

## ARAB AMERICANS SETTLING AFGHAN REFUGEES

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**ABSTRACT:** Arab American-led community organizations in Milwaukee and Chicago were heavily involved in Afghan refugee and parolee resettlement, an activity that was a first for some of these agencies. To a certain degree, ideas of “sameness” held by outside stakeholders (government agencies and funders), based on both groups being understood as Muslim and middle eastern, drove their support of this engagement. This project interrogates these notions of sameness, given that Afghans are not Arabs and that the two groups do not share a common language nor modern history, nor geographic proximity, and that one’s religious beliefs would seem to have little bearing on traditional refugee resettlement case management processes and procedures (e.g., finding housing, job referral, ESL, cash allowances, enrollment in medical assistance) and their objective of self-sufficiency within 8-9 months. Interviews with the leadership of five Arab American-led agencies revealed that they indeed did find a range of samenesses with Afghans, but not necessarily the ones presumed by outside stakeholders. Arab Americans and Afghans had shared experiences with the militarization of their daily lives, with the violence of external armed interventions, and with being refugees, and shared the central importance of caring about family left behind *صلة واجب الارحام* in unstable conditions, all of which fueled empathy and compassion. They also share structural positions in US society that require them to remain conscious of safe places to live and work and to learn ways to speak and act in an Islamophobic context. In matters of resettlement processes, rather than Islam as a set of shared religious beliefs being important, I found more meaningful an Islam-informed praxis of respect, hospitality, and dignity (دين) – *din* – which is both Islamic and a set of values any person can adopt. Equally important, rather than viewing Afghan women as powerless victims, as they have been consistently portrayed in the US media, and as hand-tied by children — as they are often characterized by traditional resettlement staff — the leadership and staff of these agencies were properly suspect of US

media narratives and had the respect and know-how to enhance women's agency, even with children in tow. Women were centered in their work, rather than ignored as in the traditional resettlement model, something particularly notable where women were in agency leadership (4 of 5 agencies). While much scholarly work in the fields of Arab American, SWANA, and US Muslim studies seeks to complicate and challenge stereotypical notions of sameness across "people of the east" (Said: 1978), which are derived from epistemologies that create inferior others, this study finds that rather than attributions of sameness being the problem, it is the content of the alleged sameness that's the problem. Despite meaningful differences, there is indeed much shared across Arabs and Afghans. They share similar structural positions connected to US empire, both domestically and "back home," and a highly admirable value system and Islam-infused praxis that is part of Islamic *din*, which produced more humane and effective<sup>1</sup> services, especially for women and children, than traditional resettlement agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Effectiveness is connected to an aspired goal. Using the state's goal of self-sufficiency, this study does not evaluate long-term effectiveness. It does concern effectiveness in addressing trauma, safety, dignity, family stability, and easing the psychological shocks of displacement and cultural difference.