

## Dynamic Syntheses

### *Reversion, Conversion, and Accommodation*

“They’re basically Marxists in hijab!” The exclamation punctuated an exchange early in my fieldwork with a longtime friend who had been a founder of the Arab Community Center (ACC), the *markaz*, and an activist in the Union of Palestinian Women Associations. I had asked her about the collapse of the political left and of PLO nationalism, generally, and about the parallel rise in the prominence and power of the mosques. I noted, particularly, the presence of younger activists who performed prayers and other ritual activities in the course of their work at the *markaz*’s successor organization, the Arab American Action Network (AAAN). My friend insisted the shift was superficial: a secular commitment to justice and liberation persisted beneath the trappings of piety. The young men and women who appeared to have embraced the Islamic shift were, she said, really leftists in beards and scarves. They were devoted to the same work and to the same liberation goals as the previous generation of secular activists. The AAAN’s Executive Director, Hatem Abudayyeh, agreed. “Take Nawal [pseudonym], for example,” he told me, “she’s committed to the same things as we are [at the AAAN] but layers on this Islam piece.”

Born in the old immigrant enclave of Chicago’s Southwest Side, Nawal, who was twenty-eight years old when I interviewed her, worked as a coordinator for a domestic violence shelter located in the southwest suburbs. She often collaborated with the AAAN on projects that focused on women’s empowerment. She had also volunteered at the AAAN after graduating from college. This volunteer work allowed her to explore career options in community development and women’s advocacy within an institution that shared her dedication to the Palestinian cause.

Nawal’s commitment to Palestine advocacy, women’s empowerment, and community mobilization aligned directly with the value orientations of secularists like Abudayyeh. Islam, however, was far from incidental to Nawal’s moral and political

commitments. Whatever the “Marxists in hijab” moniker might have meant in her case, her piety had significant implications for her negotiation of identity: Nawal’s narrative, in fact, revealed an oscillation of the religious and the secular. The terms did not collapse into one or the other, in her account, but rather co-existed in a shifting, interacting relation.

### SYNCRETIC SECULARITY

The religious shift and corresponding attenuation of secularism documented in the previous chapters have spurred a range of complex identity configurations that do not easily align with a simple secular-religious dichotomy. Indications of this complexity have already surfaced in the discussion of the generational processes underlying the formation of distinct secular and religious trajectories. This chapter and the next map this complexity further, demonstrating dynamic syntheses—vital hybridizations<sup>1</sup>—that occur as individuals travel back and forth across secular and religious spaces.

The discussion that follows depicts a typological range of identity. The types are meant to be descriptive. They are not intended as a value scale.<sup>2</sup> The narratives selected for analysis exemplify the array of articulations among my interlocutors. Whether they represent broad or statistically dominant trends beyond my data requires additional research. The profiles do not establish general representativeness, but rather indicate the range of orientations among my interviewees and, in doing so, show and explain how those orientations subjectively mediate and integrate the secular and the religious.

The outlooks I document underscore Eipper’s (2011) claims concerning “syncretic secularity,” which, he says, emerges from “the influence of religious and secular worldviews upon one another.” He explains further:

[Syncretic secularity is] the union or reconciliation of diverse, even opposed, beliefs, tenets, procedures and practices, the different elements having been brought into some kind of agreement or accord (see Droogers 1989; Stewart and Shaw 1994; Stewart 1999). In these circumstances, religious genres, allegiances, understandings and behaviours blur and blend in ways that require an acceptance of diversity, even a willingness to embrace it and enter into dialogue with it (34).

This conception of syncretism relates to the ambivalent situation that Taylor (2007) refers to as “fragility.” Fragility describes the condition of uneasy awareness that one’s worldview is not universally accepted, that it in fact co-exists with other competing value orientations. Individuals experiencing such pluralism—almost everyone, globally, today—become aware of the tenuousness of their positions: they might claim universal validity for their stances but nevertheless must confront the fact of limited acceptance. They must contend, as well, with transgressions, desertions, mergers, and conversions as “one’s own” cross lines, join other sides, and blur distinctions.

Long before Eipper and Taylor, Weber (1946b, 148) and Simmel (1955 [1922]) spoke respectively of “a polytheism of values” and the “crossing of social circles” as individuals negotiated the distinct and competing value spheres to which modern rationalization processes gave rise. But what Eipper’s concept of syncretic secularity gets at that these other ideas do not—or at least not with the same sensitivity to the complexity of lived social reality—is the interactive, mutually conditioning quality of the polytheism of values and of the crossing and overlapping of spaces in one’s daily life. The value spheres and milieus that Taylor, Weber, and Simmel so aptly identify are not discrete spaces but rather dynamically interrelated. They flow into one another transversely, churning, blending, and eddying as their currents cut into each other.

Eipper is perhaps too categorical in his emphasis on “agreement or accord,” given the dynamism of the syncretic process. The blurring and blending that occur are, as the hydraulic metaphor conveys, dynamic and provisional. Confluences that reconcile the secular-religious tensions do not stand still. Instead, they flow at varying rates, merging and separating at different points. They can reverse direction or branch sharply to form new diverging or opposing currents. In this sense, Eipper’s syncretic secularities are active, often momentary secular-religious convergences.<sup>3</sup>

Further, gender, race, and class inflect the negotiations of these convergences.<sup>4</sup> The urban space of Chicago, as seen previously, mediates this inflection. It enables, for example, encounter with other religious and activist traditions (including African American Islam and Puerto Rican nationalism) and with other types of social milieu (for example, youth party scenes; culturally diverse artistic milieus; anti-domestic violence networks) that challenge gender, race, and class hierarchies as well as the moral proprieties of the new suburban, middle class piety. The previous chapters have already shown the effects of these interactions on individual trajectories. This chapter and the next highlight their impact further in the elaboration of the syncretic range.

#### REVERSION, CONVERSION, AND ACCOMMODATION

The syncretic types I will analyze in this chapter describe movements from a secular to a religious orientation. I refer to these types of shifts as movements of “religious secularity.” In arcing from the secular into the religious, individuals undergoing this transition selectively accommodate or resignify the secular; the individual embraces piety, partially or wholly, but in doing so adapts—rather than cancels or suppresses—secularity within the terms and practices of the religious milieu into which she or he now enters. The process is not necessarily unilinear. It can oscillate, shifting in its expression as it does so.

In my data, this particular type of movement manifests in three ways: reversion, conversion, and accommodation. Reversion refers to a shift from piety to secularism back to piety. Conversion indicates a change from an original secularity

to a new religiosity. These two orientations, as will become evident below, constitute themselves partially as a critique, implicit and explicit, of the class and gender hierarchies that suburban reformism aligns with through its support for individual wealth accumulation tempered by an ethos of tithing, charity, and gender complementarity.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, accommodation, the third type of religious secularity, entails adaptation to, and partial identification with, the religious milieu and the suburban middle-class piety that marks it culturally. This partial convergence is social and political: the individual who exemplifies it in my discussion participates, for example, in the suburban Islamic institutions and collaborates, professionally, with the Mosque Foundation leadership. However, she stops short of a full acceptance of reformism, embracing only certain aspects of piety (prayer) while selectively ignoring other practices (wearing the scarf, fasting during Ramadan).

## REVERSION

### *Social Background and Early Identity-Formation Processes*

Nawal exemplifies the first type of religious secularity: reversion, which entails fluctuation and a complex negotiation between religious and secular spaces. Her initial encounter with and integration into the religious milieu tracked with the class and demographic shifts that coincided with the rise of reformist Islam in the suburbs. Nawal's parents arrived in Chicago in 1977, ten years after Israel occupied the West Bank. Her father found work on an assembly line—"He has a lot of burns on his hands from that time," Nawal remarked. Incrementally saving his money, he eventually opened a small store, one of many ("it's been store after store for twenty years.") Her mother was a homemaker. In 1991, when Nawal was nine years old, the family moved to the near southwest suburbs. Asked what prompted the shift, Nawal explained that her parents wished to shield her brother from gang violence. Also, many Arab families had already moved to the suburbs, so taking the family to a homogeneously white area created during the "white flight" of the 1950s seemed less intimidating than it might have been.

The move to the suburbs proved crucial to the formation of Nawal's early identity orientations. No longer in close proximity to the community centers on the city's Southwest Side, the family gravitated toward the new Mosque Foundation that anchored the emerging enclave in the suburbs. This change had a transforming effect on the family. Initially, Nawal said, her family was "[not] very practicing." They abstained from alcohol and said "*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*<sup>6</sup> before [eating] and that was about it." Her mother had always worn a scarf but "towards the back [with the scarf pulled back and tied behind the head rather than pinned under the chin in front] so you could see she was a Muslim, but culturally to the back [that is, in a style that did not comport with the *shari'a* requirements of Islam as Nawal understood them]; so, she didn't wear [the hijab] because she identified

as a *muhajjaba* [a woman who is deliberately committed to the scarf as a sign of Muslim identity]; for example, [even though she wore a scarf] she would still wear short sleeves and a skirt above the knees, but a scarf to the back, so she wore it because of culture and not so much because of Islam.”<sup>7</sup> Gradually, however, as Nawal’s mother began to participate in mosque activities, she conformed to the reformist norms that it instituted. She began to pin the hijab scarf under her chin in the style of a *muhajjaba*, and she started to pray regularly. Apparently desiring to make up for a perceived failure to transmit religious values to the other older children—Nawal recounted that her older siblings never learned to pray or to read the Qur’an—her mother urged her father to enroll the two youngest kids in the new Aqsa School, despite his concerns about the financial cost of doing so.

The move to the new school had a profound impact on Nawal. She described how she “LOVED [the school], I really loved it! I liked the content.” She also embraced the disciplines through which the school sought to instill reformist values within the children and staff. As a matter of course in the mosque and in these schools, girls were urged to wear the hijab scarf and the *jilbab* coat—forms of clothing that marked alignment with book-centered reformism.<sup>8</sup> The instruction she received also systematized her religious knowledge. For example, she described, in a manner similar to ‘Aziza (discussed in chapter 4), having to “correct” the prayer and recitation practice that she had originally learned from her mother. In contrast to her mother’s “cultural Islam,” Nawal became grounded in the study of texts and in the “proper” formation of practices. Her decision to embrace these revised practices, especially by wearing the scarf in a reformist style (pinned under the chin, showing only the face), also caused her to stand out against the majority non-Arab and non-Muslim culture beyond the suburban enclave.

Nawal’s Islamic (re)formation, however, was not unidirectional. As with a number of other participants in my project who attended the private Islamic schools, financial considerations forced Nawal’s family to send her to a public high school. This shift substantially altered the institutional ethos within which she lived out her daily life. One consequence, as she described it, was the weakening of her piety. She described this period, however, not as a turning away from all religious belief and practice per se: “When I was in high school, I was a Muslim, and like, I never experimented with drugs or alcohol or ate pork [ . . . ] but I [also] didn’t pray.” Unlike the Islamic school, where “you had to pray,” the public school offered other types of extracurricular activity: “My top priority [in high school] was being involved [in clubs] [ . . . ]. I was not very devout in high school.” In addition to not praying regularly, she also stopped wearing the scarf other than when she attended events at the mosque.

The alteration that occurred in Nawal’s engagement with Islamic and public institutions illustrated the fluidity in, and negotiation of, practice across different kinds of space. Her family’s precarious class situation—working class, attempting to transition to the suburban middle class—produced this fluidity by rendering

uneven their integration into the institutions of the piety-minded milieu. As she tacked back and forth between mosque and public school, disenchantment and re-enchantment of daily life acted simultaneously upon her: she removed her scarf and ceased to pray at school; she wore the hijab and returned to prayer at mosque. In doing so, she absorbed a sense of the limits of each distinct space, each zone co-existing with, but not extending into, the other. She adapted to the norms of each space, functioning within each according to its terms.

### *Nationalist-Islamic Confluences*

Nawal's transition to college—an event that stabilized her movement into the middle class—reconfigured and heightened her experience of secular-religious tension. Interaction with Muslim student organizations and the death of her mother propelled a reversion to piety. Gendered expectations and patriarchal authority demands in the home intertwined with this reversion. At the same time, an encounter with Palestine solidarity activism on campus and the development of ties with the Arab American Action Network (AAAN) led her into the secularist political milieu in the old urban immigrant enclave in which she had been born and lived her early childhood. The AAAN context, especially, generated tensions with the reformist piety that she had begun to reinhabit on campus. The tensions led her to revise her bimodal adaptive approach—that is, enacting different practices in different spaces—in an effort to achieve moral consistency across all spaces.

Nawal's entry into Palestine solidarity circles marked a honing of a previously amorphous sense of national identity. She described not being active on Palestine before college. "The most I had ever done was write rap lyrics about *filastin* [Palestine]," she said.

I was passionate about *filastin* but I didn't know much about it. I wasn't active. I was just passionate. When I was in high school I just knew I was Palestinian; and at that time I called myself "Arabian" like many high schoolers and many young adults still do. That was what I thought I was. I didn't know.

On campus, however, she learned about Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) from students she was tutoring on campus. Joining the group drew her into citywide activist networks. The key event in this process was a SJP silent sit-in: "We were going to break the silence by performing spoken word and songs [ . . . ]. I had written some lyrics about Palestine and shared them there and they liked them [ . . . ] and then the next thing I know they tell me about this new thing called Café Intifada, and they said, 'You've gotta go lay down your verse there!'" The "Café" turned out to be a AAAN-sponsored event in Chicago's Southwest Side, where Nawal had lived before her family moved to the suburbs: "It was so amazing for me. I had never been exposed to these things. Not only that but I was like, 'It's the 'hood, it's where I grew up!'" After her performance, AAAN Executive Director Hatem Abudayyeh asked if she would be willing to offer a series of hip hop classes

for youth. She agreed and soon was traveling weekly to the Southwest Side to work with a group of middle and high school students.

At the same time that her integration into the Southwest Side secular activist milieu was occurring, Nawal was also beginning to re-encounter Islam on her university campus. The experience renewed her attraction to the piety that had so powerfully shaped her childhood at the Mosque Foundation. One crucial impetus for this awakening of her dormant religiosity was the university's Muslim Student Association (MSA).<sup>9</sup> Nawal described the MSA activists as providing her with a positive example of piety as an option for young adults. She had thought that she would wear the scarf again, but only when she was older. With her mother's trajectory as a model, she associated adult piety with passage into marriage and full adulthood. The MSA, however, modeled an alternative understanding. She found herself asking, "Why do I have to wait until I'm old to start praying and getting involved?" The MSA also exposed Nawal to the diversity of Islam. Meeting Muslims from different backgrounds forced her to see that what she often took to be "Islam," especially notions of shame (*ayb*) and consequent restrictions on the activities of girls and women, in reality reflected particular "Palestinian" cultural mores.

This understanding of what she took to be her family's "traditional" or "cultural" piety led, with the help of peer mentors in the MSA, to a critical study of the authoritative textual sources of Islam. A close friend in the group was especially knowledgeable about the *fiqh*—jurisprudence relating to *shari'a*—and "introduced me to authors and sources that were authentic compared to, like, the *shaykh* on the street that gave the *fatwa* [traditionally, the learned opinion of a religious scholar on practice and doctrine] about whatever." She described that "street" Islam as focused on how it was "*haram* [forbidden in Islamic law] to blah, blah, blah," but "you never questioned sources, you never went back down and asked, 'Well, where did that come from? What's your source?'"<sup>10</sup>

Empowered by a new, critical knowledge of the foundational texts, Nawal negotiated an expanded autonomy to attend Palestinian activist meetings that would extend into the late evening, well past the hour when daughters of "respectable," aspiring middle-class families returned home. To do so, she effectively invoked the superseding authority of God (Allah) to counter the limitations imposed by her family's "cultural" patriarchy. Nawal enacted this countervailing authority by wearing a scarf, engaging in prayer, and adhering to various restrictions on cross-gender interactions.

Alongside the engagement with the MSA and her discovery of the counteracting authority of its type of piety, a second key impetus of Nawal's reversion to Islam was the crisis of her mother's terminal illness. Nawal took primary responsibility for caring for her mother in the hospital. She prayed and read Qur'an to her at her bedside daily. These practices reactivated the physical, mental, and emotional dispositions she had absorbed in the Islamic schools as a child. She stated: "During that time, even though I wasn't a *muhajjaba*, wasn't constantly wearing the hijab,

still, because I was praying around the clock, I kept the hijab on, I would just walk around with it, and again, it felt very comforting. I just felt protected.”<sup>11</sup>

Nawal’s references to comfort and protection reveal the complex sources and meanings of her reversion to reformist piety. Death can occasion a search for significance, solace, and stability among the living. Prayer and recitation of the Qur’an met those needs for Nawal by reactivating deeply embedded connections to her mother. Nawal’s initial path into Islamic religiosity as a child was through her mother’s tutelage and example. The comfort and protection she spoke of were a metaphoric allusion to a kind of divine nurture: maternal care was a quality that Nawal experienced in her relationship to the divine as she faced her mother’s death. This sense of the feminine divine heightened the contrast with the majority male family Nawal would continue to be a part of after losing her mother.<sup>12</sup>

A third and related source of Nawal’s return to piety lay in the effects of the ritual practice that she began to re-embrace. Nawal indicated the importance of these effects in her comments about wearing hijab in order to meet the conventional requirements for prayer. The sheer frequency of her engagement in the practice caused her to rehabilitate to the discipline the prayer imposed. Very soon after her mother died, Nawal had other similar reacclimating experiences. One such instance occurred during her first year as an AAAN volunteer. That summer, the AAAN cosponsored a youth camp on the premises of a nearby mosque.<sup>13</sup> Nawal typically put on her scarf just before entering the mosque and then removed it at the end of the day. This donning and discarding of the scarf caused parents and camp participants to ask: “Are you a *muhajjaba* or not?” The questioning heightened her consciousness of an inconsistency in her actions. At the same time, the sheer frequency of wearing the scarf during the day “allowed me to practice, practice, practice wearing hijab, and so little did I know how comforting it was, just to wear it, and I *took* to it, I felt much more comfortable wearing it.”

The comfort that came with rehabilitation paralleled a new sense of security. Street catcalling ended, she told me. The hijab had redefined her body, creating a boundary around it. It also imposed new borders in her workspace; but, in this instance, rather than deflecting attention, her clothing decisions drew direct challenge. One person told her “it was just a phase” she would presumably grow out of, while another expressed dismay, saying, “I thought you supported women’s rights!” Nawal reacted, saying to herself, “But what about my right to choose to wear this?” Moreover, Nawal had continued to advocate strongly for women’s social, political, and economic equality: her reversion to piety had not changed this fact. In retrospect, Nawal came to realize “it was generational and political [ . . . ]: they saw me going down this religious route, which signaled to them [in their mind] that I was going away from them [politically].”<sup>14</sup>

At home, perhaps because she sensed that especially in this space she might encounter resistance, Nawal was careful to avoid calling attention to her piety. Ultimately, in a moment she humorously referred to as “getting busted,” her family

found her out. Nawal had been careful initially to perform her prostrations in the seclusion of her bedroom. Her brother stumbled in on her one day, however, initiating an unwanted exposure and recognition of her new identity as an observant Muslim within the family. The discreet manner in which Nawal at first enacted her return to piety served to authenticate the transition in her own eyes—"I wanted to lock myself away and make sure I'm doing it for my own reasons"—but also for those around her: she would show herself and others that she was not seeking public affirmation and status or performing piety in response to pressure from piety-minded friends or family members.

Achieving consistency of practice across all domains of her life was also important to Nawal as she sought to authenticate her reversion. This attempt at consistency, however, generated tension. Conflicting expectations about bodily comportment and their implications for sociability in different milieus produced the greatest stress. As part of her enactment of piety, Nawal began refusing to shake hands with non-*mahram* men.<sup>15</sup> Among her family, this refusal created problems whenever she greeted older male cousins who, according to Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence), retained the right to marry her. Growing up, she had been accustomed to referring to these cousins as "uncles" and acknowledging them by shaking their hands and hugging and kissing them (socially, as part of the greeting practice). Declining to hug and kiss created deep awkwardness. Her father at one point became so exasperated that he attempted to compel her physically to shake hands: "I remember once my father introduced me to a cousin of his, and I was standing like this [holding her hands behind her back]. He *pulled* my hand and said, 'Shake his hand!' It was so uncomfortable." She encountered a similar tension among her activist friends. Within this social circle, she explained, hugging between and across the sexes signaled comradeship. At the mosque, by contrast, "I don't have to worry about Brother Ahmad coming over to hug me or to shake my hand."

Nawal eventually resolved the tensions her refusal to shake was creating by essentially abandoning her attempt to be consistent in this practice across the social spaces in which she interacted. For example, contradicting the *fiqh* consensus on the matter as she saw it, she decided that she would shake hands with fellow male activists at the AAAN and in other secular organizing spaces. She would do so, as well, with close non-*mahram* relatives in her family. She described the decision as religiously incorrect but socially necessary, given her need to interact across milieus that did not conform to Islamic orthopraxy as she understood and desired to enact it.<sup>16</sup> "It wasn't comfortable for me not to shake someone's hand," she told me, "and it wasn't comfortable for that person who was being rejected." Nawal had brought the religious into the secular, requiring others to adapt to her, but in doing so, she encountered resistance. Ultimately, because she desired to maintain relationships across morally heterogeneous spaces, she chose to modify her practices, accepting the inconsistency that accompanied this decision.

Nawal subsequently left her work at the women's shelter to take a position as a program coordinator with an Islamic social service organization on Chicago's Northwest Side. Nawal's transition to this new institutional setting represented not only an opportunity to advance in her career but also a chance to return to an explicitly Islamic milieu that likely resolved the contradiction between her commitment to piety and the expectations for cross-gender interactions in secular activist spaces. In her new organization, she represented a transethnic Muslim community, not a specifically Arab or Palestinian one, and yet, to the extent she made her political sensibilities known, her presence likely injected Palestinian concerns into the stream of discourse in her new workplace. Whether at the AAAN and the women's shelter or at the new Islamic organization, Nawal's reversionary movements rendered secular and religious into dynamically syncretic forms.

### CONVERSION

Whereas reversion, as Nawal illustrates, involves a shifting from piety-minded spaces to secularist milieus and back again to the piety-minded sphere, conversion, the focus of this next section, moves in a single direction from secularism to piety. As with reversion, conversion as a syncretic process is complex: rather than wholesale replacement of one worldview with another, the movement integrates and reinterprets secular orientations—particularly those that emphasize pluralism and intersectorian unity—within a new religious perspective. This reinterpretation, in my example, entails a critique and transcendence of secular nationalism and also, ironically, of the suburban Islamic shift. Secularism is seen as a limiting, provincializing mode of solidarity, which privileges the suffering of one's own ethnos or nation above that of others.<sup>17</sup> The reformist Islamic shift, in this same view, is seen as leading to a similar end by reducing Islam to an alternative, sacralized nationalism. Conversion as a syncretic mode resists the reduction of religion, Islam, in this case, to a singular identity presumed to be equivalent to a particular expression or practice or ideological construal. It speaks rather of “perspectives” and universal “aspirations” present quintessentially within Islam but also extending beyond it. In this sense, conversion generates a type of cosmopolitanism that parallels and resignifies secular pluralism.

Rami Nashashibi, founder of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), illustrates the conversion trajectory in my data with particular vividness. Nashashibi has gained national attention for his work through IMAN, a Muslim-identified social service organization and community center situated in the predominantly African American and Latinx Chicago Lawn/West Englewood area on Chicago's South Side. He and IMAN have been the focus of academic studies and a *New York Times* profile (Karim 2009; Freedman 2014; Khabeer 2016). In 2016, former US President Barack Obama appointed Nashashibi to his Advisory

Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. A year later, the MacArthur Foundation awarded him a “genius” grant.

I first met Nashashibi in the mid-1990s. The son of a Palestinian-Jordanian diplomat, he was, at the time, a young and rising activist leader within the Arab Community Center (the *markaz*). His integration into this sphere had a series of unforeseen consequences, leading ultimately to his exit from the *markaz* and its secularist ethos. This departure coincided with his “going the path of a true convert to Islam.” As I will show, Nashashibi’s “conversion” transformed his “anti-religious” secularism into a type of religious secularity. In Nashashibi’s narration, the headwaters of this transition lay in the intersecting currents of nationalism and “Americanization” in the lives of his parents and in his childhood.

### *Social Background and Early Identity-Formation Processes*

Nashashibi’s parents were from Jerusalem. His mother’s family fled the village of Ein Karem on the outskirts of the city during the war of 1948. The family eventually settled in the Palestinian enclave in Chicago’s Southwest Side. Nashashibi’s father belonged to a wealthy and established political family in Jerusalem that remained in the city through the war. He traveled to the United States for college, completing his studies in California. He met Nashashibi’s mother either in Chicago or during a trip home to see family in the Jerusalem area—Nashashibi was uncertain of the exact circumstances. After their wedding, Nashashibi’s parents established life together as a couple in Amman and then moved to Jerusalem just prior to the war of 1967. The couple lived through the events of Black September (1970–71), during which the Jordanian regime violently suppressed the Palestinian resistance organizations that had created a quasi state-within-a-state inside the kingdom. Nashashibi’s father subsequently served as a Jordanian diplomat in Tunis.

Nashashibi was born in Amman in 1972. He attended a boarding school in Rome during high school. He often visited his father in Tunis. During one such trip, his father arranged for him to meet top PLO leaders, including Yasser Arafat.

Religion seemed entirely absent from Nashashibi’s childhood and adolescence. He recalled:

My father didn’t practice at all. I was not being raised in any way, shape, or form as a Muslim, not even as a nominal Muslim. My mom did make sure I would identify as Muslim. But I never once walked into a mosque, I never opened up a Qur’an, we didn’t even do the kind of cultural stuff with *‘id* [the feasts that mark the end of Ramadan and also the end of the Hajj season] or anything like that.

As Nashashibi described the situation, the family was not “ideologically secular” but rather apathetically areligious. If religion registered at all in his mother’s home—Nashashibi’s father and mother divorced when he was still a child—it did

so in her display of Santa Clauses and other similar trappings of the commercialized public Christmas. The observation of this holiday had more to do, however, in Nashashibi's view, with his mother's assimilation of "Americana" during her childhood in Chicago than with any sort of religious influence per se. Nashashibi mentioned knowing at some point that he was a Muslim "to the extent to which I knew I wasn't Christian, whatever that meant [ . . . ]. I ran into a couple of other Muslims and learned about the role of Jesus and God, but that really was the extent of it. Other than that there wasn't really any education." Nashashibi's early sense of himself as a Muslim was passive, apophatic: Muslim meant "not Christian."

By contrast, for his mother sustaining one's identity as a Palestinian was of far greater importance than religion. Nashashibi commented:

My mother was much more intent on Palestinian identification [ . . . ]. Of course, this was true of my father, but my father didn't spend too much time trying to lecture about it [ . . . ]. My mother was intent even after the divorce to make sure I stayed connected to the Palestinian thing [ . . . ]. I definitely as a kid was very much identifying with the [Palestinian] cause.

The methods his mother used to instill nationalist sentiment included intentional exposure of her children to global media news coverage and documentaries about key traumatic moments like the Sabra and Shatila massacres during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. A second method was the act of returning "back home." Even after the divorce, Nashashibi's mother took her son on frequent visits to Palestine to maintain a relationship with his father's prominent Jerusalem family. Nashashibi recalled his first experience of crossing into Israel. Still a grade-schooler, he was separated from his mother and strip-searched at the border. "My mom [was] screaming [ . . . ]," he said, "the whole traumatic thing. It was my first encounter with military occupation and seeing tanks and guns [ . . . ]."<sup>18</sup>

Nashashibi's sense of nationalism as an identity and as a guiding moral and political commitment deepened during his years as a high school student in Italy. The main catalyst was the First Intifada: "By that time I was a kid who was really politicized," Nashashibi recalled, "and in Europe the people were very sympathetic to the Palestinians, particularly during the Intifada, wearing *kufiyas* [the emblematic checkered scarves]; the Intifada was the first time the Palestinian cause became a global solidarity issue." He became connected during this time with solidarity groups that were "Communist." "I didn't ideologically buy into all of that," he remarked, "but I did align with some of those [solidarity] politics."

#### *Of Re-ve-láy-shun and Li-ber-áy-shun*

In 1990, Nashashibi left Rome for Chicago to pursue undergraduate studies. His arrival coincided with the beginnings of the suburbanization of the Palestinian community and the corresponding Islamic shift and secularist attenuation. Yet these developments were not the principal factors in his religious transition, or

“conversion.” Instead, as Nashashibi narrated the process, the most significant influences were his encounters with racism and his relationships with Black Nationalists and Black Muslim activists on Chicago’s South and Southwest Sides.

After he arrived on campus, Nashashibi recalls, officials warned the first-year students not to cross into “certain neighborhoods” bordering the college grounds. The admonition caused him to question the interdiction’s rationale. He had never been warned away from any spaces in Rome. Curious about the forbidden zones, he began exploring those off-limits terrains, discovering as he did so a “horrificing” contrast of “two completely separate existences.” The first Gulf War, which began just four months after his arrival, unexpectedly forged a sense of connection to this geography of exclusion: white students on campus, he said, hurled racial epithets like “sand n . . . r” at him, effectively linking him to the very neighborhoods he had been told to avoid. The experience of this racist backlash led him to transfer to another university. As in Nawal’s experience, Palestinian solidarity groups at this new campus provided Nashashibi with a supportive student community and a structure through which to express his nationalist politics. These groups also had ties with the *markaz*. These connections subsequently facilitated Nashashibi’s integration into the secular nationalist activist milieu on the city’s Southwest Side.

Assimilation into the *markaz* space marked a crucial transition leading ultimately, and ironically, to Nashashibi’s disenchantment with nationalism and to his corresponding conversion process. The origins of the shift lay, according to Nashashibi’s account, in his encounter with Third World anti-imperialism and transnational solidarity orientations at the community center. As noted in chapter 2, the *markaz* founders had forged ties with other ethnic-national formations, especially anti-apartheid and pro-African National Congress groups. Activists linked to these groups were often present at the *markaz* to attend meetings or to socialize. One such individual, Thomas [pseudonym], an African American with previous Communist Party and Black Panther links, became an important mentor to Nashashibi. Thomas helped Nashashibi “connect the dots” of his experience as a Palestinian with the experience of other oppressed groups. In his own writings later, Nashashibi would characterize this particular perspective as emerging within “ghetto cosmopolitanism” (Nashashibi 2009, 271–82).

Through this lens, Nashashibi came to understand that, in the United States and globally, the intersecting lines of race and class produced hierarchies of privilege that oppressed all peoples of color, even within progressive circles putatively committed to liberation. He described this insight unfolding gradually through his interactions with Thomas. “[Every weekend] I would literally go with a notebook and sit with [Thomas at the factory in which he worked],” he recalled. Thomas would lecture, and Nashashibi would write notes “all night long.” During the day, they would drive through the different South Side neighborhoods. “[Thomas] clued me into the different brothers and the different sets [during these tours],” Nashashibi remembered. “It was my first real exposure to groups like the

Blackstones and the Vice Lords and the connections to older struggles.” Through this encounter, he “began to think [for the first time] about the Palestinian experience beyond just the Palestinian context.” He realized, he said, how “frivolous” Palestine solidarity work was without these sorts of connections. From that point onward, he began to identify with other justice struggles, for example, in Central America and Puerto Rico. “I started really connecting with black students, Latino students” on campus. He collaborated with these other formations’ sit-ins, agitating against the US interventions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Panama. “Now, again, I was doing this from an absolutely areligious vantage point,” Nashashibi commented. In fact, he said, he was “getting a little more ideologically areligious,” viewing religion as an obstacle to the “people of color, solidarity kind of thing” to which he had increasingly committed himself.

Nashashibi’s assumptions about religion, however, gradually began to change as his interaction with the milieu of South Side Black Nationalism and Black Islam deepened. Activists in these spaces—who had, as Nashashibi put it, “that black ‘street cred’ thing,” something Nashashibi respected—cast Islam as a liberating, transcendent, and transnational spiritual brotherhood. Nashashibi remembered responding skeptically to their assertions, asking, “How can you really take this seriously?” He began reading the Qur’an so that he could debate them. He would ask “about this verse and how can you really believe this verse, how is this verse in line with progressive principles in terms of liberation and stuff like that.” He recalled that in Europe he and his friends had ridiculed the piety-minded Muslims they encountered in the streets: “We would joke about the brothers all being—I mean, I never had that experience—but we would joke that they were all trying to hit on young men and asking for weed when we would go to Amsterdam, you know, we kind of saw all the hypocrisy, you know, so, that’s how we kind of filtered [our perspective on religion].”

Gradually, however, through his interactions with his Black Muslim interlocutors, Nashashibi’s perspective shifted. “[I was] beginning to take the idea of revelation seriously,” he reflected, “that there was actually revealed text from God, and just that idea was so alien [to me].” He described a growing fascination with the thought of an actual verifiable record of the Prophet Muhammad’s statements and deeds through which one could test the veracity of his claims.<sup>19</sup> He also discovered the Qur’an to be a theologically rational text that anticipated and “disproved” his skeptical assumptions about revelation. He finally “came to the point where spiritually I started taking [Islam] really seriously but I had not made the adjustments for my lifestyle [because] I never grew up with any prohibitions about anything [. . .]. I had no kind of discipline in those [spiritual] areas.”

Nashashibi’s gradual opening to Islam through Black Nationalist and Black Muslim circles entailed a parallel process of assimilation into “black” and “person of color” identities. As he talked about this experience, his hand gestures and speech began to mimic an urban hip hop cadence. He pronounced “revelation” as

“re-ve-láy-shun,” each syllable distinctly and deliberately articulated with stress on the third syllable, as he described his period of intense Qur’anic study. Later in the interview he described finally assenting to the Black Muslim perspective that Islam properly understood was a message of “liberation,” again pronounced with a hip hop cadence, as “li-ber-áy-shun.” This stylistic transition in Nashashibi’s speech, as well as the physical gestures that accompanied it, projected and performed symbolically the assimilative shift—in the sense of an assimilation to South Side Black Muslim and hip hop culture—that Nashashibi had undergone. The *kufi* cap that he wore completed the image of his black-Palestinian synthesis.<sup>20</sup>

Nashashibi’s subsequent decisions to establish a family on the South Side—pointedly, not in the suburban Palestinian enclave—and to found his Islamic social service agency in the heart of an economically depressed African American and Latinx neighborhood also symbolically marked his movement away from a strict Palestinian-centered identity toward a countercultural, black (inter)nationalist (“ghetto cosmopolitan”) Islamic one (Nashashibi 2009). In both cases, Nashashibi inverted the terms of identity. He subordinated Palestinian solidarity to “blackness” as instituted in the ethos and structures of the neighborhoods in which he had chosen to forge a life. Effectively, he had integrated not into whiteness but into blackness.

This transposition of his solidarity frame—from antireligious, secular Palestinian nationalism and Third World internationalism to an Islam mediated through Black Nationalism and the challenge from, and attraction to, Black Muslims—brought Nashashibi into parallel with the global reformist Islamic revival. Hamas, the predominant Islamic-nationalist movement in the Occupied Territories, had, by this point, established itself as a formidable force in the Palestinian political field. Nashashibi encountered participants in this milieu during a summer-abroad experience at a West Bank university. He saw the potential of a movement united in Islamic commitment. At the same time, however, he rejected the “overconflat[ion]” of Islam with “the Palestinian conflict and this Palestinian struggle.” Islam, he sensed, was in danger of becoming subsumed within a narrow Palestinianism, of becoming merely a substitute for secular nationalism rather than a radically transcending force capable of resituating the question of Palestine within the shared struggles of diverse oppressed groups.

Rejecting this type of Islamic political vision, Nashashibi returned to Chicago, seeking to enact his “black” conception of transethnic “people of color” mobilization within an Islamic mode on his campus. He quickly discerned that the Muslim Student Association (MSA) groups, despite their appeal to religious universalism, remained attached to the ethnic identities—mainly Middle Eastern and South Asian—that defined their membership. Nashashibi had committed himself to a different understanding of Islam: “It was very important that the experience of the black and Latino communities and other communities really aligned with the version of Islam I was going to take in.” Nashashibi began looking beyond his university for a means to achieve this alignment.

At this critical juncture, he received a call from Najwa (pseudonym), a longtime community activist who had mentored him in the traditions of pan-Arabism and anti-imperialist internationalism at the *markaz*. Najwa offered Nashashibi a job working at the Arab Community Center in a program aimed at Palestinian immigrant youth living on the Southwest Side. Nashashibi accepted the position and very soon succeeded in leading a resurgence of youth participation in the *markaz*'s programs. As part of this effort, Nashashibi encouraged discussions of religion and gradually began implementing organized prayer for youth on the *markaz*'s premises. Almost instantly, older, established staff and leadership objected:

I would get up, and I'd be denouncing the bankrupt [laughing] secular vantage point. Then the [*markaz* leadership] would call me in [ . . . ] and they would be like, 'You offended half the people from our community,' and I was like: 'The only reason I got entire families back into the center is because [of this]. You can't talk about the Palestinian thing without talking about how important spiritual religious identity was for [the families], so why are you dismissing this?' [ . . . ] Remember at that time that 63rd [Street] was really configured along these [community] centers and how many of them were secular, and some of the mosques were just beginning to emerge at the time [ . . . ]. So the families were just shocked that I was having programming in the center where there would be *salat* [the mandated five daily prayers], you know, that kids were coming back [to their parents] and they would talk about learning about *salat* in the *markaz* and you know that was such a foreign concept for them . . . because the *markaz* was completely not associated with *salat*, and matter of fact some of the families were not sending their children to the *markaz* because [they thought] 'they were Communists.' [So], we started bringing to the *markaz* Muslims from all over the city who were coming to connect with these Muslim kids and so Muslim identity became [central for us]. And then a group of African American Muslims from the East Side started coming through, you know, it was the first time Palestinian Muslim kids started thinking about Islam in a way that connected them to these other Muslims, and started connecting them to the African American Muslims. [This was] the early evolution of IMAN. At a certain point working out of the *markaz* we realized we [needed] to have our own separate nonprofit [that] really highlighted Islam, where it didn't have to constantly contend with the conflicting ideologies [at the *markaz*], where we didn't have to rationalize [the Islamic focus].

The formation of IMAN signaled Nashashibi's definitive break with secularism. He chose premises immediately to the east of the soon-to-close *markaz* on West 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. Many of the young activists he had recruited and oriented toward Islam followed him to help establish the new initiative. The shift eastward situated IMAN in the heart of the African American and Latinx communities of West Englewood and in doing so announced a corresponding distancing from the *markaz*'s orientation toward Palestinian and Arab empowerment and liberation. The new organization, which began to draw significant donor support, quickly became a magnet for young Muslim volunteers from diverse ethnic communities across the city. Its programs focused predominantly on black and Latinx needs: ex-prisoner reentry,

medical needs for the surrounding neighborhoods, arts events and programming, and public forums.<sup>21</sup> Through these activities, IMAN enacted a vision of Islam as a transethnic solidarity frame rooted principally in South Side black cultural forms and Black Muslim traditions and practices.

In addition to breaking with *markaz* secularism, Nashashibi's shift eastward also repudiated what the wealthy middle class mosque institutions in the newly suburbanized Palestinian enclave seemed to represent: upward mobility and abandonment of the South Side communities in which Palestinians had lived for decades. Nashashibi and IMAN refused to follow this trend and in doing so resisted Islamic reformism and its affinity with the professional and business-oriented middle class ethos in the suburbs. Commenting on this fact, Nashashibi stated: "It was very symbolic, 'cause even though we are only a mile, really only a mile and a half at most east of where we are right now [the mosque in which we held the interview], we went the opposite direction of where the migration pattern was happening." Nashashibi was speaking enthusiastically at this point in the interview: this contrast was a good thing to him.

The dual rejection of suburban reformism and *markaz* secularism stemmed ultimately from Nashashibi's deep disenchantment with the privileging of Palestinian or even strictly Muslim suffering and demands for liberation above all other experiences of oppression. He commented: "[What I resented about the] obsession about the Palestinian framework and even the Muslim-national discourse was its just utter lack of creativity, its inability to really draw on the human experience and make those connections real, and the total self-centered way in which people thought about [the Palestinian cause]." He pointed especially to how wealthy Palestinians had built "massive villas alongside refugee camps the same way folks [Israeli settlers] build settlements along refugee camps." A similar phenomenon, by implication, appeared to be manifesting in the shift to the suburbs.

Against this individual self-dealing and accompanying ethnocentrism, Nashashibi invoked the late Edward Said's appeal to a universal humanistic outlook.<sup>22</sup> Originally critical of Said's "eliticism" (sic), Nashashibi had come years later to see the views of this preeminent public intellectual as echoing the Islamic cosmopolitanism he desired to enact. He interpreted Said as offering a global humanistic perspective that brought the diverse experiences of peoples who struggled with the aftermath of colonialism into conversation. He advocated for the Palestinian cause within this universal framework and in doing so was able to draw others into solidarity with Palestinians.

Nashashibi viewed Islam in a similar way: as a universal spiritual canopy under which communities of color, including Palestinians, could come together in a common struggle for justice. But, by the same token, each community's struggle had to coexist alongside others. This required a critical reflexivity that revealed one's own connection to, and possible complicity in, the suffering of others. In Nashashibi's view, Palestinians had failed to see beyond their own trauma, to

connect profoundly with the experience of others, and this had led to their isolation. The national liberation movement had not drawn in new allies. It had become repetitive and hollowed out.

Nashashibi cited the behavior of Palestinian activists at the 2001 United Nations conference on racism in Durban, South Africa as an example of this failure of empathy. He remarked: “[The conference was] totally being, on some level for me, somewhat hijacked [in its] ability to move forward unless and until we denounce Zionism as racism.” The Palestinians, he recalled, were refusing any forward movement until this explicit denunciation happened. The message Palestinian attendees seemed to be conveying was that only Palestinian suffering mattered. To Nashashibi, this obstinacy was hypocritical in view of the “rampant but unacknowledged racism in the Arab world, the rampant racism that even exists within the Palestinian communities here in Chicago [ . . . ].” He pointed to the Arabic expression “*sakin ‘ind al-‘abid*” (“living near the slaves,” to refer to living near black communities) as an example of the casual, unexamined bigotry in the community. The failure to address racism in their own midst, argued Nashashibi, “to really immerse ourselves in a deeper humanity,” not unlike what Said did, had “led to a lack of moral authority on this position [that is, that Zionism was racism and that Palestinians were victims of racism].”

Nashashibi’s sensitivity to the question of race and the hypocrisy implicit in a Palestinian nationalism that, in his view, had demoted the suffering of others led him to clash openly with community leaders. He recalled one incident in which he criticized a delegation of Palestinian lawyers who had come to the *markaz* to meet with local activists. The lawyers seemed to lecture the group, which included African Americans from the surrounding community, for failing to see how their taxes supported Palestinian oppression. Nashashibi criticized the lawyers for failing to understand how taxation actually hurt the local community because of the unequal distribution of public funds. They had failed, as well, he said, to see the racism of local Palestinian shop owners whose stores exploited their African American and Latinx customers, operating “under the same logic as settlers in the West Bank.” The lawyers “FLIPPED!” he recalled, retorting angrily, “How can you compare that to this!”<sup>23</sup>

The incident underscored Nashashibi’s growing alienation from Palestine advocacy and from nationalism generally. Nationalist agitation, secular or Islamic, had become stale and ineffective. He commented: “[In the community], every crisis leads to the same type of emotional demand to take 15–20,000 people downtown in front of the Plaza Center.” But these protests had little if any real effect on policy. The same people continued to appear at these demonstrations. The community seemed only to be speaking to itself. What was needed, instead, was “deep community building” that went beyond a “static framework of advocacy for *filastin* [Palestine].” The older secular nationalist leaders at the *markaz* had done “phenomenal work in reaching out and working with Harold

Washington [the first black mayor of Chicago]; there were those pioneers in our community.” But the efforts of these secularist forerunners of internationalism had failed to establish the necessary deep connections to sustain the intercommunal solidarity:

A lot of that solidarity was prompted by the black community’s understanding of, like, the symmetry between South Africa and the anti-apartheid alignment with Israel and some of the international socialist frameworks that existed at the time. It wasn’t done by deep community building grassroots stuff on the ground. [Deep community building] has the possibility of fundamentally changing the political discourse, but I think we need to do this in a way that is not just politically expedient.

Deep community building, in other words, inherently removed Palestine as the central focus of solidarity and mobilization. This shift inevitably called into question the nationalist framing of the Palestinian cause. Nashashibi explained further:

[We have] to deconstruct some of our own “isms” [. . .]. [For example] we can’t still be locked in a very sentimental kind of construction about Zionism. I’m not defending Zionism [. . .], [but] there’s a passage in Qur’an where even Allah is [. . .] telling the Muslims, ‘Don’t curse the gods of the *mushrikin* [idolaters],’ right? [Qur’an 6:108] And if this is coming from [. . .] the Supreme Entity of the Universe telling you not to curse what in Islam is seen as one of the most grave sins, calling on other gods, but not to curse those gods, [then] why [is God saying this]? And the logic is because you may then invite them to turn around and curse Allah. But there is another principle there about cursing what other people find sacred [. . .]. We have to understand how some segments of the Jewish community found solace in a discourse that tried to provide them with a sense of national identity [. . .]. Zionism has translated into different things for different people. The writings of Jabotinsky are very different from the writings of [. . .] Herzl or others. [But, also], nationalism as an early twentieth century discourse had many things that were antithetical to the spirit of human dignity and justice [. . .], including [for] many Arab people and Muslims in other parts of the world [. . .]. You can go to parts of the Khalij [the Arabian Gulf region] today and see Muslim workers living essentially in modern-day concentration camps [. . .]. We just need to think in a new framework. Palestinians have always been the ones to shift the discourse.

For Palestinians, as Nashashibi hints, perhaps the most difficult “ism” to confront was the set of assumptions through which they understood Zionism. Nashashibi’s Qur’anic-Saidian universalism did not deny the suffering of Palestinians; rather, it decentered it, placing it alongside the suffering of others, including that of Jews, whose embrace of diverse forms of Zionism had to be grasped empathetically as an attempt to come to terms with devastating persecution. And yet, Nashashibi’s criticism of nationalism in all of its forms extended as well to Zionism. The bankruptcy of all types of nationalism lay in how these ideologies sundered intercommunal human solidarity rooted in an empathetic immersion in the struggles of other oppressed groups.

As a Palestinian who had entered into the urban black experience of Chicago's South Side, Nashashibi sought to "shift the discourse." He did so by reframing the question of Palestine within the universal symbols and institutions of an emergent, transethnic Islam that engaged politics at the intersection of race, class, and ethnicity "back home" and "in the 'hood." But, within this cosmopolitan vision, Nashashibi refigured Islam itself as well, rendering it into a syncretic form that even as it affirmed the One God nevertheless refused to curse the gods of others. Islamic brotherhood and sisterhood—and the ties of faith, broadly—replaced the ethnic nation as the horizon of solidarity *prima facie*. But this solidarity required a reflexive, relativizing stance that decentered both the *ethnos* and, at its logical extreme, the religious community itself. In a personal communication to me in March 2019, Nashashibi gestured toward this transcendent horizon:

I typically avoid talking about Islam as 'one thing' and typically will avoid the term 'Islamic' as an adjective to ever describe any facet of our work. I rather try to talk about how I'm drawn to a particular approach to Islam or how living out commitments in the Muslim tradition are things I aspire towards.

This was a subtle point: IMAN, Nashashibi implied, was a framework spanning diverse instantiations of piety and practice as well as of race, class, and ethnicity. Islam was not one thing but rather a range of perspectives to which Nashashibi and possibly also IMAN's staff and program participants were oriented. At this furthest extent, Islam became an empathetic, spiritual union of individuals across race, ethnicity, nation, class, and creed. The *umma* was the new cosmopolitan frame, secular in its Saidian humanism, religious in its spiritual horizon.

#### ACCOMMODATION

The third typological variation I focus on in this chapter is accommodation. As with reversion and conversion, the movement in this type is from secularism toward piety. Yet, also like the other two types, the shift is syncretic. Accommodation adapts to and partly integrates piety while maintaining practices, orientations, and organizational ties with the secularist milieu. As in the other cases, race, gender, and family ties to Palestine play critical roles in shaping a self-perception as Palestinian, a member of a negatively privileged group in the United States and in the Middle East. Community networks, secular and religious, provide a contrasting, empowering context within which Palestinian and religious identity receives positive valuation. Historical and structural factors—the First Intifada and the September 11 attacks, especially, as well as the suburban demographic and religious transition—also exert a determinative influence.

The individual I have chosen to illustrate the accommodation trajectory was a community organizer in her mid-thirties when I interviewed her. Intisar (pseudonym) began her career as an intern with the AAAN. At the time of our

conversation, she had recently completed law school and started work as a civil rights attorney for a small firm downtown. She retained ties with the AAAN nevertheless, and met me at its premises on West 63<sup>rd</sup> Street for our interview. It was Ramadan when we spoke. I found her taking a cigarette break on the back fire escape. She was wearing a white blouse and blue jeans, no scarf.

*Social Background and Early Identity-Formation Processes*

Intisar was born in the Occupied West Bank during the 1970s. She arrived in Chicago with her parents when she was only two months old. Like Nawal's family, Intisar's mother and father followed in the path of relatives who had established themselves in the city. Her uncles had settled in a North Side neighborhood with a high concentration of Puerto Rican families. They had come to the United States, arriving first in Puerto Rico, just before the war of 1967. After working in factories and then engaging in peddling, a well-established trajectory for Palestinian immigrants, the uncles pooled their capital to set up small businesses in the area. Intisar's father joined his brothers in their businesses. Her parents soon divorced, however, forcing Intisar's mother to earn money by providing childcare for neighborhood families and selling homemade cheese and yogurt in the local Arab shops.

As other relatives from their West Bank village arrived, a small nucleus of Palestinian families gradually established itself in Intisar's North Side neighborhood. The community was diverse yet divided. Intisar described the solidarity she felt with non-whites, especially. "It was African-American, Latino, and Arab, basically," she said, "we were kind of stuck together." Against this front, "you had the Caucasian community but we didn't mix with them." For Intisar, as with Nashashibi, in the American diaspora, learning to be Arab entailed learning that one was not white, indeed, that one was essentially black and thus negatively privileged within the racial hierarchies structuring Chicago.

Yet the micropolitics of race in her neighborhood were not Intisar's only identity determinant. Equally influential was a family and community life focused intensely on Palestine. Her mother and uncles attended Palestinian events across the city and were loyal participants in the activities of the Arab Community Center. As one AAAN leader put it, Intisar was "a child of the *markaz*," regularly joining in its Arabic lessons and *dabka* instruction.

An important moment in the formation of Intisar's secular nationalist orientation occurred in 1986, when her mother took her and her sister to Palestine, intending to remain there permanently. Her mother had maintained ties "back home," desiring to preserve the continuity of Palestinian traditions, family affiliations, and Arabic language in her daughters. Eighteen months after their arrival in the West Bank, the First Intifada began. Like so many other youth, Intisar was swept up into the daily demonstrations. Through these experiences of protest, she absorbed the Intifada's culture of activism. Ultimately, lacking residency permits—the family had been issued three-month tourist visas at the airport, which they

had overstayed—and worried about re-entry to the United States, they returned to Chicago as the uprising continued to surge in 1988.

As she reflected on these events, Intisar melded her memories of that time with other formative historical traumas she had witnessed through televised media. One such event stood out: the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon in September 1982. “I heard my uncles and my family yelling and screaming at the TV,” she recalled “saying, ‘The US government is not going to do anything for us!’” Commenting on this, she said the understanding was “we’re just here to work, and eventually we’re going to go back home, that’s our goal [ . . . ] ‘cause here, even if you become a US citizen it’s not going to matter, and we’re not any better than the other Palestinians back home.’ That’s the way we grew up.”

The succession of traumatizing events strengthened this presumption across generations. As Intisar related, “Sabra and Shatila have often come back to me.” In 2008, as the Israeli “Operation Cast Lead” bombing and invasion of the Gaza Strip was underway, she returned from a meeting to plan protest demonstrations in Chicago’s Loop to find her daughters watching footage of the violence on the Al Jazeera satellite feed in their home. Mediated political events “back home” or close to home—as in Sabra and Shatila or in Gaza—continually restaged, in the diaspora, the repression, dispersion, suffering, and resistance that constituted the core symbols and themes of Palestinian memory. Just as she had experienced, Intisar’s daughters also absorbed Palestinian identity through this process.

Diaspora institutions reinforced this phenomenon, channeling incipient nationalist feelings into various forms of advocacy and activism. After returning from Palestine, Intisar, for example, underwent a process of training and mobilization through participation in protest actions organized by the *markaz*. She also, like Nawal and Nashashibi, became connected with student activism on university campuses. She joined the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) during her first year of university studies. GUPS provided a broad organizing structure that instilled secular nationalist orientations within university youth. In joining GUPS, Intisar entered directly into this stream of politics and identity.

Significantly, Intisar underwent this mobilization process at the very moment—the first Gulf War of 1990–91, which substantially weakened Fatah and the PLO—in which secular nationalism began to lose its hegemonic position. The subsequent Oslo Peace Process and formation of the Palestinian National Authority furthered this weakening by effectively demobilizing the diaspora as a political force (Frisch 2012). In Palestine, political Islamic groups stepped into the breach, offering a vision of continued armed struggle with sacred intent (*jihad fi sabil illah*). In Chicago, Islamic religious institutionalization, the demographic shift to the suburbs, the disappointing results of the Oslo Process, and, finally, the events of September 11, 2001, caused some secularists to reevaluate their affiliations and orientations.

*“The Islam in Me Exploded!”*

September 11 provided a powerful, paradoxical impetus for Palestinians to identify as Muslims above all else. A new framing of the global order—posing a “victimized” US society against a malevolent Islam—dominated national discourse. Locally, the aggressive enactment of this framing, as it occurred, for example, in a march by white suburbanites on the Mosque Foundation, caused Palestinian Muslims to respond as Muslims (Goodstein and Niebuhr 2001; Fountain 2001). Intisar, who was working with youth at the AAAN at the time, described how some participants in her program responded by asserting their identities as Muslims: “After 9/11, a lot of our community really turned toward religion, people were looking for something to hold on to [ . . . ]. My students described it as, ‘The Islam in me exploded!’ right?”

“The Islam in me exploded,” I said. “That’s a powerful image, especially after 9/11.”

“Yeah,” she replied.

I had to defend myself as a Muslim now. I had no choice. When they are attacking Islam, they are attacking me. Maybe we’re not wearing hijab [and Intisar did not], we’re not praying, we’re not fasting or whatever, but the fact is you’re attacking me as ‘Islam,’ as Muslim. The Islam in me just exploded, right? And I’m not gonna stay quiet. A lot of our young women started wearing the hijab at that time. It became like a political statement.

As reflected in Intisar’s narrative, the September 11 attacks intensified a transposition of Palestinian identity into an Islamic framework that had already begun during the previous decade. For the young Muslim women that Intisar described, the hijab was a sign, not of piety per se, but of a new political solidarity. This embrace of an Islamic identity in response to the post-September 11 anti-Muslim reaction occurred simultaneously with the continuing expansion of Islamic organizational structures in the suburbs.

This transformation affected Intisar directly, not just her students. In 2003, only two years after the September 11 attacks, Intisar and her family moved to the southwestern suburbs. Initially, Intisar placed her daughters in the public schools. White classmates taunted her eldest daughter, calling her a terrorist. Intisar conferred with other parents and teachers, suggesting that the school institute anti-racism trainings. The school resisted this idea, according to Intisar. The harassment continued. Her daughter then asked to be enrolled in the Aqsa School, the private Islamic institution across from the Mosque Foundation. Concerned that she be protected and affirmed in her Palestinian identity—Aqsa drew its students primarily from Palestinian Muslim families in the suburbs—Intisar agreed to her daughter’s request after making sure she understood she would have to conform to the school’s Islamic disciplines (prayer and wearing the hijab scarf,

for example). This decision, a response to the racist backlash, led Intisar into direct interaction with the piety-minded milieu of the suburbs; it also reshaped the ethos of the family generationally, as her daughters embraced the religious practices that marked membership in the new suburban enclave.

The second impetus for Intisar's integration into the Islamic institutions flowed from cultural and strategic shifts within the secularist milieu itself. These changes directly affected the trajectory of Intisar's career. During the late 1990s, Intisar's immediate supervisor at the newly established AAAN, a person who, like Intisar, had been thoroughly imbued with the secularist ethos, began to respond to the religious shift that Nashashibi had been encouraging. The supervisor began to pray regularly and gave up drinking alcohol. He also astutely observed that secularists had no choice but to work with the mosques. The immigrant community had moved to the suburbs, and the mosques in these areas, the Mosque Foundation especially, had now become its primary institutional anchors. The mosques could mobilize large numbers for demonstrations and other public actions on behalf of Palestinian issues. The centers could either cooperate with them or become isolated and irrelevant. With this understanding, her supervisor urged Intisar to approach the Mosque Foundation leadership to develop collaboration on a range of social programs. Intisar hesitated. Among secularists, the mosque's imam had the reputation of being a humorless ideologue who refused to interact with un-scarved, un-coated women. She contacted him anyway, however, and to her surprise he welcomed her overture.

Intisar's engagement with the Mosque Foundation also coincided with a gradual shift in her career. In 2006, a civil rights organization offered her a position as an organizer. Her AAAN mentors encouraged her to take the job, arguing that it would enable her to establish bridges between Palestinians and other important groups across the city. Soon after beginning her work for the organization, a Latinx colleague challenged her refusal to participate in voting. Intisar had viewed voting as pointless in a country so thoroughly committed to Israel. Through her interactions with her new coworker, however, she began to see the rationale for mobilizing the Palestinian and Arab base: in coalition with other groups, Palestinians could advocate for their interests at different levels of government.

This shift in her views about political participation and mobilization led her to deepen her working relationships with Mosque Foundation leaders in the suburbs. The intensified cooperation she developed with them soon evolved into close coordination on civil rights advocacy. It also eventually led to an unexpected professional opportunity. Because of its centrality to the growing Arab immigrant community in the suburbs, the Mosque Foundation had become a central force in the city's Islamic coalitions. And through this role it began to create working relationships with other coalitions like the civil rights group with which Intisar was associated. Intisar's position within these cross-cutting networks made her an attractive candidate for a position with a new Muslim advocacy organization that the Mosque Foundation leadership had helped to create. This structure brought

together the major Islamic formations in the city to act as a single, coordinated force in local and state politics. Intrigued by the possibilities, Intisar accepted the offer to work in the new organization.

Intisar's narrative illustrates the transformations that could occur as individuals traveled through and across secular (nonsectarian) and religious spaces. She remained a "non-hijabi" and smoked during Ramadan, at least whenever she found herself alone on the premises of the Arab American Action Network, "back in the 'hood." But she also claimed during our interview to have started to pray and fast. She spoke of the Mosque Foundation as "my home." She defended the *shaykhs* who led the mosque, describing them as "uncles" who staunchly supported her work, even in the face of attempts within the community to delegitimize participation in the US political system as *haram* (proscribed by Islamic law). She recounted one of the Mosque Foundation imams telling her: "Look, it's very important for us to show our power, so don't give up whenever an issue comes up; you need to keep doing this work."

As she prepared to take up her new job, Intisar blurred the lines dividing secular and Islamic milieus. She selectively integrated elements of reformist piety into her own secularist demeanor, casting her work with the Islamic structures as an extension of the civil rights advocacy she had been engaged in all along. Seemingly there was no tension, no internal division. The community included the mosques; the mosques defended the community. The secular encompassed Islam; Islam incorporated the secular.

In this apparent fusion, Intisar exemplified a trajectory whose impetus lay in the post-Oslo crisis that weakened PLO-led secularism. This trajectory responded pragmatically to the shifting circumstances, forging a syncretic secularity that overcame the crisis of secularism through an accommodation of the religious. This accommodation effectively sacralized the secular, recasting political empowerment and mobilization in terms of Islamic solidarity. The transposition represented more than a mere instrumental or strategic shift: at the time of our interview, Intisar had seemingly integrated some Islamic practices into her daily life and had come to see Islam as continuous with her political and moral commitments. She stopped short of a complete identification with reformist piety, however, and four years after our interview she had left the Islamic organization to embark on a career as an attorney with a firm whose staff included individuals from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, she maintained links with the Islamic milieu by participating in the annual conference of American Muslims for Palestine and consulting with the Mosque Foundation on civil rights issues.

## CONCLUSION

Reversion, conversion, and accommodation, as I have defined these terms in this chapter, describe movements from secular or secularist milieus into religious institutional spaces. These movements result in various types of syncretic

secularity that I have termed “religious secularity.” Reversion entails an oscillation from religious to secular back to religious. Conversion involves a single movement from secular to religious. Accommodation is a partial shift from the secular to the religious. In each of these cases, the secular is never fully relinquished but rather repositioned and resignified within a sacralizing framework.

In Nawal’s case, there was a modification of reformist orthopraxy to facilitate social interactions within secular space, but, at the same time, Nawal, through the enactment of her piety, sacralized the secular spaces within which she worked. Rami Nashashibi’s conversion similarly resulted in a religious modification of the secular: his embrace of Islamic piety produced a religious variation of the transnational Third World solidarity frame of the leftist movements that cohered in the former *markaz* during the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, Intisar, in her partial shift toward the Islamic milieu, elided the secular-religious boundary as she transposed her political activism into religious structures.

In all three of these profiles, gender, race, class, and the historical convergence of secularist attenuation with Islamic ascendancy revealed the causes and direction of the syncretic shift. The weakening of secularism, the demographic shift to the suburbs, and the expansion of Islamic organizations created the conditions for a generational transformation of value orientations and solidarity structures. Nawal, Nashashibi, and Intisar’s narratives registered this phenomenon in the transitions each of these individuals underwent in their orientations and affiliations. Gender especially shaped Nawal’s trajectory. Her struggles for autonomy within her family led her to adopt a reformist Islamic critique of patriarchy as “culture.” Her relationship with her mother, as well, provided a gynocentric matrix for her embrace of piety: prayer, Qur’an recitation, and modest dress, including the scarf, became conduits of emotional connection and continuity as her mother faced death.

Race and class, by contrast, emerged as the most powerful determinants of Nashashibi’s movement from secular to religious. In his case, the religious shift occurred as part of his assimilation into Black Nationalist and Black Muslim contexts. The site of this shift, the economically depressed South Side, contrasted sharply with Nashashibi’s elite upbringing and with the middle class piety of the new suburban Palestinian communities. Race affected Intisar, too, but her response was to affiliate with the suburban religious milieu. These same factors of race, class, and gender appear in the next chapter, too. The typological focus changes, however, to a focus on syncretic movements whose origins lie in dynamics internal to the sectarian religious space.