



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on September 23, 2011

Islamic Cultural Center Opens Two Blocks from Ground Zero

Despite all the controversy surrounding what is usually referred to as the Ground Zero mosque, and the efforts put in place to halt the project in its tracks, the Islamic Cultural Center being constructed near the site of 9/11 attacks hosted a photograph exhibit on Wednesday.



While the entire Islamic Center is not complete yet, the Cultural Center opened its doors for its first exhibit, which featured pictures of New York children from a variety of backgrounds lining the walls of the building. The photographer for the exhibit is Danny Goldfield, a Jewish man who said he was inspired to create the exhibit by the story of Rana Sodhi, a Sikh from India whose brother was killed in a retaliatory hate crime just four days after 9/11.

The exhibit depicts children from 169 countries, and Goldfield said he hopes to find subjects representing 24 other countries to complete the project. Some of the photographs he has taken are currently being exhibited elsewhere.

Goldfield touts the photograph exhibit as one which reflects the goal of the center: to be a facility for everyone that's represented on the walls.

Those entering the exhibit were regaled by a small orchestra playing traditional Middle Eastern instruments.

Sharif El-Gamal, the center's developer, remarked that the exhibit was a success, but mentioned some regrets:

We made incredible mistakes. The biggest mistake we made was not to include 9/11 families. [At first], we didn't understand that we had a responsibility to discuss our private project with family members that lost loved ones [Today] were very committed to having them involved in our project. We were really listening.

The Islamic Cultural Center, located just two blocks from the World Trade Center site, features a space for Muslim prayer that has been open for two years.

According to El-Gamal, the center was modeled after the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he lives. I wanted my daughter to learn how to swim, so I took her to the JCC," he said. "And when I walked in, I said, Wow. This is great.

El-Gamal notes that the center is open to all walks of faith, and that it includes a 9/11 memorial. Still, however, the building has been the subject of fierce criticism virtually since it was initially proposed.



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Much of the controversy surrounding the mosque focused on the [Imam](#) behind it: Fiesal Abdul-Rauf. Days after the 9/11 attacks, Abdul-Rauf said, I wouldnt say that the United States deserved what happened, but United States policies were an accessory to the crime that did happen. Abdul-Rauf has also been criticized for his affiliation with the Perdana Global Peace Organization, which donated \$366,000 to the Free Gaze Movement, which in turn organized the six-ship flotilla resulting in a violent conflict with Israeli soldiers.

Likewise, opponents of the mosque criticized its funding from the State Department. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley attempted to defend the funding:

[Abdul-Rauf] is a distinguished Muslim cleric. We do have a program whereby we through our Educational and Cultural Affairs, you know, bureau here at the State Department we send people from Muslim communities here in this country around the world to help, you know, people overseas understand our society and the role of religion within our society.

Overall, polls revealed that nearly 70 percent of the American people opposed the mosque, with 60 percent of New Yorkers against it as well. Even among those who identify themselves as liberals and moderates, the majority stood opposed to the building of the mosque.

El-Gamal claims that the opposition to the mosque was part of a campaign against Muslims.

Likewise, Goldfield, who asserts that he does not want to pass judgment on the opponents of the Muslim center, said he would like for those opponents to visit the exhibit, believing they may be swayed by it.

Fundraising to complete the rest of the Islamic Center is underway. The final product will include a 15-story building featuring an auditorium, educational forums, a restaurant, a culinary school, child-care services, a sporting facility, and artist studios.

El Gamal asserts that the mosque is absolutely necessary in lower Manhattan, because thousands of Muslims both work and live in the neighborhood, and in our religion, we must pray five times a day.

Photo: The site of a planned Islamic cultural center is shown two blocks from the World Trade Center, Aug. 13, 2010 in New York.: AP Images



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