

# **History of the Islamic Center of Southern California**

*1950–1977*

By

**M. Hashem Sherif**

History of the Islamic Center of Sounthern California: 1950-1977  
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## Foreword

In October 2014, a proposal was submitted to the board of the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC) to document its history in a systematic and comprehensive way. In March 2018, the board approved the proposal, with the following objectives:

- To identify what makes the ICSC unique.
- To help the community to chart its future by learning from past challenges.
- To preserve the records relating the history of the Center for future researchers.

The first output of the project was the republication of a chapter written by Professor Mary Jane O'Donnell, of the Religious Studies Department at California State University – Northridge. This text had originally been published as a chapter in *Race, Religion, Region, Landscapes of Encounter in the American West*, edited by Fay Botham and Sara M. Patterson, and published by The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, (2006).

Next, a digital archive was set up at: <https://islamiccenterofsoutherncalifornia.omeka.net> using Omeka, an open-source web publishing platform used to share digital collections. As of now, all available issues of the *Minaret Magazine*\* have been uploaded. The archive includes digital exhibits, and a collection of ICSC audio and video files in a searchable format, as well as text documents that can be accessed by community members and future researchers.

This volume is another output of the project. It follows the evolution of the Center from its beginning as the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles in 1953 through its various transformations until it became the Islamic Center of Southern California in 1977. The narrative is based on personal recollections, official records, various documents, and newspaper articles from the period studied.

The plan is to publish a second volume relating to the evolution of the

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\* The *Minaret* started as a newsletter in 1968 and became a magazine in the 1980s. It stopped publishing in 2005. More details will be available in the second volume of the history of the Islamic Center.

ICSC's history from 1978 to the present, as well as pictorial book to support the history.

We invite those interested in sharing their knowledge or family memorabilia to contact the Islamic Center with the supporting documentation to be included in subsequent editions.

The engagement of many community members has made this project possible. We sincerely feel that the Grace of God, has made the difficult easy and opened venues that we could not otherwise have imagined. We thank Him for his help and for providing us with a sincere community that has been very supportive.

Thank you

Sadik Alloo

ICSC History Project  
Project Leader.

## Introduction

*When I first came to the United States, it was 1970 (...) We went to the old Islamic Center in St. Andrew's. And the most impressive thing I met was the people entering the Islamic Center and the way they greeted us and the way they welcomed us. This made us feel [a] sense of belonging, that we are going to meet Muslims who are caring to extend their love and welcoming to a new family. And that was the most impressive thing to me (Azmeralda (Zizi) Alfi, September 1996).*

*To visit the Islamic Center of Southern California on Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles is to witness the antithesis of one of the most oft-repeated observations about race and religion in the United States: Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America. In marked contrast to the Christian churches that prompted this observation, the Center has, during its more than fifty-year history, embraced countless immigrant and American born Muslims (and even non-Muslims) of various nationalities, races, and ethnicities (Mary Jane O'Donnell, 2006).*

*I'd never been to the Islamic Center of Southern California, on Vermont Avenue in Koreatown, so call me naïve. But I didn't expect to hear a conversation in Spanish, or see so many Latinos, African Americans, and Caucasians at the mosque and cultural center. "When you come on our main day, Friday service, it's filled with people, and you don't see two people from the same country in any row," said Asim Buyuksoy, religious director and Turkish immigrant. "It is the color of the rainbow, with people from Africa, Europe, Asia, South Asia. All are coming here to worship one God in the same sense as Christians and Jews" (Steve Lopez, 2017).*

*It's the most cosmopolitan house of worship I've ever attended – where everyone from great-grandparents to toddlers smile at one another; where people of every shade, size and style of dress, who come from six continents and speak multiple languages, unite in prayer (Robin Podolsky, 2019).*

*During my stay with the Center for over thirty years (...) not once I felt personally, or I saw, or I heard anything that would tell me that there is some differentiation between people. Everybody was one. Once you are in the Center, you are brothers and sisters. It does not matter where you come from, what beliefs you have, but in the Center, there is a common*

*goal, which is to propagate Islam as it should be and there is no discrimination against anybody, you can walk in, anybody, white, black, brown, grey, whatever color you have, whatever sect you have, whatever language you speak, whatever area, part of the world you come from, you are one inside, because you are promoting one thing, which is to provide a place for Muslims to pray, propagate Islam and have a place for children to learn (Mohamed Qureshi, 18 August 2021, Center administrator between 1983 and 2014).*

*I am very fortunate that I was part of that organization. I got to know so many nice people that became my family. I have grown spiritually and learnt a lot (Khalida Samad, 25 September 2021; former member of the board of Directors, previous President of the Women's Association).*

The Muslim community of the Islamic Center of Southern California was able to bring together and assimilate people from diverse cultures, political affiliations, and interpretations of Islam. The task of organizing this diverse body of peoples into a single cohesive body took many years, and experienced many turns and temporary setbacks as it sought to overcome divisions, extend narrow perspectives, and transcend inherited customs and cultures.

This book is an attempt to explain how this unique outcome was achieved and why members of the Center feel relaxed in a non-judgmental community; where everyone discovered that they have a role and a place. As Sherin Ezzeledin-Ali remembered in an interview on the 9 September 2021, there was a palpable atmosphere of love that could be felt, that made attending events at the Center akin to a family reunion and a way to reconnect with loved ones. Azmeralda (Zizi) Alfi also recalled how, when she came to the St. Andrew's Center for the first time, she was greeted warmly by Pat (Patricia) Awad who made her feel at home and this first impression is what drew her into the Center (Islamic Center of Southern California, September 1988). Thereafter, Zizi Alfi continued this tradition of looking for new visitors, talking to them, and connecting them to the Center's activities. Hedab Tarifi recalled that the first time she came to the Center in April 1992, Zizi Alfi asked her to sell tickets for an event. The warm welcome and the opportunity to serve made her decide to make Los Angeles her home

(Tarifi, 2021). This sense of belonging drew people in, because they felt that they could contribute, and that their participation was appreciated. Some of the newer members would subsequently play later important roles in the Center. Hedab Tarifi, for example, became the first woman chair of the board of Directors in 2016.

As narrated in the Foreword, the project to record the history of the Center in systematic and comprehensive way started with the proposal that Sadik Alloo made to the Center's board of Directors in October 2014. The goal was to collect, archive, and exhibit the written, oral, and visual records of that history so as to make the community aware of its rich heritage. One particular aspect to be stressed was the crystallization of the American Muslim identity. Another goal was to learn from past challenges so that they might act as a way by which to assist navigating the future. The archive would also be accessible to community members as well as future researchers. The project started in February 2020 and one of its first outputs was the establishment of the digital archive of the Center at <https://islamiccenterofsoutherncalifornia.omeka.net>; an outcome that was achieved with the help of UCLA library science students.

This volume documents the history of the Center from its origins to 1977. The background information contained herein was obtained from oral histories supplemented with newspaper articles and, when available, minutes of meetings. Mrs. Betty Alsabery provided a wealth of information on the early years and supplied write-ups, newspapers clippings, and photos covering the period 1957 to 1966. Ali and Mahsheed Galedary provided invaluable information on their late father Sheikh Abdullah. Mohamad Yacoob generously gave copies of early issues of *The Minaret* newsletter and the 1970 Directory of the Islamic Foundation; an invaluable source of information on the early Muslim community in Los Angeles. The late Abed Awad tirelessly repeated the events that he had witnessed; luckily Sadik Alloo was able to interview him before he succumbed to the Covid epidemic.\* The late Dr. Hadi Salem provided some rare documents and his recollections, which had been published in Egypt, were an important source of data. Without the help of Levent Akbarut, Zane Alsabery, Mahmoud Dakhil, Murad Siam, Sulejman Sulejmanagic and the late

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\* The interview is in the digital archive at <https://islamiccenterofsoutherncalifornia.omeka.net/items/show/308>

Rashid Tifrit, many details herein noted would have been lost. Heba Alfi supplied elements relating to the fundamental contributions of her parents, the late Dr. Omar Alfi and Zizi (Azmeralda) Alfi. Finally, Ozman Trad designed the timeline which highlights the landmarks events that occurred during the period under consideration.

Previously, Professor Mary Jane O'Donnell, of California State University, Northridge, had interviewed several members between 2003 and 2007 for her Ph.D. dissertation. She graciously provided the cassette tapes of these interviews so that they might be digitized and posted in the archive. Cumulatively, the recollections of Ismail Chang (son of Hajji Tze Chun Yousuf Chang), Mohammed Chang (unrelated), Hamil Ma, and Ibteessam Ting Chang highlight the overlooked contributions of Chinese Muslims in the establishment of the Islamic Center. Levent Akbarut and the podcasts that Mukhtar Abdelnaby recorded with Khalil Momand, Maher Hathout, and Omar and Zizi Alfi provided complementary information. Finally, Hedab Tarifi shared documents that Dr. Omar Alfi and Zizi Alfi had entrusted to her.

Comments by members of the Islamic Center community were generously provided on various parts of the manuscript. In particular, many thanks are due to Dr. Sami Adham, Levent Akbarut, Nilofar Amier, and the "Audeh sisters" Haifa El Haifa El Adli and Jia (Najla) Hamud. Professor Jamil Momand read several versions of the whole manuscript and his meticulous reviews and challenging questions improved the text. Of course, any remaining errors are not their responsibility and will be addressed in subsequent revisions.

The manuscript went through several rounds of editing. Many thanks to Fartoon Hagi-Mohamed, Neemah (Ziggy) Ghassemi, and Dr. Lily Lew for their contributions. The last round of proofreading was provided by Dr. Bertie Dockerill from the U.K. His judicious comments and questions were of great assistance in improving the final text.

And finally, it should be noted that the collection and archiving of documents are ongoing. Those who would like to share their memories are encouraged to contact the Islamic Center's administration.

M. Hashem Sherif, Ph. D.

## 1. Muslims in Los Angeles 1920–1952

California is a blind spot within the usual narratives on Islam in the United States of America. The purpose of this chapter is to address this gap and introduce the reader to the environment that saw the emergence and growth of the Muslim presence in Southern California and Los Angeles in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1.1. Muslims in California

There are indications that individual Muslims were present in California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the first known community organizations emerged when large groups of Muslims from the Indian sub-continent, (today's India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Afghanistan), migrated with British passports to work in the farms of the Central Valley. In particular, Sacramento is home to California's oldest Muslim community, and is comprised of two main ethnic groups: the Pathans, and the Punjabis (Nadim, 1989).

In January 1920, these Muslim immigrants (known as "Indian Mohammedans") established the Moslem Association of America in Sacramento (Bowen, 2017). One of the association's first resolutions was to protest the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (Bakersfield Morning Echo, 1920). Its co-founder<sup>1</sup> and President, Rahmat Ali Khan<sup>2</sup> (1900–1957), cabled the resolution to the British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George and the French Premier Alexandre Millerand:

*"We, the representatives in America of the Islamic world, comprising about 220,000,000 people, especially about 70,000,000 Moslems of India, urgently request that your influence be exerted against deprivation of any territory of Turkish empire possessed by her before the great war. The internationalization of Constantinople or the deprivation of any part of Turkey's territory would have a most disastrous result among other people residing within the countries embraced by the allied governments as well as the Moslems throughout the world"* (Modesto Morning Herald, 1920; Sacramento Daily Union, 1920).

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<sup>1</sup> The other co-founder was Saidullah Khan (*Sacramento Bee*, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> Rahmat Ali Khan graduated from what became Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), but was then called the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO College), in 1914; he obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1919 (*Sacramento Bee*, 1957).

Later, several female members of that community established the short-lived Moslem Women's Association of America and registered it with the State of California on 22 January 1953.

## 1.2. Muslims in Southern California

Muslims were also settling in Southern California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the death notice of Mehmet Sadik Hitay from El Toro, CA, indicates that he was born in Cypress, California, in 1910 (*Tustin News*, 28 April 1966). Most of these immigrants were Arabs from the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) as well as Turks: the Turkish American Club of Los Angeles was founded in 1923 (Akbarut, Orhan, 1968). Arab immigrants were predominantly engaged as farmers, peddlers, and traveling salesmen. Abed Awad,<sup>3</sup> for example, recalled in 2020 that an old-timer had told him that his (Abed's) father, a traveling salesman, had passed through Los Angeles in the early 1900s. By the 1940s, Abed Awad's brother and sister as well as their descendants were already established in the Los Angeles area (Awad, 11 March 2020).

The Muslims who settled in Southern California in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were few in number and lacked formal institutions. In 1930, an Ahmadi missionary, Mohammed Basheer of 1723 Whitley Avenue in Hollywood, spoke of building a mosque in Los Angeles and claimed that "hundreds of Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Persians, Syrians and Egyptians, followers of Islam, have expressed their desire to cooperate in building the proposed mosque" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1930). It is not clear what happened to these plans since there were still no mosques in Los Angeles at the end of World War II.

Before the immigration reforms of 1965, most Muslims in the U.S. had emigrated from the British Empire or from the European continent. Arabs, mostly Syrians and Lebanese, fought to be officially recognized as 'white' so that they could be naturalized as U.S. citizens; those who could not prove their whiteness were deported as 'non-white aliens'. In the late 1940s the composition of the Muslim community in Los Angeles began to change.

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<sup>3</sup> Abed Awad and his wife Patricia (Pat) Awad were associated with the Islamic Center from the early 1960s until his death in 2020; (for further see their biographies in Chapter 5).



The next wave of Muslims in Los Angeles consisted of younger males who entered the U.S. either to study at the local universities (at either undergraduate or graduate level) or to work in the movie industry. There were three reasons for this change. First, the European countries that were the traditional destinations for Arab and Muslim students were still suffering from the devastation wrought by World War II (Dockerill and Sturzaker, 2019), while the post-war economy of the U.S. was growing at an impressive rate. Second, the U.S. and the Soviet Union (USSR) were competing to attract students from what would soon be called the Third World in an attempt to change the hearts and minds of the next generation of its leaders. While most of those who studied in the USSR returned to their home countries after obtaining their degrees, a significant number of graduates from U.S. institutions stayed on after completing their studies. Finally, in the post-war period, Hollywood exerted an irresistible attraction to those who sought employment opportunities in the film industry.

By the early 1950s, there were approximately 300 Muslims in the Los Angeles area, most of whom were students attending local colleges and universities (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 1954). Many were enrolled at the University of Southern California (USC), whilst others went to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the Los Angeles State Technical College, or the Los Angeles State College (now California State University, Los Angeles). Khalil Momand, for instance, who is listed in the Articles of Incorporation as one of the Directors of the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles, was an engineering student at the Los Angeles State Technical College. Similarly, Houshang Saleh Khorram, another Director, studied at the Los Angeles State College.

### 1.3. Muslims in the Press

In the 1950s, the word ‘Moslem’ was mostly associated in the popular mindset with the Masons and particularly the Shriners, whose official name is the American Ancient Arabic Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (Bowen 2015). Masons believed that their teachings had Eastern origins and formed Islam-themed Masonic organizations. The Shriners had ‘Moslem tests’<sup>4</sup> that neophytes had to undergo before joining. Their temple names, like *Zem*

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<sup>4</sup> The test consisted of walking on hot sands (*Daily Herald*, 12 November 1950).

*Zem, Medinah, Wahabi, Mecca and Bagdad*, introduced a vague awareness of Muslim terminology into the mainstream. For example, Arthur M. Dole of the *Al Malaikah* Temple in Pomona greeted his fellow Shriners with a poem entitled "Greeting Nobles" in which he praised "Allah wise All-Seeing Eye" (Dole, 1950). The Shriners, with their red fezzes, camels, and dresses, captured popular attention and received ample coverage in the press as they arrived by train to Union Station in Los Angeles for their convention in June 1950 (*Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1950). On the occasion of this convention, the Moslem Students Association at the University of Southern California (USC) and the Institute of the Arts of USC arranged for a show on campus at the Bovard Auditorium which featured eastern dancing by the dancer Delal and her company (*Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 1950).

In the 1950s, Moslems were mentioned in relation to high-profile cross-cultural and cross-religious marriages. The first such marriage was that of Californian Vincent Hillyer to Princess Fatemeh Pahlavi (Pahlevi) of Iran, who were wed first in Rome and then in a Muslim ceremony in Paris after Hillyer converted to Islam at the insistence of the Shah. The second marriage was that of Princess Fathia, the youngest sister of King Farouk of Egypt, to Riad Ghali, the Royal Advisor of her mother. He was 11 years her senior and nominally converted from Christianity to Islam (*Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 1950; *Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 23 September 1950).<sup>5</sup> The third marriage was that of the Texan millionaire Shephard King III, who divorced his wife and converted to Islam, adopting the name Abdullah, when he married the Egyptian belly dancer, Samia Gamal (*Mirror News*, 3 October 1951). Finally, the marriage of Rita Hayworth to Prince Ali Khan, son of Aga Khan III, and their divorce kept the newspapers busy from 1949 to 1953, particularly during their public custody battle for their daughter Yasmin, which ended with Ali Khan offering his ex-wife a million dollars to raise their daughter as a Muslim (*Pasadena Independent*, 14 January 1949; *Long Beach Independent*, 12 September 1953; *Napa Register*, 9 September 1953). Moslems were also mentioned in Southern California newspapers with respect to the struggles for independence in Algeria and the Malay Peninsula (now Malaysia).

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<sup>5</sup> The first marriage ended in divorce in 1959, the latter ended tragically in 1976 when Riad Ghali shot and killed his estranged spouse.

### 1.4. Eid Celebrations in Los Angeles

Because there were no designated gathering places for Muslims to congregate regularly, Muslims in the Los Angeles area had to rent public arenas for special occasions. In September 1950, Hassan Khayyam, a Pakistani actor and a local celebrity, who, as we shall see, would go on to spearhead the establishment of the first Muslim organization in Los Angeles, rented the Armenian Center, at 1501 Venice Boulevard<sup>6</sup> for Eid al-Adha prayers. These prayers were officiated by Moulvi Bashir Ahmad Minto from Pakistan who, earlier in the year, had conducted the marriage of Princess Fathia to Riad Ghali (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 23 September 1950). As part of the festivities, Denise Rithner, the daughter of Mrs. Khayyam from her first marriage, performed music and hosted dancing (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 23 September 1950). The Hollywood actor Bruce Cabbot and his wife also attended the celebration (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 25 September 1950).

On 4 July 1951, the Pakistan Association of Los Angeles organized the Eid al-Fitr prayer and celebration at Park View Manor, 2200 W. Seventh St, a public dance hall that had been rented for the occasion<sup>7</sup> (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 3 July 1951). The Eid al-Adha celebration was a joint event by the Arab-American Club at UCLA and the Pakistan Association and was held again at Park View Manor. An Egyptian Ph.D. student from UCLA, Yousry Ghitany, led the ceremony while Hassan Khayyam chaired the celebration committee (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 11 September 1951; *Los Angeles Times*, 13 September 1951). Most of the participants were students from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Egypt, and Pakistan. On the same day, Ghitany announced that the Muslims of Los Angeles were starting to organize to build a mosque (*Daily News*, 13 September 1951; *Los Angeles Times*, 13 September 1951).

Two weeks after the Eid al-Adha celebrations of 1951, Abu Said Bazmi, a newspaper editor from Pakistan, died of a heart attack on his way home after attending what was then called the Japan Peace Conference in San Francisco (known also as the San Francisco Peace Conference). Hassan Khayyam, as the President of the Pakistan Association of Los Angeles and as the founder of the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles – which at that time

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<sup>6</sup> In 2021, the building became a Pentecostal church (Iglesia de Dios).

<sup>7</sup> In 2021, this was the address of the Park View Terrace apartments.

was still in formation – took responsibility for the mortuary arrangements and the *janaza* prayers (*Los Angeles Times*, 26 September 1951).

It is quite likely that this tragic event increased the urgency of having an Islamic institution in the Los Angeles area. However, with such a small community of students and recent immigrants, funding was scarce. Khayyam decided to address a larger audience of Los Angelenos, using the same fundraising strategies that were used by other communities and groups. As a result, on 25 November 1951, an ‘Arabian Nights’ review was organized at the Assistance League Playhouse, 1367 N. St. Andrew’s Place, to raise funds for a “Moslem center and a mosque” in Los Angeles (*Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 1951). The show comprised dances, music, and songs from all over the Muslim world and represented many Muslim communities including: Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, India, Yugoslavia, Egypt, Pakistan, North Africa, Armenia, Greece, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Spain, Indonesia, and the United States. Karoun Tootikian<sup>8</sup> and her company of 30 dancers donated their services for the fundraiser. Civic and religious leaders and several motion picture, stage, radio and television personalities were invited (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 17 November 1951).

Yousry Ghitany and Hassan Khayyam organized another community event at the Park View Manor to celebrate the arrival of Ramadan in May 1952 (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 1952). At the end of the month, the Arab students at UCLA and the Pakistan Association conducted their joint Eid al-Fitr ceremonies again at Park View Manor with Yousry Ghitany leading the prayers (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1952).

This was not the only place where Eid was celebrated. At various Eid occasions, the family of Muhammad (Michael) Alhandy invited Muslim students to their home to celebrate the holiday<sup>9</sup> (Siam, Mustafa, 1989). In

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<sup>8</sup> Karoun Tootikian (1918–2000) was born in Pennsylvania, of Armenian parents. She had previously performed native dances of Pakistan in celebration of Pakistan’s fourth Independence Day at the invitation of Hassan Khayyam (*Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 1951). Some of her performances are available in the New York Public Library digital collection <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7b05dc10-ef96-0133-71f4-60f81dd2b63c>.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1970 Directory of the Muslim community published by the Islamic Foundation of Southern California, Michael Alhandy is listed in Whittier, CA. Mr. and Mrs. Alec Alhandy bought a page in memory of their mother Mary Alhandy, but they were not listed in the community directory.

2020, just weeks before his passing, Abed Awad reminisced about praying with other students and some elders at a garage of the house owned by a Muslim white American Immigration lawyer,<sup>10</sup> “on Florence Avenue near Normandie Avenue”. He further commented that:

*“We went to his house, his garage. They emptied the garage, and we ha[d] the carpets on the floor and all of that, and we did our Eid prayer there. Yeah, I remember that vividly”* (Awad, Abed, 11 March 2020; 23 April 2020).

In August 1952, the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles, while still not officially registered with the State of California, organized Eid al-Adha prayers at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood. This time Abdul Karim (Karim) Khudairi, from Iraq, was the prayer leader (*Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1952). That same year, the celebration of the birthdate of the Prophet was conducted in private (*Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 1952).

As we can see, the underrepresentation of Muslims in Southern California opened cross cultural collaboration and drew people from diverse backgrounds. They were united only by their common beliefs and their close geographic proximity. To be able to work together, they had to be flexible in their interpretation and implementation of the inherited traditions and practices that they associated with Islam. While this diversity created inevitable challenges, the organization they established, which later became the Islamic Center of Southern California, was able to reach across ethnic, racial, and sectarian lines from its very inception. In other words, from its earliest origins, the organization was never an enclave where like-minded Muslims would gather to reproduce the patterns imported from their mother countries.

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<sup>10</sup> Most probably he was Boyd H. Reynolds, the Vice-President of the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles in 1953. According to the 1940 Census and voter registration information, he resided at 1236 W. Florence Avenue in Los Angeles.

## **2. The Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles (1953–1957)**

The subject of this chapter is the early years of the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles, the first formal Muslim institution in Los Angeles and Southern California. We also describe how individual Muslims were gradually integrated into an organized community that was able to establish a permanent location on City Terrace Drive.

### **2.1. Incorporation**

The Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles was incorporated on 16 May 1953 and registered with the state of California on 4 June 1953. Hassan Khayyam was the association President, Boyd Reynolds was the Vice-President, and Mohammed Tahir was the Secretary.

According to the Articles of Incorporation the purposes of the Association were:

*“To develop understanding, good will and brotherhood between all Moslems and the people of the United States to foster an appreciation of Moslem culture and ideals; to aid the members of this Association in times of distress and encourage a mutual acquaintance between Moslems living in the Western Hemisphere; to promote the observance among Moslems of religious holidays and celebrations and provide suitable for same; to contribute according to the capacity of this Association to the civic betterment and general welfare of all people in the community”.*

### **2.2. Activities**

The Association faced two main challenges: raising funds to establish a permanent location and recruiting a religiously trained individual to lead the prayers and officiate at weddings, divorces, and burials. These issues had already been solved many generations earlier in Muslim-majority countries where private donors established mosques, while the maintenance of the physical plant and the handling of the structural elements were undertaken through trusts or public authorities. The day-to-day running of mosques, such as establishing calendars, and appointing staff (imams, muezzins, cleaning personnel, etc.) was the responsibility of government bureaucracies.

Concerning religious leadership, Hassan Khayyam fortuitously lived close to the Iranian-born Shaikh Abdullah Galedary.<sup>1</sup> Khayyam was able to recruit Shaikh Galedary to be the religious leader and officiate at meetings on Sundays and during Eids (there were no Friday prayers then), because of his fluency in classical Arabic, his memorization of the Quran, and his Islamic education (Awad, 2020; Galedary, April 2020; May 2020). Although Shaikh Galedary had to leave the U.S. in 1956 when his visa expired, Khayyam was instrumental in getting him a clergy visa in 1959 (see p. 14).

### 2.2.1. Prayers and Celebrations

The Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles celebrated Eid al-Fitr on 14 June 1953. This was the first celebration that it organized. In the morning, Shaikh Abdullah Galedary led the prayers. In the evening, a celebration dinner and entertainment event were held at the UCLA Religious Conference Center. A group of UCLA, USC, and City College students performed the dabka<sup>2</sup> dance while Mohammed Tahir and his three children delivered a Muslim chant. The event was co-sponsored by the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles and the Arab-American Club at UCLA. Hassan Khayyam was the ‘toastmaster’ and Dr. Abdul Karim Khudairi was the program Chairman (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen News*, 9 June 1953).

On 22 August 1953, the Eid al-Adha celebration was again held at the UCLA Religious Conference Center. The Arab-American Club at UCLA was the co-sponsor of the event, and it was open to other Arab students and organizations, whether Muslim or Christian. The American-Middle East Relief Society of Southern California displayed handicrafts made by Palestinian refugees, while Iranian students expressed their support for Mohammed Mossadegh who had just been toppled in a coup arranged by British and U.S. intelligence agencies. Boyd Reynolds, the Vice-President of the Moslem Association, spoke on “What is Islam”. He emphasized that “Islam believes neither in fatalism nor predestination and that each Muslim is held responsible for his own actions. Islam makes no distinction between rich and poor, high and lows – all men are equal, but faith must be translated into action. A man is judged by his virtue and service

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<sup>1</sup> Also spelled Abdulla.

<sup>2</sup> A dance of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine).

to humanity. Islam welds black, white and yellow into one" (Henderson, 1953). Houshang Saleh Khorram, the student representative in the Moslem Association, encouraged his fellow students to mix with the people of the U.S. and to learn from them what would be useful in their home countries (Henderson, 1953).

There was also food and entertainment, including a dabka performance by male students and folk dances from around the Arabic and Islamic world which were performed by the Armenian Ballet Company. The company was directed by Karoun Tootikian (Henderson, 1953).<sup>3</sup> Denise Rithner, Hassan Khayyam's stepdaughter, performed a dance that she called "Forbidden Dance" (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen-News*, 19 August 1953).

The start of Ramadan was celebrated on 2 May 1954 at the Armenian Center which was located at 1501 Venice Boulevard, with Shaikh Galedary officiating. The organizing committee consisted of Shiraj Uddin, Shaikh Dastagir,<sup>4</sup> and Majid Ali.<sup>5</sup> Attendees travelled from as far away as the Long Beach area (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen-News*, 30 April 1954; *Daily News*, 1 May 1954; *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1954). The prayer for Eid al-Fitr was held on the 2 June 1954 at the New Century Foundation Hall, 1159 W. Olympic Boulevard (*Daily News*, 1 June 1954).

There is a listing for a "Hassan Khayyam" of 7751 Sunset Avenue, Hollywood, in the 1955 Los Angeles Area telephone directory. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, this is where Muslims conducted prayers for Eid al-Adha in August 1954 (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 1954). The location may have been a recording studio or a radio station.

In 1955, the Moslem Association rented a bungalow, a craftsmen-style house, at 5060 Fountain Avenue. The rent was \$80 per month, paid by

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<sup>3</sup> The article implicitly assumed that Iranians were Arabs. Nassib Hemaidan, the President of the Arab American Club at UCLA and Majeed Sheraidah, a member of the board of Directors of the Moslem Association of American at Los Angeles, wrote to correct this assumption to *The West Los Angeles Independent* (Hemaidan and Sheraidah, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> Shaikh Dastagir (1913–1960) was from Mysore, India, and was the brother and manager of the movie actor Sabu Dastagir (1924–1963), known as Sabu. He owned a furniture store in Van Nuys and was murdered in his home by a former employee during an attempted robbery (*Valley Times*, 24 June 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Unidentified.



Shaikh Abdullah Galedary (Galedary, 20 April 2020). This is where Eid al-Adha prayers were conducted in July 1955 (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen-News*, 28 July 1955).

In 1955, Mustafa Amier provided a hall for worship in Hollywood at the invitation of a “Pakistani man” (probably Hassan Khayyam) but the address is unspecified (Twair, 2005). The circumstances of the change of address are not clear; the reason for it probably lies in the fact that Shaikh Galedary had to leave the United States in 1956 because his visitor’s visa was expiring (see p. 14).

On the 21 July 1956, the location for the dinner celebration of Eid al-Adha was 500 N. Western Avenue (*Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1956).

### 2.2.2. Fund Raising Activities

In 1954, the Moslem Association raised \$3,000 at a fund-raising event during the Eid celebration for a down payment to buy a property (Fazel, 2009; Siam, Mustafa, 1989). On 8 December 1956, another fundraiser was organized under the title “Arabian Night” with “harem dances, desert drums and Arabian music”, in St. Nicholas Hall at 2300 West Third Street. The Acting Mayor of Los Angeles John S. Gibson<sup>6</sup> and Sheriff Eugene W. Biscailuz<sup>7</sup> were the guests of honor. Danny Thomas (1912–1991), the renowned actor, singer, and nightclub comedian of Lebanese parentage, was the master of ceremonies. A group of 100 dancers also performed (*Los Angeles Times*, 6 December 1956). At this event, a sum of \$15,000 was raised (Momand, ca 2003; 2010).

To raise additional funds, a Mosque Fund committee was constituted. Its head was the successful Long Beach restaurateur, Sultan Kutzatza, who was also the Vice-President of the Moslem Association. Other committee members were Shaikh Dastagir of Van Nuys, and Dr. Faizi Zahewi<sup>8</sup> of Santa Ana (*Los Angeles Times*, 15 January 1956; 29 February 1956).

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<sup>6</sup> John S. Gibson Jr. (1902–1987) was a powerful politician from San Pedro and a member of the Los Angeles City Council for thirty years between 1951 and 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene W. Biscailuz (1883–1969) served as Los Angeles Sheriff from 1932 to 1958. He also organized the California Highway Patrol.

<sup>8</sup> Information on Dr. Faizi Zahewi is currently not available.

### 2.2.3. Interfaith Activities

The young Association participated in a range of interfaith activities. For example, Shaikh Galedary represented the Moslem Association at the Faith Festival organized in Claremont in April 1956 (*Pomona Progress Bulletin*, 1956).

### 2.3. Profiles of the Founders

Table 2.1 lists the initial directors of the Moslem Association of America in Los Angeles and their addresses as indicated in the Articles of Incorporation. The names are arranged in alphabetical order.

Name	Street Address (current format)
Sayyad Tayyab Ali	908 Harvard St, Santa Monica, 90403
Shaikh Abdullah Galedary	609 Kelton Avenue, Los Angeles, 90024
Frank George	1338 E. Washington Blvd., Los Angeles, 90020
Hassan Khayyam	6650 Franklin Avenue, Los Angeles, 90028
Houshang Saleh Khorram	1430 Exposition Blvd, Los Angeles, 90018
Karim (Abdul Karim) Khudairi	11940 ½ Goshen Avenue, Los Angeles, 90024
Alwan Labanie	5921 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, 90028
Robert J. Lehr	3274 La Crescenta Avenue, Glendale, 91208
A. Rashid	3014 Royal Street, Los Angeles, 90007
Boyd H. Reynolds	257 S. Spring Street, Los Angeles, 90012
Mohammed Tahir	1550 West 12 <sup>th</sup> Place, Los Angeles, 90015
Shiraj Uddin	2303 West 22 <sup>nd</sup> Street, Los Angeles, 90018

**Table 2.1** *Initial Directors of the Moslem Association of American in Los Angeles*

The following section provides biographical information on the initial directors listed in alphabetical order.

#### 2.3.1. Shaikh Abdullah Galedary

Shaikh Abdullah Galedary, was born in Bandar Abbas, Iran, on 26 July 1914, the first of two sons of a moderately wealthy local merchant. His grandfather was a renowned Sufi Shaikh of the Qadiriyyah tariqa. His

father was a big importer, exporter, and shipper based in Bandar Abbas. Shaikh Abdullah Galedary and his younger brother Shaikh Hussein were educated in Farsi, and privately tutored in Classical Arabic, the Qur'an, and Hadith by a prominent local alim, Shaikh Abdul Rahim Al-Ansari. They learned English during their secondary education at a British boarding school located in Bombay (now Mumbai), India.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1930s, both brothers accompanied their father on his trip for medical treatment in Germany and then stayed there to study and seek business opportunities. During this period, they also visited New York and its famous Cotton Club.

With the Nazis in power (1933 -1945), Shaikh Abdullah was instrumental in providing German Jews with Iranian passports so that they could leave Germany. He also helped them to transfer their assets to England where his brother Shaikh Hussein was living at the time. The German authorities arrested Shaikh Abdullah and sentenced him to execution. Thanks, however, to the intervention of the Iranian embassy the German authorities agreed instead to deport him. This gesture was a favor to Reza Shah Phalavi, the then Shah of Iran, who was a close ally of Germany to oppose the plans of the Soviets and the British in India to partition Iran between themselves.

In August 1941, the British and the Soviets invaded Iran; the Soviets from the north and the British from the south. The British had assembled a naval force which seized Bandar Shahpur, Abadan, and Khorramshahr, and then the army advanced toward Tehran through Khuzistan. The invading Allies forced the abdication of the pro-German Reza Shah and they replaced him with his son Mohammed in September 1941.<sup>10</sup> Shaikh Abdullah Galedary used his connections with the Qashqai tribesmen around Bandar Abbas<sup>11</sup> to convince them not to attack the British troops. He also married a Polish

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the information on Shaikh Galedary is from Sadik Alloo's interview with Ali and Mahsheed Galedary which took place on 21 April 2020 and an email from Ali Galedary to Sadik Alloo which is dated 17 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran started on 25 August 1941. The purpose was to take over the oilfields at Abadan and ensure supplies for the Red Army fighting against the German army on the European Eastern Front.

<sup>11</sup> Bandar Abbas is an Iranian port on the Persian Gulf, which controls the narrow Strait of Hormuz. At the time, it was under British control through a convoluted manner: it was leased to Oman which was then a British Protectorate.

refugee, who became the mother of his eldest daughter Lyly. After the war, he became a member of the Iranian parliament and represented Bandar Abbas in the pro-monarchy majority.

In 1950, Shaikh Abdullah traveled to the U.S. with his second wife, Zinat, their infant daughter Mahsheed, and his daughter from his first marriage, Lyly. The family settled in Los Angeles, where a third daughter, Maggie (Margarte), was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1950. The Galedarys first lived at the Sheraton Hotel in the MacArthur Park area, and later at the Ambassador Hotel.<sup>12</sup> They then moved to Westwood, and lived in an apartment complex at 609 Kelton Avenue that Shaikh Galedary bought and managed. The family resided there from 1952 to 1956.

During this time, Shaikh Abdullah Galedary and Hassan Khayyam became acquainted. Khayyam recruited Galedary as one of the Directors of the Moslem Association and, as its imam, convinced him to donate the rent for the building at 5060 Fountain Avenue where the Moslem Association conducted its Sunday meetings.

In 1956, the Galedarys had to leave for Germany when their U.S. visa expired, and they settled in Lausanne, Switzerland. With the assistance of Hassan Khayyam, Abdullah Galedary was able to qualify for a clergyman visa for the Moslem Association, which was then operating out of its property on City Terrace Avenue. He returned to Los Angeles with his wife Zinat and daughters Lyly, Mahsheed, and Margarte in July 1959 (Du Zan, 1959), and they settled in West Los Angeles. For several years in the early 1960s, Abdullah Galedary served as the Imam of the City Terrace mosque and represented it in public ceremonies such as the raising of the Pakistan flag at City Hall (*Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1960).

Shaikh Galedary appears, in profile, in a picture taken with the Shah of Iran (Mohammed Reza Pahlavi) and his wife, Empress Farah at the Beverly

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<sup>12</sup> A famous hotel in Los Angeles that was located at 3400 Wilshire Boulevard, and close to the current Islamic Center. Built in 1921 in a Mediterranean style (Italian and Moroccan), it was home to the Coconut Grove nightclub and the host of six Oscar ceremonies. It was also the site of Robert Kennedy's assassination on the 5 June 1968. Because it was close to the Islamic Center on Vermont Avenue, the board of the Islamic Center met there every Sunday (Khaja, April 2020, Part I). It closed in 1989 and the building was demolished in 2005.

Hills hotel along with other members of the Moslem Association, such as Hassan Khayyam, Ray Jallow, and actress Mari Blanchard, a convert to Islam (see Figure 3.4).

From the second half of the 1960s onwards, professional obligations reduced Abdullah Galedary's involvement with the Muslim community, particularly after the tragic death of Hassan Khayyam on 31 October 1964. During this period, he made frequent business trips to the Gulf Region and, in particular, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. He settled permanently in Los Angeles in 1975.

Shaikh Abdullah Galedary remained as the liaison between the Islamic Center and the Iranian community, performing marriages and conducting funerals until his death in 1997. He was laid to rest in the Muslim section of the Rose Hills Memorial Park cemetery in Whittier. His instructions were that Misbah El-Dereiny, who was then the religious administrator of the Center, should perform the religious ceremony. In deference to Dr. Maher Hathout,<sup>13</sup> who was also present at the burial, Misbah El-Dereiny requested the permission of Shaikh Galedary's son, Ali, that Dr. Hathout perform the prayer in his place, a request to which Ali Galedary agreed (El-Dereiny, 27 June 2021).

### 2.3.2. Hassan Khayyam

By all accounts, Hassan Khayyam was a colorful figure and was the dynamo behind the establishment of the Moslem Association. According to the petition for U.S. Naturalization filed on 24 June 1949 in Los Angeles, Hassan Deen/Dean Khayyam was born on 5 April 1900 in Malikabad, British Colonial India, in what is now Pakistan (although his Draft Registration card records the place of birth as Afghanistan). In the 1930s, Hassan Khayyam was an entertainer and palm reader who performed in nightclubs. On 3 August 1938, the Associated Press syndicated columnist Dale Harrison reported that Khayyam had read the palms of both Harry Richman the Broadway and night-club singer; and his new wife, Hazel Forbes from Beverly Hills, a former showgirl who had inherited a fortune from her first husband. According to Khayyam's reading, they would have three chil-

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<sup>13</sup> Ali Galedary was born in December 1960. Dr. Maher Hathout's and Misbah Eldereiny's contributions are discussed in Volume II of this study.

dren (Harrison, 1938). Three years later, however Hazel Forbes obtained a divorce on the grounds of extreme cruelty; a charge that Harry Richman did not contest (*Daily News*, New York, 3 July 1941).

According to his 1942 draft registration card, Khayyam was at the time residing in Washington, D.C., and working at the Troika Restaurant which was sited at 1011 Connecticut Avenue, N.E. In 1944, he married Lucille Evan Rithner, who had been born on 28 February 1887 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She had been previously married and already had a daughter, Denise.<sup>14</sup> After the war, the couple moved to Los Angeles and resided in the Hollywood area.<sup>15</sup> In addition to playing secondary roles in several movies, Khayyam was also a fortune teller at the Beverly Hills Hotel and owned a motel (Galedary, 20 April 2020).

Before establishing the Moslem Association of America at Los Angeles, Khayyam was the founder and President of the Pakistan Association of America. In 1950, he hosted Sir Zafrulla Khan, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, who was then making an unofficial visit to the Los Angeles area, for a Thanksgiving dinner at his home on Floyd Terrace (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 1950). In 1951, the Pakistan Association celebrated Pakistan's fourth independence day with a program of speeches, music, and dance. Dr. Russell L. Caldwell, the associate professor of history at the University of Southern California (USC) and advisor to the Moslem Students at USC, gave a short speech. Hassan Khayyam read a message from the Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S., M. A. H. Ispahani. At the dinner, Karoun Tootikian and Hubert Pope presented Mogul and Arabic dances, whilst Jabbar Walli, an Iraqi student of stage production, presented a dramatic sketch (*Los Angeles Times*, 13 August, 1951). As the leader of the Pakistani community in Los Angeles, Khayyam participated in the observation of its Independence Day and its Republic Day when its flag was raised at City Hall (*Los Angeles Evening Citizen-News*, 23 March 1957; 24 March 1957; 24 March 1961).

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<sup>14</sup> Denise married Mahmoud Sherif, a Hollywood producer of Egyptian origin in a ceremony conducted at the Moslem Association of America in Los Angeles at City Terrace (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 1959)

<sup>15</sup> From 1948–1950: 3456 Floyd Terrace, 90068; 1952–1956, 6650 Franklin Avenue, 90068; 1956–1957: 1251 N. Genesee, 90046; 1958–1962, 1302 N. Sweetzer, 90069. These details are consistent with information from the Los Angeles Central Area telephone directory and with an article in the *Los Angeles Times* of 24 March 1957 which listed his address on N. Genesee.