Controversy Over Islam and Mosques Spreads Beyond Park 51

by Farah Akbar
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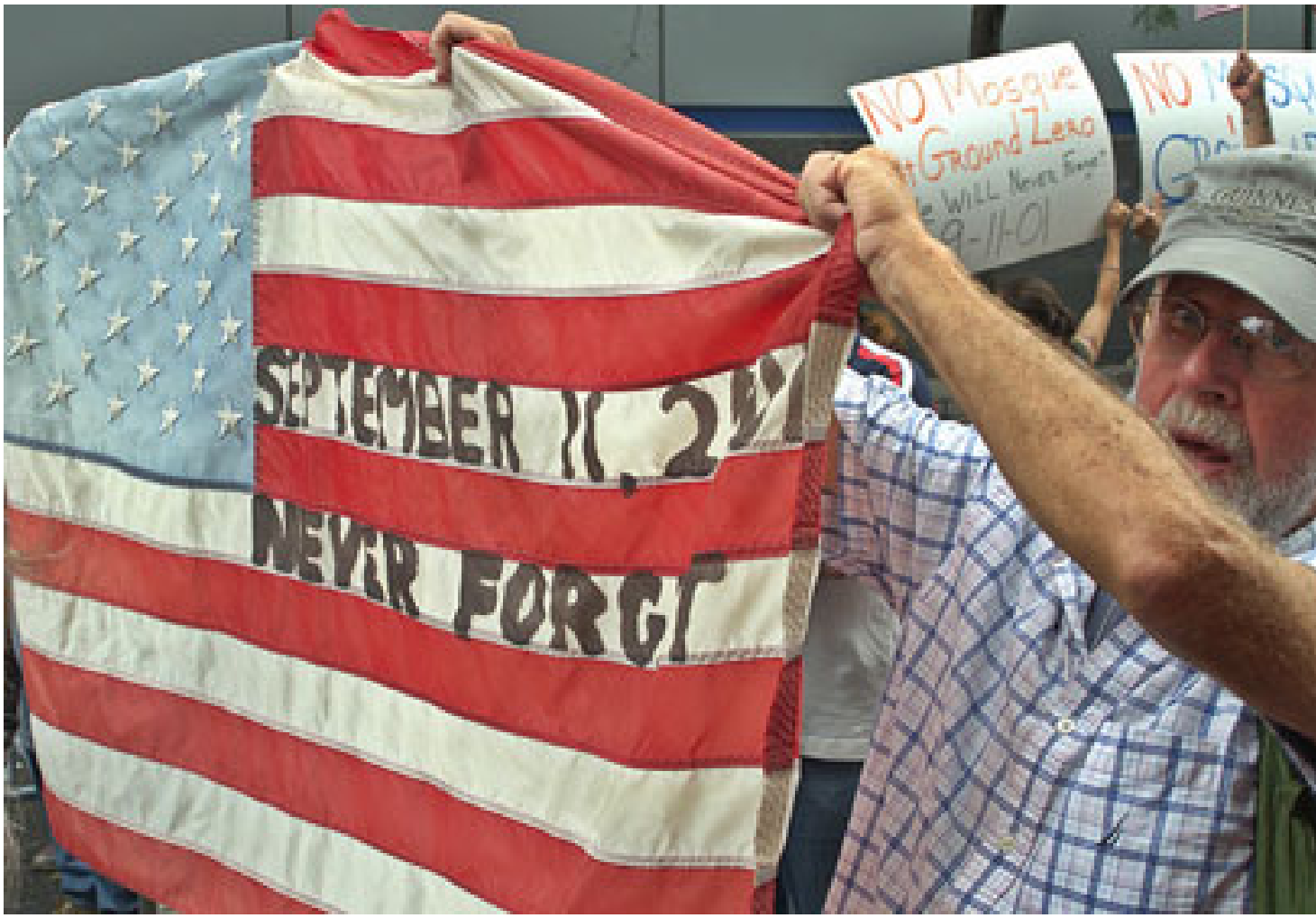

Photo by David Shankbone The area near ground zero has been the scene of several protests for and against an Islamic center proosed for lower Manhattan.

Nine years after the Sept, 11, 2001 attacks, a heated debate over a proposed Islamic community center two blocks from Ground Zero has helped spark a wave of distrust and anger toward Muslim Americans and Islam in New York City and beyond.

Polls show opposition to the construction of the center, known as Park51 . People have rallied against it, and while Mayor
Michael Bloomberg
and President
Barack Obama
have supported the developers' right to build the center, many other politicians have stridently opposed the project. Republican gubernatorial candidate
Rick Lazio
, for one, has referred to the project's leader, Imam Faisal Rauf, as a "terrorist-sympathizing imam," even though the State Department sponsored Rauf's recent trip to the Middle East to discuss Muslim life in America and religious tolerance.

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"Opponents to Park51 continue to smear all things Muslim and justify their calls to move the project away from the 9/11 site by erroneously linking the criminals responsible for the attacks to the organizers and its supporters," said Faiza Ali, community affairs director for the Council on American Islamic Relations NY chapter.

While Muslims were victims of bias attacks in the days and weeks immediately after 9/11, then President George W. Bush made efforts to defuse the rage against Muslims and Islam. He visited the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. six days after the attacks, condemned any type of biased attacks against Muslims, and said that Muslims needed to be treated "with respect."

Now, though, following a period of calm, some Muslims in New York and beyond feel a return of the fears some experienced after 9/11. The apparent change in the country's attitude toward Muslims, Islam and their houses of worship has alarmed American Muslims and others in the country and left experts and common citizens struggling to shed light on why the apparent shift has occurred.

Two Blocks from Ground Zero

Two thirds of New York City residents want the lower Manhattan Islamic center to be moved to a location farther from the World Trade Center site, according to a recent New York Times poll . One fifth of those surveyed admitted to harboring animosity toward Muslims, and 33 percent said that they believed that Muslims were more sympathetic to terrorists than other American citizens. Another poll -- this one by the Daily News - found that half of those opposed to the center near ground zero do not want it to be built anywhere in Lower Manhattan.

This year marked the first time since 9/11 that the anniversary of the attacks featured protests near the trade center site, clearly a result of the mosque furor. Supporters held a demonstration at City Hall, while one anti-community center rally featured Geert Wilders , the controversial anti-Islamic Dutch parliament member who has called for taxing Muslim women for wearing headscarves and opposed the building of new mosques in the Netherlands. Police estimate that thousands attended the rally.

Politicians have weighed in. Gov. David Paterson suggested that the developers find another place to build "that would not be so close to Ground Zero." Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has said
that the project would "horribly offend" the families of those killed on Sept. 11.

To the concern of many, such rhetoric seeks to make all Muslims responsible for the attacks on the trade center and Pentagon. "This insinuation of collective guilt, the notion that American Muslims should be treated as second class citizens in our home is false, un-American, and should be rejected," Ali said.

As the debate has raged, some have tried to find a way out.

Yesterday, Rauf himself pledged to find a way out of the dispute. "Everything is on the table," he said in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations. "We really are focused on solving it." One idea reportedly under consideration would involve expanding the interfaith programs at the center and allowing worship space for people of other religions.

Previously, Donald Trump offered to buy the site now slated for the proposed Islamic center -- if the mosque were to be built at least five blocks from ground zero. He maintains the proposal arose from his desire to "end a very serious, inflammatory and highly divisive situation that is destined, in my opinion, to only get worse."

Beyond Park51

However the issue is ultimately settled, the anger toward Muslims and mosques has spread to many parts of the city. Police Commissioner Ray Kelly has said that bias attacks against Muslims have increased in New York. Since 2001, the city has dealt with about 10 crimes or allegations of hate crimes against Muslims every year. This year, there already have been 10 cases, and Ali thinks some bias attacks may go unreported.

Last month, a Muslim cab driver in New York City was slashed in the mouth, throat and arm by a passenger this summer who asked him if he was Muslim prior to attacking him. In Astoria, Queens, an inebriated man walked into the Al-Iman mosque and then

urinated
on the rugs used by congregants for prayer and hurled anti-Muslim comments at the mosque-goers.

A 37-year-old Queens resident, who does not want his name used, thinks that he may have been the victim of a hate crime. On a warm August evening, he was taking the routine four-block walk home from the Jamaica Muslim Center after completing his prayers. He was wearing a traditional outfit from his native Bangladesh, which consists of a long overflowing shirt that reaches the knees and baggy pants. Two blocks shy of his home, five men surrounded him began punching him.

"I kept saying, 'Don't hit me. Take what you want, but don't hit me,'" he said. The men did not ask for money or for his watch. In fact, they did not say a word to him throughout the entire ordeal. The victim, an information technology professional, had to take two days off from work to recover from his injuries.

Officials from the Jamaica Muslim Center believe that this was a hate crime. "He was wearing Muslim garb, he was not robbed and he was only two blocks away from the mosque," said Junnun Choudhury, general secretary of the center.

In Westbury, young people recently threw stones, shattering the windows of cars parked in front of the Islamic Center of Long Island. "I don’t know what their (the youths') true intentions were," said Habeeb Ahmed, the chairman of the board of trustees for the center. "But one could classify this as a hate crime."

Ahmed said that incidents such as these last occurred shortly after Sep. 11, 2001, when the mosque's sign was egged numerous times. He says that he and the congregants are not fearful these days, but that they are being extra careful. "I am concerned," he said. "Things can get out of control and somebody may get hurt one day. We are thankful for the presence of the police officers."

And in upstate Carlton, NY, police arrested five teens for disrupting religious services at a mosque. One teen fired a shotgun into the ground outside the mosque's building.

Construction Conflicts

Meanwhile, it has become increasingly difficult to build a mosque in New York City. The city already has about 140 mosques in all shapes and sizes. They range from simple basement apartments to large, multipurpose community centers that can include Islamic schools and auditoriums. One , the Islamic Cultural Center of New York , also known as the 96th Street Mosque, fills an entire block on the Upper East Side.

Louis Abdellatif Cristillo, the project director for Columbia University's Muslims in New York City project, said that historically opposition to mosque-building was motivated in part by fear of the Muslim "other," but that it was dressed up under other pretexts, such as concern about zoning or complaints about noise and traffic. Most of those conflicts, he said in an email, were resolved without much difficulty -- "nothing like we are seeing with the Park51 community center."

Opponents of mosques throughout the New York City area have become much bolder in expressing why they do not want a mosque near them. In Staten Island, the board of trustees of a Roman Catholic Church recently rejected a proposal to sell a vacant convent to the Muslim American Society
, which in turn, planned to convert it into a mosque. Neighbors who were opposed to the mosque labeled the Muslim American Society terrorist sympathizers and rallies against the mosque featured protesters carrying hateful signs against Muslims.

In Bethpage, Long Island, the town shut down the area's only mosque, Masjid Al-Baqi , on the eve of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, citing electrical and plumbing issues. The town supervisor acknowledged that the inspector who found the problems was sent after over 100 community residents called to complain about a proposal for a second mosque in the area.

Mosque officials claim they corrected all the maintenance problems but that the mosque was ordered to close anyway. According to the suit filed by mosque leaders with the State Supreme Court, an anonymous email chain letter had circulated among residents reading in part, "This is not a Muslim neighborhood; we have no Muslim congregation in Bethpage. â€¦ Many of these organizations are on the FBI's watch lists. I do not want this in my neighborhood. They need to go elsewhere."

In Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, some residents have formed a group called Bay People to block the construction of a mosque in a residential area. According to its website, the group cites the typical complaints: noise, traffic and parking problems. Additionally, they openly allege that the builder of the mosque, the Muslim American Society, has a history of associations with radical organizations that promote terrorism. Leaders of the Muslim American Society reject such allegations. The group claims that it has raised $30,000 to fund a legal battle to block the mosque by arguing that it violates zoning laws.

Earlier this month, opponents of the mosque protested when member of the society handed out free backpacks and other school supplies at the site of the proposed mosque.

Politics and Religion

Many of those watching the increase in opposition to the construction of mosques blame politics and politicians. A New York Times front page story on the lower Manhattan Islamic center last December did not mention any opposition. In fact, it said, the project "has drawn early encouragement from city officials and the surrounding neighborhood."

"This controversy only began in May," Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf said in a recent interview on Larry King Live. "And it began as a result of some politicians, who decided to use this for certain political purposes. And this is when it began to snowball."

Bloomberg sees political motives as well. "This whole issue, I think, will go away right after the next election," he said during an appearance on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. “This is plain and simple people trying to stir up things to get publicity and trying to polarize people so that they can get some votes."

While some Republicans support the center and some Democrats do not, many Republicans see opposition to the project as a good issue for them this fall. Republicans who oppose the mosque sometimes have challenged their Democratic opponents to take a stand on the issue, the Times reported last month.

Cristillo agrees that politics is a factor but sees social and economic factors at work as well.

"I think the far right is conflating anti-immigrant legislation with Islamophobia in a climate of anger over the inability of government to resolve the economic crisis to rally its base for the upcoming November elections and the presidential election in 2012. We see this in the ludicrous rhetoric coming out of talk radio, cable news and the blogosphere casting doubt on Obama's birthplace and religion," he wrote. In addition, he said, social conservatives view mosques as examples of spaces that reject assimilation to American values and culture.

All of this has no doubt helped push Park51, which is, in essence, a local issue, into the national arena. Politicians, largely Republicans but Democrats such as Sen. Harry Reid and the former head of the Democratic National Committee and onetime Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, have chimed in too. They have both said that the center should be built elsewhere.

Other politicians have expressed their support for the center. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, a Republican, has defended the rights of the organizers to build the community center. "There's a huge, I think, lack of support throughout the country for Islam to build that mosque there, but that should not make a difference if they decide to do it. I'd be the first to stand up for their rights," he has said.

Park51's most vocal supporter has been Bloomberg. In an emotional speech, the mayor reminded everyone of New York City's dark history of religious intolerance. Indeed, Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor of what was then called New Amsterdam, wanted to bar Jews from arriving in the city and effectively prohibited them from practicing their faith in public. At one time, Catholics were prohibited from practicing their religion and priests could even be arrested. Today though, most Catholics and Jewish New Yorkers oppose the center, according to the Times poll.

"Whatever you may think of the proposed mosque and community center, lost in the heat of the debate has been a basic question: Should government attempt to deny private citizens of the right to build a house of worship on private property based on their particular religion?" he asked. "That may happen in other countries, but we should never allow it to happen here. ... Muslims are as much a part of our city and our country as the people of any faith."

After appearing to vacillate on the issue, Obama, whose own religion has been called into question lately, reiterated his support on the eve of 9/11. "This country stands on the proposition that all men and women are created equal; that they have certain inalienable rights. One of those inalienable rights is to practice their religion freely," he said, adding "if you could build a

Hindu temple on a site, then you should be able to build a mosque on the site."

Ali thinks such statements can play an important role "Americans have the right to freely practice their faith without intimidation and discrimination including the constitutional right to build houses of worship anywhere in the country," she said. Noting "the hate rhetoric against Muslims," she said, "Without strong repudiation from our elected officials, our fear is that this unsettling trend will only continue to grow."