

# The Mainichi

NEW YORK (Mainichi) -- It was December 9, 2009, when the New York Times published an article with the headline, "Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero" on its front page. The article reported on the idea of building an Islamic community center near the site of the World Trade Center, which collapsed in the September 11 attacks eight years earlier.

"At the time, nobody complained about it. But the following summer, as the midterm elections approached, it snowballed. It became a very hot issue." In early August at his home in New Jersey, Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf, 72 —founder of the Cordoba House, an Islamic organization in New York and the man who proposed the idea—recalled.

The location was Park Place in Manhattan, just around the corner from Ground Zero, two blocks north, about 150 meters away. A thirteen-story building was to house multiple facilities such as a worship space, swimming pool, and restaurant. Imam Rauf envisioned that the building, named Cordoba House, would be open to not only Muslims but also people of all religions, and would become a place for the community to interact with another.

"It's like a Muslim YMCA. It would play an important role in creating bonds of friendship between people of different religions in the society to reduce the tension between communities."

After 9/11, "Islamophobia," or prejudice against Muslims, spread in the United States. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the number of hate crimes against Muslims in 2001 jumped to 481 from 28 the previous year. A series of incidents stereotyping ordinary Muslims as terrorists and the burning of mosques left Muslims vulnerable.

Imam Rauf was inundated with requests for lectures from universities and churches, etc. He was almost always asked the same question: "What is Islam?" While the images of extremism spread, little was known about the lives of ordinary Muslims. Ignorance bred suspicion, and suspicion bred hatred.

"Moderate Muslims and extremists are different." In July 2009, Rauf, who was keenly aware of the need for mutual understanding and was looking for a place to realize his

vision, bought a plot of land that was for sale and tried to bring his idea to life. He felt that he had to send the opposite message that the terrorists sent during the attacks.

"America was founded with a concept of government which accepted the idea that all men are equal. [However] the Muslim community living there has not been fully integrated. I was thinking of how we solve this problem. It wasn't easy, but this was part of the challenge."

The idea was met with opposition from the families of the victims of the attacks. A local public hearing held in early May of 2010 was disputed. Mayor Bloomberg at the time expressed support for the project, saying that it should respect "religious freedom," but a poll of New Yorkers showed that 52% opposed the construction, more than the 31% in favor.

Imam Rauf said that this was intensified by the right-wing media. At the time, President Barack Obama, who was committed to reconciliation with the Muslim world, was preparing for the midterm elections in November. "As the midterm elections approached, the right-wing press, trying to attack Obama, used our issue as a wedge issue in the elections. They started calling it 'Ground Zero Mosque' and branded it [as going against American values] to create hostility."

Pamela Geller, a well-known anti-Islamic and far-right blogger, was one of those who spearheaded the smear campaign. "What could be more insulting and humiliating than a monster mosque in the shadow of the World Trade Center buildings brought down by Islamic attack?" In early May, Geller wrote on her blog and called for a protest at the hearing, which spread to right-wing media outlets such as Fox News, and led to a flurry of fake reports suggesting that extremists were involved in the project.

As the summer wore on, protests broke out across the country, with placards attacking the President, saying, "Obama, your middle name is Hussein." In August, President Obama initially expressed his support for the plan, saying that Muslims have the right to practice their religion. The next day, however, worried about the struggles of the ruling Democratic Party and the decline in his approval rating, he was forced to effectively withdraw his support, saying he was only speaking in general terms.

In the face of the fierce "anti-Islam" firestorm, Rauf gave up on the construction at the site.

The opposition to the construction of the Islamic community center showed the persistence of Islamophobia in American society. John Esposito, a professor of Religion and International Affairs at Georgetown University, recalled when Time magazine ran the headline "Islamophobia" on its cover in the summer of that year, saying, "That phenomenon was the tip of the iceberg of 'Islamophobia' in the United States."

After businessman Trump was elected president in 2016 on an "anti-Muslim" campaign, hate crimes against Muslims surged again. "In recent years, social media creates fears in a lot of people. Islamophobia had become normalized," said Professor Esposito. "There are reasons for being concerned about the future. This isn't just about Muslims, but also about the future of our political and religious pluralism."

Cordoba, the planned name for the community center, is the ancient capital city of the post-Umayyad dynasty (756-1031) in Spain. It is said to have been a multicultural society with many Christians and Jews living there as well as Muslims. The post-Umayyad dynasty later collapsed due to repeated internal conflicts. Imam Rauf said he wanted to create a "new Cordoba" in the United States.

Twenty years since the terrorist attacks and distrust of Islam remains rooted in American society. However, Imam Rauf said, "I'm hopeful that America will Keep it's democracy. We have to define our humanity on a common ground that embraces religious diversity, racial diversity and cultural diversity." He still has a hope in his mind to build an Islamic community center somewhere.

*(Japanese original by Toshiyuki Sumi, New York Bureau Chief)*