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FROM BACKLASH TO MOBILIZATION:
MUSLIM AMERICAN PRAYER SPACES IN POST-9/11 NEW YORK

by

George E. Melissinos

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University New York.

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

FROM BACKLASH TO MOBILIZATION:
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George E. Melissinos

Advisors: Professor Mandana E. Limbert and Professor Simon Davis

This paper argues that Muslim Americans mobilized against the threat of backlash post-9/11 through the creation of new prayer spaces and maintenance of prayer spaces already in existence before the terrorist attacks. I suggest that the successful mobilization of prayer spaces continues to provide a mechanism of support and unity against backlash for Muslim Americans in New York City since the events of September 11, 2001. I also explore how ineffective mobilization efforts, such as demonstrated by the Park51 project, fail to protect the Muslim American community against backlash.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Historical Examples of Backlash in the United States	4
Backlash Against Muslim Americans	7
Mobilization	11
History of Islam in the United States	14
Institution Building	18
Example 1: The Park51 Project	21
Example 2: Storefront Mosques in New York City	25
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	39

Introduction

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon changed the political culture of the United States by creating a completely new atmosphere of fear regarding threats of terror. What the general public may understand less well are the ways in which the lives of ordinary Muslim Americans were changed by their perceived association with the perpetrators. Because the terrorists were self-proclaimed Muslim jihadists, Muslim Americans continue to live with the backlash of that fateful day, over a decade later. This paper examines how the Muslim American community in New York City adapted to the post-9/11 threat of backlash through mobilization. For the purposes of this paper, mobilization refers to the setting of a goal by a collective group of people and their actions which further that aim, and backlash is defined as “a combination of stereotyping, scapegoating, hate crimes, and government initiatives.”¹ This paper focuses on two particular areas of interest, the Park51 controversy, an example of ineffective mobilization, and the effective proliferation of prayer spaces in New York City post-2001.

This paper argues that Muslim Americans mobilized against the threat of backlash post-9/11 through the creation of new prayer spaces and maintenance of prayer spaces already in existence before the terrorist attacks. I suggest that the successful mobilization of prayer spaces continues to provide a mechanism of support and unity against backlash for Muslim Americans in New York City since the events of September 11, 2001. I also explore how ineffective mobilization efforts, such as demonstrated by the Park51 project, fail to protect the Muslim American community against backlash.

¹Bakalian, Anny and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009; 251-252.

In order to support my argument about successful mobilization against backlash, I review the history of Muslims in the United States and the backlash model of Bakalian and Bozorgmehr. I also review the theory of congregationalism (the formation of small institutions in order to carry out the social and religious functions of a religious group) to help explain the context for Islamic mobilization in New York City. Additionally, I visited and observed twenty prayer spaces in four boroughs of New York City in order to test my hypotheses and arrive at the conclusions of the study.

The backlash against Muslim Americans became evident almost immediately after the 9/11 attacks. It included social and governmental targeting of Muslim Americans through physical violence and the loss of civil liberties.² On the surface, the Bush administration took steps toward preventing backlash against Muslim Americans. On September 17, President George W. Bush visited the Islamic Center of Washington and told the press that “Islam is peace.”³ In his address, Bush spoke sympathetically about the rights of Arab Americans and the need for America to continue its tradition of peaceful coexistence with Islam. On the same day, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced over forty ongoing hate crime investigations relating to incidents involving attacks on Arab Americans.⁴

Nonetheless, following the events of 9/11, the United States government issued a series of directives and policies which appeared to target Muslim Americans. These actions included detention of suspects without charge, and a focus on Muslim Americans of Middle Eastern origin

² This paper is about Muslim Americans. However, the author includes Middle Eastern Americans in this study, to the extent that they are Muslims.

³ “Bush Visits Mosque to Forestall Hate Crimes; President Condemns an Increase in Violence Aimed at Arab Americans.” Dana Milbank and Emily Wax. *Washington Post*. September 18, 2001.

⁴ “Bush Visits Mosque to Forestall Hate Crimes; President Condemns an Increase in Violence Aimed at Arab Americans.” Dana Milbank and Emily Wax. *Washington Post*. September 18, 2001.

for visa overstay violations.⁵ The sociologists Bakalian and Bozorgmehr argue that these government initiatives were part and parcel of the 9/11 backlash. These authors state that the Bush administration's "War on Terror" provoked mistreatment of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans both by the government and by private individuals.⁶

The Park51 controversy, discussed later in this paper, illustrates how the backlash continued even ten years after the 2001 attacks. Individuals from the Middle East were again viewed with suspicion, this time over a community project. Park51 was a project to build an Islamic cultural center on Park Place in Lower Manhattan, a few blocks from the World Trade Center. Instead of creating a unifying cultural center, the leaders, including the developer and the imam involved in the project, were surprised to find themselves in a vitriolic debate over the rights of Muslims to religious freedoms, and the ways in which those freedoms were impacted by the laws of the City of New York. The backlash surrounding the project illustrated how Muslim Americans might not be permitted to exercise their right to religious freedoms to the same extent as other Americans. This is because they were collectively held responsible for the actions of nineteen individuals acting as Muslim jihadists.

In examining the post-9/11 backlash against Muslim Americans, a potential semantic problem emerges: the labels "Arab" and "Muslim" are often used interchangeably but have different meanings. The term "Arab" is an ethno-linguistic term describing the Arabic-speaking people hailing from 22 countries in a region stretching from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula.^{7,8} In the United States, the best data available suggests that Arabs make up about a

⁵ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 159.

⁶ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 4.

⁷ Samhan, Helen Hatab. "Who Are Arab Americans?" Arab American Institute Foundation, 2001.

⁸ Bagby, "The Mosque in America." Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2012; 13.

quarter of regular mosque attendees in America, behind both African Americans and South Asians. Furthermore, Arabs in the United States have always been religiously diverse, counting Christians and Druze among their numbers. Arab Americans have never been overwhelmingly Muslim at all. Arabs do not make up a majority of Muslims in the world or even in the United States. The term “Muslim” refers to someone who adheres to the Islamic faith.⁹ These religious and ethnic components of the term “Muslim” are both important, because the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” often overlap. The two categories share many of the same members and the lack of distinction between them affects how the backlash phenomenon operates. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “Muslim” throughout.

Historical examples of Backlash in the United States

Bakalian and Bozorgmehr define backlash “as an excessive and adverse societal and governmental reaction to a political/ideological crisis against a group or groups.” They also state that “during periods of war or political/ideological crises the state tends to treat a minority population as an ‘outgroup’ that happens to share the same immigrant/ethnic or religious background as the ‘enemy.’” In addition, the writers define backlash “as a combination of stereotyping, scapegoating, hate crimes, and government initiatives.” Muslim and Arab communities considered the actions of the Bush administration in the months after 9/11 more egregious than the bias incidents and discrimination against their members. Bakalian and

⁹ It is important to understand that there are significant numbers of South Asian and African American Muslims in the United States. South Asian Muslims hail in large numbers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Indian and Pakistani Muslims are particularly common in New York.

Bozorgmehr compiled a list of 62 government actions initiated against these communities between September 2001 and February 2007.¹⁰

I believe that in order to understand the ramifications of backlash that occurred after 9/11, it is necessary to examine historical precedent. Although this paper focuses on the backlash experienced by Muslim Americans following 9/11, it was not the first time that the government of the United States targeted a group of people who shared the same ethnicity, religion, or nationality and identified them as the enemies of the country. During World War I, the government created laws and policies that discriminated against German Americans. At the outbreak of the war, the government began manipulating the education system for the purposes of war propaganda, portraying Germans as savage aggressors.¹¹ State governments pursued this idea even further – California’s Board of Education denounced German as a language of autocracy, loyalty oaths were demanded in schools, and New York passed a textbook censorship law.¹² Later, the governor of Iowa banned the speaking of German in public. Around the same time, the climate against German-Americans was so noxious that multiple lynchings occurred in places with large German populations, such as St. Louis and Cincinnati.¹³

Similarly, latent cultural stereotypes directly led to aggressive government action against Japanese Americans during World War II. In the nineteenth century, an anti-Japanese climate emerged as a result of large-scale Japanese immigration. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States military began to issue overtly racist retaliatory orders uniformly declaring

¹⁰ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 14, 156, 251-262.

¹¹ Kennedy, David. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. Oxford, 2004; 23-25.

¹² Kennedy, David. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. Oxford, 2004; 24.

¹³ Kennedy, David. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. Oxford, 2004; 24.

Japanese Americans as racially different from other Americans.¹⁴ The United States government had little need to justify the legal suspension of the rights of Japanese Americans. This is because media outlets, such as the Hearst newspaper conglomerate, expressed these sentiments strongly after the events of 1941 and the American public came to believe them.¹⁵ Thousands of innocent Japanese American citizens were detained and placed in internment camps until a Supreme Court ruling halted the process in January 1944.¹⁶

There were no public attempts at formal redress from within the Japanese American community until a Japanese American Citizens League meeting in 1970.¹⁷ The initial potential for reparations for Japanese Americans was severely limited by the Supreme Court decision in *Korematsu v. United States*, in which Justice Hugo Black's ruling claimed that the order for the internment camp in question was "nothing but an exclusion order" and did not violate the rights of Japanese Americans.^{18,19} Because the federal government's actions during the war were deemed legal, redress was not possible at the time. It was not until October 1990 that the first victim of the internment camps received a formal apology and compensation from the government.²⁰

¹⁴ Thiesmeyer, Lynn. "The Discourse of Official Violence: Anti-Japanese North American Discourse and the American Internment Camps." *Discourse & Society* 6: 327.

¹⁵ Thiesmeyer, Lynn. "The Discourse of Official Violence: Anti-Japanese North American Discourse and the American Internment Camps." *Discourse & Society* 6: 321-325.

¹⁶ "World War II: Internment of Japanese Americans." Alan Taylor. *The Atlantic*. August 21, 2011.

¹⁷ Takezawa, Yasuko. *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity*. Cornell University Press, 1995; 33-35.

¹⁸ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944); 323.

¹⁹ Takezawa, Yasuko. *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity*. Cornell University Press, 1995; 35.

²⁰ Takezawa, Yasuko. *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity*. Cornell University Press, 1995; 28.

The German Americans during World War I and the Japanese Americans during World War II were targeted by the federal government prior to the experience of Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 environment. Both earlier groups were focused on indiscriminately. Individuals in the targeted groups were brought in for questioning without evidence that crimes had been committed or that they had aided their countries of origin. These examples underscore the historical context for the targeting of particular subgroups in the United States under times of national duress. Muslim Americans experienced much of the same backlash reaction decades later beginning with the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Backlash Against Muslim Americans

The backlash against Muslim Americans manifested itself almost immediately after the 9/11 attacks. While the precise details of the attacks were still largely unknown, President Bush's remarks in the days after the attacks were seen as forward-thinking in regards to the protection of Muslim Americans due to his positive words about their community. These statements received positive attention in the media.²¹ However, the Muslim American community experienced a politically difficult situation almost immediately after the president's goodwill gesture. Within days of the attacks, as more details emerged about the religious affiliation of the perpetrators, Muslims became politically targeted because the events were hostile actions undertaken to harm the United States.²² Once again, as with German Americans during World War I and Japanese Americans during World War II, law enforcement actions included the detention of significant numbers of Muslim men soon after 9/11. Overzealous law

²¹ "Six Days After 9/11, Another Anniversary Worth Honoring." Samuel Freedman, *New York Times*. September 8, 2012; A15.

²² Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 157.

enforcement incidents also occurred. For example, an innocent Pakistani man was arrested and detained for four months because he used a credit card to make photocopies on the same day as one of the 9/11 hijackers.²³

The post-9/11 period signaled overt anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. Public opinion prior to 9/11 was more subtle and based more on a lack of understanding than intolerance.²⁴ The media played a role in this process of growing anti-Muslim sentiment, which took several years after 9/11 to complete, by focusing on religious extremism and the possibility of home-grown terrorism.²⁵ Following September 11, Muslim Americans have been subjected to previously unseen levels of public and government scrutiny.

The relevance of Muslims in American society changed drastically in the years after 9/11 because of the supposed dangers they represented to American Judeo-Christian culture and to security. The backlash after the attacks took a heavy toll on the Arab American and Muslim American communities. The two groups, and people who “looked like” members of these groups, came under heavy suspicion from the American public and were subjected to verbal harassment, bias incidents involving serious bodily harm, and even death.²⁶

Physical violence was frequently experienced by Muslim Americans soon after the attacks. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr identify a list of hate crimes targeting Muslims and Arabs in late 2001; one violent incident included a man shot in the back while running from a killer who

²³ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 159.

²⁴ “Muslim Americans and the Media after 9/11.” Mohammad Abid Amiri. *Islam and Muslim Societies*. Vol. 5, No. 2 (2012); 2 .

²⁵ “Muslim Americans and the Media after 9/11.” Mohammad Abid Amiri. *Islam and Muslim Societies*. Vol. 5, No. 2 (2012); 3.

²⁶ Peek, Lori. *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2012; 29; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 144.

broke into his home.²⁷ A Pakistani immigrant was killed in his Dallas convenience store by a white supremacist four days after 9/11.²⁸ Arab-centered organizations were flooded with threatening phone calls. Non-Muslim South Asians, Sikhs in particular, and Africans were often mistaken for Muslims by the uninformed public. One study documented nearly 700 hate and bias incident reports in newspapers around the country in the week after 9/11.²⁹ Much of the American public was relatively uninformed about what Islam is and who Muslims are, so violent extremists took their frustration out on anyone they perceived to be Muslim.³⁰

Arabs, Muslim or not, relegated to a manifestation of the “bad Muslim” archetype, found themselves under suspicion by virtue of their background and had to repeatedly explain why they condemned the 9/11 acts and wanton acts of violence against the United States. The “good Muslim/bad Muslim” theory holds that there are moderate “good” Muslims who integrate into their host culture, and “bad” Muslims who are extremists and reject non-Muslim society.³¹ The effect of this theory is to oversimplify Muslim political dynamics, and to cast suspicion on Muslims who do not superficially appear to be integrated into mainstream American society. This archetype was applied to immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr suggest that immigrants from countries with governments unfriendly to the United States were forced to prove their loyalty to United States authorities, thereby causing entire communities to question the trustworthiness of law enforcement groups. This led to certain groups being less willing to cooperate in law enforcement efforts aimed at apprehending real

²⁷ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 4-5.

²⁸ “Kin of 9/11 Hate Crime Victim Now Americans.” Houston Chronicle. 03/17/2002.

²⁹ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 1.

³⁰ Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg. *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008; 81.

³¹ “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” Mahmood Mamdani. *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 104; No. 3 (2012).

terrorists. In other words, Muslims were more or less suspect in the eyes of the United States government based on the nature of the regime in the country from which they originated.

The centrally-planned actions of the federal government in Washington, D.C., were not favorable to Muslim Americans either. The Bush administration initially appeared to take a pro-Muslim stance, both in the words of the president shortly after the attacks and in the prosecution of hate crimes.³² Civil liberties groups, however, complained that those words were not matched by actions.³³ In the criminal justice system, many anti-Muslim actions occurred. Suspects were detained irrespectively of constitutional limits and conditions. Moreover, arrests for other crimes, like visa overstays, drastically increased for those of Arab origin or from Muslim countries in the final months of 2001.³⁴ The government disregarded the rights of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans in numerous cases. Thousands of detentions occurred. The Justice Department held suspects in custody without telling their families or others. The government did not share with the public information about the number of suspects detained, or the location of their incarceration. According to internal Justice Department reports, due process laws were ignored, as were safeguards relating to custodial control of suspects.^{35,36} In the aftermath of 9/11, government policies targeting Arabs and Muslims as automatically suspicious harmed

³² Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 156.

³³ “America’s Challenge: Domestic Security, Civil Liberties, and National Unity after September 11th.” Muzaffar A. Chishti, Doris Meissner, Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Jay Peterzell, Michael J. Wishnie, Stephen W. Yale-Loehr. Migration Policy Institute, 2003.

³⁴ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 158.

³⁵ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 4.

³⁶ Cainkar, Louise. “Post 9/11 Domestic Policies Affecting U.S. Arabs and Muslims: A Brief Review.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24:1. This article supports Bakalian/Bozorgmehr’s argument as to the Yemeni community.

community-police relations.³⁷ This resulted in lack of trust from the Muslim community, which jeopardized potential crime reporting information for the future.

Many Muslims in the United States are recent immigrants, and therefore not yet invested into the mainstream political system through citizen participation. They are not able to vote until they attain citizenship, and therefore participate in their local Muslim community rather than in American politics. Because these Muslim Americans cannot presently participate in the American political process, they mobilize through their Muslim communities.

In another turn of events for Muslim Americans, the awareness that the final phase of the 9/11 attacks originated within the United States heavily influenced government policy in the decade after the attacks.³⁸ However, this information obscured the fact that all 19 hijackers in the attack were foreign nationals on visas, not naturalized Muslim Americans, and had only been in the United States for a few months.³⁹ Since most Muslim Americans are immigrants, they were negatively associated with foreign-born terrorists and subjected to backlash.

Mobilization

Bakalian and Bozorgmehr argue that mobilization by Arab Americans has been a direct response to the backlash after 9/11.⁴⁰ They further contend that “backlash promotes

³⁷ “America’s Challenge: Domestic Security, Civil Liberties, and National Unity after September 11th.”; 11.

³⁸ “The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States - Executive Summary.” Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004; 2.

³⁹ “While America Slept: The True Story of 9/11.” Brian Ross. Abcnews.com. Last Accessed: July 29, 2013.

⁴⁰ Koopmans defines mobilization/claims-making as “a unit of strategic action in the public sphere...consist[ing] of the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, which actually or potentially, affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors.”

mobilization/claims-making in the short or long term, depending upon favorable structural and cultural conditions, namely political opportunities, resources, repertoires of collective action, and framing promises.”⁴¹ Major public attention on issues like the 9/11 attacks and the Park51 “World Trade Center” mosque caused a backlash against Islam and Muslim Americans, which lead to different forms of community mobilization. While the mobilization regarding the Park51 project was unsuccessful, mobilization in other areas was more successful. This paper looks at the unsuccessful mobilization of Park51 and the successful mobilization based around the construction and maintenance of prayer spaces.

Government backlash against Muslim Americans after 9/11 was a reflection of racial policies established in the 20th century, such as the previously described actions that targeted the Germans in World War I and the Japanese in World War II. While it took Japanese Americans over twenty years to demand recognition of their rights from the government, Muslim Americans mobilized and advocated for their rights within a week after the attacks. They denounced the heinous actions of the terrorists and distanced themselves from those actions. Additionally, Arab American community leaders demanded their members’ “rightful places” in American society.⁴²

Bakalian and Bozorgmehr stress themes of integration and civic activism and focus on the idea of the community as a targeted group.⁴³ Civic activism and mobilization were enhanced through Arab American groups appearing on television and other media to condemn terrorism and to bolster the image of the Muslim American community. In response to potential ethnic stereotyping, Arab and Muslim Americans became consultants to the government and

⁴⁰ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 17.

⁴¹ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 17.

⁴² Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 179.

⁴³ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 179.

“ambassadors” to the public. They spoke on such topics as the Middle East and Islam.⁴⁴

Mobilization was crucial towards combating the negative post-9/11 perceptions of Arabs and Muslim Americans. The presence of representatives of the Muslim American community in the public eye, from television appearances to government committee participation, aimed to reduce the backlash effect.

This paper will present two examples, one of effective mobilization and one of ineffective mobilization, that were responses to post-9/11 backlash. The first illustration is the Park51 project, which was an attempt to build an Islamic-themed cultural center with both religious and non-religious activities a few blocks from the World Trade Center site. The Park51 project is striking because the lead developer, who is a Muslim American himself, did not ask the Muslim American community for support during the initial phases of the project. This lack of civic engagement by the developers led directly to a lack of Muslim American mobilization once the project became the victim of anti-Muslim backlash.

The second example is of the proliferation of mosques in New York City after 9/11 against the backdrop of mosques in the United States.⁴⁵ As the socio-political environment for Muslim Americans became more difficult, Muslims significantly increased the number of prayer spaces in the United States. As the number of Muslim American immigrants increased, it was important for them to increase the number of available prayer spaces while simultaneously combating stereotypes and defending their religious freedoms in the face of backlash. While large-scale issues like Park51 subjected Muslim Americans to backlash, the construction of prayer spaces at the neighborhood level created different problems. As a response to these problems, Muslims built mosques in their local communities in order to firmly establish their

⁴⁴ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 193.

⁴⁵ Bagby, Ihsan. “The Mosque in America.” Council on American-Islamic Relations. 2012.

religion in their locales and to protect their religious rights. Through the use of observational research based in New York City, and a set of reports on mosques in the United States, this paper argues that Muslim Americans mobilized to protect their religious rights post-9/11 by building and maintaining prayer spaces.⁴⁶

History of Islam in the United States

In order to understand the backlash against American Muslims, it is important to understand the history of Islam in the United States. Scholars have opined on the popular treatment of Muslims by the West ever since Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*.⁴⁷ Subsequently, academics have become keenly aware of how stereotypes of Muslims are heavily ingrained in American consciousness. In wider society, these stereotypes came to a head post-9/11.

Said advanced his earlier work to write about "Islam as news," arguing that Islam was depicted to Western readers by journalists and academics as underdeveloped and autocratic.⁴⁸ In *Covering Islam*, Said criticizes academic centrists like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Robert Tucker for not understanding Islamic cultures and assuming that the United States needed to be wary of a monolithically "Muslim" part of the world.⁴⁹ This debate reflects the tension between Islamic cultures as it is sometimes perceived and the realities of these cultures. These differences in perception significantly contribute to problems for Muslim Americans contending with backlash.

⁴⁶ Bagby, "The Mosque in America." 2012.

⁴⁷ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1994.

⁴⁸ Said, Edward. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Random House, 1997; 29-33.

⁴⁹ Said, *Covering Islam*; 37-38.

Islam's roots in the United States are complicated and diverse. According to historian Sulayman Nyang, there are accounts of Muslims coming to the New World as early as 1312, specifically the journey of Mansa Abu Bakr from the coast of West Africa to the Gulf of Mexico in that year.⁵⁰ This semi-mythical account is also mentioned in the writings of British scholar Basil Davidson and Harvard's Leo Winer.⁵¹ Jane Smith makes note of questionable evidence that Muslim trading posts may have been set up by Muslim explorers and that intermarriage with Native Americans might have occurred.⁵² While Muslims probably did not arrive in America in the fourteenth century, they did help the Spanish explore the continent.⁵³ GhaneaBassiri believes an aide to Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca was likely the first Muslim, at least the first known by name, to reach the United States, in the 1530s.⁵⁴

Little empirical evidence on Muslim Americans exists before the antebellum South, where Allen Austin estimates that more than ten percent of black slaves practiced Islam. This number, however, is a rough estimate based on extant slave ownership documents recorded once the slaves were in America, and there are no surviving records of sales from slave ships.^{55,56} Historian Michael Gomez, based on data compiled by Elizabeth Donnan and later used in Philip Curtin's important book, contends that "possibly tens of thousands" of forcibly imported slaves were Muslims.^{57,58,59,60} Although there is support for the argument that Muslims might have

⁵⁰ Nyang, Sulayman. *Islam in the United States of America*. Chicago: ABC International Group, 1999; 12.

⁵¹ Nyang, 12.

⁵² Jane Smith. *Islam in America*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; 51.

⁵³ GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz. 2011. *A History of Islam in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 11-12.

⁵⁴ GhaneaBassiri, 8-12.

⁵⁵ Nyang, 13.

⁵⁶ Allan Austin. *African Muslims in Antebellum America*. London: Routledge, 1997; 1, 32-36.

⁵⁷ GhaneaBassiri, 16.

constituted a sizable minority of American slaves, there is no evidence known to Nyang of an African-American family continuing to practice Islam post-slavery.⁶¹

Nyang organizes the history of American Islam into three major phases. The first is the early history of Muslims in what is now the United States, including the pre-Colombian period and the periods of Spanish exploration.⁶² The second phase, he says, is the period in between the American Revolution and the end of the American Civil War. During this period, Muslims were brought to the United States as slaves. The history of this era comes largely from narratives of individual Muslims.⁶³ The second phase concludes with the migration of Muslims to America beginning in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Nyang argues that Islam was established permanently at the end of the third stage, when Muslim migration occurred in the post-Civil War period through the Cold War and upheavals in the Middle East.⁶⁵ During the early years of the third phase, Ottoman Muslim Arabs began immigrating to the United States.⁶⁶ Most Arab immigrants to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century were “Syrian” Christians (which actually includes people from several countries, including modern Syria, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine) escaping the difficult socioeconomic conditions of the Ottoman Empire; many had ties to the United States through Christian missionary groups.⁶⁷ Amongst these, there were some Muslim

⁵⁸ Philip D. Curtin. *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969; 157.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Donnan. *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: New England and the Middle Colonies*. New York: Octagon Books, 1965.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Donnan. “The Slave Trade into South Carolina Before the Revolution.” *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 1928).

⁶¹ Nyang, 13.

⁶² Nyang, 12-13.

⁶³ Nyang, 13-15.

⁶⁴ Nyang, 25.

⁶⁵ Nyang, 17-19.

⁶⁶ Nyang, 47.

⁶⁷ GhanneaBassiri, 138-139.

immigrants from Greater Syria, which constituted multiple Ottoman provinces that make up the current Syrian state.⁶⁸

Muslims also immigrated to the United States from countries outside the Middle East over a long period of time. Indian Muslims arrived in large numbers following the pattern of Sikh immigration to Canada in the 1870s through the 1890s.⁶⁹ Many Muslim immigrants came from places less associated with Islam today, such as Central Asia and the Ukraine after the creation of the USSR; additionally, many formerly-Ottoman Muslims came from southern European countries like Greece and Serbia in the middle of the 19th Century.⁷⁰ Many nineteenth century Muslim immigrants came to the United States to avoid conscription into the Ottoman Army, to which they felt little allegiance.⁷¹ The Muhammadan Society of New York, one of the earliest attempts at a Muslim cultural organization in America, was created by Ukrainian Muslims to serve the faithful formerly of Soviet Ukraine and Central Asia.⁷² Sweeping immigration law changes in 1965 ensured that Islam would maintain a permanent presence in the United States. The 1965 law enabled the United States to accept many more Muslims from around the world, which led to consistently higher rates of Muslim immigrants fleeing political instability in the Middle East or the breakup of the Soviet Union.

In summary, Islam has had a long and complicated history in America. Muslims were in the country as early as the Spanish exploration period, but never in large numbers until the latter part the twentieth century. Therefore, Islam has both a long history in the United States and the

⁶⁸ GhanneaBassiri, 138-139.

⁶⁹ Nyang, 16.

⁷⁰ Nyang, 16-17.

⁷¹ GhanneaBassiri, 138-139.

⁷² Nyang, 16.

disadvantage of little time as a large-scale religion in America. This contributes to the circumstance that many Americans have little experience with Muslim Americans or Islam.

Institution building

A consequence of Muslim American mobilization after 9/11 was the institutionalization of Islam in the United States. Following the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror, many Muslim immigrants organized to build mosques and local community centers, usually without the aid of national coordinating groups or other bodies. Across the country, small and large Muslim groups organized to establish communal spaces where they could come together to pray, celebrate marriages, raise their children, mourn and bury their dead, and address their members' needs as immigrants.

Communal prayer spaces are congregational institutions. Muslims have had to adjust the way they practice their faith and how they administer their religious affairs like all immigrant religions in American history. According Ebaugh and Chafetz, the process entails integrating elements of the “congregational structure and a community center model of secular service delivery to members”.⁷³ Unlike mosques and Islamic institutions in majority Muslim societies, American Muslims have to form non-profit organizations to manage the business of the congregation. This requires a governing board or executive committee to oversee the economic and social affairs of its community. These affairs include raising funds from members to pay the salary of the imam and staff, to sustain activities, and to maintain the property. Since the imam is on payroll, his relationship to the faithful and the board is different from that of the imams in the

⁷³ Ebaugh, Helen and Janet Chafetz. *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2000; 347.

Middle East and South Asia.⁷⁴ Further, Diana Eck observes that religious institutions are independent of government in the United States, yet they still have to set up “tax-exempt nonprofit status with the Internal Revenue Service.” The faithful must consider themselves “members” of the “corporation” and file taxes annually; all these activities and perspectives are often alien to Muslim immigrants. In summary, as Eck writes: “The shape of ‘religion’ in the U.S. has been molded by the exigencies of becoming a nonprofit voluntary organization and the necessity of competing as such for adherents and support.”⁷⁵ In other words, congregations in the United States are affected by the fact that they are required to have some level of formal institutional basis. In America, unlike in majority-Muslim countries, Muslim congregations must establish their own leadership in a way that complies with U.S. tax regulations, and acquire their own property. While this is burdensome, it is also a form of mobilization and initiates a helpful level of community involvement.

Ebaugh and Chafetz’s second point that characterizes Muslim immigrant congregations is that they follow the “community center model.” This means that an Islamic Center provides ESL, citizenship and other such classes to their members; offers health services, immigration clinics, financial planning, counseling and other knowledge helpful for their integration in the United States. Last but not least, they provide social and recreational facilities for their members.⁷⁶

American mosques and Islamic Centers differ generally from majority-Muslim societies in that their congregation is less homogeneous in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds as well

⁷⁴ Ebaugh and Chafetz, 347.

⁷⁵ Eck, Diana L. 2007. “Religion.” Pp. 214-227 in *The New Americans: A Handbook to Immigration Since 1965*. Edited by Mary Waters, Reed Ueda and Helen Marrow. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 220.

⁷⁶ Ebaugh and Chafetz, 354.

as socioeconomic status. For example, in New York City, the Atlantic Avenue area of Brooklyn is home to both African American Muslims and Arab American Muslims. One of the mosques has a mix of Arab immigrants and African American families as congregants. While they are all Muslims, they speak different languages and have widely different cultural traditions and practices. Moreover, some individuals may even be racist or biased. Not surprisingly, friction and conflict happen within these communities.

Certainly, other religious groups have a similar diversity of membership and exist on a multi-ethnic basis. Min argues that religion is a component of ethnicity.⁷⁷ He considers the identification of different Christian and Jewish groups as “panethnic” rather than as completely separate groups. Min notes that earlier literature on religious identity tended to focus on religion as a solidifying force for immigrants in a new country and traces ethnicity directly with religion.⁷⁸ While religion can be a unifying force, identifying the nature of the social formation is the real aim of Min and other authors. The process of exposure to different ethnicities and religious practices enriches identities by making congregants aware of their specific ethno-cultural identities and serves to reinforce the notion of belonging to a particular group. I suggest that this sense of belonging relates to the very concept of congregationalism.

Having considered some of the effects of the 9/11 backlash, especially its impact on Muslim Americans, I turn my attention to the Park51 project in order to illustrate that biases against Islam and Muslims prevail. I then describe the proliferation of mosques in New York City in the post-9/11 world and argue that this is a response to backlash. To defend themselves and protect themselves against injustices, Muslim Americans must form congregations to create

⁷⁷ Min, Pyong Gap. 2010. *Preserving Ethnicity Through Religion in America*. New York: New York University Press; 27.

⁷⁸ Min, 13-20.

communities of similar ethnicities and cultures to support their religious lives. This illustrates an effective form of mobilization because members of the community come together to meet the goal of forming needed prayer spaces.

Example 1: The Park51 Project

In 2006, an organizing group envisioned a center where Islamic culture could be celebrated. An imam, Faisal Abdul-Rauf, his wife, Daisy Khan, and developer Sharif El-Gamal wanted to create a visible Muslim community presence in Lower Manhattan.⁷⁹ Mosques have existed in the area for decades, and the site housing the Park51 project has included a Muslim prayer space since it was acquired by its current owners in 2009.^{80,81} Park51 is located at 45-51 Park Place in Lower Manhattan, and sits among various other buildings on the same busy street.⁸² The building was previously a retail outlet, and there is no evidence of local outcry when Muslims began praying there.⁸³ There were no outward signs, such as minarets, that drew attention to the address as a mosque. Its location two blocks from the World Trade Center site was what initiated a vocal and public backlash to the project.⁸⁴

Despite the fact that the center was not intended to function primarily as a mosque, is not shaped like a classical mosque, and already contained a prayer space before it was to be enlarged, it became known to the public as the “World Trade Center Mosque.” The public

⁷⁹ “For Muslim Center Sponsors, Early Missteps Fueled a Storm.” Anne Barnard. *The New York Times*. August 11, 2010.

⁸⁰ “In Lower Manhattan, 2 Mosques Have Firm Roots.” Anne Barnard. *New York Times*. August 13, 2010.

⁸¹ “Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero.” Ralph Blumenthal. *New York Times*. December 8, 2009.

⁸² “Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero.”

⁸³ “Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero.”

⁸⁴ “Ground Zero: Its Boundaries are Elastic.” Clyde Haberman. *New York Times*. August 23, 2010.

quickly became convinced that the site did not already contain an Islamic prayer space, and believed it was intentionally started after 9/11 as an Islamic symbol.⁸⁵ By August 2010, multiple polls found that more than 70 percent of Americans opposed building a mosque near the World Trade Center site, even if only a slightly smaller percentage agreed that the developers had every right to do so.⁸⁶ A CBS News poll found that this was untrue, as the space was intended to be an Islamic cultural center.^{87, 88} It was meant to be a building with cultural and community components, such as a swimming pool and performing arts space, built around an already existing prayer space.⁸⁹

In 2009 and 2010, significant political tension occurred between opponents and proponents of the site, due to the perception by the project's opponents that it was disrespectful to build what they called a "victory mosque" so near to the World Trade Center site. Most proponents of the project felt that it would be a significant contribution to cultural understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in New York City in an era when Islam was unjustifiably blamed for directly harming the United States.⁹⁰ The opponents, however, treated Park51 as a religious building glorifying Islam next to the ruins of a site that the religion itself had destroyed.

Following the announcement of the Park51 project, significant opposition emerged from certain quarters of the public. By the summer after the project's announcement in 2009, large

⁸⁵ "Ground Zero Mosque'? The Reality is Less Provocative." Charlie Brooker . *The Guardian*. August 22, 2010.

⁸⁶ "Poll: Most Say 'Ground Zero Mosque' Is Inappropriate." Sarah Dutton, Jennifer De Pinto, Fred Backus and Anthony Salvanto. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20014737-503544.html. Last Accessed: November 3, 2013.

⁸⁷ "Vote Endorses Muslim Center Near Ground Zero". Javier C. Hernandez. *New York Times*. May 26, 2010.

⁸⁸ "TIME Poll: Majority Oppose Mosque, Many Distrust Muslims." Alex Altman. *Time*. August 19, 2010. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011799,00.html#ixzz2jdmc7Qd6>. Last Accessed: November 3, 2013.

⁸⁹ "Vote Endorses Muslim Center Near Ground Zero."

⁹⁰ "Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero."

protests for and against the project occurred, with significant media attention.⁹¹ Many opinion pieces appeared, in prominent media outlets, regarding the potential merits and negative aspects of the proposed center.⁹² Community discussion over the issue also attracted national attention when the local community board meeting involved high-profile figures both in favor of and against the construction of the center.^{93,94} Petitions by Park51 opponents for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the building as a landmark intensified public debate over the center's construction. Ultimately, the commission voted not to designate the site as a landmark in August 2010, which eliminated the final legal impediment to Park51's construction.⁹⁵

Park51 attracted national discussion for three reasons. For one, the World Trade Center site is "hallowed ground" to many New Yorkers.⁹⁶ Secondly, the furor over Park51 occurred when Islam was under heavy scrutiny in the political realm, not only in relation to 9/11, but as a possible criticism of President Obama.⁹⁷ Although elected the year prior to the beginning of the controversy, the president faced recurrent conspiracy theories relating to his religious beliefs into

⁹¹ "Proposed Muslim Center Draws Opposing Protests." Michael Grynbaum. *New York Times*. August 22, 2010.

⁹² "Broadway and the Mosque." Thomas Friedman. *New York Times*. August 3, 2010. Last Accessed: November 15, 2013.

⁹³ "Vote Endorses Muslim Center Near Ground Zero." Javier C. Hernandez. *New York Times*. May 26, 2010.

⁹⁴ In New York City, community boards are part of the official government hierarchy in New York City. Although they can officially only make recommendations, their views are taken very seriously by city politicians.

⁹⁵ "Mosque Plan Clears Hurdle in New York." Michael Barraro and Javier Hernandez. *New York Times*. August 3, 2010.

⁹⁶ Gabriel Winant. "Glenn Beck, Park 51, and The Politics of Hallowed Ground." http://www.salon.com/2010/08/30/beck_park51_hallowed_ground/. Salon.com. August 30, 2010. Last Accessed: August 14, 2013.

⁹⁷ "Obama's Religion Still A Campaign Issue: Some Alabama, Mississippi GOP Voters Believe President Is Muslim." Chris Gentilviso. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/12/obama-religion-mississippi-alabama_n_1338990.html. Huffington Post. March 12, 2012.

the 2012 election cycle.⁹⁸ Direct criticism of Islam in the public sphere became much more common and acceptable than in the pre-9/11 period. Thirdly, the number of Islamic prayer spaces in New York City, while large, constitutes a minimally visible presence in the city. There is a large, traditional mosque on East 96th Street, but many are non-descript buildings with minimal signage indicating they are prayer spaces.^{99,100} Most are not obvious at all.

Sharif El-Gamal, the developer of the Park51 site, began the project without anticipating any negative public reaction.¹⁰¹ According to one interview with him, he made a large miscalculation in not anticipating potential problems and not consulting the neighborhood and families of the 9/11 victims before developing his cultural center.¹⁰² However, the construction of an Islamic center two blocks from the World Trade Center was an opportune excuse for the opponents of Islam and Muslims to vent their biases.

The Park51 project is an example of how the backlash effect could have been mitigated through effective mobilization. While the project would no doubt still have faced some controversy because of its proximity to the World Trade Center, the lead developer and others involved did not realize how much their project was seen to represent Islam itself. Prevention of the backlash might have been possible if the proponents of the project had engaged the local Muslim community about the aims of the project and had attended to the feelings of the surrounding community toward the proposed construction. This would have led to visible

⁹⁸ “Obama's Religion Still A Campaign Issue: Some Alabama, Mississippi GOP Voters Believe President Is Muslim.”

⁹⁹ “Mosque Rising is a First in New York.” Paul Lewis. *The New York Times*. September 26, 1988. This mosque, paid for by the Kuwaiti government, began construction in 1988 and opened at the end of Ramadan 1991.

¹⁰⁰ “Manhattan Mosque Opens After Years of Delay” [Photo Caption]. *The New York Times*. April 16, 1991.

¹⁰¹ *American Thinker*. August 7th, 2011.

¹⁰² “Ground Zero Mosque Developer, Sharif El-Gamal, Regrets Not Involving 9/11 Families.” Verena Dobnik. Associated Press. September 21, 2011.

support from Muslim American individuals and groups much earlier, and would have made it much more difficult for a vitriolic environment to exist in the face of tangible Muslim American support. Muslim American testimonials in favor of the project would have given a human dimension to counteract the very politicized and negative false characterizations of Muslims circulating in both the media accounts and public consciousness at that time. Instead, Muslim American mobilization was not sought until long after the project had become national news. After the backlash began against the Park51 project, it was very difficult for the Muslim American community to mobilize against it. With the media positioned against Muslim American interests, it was impossible for the community to overcome the negative perceptions that were projected onto their community.

Example 2: Storefront Mosques in New York City

Because Islam in the United States is practiced by a heterogeneous community, different ethnic communities have different cultural needs, even while sharing the Arabic language of the Qur'an. Islam in the United States faces the challenges of racial elements and divisions, something that does not tend to affect Islamic societies as much in Muslim-majority societies. Islam places Arabic in a primal position as the language of the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the early community in Arabia. The United States is one of the countries where Islam has a relatively new presence, fueled by many different ethnic communities. It is made up of Arab and South Asian Muslims, but also large and long-running African-American Muslim communities.

With Islam, a faith in which basic tenets can be heavily contested by different practitioners, this is particularly important to remember. This project views religion as congregational in a sociological sense. Theological ramifications are not taken into account, even

though different groups within Islam might object to what constitutes a mosque for the purposes of this paper. As one scholar has noted, “Religion can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred”.¹⁰³ Groups of people sharing the same belief system form religious communities. In the United States, Islam is practiced by different ethnic communities that form congregations to support the worship of their shared religion among people of the same ethnic or national origin.

Through the use of observational research based in New York City, and a set of reports on mosques based in the United States, this paper argues that Muslim Americans mobilized to protect their religious rights post-9/11 by building and maintaining small-scale mosques. It questions whether the “congregational” model of religion is occurring in the Muslim community in line with Min’s theory of congregationalism or whether American Muslims are responding to negative public treatment through mobilization, as Bakalian and Bozorgmehr predict.¹⁰⁴ To attempt to answer this, I collected data on local prayer spaces. I did not take into account how different Muslim congregations might define “Muslim.” For the purposes of this paper, I include any congregation that calls itself “Muslim,” and/or uses the words “mosque” or “Islamic center” as its place of congregation.

Muslims in the United States face several challenges unique to both their religion and historical situation. Muslim immigrants are not always sure whether participating in religious life within a broader host society is permissible under Islamic norms.¹⁰⁵ Muslims are relatively new as an organized group in the United States, which may explain the relative unease with which

¹⁰³ Johnstone: Ronald L. *Religion and Society in Interaction: The Sociology of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975; 20.

¹⁰⁴ Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 199.

¹⁰⁵ McCloud, Aminah Beverly. “Islam in America: The Mosaic.” Pp.159-174 in *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and John L. Esposito. New York: Altamira Press, 2003; 156.

some sectors of their communities view visible public life. In New York City, Muslims acknowledging the need to worship as a community and their limited resources tend to adapt small spaces into mosques. Anthropologist Slomovics has called them “storefront mosques.”¹⁰⁶ On the one hand, Muslims in the City are not normally particularly visible to the average city resident. Slomovics argues that this occurs because they participate in religious life generally close to their places of work and residence, and tend to be visible mostly during events such as the Muslim World Day Parade. Some congregations meet in houses where more space is available, rather than in storefronts.

The 2012 Bagby report on mosques illustrated the extent of Muslim worship spaces in the United States. Ihsan Bagby’s survey of mosques received significant and national media attention around the time of its release in 2012, which makes it important as an empirical milestone on the subject of Islam in America. The study contains an impressive sample of 727 mosques, selected from a count that found 2,106 mosques in the United States, with the claim that this figure represents “all mosques” in the country.¹⁰⁷ As Bagby’s 2001 survey accounts for one of the only purportedly complete data sets on the number of mosques in America, it is particularly vital to understanding not only the present state of actual Islamic life in the country, but it remains the only major empirical mosque study with references to previous work conducted by comparable methodology.

The 2012 Bagby report is therefore significant in scope and has an empirical legitimacy that ethnographic work on American Muslims tends to lack. The most significant finding in the study was that the number of mosques in the United States increased by 75 percent, from 1,209

¹⁰⁶ Slomovics, Susan. “The Muslim World Day Parade and ‘Storefront’ Mosques of New York City.” Pp.204-216 in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Edited by Barbara Daly Metcalf. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; 204.

¹⁰⁷ Bagby, 4-5.

to 2,106 between roughly the years 2000 and 2010.¹⁰⁸ This also means that the number of American mosques doubled within about a decade, which is particularly emphasized in the media coverage of the report.¹⁰⁹ Web sites and groups that consider themselves hostile to “jihadist” Islam and political correctness also frequently noted the study, sometimes using language similar to that of the mainstream media.¹¹⁰ The report unmistakably shows an increase of Islamic presence in terms of houses of worship and mosque attendance. In the year 2011 alone, Friday *Jum’ah* prayer attendance rose by ten percent or more in almost two out of every three American mosques.¹¹¹ In addition, the report indicated that the majority of prayer spaces in the United States are small-scale facilities.

New York City has a wide variety of Islamic prayer spaces, from house and storefront prayer spaces to large mosques in the classical style with large capacities and minarets. The purpose of collecting data on Muslim prayer spaces was to observe the state of Islamic congregations as they actually exist, rather than focusing solely on well-known mosques. By doing so, I hoped to understand how Islamic communities mobilized at the local level as functional community spaces in the face of the threat of backlash.

¹⁰⁸ Bagby, 4.

¹⁰⁹ See for instance,

http://www.catholic.org/national/national_story.php?id=45002&utm_source=catholic.org%2Fhomepage&utm_medium=banner&utm_content=latest%2Bnews&utm_campaign=which_includes_“Exponential_Rate”_in_its_title;_The_Washington_Post_story_contains_“Nearly_Doubles”_, which includes “Exponential Rate” in its title; The Washington Post story contains “Nearly Doubles”, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/study-of-us-muslims-finds-more-than-2000-american-mosques-significant-rise-in-last-decade/2012/02/29/gIQAEL6BiR_story.html. November 15, 2013.

¹¹⁰ “Number of Mosques in U.S. Nearly Doubles Since 9/11.” <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/03/number-of-mosques-in-us-nearly-doubles-since-911.html>. Last Accessed: November 15, 2013. Notably, Jihad Watch actually commented that the increase in mosques proves that Islamophobia is *not* a problem, and that the portrayal of the idea of Islamophobia was used as a tool to silence critics of Islamic cultural supremacy through the guise of political correctness.

¹¹¹ Bagby, 8.

In order to research Muslim prayer spaces in New York City, I tried to take into account the size and geographical distribution of different congregation sites. Because prayer spaces may operate in multiple languages and are often not visible, they are difficult for non-members to find. As noted above, many Muslim congregations are extremely private, with little more public face than a storefront sign. Contact information, when it is made available, tends to be in Arabic and requires extensive follow-up work. I canvassed different areas of New York City based on leads, and visited mosques that I had substantiated through various search methods. For example, I initially chose mosque, prayer space, and Islamic center subjects by using a search engine known as IslamicFinder.net, via a Google search, and through Muslim colleagues who had knowledge of prayer spaces in different areas of the city. I sometimes found additional prayer spaces by canvassing neighborhoods I had already visited.

I also tried to maintain an equal geographical distribution of prayer spaces in New York City, in order to take into account regional differences between various neighborhoods as well as the national origin and ethnicity of those congregants who live in various parts of the city. All of these factors heavily influenced what I found. In this observational study, the data is from twenty prayer spaces, all of which include either the name “mosque” (or more usually, on a sign in both English and Arabic as *masjid*, transliterated in English) or “Islamic center” (in the case of four of them). Five of the prayer spaces are in each of the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx. All of the prayer spaces in my sample are multi-national in attendee composition. Out of the four “Islamic centers,” a name which implies a larger entity, one of them was not much larger than most other prayer spaces I visited. However, the other three all had the architecture of a classical Middle Eastern mosque, with a large prayer space and minarets. One, in Brooklyn, is fairly large and offers community outreach and social service

functions. And another in Manhattan is very large and does the same. The Islamic centers tended to have a prayer space and mosque within larger buildings, while most of the smaller “mosques” were prayer rooms without any offices. About half of these were two-room storefronts with only a small lobby or entryway and a prayer room.

I attended prayer services at all of these prayer spaces at least twice, and collected observational data. This included the number of attendees to weekday and Friday services, the location and the architecture of the mosque itself, the ratio of prayer attendance to the capacity of the space, the language spoken by the clergy as well as of the attendees, the types of spaces occupied by the prayer rooms, the number of Friday prayer services held by the congregation, whether the congregation shared its space with another group, and the materials and pamphlets displayed near the prayer space. This information is applicable to the thesis question of the construction and maintenance of prayer spaces in the post-9/11 environment because it helps to demonstrate whether prayer spaces function as viable entities within the various Muslim American communities. The existence of dynamic prayer spaces would contribute to the understanding of mobilization efforts post-9/11 because the research examined whether the efforts of different ethnic groups within the Muslim American community were successful in combating the backlash fomented by 9/11 and the Park51 controversy by forming and maintaining prayer spaces to meet to the needs of their communities.

Observation of the prayer spaces in question led to several important discoveries. By far the most important is the type of physical space normally occupied by a New York City Islamic prayer room. As mentioned above, a large majority (sixteen out of twenty) of the spaces had very minimal signage indicating what they are. Most have some sort of sign, but in a very discreet setting. Inside, the spaces vary in terms of how elaborate they are, but the same sixteen out of

twenty are adapted from spaces that served other, non-religious uses. In most cases, thirteen out of the twenty, the spaces were built into storefronts that were probably used previously by small businesses or merchants. For this reason, much effort has gone into recreating as close as possible the interior of a mosque as it exists in a majority-Muslim country, even though none of sixteen spaces in question remotely resembles a traditional mosque on the outside. In the other four cases, conditions are more suitable in terms of size and especially in terms of the building exterior. Two sites have traditional mosque-type features, and two are traditional mosques in the sense that they have a large prayer space, were built as Islamic structures, have minarets, and occupy a small plot of land with a courtyard. However, other than size and resemblance to classical mosques, nothing else separates the prayer rooms in this study from each other for the purposes of daily prayer. All had some sort of speaker system for Friday prayers, and about five even had small loudspeakers outside to announce the *adhan*, or Islamic call to prayer. All had some sort of *minbar* (pulpit) for the Friday sermon, and at least a few bookshelves of Qur'ans and other Islamic materials.

The most obvious difference between the prayer spaces is not physical structure, but language. Twelve of the sixteen smaller spaces operated fully in languages other than English, while larger, multi-ethnic spaces tended to use at least some English in sermons or announcements. This difference probably indicates a higher percentage of immigrants in the neighborhood, storefront spaces.

One of the most visible aspects of Islam in New York City is the number of worshippers for Friday prayers. Unlike other prayers during the week, Friday noon *jum'ah* prayer is obligatory for all Muslims. Because of this, the true number of worshippers who attend a prayer space can be counted this one time a week. In New York City prayer spaces, this has two

ramifications. For one, the neighborhood in which the prayer space is located can transform into a busy street during Friday prayers, as every one of the twenty spaces in my sample is beyond seated capacity at that time.¹¹² Frequently, the prayer spaces are so far over capacity that there are multiple times for Friday prayers, to accommodate more worshippers, and many worshippers perform their prayers outside the building with their prayer rugs placed on the sidewalk. The Friday prayer data also suggest that there is a need for more and larger Islamic prayer spaces in the city. Muslims have mobilized to construct local worship congregations. But, without building larger structures like traditional-style mosques and attracting more attention, Muslim Americans may find it difficult to meet community needs.

To summarize, New York City has a variety of Islamic prayer spaces, but a vast majority of them are small, storefront environments with little outside indication of their functions. As with prayer spaces everywhere in the United States, there are wide varieties of ethnic groups. But because New York has so many local prayer spaces, congregations there tend to be somewhat more homogenous than larger, full-size mosques. Large Islamic centers such as the 96th Street Mosque have congregants of many ethnic groups and immigrant backgrounds. But this is not the norm in New York City. In Brooklyn and Queens especially, the prayer spaces tend to be small and cater to groups such as Yemeni immigrants in the former, and South Asian immigrants in the latter.

¹¹² The Dawood Mosque in Brooklyn Heights, for instance, has several hundred (probably 500-600) worshippers every Friday, with so many that the hallways and upstairs are filled every Friday to the absolute maximum capacity. Fortunately, the worshippers do not seem to be hassled even though prayer rugs line the street outside the mosque, and the neighborhood shows no visible signs of aggravation to the overflow and post-worship traffic. The Islamic Cultural Center of New York [the “96th Street Mosque” in Manhattan] overflows almost every Friday as well, even though it holds thousands of people. In some places, like Masjid Ar-Rahman on 29th Street (also Manhattan), there is so much demand for Friday prayer that there are 3 Friday sermons and prayer sessions staggered over an hour and a half, with one of them in a neighboring church.

The other crucial fact about New York City Islamic prayer spaces is that many of them are very low-profile and difficult to find. They act more as neighborhood institutions rather than vehicles for advertising a religion. In contrast to the two Islamic centers in this paper, these prayer spaces are not designed to spread information about Islam, focus on large outreach projects, or interact with the non-Muslim public about the faith. Simply put, most small Islamic prayer spaces in New York City are storefront congregations which cater to a local community and value privacy over visibility in the wider community. These congregations have successfully mobilized to fulfill a need required by the communities they serve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper is about Muslims and their complicated actions of response to the backlash after the 9/11 attacks. Prayer spaces are an extremely important component of Islamic life in the United States. Furthermore, the example in the paper of the Park51 project illustrates that a major backlash episode against Muslim Americans more than a decade after 9/11 had to do with a prayer space. By employing two examples, this project showed that group mobilization (as defined on page 1) contributed much towards the goal of reducing the effects of backlash.

The paper began with discussion of the backlash, by both government and private citizens, after the 9/11 attacks. This illustrated the negative treatment brought upon Muslim Americans without cause, and the extent to which governments and individuals would go to target individuals who had absolutely nothing to do with the attacks. But to show that there is some precedent in this area, this paper also discussed the incidents against the German Americans and Japanese Americans in the Twentieth Century during the two world wars.

In order to show a key difference in the case of Muslim Americans, this paper employed Bakalian and Bozorgmehr's theories of backlash and mobilization. Such mobilization opportunities did not exist in earlier times for the German and Japanese American communities. Although this paper does not deal with issues relating to the direct aftermath of 9/11, it uses these theories as a lens to investigate phenomena later in time. This paper argues that Muslim Americans responded with a particular type of mobilization against the backlash they endured after the 2001 attacks. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr argue that Muslim Americans were targeted as a group and were unfairly targeted by both the United States government and by the actions of individuals. In response, Muslim Americans employed various modes of collective action to mobilize and counteract the backlash they experienced.

One of those forms of mobilization was the construction and maintenance of Islamic prayer spaces. The construction of these prayer spaces emerged from the necessity of different Muslim sub-groups within the United States to create communal prayer venues for their particular cultural affiliations. Min, Ebaugh, and Chafetz aver that members with a shared cultural identity form congregations when they wish to worship together in a shared setting. The observational data in this project support both Bakalian and Bozorgmehr and Ebaugh, Chafetz, and Min, because Muslim communities in New York City repeatedly mobilized to create community worship spaces run by particular congregations and in response to backlash.

Before discussing the two main examples directly, this paper uses existing literature on Muslims in the United States to provide background prior to the post-9/11 period. The historical record shows that Muslims have been part of American life for centuries; at least since before the Civil War and probably since colonial exploration. In spite of this, Islam is often seen as a foreign or un-American entity. This negative perception may have to do somewhat with the high

rate of immigration among Muslim Americans. Although there have been many African-American conversions to Islam, especially after about 1930, a large majority of Muslim spaces are run by immigrant communities. This trend dates to the late nineteenth century, when Syrian Muslims began coming to the United States; it accelerated after the immigration reform of 1965. These groups began to organize themselves. This paper uses several social scientists to show how Islam became a congregational religion in the United States. Muslims established boards of directors, charity groups, and other institutions intrinsic to providing Islamic services.

After this, the paper explained the two key examples that illustrate the backlash and mobilization theories. The first, Park51, was a controversy regarding the construction of a large Islamic center, with both religious and non-religious functions, two blocks from the World Trade Center site. The project angered many people, who considered it a “victory mosque” trumpeting Islam’s supposed triumph over America in the 9/11 attacks. In one sense, the Park51 project was an extension of the 9/11 backlash, because it brought out intense feelings against an Islamic building which had nothing to do with 9/11. The Park51 controversy showed that many Americans were willing to prevent Muslim Americans from exercising their right of worship, simply because the perpetrators of 9/11 happened to be Muslims.

In an illustration of exactly how not to handle a backlash problem, the lead developer was unaware of many of the above signs, and did not adequately mobilize community support prior to undertaking the project. This supports my point that Park51 represents ineffective mobilization. Instead of employing many of the techniques that Bakalian and Bozorgmehr suggest, like rallying Muslim New Yorkers and sending out ambassadors to appear in the media and at functions, Sharif El-Gamal initially assumed that such measures were unnecessary. Even

when the debate reached its apex in the summer of 2010, no such potentially helpful tactics were employed.

This example contrasts significantly with the example of mosque-building and prayer spaces in New York City. In the period, slightly short of a decade, between 9/11 and the Park51 controversy in 2009 and 2010, the number of mosques in the United States increased dramatically, and the number of Islamic congregants in New York City continued to grow at a high rate. Despite the many Islamic prayer spaces currently in New York City, many are far over capacity at Friday prayers.

Whether the prayer spaces were created after 9/11 or have been maintained after 9/11, the data suggest that Muslim American prayer spaces are filled with more congregants than they can support. Muslim Americans in New York City have therefore successfully mobilized to create and maintain vibrant prayer spaces in response to backlash. In the face of backlash, Muslim Americans did not close their places of worship. Instead, they have maintained the prayer spaces as a vital component of their expressions of faith. In addition, the prayer spaces are comprised of congregations reflective of their communities. My data supports the argument that congregationalism presents a sense of belonging because the prayer spaces that I visited consisted of common ethno-linguistic communities. While there are many ethno-linguistic groups represented in the various prayer spaces of New York City, individual prayer spaces tend to reflect the membership of one particular cultural community.

The proliferation and success of Islamic prayer spaces in New York stems from two key factors. One, the groups that founded those spaces undertook the mobilization and collective action successfully, by involving particular congregations of neighborhood Muslims and members of common ethnic and religious groups in creating their own religious communities.

But perhaps more important, they avoid backlash altogether by keeping a low profile. These spaces are functional substitutes for full mosques but attract significantly less attention.

The prayer spaces in this paper reflect successful mobilization by the Muslim Americans who created them. The data in this paper comes from twenty prayer spaces. In all the cases, a community of Muslims managed to come together and fashion a prayer space out of whatever environment it had at its disposal. The large Islamic centers required significant amounts of money to build, which is a scale that most of the immigrant communities in my data could never dream of achieving. Nonetheless, the remaining locations in my sample all did a remarkable job of trying to replicate the interior of a traditional mosque, despite architectural and space challenges. No matter how large or small the prayer space in question, each community put together a space which felt Islamic and had the pulpit, prayer niche, carpeting, and bookshelves one would find in any mosque. The presence of these prayer spaces increased the visibility of Muslim Americans within the New York community, by quietly making them a part of the cultural frameworks within the neighborhoods they inhabit. Just as in the case of Muslim American leaders appearing in the media post-9/11, I suggest that this visibility helps prevent backlash. At the same time, these prayer spaces are also congregations. In the way that Min, Ebaugh, and Chafetz discuss people of a common background coming together to form institutions for group worship, Muslim Americans mobilized from the local community level and formed prayer communities in prayer spaces to fit their needs.

Prayer space building as a function of mobilization is an impressive trend in itself. But the fact that this mobilization occurred under such constraints makes it even more noteworthy. Due to the backlash that Muslim Americans faced in the decade after 9/11, they were limited as to the scope and size of any potential prayer spaces. Muslim Americans learned to mobilize in an

inconspicuous way, because they had no other choice in an environment which made them feel insecure and hated. The result was a diffuse but extensive mobilization, starting at the very local level but encompassing, and fundamentally changing, the extent of Islamic life in America.

These achievements are also remarkable in the context of wider New York society. During The Park51 controversy, most people were unaware that there are probably twenty Islamic prayer spaces within just a few miles of the World Trade Center. The people who feared Islam might take hold in New York City completely missed the fact that it already had, peacefully, and in large numbers. In other words, Islamic prayer spaces in New York are an almost invisible form of mobilization, one in which Muslim Americans quietly created their own religious environments away from the scrutiny of the general public, but to great success.

Muslim Americans did not close and abandon prayer spaces in response to backlash after 9/11. Instead, my data show that all twenty prayer spaces I observed are full to overflowing. More than a decade after 9/11, Muslim American prayer spaces in New York City are facilities that allow congregations of different ethnicities to meet and worship using a common language. They are active, integral components of Muslim American communities that demonstrate successful mobilization in response to backlash.

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