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Unifying Muslim community after Ground Zero mosque uproar

By Nat Hentoff

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | Shortly before returning here after his State Department Mideast tour, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf said in Abu Dhabi that the viral furor over his insistence on building a mosque just blocks from Ground Zero was due in large part to the coming midterm elections. Further minimizing his role, he blamed (Associated Press, Aug. 31) "radicals in the Muslim World ... and other faith traditions," and then almost blithely noted that "the story has expanded far beyond a piece of real estate, it has expanded to the issues of Islam in America and what it means for us." (NY Post, Sept. 1)

As I have reported, Islam in many parts of the world beyond America has been affected. Al-Qaida websites cheer the rise of anti-Muslim stereotyping in the United States as a boon to recruiting violent jihadists.

Also, in this and other countries, Muslims who oppose violent jihadism cannot understand why Rauf created this conflagration when mosques have existed without controversy in New York and elsewhere in America before Rauf emerged.

In a Sept. 1 N.Y. Daily News lead editorial, "The imam must speak," Rauf is reminded of a recent Quinnipiac poll showing that 54 percent of New Yorkers do believe he has a constitutional free-exercise-of-religion right to build the mosque at that site near Ground Zero. "But 53 percent, including many Muslims and supporters of the right to build believe 9/11 sensitivities (in those areas)" should carry the day.

The reaction in New York, as it has been throughout the country, has not been as black or white as portrayed by the mass media. The editorial also asked why Rauf "will not outright condemn Hamas a terrorist group"?

Rauf had an immediate chance to do just that when, on the same day as the editorial, the Daily News reported that "Hamas gunmen slaughtered four Israeli settlers -- including a pregnant woman -- in an ambush yesterday in the West Bank" near Hebron -- not coincidentally, I believe, two days before face-to-face Israeli-Palestinian peace talks were to start in Washington.

If, at last, Rauf needed any direct evidence that Hamas is officially a terrorist organization, here was the reaction of a Hamas spokesman, Farzi Barhoum, to the obviously planned assassinations that, as was reported in the Sept. 1 New York Post, "orphaned seven children" in "the worst terror incident in the West Bank in



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four years."

Hamas praised the murders as the "heroic operations in Hebron." (New York Daily News, Sept. 1)

There has not been a word from Imam Rauf.

Because of the anti-Muslim surge in America triggered by Rauf's insistence on that precise location for the mosque, there is an urgent movement among American Muslim leaders to create a National Muslim Leadership Alliance. As one of them, Naeem Baig, director of the Islamic Circle of North America, says: "There's a real serious threat of violence against individuals." (Washington Post, Aug. 31)

Adds Salam Al-Marayati, president of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), "The story of what mainstream American Muslims stand for has not been told effectively." As Washington Post reporter Tara Bahrapour explains: "The diversity of sects, native languages and ethnicities has made it harder for a unified voice to emerge."

Among the organizations forming a National Muslim Leadership Alliance are: the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) and Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC).

The impact and degree of influence of this unified voice will depend, of course, on the believability of the intentions in its message. If, for example, one of the participants has previously helped fund Hamas, it should declare that involvement and the context for its decision then.

Also required from the burgeoning National Muslim Alliance is a basic national education in Islamic law. Rauf has been quoted widely as maintaining that in his discussions with Muslim theologians, "it is clear an Islamic state can be established in more than just a single form or mold. It can be established through a kingdom or a democracy (provided) ... the important issue is to establish the general fundamentals of Shariah that are required to govern."

This leads to his assurance that "the American Constitution and system of government (do) uphold the core principles of Islamic law." (From his 2004 book, "What's Right with Islam Is What's Right with America.")

I expect an instant visceral reaction by some Americans to Rauf's claim of interreligious communion might have led to a vision of a Muslim woman, charged with infidelity, being officially stoned to death. It's not that any prospect of that form of religious capital punishment is possible in America; but clearly, this National Muslim Leadership should ask Rauf to explain to all of us precisely what he means when he claims that our Constitution is "compliant" with Shariah law, as if Shariah law is the same everywhere.

A not small point is that while Muslim states are theocracies, this country is not. As the Constitution emphasizes, "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or Public trust under the United States." (Article VI, Constitution of the United States) So where does Shariah law fit into our Constitution?

Unexpectedly, to say the least, Rauf has precipitated a need for essential education about Islam and our Constitution among American-Muslims and the rest of us. In so many of our schools, because of the assembly line testing in reading and math, far too many students do not learn their individual liberties, rights and responsibilities under the Constitution.

This includes American-Muslim students -- from their public school teachers and from their imams in religious schools. Salam Al-Marayati says, "The story of what mainstream American-Muslims supposedly stand for has not been told effectively."

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Neither has what we Americans of all faiths, and none, supposedly stand for been told effectively.

It's not mandatory under the Constitution that the mosque be moved farther away. The reason it should be is what used to be sought as mutual understanding and respect for all Americans.

That's not a "radical" notion, Imam Rauf. Not only "radicals" criticize you for what you have unleashed.

Evan Kohlmann, "an independent terrorism consultant" added: "We are handing al-Qaida a propaganda coup, an absolute propaganda coup" with the firestorm over Rauf's mosque vision. Kohlmann's job at Flashpoint Partners, where he works, is monitoring jihadist websites. He knows whereof he speaks -- and worries.

Rauf, even if inadvertently, is not the only American propaganda provider to al-Qaida. There is Terry Jones, a pastor at a megachurch in Gainesville, Fla., the Dove World Outreach Center.

It was not from the debate over the Rauf mosque that this pastor, on his own, has declared that Sept. 11 be "an International Burn a Koran Day." But after the jihadist threats following the New York mosque debate, Jones is nonetheless going ahead to actually burn a Koran on the evening of Sept. 11. The Fire Department refused to give him a permit, but the pastor is on what for him is a holy mission. Islamic radicals around the world will be very pleased at this glistening recruiting tool. They may toast the pastor.

In a significant article in the Aug. 18 Washington Post ("Mosque near Ground Zero? 'It's about the community, stupid.'"), Abed Z. Bhuyan, a Muslim and a graduate of Georgetown University who will be teaching English in Turkey next year as a Fulbright scholar, charges that this "is not a fight that ever really needed fighting."

He cites and agrees with Anne Barnard, who complained in The New York Times that Rauf and Kahn, who say they're so surprised at the baleful hurricane they have caused, "did not (first) seek the advice of established Muslim organizations experienced in volatile post-9/11 passions and politics."

Adds Bhuyan: "If they didn't expect this fallout, just how connected are Khan and Imam Abdul Rauf to the American Muslim community? ... There is a difference between building a building and building a community. ... If we are to grow as a community, we must demand strong leadership."

As I recently reported, there are possible indications that Rauf himself may not have been all that surprised at the uproar and its results, if he himself is somewhat a jihadist. He did say on "60 Minutes" before all of this, that the U.S. was "an accessory to the crime" of 9/11. While on his State Department Mideast tour, Rauf's reaction to the firestorm he created was (AP, Aug. 22) "that he took heart from the dispute over the mosque, saying 'the fact we are getting this kind of attention is a sign of success. It is my hope that people will understand more.'"

Does this strike you as coming from an honest man -- or a suave actor? What will the Muslim community say to this imam when he returns?

Do you think that Nancy Pelosi, so strong a supporter of the Ground Zero mosque, should investigate Rauf for igniting this conflagration?

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Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights and author of several books, including his current work, ["The War on the Bill of Rights and the Gathering Resistance"](#). Comment by clicking [here](#).

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