



## **After George Floyd: Repairing Harm Between Arab Muslim Business Owners and the Black Community<sup>1</sup>**

### **Case Problem Statement:**

The religion of Al-Islam is clear on the dignity and worth of every person. In the words of the Qur'an, "Certainly We have made honorable all the children of Adam." However, historically the lived reality of the Black Muslim Community has been filled with racism, anti-Blackness, minimizing and silencing at the hands of Arab, South Asian and other Muslims. The exception to this occurs in extreme situations when the Black community is often tokenized due to some external pressure (i.e., race, terrorist attacks of 9/11).

**Time Period:** Summer 2020

### **The Main Actors:**

1. Yemeni father and daughter of a prominent Muslim family and successful business owner in a city with a recent incident of police violence
2. The imam of a historical African American masjid in the same city as business owners
3. Yemeni community leader and organizer, with 20+ years of working in the Black Community

### **Case Presentation:**

In the summer of 2020 a Black man was murdered in the streets of an American city. A bystanders' video showed the event to be a clear case of police brutality. This tragic murder was set into motion by a phone call from a Yemeni-owned corner store where the victim

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<sup>1</sup> This case was authored by an alumni fellow of the American Muslim Civic Leadership program. The case study has been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of the actors and presents a potentially hypothetical case format.

allegedly presented a counterfeit \$20 for payment of a pack of lighters. Three days later, tweets surfaced from the daughter of a prominent Yemeni business owner in the same city that were racist and anti-Black, antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ. Those comments sparked outrage from several communities, but primarily Black communities and Black Muslims in particular.

Facing mounting pressure, the loss of community support, the severing of business relationships and boycotts, the Yemeni business owner reached the African American Imam for help, support and cover. Though they have known each other for nearly three decades, it was the first time he had ever visited the Imam's home, let alone seek support to salvage his business and reputation. After listening to what had happened, much of which the Imam was deeply disturbed and offended by, the Imam said he needed some time to think about his ask.

They met approximately a week later for a candid conversation about what needed to happen and potential next steps to begin addressing those who have been hurt by these actions coming to light. They spoke about the historical tensions within the Muslim Community between Arabs and African Americans, and why this was such an important moment for the entire Muslim Community. They spoke of how his business had begun very modestly. His business grew to a \$20M per year empire that has been supported by all communities; and became a pillar in the local Muslim Community. They also spoke of the leadership role he plays among Arab business owners, many of which have operated in the inner city and Black communities for decades, becoming very wealthy.

The Imam explained before he could spend his "social capital," there MUST be tangible actions taken so that the Yemeni business owner would be taken seriously by the community. In his opinion, after consultation with other Black leaders, a way forward should include:

1. An unequivocal denouncement and apology for the hurtful things that were said.
2. A commitment to changing the culture of the business and training.
3. Being a leading voice against anti-blackness in the local Muslim community.
4. Organize Arab business owners that operate in the Black community to improve their business practices.
5. A five-year commitment to invest in the African American community in the areas of food insecurity, affordable housing, employment, and business development.

The Yemeni business owner initially agreed with this proposal, but later voiced reluctance and pulled back citing financial concerns with his business. He has since reached out and made some small overtures, but nothing that resembles the agreed actions or public statement of commitment. There is a sense in the Black community that once again in the heat of the moment, we were sought out to help. But as time passes, things go back to “business as usual.”

To Be Continued and Allah Knows best.

#### Discussion Questions:

- Was the proposal by the Imam appropriate based on what took place? What would you have added or omitted?
- What other questions do you have after reviewing this case study?
- What is the obligation of the Imam & business owner to each other in this situation? What is our obligation as a Muslim community to repair the harm caused by anti-black behavior and attitudes?
- What other actors should have been involved?
- What are the long-term effects of racism and anti-blackness in the Muslim community that goes unaddressed?
- Does anything change about this case if the ethnicities/nationalities/racial backgrounds of the actors are changed? If yes, how? If not, why not?
- Does the amount of visibility and/or scrutiny an incidence of police violence receive influence the case in any way?
  - Relatedly, does the level of violence/brutality in an incidence of police violence influence the case in any way?