

2024 - 2025

Vassar College

# Muslim Life

*Office of Religious and Spiritual Life & Contemplative Practices*



## Assalaamu Alaikum

As I write this newsletter – our second annual Muslim Life Vassar Alums Outreach update – I’m reminded how quickly a year passes on a college campus. This is a small effort to keep you, our alums, informed about how the Muslim community at Vassar College continues to grow, thrive, and surprise us.

And a lot has happened and changed for Muslim students over the past year. While the political climate is proving increasingly difficult, especially for international students, our campus remains engaged and responsive. Vassar is doing what it can to ensure students feel safe and are safe.



### **SABA ALI, ADVISOR FOR MUSLIM STUDENT LIFE**

Saba Ali is the Advisor for Muslim Student Life and joined Vassar in March 2023. Saba has deep roots in the Hudson Valley Muslim community, where she worked with local masjids to help foster community building. Her previous work was in journalism. She was a reporter for the Poughkeepsie Journal and wrote for various publications on topics related to the Muslim American experience. Connect with Saba at [Sabaali@vassar.edu](mailto:Sabaali@vassar.edu).



**HALAL HOTPOT**

## **FULL-TIME MUSLIM LIFE ADVISOR**

Vassar expanded my role as the Advisor for Muslim Student Life to support the growing population and the broader needs of the various religious and contemplative communities fostered by the **Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and Contemplative Practices** (RSLCP). My full-time status enabled me to enhance the visibility of Muslim Life, the branch of RSLCP that supports students and student organizations such as the **Vassar Muslim Student Association** (VMSA). One of our RSLCP interns organized the second Halal Hotpot, this time in collaboration with the Southeast Asian Student Alliance. I also worked with students to develop a panel discussion about the experiences of being African American and Muslim, which was hosted by the Dean of the Faculty Office.

This year, I was also able to focus more on building relationships with students through one-on-one conversations, supporting the VMSA executive board, and creating opportunities for students to shape the campus Muslim experience. For example, we established the Halal Food Committee, a group of students who will meet with Campus Dining regularly to enhance the halal food experience on campus. I'm also working with the college to expand religious accommodation to include both religious observations (Jummah) and holidays.

## **MA'IDAH DINNER**



## **VASSAR MUSLIM STUDENT ASSOCIATION**

The growth of the Muslim community is evident in the attendance at programming and services, especially Jummah. The Friday prayer continues to be organized by the VMSA and attracts up to 30 students, a significant increase from the handful of students who attended when I started in 2023.

## The VMSA continues to be the heart of Muslim-centered programming.

The VMSA is the heart of Muslim-centered programming. The student organization works independently of Muslim Life, though we seek opportunities to work together. For example, VMSA partnered with Muslim Life to invite a professional Qawaali group to campus in the Fall. Along with planning weekly gatherings, the VMSA organizes dinners and trips off campus. The VMSA hosted a Friendsgiving potluck dinner for over 50 of their friends as one of the many joyful offerings this year. What makes the VMSA community exceptional is its collaborations and social reach. During Ramadan, the VMSA held joint discussions and iftars with students from the Christian, Hindu and Buddhist communities. Such inter-religious activities exemplify how Muslim students embody what it means to be family here at Vassar. They cook for each other, help each other with classwork, and just bring joy to the spaces they inhabit.

### ISLAMOPHOBIA

Muslim Life also helped students talk about Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism and how to respond. I worked with the Dean of the College to invite [Saher Selod](#), research director for the [Institute for Policy and Understanding](#), to hold an Islamophobia training for student-facing administrators. I invited [Khaled Beydoun](#), who has written on Islamophobia and is an associate professor of law at Arizona State University, for a lunch with students in the fall. Professor Beydoun was invited back to campus in the spring by Engaged Pluralism as part of a [panel discussion on speech, Islamophobia and antisemitism.](#)



Vassar Muslim Student Association partnered with the Office of International Services on the first sahoor of Ramadan.



# Connecting Vassar's Muslim Alums

Looking ahead, I have a lot planned for the coming academic year and look forward to working with the new dean of RSLCP. I also hope to connect with more alums. I recently had breakfast with a Muslim alum who attended our surprise retirement dinner for Sam and Annie. I treasure conversations like the one we had over bagels and granola, and took to heart the advice shared on how to work with Muslim students, and the enthusiasm towards building Muslim alum support for students. I'm planning to work with the Office of Advancement on a Muslim Life alums New York City gathering this summer, so look out for the invite.

I hope this update inspires deeper engagement and support for students. Please feel free to share this newsletter, and I look forward to next year's Muslim Life Vassar Alums Outreach update.



## Congratulations Class of 2025!!!

May Allah grant you success and ease and make you a benefit and a blessing wherever you may be.

## Happy Retirement Sam & Annie

Many of you may know Rev. Sam Speers, Associate Dean of the College for the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and Contemplative Practices. He and Annie Sampugnaro, our administrative assistant, have retired. We will miss them dearly.

Sam has been one of the strongest advocates for the Muslim community on campus. He made sure students had a prayer space and started the conversation towards moving to a bigger space. He laid the foundation for Muslim Life under the RSLCP, trusted students with 24/7 access to Pratt House during Ramadan, and supported programming centering the Muslim experience. He advocated for my role to be full-time, which I greatly appreciate.



# Muslim Life & Office of Religious and Spiritual Life & Contemplative Practices Events:

- Organized the Second Annual Farm Visit to Halal Pastures, where students learned about organic farming and participated in a zabiha slaughter demonstration.
- Held the first Muslim Life Seniors Farewell with guest speaker Yale Director of Muslim Life Omer Bajwa, who facilitated a discussion about our hearts, community, and the need for alumni support. VMSA provided gifts for seniors.
- Invited Chaplain Bilal Ansari to lead Jummah and to hold a pre-Ramadan halaqa with students.
- Hosted two thoughtful conversations with students in collaboration with Associate Professor of Religion and author Kirsten Wesselhoeft. The first, *Al Ma'idah* (table spread), Muslim students explored community life, engaging with questions such as “What are your visions and aspirations for Muslim community life?” and “How do we navigate disagreements that challenge our sense of belonging and shared spiritual life? In the second, *My Religion, My Identity, and Me*, brought Muslim and Jewish juniors and seniors together to share stories and reflect on life after college. On this one, we also worked with Rabbi Bryan Mann, who is the Rachlin Director of Jewish Student Life and Assistant Director of the RSLCP.
- RSLCP co-sponsored a panel discussion, Islamophobia and Antisemitism: Hate and the Contours of Speech and Expression, with Engaged Pluralism. Professors Khaled Beydoun and Kenneth Stern were the invited speakers.
- Rabbi Bryan Mann, Nicole Beveridge, Director of ALANA Center, Amanda Cora, Program Manager at the ALANA Center, and I provided training on racism, Islamophobia, and antisemitism to Vassar Students Association student leaders and students on the House Team at the start of the academic year.
- I coordinated a small group discussion with Muslim students and the Office of Institutional Equity on Islamophobia and Title VI discrimination reporting.
- I partnered with the Dean of the Faculty on inviting Professor Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Professor Tariq al-Jamil to speak on the African-American Muslim experiences. The panel discussion was moderated by Professor Sa'ed Atshan, who posed questions around race, religion, Blackness, and civic engagement. This was the first time RSLCP approached this topic, which was sparked by conversations with students. The panel discussion occurred during Ramadan and was followed by a community iftar.

- RSLCP launched its new initiative, [Engaging Differences](#), which explores how students talk to each other about how they're intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually processing a myriad of personal, cultural, national, or international issues.

## Vassar Muslim Students Association Events

- Invited a professional Qawaali group to perform South Asian Sufi music, bringing together students, faculty, and administrators. The VMSA organized the event, which was sponsored by various other departments.
- The VMSA and Students for Justice for Palestine organized a vigil and janazah prayer for those killed in Gaza on the anniversary of Oct. 7th.
- Students collected clothing, food and supplies to send overseas via Helping Hand. Some of the donations were also shared with local organizations. The collection was organized with the Middle Eastern and North African Student Association.
- Students were invited to attend a Mock Walima, which brought together food, music, and festivities showcasing the diverse and beautiful traditions of the Muslim global community. Hosted in collaboration with the Middle Eastern and North African Students Association, African Students Union, Asian Students Alliance, and Let's Naach.
- Honored Black History Month with a series of movies and foods.
- Held a combined Ash Wednesday discussion and iftar with Vassar Christian Fellowship, Vassar Catholic Community, and the Episcopal Church at Vassar College
- Held a combined iftar and meditation practice with the Buddhist Sangha and the Hindu Student Association, where students experienced spiritual grounding, meditation, and interreligious dialogue, along with the breaking of fast.
- VMSA First-Year representatives hosted an advice panel of Muslim upperclassmen who offered learnings and tips about courses, internships, majors, and career paths.
- Created an immersive Ramadan and Eid experience with trips to the masjid, community sahoors and iftars, and an Eid carnival. Students also attended the Eid Gala hosted by Bard College in collaboration with various local colleges.
- Syrian refugee and activist [Taimaa Hourizada](#) spoke on her experience living in Syria. Organized with the Middle Eastern and North African Students Association, Students for Justice for Palestine, and Black Students Union.