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Mosque at Ground Zero, or Elsewhere?

Newspaper headlines and lead-ins on TV news programs no longer feature daily coverage of the plans to build a mosque and Islamic center near Manhattan's Ground Zero. But the controversy about the proposed project, only two blocks from the scene of the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, isn't dead. In fact, the outcome appears to be headed in favor of what the project's backers have always wanted.



Contrary to most reports, the real decision maker regarding the mosque isn't the oft-quoted Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. Even though he's the local religious leader and would be the mosque's chief imam, he does not own or control the property. The project's fate sits in the hands of Sharif el-Gamal, a real estate developer who holds title to the site. Also a Muslim, he's determined to proceed with the plan for Park51, a name taken from the property's address, 45-51 Park Place. Described by the *New York Times* as businesslike, brash and sometimes pugnacious, he openly proclaims, I don't hold my faith responsible for 9/11. He contends that, as an American, he has a right protected by the Constitution to build whatever he wants on the property as long as he obeys local zoning laws and building codes. He further insists that moving the project to another site wouldn't satisfy its critics.

Imam Rauf, on the other hand, refers to the project as Cordoba House, a reference to the Spanish city dominated by Muslims for several centuries. Eventually, Muslim conquest of much of Spain was reversed, and Christians converted the famous mosque of Cordoba into a church in 1236, but their Moorish architecture remains a tourist attraction for visitors to southern Spain. The curious name for the project chosen by Abdul Rauf is believed by some to indicate his desire to create Islamic domination here in America. It certainly has stiffened the resolve of many of the project's history-aware opponents.

The build-or-not-build controversy grew even more intense when Pastor Terry Jones announced his intention to commemorate 9/11 by burning a Koran at his Florida church. The leader of a minuscule congregation, Jones backed off after being pressed to do so by President Barack Obama, General David



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Petraeus, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and a host of others. Having achieved his 15 minutes of fame, and after his plan actually provoked death-creating riots in Muslim-dominated countries and created threats directed at American forces in Afghanistan, Jones retreated into his former obscurity.

President Obama initially said that it should not be blocked, but then backed off. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has always supported the right of the planners to proceed. Former Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Bolton are among many who oppose the idea because of its proximity to what many consider hallowed ground. They agree that the planners have the right to proceed, but they insist that it would be extremely insensitive to proceed.

A growing uneasiness is permeating the American Muslim community over the project. U.S. citizen Porochista Khakpour stated in a *New York Times* essay that her relatives fear that completion of the project as planned would put them in danger a danger they haven't felt in ages, or ever. Former U.S. Navy officer Dr. Zudhi Jasser, an American citizen who leads the American Islamic Forum for Democracy in Phoenix, faults the backers of the project for making Ground Zero an Islamic issue rather than an American issue. He accuses Imam Rauf of being an Islamist in moderate disguise, but an Islamist nevertheless who is serving the same aims of the separatist and supremacist wings of political Islam.

A case involving great societal sensitivity somewhat reminiscent of the present controversy in New York demonstrates a different tack. In the 1980s, Catholic Carmelite nuns built a cloistered facility at Auschwitz, the site of World War II's famous death camp. They did so to memorialize the Catholics who perished at that site, especially the heroic priest St. Maximilian Kolbe. Militant Jews from New York City chose to desecrate the convent in 1989, claiming it was on their hallowed ground. Condemned soundly by many fellow Jews, the militants promptly declared their intention to repeat the outrage.

By 1993, Pope John Paul II told the nuns to vacate their home and move elsewhere. He did so in hopes of preventing more violence. The nuns, who had every legal right to remain as a reminder to the world that Nazis persecuted and killed Catholics as well as Jews and others, complied.

If the Catholic nuns at Auschwitz would reluctantly relocate in order to prevent violence and promote civil accord, why cant the planners of the mosque in Manhattan do likewise? Is there a hidden goal here to foment strife within our country? Only time will tell.

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