

Muslim Chaplains in Law Enforcement: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This reflection piece explores the journey of a Muslim female police chaplain navigating the complexities of identity. Highlighting moments of connection, the paper emphasizes the power of authentic engagement and empathy in breaking down barriers. The author's narrative also touches on the broader themes of representation, advocacy fatigue, and the internal conflict experienced when one's values diverge from institutional norms. Ultimately, this piece offers insight into the journey of a Muslim chaplain striving to be a compassionate presence while questioning the impact and limitations of her role in a space where conformity reigns.

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I entered into the law enforcement world as an anomaly—no familial ties to the police, no social overlap with law enforcement members, and thus little to no understanding of the law enforcement world's "language," culture, and dynamics. Conversely, most police officers and police chaplains with whom I spoke shared one main narrative: inspired by a dad, uncle, grandfather, or brother who had been an officer or in the military and had a desire to "help and serve" people.

I did not seek a police chaplain role. The police chief invited me to the chaplaincy team after we first met at a local Ramadan interfaith iftar. Acknowledging the high concentration of Muslim families in our city, he liked the idea of adding a Muslim police chaplain and admitted that he never knew such a role existed among Muslims. Wide-eyed and hopeful, I accepted the chief's offer to join as a volunteer chaplain in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2021, hoping to provide an outsider's perspective to officers and to understand how potential oppression could exist. Stepping into this role brought with it a mix of hope and hesitation. On the one hand, I felt a deep desire to challenge misconceptions about Muslims among the police and to humanize law enforcement members among the broader community. On the other hand, I grappled with questions about whether I could truly belong in a space that often felt foreign to me—a Muslim woman, a hijabi, and an outsider to police culture. Yet I also felt empowered by the image of a hijab-wearing, Muslim woman serving as a police chaplain—a far cry from

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the stereotypes of Muslim women and chaplains generally. This tension would soon define my journey as I navigated my dual identities and sought to find my place in a world that seemed reluctant to embrace me.

From the start, I felt determined to be seen by the entire department as just as—if not more—capable as my Christian and Jewish counterparts. With professional board certification under my belt, on paper I surpassed the standard criteria required of police chaplains nationwide; however, with no personal or professional law enforcement experience, I was eons behind. I struggled to memorize the titles introduced to me as I walked through the department—sergeant, lieutenant, chief, assistant chief—and how they ranked. I stole desperate glances at name tags to remember those introduced to me: Mark, Mike, Matt, Jeff, Rob. The number of one-syllable first names seemed endless.

As a hospital chaplain already struggling to balance work and family commitments, I joined the police chaplaincy team with disclaimers around my availability as a volunteer per diem. “Even a couple of hours a week, or even a month, would be welcomed,” the chief reassured me. With expectations set, I began the grueling mandatory onboarding process that all officers undergo before joining—completing the application packet; scheduling interviews that included a polygraph (lie detector) test; and even providing names of friends, family members, employers, and community members who were interviewed about me by an investigator. At the end, I was shown a fat binder of my entire life and told that I had passed the onboarding process. I made several trips to the nearest law enforcement gear store, where I was fitted for a number of shirts, pants, jackets, and accessories included as part of my uniform sets—casualwear, business, and formal. I also received a shiny badge that identified me as a “Chaplain.” I admired the crescent and star symbol (commonly denoting Islam) directly underneath the identifier.

While researching the role of the pastor and rabbi who had joined as police chaplains a decade earlier, I stumbled upon a social media post with pictures of their “swearing in” ceremony. I wondered nervously what that ceremony would be like for me. The chief and chaplaincy team lead encouraged me to invite my friends and family to the next city council meeting, where I would be introduced formally as the new chaplaincy addition. My family (including my 90-year-old grandmother) proudly filled up the first two rows of the beautiful city council room as I stood in front, my heart beating wildly, clutching my *sibha* beads for support. The chief approached the podium and read my biography by way of introduction, welcomed me to the team, and posed for pictures as my family applauded loudly. The city council meeting then continued on as usual. I felt relieved that I did not have to speak, but I wondered about the absence of the swearing-in; maybe they had stopped swearing-in chaplains these days. The next part of my onboarding included attending the 6am and 6pm briefings at the department over the course of a few days to introduce myself in person alongside the other chaplains. During these interactions, I noticed myself overemphasizing my hospital training in trauma and crisis. I felt awkward and uncomfortable boasting about myself in that way and examined my desire to overcompensate for my lack of connection to the police world.

In reality, my role as police chaplain shared many of the same qualities as my role at the hospital. Serving as a chaplain translates into various means of support, such as remaining available on-call for death notifications or onsite traumas alongside officers,

attending official city and law enforcement related events and banquets, spending time with officers, popping in on briefings as necessary, and dropping by the department to establish familiarity and presence with staff. As a board-certified chaplain, I understood the skills necessary to serve; however, the context remained a mystery for me. To help familiarize myself, I pored over books written by other police chaplains—all Christian males—that a close friend gifted me out of her excitement for my appointment. I learned that these chaplains carried guns as part of their uniform (!), assisted the officers on pursuits (on foot and in the police vehicle!), and patrolled alongside officers for hours in the dead of night. I felt intimidated by most of these images and wondered how I would fit into the team.

Recognizing my limited time between the hospital and my family commitments, I immediately scheduled two ride-alongs per month to begin familiarizing myself with the department and its officers. A “ride-along” refers to the chaplain accompanying a police officer during his/her shift, riding in the patrol car as he/she responds to calls and carries out his/her duties. This experience allows the chaplain to observe law enforcement work firsthand, build rapport with officers, and provide support or a calming presence during potentially high-stress situations. I chose Friday nights after work when my kids attended youth groups and my husband frequently visited with friends. Most of the time, I prayed *maghrib* at home and then drove to the police station to meet my assigned officer; however, on a handful of occasions, I had to excuse myself from a scene to pray *maghrib* nearby. One time, with instructions not to leave the scene of a vandalism, I had to ask the owner of the wrecked apartment studio for a corner to complete my prayers and I scrunched myself halfway into a closet for privacy.

Spending almost four hours with an officer riding around the city provided me with ample opportunities to get to know him/her on a personal level and understand the nuances of the job. I also witnessed the softer side of police officers that the public may not always see. For example, my heart warmed when I learned of an officer “turning a blind eye” to someone clearly on hard times selling wares at a pop-up stand on the sidewalk, or when an officer pulled over a car with the headlights turned off and helped the new driver navigate the switch “on” rather than issue a ticket. The chaplain coordinator of the department paired me up with a different officer each time. The female officers—to whom I was almost exclusively assigned until I informed the scheduler that I felt comfortable riding with all officers, regardless of gender—kept their walls up but remained polite as we conversed. I wondered if they sensed the agenda behind the coordination of assigning me as a female chaplain with them as a female officer and refused to play into the hidden motive. Perhaps they, too, wanted to be seen as equals despite their minority status on the team.

On ride-alongs, I always asked how and why the officer joined law enforcement, what he/she enjoyed about the role, found challenging, and how he/she liked to “unwind” off duty. Meanwhile, we drove around responding to incoming calls ranging from domestic violence reports to burglaries. Most of the time, the officer invited me to join him/her on foot; but other times, the officer instructed me to remain in the car with the doors locked. I always wore a bullet-proof vest under my polo shirt and quietly recited the *du‘ā* for protection for both of us as I climbed into the passenger seat next to the stored rifles. My role—apart from making conversation and getting to know the officer—included providing on-site emotional support to victims, offering an extra pair of eyes taking account of the

scene, exuding non-anxious presence for high adrenaline moments, and embodying a reminder for all to serve and be served with higher standards. When I did step onto a scene, I would receive curious and puzzled glances by community members as they eyed my hijab and the CHAPLAIN embroidered onto the back of my shirt. More often, I played the role of an observer rather than trying to intervene and potentially risk the safety of the officer with my inexperience. I felt nothing like those police chaplains in the books I had read who carried guns and “covered” the officer in pursuits.

After about a year or so of sparsely scheduled ride-alongs and city event attendances to provide the invocation or benediction, I still felt ill-equipped to serve in the law enforcement world. Despite the police chief’s reassurance that any time was enough time volunteered, I knew that a chaplain’s efficacy correlates directly to presence and visibility at the institution. If I could not give more time, I needed some help to understand how to make the best use of my time. Thus, when I learned that a three-day police chaplaincy training was being offered, I immediately signed up. The twenty-four hours spent over the course of those three days proved extremely eye-opening and clarifying in ways that pushed me well beyond my comfort zone.

Five minutes after entering the conference room at a neighboring police department hosting the training, I received a glimpse of what was to come. Greeted by one of our team chaplains—the only familiar face in a sea of mostly white, mostly male attendees—I was ushered toward the breakfast offerings. Coffee, tea, and three different kinds of breakfast burritos: egg and sausage, egg and bacon, egg and chorizo. My colleague immediately understood the problem and volunteered himself to request a vegetarian option for me. Clearly, the organizers were not expecting a Muslim attendee!

I accepted my veggie burrito from an apologetic training organizer and found a seat at a table of three other police chaplains—my colleague and a husband and wife team in their late retirement age. My colleague leaned over and whispered, “By the way, this entire room is evangelical Christian.” Almost as though on cue, the couple sitting across from me eyed my hijab and wordlessly handed me a small brochure: “The role of a police officer, and all government officials, is a God ordained appointment for the protection and safety of society,” I read from the paper. “The Bible is God’s plan in written form for humans to live happily and successfully on earth... In the Scripture, Romans 13 records that God created police...”

On the first day, we covered the chaplain’s role on ride-alongs and how to offer general support. I benefited from hearing from seasoned chaplains representing different cities in our county who shared that they gently and wisely correct officers when sensing an increase in emotional energy. We also covered confidentiality, mandated reporting, and situational awareness while accompanying officers. The trainers/speakers (all male, mostly white) were retired law enforcement members who shared from their point of view as wanting chaplains to offer emotional stability to any situation, rather than serve as a liability or distraction. We reviewed radio codes, the different uniforms and when to wear them, how to address people at the department (sir and ma’am, always), and what to carry when on duty. I learned that an 82% divorce rate exists among police officers due to a variety of stressors and that the “thin blue line” informs much of law enforcement culture, which rests largely upon a foundation of brotherhood and trust. I recalled the Islamic

concept of *ummataṇ wasaṭan* (the middle way), as retired officers spoke about trying to keep balance in all aspects of life, from work/family to lawful/unlawful temptations.

On the second day, we discussed in detail a police chaplain's role and function when called to a scene for a death or tragic accident. We spent hours reviewing the process and procedure of coroner autopsies and death investigations, as well as covering depression and mental health obstacles for officers. It was also on the second day when I learned that police chaplaincy strongly integrates Christianity far more than does hospital chaplaincy. The police chaplains in the room identified closely with the role of pastor and admitted to struggling with separating between their pastor and chaplain title. As one chaplain said, "If an opportunity presents itself and you feel the Holy Spirit tug at you, go with it," implying that these police chaplains look for opportunities to share about Jesus with those in crisis. I felt unsurprised that only three other chaplains in the room had completed a unit of CPE, a clinical training program that encourages pluralistic approaches to faith. I remained silent, absorbing and processing the streams of new information and wondering why the chaplains in the room spoke so plainly about their agendas in front of me. I even thought about cautioning my Muslim community against accepting police chaplaincy support if the chaplain presented as Christian.

On the third day, the speakers raised awareness about the presence of excessive force out in the field, largely attributing it to the lack of opportunities for officers to debrief and unpack stacked traumatic experiences. Thus, a police chaplain may step into this space and have conversations with officers in relaxed settings to release the daily exposure to trauma. The trainers recommended speaking to officers at least two to three days after a crisis, starting with small talk and then a deeper check in. During the actual crisis, the chaplain's role includes being present to pay attention to the event and note the officers needing a check in.

At some point towards the middle of the third day, the organizers split us into small groups to discuss our core values. Among the more common words offered to describe chaplaincy values such as hope, calm, peace, empathy, wisdom, and care, a couple of groups once again incorporated an evangelical lens by sharing a core value of "preaching Christ."

By this point, I felt my frustration rise and overflow. I raised my hand. With a quivering voice, I finally spoke my discomfort and disappointment regarding the overtly evangelical approach to police chaplaincy. I expressed my concern that chaplaincy should center around care and never as a channel to convert people, especially at their most vulnerable. I shared my earlier thought about cautioning my Muslim community to accept care from a Christian chaplain, knowing what I now knew about their hidden or explicit agenda.

The reactions of the police chaplains varied between some defensiveness and justification to some relief that someone had finally said something. One chaplain approached me during the break and said, smiling, "I was waiting for you to speak up!" I sighed. I wish I had told him that I was waiting for him—or anybody else—to speak up. The organizer of the training also approached me during the break and shared in hushed tones that he was actually Jewish and had always been bothered by the group's evangelism but felt outnumbered to say anything. He conceded that they really needed to revamp the

curriculum. I'm not certain how committed he felt to doing that, but I hoped that sincerity—not damage control—underscored his remarks. My chaplain colleague walked me to my car at the end of the training. We walked in silence until he said, "Thank you for what you shared. I wonder if sometimes it feels like we Christians serve people because we want them to become Christians." I nodded in agreement and explained that it feels like love and service with strings attached, rather than for the mere sake of love and service. He appeared lost in thought as we parted ways.

I revisit this memory and feel gratitude to Allah for giving me the ability to speak up despite the immense difficulty and fear. Being the only Muslim in a group of chaplains is a common occurrence for many of us, particularly in the field of law enforcement. While our perspective may prompt discussion, self-reflection, and opportunities for improvement, I wonder about putting the onus on Muslims to continually be in the position of teaching and truth-telling. The potential for moral distress, advocacy fatigue, and tokenizing Muslims within chaplaincy remains a concern.

I withdrew from police chaplaincy nearly three years after my appointment by the chief. Ironically, I had joined the team intending to alleviate some of the moral injury experienced by officers while also hoping to offer a voice that challenges the misconceptions of both police and Muslim groups within the community. While I may have touched upon the latter, I felt overburdened by my own moral injury within law enforcement, particularly following the presence of police violence against students at encampments locally and across the country. I already felt moral distress around my inability to offer my full presence and time in the role, and felt even more distanced from the team socially and emotionally post-October 2023.

Serving in law enforcement necessitates some degree of love and appreciation for America, as the two are often presented hand-in-hand, and I really struggled with my sense of belonging as an American—not that I was ever given the reassurance that I belonged anyway. I remember attending a city interfaith breakfast for the first time with two other police chaplain colleagues from the department. The minute I sat at the table, a city official approached me and asked where I was from. This often triggers me because I understand that the question stems from my wearing the hijab and nothing else (I had not even opened my mouth to speak yet!). Right after that incident, my chaplain colleague, in the spirit of getting to know me better, leaned in and said gleefully, "So, what are your thoughts on that lady who was murdered for not wearing the hee-jab in Iran?" I pretended not to understand the question and asked him to elaborate. My response took him aback, and he said, "I saw it on the news. Thank God for the USA! We are indebted to our soldiers for dying for the freedom you and I enjoy today." These moments serve as just some examples of the micro- and macro-aggressions I regularly experience in interfaith spaces. It made no difference that I, too, was dressed in full police chaplain uniform as my colleagues; in the hijab, I remained foreign and othered.

My decision to withdraw solidified after receiving a phone call from a lieutenant expressing concern about my presence at a recent local university encampment. As a dozen police departments descended upon students, faculty, and community members in full riot gear, I arrived in plainclothes wearing my police chaplain badge. On my drive over to campus, my mobile group chats accelerated in messages expressing distrust and fear of the

police present. In the car, I made the decision to wear my badge with a strong and clear intention to challenge the community's negative perception of law enforcement, understanding the risk to my relationship with the department as a result of doing so. Rather than stand alongside the officers in helmets, carrying shields and wielding batons, I roamed from students to community members checking on their palpable fear. As I approached students and community members, they would eye my badge with furrowed brows and a glare until I asked them how they were doing and offered a listening ear. Their faces would immediately lighten, and worry would replace the glare in their eyes. They could not believe I was a part of the police and asked questions about my role as chaplain, opening the channels of dialogue.

However, this decision cost me the trust of the entire department. Two days later, the lieutenant called to inform me that officers saw me "standing on the other side." I was reprimanded for wearing my badge in plainclothes. I knew then that I had shattered any potential for rapport, especially given my lack of availability to debrief and provide presence within the department. I communicated my resignation a week later and dropped off a box with my uniforms, badge, and a bouquet of flowers for the lieutenant. I do not know how my resignation was communicated to the department, but after a week, one of the two Muslim officers texted me and asked if it was true. He shared that the other Muslim at the department, a lieutenant, was informed at a closed meeting. I had come into the department quietly and left quietly. In comparison, mere weeks prior to my resignation, the chief appointed one more person to the police chaplain team, a former member of the military and a Christian pastor. I never knew if he was sworn-in or just introduced at a city council meeting, but his addition to the team was announced via a department-wide email with his picture and biography.

Law enforcement relies heavily on hierarchy, and as a volunteer chaplain with very limited time to spend making relationships, I found it very difficult to make any changes in the system. However, I carry a hope that any one-on-one conversations I shared with officers on ride-alongs and otherwise offered some value. I remember one particular shift riding with a young, fresh-from-the-academy officer who volunteered to pick me up after my original ride-along assignment canceled at the last minute. He overheard our conversation at the front desk and offered me a spot in his vehicle. Frankly, I felt surprised by his offer. He seemed like the typical white, buzz-cut, clean shaven, eager young officer, and I was the unfamiliar, hijab-clad volunteer looking to crash his otherwise personal time in the patrol car, an officer's "office on wheels."

We first shared a conversation discussing his entry into law enforcement and his perceived challenges and appreciations while checking in on a live burglary and patrolling commercial properties. A few hours into our ride-along, the young officer finally asked, "So, do you speak any other languages?" I mentally applauded his rather creative way of asking about my ethnicity. "Yes," I replied, "My first language was Arabic. How about you?" I saw him as a white male but figured I shouldn't "rob" him of the experience of being asked about his background. He paused briefly before saying, "Actually, I speak Bosnian." I turned to him incredulously. "What? You're Bosnian?" I asked, leaving behind all formalities. Now it made sense why he offered me a ride! My hijab was not all that foreign to him as I had assumed. He responded in kind, eagerly sharing about his parents

leaving Bosnia for America in the 90s. “The genocide!” I confirmed. He looked at me, genuinely surprised. “You know about the genocide?” He asked. “Of course!” I said. At that moment, all the walls between us came crashing down, and we had a lively discussion about our shared experience as children of immigrants. He shared about visiting Bosnia regularly, and we both mentioned the local Bosnian restaurant that served incredible cevapi.

Everybody who met this young officer assumed, like I did, that he was your stereotypical white American male, and this young officer blended in quite easily as a result. However, in that patrol car with me, he could be both Bosnian and a police officer without contradiction or challenge. I hope that, following our moment together, he felt empowered to embrace and share that part of his identity, even among colleagues who might otherwise “otherize” him as a “foreigner.” Perhaps our connection that night will remind him that strength exists in bringing his full self into any space, even in a profession where conformity can be the norm.

As I reflect on my journey as a police chaplain, I am filled with a mix of gratitude, frustration, and clarity. Stepping into this role, I had hoped to serve as a bridge between communities, embody compassion, and challenge stereotypes—both about Muslims and about law enforcement. Yet, over time I realized that the weight of constantly navigating a space that often felt at odds with my own values took an emotional toll. The moments of connection, like the conversation with the young Bosnian officer, were profound reminders of the power of empathy and the potential for belonging. However, these instances were few and far between, often overshadowed by the reality that the system I sought to serve remained rooted in a culture that sometimes resisted change and complexity.

Through this experience, I learned that to be an effective chaplain, one must feel a sense of authentic alignment with the organization’s values. When that alignment is absent, the chaplain’s role shifts from being a source of support to one of internal conflict, constantly negotiating between personal integrity and institutional expectations. Ultimately, my journey reaffirmed that chaplaincy is about more than just providing comfort; it requires a deep sense of belonging and authenticity. Without these, the ability to serve wholeheartedly becomes compromised. While I chose to step back from this role, I carry forward the belief that true chaplaincy is rooted in the courage to be oneself, to challenge injustices, and to offer care that honors both one’s values and the humanity of others.