Center of Dispute (A)

On the evening of May 5, 2010, Daisy Khan was in a festive mood. Khan and her husband Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, together with colleagues and friends, celebrated the first formal presentation of their plans for a Muslim Community Center in Lower Manhattan. As the plates of tandoori chicken, biryani, and saag paneer were passed around the restaurant table, they discussed how warmly the local Community Board received the proposal: “All 15 members were in favor of this; they were glad a center like this was coming to their neighborhood.”1 The center promised to bring jobs, vitality, and cultural events to an area near the World Trade Center site. In a neighborhood that had more commerce than community, and many empty storefronts, they would build a place for recreation, education, worship, and interfaith engagement. After more than ten years of imagining the project, even small steps forward were a cause for celebration. There was still much to be done, from fundraising to developing a board, yet she and Rauf were elated that their vision was finally becoming a reality. It would be called “Cordoba House,” taking its name from the Spanish city in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews once “lived together in peace and harmony.”2

Yet Khan’s mood changed the next morning when she came into the Upper West Side offices of the American Society for Muslim Advancement. A staff member gave Khan a copy of the *Daily News*, which reported that Cordoba House was “a 13-story mosque”3 located “steps from ground zero.”4 Khan was stunned. At the presentation the night before, they identified the prayer area as a small part of a larger project. Yet, she recalled, “There it was, in black and white: a 13-story mosque.” Khan put down the newspaper and braced herself for what would come next.

From Cordoba House to Ground Zero Mosque

In the blogosphere, the dispute over the center had just begun. Pamela Geller, a blogger and executive director at Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA) took a particular interest in the project. The day after the presentation to the civic association, Geller posted: “What better way to mark your territory than to plant a giant mosque on the still-barren land of the World Trade Center? Sort of a giant victory lap.” Calling it an “insult,” she asked: “What’s wrong with these people? Have they no heart? No soul?”5 The next day, Geller announced the launch of a “Campaign Offensive” called “Stop the 9/11 Mosque!” Geller’s blog posts about Cordoba House generated emotional responses:

Disgusting!!! This is an insult beyond comprehension. … I would rather not see any more mosques built here, but guess that can't be stopped. … This cannot be allowed to happen. … When are we as a people going to open our eyes and see the creeping infestation by this vile cult?6

News coverage quoted those who questioned the sensitivity of the project: one 9/11 family member said, “That’s sacred ground.” Some characterized Cordoba House as a “slap in the face” or an “insult”; others found it “despicable.”7 One week later, a *New York Post* piece, ”Mosque Madness at Ground Zero” quoted Geller, who asked: "What could be more insulting and humiliating than a monster mosque in the shadow of the World Trade Center buildings that were brought down by an Islamic jihad attack?”8 Later, the piece quoted Khan: "For us, it's a symbol, a platform that will give voice to the silent majority of Muslims who suffer at the hands of extremists. A center will show that Muslims will be part of rebuilding lower Manhattan." The columnist

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raised a host of issues, from appropriateness to funding, and concluded: “There are many questions about the Ground Zero mosque. But just one answer. Move it away.”

Khan considered how to respond. Their goal was to improve understanding and build trust, yet now she and her husband found themselves in the middle of a heated dispute. Khan noted, “And then we saw the people behind it, and then we began to see who was driving the opposition. Stop the Islamization of America is an organized group, and this is now going to be a big fight.” She explained: “So, either we were going to stay in the fight or we were going to withdraw completely. We decided to stay in the fight.”

**Daisy Khan and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf**

Khan has flowing hair, a penchant for embroidered jackets and silk scarves, and a proud and purposeful bearing. Born in Kashmir, she moved to Long Island, New York as a fifteen-year-old. She is known today by her childhood nickname, “Daisy.” Khan sometimes speaks of a “kinder, softer Islam,” and for many in the interfaith movement, Khan and her husband seem to be an embodiment of that idea. Rauf has a charming, engaged manner that seems well suited for a self-described “bridge-builder.” Since the publication of his book, What’s Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West, (2004) Rauf has been in great demand at high-level interfaith meetings and in international diplomacy efforts. His message is accessible, and hopeful:

> We have two powerful tools with which to bridge the chasm separating the United States from the Muslim world: faith in the basic goodness of humanity and trust in the power of sincerity and dialogue to overcome differences with our fellow human beings.

Khan and Rauf were married in 1996, and soon established the American Society for Muslim Advancement (originally named the American Sufi Muslim Association). A friend of Khan and Rauf, speaking to a journalist, characterized their partnership: “He is the thinker; she is the doer.” By 1998, they began planning for a center, which brought together Rauf’s observations about the evolution of religious traditions in America with Khan’s training in architectural design. She recalled:

> He said, ‘You know, in America, religions evolve and they Americanize over time.’ He had observed the Americanization of the Christian community, the Americanization of the Jewish community, and what institutions they had to build in order to be … truly considered to be part of the American fabric. And it was largely going from places of worship to places of service: creating those kinds of institutions that served the larger community.

Their center would be modeled on the YMCA, the Jewish Community Center (JCC), and New York City’s 92nd Street Y, “a proudly Jewish institution” open to all as a cultural and community center. It was also inspired by the 140-year-old Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York, which brought together fine and performing arts, lectures, recreation, and worship. Their planned center would have a dedicated space for Muslim worship, given the lack of available prayer space for Muslims in the city.

Khan recalled that when they started envisioning the center, it was well before texting and email made virtual communication the norm. Together with young, creative congregants, they would meet to discuss the project at lunch after Friday *Jum‘ah* prayers and at dinners that stretched late into the night. They dreamed, discussed, and planned the center they hoped to create. There were numerous business plans and hand-drawn sketches over the years, but the core concept was consistent: people would access the center through “pods” dedicated
to worship, recreation, culture and the arts, and education. Each pod would have a corresponding Qur’anic reference: “So for education,” she offered as an example, the motto would be: “…’God increase my knowledge.’” Khan brightened as she described it: “…everything had a strong meaning to it.” It was, she explained, “building from within, from our scripture, and letting it become alive.”

From Inreach to Outreach

Khan and Rauf were both well aware of the challenges of establishing a center. As a young adult, Khan’s family mosque was the Islamic Center of Long Island (ICLI), established by her uncle Dr. Faroque Khan. When still a student, she was brought into conversations with the architect; Khan designed the carpets that line the floors to this day. Khan laughed as she remembered the differences in vision: the architect wanted to create a Spanish-style terra cotta mosque; the largely Indo-Pakistani community wanted a “little white marble Taj.” She added: “We settled somewhere in between the two.” When Khan studied the floor plans, she identified another issue: the women’s section was to be located in the basement, away from the main prayer hall. The architect, who was not a Muslim, applied a template from another mosque. “And I know all of the women who are behind this mosque: they are all heads of medical departments, they sit at the highest levels of their profession, and I remember telling some of these women, ‘Do you know that you’re going to be in the basement?’”

The layout of the Islamic Center was subsequently changed, but the negotiations were not over. There were members of the community who felt that the prayer hall should be separated, so an accordion door was installed between the men’s and women’s sections. Khan noted, “And that accordion door became everybody’s nemesis.” She continued, “Because a certain group of people who were very conservative started coming to the mosque, and just when the prayers would begin, the women who would wear niqab would get up and they would close the door. And the women who had built the mosque would go and open it again. Open, close, open, close.” Khan added, “These are the kinds of things you deal with when you have different interpretations, when you have people with different schools of thought. We’ve seen this, we’ve seen this over and over again and we’ve learned great lessons from it.”

They later applied those lessons to their planned center, which would serve as a form of “inreach” to the Muslim community.

…[T]here was so much that needed to be done within the Muslim community. Even doing culture and the arts within the Muslim community was like a big thing, because there was so much conservatism, and people thought, ‘Oh this is forbidden, this is forbidden.’ So we were even trying to promote, and project, the kind of Islam that we understood to be an Islam that encompasses all these different expressions.

People of other faiths would be drawn in through programmatic activities, but the primary audience was fellow Muslims. In 2000, they found the ideal site: the McBurney YMCA at the corner of 23rd Street and 6th Avenue. “We got several supporters lined up, and the dot-com bust happened, and that was the end of that project. … And then, the next year, 9/11 happened.”

Khan explained, “All of a sudden, all of this work that we had planned for ourselves just literally got shelved and we went into doing massive outreach into the American public.” She added: “And so we went from being an inreach organization to an outreach organization overnight.” Khan offered another reason for the shift to
outreach: “[We] were also a community that was being challenged, especially post-9/11, from outside. So some of that natural infighting got diffused … because we have to be united right now, and we have to remain united.”

“Come, Come, Whoever You Are”

After 9/11, Khan explained: “Our new mandate began.” Through interfaith outreach, “[W]e got to know the most amazing people that we would have never gotten to know if 9/11 hadn’t happened.” They built coalitions and learned about the complexities and internal diversities of other faiths. They heard about the challenges that other communities had experienced before them, whether Catholic or Jewish, Japanese or African American. “So we’re the latest kids on the block and we are going to have to face these challenges.” She and her husband spoke at churches, synagogues, think tanks, and schools. “We were speaking to as many people as we could.” These interactions led to the creation of new initiatives: Khan and Rauf developed a global initiative for women, in part due to the questions about the status of women in Islam. In response to the persistent question ‘Why don’t more Muslims speak out against extremism?’, they created Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow to bring new voices into the public conversation. Questions about the role of democracy in Islam led to the Islamic Governance Project, which looked at ethics and law. “And so,” Khan said, “we basically just put the [center] idea on the back burner.”

Yet Khan and Rauf still held tight to the idea of a Muslim Community Center. When they established the Cordoba Initiative in 2004, they began referring to the center as “Cordoba House.” The vision would now reflect their new emphasis on outreach: “[W]e knew that there would have to be a strong multi-faith component to this because Americans wanted to know more about Islam, and because we had started building coalitions with our faith communities. So after 2004, when we re-started thinking about this we said ‘OK, this has to have a multifaith, pluralistic component to it.’”

In 2009, Khan met with a new congregant of Imam Rauf’s, Sharif el-Gamal, a real estate developer. Khan remembered, “Gamal showed us the property that had been purchased for potential development.” She recalled that his original plan had been to build condos, perhaps with one floor dedicated to a Muslim prayer space. “And we convinced Gamal to work with us on realizing the vision of the Cordoba House.” The former Burlington Coat Factory building was damaged in the 9/11 attacks, and had been vacant for almost 8 years. “It was the right size, the right footprint, and we could build up to 13 stories.” It was also in the right place, not far from Rauf’s Tribeca mosque. Soon, they would start using the lower level as an overflow prayer space.

As the leaders of the center, together, Khan and Rauf established the mission and vision:

Our guiding principle was always pluralism, because it is extremely important that we stay true to the highest, highest Islamic values of pluralism. Which is pluralism within the faith, because God has created this diversity; and pluralism among the faiths, because God has created all of these religions. … No one can challenge that, if you say that that is your guiding principle. It’s like the Rumi poem, ‘Come, come whoever you are, the worshipper and wanderer. Ours is not a place of despair. Just come.’

Indeed, their original plans for the center called for these words from Rumi’s poem to be etched in stone outside, as a form of invitation. But throughout May 2010, Khan and Rauf continued to receive a very different message in the growing opposition to Cordoba House: “Leave.”
From Muslim Community Center to “Ground Zero Mosque”

The first protest rally against the center, sponsored by SIOA with assistance from the longer-established Stop the Islamization of Europe, took place on June 6, D-Day. More than one thousand people participated, many carrying flags or dressed in red, white and blue. They gathered at the corner of Church Street and Liberty Street and carried signs such as: “A mosque at Ground Zero spits on the graves of 9/11 victims – Stand up America!” and “Why Cordoba? Cordoba is the place in Spain where [the] first Islamic Caliphate was established in the West.”\(^{13}\) Some held copies of a printed sign with the word “Sharia” in dripping red paint, evocative of blood. An older man wearing a New York Yankees cap and a flag T-shirt held up a handmade sign that said simply: “Everything I wanted to know about Islam I learned on 9/11.”\(^{14}\) Supporting groups included Jihad Watch, the Manhattan chapter of ACT for America, the Center for Security Policy, the New York Tea Party, and a number of grassroots groups.\(^{15}\) Newt Gingrich and Geert Wilders, a controversial Dutch politician, were among the political figures in attendance.

The tenor of some of the opposition was troubling, not just for Khan and Rauf, but also for their supporters and advisors. One radio talk-show host said, “I hope the mosque isn't built, and if it is, I hope it's blown up. And I mean that.”\(^{16}\) An advertisement by a Republican PAC, called “Kill the Ground Zero Mosque” was so “inflammatory” Khan was told plainly by a media strategist that if it was televised, they would have to leave the country. While major networks refused to air the ad, they regularly invited Pamela Geller to speak on her opposition to a project that was now widely known, and understood, as “the Ground Zero Mosque.”\(^{17}\)

Khan, Rauf, and their small staff scrambled to keep up with the growing crisis – as well as the heightened emotions, and ongoing threats and accusations. There were also practical matters: in mid-July, based on recommendations of the new PR team, Cordoba House was rebranded as “Park51”; however, the organization remained “The Cordoba Initiative.” Khan explained that once the controversy began, and the opposition came out, “everything spun out of control. …We didn’t know what happened to us.” She remembered:

> I was so busy going day by day, and surviving, and trying to stay strong for everybody else that was looking at me … I didn’t have those moments where I said ‘You know what, it’s not worth it’ because I know the stakes are very high. I just couldn’t afford to have those moments. I used to walk in here, and I had 20-year-olds who were managing the biggest crisis of this decade. That’s what it felt like in America. And if I didn’t come in here, and I didn’t stand strong for them, then they wouldn’t have been able to function properly. So I was doing it for them; I was doing it for our community. I was doing it, like a good mother does: you don’t show your children your vulnerability when you are being attacked. You just try to embrace and calm everybody down.

Khan also drew upon her spiritual resources. She noted that all of those who try to “change the status quo” are persecuted, and remembered the Prophetic history, from Moses to Muhammad. Khan laughed, “What is my struggle? These people spoke to God.” Khan remembered one Hadith (a story from the life of the Prophet Muhammad intended as an example) that she kept in her mind so constantly, so vividly, “as if it was an image.” She recounted that when Muhammad first brought a new message, of One God, many people didn’t like it. At the time, Khan explained, the Ka’aba was filled with idols, and people worshipped hundreds of gods. “Talk about bringing the opposite message of what people believe!” She continued:
So, he used to walk by this alleyway, and there would be this one woman who would always throw entrails and garbage at him. …We’re talking loose entrails. And a couple of times he got hit, and after a while he got used to it, and he would duck. And then one day, there were no entrails.

Khan explained that when Muhammad asked what happened to the woman, he was told she was sick. He went to visit her, and the woman who was once full of hate was transformed by the profound act of kindness. Khan remembered:

I was always imagining myself walking down the alleyway, and entrails are being thrown at me. And I would imagine, every time I saw a newspaper article or blog, I would just say ‘Entrails!’ …I would come in here and say ‘Guys, these are just entrails. Remember the Prophet’s story of the entrails. Just duck. …File them away. Don’t even read them. Hate mail: handle them; send it to the police. You have to protect yourself. These people will recognize their own mistakes in due time. Not right now.’ And that’s how I survived.

Khan, Rauf, and their partners received violent threats and graphic hate mail. Her voice trailed off as she explained, “…it is unbelievable. It’s so bad, it’s so ugly…” Khan preferred to focus on what they called “great mail.” She explained, “Whatever negative was out there, it was always outweighed by the positive; and this huge embrace that was coming out of America.” Khan elaborated:

…There were some wonderful emails from 9/11 families, who said that you honor the memory of the person we lost by doing what is right. And then there was a teenager, she was 16 years old, she wrote a beautiful email, telling us how disgusted she was about the vitriol around the country and how much she really supports us, and wants us to succeed with whatever our dream is.

Interfaith Support

Khan survived by drawing upon spiritual resources and, she explained, because of the “well” of interfaith support. Pamela Geller and other bloggers referred to her as “Khan the Con” and continued to ask: Was this a “victory mosque”? Would they impose Shari’ah Law? Was the funding from extremist sources? Were they pretending to be moderates, using taqiyya (translated by SIOA and Jihad Watch as “Muslim deception”)? Khan responded:

I also knew that the opposition didn’t have anything on us. They were just going to fabricate things. There was nothing that I was concerned about. What are they going to do? And we had assets that they didn’t have. Our assets were all our relationships. Our relationships came out so strongly.

From the beginning, Khan and Rauf received support from their interfaith allies. Some worked behind the scenes, as consultants to the project; others stepped into the media fray or stood by their side during public events. At one charged and contentious community meeting, Khan recalled seeing Rev. Dr. James Forbes, an esteemed Senior Minister Emeritus of the Riverside Church, sitting on a staircase outside the crowded meeting room. She thanked Rev. Forbes for his support, but encouraged him to go home, as it was getting late. Khan recalled:
And he said, ‘Oh no, no, no, I’m not missing this, this is a historical moment, this is like I’m back in the old days.’ People saw many parallels within their own faith communities, especially in the African American community, [they] saw some very, very strong parallels with what they had gone through.

Khan explained that Rev. Forbes was one of many people to go “over and above the call of duty.” She added: “They were not getting paid to do this; they were just doing what they thought was the right thing to do.”

Yet not everyone working in interfaith relations supported the proposed center. On July 28, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a statement about the project, which read, in part: "The controversy which has emerged regarding the building of an Islamic Center at this location is counterproductive to the healing process. Therefore, under these unique circumstances, we believe the City of New York would be better served if an alternative location could be found." Khan was shocked. “It took the rug from underneath our feet.”

While some found the position of the ADL sensible, for others the statement seemed contradictory to the mission of the ADL. Khan believed that the ADL’s stance served to galvanize support for the center. She explained that, as the controversy continued, the voices of support from the Jewish community proved especially critical.

On August 4, two days after the Landmarks Commission ruled against making the former Burlington Coat Factory Building a protected landmark, a group of rabbis and Jewish activists convened at the site of the proposed center. Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Ellen Lippman were among those who offered Khan traditional housewarming gifts: a candle, bread, salt, and honey. At the event, Khan read a prepared statement, but didn’t take questions from the media. Many of the rabbis stepped up to express their support. Khan remembered that it was 104 degrees that day:

> It was blistering! Sweating, the sun was pouring, and there they are giving me honey, and honoring me, and doing a press conference.... There are lots of people that did things that no one ever expected of them, and they changed the discourse because of that.

As the controversy continued, many individuals stood up in support of the project, but Khan preferred not to state their names. Some had already received hate mail; others had lost donations from their congregations after taking a stand. “People had to pay a hefty price.”

**Pressure from the State Department and Hostility on the Homefront**

While many in the interfaith community provided support, the State Department represented another source of pressure. Khan and Rauf were scheduled for a diplomatic tour of the Middle East to begin in August, but as the crisis wore on, they thought it might be better to stay in New York City. From the highest levels of government, the message they received was clear: Imam Rauf, who was speaking on behalf of the administration, could not cancel the trip because of a small opposition group. Yet at the same time, Khan felt, “There was no way we could leave the house burning.” Together, they decided that Rauf would go on the three-week trip, and Khan would stay behind to advocate for the center. “I knew it would be a lonely journey, that it would be tough, but I had to do it.” Yet once Rauf left on the trip, Khan stated, “That created suspicion: ‘Where’s the Imam?’”

By early August, the national media began reporting that the “Ground Zero Mosque” might be fueling anti-Islam sentiments, with reports of incidents that mosques across the U.S., including Islamic Centers in
Michigan, Texas, Wisconsin, and Washington, experienced vandalism; a New York mosque received a bomb threat and a pipe bomb was detonated at an Islamic Center in Florida. And, in late July, the Dove World Outreach Center announced an “International Burn the Qur’an Day.” New and expanding Islamic Centers in Tennessee, New York, and Wisconsin faced opposition and strong rhetoric. While local opposition to mosques was a common occurrence, as Dr. Ihsan Bagby observed in the New York Times, “What’s different is the heat, the volume, the level of hostility … It’s one thing to oppose a mosque because traffic might increase, but it’s different when you say these mosques are going to be nurturing terrorist bombers, that Islam is invading, that civilization is being undermined by Muslims.”

During the month of August, reports of incidents were on the increase. A toy pig with the message “No Mosque in NYC” was left at a mosque in Chico, California. The Islamic Society of Wisconsin faced harsh opposition at a Green Bay City Council meeting. Demonstrators appeared outside a Bridgeport, Connecticut mosque. Signs reading “No temple for the God of Terrorism at Ground Zero” were left at an Islamic Center in Madera, California. And, at the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro in Tennessee, shots were fired near the construction site of a new mosque.

As Khan read media reports of the attacks against other Muslim centers, she said, “That’s when we knew this was bigger than just us. Move it? You’ve now moved on to California, Tennessee, Florida.” At her family’s mosque on Long Island, over the years they had encountered occasional local opposition based on parking or traffic, “…but not placards protesting Shariah.” She continued, “Not a national, organized opposition.”

Mounting Tensions, Mounting Criticism

With tensions mounting, as the controversy continued into its third month, it was no longer merely a matter of those who supported the project and those who opposed it. The New York Times, which had been largely favorable in its coverage of the project, published a piece in early August that was critical of Khan, Rauf, and the real estate developer Gamal. The article noted that while planners may not have realized that it would be called “a victory monument to terrorism,” they failed to engage with those who might oppose the project, did not consult with experienced Muslim organizations, and didn’t hire a public relations firm until after the controversy ensued.

How Ms. Khan’s early brainstorming led to today’s combustible debate, one often characterized by powerful emotions and mistaken information, is a combination of arguable naïveté, public-relations missteps and a national political climate in which perhaps no preparation could have headed off controversy.

A Washington Post column pointed criticism at Khan’s husband, Rauf: “At the center of a global firestorm of debate, Rauf is absent, sticking to his commitment to lecture for the State Department in Bahrain about, of all things, ‘how we emphasize religious tolerance in our society.’” The August 23 article added: “Rauf's wife said he would not be available for an interview until next month.”

In August, a number of Muslim individuals and organizations publicly expressed concerns and criticism. The Muslim Canadian Congress wrote a letter to Rauf, dated August 10, which “urg[ed] the Cordoba House Initiative to abandon its proposed Ground-Zero Mosque in New York in the face of outrage expressed by large segments of the American population…” The letter stated, in part:
Many Muslims suspect that the idea behind the Ground Zero mosque is meant to be a deliberate provocation, to thumb our noses at the ‘infidel.’ We believe the proposal has been made in bad faith and, in Islamic parlance, is creating ‘fitna,’ meaning ‘mischief-making,’ an act clearly forbidden in the Qur’an. … The Qur’an commands us Muslims to, ‘Be considerate when you debate with the People of the Book’ -- i.e., Jews and Christians [chapter 29, verse 46]. Building an exclusive place of worship for Muslims at the place where Muslims killed thousands of New Yorkers, is not being considerate or sensitive, it is undoubtedly an act of ‘fitna.’

Mustafa Stefan Dill developed a three-part analysis of the project, which characterized the “failures” of the Cordoba Initiative’s social media and PR approach as “exhaustive and severe.” More than two months into the controversy, he noted, “…there still appears to be some confusion in the public perception over whether … the project is a community center, an Islamic center, a mosque, or a mix, which got stuck with the label “Ground Zero Mosque.”

Hussein Rashid, long active in interfaith affairs, posted on “The Leadership Failure of Park51,” which cited a lack of media planning or ability to articulate the center’s goals:

> Many people are speaking out against the Islamophobes, but we should not conflate this with support of the center. The organizers of the proposed Park51 project lacked the vision that could have foreseen both the fabricated ‘controversy’ of the Islamophobes and the discontent of the Muslim community that was not included in the planning process. Because the project’s planners failed to foresee the former, the Muslim community has been forced to defend a project about which it is otherwise ambivalent.

One young Muslim commentator described the project as “dangerously naïve” in the “On Faith” blog of the Washington Post. Despite the “noble intentions” of Khan and Rauf, Abed Bhuyan asked why they did not consult with other American Muslims who became “bystanders in what has become an attack on our religious freedoms.” He added:

> We want to want to support this project, but we don't want to have to support it. There has been concern that this controversy, one that leaves all Americans weary, is not a fight that ever really needed fighting.

Blogger Aziz Poonawalla echoed the concern that the Muslim community was being “dragged into” the controversy on his BeliefNet post: “In some ways it would be a relief if the issue went away. However, if the project does fail, then I think that the message that will be sent is that bigotry and fear of Muslims is not just permitted, it is effective.”

Khan described strong support from most Muslim individuals and organizations, despite a few vocal detractors. For some, Khan argued, it was a matter of “getting their 15 minutes of fame.” For those who said they should have consulted the Muslim community, Khan countered: “Who is ‘the Muslim community’?” She explained that every Muslim center, whether in Long Island or Los Angeles, grows out of a small group in its own context: the Muslim community is diverse, complex, and ultimately, local. As to the persistent criticism about the center’s public relations approach, Khan laughed. As soon as the crisis broke, she noted, they engaged some of the best media and communications firms available, but this crisis was something they had never seen. They hired one of the top PR people in the city, who worked with major banks and knew how to
handle crisis: even she was stumped. Khan offered an explanation: “You’re dealing with Islam. Islam is a brand that has been so tarnished in the past 10 years. That is at the root of this.”

**Polls and Politicians’ Perspectives**

In the summer of 2010, opinion polls clearly indicated that the majority of Americans opposed the proposed center, an important fact given the mid-term elections in November. As the controversy wore on, Mayor Michael Bloomberg was among the few political figures to consistently affirm the right for the center to be built. In early August, Bloomberg went one step further. Standing on Governor’s Island, with the Statue of Liberty in the background and a group of diverse religious leaders at his side, Bloomberg spoke:

…This nation was founded on the principle that the government must never choose between religions or favor one over another. The World Trade Center site will forever hold a special place in our city, in our hearts. But we would be untrue to the best part of ourselves and who we are as New Yorkers and Americans if we said no to a mosque in lower Manhattan.

Let us not forget that Muslims were among those murdered on 9/11, and that our Muslim neighbors grieved with us as New Yorkers and as Americans. We would betray our values and play into our enemies’ hands if we were to treat Muslims differently than anyone else. In fact, to cave to popular sentiment would be to hand a victory to the terrorists, and we should not stand for that.

For that reason, I believe that this is an important test of the separation of church and state as we may see in our lifetimes, as important a test. And it is critically important that we get it right.31

On August 11, 2010, CNN released a poll regarding Americans’ attitudes about the “plan to build a mosque two blocks from the site in New York City where the World Trade Center used to stand”: 68 percent opposed; 29 percent supported; and just 3 percent held no opinion.32 A Marist Poll indicated that 53 percent of New Yorkers opposed the project; however, only 31 percent of Manhattan residents disapproved.33 While Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin had weighed in earlier to express their opposition, President Obama did not comment on the issue until the White House *Iftar* (a shared meal to break the fast during Ramadan), held on August 13. He began by acknowledging the trauma of 9/11, and continued:

But let me be clear: as a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country, and that they will not be treated differently by their government, is essential to who we are. The writ of the Founders must endure.34

The next day, President Obama was asked follow-up questions about his support of the project, to which he responded: "I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there[.]”35

Soon thereafter, a range of political figures weighed in, and in late August, one politician raised the stakes: New York Governor David Paterson asked Khan and Rauf to meet with him to discuss moving to another location: "If the sponsors were looking for property anywhere at a distance that would accommodate a better
feeling among the people who are frustrated, I would look into trying to provide them with the state property
they would need.” Khan noted, further, that a move would be “a noble gesture to those who live in the area,
who suffered after the attack on this country, and at the same time would probably, in many ways, change a lot
of people’s minds about Islam.”

For months, Khan knew the center had become a “wedge issue” for politicians, and the question of a move had
been with them from the beginning. “Advisors came out of everywhere, ‘Don’t move it; stay the course.’
‘Move it; you’ll be heroes.’ ‘Don’t move it: it will show you have buckled.’” Khan said, “There is no rule
book on what to do when you’re in a national crisis.”

“Everybody is a Stakeholder”

By late August, Ramadan was well under way, and the controversy had now extended over more than three
months. On August 22, with Imam Rauf overseas on a State Department tour, protestors and supporters faced
off at the site of the proposed center. The same day, Khan appeared on ABC News, together with Rabbi Joy
Levitt from the JCC in Manhattan, on a program titled “Debating the Ground Zero Islamic Center.” Khan
explained that their focus now was “bridge-building,” as “that is what we do best.” The host, Christiane
Amanpour, asked if Khan was going to “seek a compromise and move it?” She replied

Well, what we are doing is we are meeting several stakeholders right now, because we understand the
pain and the anguish that has been displayed throughout the country with the polls that are represented
out there. And we want to build bridges. We don’t want to create conflict. This is not where we were
coming from. So, this is an opportunity for us to really turn this around and make this into something
very, very positive. So we will meet. And we will do what is right for everyone.

Amanpour asked if Khan planned to meet with the Governor and consider his offer of another location, and
Khan explained that first, she would need to meet with their New York stakeholders. Khan outlined the many
considerations: the sentiments of their supporters; their “constitutional right” to build the center; the
“extremists” who are “seizing this moment.” Khan noted: “We have to be very careful, and deliberate, when
we make any major decision like this.”

Amidst “all the stress” Khan was also acutely aware of “the various stakeholders that are now looking to see
what we are going to do.” She reflected:

The Muslim world is a stakeholder because they all want to see if you’re going to be allowed to build
a mosque. The Muslim community is a stakeholder, because everyone’s saying ‘Oh, let’s see what
happens with this Islamophobia.’ The whole interfaith community is a stakeholder, because they want
us to succeed. The civic associations are all stakeholders, because they really want to make sure that
the constitution is being upheld. Then, the 9/11 families… the whole thing came out because of them.
And then you have the American public that seems to have also weighed in.

Khan emphasized: “Everybody is a stakeholder.”
Endnotes

1 All quotes from Daisy Khan, unless otherwise noted: Daisy Khan interview by Ellie Pierce, New York City, NY, May 27, 2011.


4 Ibid.


7 Jackson and Hutchinson.


9 Ibid.


15 Ibid.


22 Ibid.


24 Ibid.


39 Ibid.