

I am an American We are One Nation

STRESSING WHAT WE HAVE IN COMMON

Cincinnati Islamic leader honored to join national Muslim-Jewish council

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Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.

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CARA OWSLEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

Shakila Ahmad, board chair and president of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati in West Chester, Ohio, has agreed to serve on the national Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council.

Shakila Ahmad

Profession: President and chair of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati board. Director of business management at Allergy & Asthma Specialty Center.

Age: 56 **Home:** Evendale, Ohio **Mission:** Bringing people together, educating and learning to build a strong community that relies on all of us.

CINCINNATI - Shakila Ahmad doesn't really shake your hand, she embraces it.

She shakes with one hand, while placing her other hand on top of yours as a kind of hand-hug.

It's the kind of greeting that puts strangers immediately at ease.

Ahmad is a Muslim-American woman who has spent much of her life drawing people in from various communities, religions and political persuasions to help educate others about Islam.

And that is why Bob Silverman, the U.S. director of Muslim-Jewish Relations for the American Jewish Committee, invited her to join the national Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council last year.

The council was launched by the AJC and the Islamic Society of North America in November to advocate on shared national issues and concerns.

Ahmad is one of 31 Muslim and Jewish leaders who will serve on the council, designed to fight Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

Her work at the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati in West Chester, Ohio, for more than 20 years made her a natural for inclusion on the council.

“She’s a sparkling individual,” Silverman said. “She’s been a real force for good.”

Ahmad said she was both honored and a bit reluctant to take on the role, given her local commitments. She is president and board chair of the Cincinnati center.

“If Jewish Americans are reaching out and I have the opportunity to make a positive impact, then I’m being selfish for saying I don’t have time,” she said.

Ahmad was the first woman and the youngest to serve on the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati’s board. She created its Tours and Talks program to educate law enforcement officers, business leaders, nonprofit groups, schools and communities about Islam. She was the founding member of the center’s Muslim Mothers Against Violence initiative.

She has learned through her work that most of us want to learn about what binds us and not focus on what divides us.

“Whatever I can do to make a difference,” she said, “I try and do.”

Q& A WITH SHAKILA AHMAD

What does it mean to you to be an American?

Being an American is an incredible privilege. The freedoms this country affords are incredible: freedom of religion, freedom of expression, education. The opportunities are tremendous.

What moment touched and motivated you to become involved in this effort?

I have been committed to interfaith work for two decades. We did a women of interfaith program on Fountain Square (in Cincinnati) in 2016, and there were 300 women who came forward to stand together, to establish relationships. It was moving. And so when the national coalition asked me to be involved — to stand up against discrimination, to speak up and to speak out for each other and to look at domestic policy issues — I had to say yes. I believe in this work. The possibility of positive impact and positive change is the number one reason I said yes.

What gives you hope and what concerns you?

What gives me hope is the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council and the work we will do to serve our country. What gives me hope is the women’s interfaith community and that people show up in the hundreds to get to know their neighbors. What gives me hope is that all fellow Americans are able to stand shoulder to shoulder regardless if we are Muslim Americans or Jewish Americans or Christian Americans. We are all Americans.

What concerns me is when we don't take time to understand our similarities and our differences. When we chastise each other, we are cut off from one another. That is deeply, deeply concerning to me and deeply un-American.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

I hope to really empower one another with our diverse voice. As a nation ... we have tremendous values, and I hope to celebrate that and contribute to that work. I am hopeful we can build relationships with each other and our political leaders so the message is: We are your constituents, the voters, and we are the people you want to help make our government listen to us. I also hope we will advocate in order to decrease these unfounded fears and the disenfranchisement and bigotry that we have seen across the country and in our own region.