

If you visit the University of Houston's Student Center South on a Monday, you might run into a group of students running the "Dawah Dollar Mondays" table event. They ask passing students one question about Islam, and if the participant answers correctly, they win cash.

The University of Houston Muslim Student Association (UHMSA) hosts the Dawah table as a form of community outreach and education. The association has existed at the University of Houston (UH) for approximately six decades; however, the organization's history has seen little coverage in yearbooks and school newspapers. Nevertheless, the Muslim Student Association has substantially impacted Houston, which boasts the largest Muslim population in Texas.¹

The introduction of Islamic thought in Houston came through the African American-led nationalist and religious movement, Nation of Islam (NOI), which differed in certain ways to mainstream Islam. African American Muslims created the first mosque in Houston in 1945 in a barbershop owned by Charlie Boyd. Barbershops soon became a way to spread the word about the NOI in Third Ward. The location of this Muslim community moved from place to place to accommodate their growing numbers, even settling in the historic El Dorado Ballroom for a time.²

The first permanent mosque, Masjid Al-Islam, opened in 1978 in a pre-existing building on Bellfort Avenue that formerly served as the First Church of Christ, Scientist. When Third Ward Muslim community members first set

A Pioneer of Local Diversity: University of Houston's Muslim Student Association

By Laura Mullis Brown

practices. The mosque served the community for decades, until Hurricane Ike damaged it in 2008.³

their sights on this building, they lacked the funds to buy the property. With the help of a generous donation from world champion boxer Muhammad Ali and his manager Jabir Muhammad, congregants purchased and quickly renovated the building as a mosque to fit their Islamic



Boxing champion Muhammad Ali donated money to establish Houston's first mosque.

Photo courtesy of John Matthew Smith, and Wikimedia Commons.

Ahmed Sharma, a Fox 26 reporter and UHMSA alumnus, was one of the first to bring this story to light. "The sad truth is, nobody knew [about the first mosque's founding] except for African American Muslims because their story was passed down through their community. It kind of upset [me]. Why had nobody told me that Muhammad Ali was part of Houston history? I was fortunate that I got to help tell that story, but that wouldn't have happened without African American Muslims being so open with sharing their stories with me. ... I wrote on it, but this is their story." Sharma has

UHMSA poses with their trophies after winning first place for the 2022-23 school year at the state-wide MSA Showdown. MSA organizations from across Texas compete in sports, Nasheed (singing), fashion, and more.

Photo courtesy of UHMSA marketing coordinator Zuhayr Haq.





Masjid Warithuddeen Mohammad is named after the son of Elijah Muhammad, Honorable Imam W. Deen Mohammed. A famous Muslim American scholar and Islamic trailblazer, he rejected his father's ideologies, discontinued the aggressive NOI policies, and created a welcoming community open to all practitioners of orthodox Sunni Islam.

Photo courtesy of Miranda Ruzinsky.

made it his life's work to continue to share the stories of Houston's Muslim community.⁴

After Hurricane Ike, a new masjid opened in the same location in August 2010. It was renamed Masjid Warithuddeen Mohammad, after the leader who eventually dissolved the NOI and converted many followers to orthodox Sunni Islam. The building became the "first mosque built in the United States (from the ground up) using West African architecture."⁵

During the 1950s and the 1960s, Houston's Islamic community saw a large influx of people seeking employment in the Texas Medical Center. With this growth, graduate student Mazhar Kazi (now Dr. Mazhar Kazi) and other UH students formed the Muslim Student Association in 1964 as one of the nation's first Muslim student organizations. Its initial purpose was to hold Friday prayer, or Jum'ah, which is Islam's dedicated day for congregational worship and sermons.⁶



Arriving in the United States as a UH graduate student in 1963, Pakistani native, Dr. Mazhar Kazi, shown on campus at left, has devoted his life to Islamic leadership. He created UHMSA as UH's first Muslim organization, became a founding member of Islamic Society of Greater Houston, and wrote over a dozen books on Islamic scholarship.

Photo courtesy of Yasir Qadhi.

Just a year after UHMSA's formation, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson to end the restrictions imposed by the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, which used quotas and literacy tests to limit immigration to the United States from most parts of the world except Western Europe. The end of these quotas in 1965 offered opportunities for Muslims around the world, especially those from South Asia who were previously barred, to immigrate to the United States. This act also opened the door for a population boom in various U.S. ethnic and racial communities, resulting in the diversification of many local cultures.⁷

UH students became a key force in bringing together Muslims across the Greater Houston area. The Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH) is currently the largest Islamic society in North America, and it credits the beginning of the Houston Islamic community to a small group of UH students and other young professionals who created a network of Muslims who gathered to pray at each other's houses because they lacked a masjid of their own. This grew



The 1982 UH yearbook shows members of the "Moslem Student Society" supporting the struggle of political prisoners and Iranians.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1982, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

into the ISGH by 1969. Today, it oversees twenty Islamic centers across Greater Houston as well as six Islamic schools and a Muslim cemetery.⁸

Throughout the twentieth century, UHMSA changed its organization as new students brought in new perspectives, but it never abandoned the goal of bringing together Muslim students and helping them become active in the campus community. From its early years until the mid-1980s, the organization was called the "Moslem Student Society." During this time, the group was politically active in international affairs, but members were fearful about their place on campus because of the unstable political climate. By 1979, Muslim students and approximately 2,000 Iranian students

in the Houston area were on edge. Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shi'ite religious scholar, rose to political leadership after the 1979 fall of the Shah in Iran, resulting in the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the revolution, Iranians captured more than fifty Americans at the U.S. embassy and held them hostage for 444 days in what came to be known as the Iranian Hostage Crisis. UH students protested the new Iranian government with flag burnings and various demonstrations.⁹

The *New York Times* reported Iranian UH student Ali Amoron expressed fear of leaving his home, explaining, "I am afraid someone will kill me." Non-Iranian students confirmed that these fears were warranted. Many American Muslims at UH did not approve of Khomeini's actions. On February 2, 1983, Muslim students protested Khomeini's imprisonment of his political opponents and circulated petitions at the rally to send to the United Nations.¹⁰

In addition to its political activism, UHMSA played an active role in the more festive and light-hearted affairs of the university. In the 1990 International Food Fair, UHMSA



In 2002, UHMSA hosted Islamic Awareness Day where they displayed items from their religious heritage to connect with the student body after 9/11.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 2002, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

ranked third for its booth that sported a replica of an "ancient place of worship."¹¹

Through the 2000s, the Muslim Student Association went through its own struggles. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Muslim students were thrust to the forefront of political discussion on campus. They reported being verbally harassed and attacked, and many opted to be escorted to class for their protection. UHMSA argued that non-Muslims and Muslims were all affected by the events, and that UH students should not be harassed for their faith. To better connect with other students and promote greater understanding of the Islamic religion after 9/11, UHMSA hosted Islamic Awareness Day, featuring an educational



UHMSA members at the Dawah table event of 2022.

Photo by Laura Mullis Brown.

display. Other students continued to hold various demonstrations to voice their beliefs on how Americans should react to the tragedy.¹²

During this time of turmoil, UHMSA played an integral role in making Muslim students feel at home at UH. They held their own summer orientations for incoming freshmen and practiced traditions that continue today. For example, they started a Dawah table in the Philip Guthrie Hoffman Hall breezeway where they shared food and pamphlets and informed students about Islam. More than ten years later, the Dawah table remains a regular event for the organization. As the United States moved closer toward a war against Iraq, which began in 2003, students rallied and protested. Pro-war and anti-war sentiments were often expressed, with many Muslim students joining in anti-war protests on the one-year anniversary of 9/11. These demonstrations ended up clashing, and police were present to prevent escalation.¹³

To continue community outreach and to fight Islamophobia, UHMSA began one of its largest campus initiatives: a charity event known as the Fast-a-Thon. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims abstain from food and



UHMSA members served food to UH students who pledged to participate in the 2009 annual Fast-a-Thon during Ramadan to raise money for charity.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 2009, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



UHMSA members meet in the UH MD Anderson Library basement.

Photo courtesy of UHMSA marketing coordinator Zuhayr Haq.

drink from dawn to dusk. All students were invited to sign a pledge to fast for one day of Ramadan. Local businesses sponsored non-Muslims who decided to fast, and UHMSA donated all proceeds to charity. The 2009 Fast-a-Thon pledged its funds to Target Hunger, a Houston-based charity that assists children, families, and seniors who experience food insecurity.¹⁴ At the end of the day, the UHMSA invited participants to join them in a meal to break their fast.

Today, UHMSA continues to be an active force in the lives of Muslims at the University of Houston. Starting in 2015, UH began collaborating with UHMSA to create more halal options on campus. Halal dining options were labeled in dining halls, halal food trucks were brought to campus, and halal snack options were made available in the campus convenience stores. UHMSA also started the American Muslim Mentorship Program (AMMP), which provides professional development training to underclassmen. This includes workshops, how-to activities on creating resumes, and a mentorship program that connects members to upperclassmen and alumni.¹⁵

Muslim students have continued to make their voices heard during politically turbulent times. In 2017, UHMSA members participated in protests that opposed Executive Order 13769 signed by former president Donald Trump that prevented travelers and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries from coming to the United States. Ahmed Sharma recalled the fear that weighed upon the UHMSA members: "What did this mean for us or our parents? ... We were all so worried about what would happen." During this time, UHMSA leaders urged students, "If you don't feel safe, keep each other around. Please walk with each other and don't leave anyone behind." These measures were much like the ones put in place following 9/11; however, this time, little backlash occurred. "Fortunately, nothing happened because people at UH are so diverse." Sharma and his peers also participated in pro-Palestine protests across the Houston area.¹⁶

UHMSA has tried to further its community outreach in creative ways like its "Muslims Heart Jesus" discussion table where they challenged passing students to guess if quotes about Jesus came from the Quran or the Bible. This encouraged further conversation and curiosity about the topic. Members have also participated in numerous philanthropic projects such as UH's charity week, raising funds through a bake sale and a game night.¹⁷

In the fall 2022 semester, UHMSA members reported that their current prayer space in the MD Anderson library basement could no longer accommodate the number of students who came for daily prayers. The A. D. Bruce Religion Center opened in 1965, a year after UHMSA was founded, but the design had no accommodations for the Islamic practice of ritual washing or a wide-open space for prayer. Today, UHMSA members meet in the library basement and are working with the Student Government Association to find a place that is more suitable for their needs.¹⁸

UHMSA has provided a space of worship and connection for UH Muslims for almost sixty years and evolved into an influential organization. Its growth and diversity reflect the expansion of the Houston Muslim population, and the organization continues to cater to the needs of the community. The group welcomes Muslims "from all backgrounds and cultures to find a supportive community," and embraces practicing students with different levels of religiosity. The UHMSA website promotes religious, social, and professional development events, public service projects, and seeks to educate the wider UH community on "what Islam truly teaches and what being a Muslim is all about."¹⁹ UHMSA remains a beacon of kinship for local Muslims and an inspiration of diversity and equality for Houstonians. **HH**

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