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## Islamophobia: Does America Have a Muslim Problem?

By Bobby Ghosh / Dearborn

To experience what it feels like to be a Muslim in America today, walk in the shoes of Dr. Mansoor Mirza of Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. It's a February evening, and you're at a meeting of the planning commission of Wilson (pop. 3,200), which is considering your application to open a mosque in the nearby village of Oostburg. You're not expecting much opposition: you already own the property, and having worked in the nearby Manitowoc hospital for the past five years, you're hardly a stranger to the town. Indeed, some of the people at the meetings are like most of your patients — white Americans who don't seem to care about their doctors' race or creed when they talk to them about their illnesses.



But when the floor is opened to discussion, you hear things they would never say to you even in the privacy of an examination room. One after another, they pour scorn and hostility on your proposal, and most of the objections have nothing to do with zoning regulations. It's about your faith. Islam is a religion of hate, they say. Muslims are out to wipe out Christianity. There are 20 jihadi training camps hidden across rural America, busy even now producing the next wave of terrorists. Muslims murder their children. Christian kids have enough problems with drugs, alcohol and pornography and should not have to worry about Islam too. "I don't want it in my backyard," says one. Another says, "I just think it's not America."

Looking back, Mirza recalls that a couple of speakers tried to steer the conversation into calmer territory. "I don't think that we should be making broad, sweeping generalizations," said one, according to minutes of the meeting obtained by TIME. But such words barely gave pause to the blunt expressions of suspicion and hostility toward Islam and Muslims. When it came Mirza's turn to speak, his shock and hurt were palpable. "If we are praying there, we don't stink. We don't make noise. We just come, pray and leave," he said. He kept calm when a commissioner asked if there would be any weapons or military training at the mosque. But afterward, Pakistani-born Mirza, 38, was shaken. "I never expected that the same people who came to me at the hospital and treated me with respect would talk to me like this." His lawyer had to take him to a nearby café to help him calm down.

Some of Mirza's roughly 100 fellow Muslims in Sheboygan County would say he was naive. The majority are Bosnians and Albanians who fled to the U.S. to escape persecution by Serbs after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Scarred by their experiences back home, some chose to keep their faith under wraps. They feared that plans to build a mosque would draw too much attention to their community. They were not entirely wrong. After the meeting, pastors in Oostburg began a campaign against the project. "The political objective of Islam is to dominate the world with its teachings ... and to have

domination of all other religions militarily," said the Rev. Wayne DeVrou, a pastor at the First Reformed Church in Oostburg.

The battle in Wilson received little national attention until this month, when a much larger and noisier uproar erupted in New York City over plans to build a Muslim cultural center and mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. Park51, as the project is called, is the brainchild of Imam Feisal Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan, American Muslims well known for promoting interfaith dialogue. Their plan has been approved by city authorities and has the backing of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, but it has ignited a nationwide firestorm of protest.

Some opponents are genuinely concerned that an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero would offend the families of the nearly 3,000 people killed in the attack on the World Trade Center. Paul Walier, a Buffalo, N.Y., lawyer whose sister Margaret died in the towers, acknowledges that Rauf and Khan are within their constitutional rights but adds, "I just don't think it's the appropriate thing to do." You don't have to be prejudiced against Islam to believe, as many Americans do, that the area around Ground Zero is sacred. But sadly, in an election season, such sentiments have been stoked into a volatile political issue by Republican leaders like Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin. As the debate has grown more heated, the project has become a litmus test for everything from private-property rights to religious tolerance. But as in Wisconsin, some of Park51's opponents are motivated by a troubling Islamophobia.

### **Islam Meets America**

The proposed site of Park51 is close not just to Ground Zero; it's also a stone's throw from strip clubs, liquor stores and other establishments typical of lower Manhattan. Local Muslims have been praying in the building for nearly a year, a fact that has been lost in the noise of the anti-mosque protests. But since early August, the site has been the scene of frequent demonstrations in which protesters carry signs saying such things as "All I Need to Know About Islam, I Learned on 9/11." Like Mirza, Rauf and Khan seem stunned into paralysis. While opponents have cast them as extremists sympathetic to al-Qaeda, they themselves have given very few interviews. Rauf has been abroad for much of the time, but pressure is mounting on the couple to move their center to a less polarizing location.

The controversy, meanwhile, has brought new scrutiny to other examples of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim protests across the country, raising larger questions: Does the U.S. have a problem with Islam? Have the terrorist attacks of 9/11 — and the other attempts since — permanently excluded Muslims from full assimilation into American life?

### **Muslims and Mosques in the West**

Muslim Americans need no convincing. The Park51 uproar, says Ebrahim Moosa, an associate professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, "is part of a pattern of intolerance" against Muslims that has existed since 9/11 but has deepened in the past few years. Although the American strain of Islamophobia lacks some of the traditional elements of religious persecution — there's no sign that violence against Muslims is on the rise, for instance — there's plenty of anecdotal evidence that hate speech against Muslims and Islam is growing both more widespread and more heated. "Islamophobia

has become the accepted form of racism in America," says Muslim-American writer and commentator Arsalan Iftikhar. "You can always take a potshot at Muslims or Arabs and get away with it."

There's reason to think that the sentiments expressed in lower Manhattan and in Sheboygan County are not isolated. A new TIME — Abt SRBI poll found that 46% of Americans believe Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence against nonbelievers. Only 37% know a Muslim American. Overall, 61% oppose the Park51 project, while just 26% are in favor of it. Just 23% say it would be a symbol of religious tolerance, while 44% say it would be an insult to those who died on 9/11.

Islamophobia in the U.S. doesn't approach levels seen in other countries where Muslims are a minority: there's no American equivalent of France's ban on the burqa or Switzerland's new law against building minarets. Polls have shown that most Muslims feel safer and freer in the U.S. than anywhere else in the Western world. Two American Muslims have been elected to Congress, and this year, Rima Fasih became the first Muslim to be named Miss USA. Next month, the country's first Muslim college will formally open its doors in Berkeley, Calif. Zaytuna College's motto: "Where Islam Meets America."

But where ordinary Americans meet Islam, there is evidence that suspicion and hostility are growing. To be a Muslim in America now is to endure slings and arrows against your faith — not just in the schoolyard and the office but also outside your place of worship and in the public square, where some of the country's most powerful mainstream religious and political leaders unthinkingly (or worse, deliberately) conflate Islam with terrorism and savagery. In France and Britain, politicians from fringe parties say appalling things about Muslims, but there's no-one in Europe with the stature of a former House Speaker who seemed to equate Islam with Nazism, as Gingrich did recently. "The core argument emerging from [the anti-mosque protests] is that Muslims are not and can never be full Americans," says Eboo Patel, an American Muslim on Obama's advisory council on faith-based and neighborhood partnerships.

It makes sense that the most heated encounters take place over mosques. Since America's Muslim population tends to be much more diffusely scattered than Europe's (with the exception of concentrations in cities like Dearborn, Mich.), places of worship are often the most tangible targets for hatred. And there are suddenly many more of them than before. According to Ihsan Bagby, an Islamic-studies professor at the University of Kentucky, there are now 1,900 mosques in the U.S., up from about 1,200 in 2001. Many of these are little more than makeshift prayer rooms in shops and offices; when Muslim groups set out to build formal mosques, they become more exposed and vulnerable.

This year, at least six mosque projects across the U.S. have faced bitter opposition. In Temecula, Calif., a group in July brought dogs to a protest where Muslims were praying, knowing full well that the animals are regarded as unclean in Islam. And the rage against Muslims is by no means limited to proposed mosques. In Gainesville, Fla., a pastor has announced plans to burn copies of the Koran on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, arguing that Jesus would burn the Koran because "it's not holy." Groups calling themselves the Freedom Defense Initiative and Stop the Islamization of America have sponsored advertisements offering Muslims a "safe" way to give up Islam — the sort of exhortation directed at Jews and Roman Catholics in generations past.

But perhaps the most vicious attacks take place online, where extreme bigotry can easily metastasize. Bloggers like Pamela Geller, a New Yorker who runs the website Atlas Shrugs, played a pivotal role in

making Park51 a national issue even after mainstream conservative commentators had given it a thumbs-up. In December, Laura Ingraham, sitting in for Bill O'Reilly on Fox News, interviewed Daisy Khan and ended the segment by telling her, "I like what you're trying to do." Geller, however, mounted a concerted campaign against the center. "This is Islamic domination and expansionism," she wrote. "The location is no accident — just as al-Aqsa was built on top of the Temple in Jerusalem." Eventually other bloggers picked up the thread, and the campaign went viral.

## **Abandoned by Friends**

The arguments marshaled by Islam's detractors have become familiar: Since most terrorist attacks are conducted by Muslims and in the name of their faith, Islam must be a violent creed. Passages of the Koran taken out of context are brandished as evidence that Islam requires believers to kill or convert all others. Shari'a laws requiring the stoning of adulterers or other gruesome punishments serve as proof that Muslims are savage and backward. The conclusion of this line of reasoning is that Islam is a death cult, not a real religion, so constitutional freedoms don't apply to it. Religious intolerance is not limited to Islam, of course: Jews, Mormons and others still experience hate speech. But the most toxic bile is reserved for Muslims. Franklin Graham, son of Evangelical giant Billy Graham, tells TIME that Islam is "a religion of hatred. It's a religion of war." Park51 should not be allowed, he says, because Muslim worshippers will be able to walk there, and "the entire area they walk by foot they claim as Islamic territory. They will claim now that the World Trade Center property ... is Islamic land."

Those railing against new mosques also use arguments of equivalence: Saudi Arabia doesn't allow churches and synagogues, so why should the U.S. permit the building of Islamic places of worship? Never mind that the U.S. is not, like Saudi Arabia, a country with a state religion, or that America was founded on ideals of religious freedom and tolerance.

It's worth noting that wherever opposition has been nakedly anti-Islamic, it has been denounced by many Christian, Jewish and secular groups. Muslims are by no means friendless. But in recent weeks, they have felt abandoned by people they would have expected to be their staunchest allies. Prominent Democrats either have been notably silent on the Park51 controversy or, like Senator Harry Reid recently, have sided with those who think the center should be moved someplace else. Even André Carson, a Democratic Congressman from Indiana and one of two Muslims in the House, skirted questions on the location of the project, telling TIME, "That's certainly a question my friends in New York will have to hash out."

Over the weekend, Muslim hopes were first raised, then dashed, by President Obama. On Friday, Aug. 13, hosting a dinner for Muslim leaders at the White House, he eloquently defended the community's constitutional right to practice its faith — and by inference, to build their mosques where legally permitted. But the very next day, Obama added a rider: he was not, he clarified, commenting on the "wisdom of making the decision to put the mosque there." A White House official explains the Saturday restatement by saying, "There's a reason the President rarely makes the tactical decision to speak" with reporters in impromptu media gaggles.

Even from the distance and relative safety of Dearborn, Muslims expressed alarm at the explosion of bile over Park51. A heated discussion broke out among customers at a bakery on Aug. 11, the start of the fasting month of Ramadan. Some argued that the Park51 project should be scrapped, lest it inflame

anti-Muslim sentiment; others said backing down would be a mistake. "If they don't build it, they will be agreeing with those who say Muslims are not proper Americans," said Sami, a recent Iraqi immigrant who would give only his first name. "If that's the case, I might as well go back to Baghdad, because I will never be accepted here."

In Dearborn and elsewhere, many American Muslims are especially distressed by the demonization of Rauf, one of the country's foremost practitioners of Sufism, a mystical form of Islam reviled by extremists like Osama bin Laden. "It demonstrates that this is not about distinguishing good from bad, extreme from moderate," says Saeed Khan, who lectures on ethnic-identity politics and the Muslim diaspora at Wayne State University in Detroit. "Muslims are being subjected to a broader brush as a community." In reality, the U.S. has probably the most diverse Muslim population of any country: American Muslims represent practically every race and sect, even those regarded by many Islamic states as heretical.

Why has Islamophobia suddenly intensified? Some Muslim Americans argue it hasn't: these sentiments have existed for years. Others say there have been peaks and troughs since 9/11. Muslim-American commentator Iftikhar recalls the "first wave" of anti-Muslim outbursts after the terrorist attacks, when leading Christian figures like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell openly questioned whether Islam was a religion at all and labeled the Prophet Muhammad a robber, brigand and terrorist. Political leaders were hardly more circumspect. Saxby Chambliss, then a Representative from Georgia (now a Senator), said his state should "arrest every Muslim that comes across the state line," though he later apologized for the remark.

The venom was diluted by President George W. Bush. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Bush visited an Islamic center in Washington and declared that there would be no reprisals against Muslims. Islam, he said, was a religion of peace. The message was reinforced by top Administration officials like Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell. While Bush's credibility with American Muslims would eventually be blighted by the war in Iraq and the attendant death of tens of thousands of Muslims there, some commentators give him credit for reining in Islamophobes. Patel says, "Bush was very strong [in defending Islam] on the domestic front." Like Obama after him, Bush repeatedly drew sharp distinctions between the extremist, violent interpretation of Islam by followers of bin Laden and its peaceful majority. (Bush has declined requests, including from TIME, to comment on Park51.) But by the tail end of his Administration, some Republican groups were already breaking away from the White House line. One unexpected watershed moment was the 2007 release of the Pew Research Center report Muslim Americans, still the most comprehensive survey of the community, which estimated the Muslim-American population at 2.35 million. It was the first definitive number and was much smaller than previous estimates, which ranged from 6 million to 8 million. One consequence of the reduced estimate, says Wayne State's Khan, was that it made the community much more vulnerable to political attack. "It put the metaphorical chum in the water," he says. "It signaled to people that Muslims were a very small group and didn't need to be taken seriously."

Then came the attempt to portray Obama as a closet Muslim during the 2008 presidential campaign, which brought anti-Islamic rhetoric onto the political stage, marking a break from the Bush years. (Remarkably, according to TIME's poll, nearly a quarter of Americans still think Obama is a Muslim.) Since becoming President, Obama has made it a priority to improve the country's image in the eyes of the Islamic world.

His outreach to American Muslims has been much quieter. Unlike Bush, Obama has not yet visited a mosque in the U.S. Attitudes toward Islam have worsened perceptibly in the past two years, perhaps because of a string of terrorism-related incidents involving American Muslims like the accused Fort Hood shooter Major Nidal Hasan and the would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad. Sami, the Iraqi immigrant in Dearborn, says he noticed a change in his neighbors' attitude after the Times Square incident. "Two days later, I was loading some bags in my car, and one guy comes over and looks over my shoulder," he recalls. "I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew what he was thinking."

The concern now is that the mosque protests and the attention they have drawn from politicians may have brought Islamophobia firmly into the mainstream. "It may have become a permanent political wedge issue," says Iftikhar. So far, the Muslim-American community's response has gone little beyond hand-wringing. It has historically had trouble presenting a united front: divisions abound along both racial and linguistic lines, and the community has no obvious leaders.

In the meantime, some worry that growing resentment against Islam will discourage Muslims, especially young ones, from assimilating into the wider society. "When you have a leading politician equating Islam to Nazism, you can imagine that a 17-year-old Muslim in Virginia is thinking, Oh, my God, these people are totally against my religion," says Duke's Moosa.

For Iftikhar, the community's best chance now is to appeal to Americans' sense of justice and fair play. And such appeals can work. In Wilson, the town's executive council eventually ruled in Mirza's favor, and the Islamic Society of Sheboygan has converted a building on his property into a mosque. The Muslim community has already elected an imam, Mohammed Hamad. But it took a tragedy to bring Muslims and non-Muslims closer together. In June, Sofia Khan, a Muslim girl from Chicago, disappeared in Lake Michigan near Oostburg while on vacation with her family. Rita Harmeling, a local woman from a church that had opposed the mosque, called the imam and asked him to minister to the grieving Khan family. Later Harmeling helped volunteers and rescue workers who tried to find the girl. Soon, other residents opened their homes to the Khans. A neighbor of the mosque offered the use of his front yard for the girl's family to gather.

In Sheboygan County, the good old-fashioned American sense of community came through for Mirza, Hamad and the Khans. But when it comes to Muslims and Islam, America's better angels are not always so accommodating.

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