for the release of the 52 Americans held hostage in Iran. The Iranians refused to meet with me face to face, insisting instead that we send messages back and forth through the government of Algeria. Although I had never before worked with the Algerian foreign minister, I had to rely on him to receive and transmit, with absolute accuracy, both the words and nuances of my messages. With his indispensable help, all 52 Americans came home safely.



This I believe: why would it be important to hear Mona's take on the same situation Warren Christopher wrote about?

Mona, a widow who has been struggling for years to provide for her children, came to America [from South Lebanon] wearing the *hijab*. Though she only wore the *hijab* for a few years after she came to the United States, she finally abandoned it, claiming that someone had assaulted her because he thought she was Iranian and blamed her for the hostage situation in Tehran. But her decision to abandon the scarf probably has more to do with the fact that the *hijab* would interfere with her aspirations to work as a cosmetologist and that she wanted acceptance from American society. It does not appear to reflect a diminishing concern for her religion.

“Mona” is a real Dearborn resident who was interviewed by anthropologist Linda Walbridge in the early 1980s.

Interview Assignments: Being a good interviewer

1. Do you think Sally Howell (the interviewer) had met Lila and Mohsen Amen before this interview? How do you know? What do you think she already knew about them?
2. What evidence do you see in the transcript that Lila and Mohsen Amen feel comfortable and are willing to open up during the interview?
3. What do you notice about the way Sally Howell phrases her questions? What patterns (or question stems) is she repeating?
4. It is certainly possible to make up questions on the spot in response to how the conversation goes. But interviewers always come prepared! Using any 2 question patterns/stems that Sally Howell used, write 2-4 possible questions for your upcoming interview.

Other ideas

- *Persepolis* context
- *Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football* context
- Writing and interviewing about religious practice (your own and others')
- Really, I just want Sally Howell to email me back and agree to collaborate