

Ground Zero controversy part of rise in anti-Islamic sentiment, experts say

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WASHINGTON (ABP) — The most recent prominent spat in the United States over building a new Islamic facility — the so-called “Ground Zero mosque” in New York — is indicative of a broader movement that is becoming increasingly suspicious of accommodating Islam as any other faith would be under the First Amendment, according to religious-liberty experts.

“Since the 9/11 attacks, some religious and political leaders have taken advantage of the general fear of Islam and Muslims to launch an attack on Islam itself as an evil ideology that teaches hate and violence,” said Charles Haynes, [director](#) of the Newseum’s Religious Freedom Education Project.

Charles Haynes

Haynes noted that some conservative U.S. Christian leaders “have fueled the movement to turn the ‘war on terrorism’ into a ‘war on Islam.’” He added, noting that leaders of anti-Islamic groups have been “speaking at Tea Party meetings and whipping up fear and anger.”

On July 3, New York City’s [Landmarks Preservation Commission](#) voted, 9-0, not to provide historic-significance protection to a building that an Islamic group wants to raze to construct a 13-story facility called the [Community Center at Park51](#) that would house an interfaith-dialogue program called [Cordoba House](#).

A Muslim-led group called the [Cordoba Initiative](#) has long had plans to

create the facility and establish the program — named after the Spanish city where Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together peacefully during the Middle Ages — two blocks north of the northern edge of the former World Trade Center site.

It would contain [facilities](#) including an auditorium, a restaurant, art-exhibit space, a swimming pool and a mosque that would be open to the public.

“We believe that Park51 will become a landmark in New York City’s cultural, social and educational life, a community center to promote the American values we all aspire towards and to realize a better city for all,” said Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Cordoba Initiative’s chairman, in a statement posted on the group’s website after the commission’s vote.

But vocal opposition to what many opponents labeled the “Ground Zero mosque” developed and gained national attention in the weeks prior to the vote. Former Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, in a July 18 note since removed from her Twitter feed, asked “peaceful Muslims” to “refudiate” the center. And, in [a separate post](#), Palin said, “Ground Zero mosque is UNNECESSARY provocation; it stabs hearts. Pls reject it in interest of healing.”

Former House Speaker (and Baptist-turned-Catholic) NewtMelissa✘Rogers Gingrich — who, like Palin, is widely expected to contend for the GOP presidential nomination in 2012 — upped the ante [with a July 21 statement](#) posted on his website.

“There should be no mosque near Ground Zero in New York so long as there are no churches or synagogues in Saudi Arabia. The time for double standards that allow Islamists to behave aggressively toward us while they demand our weakness and submission is over,” Gingrich said. “America is experiencing an Islamist cultural-political offensive designed to undermine and destroy our civilization. Sadly, too many of our elites are the willing

apologists for those who would destroy them if they could.”

And, in a July 22 post on the *Washington Post/Newsweek* On Faith blog, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission [came out against](#) the Park51/Cordoba House project.

“As a Baptist who believes in religious freedom and separation of church and state, I strongly support religious communities' right to have places of worship within reasonable distance of where they live,” he said. “However, no religious community has an absolute right to have a place of worship wherever they choose, regardless of the community's objections.”

“I believe that putting a mosque at Ground Zero ... is unacceptable,” Land continued. “The persons who committed that atrocity did so in the name of their understanding of Islam. Even though the vast majority of Muslims reject that ideology and condemned their actions on Sept. 11, 2001, it still remains a fact that the people who perpetrated the 9/11 attack were Muslims and proclaimed they were doing what they were doing in the name of Islam. Given that fact, I believe that it is inappropriate for a mosque to be at Ground Zero, and for Muslims to insist that they have the right to have a mosque there is counterproductive to the spirit of reconciliation and healing that we all seek.”

But Wake Forest Divinity School professor Melissa Rogers, [in an Aug. 4 analysis](#) for the Brookings Institution, said that it would be counterproductive to deny such a symbolic project.

“If Americans rebuff high-profile efforts by Muslims who condemn terrorism to reclaim their faith, we effectively give the 9/11 hijackers and their ilk a monopoly on the symbols and institutions of Islam. This would provide violent extremists with a powerful recruiting tool, and it would be deeply unfair to the vast majority of Muslims who practice their faith in peace,” she wrote.

Rogers, a former Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty general counsel, added: "In the face of enormous pressure to do otherwise, city officials held fast to the principle that the government must apply the same standards to all faiths, a linchpin of the American tradition of religious liberty. Adherence to this principle has helped us to make peace and build solidarity in a nation where a stunning array of religions are practiced, often with great fervor, and frequently side-by-side. Contrary to Newt Gingrich's suggestions, honoring this standard of religious freedom has not made us 'weak' or 'submissive.' It has made us strong."

The Newseum's Haynes agreed that halting construction of the center would do more to harm Land's "spirit of reconciliation and healing" than help it.

"If Muslims were barred from building an Islamic center two blocks from Ground Zero, it would send a message that Islam is responsible for the terrorist attacks — a message that Al Qaeda and Islamophobes have been trying to send for years," he said. "And it would also say that the Muslims in the United States do not have full religious freedom. We are, I hope, better than that."

The controversy is the most highly publicized of several recent flare-ups over the construction of new mosques or Islamic community centers in locations from California to Brooklyn to Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Rogers, in a separate statement to Associated Baptist Press, said Baptists should especially work to protect the rights of religious groups disfavored by majorities in their communities.

"Baptists have always been in the forefront in the defense of religious liberty for all, and we have sometimes been a persecuted minority," she said. "As anti-mosque protests flare in some communities across our nation, we must assert a strong and civil voice in support of the equal right of free

exercise of all faiths."

-Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.