



Uniting the *Ummah*: Strategies to Foster Solidarity with Uyghur Muslims

**DR. FARAH ISLAM
SHAHD FULATH KHAN
HALA BUCHEERI
ARZU GUL
DR. DILMURAT MAHMUT**

YAQREEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Farah Islam is a mental health advocate, educator, and researcher. She explores mental health and service access in Canada's racialized and immigrant populations using mixed methods research and orients her research and community work around breaking down the barriers of mental health stigma. Dr. Farah has served as the Co-Director of Psychospiritual Studies at Yaqeen and currently sits on the board of Yaqeen Canada. She is a student in the Scholar of Islamic Sciences 'alimiyyah program at Mathabah Institute. Dr. Farah has taught courses in Muslim mental health at the University of Toronto, Islamic Online University, and the Islamic Institute of Toronto and currently serves on the advisory committee for Nisa Homes, Ruh Care, and ABRAR Trauma and Mental Health Services.

Shahd Fulath Khan is a registered psychotherapist (qualifying) in Ontario. She currently serves as a research-intern with the Stanford Muslim Mental Health and Islamic Psychology lab. Shahd completed her MSc in Family Relations at the University of Guelph, and her BSc of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Toronto.

Hala Bucheeri is currently a clinical psychologist in a private practice in the Kingdom of Bahrain, specializing in women's health psychology and perinatal mental health (Beck Institute; Postpartum Support International). Hala graduated from the University of Toronto with an Honours Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Neuroscience and from the University of Bath with a Master of Science in Applied Clinical Psychology. Hala's research interests include exploring the mental wellbeing of refugees and cultural competency in therapy. Hala has published her findings on the evaluation of the cultural competency trainings provided to Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners (PWP) in Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services in the United Kingdom (2023). Hala has also presented her preliminary research findings on belongingness and mental illness amongst Uyghur refugees at various conferences such as the American Psychological Association Annual Convention (2022) and the Canadian Muslim Mental Health Conference (2021).

Arzu Gul is a Uyghur Muslimah born and raised in East Turkestan. She has a master's degree in Logistics and Transportation Management. She is currently a Uyghur human rights activist and educator. She tries to be a bridge between the Uyghur and other Muslim communities. Arzu Gul dedicated her effort to the Bilimhumarlar Cultural Program, where she teaches remotely and organizes over 10 classes for Uyghur children and women about Islam, tajweed, and the Uyghur language. She also manages several online mental health groups for Uyghur women.

Dr. Dilmurat Mahmut obtained his Ph.D. in Educational Studies from McGill University. Currently, he is a FRQSC postdoctoral fellow at Concordia University and a course lecturer at McGill University, Canada. His research interests include Muslim identity, education, violent extremism, and immigrant/refugee integration in the West. His publications appeared in various academic journals such as *Diaspora*, *Indigenous and Minority Education*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, *Journal for Deradicalization*, *Forum for International Research in Education*, and *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion*.

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Introduction

Connection to the community is a vital component of thriving religiosity for Muslims¹ and provides a sense of belonging that is commonly used in the field of psychology to refer to the human need for acceptance, understanding, and to be part of a greater whole.² Correlating with the Islamic concept of brotherhood and sisterhood (*ukhuwwa*) in the *ummah*, our beloved Messenger ﷺ told us, “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.”³ In this paper, we draw upon the prophetic biography (*sīra*) and how the Prophet ﷺ actualized the concept of brother/sisterhood by establishing a sense of belonging and community integration amongst the Medinan Helpers (*anṣār*) and the Meccan Emigrants (*muhājirūn*) during the migration. This paper will take the case study of Uyghur Muslims in the global diaspora, fleeing genocide in China, as a modern-day example of the *muhājirūn* who critically need integration into the greater Muslim *ummah*. This qualitative study draws upon interviews to outline the mental health challenges, loss of sense of belonging, disenfranchisement from the *ummah*, and loss of institutional and community connection experienced by Uyghur immigrants and refugees.

As will come to light from the Uyghur interviews detailed later on within this paper, voluntary charity (*ṣadaqa*) and sympathy are felt to fall short of what is expected from the *ummah*. Muslim countries’ continued alliance with and economic reliance on China, the Western Muslim community’s lack of knowledge regarding the Uyghur genocide, the lack of public outcry from the *ummah*, and an

¹ This component is referred to as “Institutional Connection” within Yaqeen’s measure of holistic religiosity BASIC. This refers to a person’s involvement in, and connection with, the Muslim community. It includes one’s feelings toward the *masjid*, Islamic centers, and other Muslim institutions. Connection also includes attendance at community events and the emotional attachment one feels towards the community. Tamer Desouky and Osman Umarji, “The Impact of Muslim Religiosity on Well-Being Outcomes,” *Yaqeen*, September 15, 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/data/reports/a-holistic-view-of-muslim-religiosity-introducing-basic>; Jihad Saafir and Osman Umarji, “How to Raise Religious Teens: A Self-Determination Theory Approach,” *Yaqeen*, October 24, 2022, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/how-to-raise-religious-teens-a-self-determination-theory-approach>.

² Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1968), 45.

³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6011; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2586; grade of authentication: *muttafaq ‘alayh* (authenticity agreed upon) according to al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

absence of concrete political action and advocacy are the major stumbling blocks that have appeared to have frayed the Uyghur community's sense of belonging to the greater Muslim community. Within this paper, power structures in some Muslim communities and mosques seem to privilege certain races over others, specifically where those who don't fit neatly into the dominant groups (i.e., Arab, South Asian) are relegated to the margins (e.g., Black, revert, Malaysian, Bosnian, Afghani, Rohingya, Uyghur, and many others). The prophetic model of the mosque will be explored, presenting it as not only a place of worship but as a space for community integration, a shelter for the unhoused, a hospital, and a place of education, among other roles. From this, a parallel will be drawn highlighting the central role of the mosque today in the community integration of Uyghur immigrants and refugees. Finally, recommendations will be presented for how this prophetic model of community empathy and solidarity and the holistic role of the mosque can be revived in our *ummah* today, allowing the Muslim community to serve as the scaffolding upon which Uyghurs are able to restore their sense of belonging.

Vignette

Arzu diligently reached out to Muslim community members and leaders for years, asking their support of the protest against the Uyghur genocide. She tirelessly emailed and phoned every imam, shaykh, or scholar she could find but only received a lukewarm response at best. Finally, it was the day of the protest. Arzu stepped off the public transit bus and scanned the crowd gathering in the public square. While she saw around one hundred of her fellow Uyghur sisters and brothers in attendance, holding posters and banners, she counted just two Muslims from the larger Muslim community at the rally. She picked up her banner and joined the demonstration. While she was protesting, a man came to her and said, "Al-salām 'alaykum, Sister." Arzu returned his greeting, hopeful that another member from the greater Muslim community had come to join the protest. Instead, he barked, "Sister, why are you protesting against China? Why not Israel, the US, or India?" Arzu could feel the hot tears streaming down her face as she yelled back at him, "Millions of innocent Uyghur Muslims are in Chinese concentration

camps! China is carrying out a Uyghur genocide!” The man offered no reply, but instead, snapped a picture of the protesting crowd before walking away.

The first author first learned about Arzu’s Uyghur community advocacy when they met many years ago while volunteering for a Muslim sisters’ organization. Since then, they have worked on several projects together, including organizing political rallies and community education events, and their children have attended the same Islamic school. Arzu recounted this story in preparation for this paper; she said that, after hearing this man’s harsh reproach, “A part of me gave up.”

Uyghurs in context

Approximately 13 million Uyghurs, the majority of whom are Muslim and belong to Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, reside in China’s northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or East Turkestan as it is referred to by the Uyghurs. Muslim Turkic tribes who lived in the Uyghur homeland embraced Islam in the fourth/tenth century and have resided there for centuries.⁴ For decades, the Chinese government has attempted to repress and colonize East Turkestan, seeing Muslim identity as a threat to communist power.⁵ Since 2017, Uyghurs have been facing a brutal genocide at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party, who have sought to eliminate Uyghur culture by forcefully assimilating Uyghurs into mainstream Chinese culture.⁶ Millions⁷ of Muslim Uyghur men and women have been locked away in forced labor concentration camps, where they endure a humiliating and torturous process of “re-education” designed to rid them of their faith.⁸ Severe religious repression has been enforced; acts of worship such as praying, reading

⁴ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84.

⁵ Toqa Badran and Aydin Anwar, “A Response To Habib Ali Al-Jifri’s Comments On Uyghurs,” Muslim Matters, 2020, <https://muslimmatters.org/2020/05/13/a-response-to-habib-ali-al-jifris-comments-on-uyghurs/>.

⁶ Edward Wong and Chris Buckley, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide,’” *New York Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>; Samir Sweida-Metwally, “Spending Ethically for Justice: A Muslim Response to the Uyghur Genocide,” *Yaqeen*, 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/spending-ethically-for-justice-a-muslim-response-to-the-uyghur-genocide>.

⁷ While reports suggest that one million Uyghur men and women have been imprisoned, this number is contested by some Uyghur community members and activists who claim that this is part of the Chinese government’s attempt to suppress the real scale of oppression. Uyghur community members and activists estimate that there could be up to 35 million Uyghurs in concentration camps.

⁸ Eva Dou and Erin Cunningham, “Who Are the Uyghurs, and What’s Happening to Them in China?” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/02/11/china-uighurs-genocide-xinjiang/>.

Qur'an, and fasting in Ramadan, have been outlawed.⁹ There are reports of unimaginable brutality ranging from organ harvesting¹⁰ to mass sterilization¹¹ and gang rape.¹² As one participant in our research shared,

Young [Uyghur] men became the target of hate and terror. A lot of them were pious... They just wanted to follow their faith... But the [Chinese] state began to conflate religious appearance and violent action. Young men became criminalized and began disappearing. Families were shattered in a lot of ways. It had a larger impact than just the person who was detained... [The Chinese government] talked about Islam as a disease—a virus or cancer spreading hate, which needed to be rooted out. In order to build the camp system, you have to dehumanize the population, and thinking of [Uyghur Muslims] as terrorists enabled them to do that.

In response, tens of thousands of Uyghur Muslims have fled China. Many have settled in over 50 countries around the world. The largest numbers have settled in other ethnically Turkic countries, such as Kazakhstan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while smaller populations have migrated to the US (8,000-10,000),¹³ Canada (less than 2,000),¹⁴ Australia (5,000-10,000),¹⁵ Sweden (2,000),¹⁶ Germany (750), and other countries.¹⁷

⁹ “Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang,” Human Rights Watch, April 11, 2005, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/04/11/devastating-blows/religious-repression-uighurs-xinjiang>.

¹⁰ Ewelina U. Ochab, “United Nations Concerned About Organ Harvesting In China,” *Forbes*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2021/07/08/united-nations-concerned-about-organ-harvesting-in-china/?sh=7e514da942dd>.

¹¹ “China Forcing Birth Control on Uighurs to Suppress Population, Report Says,” *BBC*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53220713>.

¹² Ivan Watson and Rebecca Wright, “Allegations of Shackled Students and Gang Rape Inside China’s Detention Camps,” *CNN*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/18/asia/china-xinjiang-teacher-abuse-allegations-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

¹³ Uyghur American Association, <https://www.uyghuraa.org/latestnews>.

¹⁴ “Census Profile, 2016 Census – Canada [Country] and Canada [Country],” *Statistics*, February 8, 2017, www12.statcan.gc.ca. This is the number of “self-reported” Uyghurs in Canada and is most likely underreported.

¹⁵ Biwa Kwan, “Uighur Abuse: Australia Urged to Impose Sanctions on China,” September 18, 2018, www.sbs.com.au.

¹⁶ Bertil Lintner, “Where the Uighurs Are Free to Be,” *Asia Times*, October 31, 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/10/where-the-uighurs-are-free-to-be/>.

¹⁷ Yitzhak Shichor, “Nuisance Value: Uyghur Activism in Germany and Beijing–Berlin Relations,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (2013): 612–29.

The importance of religious community post-migration

The migration and resettlement process is often one of disruption, grief, and uncertainty. When this is compounded by traumatic events such as the threat of torture and genocide, mental health issues like distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) become pressing concerns.¹⁸ For example, one participant in our research shared how the time after migration “is not post-trauma, but rather ongoing trauma” as Uyghurs grapple with news of their loved ones being tortured and detained. Even post-migration, Uyghurs have to contend with the constant threat of surveillance and censorship, which has eroded trust internally within the Uyghur community. One participant explained, “There is lots of suspicion within [the Uyghur] community. Some are afraid that Uyghurs are informants... [As a result] people become more and more isolated.”

As is common in the migrant experience, a deficit of social capital is felt amongst the Uyghur diaspora. However, to combat this, research has shown that being part of a religious community often provides congregants with a sense of group solidarity, shared values and identity, validation of beliefs, and a sense of belonging.¹⁹ Following loss, shared communal religiosity can be a protective factor that helps people through the grieving process, unlike personal religiosity, which

¹⁸ Jutta Lindert, Ondine S. von Ehrenstein, Stefan Priebe, Andreas Mielck, and Elmar Brähler, “Depression and Anxiety in Labor Migrants and Refugees: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” *Social Science Medicine* 69 (2009): 246–57; Mina Fazel, Jeremy Wheeler, and John Danesh, “Prevalence of Serious Mental Disorder in 7000 Refugees Resettled in Western Countries: A Systematic Review,” *Lancet*, 365 (2005): 1309–14; Zachary Steel, Tien Chey, Derrick Silove, Claire Marnane, Richard A. Bryant, and Mark van Ommeren, “Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events with Mental Health Outcomes among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *JAMA* 302 (2009): 537–49; Laurence J. Kirmayer, Lavanya Narasiah, Marie Munoz, Meb Rashid, Andrew G. Ryder, Jaswant Guzder, Ghayda Hassan, Cécile Rousseau, and Kevin Pottie, “Common Mental Health Problems in Immigrants and Refugees: General Approach in Primary Care,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal (journal de l'Association médicale canadienne)* 183, no. 12 (2011): E959–E967, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.090292>.

¹⁹ Anthony P. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Hansong Zhang, Joshua N. Hook, Jennifer E. Farrell, David K. Mosher, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, and Don E. Davis, “The Effect of Ideological Homogeneity on Religious Belonging and Meaning: The Role of Intellectual Humility,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10 (2018): 72–78.

does not have the same impact.²⁰ Communal religious participation enhances social ties, social support networks, and increases the likelihood of forming friendships.²¹ It also offers a space of shared language, culture, and ethnicity. For these reasons, finding a sense of belonging within one's religious community post-migration can accelerate integration and prevent mental health issues.²²

In addition to facilitating the accrual of social capital, many places of worship and faith-based organizations can also offer vital services to newcomers, ranging from food banks, housing assistance, language training, and job search assistance.²³

The majority of studies cited above that found a positive relationship between religiosity and sense of belonging measured communal religiosity, where a person's faith was not confined to their private life but was rather connected to the greater religious community. Supporting such findings, Yaqeen Institute's analysis of different profiles of religiosity and their connection to mental health also found that confining one's religious life to the personal and private domain (e.g., engaging only in individual ritual acts of worship like prayer and reading Qur'an in one's own home) was not associated with mental health benefits.²⁴ In contrast, those who engaged with their faith comprehensively through personal worship and connecting to the greater *ummah* experienced the full mental health benefits of religiosity as they actualized Islam as a holistic way of life.

²⁰ Eva-Maria Stelzer, Roman Palitsky, Emily N. Hernandez, Eli G. Ramirez, and Mary-Frances O'Connor, "The Role of Personal and Communal Religiosity in the Context of Bereavement," *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* 48, no. 1 (2002): 64–80.

²¹ Christopher G. Ellison and Linda K. George, "Religious Involvement, Social Ties and Social Support in a Southeastern Community," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 1 (1994): 46–61; Robert Wuthnow, "Religious Involvement and Status-Bridging Social Capital," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 669–84.

²² William Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1955).

²³ Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2000); R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, eds., *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998); Stephanie Nawyn, "Faithfully Providing Refuge: The Role of Religious Organizations in Refugee Assistance and Advocacy," Working Paper 15, *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies* (San Diego: University of California, 2005); Jessica Eby, Erika Iverson, Jenifer Smyers, and Erol Kekic, "The Faith Community's Role in Refugee Resettlement in the United States," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 586–605.

²⁴ Osman Umarji and Tamer Desouky, "T. BASIC Chapter 3," (forthcoming).

Research has found that for Uyghurs in the diaspora, Islam can be a source of deep meaning, empowerment, and identity.²⁵ For Uyghurs who have been experiencing religious persecution for so many years, reconnecting with a Muslim community post-migration can be critical to the health of their faith.

The *ummah*: Creating a community of belonging

In our faith, the concept of the *ummah* plays a central role. The *ummah* is a community of believers who all share the same purpose: to worship Allah. This community of believers transcends the boundaries of nation-state, ethnicity, culture, race, and language. As Allah tells us in the Qur'an, "And certainly this *ummah* of yours is one *ummah*, and I am your Lord and Cherisher. Therefore fear Me and no other."²⁶

Belonging to a greater community of faith is a vital part of our religion. As the 'verse of brotherhood' reminds us, "The believers are but one brotherhood (*ikhwa*), so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy."²⁷ Significantly, we know that the bonds of brotherhood don't come to fruition passively. In fact, in our faith, believers are encouraged to take an *active* role in creating community and facilitating others' sense of belonging. For example, our beloved Prophet ﷺ advised us, "If there are three of you, do not let two privately converse to the exclusion of the other." Moreover, in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, "Do not let two privately converse to the exclusion of one, for that will hurt a believer and Allah Almighty hates for a believer to be hurt."²⁸

There is no greater example of the active integration of brothers and sisters into the *ummah* than in the story of migration (*hijra*) to Medina. In this beautiful moment within the *sīrah*, the overwhelming generosity of the helpers and residents of Medina (*anṣār*) towards the emigrants from Mecca (*muhājirūn*) entering their city

²⁵ Beydulla, Mettursun. "Experiences of Uyghur migration to Turkey and the United States: Issues of religion, law, society, residence, and citizenship." In *Migration and Islamic Ethics*, pp. 174-195. Brill, 2019.

²⁶ Qur'an 23:52.

²⁷ Qur'an 49:10.

²⁸ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2825.

is staggering. In what follows, we will draw upon this model of integration as we examine religiosity and its impact on the sense of belonging and mental health of the global Uyghur diaspora.

Reviving the *sunnah* of active integration

In the most phenomenal example of active *ukhuwwa*, the Prophet ﷺ called upon his *umma* to establish official bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood (*mu'ākhā*) between the *anṣār* and the *muhājirūn* after their arrival in Medina.²⁹ The bonds ran so deep that it was initially legislated that they could even inherit from one another.

³⁰ Allah extols the generosity of the *anṣār* in the Qur'an:

And [also for] those who were settled in Medina and [adopted] the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul—it is those who will be the successful.³¹

The *muhājirūn* were so moved by the *anṣār*'s overwhelming acts of generosity that they remarked to the Prophet ﷺ:

O Messenger of Allah! We have not seen a people more willing to sacrifice when having a lot, nor more patient when having a little than the people whom we are staying amongst...³²

The *muhājir* Sa'ad b. al-Rabī' recounts,

When the emigrants reached Medina, Allah's Messenger ﷺ established the bond of fraternity (*mu'ākhā*) between 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Awf and Sa'ad b. al-Rabī'. Sa'ad said to 'Abd al-Raḥmān, "I am the richest of all the *anṣār*, so I want to divide my property (between us), and I have two wives,

²⁹ "The Messenger of Allah ﷺ established an alliance [of brotherhood] between the Emigrants and the Helpers in our house. He was asked: 'Did not the Messenger of Allah ﷺ say: "There is no alliance in Islam?"' He replied: 'The Messenger of Allah ﷺ established an alliance between the Emigrants and the Helpers in our house.' He said [it] twice or thrice." *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 2926.

³⁰ This ruling was later abrogated by Qur'an 33:6.

³¹ Qur'an 59:9.

³² *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2487.

so see which of the two you like and tell me, so that I may divorce her, and when she finishes her prescribed period (i.e., *idda*) of post-divorce, then marry her.” ‘Abd al-Raḥmān said, “May Allah bless your family and property for you. Where is your market?” So they showed him the Qaynuqā’ market. He [went there and] returned with a profit in the form of dried yogurt and butter. He continued going [to the market] until one day he came bearing the traces of a yellow powder. The Prophet ﷺ asked, “What is this?” He replied, “I got married.” The Prophet ﷺ asked, “How much dowry (*mahr*) did you give her?” He replied, “I gave her a datestone of gold or a gold piece equal to the weight of a date-stone.” [The narrator, Ibrahim, was in doubt as to which was correct.]³³

In common vernacular we talk about the generous person as being one who would give the shirt off their back for another. Yet, this incredible act of generosity by the *anṣārī* Sa’d goes far beyond this. It’s also a beautiful account of the *muhājir*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān being grateful for the generosity of his brother but seeking means to establish himself on his own.

In another narration, it is related, the *anṣār* said [to the Prophet ﷺ], “Please divide the date-palm trees between us and them [i.e., emigrants].” The Prophet ﷺ said, “No.” The *anṣār* said, “Let them [i.e., the emigrants] do the labor for us in the gardens and share the date-fruits with us.” The emigrants said, “We accepted this.”³⁴

Such is the power of generosity when we give solely for the sake of Allah. Here, the *anṣār* were ready to give of their most coveted livelihood—their date-palm trees—and again, the Prophet ﷺ appreciated the offer but insisted that the *muhājirūn* should work and strive for their living. The Prophet ﷺ, in his profound wisdom, knew the power of creating a community that was built on social connectedness and, at the same time, a community that offered real opportunity for engagement for the emigrants. Being given the opportunity to work and make an honest living gives people honor and dignity and is a sentiment we can see exemplified in calls for a living wage and skills-bridging programs for

³³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3780.

³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3782.

immigrant and refugee populations today.³⁵ Research has shown how being engaged in “meaningful work,” where a newcomer has the opportunity to put the skills they acquired prior to migration to use in their host country, positively impacts mental health outcomes.³⁶ Most people desire productivity and a chance to meaningfully contribute to their society, which in turn creates a sense of dignity and belonging.³⁷

With his deep empathy and foresight, the Prophet ﷺ also made a refuge in the mosque for the *muhājirūn* who were unable to establish themselves in Medina by securing a home or getting married, choosing instead to live a life devoted to worship and spiritual service. These Companions were known as the ‘People of the Platform’ (*ahl al-ṣuffa*) or the Companions of the Platform (*aṣḥāb al-ṣuffa*). Abū Hurayra (may Allah have mercy on him) commented on their poverty, “I saw seventy of *aṣḥāb al-ṣuffa* in such a condition that none of them had complete dress for himself. Each one of them had one sheet that he tied up with his neck. Some of them had their sheets reach near their ankles but others’ sheets reached just below their knees. Each of them used to hold the partition of his sheet with his hand lest his body be exposed.”³⁸

Our beloved Prophet ﷺ cared deeply for the *ahl al-ṣuffa* and would give them charity and feed them or regularly encourage his Companions to do so. Caring for those in disadvantaged situations was a communal effort. Some Companions

³⁵ Ruth Marie Wilson, Patricia Landolt, Yogendra Shakya, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Z. Zahoorunissa, Darren Pham, Felix Cabrera, Sherine Dahy, and Marie-Pier Joly, *Working Rough, Living Poor: Employment and Income Insecurities Faced by Racialized Groups in the Black Creek Area and their Impacts on Health* (Toronto: Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, 2011).

³⁶ Farah Islam, Nazilla Khanlou, and Hala Tamim, “Maybe Once I Find a Good Job, I Will Be Better: Seeking Mental Healthcare in Little Bangladesh, Toronto, Canada,” *Journal of Concurrent Disorders* 2, no. 1 (2020): 35–55.

³⁷ Living under the constant stress of precarious employment and income insecurity has severe consequences for families and children after migration, including: mental health issues, chronic exhaustion, higher levels of cortisol, hypertension, coronary heart disease, and others. Over time, prolonged exposure to income insecurity results in deteriorating health and disempowerment for immigrant and refugee families. Socioeconomic status has been found to be the single most powerful predictor of human health and development at every stage of life. Boyce, W. Thomas. *The orchid and the dandelion: Why sensitive people struggle and how all can thrive*. Pan MacMillan, 2019, pp. 134–35; Wilson et al., “Working Rough, Living Poor.”

³⁸ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2477.

would bring food, while others offered the nourishment of knowledge by teaching members of the *ahl al-ṣuffa* the Qur'an and how to write.³⁹

Living in the Prophet's Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Nabawī*) allowed members of the *ahl al-ṣuffa*, such as Abu Hurayra (rA), to rise to great prominence and dignity because of their closeness to the Prophet ﷺ and ability to transmit his *sunnah*. In this prophetic vision of the mosque and *umma*, everyone had the chance to participate and belong. The Prophet ﷺ even worked judiciously to provide the *ahl al-ṣuffa* opportunities to give *ṣadaqa* themselves,⁴⁰ as he knew the transformative effect of the power of giving.⁴¹

Taking this prophetic framework for integration and community building as inspiration for the current study, it's clear that expanding access to our mosques will offer newcomers a place of refuge, engagement, and support. Initiatives like resume workshops, parenting support circles, food banks, soup kitchens, and volunteer schemes would provide people with opportunities to give back to the community and help actualize the prophetic vision of the mosque and *umma* today. Creating newcomer family matching programs or “buddy systems” within the mosque, where a newly arrived family can be matched with an already established family in the community, is also a powerful way for new families to build their social capital and increase their sense of belonging.⁴² There are numerous programs like these offered through settlement agencies and Christian faith communities. Research has found that the Uyghur diasporic community grapples with the anxieties of acculturation. Many Uyghur parents worry that their children will become alienated from Islam after migration and feel their efforts to foster a sense of Uyghur cultural and religious Islamic identity are sabotaged by

³⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 602.

⁴⁰ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2477, grade: rigorously authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*).

⁴¹ Carolyn Schwartz, Janice Bell Meisenhelder, Yunsheng Ma, and George Reed, “Altruistic Social Interest Behaviors Are Associated with Better Mental Health,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65, no. 5 (2003): 778–85.

⁴² Shireen Salti, “The Impact of Together Project Welcome Groups on Government-Assisted Refugee Social Capital,” 2021; Celine de Richouffitz, “From Research to Outreach to Action: Community-Based Approaches to the Integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Montreal,” *Samuel Center for Social Connectedness*, 2018, www.socialconnectedness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Community-based-approaches-to-the-integration-of-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-Montreal-1.pdf.

the influences of the dominant culture and prevailing worldview.⁴³ Integrating Uyghur families into the mosque and the broader *ummah* is one way to counteract these ideological forces.

Methods

For this qualitative study, Uyghur Muslims residing in the global diaspora were interviewed to explore the following research questions:

- 1) What post-migratory settlement and mental health challenges do Uyghur Muslims face and how do they cope?
- 2) Do Uyghur Muslims feel a sense of community and belonging post-migration?
- 3) What recommendations do Uyghur Muslims have on what needs to be done (e.g., programs, initiatives) to nurture their mental health and well-being as they try to cope with ongoing trauma post-migration?

Sampling

Participants were recruited through social media and via outreach from Uyghur organizations and stakeholders. Recruitment and data collection lasted for 6 weeks from June-July 2020 (during the COVID-19 pandemic).⁴⁴ Convenience sampling and snowballing recruitment took place as the Uyghur population was hard to

⁴³ Dilmurat Mahmut, "Conflicting Perceptions of Education in Canada: The Perspectives of Well-Educated Muslim Uyghur Immigrants," *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education* 15, no. 1 (2021): 34-46; Dilmurat Mahmut and Edmund Waite, "Lost in Translation: Exploring Uyghur Identity in Canada, Taboo," *The Journal of Culture and Education* 20, no. 1 (2021): 173-91,

<https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1105&context=taboo>; Rebecca Clothey and Brian McCommons, "Uyghur Students in Higher Education in the USA: Trauma and Adaptation Challenges," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 16, no. 2 (2022): 106-18.

⁴⁴ The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participants self-identified their ethnicity as Uyghur and/or Uyghur-mixed. As the psychological scales employed in this study have not previously been used with the Uyghur population, scale items and wording were adapted accordingly to make the survey comprehensible and relevant to participants. At the end of the survey, all participants were given the chance to either donate \$10 CAD to Darman Foundation, a Canadian-based organization that supports Uyghur immigrants and refugees; receive an Amazon e-gift card worth \$10 CAD; receive a Starbucks e-gift card worth \$10 CAD; have \$10 CAD sent to their bank accounts using e-transfer; or decline any of those options.

reach. As a consequence, selection bias is likely present in this study because of the sampling and recruitment methodology.

Five men and five women who had experience working with the Uyghur diaspora were interviewed.⁴⁵ Interviewees included 7 Uyghurs who were strong advocates for their local communities and 3 non-Uyghurs who were frontline workers with Uyghur immigrants. All interviews were conducted in English, and Uyghur-speaking community volunteers verbally translated the survey during the group Zoom call interview, when needed. These participants were interviewed following a semi-structured interview guide. Participants were asked about a range of topics, including specific challenges they were facing post-settlement, causes of low mood in their life, support-seeking behaviors, and their feeling of belonging in their host country. Participants were asked about their coping strategies with traumatic memories of being in East Turkestan and how ties to their now-local religious community affected their sense of belonging. Lastly, Uyghurs were also asked to brainstorm what community and government programs need to be established to support Uyghur communities. Interviews with non-Uyghur activists revolved around their specific experiences working with the Uyghur community. In order to ensure rigor, member checking⁴⁶ was carried out with members of the Uyghur diasporic community in order to ensure that the results and interpretations of the findings resonated with their lived experience. In addition to this, self-reflexivity and positionality were reflected upon by the researchers (Appendix A). Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Interviews were carried out using various platforms of the participants' choice, such as WebEx, Google Meet, Zoom, email, or WhatsApp.

⁴⁶ Margarete Sandelowski, "The Problem of Rigor in Qualitative Research," *Advances in Nursing Science* 8, no. 3 (1986): 27–37.

⁴⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Results

Qualitative findings

During a 2019 Muslim mental health conference, Dr. Zain Shamoon, a mental health educator and advocate explained, “Genocide happens at two levels: it happens with the eradication of a people *and* with the eradication of their stories. There is healing in witnessing someone’s story and not needing to interrupt it.”⁴⁸

As numbers do not give us the complete picture, we will attempt to convey the lived experiences of the Uyghur diaspora in their own words to honor their stories through the interviews gathered.

Degrees of isolation

Uyghur participants and stakeholders spoke about the deepening degrees of isolation faced by the Uyghur diaspora as a result of being cut off from their families and loved ones. As one Uyghur settled in the US explained, “I can’t have childhood friends and relatives around me.” In addition, Uyghurs post-migration also contend with the constant threat of surveillance, which leads to mistrust of their fellow Uyghurs living abroad, fraying their social networks and sense of safety. One non-Uyghur ally who works with the United Nations explained this loss of trust further, “When someone new shows up, they ask why they are here? What do they want? There’s a real suspicion that they have for one another. There are instances of Uyghurs who report back to China.”

At another level, and in line with the focus of this paper, Uyghurs spoke about feeling abandoned by the non-Uyghur Muslim community. One Uyghur in Canada shared,

I feel unsupported because we want to see [support] from our Muslim community... at least make supplicatory prayers (*du‘ā*) for us, even if they

⁴⁸ “Putting In the Work: Service and Advocacy for Mental Health in Muslim Communities,” 11th Annual Muslim Mental Health Conference, April 4–6, 2019.

don't raise money financially. Our issue is that we don't [get] mention[ed]... in our Muslim community. Not many people talk about us. They forget to mention us while making *du'ā*'s. Our issue is not about a hundred people or a thousand people. Like when there was an attack in New Zealand, the number was 56 people, but we still remember them, mention them, talk about them. But millions of Uyghur are at risk... and losing their Islamic belief... How can you ignore it?

Beyond the Muslim community, participants also spoke about their experiences with discrimination, xenophobia, and alienation in their host country. As one non-Uyghur United Nations worker explained, “Usually when people look at Uyghurs, they think, ‘They don't speak English’ or ‘They look different.’”

Multi-level abandonment by the wider Muslim community

The feeling that the wider Muslim community had failed to offer a place of belonging to the Uyghur diaspora was widely discussed amongst participants. Taking a multi-level perspective of discrimination,⁴⁹ the experiences of abandonment and disenfranchisement from the wider Muslim community were seen to be multi-layered, occurring at the micro, meso, and macro levels (individual, community, and systemic levels). Micro-level abandonment in what were perceived as empty words of condolence (given the lack of involvement in political advocacy against the Uyghur genocide) was reported to have been experienced at the individual level during daily interactions with the wider Muslim community. As one Uyghur participant in the US remarked, “Either most of [the wider Muslim community] don't know [what is happening] or just express their sympathy.”

At the meso-level, participants reported that they or Uyghurs they had worked with experienced abandonment within the mosque. This came in the form of being left out of communal *du'ā*'s where other Muslims under oppression were mentioned to the exclusion of the Uyghurs, a lack of welcoming in the mosque, and a lack of mosque fundraising for Uyghur causes. While participants spoke about the

⁴⁹ Coretta Phillips, “Institutional Racism and Ethnic Inequalities: An Expanded Multilevel Framework,” *Journal of Social Policy* 40, no. 1 (2011): 173–92.

ever-present threat of Chinese surveillance that has created suspicion and mistrust between members of the Uyghur community, at the same time, the Uyghur community was often seen as the only source of solace and a safe space to share grief. As one Uyghur in Canada recounted,

Before the pandemic we used to get together once a week in the Toronto Uyghur mosque. It is also a cultural center. We get together and try to share stories with each other or visit community members personally and spend time with them and share common experiences to relieve ourselves. That is moral support. We pray a lot right now because we are helpless and powerless, and the reaction from the outside world for the challenges we are facing is a great disappointment. So, what do you do? We can't change the situation, and evil continues. The only thing you can do is talk within your own community who understands and prays and consoles one another. That's the only moral support you get from your own community, or giving more to communities that live in desperate places. Basically, we don't get support from anywhere and are alone with ourselves. A good word is comforting but doesn't solve the problem.

It is the right of the oppressed and disenfranchised that we spend our wealth upon them, as our sustenance (*rizq*) is given to us by our Provider and Sustainer, which we have merely been temporarily entrusted with. Giving our wealth to support Uyghur causes and boycott goods that involve Uyghur slave labor are all attempts to spend our wealth more ethically to uphold our Islamic duty of radical altruism.⁵⁰ It was also discovered that multi-level disenfranchisement has even left Uyghurs feeling distrustful of Islamic philanthropic organizations who are working for the Uyghur cause. For example, one participant shared how Uyghurs are “less trusting of charity organizations because it is unclear if the money is going to the right place or not.” There was a sense that although Islamic charity organizations may profess to support Uyghur causes, many Uyghurs did not feel that the money was actually going to Uyghur causes. This may point to a lack of bridge-building, Uyghur community buy-in, and Uyghurs holding positions of power within Muslim charitable organizations.

⁵⁰ Sweida-Metwally, “Spending Ethically for Justice.”

Finally, at the macro-level, Uyghurs spoke about political abandonment, where governments of Muslim countries allied themselves with China and did not speak out on the atrocities being committed. Muslims living in the Global North were also seen to have displayed this apathy, leading to political inaction and lack of outcry. One Uyghur in Canada expressed their dismay,

There is no outrage or outcry or anger from the Muslim community in Canada. These reactions came from Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh. There was no reaction from Turkey... the Turkish government does not allow 'false' propaganda against China, so even Turkish media [is] filtering out information. Saudi [Arabia is] receiving aid from China through [the] Belt and Road Initiative. [All of this is] basically the totally opposite of what the Holy Qur'an teaches. The Muslim countries are selling out their Uyghur brothers and sisters for money.

The Muslim “Other” and empathy

In order to gain a better understanding of the realities shared in our participant interviews, it proves necessary to “unpack the invisible knapsack of privilege”⁵¹ and examine the interplay of power structures and racism that may be behind the isolation and abandonment experienced by sections of the Uyghur community. It's no secret that anti-blackness exists within our community, both historically and in the present-day,⁵² and has been called anti-black Islamophobia.⁵³ Muslim “othering” is also present within our communities, where interlocking power structures privilege certain races over others;⁵⁴ those who don't fit neatly into the dominant groups (i.e., Arab, South Asian)⁵⁵ are relegated to the margins (e.g.,

⁵¹ McIntosh, Peggy. "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack." (1990), pp. 29–34.

⁵² Samia Errazzouki, “Between the ‘Yellow-Skinned Enemy’ and the ‘Black-Skinned Slave’: Early Modern Genealogies of Race and Slavery in Sadian Morocco,” *The Journal of North African Studies* (2021): 1–11; Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mariam Durrani, “#BlackOutEid: Resisting Anti-Blackness in Digital Muslim Life,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (2021): 298–303.

⁵³ Delice Mugabo, “On Rocks and Hard Places: A Reflection on Anti-Blackness in Organizing against Islamophobia,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 159–83; Fatimah Jackson-Best, “Black Muslims in Canada: A Systematic Review,” 2019, <https://blackmusliminitiative.ca/bmic%3A-systematic-review>.

⁵⁴ For example, the rank ordering of “Arab Muslims” as superior to all other Muslims is termed ‘Arab chauvinism’ by some scholars. See: Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁵⁵ Pasha-Zaidi, Nausheen, Meg A. Warren, Yvonne El Ashmawi, and Neneh Kowai-Bell. "Promoting allyship among south Asian and Arab Muslims toward black and Latino/a Muslims in American Islamic centers." Toward a Positive

Uyghur, Black, revert, Chinese Hui Muslims, Bosnian, Rohingya, and countless others).

The presence of such hierarchies of class and “Muslim-ness”⁵⁶ can arguably be seen as evidence of neocolonialism, where we have invented new ways to categorize the warring factions of the in-group versus the out-group⁵⁷ or “other” within our own communities.⁵⁸ As the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkinson writes, “The human impulse to create hierarchies runs across societies and cultures.”⁵⁹ She also explains,

It was in the making of the New World that Europeans became white, African black, and everyone else yellow, red, or brown. It was in the making of the New World that humans were set apart on the basis of what they looked like, identified solely in contrast to one another, and ranked to form a caste system based on a new concept of race.⁶⁰

However, in order to embody the prophetic virtues of empathy, compassion, and generosity, it is vital that we transcend this egocentric (*nafsi*) framework of existence and embody the prophetic wisdom that “None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”⁶¹ Indeed, the health of a society can be measured via its level of social capital, which is a value or asset of a society that measures the level of social connectedness in the group and is connected to the level of empathy members of the society convey towards one another.⁶² As our

Psychology of Islam and Muslims: Spirituality, struggle, and social justice (2021): 307-331.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72606-5_14. Further hierarchies exist within this, with Arabs being considered superior in “Muslimness” to South Asians. Finer classifications within these groupings also exist based on shadeism (anti-blackness within one’s race), class, language, etc. For example, Pakistani Muslims may be deemed greater in Muslimness than Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi Muslims (because Urdu-speaking Pakistanis have a language that more closely resembles Arabic and are generally lighter skinned, among other reasons).

⁵⁶ Jeanine Elif Dağyeli, Claudia Ghrawi, and Ulrike Freitag, eds., “Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds: Religion and Society” in *The Context of the Global* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 299.

⁵⁷ Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House, 2020.

⁵⁸ Jean-Louis Triaud, “Giving a Name to Islam South of the Sahara: An Adventure in Taxonomy,” *The Journal of African History* 55, no. 1 (2014): 3–15.

⁵⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 67.

⁶⁰ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 53.

⁶¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 13; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 45, grade: authenticity agreed upon (*muttafaq ‘alayh*) according to al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

⁶² Jayant Venkatanathan, Evangelos Karapanos, Vassilis Kostakos, and Jorge Gonçalves, “A Network Science Approach to Modeling and Predicting Empathy,” in *Proceedings of the 2013 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining* (2013): 1395–1400; Pat Dolan, “Social Support, Empathy,

beloved Prophet ﷺ told us, “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.”⁶³ This is a call for radical empathy. While empathy calls on people to see the world through another’s eyes, *radical empathy* asks people to take this one step further to actually create change and work towards social justice, even if it is to the detriment of our economic or social prosperity.⁶⁴ As Allah reminds us in the Qur’an, “You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives. Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly—if you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do.”⁶⁵ The Prophetic vision of the *ummah* is one of flourishing social capital, where every believer feels an intimate bond with their Creator and a deep sense of connectedness with their brothers and sisters.

In contrast to this, empathetic distancing occurs when we perceive the “other” as very different from ourselves and so a stumbling block to the development of empathy is formed. Some scholars have even contended that we are only able to fully empathically comprehend someone when we perceive them as being like us.⁶⁶ Consequently, most of us only empathize with someone who looks, talks, thinks, and acts sufficiently like ourselves. However, our beloved Messenger ﷺ reminded us, “A believer to a believer is like the bricks of a wall, enforcing each other.”⁶⁷ Thus, despite our differences, we can and must bridge the empathic divide through introspection and intentional effort.

Social Capital and Civic Engagement: Intersecting Theories for Youth Development,” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 17 no. 3 (2002): 255–67.

⁶³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6011; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2586, grade: *muttafaq ‘alayh* according to al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

⁶⁴ Terri Givens, *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021).

⁶⁵ Qur’an 4:135.

⁶⁶ See: Lynne Layton, “Racial Identities, Racial Enactments, and Normative Unconscious Processes,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 237–69; Lynne M. Jacobs, “Learning to Love White Shame and Guilt: Skills for Working as a White Therapist in a Racially Divided Country,” *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 9, no. 4 (2014): 297–312.

⁶⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no.481; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2585.

Recommendations: Becoming a community of conscience and compassion

As believers, we are urged to engage in constant self-reformation (*iṣlāḥ*) to better ourselves. Through this process of self-interrogation, we often uncover our blindspots, shadows of hypocrisy, or seeds of arrogance and oppression, and must work to rectify such weaknesses of the heart. This is indeed what striving against the soul (*jihād-al-naḥs*) is all about. As Sufyān al-Thawrī (may Allah have mercy on him) said, “I never dealt with anything more difficult on me than my own self. Sometimes it would be against me, and sometimes it would be for me.”⁶⁸ Our Messenger ﷺ also stated, “The *mujāhid* [the one who strives in *jihād*] is he who strives against his lower-self.”⁶⁹ In the beautiful *du‘ā’a* we are instructed to say upon leaving the house, we seek refuge in Allah from “being an oppressor or being oppressed.”⁷⁰ Self reflection and reformation are prophetic practices that we should consistently strive to embody in every context. In what follows, we outline the Uyghur participants’ recommendations for nurturing empathy and compassion towards the Uyghur plight.

1 Unpacking our privilege

Sometimes our unconscious oppression⁷¹ is a result of a lack of knowledge of our privilege. For those of us from “dominant” Muslim groups, taking time to reflect upon the invisible knapsack of privilege that we all carry in various forms can humble our *naḥs* and keep our ego in check. Building upon Peggy McIntosh’s work in *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*,⁷² the following questions have been developed as an empathy-building activity designed to better understand

⁶⁸ Abū Na‘īm al-Asbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’ wa ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘āda, 1974), 7:5.

⁶⁹ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no.1621, grade: authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).

⁷⁰ Whenever the Prophet ﷺ stepped out of his house, he would say, “*Bismillah, tawakkaltu ‘alā Allāh. Allāhumma inni a‘ūdhu bika an aḍilla aw uḍal, aw azilla aw uzal, aw aẓlima aw uẓlama, aw ajhala aw yujhala ‘alayy,*” which translates as follows: “I begin with the Name of Allah, I trust in Allah; O Allah! I seek refuge in You from leading or being led astray, or against slipping or being caused to slip; or doing injustice or being done injustice; or doing wrong or having wrong done to me.” *Sunan Abi Dawud* 5094.

⁷¹ McIntosh, “White Privilege.”

⁷² McIntosh, “White Privilege.”

the alienation Uyghurs and other non-dominant Muslim communities experience on a daily basis.

Questions	Yes	No
I am greeted warmly when I enter a Muslim space and am surprised when this does not occur.	☐	☐
My community is mentioned in communal <i>du‘ā</i> ’s on a regular basis.	☐	☐
I can name at least five Muslim leaders and scholars who are from my ethnocultural/racial background, who are well-known to the broader Muslim community.	☐	☐
The issues that are most pressing to my community are presented in the Friday sermon.	☐	☐
I expect that people will know how to pronounce my name and be familiar with where I am from when I enter Muslim spaces.	☐	☐
I can expect food from my culture to be served at an <i>iftar</i> or other events in the Muslim community and/or mosque.	☐	☐
When I enter the mosque or another Muslim gathering, people speak to me in their own language and presume I am from their community.	☐	☐

Muslim community fundraisers regularly support issues that are important to my community.	☐	☐
When I enter a Muslim space, there are others there who look like me.	☐	☐
People on the mosque board and other positions of Muslims community leadership speak my mother tongue.	☐	☐
When I enter a Muslim gathering, other Muslims greet me as one of their own.	☐	☐
I hear my mother tongue being spoken regularly in the mosque and other Muslim spaces.	☐	☐
There are multiple translations of the Qur'an and other Islamic works in my mother tongue.	☐	☐
When there is an Islamic conference, there are speakers who look like me and speak like me.	☐	☐
When a tragedy occurs in my community, members of the broader Muslim community reach out to me to offer their condolences and <i>du'ā's</i> .	☐	☐
Islamic scholars reference scholars of my peoples in their lectures and writings.	☐	☐
No Muslim has ever questioned whether or not I am Muslim.	☐	☐

During Eid or other celebrations within a communal Muslim gathering, I can expect to see others wearing traditional clothing from my culture.	☐	☐
When a tragedy occurs in my community, whether at home or abroad, I expect that members of the Muslim community will participate in political advocacy, rallies, boycotts, fundraisers, etc. to show their support.	☐	☐

Privilege acts as a blinder. If, after this exercise, you notice that you answered yes to the majority of the questions, reflect on what realities of the *ummah* your privilege may be cocooning you from seeing and how you can use your privilege to act as an ally to those who don't enjoy the same feelings of belonging to the mosque and *ummah*. If you choose to keep these blinders on, how will you conquer the oppressor within you?

② Bridge the empathic divide

Sometimes our empathic distance requires some introspection to uncover the implicit biases we may hold towards certain “out-groups.” It is important to reflect on how the dominant culture has instilled implicit biases in us (whether through the media, school, friends, etc.), whether our parents/caregivers display biases, whether we have a diverse circle of friends and acquaintances, and what our workplaces, neighborhoods, and mosques look like. This will help us to develop a greater awareness of our own biases and thus an ability to interrogate them.

A practical way to bridge the empathic divide is to disrupt any narrow definitions of “Muslimness” by broadening how and where we gather religious knowledge. Going the extra mile to learn history and gather religious knowledge from scholars of non-dominant Muslim groups, such as Uyghur scholars like Sh. Muhammad Salih Hajim, can help deepen our understanding and appreciation for all members of our *ummah*. In order to gain an appreciation for Islam as a religion that stretches

beyond those of dominant groups, we need to seek knowledge from Islamic scholars from across the Muslim world who may not be as well-known and accessible because of historical marginalization. As the great scholar of Touba in Senegal, Sh. Ahmadou Bamba once said, “Don’t reject my work just because I am black.” As allies we have a duty to amplify these voices. Another practical way to bridge the empathic divide is to disrupt our environments of sameness and homogeneity by pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones. This might look like going for the weekly Friday (*jumu’a*) prayer at the Uyghur mosque (if you have one in your city), advocating for your mosque to hold a community event about the Uyghurs or hosting a program on the history of Islam in East Turkestan, joining an Uyghur protest, or attending a Uyghur event. Learning about others allows us to appreciate our shared humanity and we can’t do this from a distance. As Isabel Wilkerson writes, “It is harder to dehumanize a single person standing in front of you, wiping away tears at the loss of a loved one, just as you would...”⁷³ As Allah beautifully reminds us, “Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.”⁷⁴

③ Get educated

True empathy requires active demonstration of allyship. Educating ourselves about the ongoing Uyghur genocide is an important first step. As one Uyghur in the US shared, “Yes, definitely they need to be educated; most of [the Muslim community] is just sympathetic, not really politically supportive.” Another Uyghur in the US spoke about feeling hurt,

It’s hard to see that the Muslim community is not taking any action. It hurts. When they trust Chinese media more than us, it hurts. I believe that the Muslim community is good in general, but they are not getting the right information. Chinese people produce more than 450 million bots and stuff as misinformation, and fake videos to cheat [the] Muslim community... I want the Muslims here [in the US] to advocate for us here.

⁷³ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 141.

⁷⁴ Qur’an 49:13.

Uncovering the truth in an era of “fake news” and propaganda requires a valiant effort. It is crucial to seek out news sources that offer more balanced coverage of the Uyghur genocide, such as Al Jazeera.⁷⁵

Beyond that, speaking to Uyghur community members and listening to their stories is also an important way to get informed and develop a robust understanding.

④ Get active

Getting active is the next step. We need to think outside the *ṣadaqah* box. The power of allyship revolves around members of the dominant or majority group working together with marginalized groups to actively support, socially engage, and advocate for oppressed peoples.⁷⁶ As witnesses to oppression, it is imperative for us to stand for justice.

Our Messenger ﷺ exhorted us, “Whoever among you sees evil, let him change it with his hand. If he is unable to do so, then with his tongue. If he is unable to do so, then with his heart, and that is the weakest level of faith.”⁷⁷ In this case, we are not only witness to the genocide Uyghurs are facing, but our Uyghur brothers and sisters have also bravely offered us a mirror to recognize our own part in that oppression. As the Prophet ﷺ reminded us, “The believer is a mirror to his brother. If he sees something wrong in him, he should correct it.”⁷⁸ Participants shared how important it is for the greater Muslim community to step up and demonstrate their empathy. While it’s likely that Islamophobia/xenophobia contributes to this alienation, as was illustrated in the interviews, the wider Muslim community also has a hand in this. This is heartbreaking. Being connected to the

⁷⁵ See <https://www.aljazeera.com/tag/uyghur/>.

⁷⁶ Jamie Washington and Nancy J. Evans, “Becoming an Ally,” in *Beyond Tolerance: Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals on Campus*, ed. Nancy J. Evans and Vernon A. Wall (N.p.: American Association for Counseling and Development, 1991), 195–204; Joshua C. Collins and Dominique T. Chlup, “Criticality in Practice: The Cyclical Development Process of Social Justice Allies at Work,” *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 16, no. 4 (2014): 481–98; Kendrick T. Brown and Joan M. Ostrove, “What Does It Mean to Be an Ally? The Perception of Allies from the Perspective of People of Color,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43, no. 11 (2013): 2211–22.

⁷⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 49, grade: authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) according to Imam Muslim.

⁷⁸ *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 239, grade: *ḥasan* (fair) according to Al-Albani.

wider Muslim community is an integral part of healthy religious socialization.⁷⁹ We cannot continue to push our brothers and sisters to the margins.

Active solidarity can be demonstrated by:

1. **Mobilizing and advocating politically against the Uyghur genocide.** Civic engagement through reaching out to your local political representative or joining a rally are powerful ways you can effect change.
2. **Developing a welcoming program in your mosque** so Uyghurs and other marginalized Muslim community members can feel they have a place of belonging. This is one way we can embody the Prophetic model of the *anṣār* welcoming the *muhājirūn* into Medina.
3. **Contacting your mosque board** seeking ways to get involved. You can also make sure to vote in a more diverse and representative board every year.
4. **Fundraising** to support the Uyghur brothers and sisters in your community to set up a Uyghur prayer area (*musallā*) or a dedicated mosque if there is a large community. As one participant shared, “Religious spaces are important. There is no Uyghur mosque anywhere [in the area I live in]. If the broader Muslim community could support them, that would be useful.”

You can educate yourself on what products and brands are linked to forced Uyghur labor in order to boycott them.⁸⁰ As one Uyghur participant recommended, one way the Muslim community can step up is to, “Stop the products that are coming from China that contain Uyghur forced labor or from the concentration camps.” The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has published an excellent [report](#) outlining 83 companies that use forced Uyghur labor and should be boycotted.⁸¹

5. **Organizing regular community gatherings around Uyghur food, arts, and culture.** This can help our Uyghur brothers and sisters feel a sense of belonging and could be as simple as including traditional Uyghur foods in

⁷⁹ Saafir and Umarji, “How to Raise Religious Teens.”

⁸⁰ Sweida-Metwally, “Spending Ethically for Justice.”

⁸¹ Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro, and Nathan Ruser, “Uyghurs for Sale,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute* 1 (2020): 20.

iftar programs at the mosque in Ramadan.⁸² The more regular such events are, the more visible the Uyghurs will be to us.

6. **Facilitating the teaching of Uyghurche, the Uyghur language** by securing a free space at the local mosque, community center, or other suitable premises to accommodate the program. This recommendation repeatedly presented itself in our participant interviews,

... support Uyghur kids to learn their own culture, language, and tradition. The [Uyghur] community [in Canada] is [small in number and] not enough... to be sustainable, so Uyghurs will be assimilated and integrated into Canadian culture. [Uyghur] families hope that their children can learn and preserve their language and traditions.

[Rent] is very costly. [The Uyghur] community is small and scattered across the Greater Toronto Area [in Canada]. It is difficult for people to bring their children from [the different corners of the city]... It is a real challenge.

The loss of language, tradition, and knowledge is one of the greatest sources of sorrow for the Uyghur peoples. Robbing a people of their mother tongue is an especially insidious tactic employed in cultural genocide, where the eradication of a people's language and the imposing of a foreign language leads to the systematic destruction of the bond between parent and child and a sense of unrootedness from one's history and way of life.⁸³ In this, there are harrowing echoes of the brutality of the government-instituted residential school system and how it continues to devastate generations of indigenous peoples in Canada.⁸⁴

⁸² Erin Handley and Sean Manteso, "Uyghurs Are Facing 'Cultural Genocide' in China but in Australia They're Fighting for Their History," ABC News (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), November 19, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-10/uyghur-culture-under-threat-in-china-thrives-in-australia/1167363>.

⁸³ Elisa Novic, "The Concept of Cultural Genocide: A Historical–Legal Perspective," in *The Concept of Cultural Genocide: An International Law Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2016), <https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198787167.003.0002>; Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. routledge, 2022.

⁸⁴ Kevin Hutchings, "Cultural Genocide and the First Nations of Upper Canada: Some Romantic-Era Roots of Canada's Residential School System," *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 3 (2016): 301–8; Elizabeth Hudson and Jeff Benvenuto, "The Cultural Genocide of the Indigenous People of North America," in *Native American Genocides*, 2021.

Although some Uyghur groups have been able to successfully push their local municipal governments to establish an Uyghurche language school, this only occurs in voting districts with large Uyghur populations. As one participant said, “It doesn't work for small [Uyghur] communities because [there are] not as many votes. They tend to be marginalized and ignored.” Facilitating spaces for children to learn Uyghurche is a very tangible way for the wider Muslim community to demonstrate their solidarity and nurture a Uyghur sense of belonging to the *ummah*. Allowing oppressed peoples to reclaim ownership of their language and their stories is empowering. One participant spoke about the struggles of this voicelessness, “The Uyghur community gives the impression that they themselves don't know what's happening, but their struggle is telling their story properly [and] not in their own language.”

Conclusion

As members of dominant groups within the Muslim community or as those empowered through citizenship or finances, we have the opportunity to step up and act as allies to our Uyghur brothers and sisters. Our strength as an *ummah* is as a people of consciousness—of Allah and of ourselves. Our strength as an *ummah* is as a community of faith, fortified together through the ties of *ukhuwwa*, where all our brothers and sisters work together to serve the *dīn* of Allah and worship our Creator.

We have a real opportunity to work as allies with our Uyghur brothers and sisters so they can find their voice again. When an oppressed person tells us that we have, unconsciously or not, contributed to their oppression through exclusion, marginalization, and abandonment, we should pause and listen. There may be unfamiliar faces within our communities, who feel pressed to the margins. *Ukhuwwa* is so critical that without it we cannot call ourselves believers.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said,

By Him in Whose Hand my soul is! You will not enter *jannah* until you believe, and you shall not believe until you love one another. May I inform

you of something, if you do it, you will love each other? Spread *salām* amongst yourselves (by saying *assalāmu ‘alaikum* to one another).⁸⁵

When one of the *anṣār* expressed concern that the Prophet ﷺ would return to Makkah and leave them, our Messenger replied in one of the most poetic encapsulations saying:

Your life is my life.

You are mine and I am yours.

Your enemy is my enemy.

Your ally is my ally.⁸⁶

In the Prophet’s final sermon, the Mercy to All the Worlds, reminded us that,

O people, your Lord is one and your father is one. There is no virtue of an Arab over a foreigner, nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white over black nor black over white, except by righteousness.⁸⁷

This exhortation was given to us precisely because it is difficult. Because the tendency to rank, order, and create hierarchies, and the penchant to favor one’s own tribe runs deep within us. This is why fighting racism, casteism, tribalism, and prejudice in all its forms, starting first within ourselves, is a courageous act of worship.

May Allah accept our efforts to show compassion to our Uyghur brothers and sisters and welcome them into our communities for His sake, and may He elevate our ranks in *jannah* for doing so. May He grant justice and mercy to all the oppressed peoples of our world.

⁸⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 54.

⁸⁶ ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Ibn Hishām: Biography of the Prophet* ﷺ, trans. ‘Abdus-Salām M. Hārūn (Cairo: al-Falah Foundation for Translation, Publication and Distribution, 2000).

⁸⁷ Aḥmad al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-imān*, ed. Mukhtār al-Nadawī (Riyadh: Maṭba‘at al-Rushd, 2003), 7:132, grade: authentic due to corroboration with other hadiths (*ṣaḥīḥ lī-ghayriḥ*) according to al-Albānī.

APPENDIX A

Rigor

Self-Reflexivity & Positionality

As this paper centers on the intersectionality of identity, the researchers have shared their reflections on their positionality. Dr. Farah Islam identifies as a Muslim from a “dominant” Muslim diasporic group (Brown/South Asian/Bengali), who is from a peoples who have experienced genocide [when Pakistan (formerly West Pakistan) carried out a genocide of the Bangladeshi people (then East Pakistan), where about three million Bangladeshis died and half a million women were raped.⁸⁸] And so the spaces of insider/outsider, diasporic migrant community, and forgotten histories of genocide are ones she inhabits and identifies with in this project.

Shahd Fulath Khan is a Muslim living in Canada. Her paternal grandparents migrated from Turkestan (currently Uzbekistan) and settled in Makkah for the freedom of practicing Islam. Her maternal grandparents migrated from Syria to Saudi Arabia, escaping an oppressive regime. The themes of *hijrah* (migration) for a higher purpose and the sacrifices of the *muhājirūn* have been important in informing her work throughout this project.

Hala Bucheeri identifies as a Muslim Arab and is currently living in Bahrain. The concept of migration is not a foreign concept in Bahrain, as a minority of its inhabitants come from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Persian, African, South Asian, South East Asian) in hopes of finding a home, financial security, and political stability. Despite Bahrain’s cultural diversity, cultural competency is still lacking. Therefore, this project highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the specific cultural and religious needs of ethnic minorities.

⁸⁸ Wardatul Akmam, “Atrocities against Humanity during the Liberation War in Bangladesh: A Case of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 4, no. 4 (2002): 543–59; Lisa Sharlach, “Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda,” *New Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2000): 89–102; Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975); Dorothy Q. Thomas and Regan E. Ralph, “Rape in War: Challenging the Tradition of Impunity,” *SAIS review* 14, no. 1 (1994): 81–99.

Lastly, Arzu Gul and Dr. Dilmurat Mahmut are both Uyghur advocates living in the diaspora.