

## **Contact and Divergence: How Muslim-American Ties to the Middle East Have Transformed Islamic Practice and Identities in the United States**

Edward E. Curtis IV  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
ecurtis4@iupui.edu

Cultural exchanges and imagined encounters between the United States and the Middle East have shaped the practice of Islam in the United States since the 19th century. This paper will show how the religious identities of both immigrant and indigenous Muslim Americans—brown, black, and white—have been forged through contact and sometimes conflict with one another. Three periods of interaction will be considered. The first is the inter-war period, when African Americans, Arab Americans, and South Asian missionaries began to establish Islam as a bona fide American religious denomination that was, on the one hand, national in its adherence to U.S. laws and cultural norms, and on the other hand, international and even supranational in its religious and political imagination. The second period of contact and divergence is the era of Afro-Asian solidarity and the Arab Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, when Arab immigrants, students, and visitors in the United States such as Aliya Hassen, Ahmed Osman, Mahmoud Shawarbi, and Said Ramadan sought greater ties with African-American Muslims such as Malcolm X and Daoud Ahmed Faisal. The third period under consideration is the era of Islamic revival, extending from the 1970s until today, in which greater numbers of Arab Muslims have settled in the United States and Muslim-American converts have traveled to the Middle East for the purposes of religious pilgrimage (hajj, umra, and ziyara) and study (rihla and talab al-'ilm). In all these cases, the paper pushes beyond exceptionalist narratives of America and the Middle East to show how religion, like other social phenomena, has been diasporic and transnational in the modern era.