

BUILDING  
COMMUNITY





**CONVICTION  
RESPECT  
GENEROSITY  
SACRIFICE  
ACTION**

## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This year was an important year of building for us at Pillars. We know that it's not enough to change the world as it is today; we must stay focused on creating a world that works for us and for our future generations. In 2019 that meant strengthening the foundation upon which Pillars rests. We grew strategically and added team members who are inspiring us to think boldly and go deeper in our dedication to our communities. It is among my greatest privileges to lead and serve alongside the Pillars staff as we continue to build support for the next generation of Muslim civic leaders in the United States.

In 2019, we also spent time building community. We brought nearly 80 members of the Pillars network to Chicago for a two-day gathering. During our time together, our grantee partners, trustees, and staff learned from each other and forged connections that now extend across geography and issue areas. We saw firsthand the creativity, love, and sense of duty that our leaders bring to their work every day. Beyond the energizing conversations, we were reminded that time and space for our leaders to share and celebrate their wins—and open up about the challenges they face—is critical to their growth and to develop their sense of togetherness.

This was a groundbreaking year for Muslim storytellers. As a part of our growing narrative and culture change work, we hosted a vibrant conversation about representation of American Muslim communities in popular culture at the Sundance Film Festival in partnership with the Pop Culture Collaborative and MACRO, a leading media hub that creates and finances film, television, and digital content driven by people of color. It was fitting that the conversation took place at the MACRO Lodge in Park City, a space that celebrates an array of creative perspectives and forces the entertainment industry to take a hard look at how they can do better when it comes to representation. Our panel included the incredible Mara Brock Akil, who encouraged us to take a look at her long and trailblazing career and remember that authenticity and representation come one story at a time. And we're only just beginning.

Of course, none of our work would be possible without the generous support of our Trustee network. Their commitment to working together to amplify and invest in American Muslim voices is what makes Pillars possible. In 2019 alone, we saw a 30 percent increase in the growth of our Board of Trustee membership. We began Pillars in 2010 with a small network of five families. Today that network includes nearly 30 families who show us what philanthropy looks like.

Since our inception over nine years ago, over 500 organizations have applied for a Pillars grant. While there are so many important and worthy organizations that apply, we are only able to support a small fraction of these. Each year, our team works to curate a docket of grants that represent some of the most challenging but necessary work facing our community and each year I am filled with hope by these leaders and organizations. It is truly our privilege to support their work.

Thank you for your continued support and trust. We are truly excited about what we are building together.



**Kashif Shaikh**

Co-Founder and Executive Director

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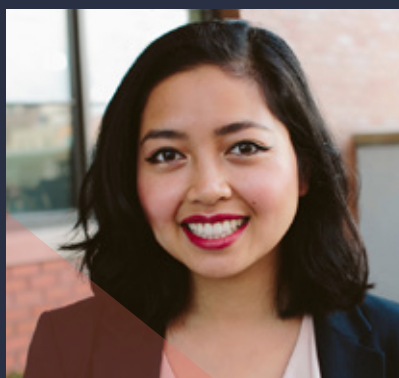
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# Pillars Team



**KALIA ABIADE**

*Managing Director,  
Strategy & Partnerships*



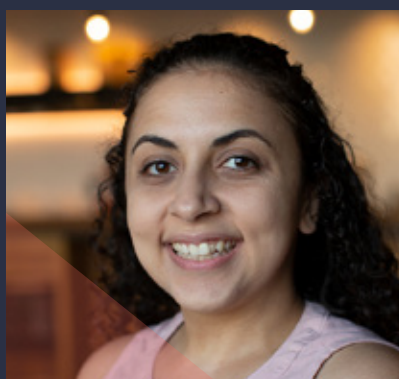
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*Program Manager*



**RANDA KUZIEZ**

*Director of Development*



**NOHA MAHMOUD**

*Digital Media Coordinator*



**ARIJ MIKATI**

*Managing Director,  
Leadership & Culture*



**KASHIF SHAIKH**

*Co-Founder and Executive Director*





## Pillars amplifies the voices, talents, and leadership of Muslims in the United States to expand rights and opportunities for all people.

Founded by a small collective of individual philanthropists, Pillars has grown into a community of grassroots leaders, advocates, media makers, educators, and entrepreneurs who believe Muslims have a critical role to play in movements for social change in the United States. Since our start in 2010, Pillars has invested more than \$4 million in organizations and individuals who are creating a deeper understanding of our complex communities, and who are driving people to learn more and take action. Our grants and partnerships support a fierce combination of emerging and established Muslim leaders who are transforming our society.

Pillars is helping to build a long-term movement infrastructure through three core programs:

### **Grants**

Pillars grants and sponsorships support programs and projects as well as leadership development and organizational capacity to strengthen the American Muslim civic engagement community as a whole.

### **Collaborative Giving**

Pillars offers a unique opportunity for individual donors to collaborate with philanthropic institutions, learn more about social movements, and work together to address the current needs of American Muslim communities while building for the next generation.

### **Storytelling**

Pillars invests in initiatives and cultural projects that empower American Muslims to tell their own stories, ensuring that more accurate and authentic narratives are represented in media and pop culture. From backing talented Muslim writers and entertainers to designing a long-term culture change strategy in partnership with Pop Culture Collaborative, we recognize the power of media and pop culture to influence our daily lives by shaping our perceptions of one another.



## Grantmaking Context

If we've learned anything this year, it is to expect the unexpected. As we look to 2020, we know that the challenges ahead will demand unwavering support and flexibility. This is why we are increasing our commitment to general operating support as our communities build local leadership and organize power. We are excited to support creative cultural projects that are transforming our conversations. And we are intent on nurturing safer spaces and creating avenues for deep healing. Pillars is often the first funder for many organizations, and we've seen how a Pillars grant can have a catalytic effect. As our country continues to struggle toward its promise of liberty and equality for all, we reaffirm our commitment to American Muslim visionaries and community leaders.

## What We Support

### CHANGE AND BUILD

At Pillars, we recognize there are many pathways to a just, vibrant society. We aim to help cultivate an American Muslim community that is more informed, powerful and influential in spaces where decisions about us are being made. To help us get there, we focus on efforts that **change norms** and **build infrastructure** to advance three priorities.



#### Rights

We support social and policy change efforts that allow American Muslims to live and thrive with dignity and that protect and expand the human and civil rights of us all.



#### Wellness

We support the growth and nurturing of whole, healthy American Muslim communities that are equipped to serve those nearest to them and society at large.



#### Understanding

We support a range of approaches to amplify American Muslim voices, create a deeper understanding of American Muslims and American society, and encourage people to learn more and take action.

Because **strong leaders and institutions** are key to advancing these priorities, we also invest in leadership development and organizational capacity to strengthen the American Muslim civic engagement community as a whole.

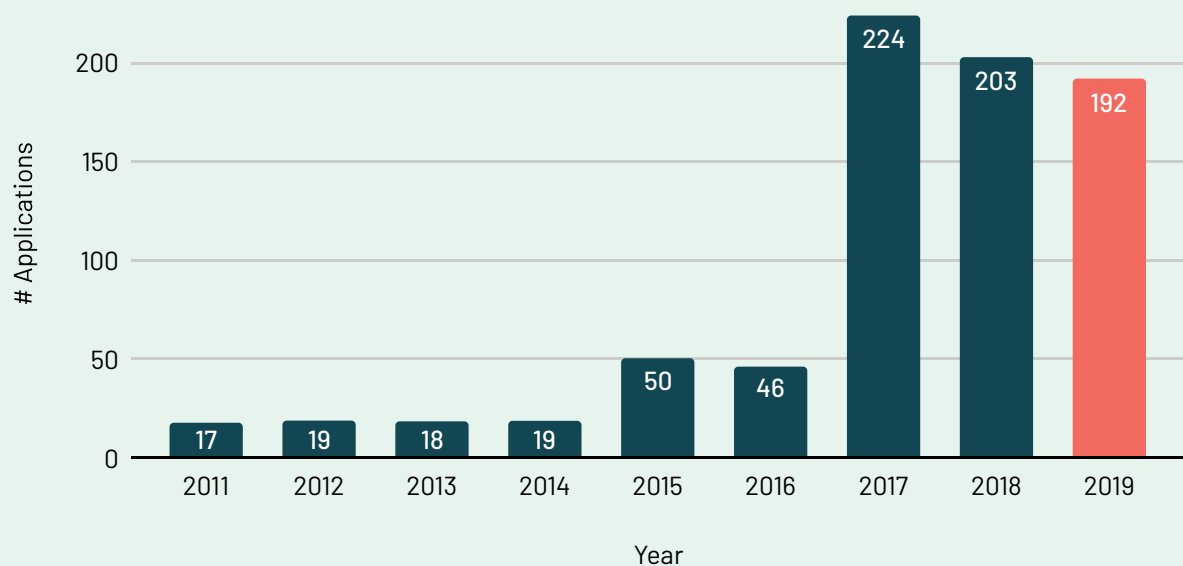




## Grant Cycle Growth 2011 – 2019

As we strengthen Pillars Fund's grant cycle process, our applicant pool has also grown more and more competitive over the years. Although our total grant dollars have nearly tripled since our first cycle, Pillars' acceptance rate remains about 10% each cycle. In the last eight years, we have received 777 total letters of inquiry from 568 unique organizations conducting work in and alongside Muslim communities nationwide. This boost in applicant activity demonstrates the growth and dynamism of American Muslim nonprofit organizations in the U.S. and the need for Pillars to ensure we are ready to support them through the challenges ahead.

**TOTAL LETTERS OF INQUIRY** 2011-2016



## Process

1

### **We seek out talented leaders and exciting opportunities.**

In 2019, we continued our efforts to identify organizations and individuals to partner with. Throughout the year, we attend events and workshops, follow up on referrals, participate in one-on-one conversations, nurture relationships, and conduct ongoing research to learn as much as we can about the organizations and individuals leading the work.

2

### **We encourage organizations and projects from across the U.S. to submit their ideas.**

Each year, about 200 organizations and project teams submit formal letters of inquiry through our grant portal, underscoring an overwhelming need in our communities not only for funding but for organizational support and networking opportunities that strengthen capacity and increase the potential for long-term impact. While we cannot fund each idea that comes our way, this process helps us better understand the landscape of organizations and entities working in and alongside Muslim communities in the U.S., what strengths and challenges exist, and what types of support our nonprofits need most.

3

### **We gather expert insights and feedback through a community advisory panel.**

For the 2019-20 grant cycle, Pillars expanded our process to include the insights and expertise of a cohort of community reviewers, a team of individuals who scored and provided feedback for each letter of inquiry. This cohort included 10 individuals from across the country whose professional backgrounds and community service include academia, business, entertainment, government and public service, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, religious leadership, theater, and more. Having the perspectives of a diverse panel is an invaluable step toward a more holistic, community-driven process.

4

### **We invite selected applicants to submit a full proposal then conduct a thorough assessment.**

With the guidance of the community reviewers, Pillars invites about a third of the applicants to submit full proposals for a deeper review. The assessment at this stage is a comprehensive consideration process, which includes conversations with organization and project leads, site visits, event attendance, document analysis, feedback from other peers and funders, and a financial review. During this stage, we also begin to better understand how organizations and projects may complement one another or how they may already be in collaboration with each other.



5

**We present our recommendations to the Board of Trustees for review and a final vote.**

The Pillars community includes a network of generous Muslim donors across the U.S. who believe collective action can transform society and achieve social change. Our annual allocation meeting is a forum for our trustees to learn more about the most pressing issues facing philanthropy and Muslim nonprofits in the U.S. and hear directly from some of the leaders at the forefront of this work. After learning more about each staff-recommended organization, trustees make the final decision about who receives a Pillars grant.

6

**We deepen our relationships with grantee partners and provide ongoing support.**

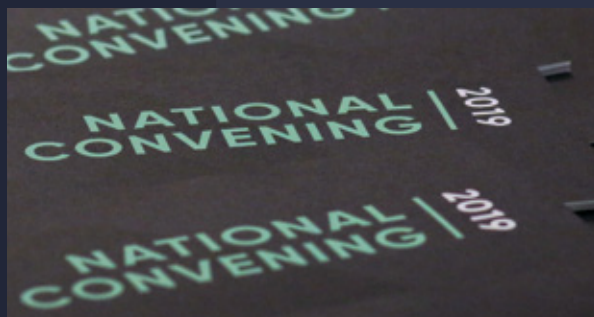
Our relationships with our grantee partners cannot end with the disbursement of a check. Pillars staff is available throughout the year to provide consultation to grantee partners, to make connections with other organizations and potential funders and to act as a thought partner as they shape and implement their work. We also connect our grantee partners to professional development opportunities including board training, media workshops, leadership coaching, digital security training, and more.

7

**We conduct periodic assessments and collaborate with grantee partners to strengthen their work.**

Pillars staff tracks grantee partner performance throughout the year based on the goals outlined in the final grant proposal and signed agreement. We document media mentions and appearances, attend events, hold one-on-one meetings and site visits, and conduct formal and informal check-ins with our grantee partners. This process allows organization leaders to reflect on the progress of their stated goals and make adjustments as needed. It also allows Pillars to learn more about the work on the front lines, challenges and trends in the field, and continuously reassess our own grantmaking aims.

2019 YEAR IN REVIEW



## 2019 Grantee Convening

We believe that our collective power and influence will grow if it is rooted in community.

In April 2019, we gathered our grantee partners, trustees, and staff members in Chicago for two days of deep listening and collaboration. Each member of the Pillars community is working to improve the lives of people across the country, and we were reminded during our time together that support for these efforts must go beyond a single grant. We learned more about each other's work, took part in skill-enhancing workshops, and shared the unique insights and histories that make up the bigger story of us. These days, opportunities to connect in person feel few and far between. The energy that was created from sharing space—and experiencing some of Chicago's April snow together—demonstrated what it truly means to work in community and support one another.







“

The Pillars convening allowed me to zoom out from the day-to-day and see our work as part of a bigger picture. It also was a great time to reflect on the impact of our work in the field and deepen my relationship with so many people.”





2019 YEAR IN REVIEW

## 2019 Grantees

**Action Center on Race and the Economy | Crescendo Project**  
Chicago, IL  
**Founded:** 2017  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute**  
Los Angeles, CA  
**Founded:** 2006  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Brooklyn Historical Society**  
Brooklyn, NY  
**Founded:** 1863  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**Chicago History Museum**  
Chicago, IL  
**Founded:** 1856  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**Children's Museum of Manhattan**  
New York, NY  
**Founded:** 1973  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**CUNY CLEAR Project**  
New York, NY  
**Founded:** 2009  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Emgage Foundation**  
Washington, DC  
**Founded:** 2009  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Faith in Action | Muslim Power Building Project**  
Washington, DC  
**Founded:** 1972  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**Filmmakers Collaborative**  
New York, NY  
**Founded:** 1986  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project

**Georgia Muslim Voter Project**  
Suwanee, GA  
**Founded:** 2016  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Hurma Project**  
Great Falls, VA  
**Founded:** 2000  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN)**  
Chicago, IL  
**Founded:** 1997  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**International Museum of Muslim Cultures**  
Jackson, MS  
**Founded:** 2001  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)**  
Dearborn, MI & Washington, DC  
**Founded:** 2002  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Islamic Scholarship Fund**  
Newark, CA  
**Founded:** 2009  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**MPower Change**  
New York, NY  
**Founded:** 2016  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**MUHSEN**  
Naperville, IL  
**Founded:** 2014  
**Grant Type:** Capacity Building

**Muppies, Inc**  
New York, NY  
**Founded:** 2006  
**Grant Type:** Capacity Building

**Muslim Advocates**  
Oakland, CA  
**Founded:** 2005  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative**  
Southfield, MI & Alta Loma, CA  
**Founded:** 2014  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Muslim Wellness Foundation**  
Philadelphia, PA  
**Founded:** 2011  
**Grant Type:** Capacity Building

**Pillars of the Community**  
San Diego, CA  
**Founded:** 2012  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Project South**  
Atlanta, GA  
**Founded:** 1986  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Sahaba Initiative**  
San Bernadino, CA  
**Founded:** 2010  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Sapelo Square**  
Ann Arbor, MI  
**Founded:** 2015  
**Grant Type:** Capacity Building

**Ta'leef Collective**  
Fremont, CA  
**Founded:** 2005  
**Grant Type:** General Support

**Unity Productions Foundation MOST Resource**  
Potomac Falls, VA  
**Founded:** 1999  
**Grant Type:** Program/Project



“

It was great to connect and network with grantees. I was able to talk better about the ecology of Muslim social change in follow-up interviews with media. It is also great to establish personal relationships, rather than go on social media to reach out.”

PILLARS CONVENING PARTICIPANT



I felt really cared for. That means a lot as we've been overworked and underfunded. Having a foundation that shows that they care about the people behind the work means a lot... I felt like a partner in the work and that my organization fulfills an important need nationally and locally."

PILLARS CONVENING PARTICIPANT

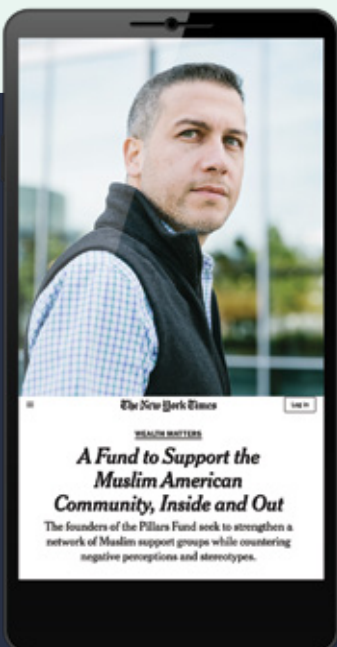




## 2019 HIGHLIGHTS

# Storytelling at Sundance

Pillars is supporting/hosting events and conversations about Muslims in the U.S. and storytelling. In January 2019, we partnered with the production company MACRO to host a conversation at Sundance about how Muslims are owning their own stories; the panel included veteran producer and writer Mara Brock Akil and was attended by about 150 creatives, funders, and industry executives. In April 2019, Pillars hosted a New York screening of the new Hulu comedy series *Ramy*, about a first-generation Egyptian-American millennial, along with a discussion with the show's creator and protagonist Ramy Youssef. The show is sparking conversations in Muslim communities about identity, social expectations, and faith.



## In The News

### NEW YORK TIMES FEATURE

In May, Pillars was featured in *The New York Times* for the first time. *Wealth Matters* columnist Paul Sullivan wrote about our origins, what we do, and why we do it. He was able to tell our story from the perspective of our investors for readers of *The Times*'s Business section.



Many of the initiatives Pillars supported then and continues to support today were early in their life cycle," said Trustee Sameer Shamsi. "I felt we were seeding really exciting investments."





## Hosting NYC Premiere of *Ramy*

Earlier this year, comedian Ramy Youssef approached Pillars seeking advice on how to engage American Muslims ahead of his show's premiere on Hulu. Together with his production company A24 and Hulu, we hosted the show's NYC premiere, ensuring that a diverse gathering of Muslim creatives, activists, journalists, businesspeople, and other tastemakers had the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful conversation with Ramy, Hasan Minhaj, and Deana Haggag of USA Artists. It was an important way for us to show support for a groundbreaking program and to engage our community in meaningful conversations about what it means to be a Muslim in America today.



Ultimately the insinuation of being first is that you might be the last — so you'd better get it all in there. I hope that a show like mine can push Hollywood to get obsessed with seconds and thirds, because we need other Muslim stories too."

**RAMY YOUSSEF**

(excerpt from the *Hollywood Reporter*, 2019)

## Partnering with NPR to Spotlight Muslim Storytellers

We teamed up with two of NPR's biggest affiliate stations to showcase Muslim storytellers. The special Ramadan live events were hosted by Pillars along with WNYC and KPCC in Southern California. In New York, *A Night of Muslim Dramas* was emceed by NPR's Arun Venugopal and featured readings of plays written by American Muslims about facets of their identities. The evening included a conversation with actor-comedian Maysoon Zayid and screenwriter Sharbari Zohra Ahmed about what it's like navigating the corridors of Hollywood as Muslim women. In Pasadena, we celebrated the launch of the podcast "Tell Them, I Am," which featured a new interview with a prominent American Muslim every weekday of Ramadan. Rather than focusing solely on faith, the podcast challenged each guest to recall a moment that ended up determining the course of their life in some way.



*Tell Them, I Am* is a podcast about the small moments that define who we are and who we are not. The stories are universal, the voices are all Muslim."

**MISHA EUCEPH**

Host & Creator, *Tell Them, I Am*

## 2019 HIGHLIGHTS

# Building Community through Digital Media

American Muslims are at the center of much of today's news and entertainment media, but so often our stories are being told for us. Digital media platforms reach audiences in every part of the globe, across age, faith, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and political belief. Digital media makes it possible for each of us to tell our own stories to educate, to learn, to create space, and to bring people together over an issue or call to action. But, perhaps most importantly, digital media is helping Pillars build and nurture a community. Pillars partners use digital media as a way to be in conversation with one another and to enthusiastically share and lift up each others' work in a spirit of mutual support and celebration. In 2019, Pillars expanded our team and created new programming as part of our commitment to strengthen our communities through digital media.



## Pillars Presents



“[It’s] about unlearning the deeply dehumanizing narratives that we have been taught our entire lives.”

### NAMIRA ISLAM

of MuslimARC in *Pillars Presents* video about dismantling racism

We use social media platforms to amplify Muslim artists, activists, and change agents who are telling stories from a multitude of perspectives. And digital media provides a way for us to amplify Muslim voices during key moments in the news, when they might otherwise be unheard. Pillars is excited to work with our vibrant network of community organizations to create and disseminate original and authentic media content. Original content is key to generating public discourse, deepening understanding, and sowing the seeds for civic engagement and action.

In July 2019, we launched *Pillars Presents*, a video series that amplifies critical conversations that matter to so many people in Muslim communities. These conversations cover a range of perspectives and issues including the history and impact of mass surveillance on Muslim communities, how we can all show up to fight racism, and ways that we can ensure that survivors of abuse do not suffer in silence. Our first two videos alone have already been viewed more than 100,000 times across digital media platforms.

As we look ahead to all of the challenges and possibilities of 2020, we’re excited to continue to weave the multitude of American Muslim narratives into the larger fabric of American society and the broader struggle for basic human dignity.

## In The News

Sometimes it can be hard to break through the media clutter. This year, we worked with our partners to spot and take advantage of opportunities to share our work in the news media. We know that forces working against rights and equity operate on both the local and national levels, and it is critical that Muslim voices are heard loud and clear when it comes to correcting inaccurate and biased reporting and proactively raising issues that matter to our communities.

### INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

*Changing the Narrative and Building Power: A Muslim American Fund Takes the Long View*

“But if the last two years have taught us anything, it’s that we need to take the time we need to reimagine the society and country we want and invest what it takes to build that.”

KASHIF SHAIKH

### PHILANTHROPY NEWS DIGEST BY CANDID

*5 Questions for... Kashif Shaikh, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Pillars Fund*

“Pillars is building a community of Muslim grantee-partners, storytellers, and investors who share a broad vision, but each brings unique and important perspectives to our collective work.”

KASHIF SHAIKH

### FINANCIAL TIMES

*State scrutiny has not turned U.S. Muslims away from giving*

Pillars was featured in the *Financial Times* alongside other philanthropic efforts working in the American Muslim community. The article highlighted the ways Muslims in the United States are finding ways to increasingly formalize their collective strategic giving. Giving continues to rise in the American Muslim community.

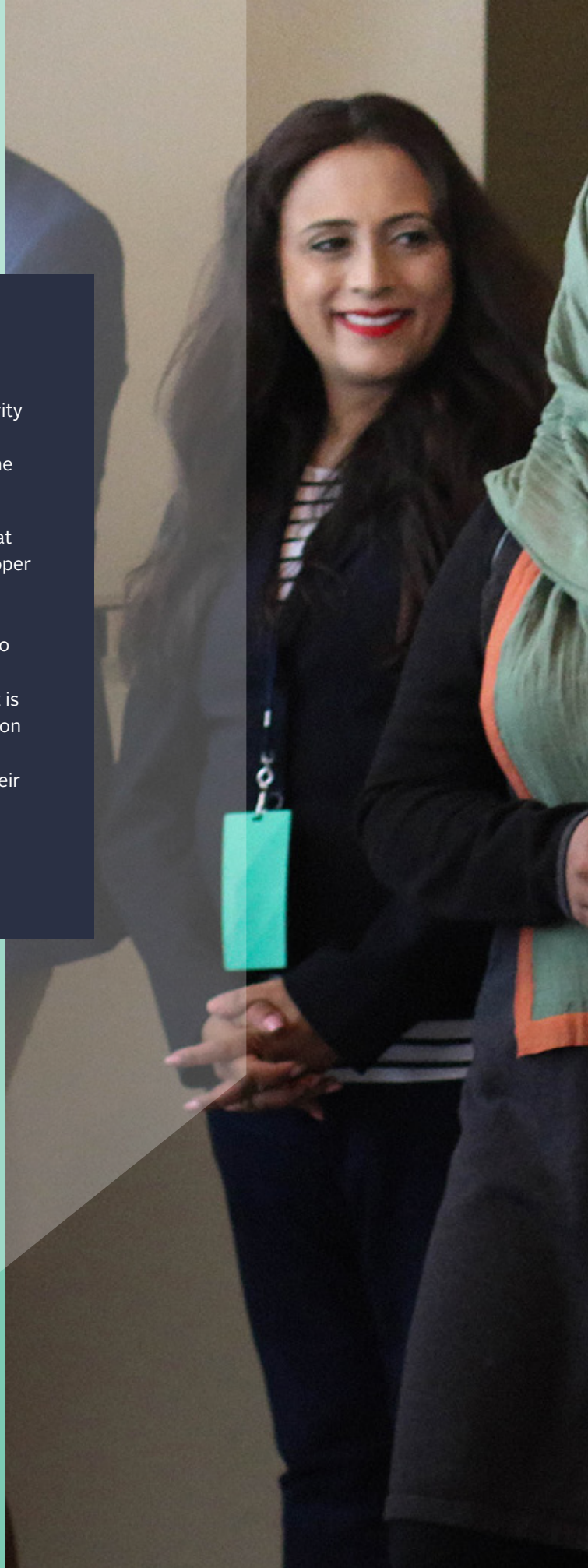


## ZAKAT OPINION

In 2017, the Pillars Fund was recognized as a zakat-eligible charity by Mohammad Fadel, PhD, JD, Associate Professor & Canada Research Chair for the Law and Economics of Islamic Law at the University of Toronto.

The opinion states: “It is appropriate for a Muslim to believe that paying money to Pillars, provided that it is coupled with the proper religious intention, satisfies his/her religious obligation to pay zakat, given the reasonable basis such a donor would have for concluding that money entrusted to Pillars is used exclusively to further goals that serve the American Muslim community, and God knows best.” Pillars provides this opinion and recognizes it is one opinion, and the final decision to accept or reject this opinion is the donor’s choice. Pillars also provides a list of our grantees that have their own zakat opinion, if donors choose to make their decision based on the individual grants.

God knows best.





## OUR PARTNERS





