



from the July 12, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0712/p13s03-lire.html>

Boston mosque rises above the fray

Muslim and Jewish groups drop lengthy lawsuits, and a house of worship moves forward.

By [Jane Lampman](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

More than 2,000 people gathered in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood last month for a highly symbolic moment – the capping of the minaret on a new mosque. A joyous occasion, the event sparked greater emotion than usual because construction of the Islamic Society of Boston's Mosque and Cultural Center had been stalled for more than two years – and had seemed in jeopardy. Controversy over allegations that the mosque had ties to terrorism had mushroomed into lawsuits and poisoned relations among the city's Jewish and Muslim communities.

The lawsuits have now been settled, thanks in part to interfaith efforts for more than a year to bring the litigants together. Some in the Jewish community say, however, that difficult questions still stand in the way of restoring relations with the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB). Others see the opportunity for a fresh start to break down suspicions and distrust through renewed dialogue.

"This is an opportunity to take advantage of.... Being able to resolve this difficulty and to grow out of a sense of conflict into a more active, positive conversation has an importance not only for Boston, but beyond," says David Gordis, president of Hebrew College, in Newton, Mass.

The conflict reflects fears and insecurities felt since 9/11 by many Americans who worry about the potential for the kind of threats Britain is currently facing. For Jews and Muslims, it is even more challenging.

The success will depend, it seems, on the extent to which those in the local community dwell on deep concerns associated with the Middle East situation or focus on building local ties. Boston has a history of strong Christian-Jewish relations, and post-9/11, the conversations began to embrace Muslims, including the ISB.

But when the society took steps to build the largest mosque in New England, some people who see the Muslim presence itself as a threat and US Muslims as under suspicion mounted a challenge.

Local objections to mosque

Contracting for a property with the Boston Redevelopment Authority in 1999, the ISB got the land at less than market value (as have several religious entities), with the proviso that it provide certain services to the local community, such as maintaining a neighborhood park.

But after the 2003 groundbreaking, obstacles appeared. The Boston Herald and local Fox 25 TV published stories accusing ISB leaders of links to terrorism. A city resident filed a lawsuit challenging the discounted land sale as unconstitutional. The David Project (DP), a right-leaning, pro-Israel advocacy group, began to publicize the charges and seek public hearings. It later came to light (via subpoenaed e-mails) that members of the group had worked actively to instigate the lawsuit and news stories as part of their "strategies to attack the mosque."

In 2005, the ISB filed a defamation suit against the groups and media outlets. That led mainstream Jewish organizations to line up with the David Project and to say the lawsuit made it difficult to carry on any communication with the ISB.

As tensions mounted, the Interreligious Center on Public Life (ICPL), a joint venture of Hebrew College and Andover-Newton Theological School, invited an expert in conflict resolution, the Rev. Raymond Helmick, S.J., of Boston College, to lead an effort to bridge the divide.

"The ICPL's interest was in trying to head off community damage," says Father Helmick. "Our task force [which included well-known author Rabbi Harold Kushner] worked for a full year to urge the parties toward mediation.

The ISB was willing from the start, but the David Project resisted."

They insisted there was nothing to mediate. "The David Project rejected absolutely the suggestion there would be any limitation on their ability to raise questions about the funding and leadership of the ISB," says Jeffrey Robbins, the group's attorney.

Their accusations of radical leadership rest on past or present ISB ties to three people. One charge involves a recent trustee, Walid Fitaihi (who taught at Harvard Medical School and returned to Saudi Arabia to open a hospital), whose anti-Semitic comments were published in an Arabic newspaper in 2000. Another involves a man who had been involved in the ISB in the 1980s and was recently jailed for participating in a plot to kill a Saudi official.

The third involves Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of Qatar, a very prominent Muslim cleric. A reformist on issues such as support for democracy, the sheikh holds a controversial stance on suicide bombing. Opposing it in general, including 9/11 and the London bombings, he supports it when people are under occupation, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq. He has been banned from the US since 1999.

The ISB responds that Mr. Qaradawi was an honorary trustee in the 1990s but is not connected to the society today.

The DP also questions the fact that some funding for the new mosque has come from Saudi Arabia. The ISB, which got a loan from the Islamic Development Bank, says the bank is a reputable organization that allows ISB to meet the requirements for interest-free Islamic financing.

When Jewish leaders talked of a complete cutoff of communication with the ISB, one Jewish organization, the Boston Workmen's Circle (BWC), picked up the torch.

"Lawsuits can go on for years, and we started looking at what we could do to keep communication going," says Michael Felsen, BWC president. They held a forum at which attorneys for both sides made presentations, and then began seeking backing in the Jewish community for a public call for mediation.

Meanwhile, a group of young Jews, seeing the challenge against the ISB as "fear-mongering and Islamophobia," launched a website (www.supportthemosque.org) to encourage others in the Jewish community to support the ISB.

At the same time, the ISB was winning in the courts. The suit challenging the land sale was thrown out in February 2007. Efforts by DP to get the defamation suit dismissed were rejected.

An apology and an opening

Then the ISB trustee who had made the inflammatory statements in the Arabic press came to Boston. In mid-April, the BWC hosted a meeting at which Dr. Fitaihi apologized to Jewish community leaders. "We saw that meeting as an important event, an opportunity for leadership of both communities to come together and share views openly and honestly," says Mr. Felsen. "He made it clear he was there to heal, and other Muslim community members there said they were looking for reconciliation."

With the confluence of events, within a month the attorneys were talking, and an agreement was reached in late May to end all litigation: The defamation suit and the appeal of the suit against the land sale were both dropped.

Both sides claim victory. Mr. Robbins, lawyer for the David Project, says the ISB settled to avoid having its officers testify under oath and damaging information becoming public during trial.

"A claim like that cuts both ways, and the David Project had documents they didn't want to come into our hands," says Albert Farrah Jr., ISB's lawyer. "They said they were going to prove my clients had links to terrorists. I don't think had the defendants truly thought they could have proven those claims that they would have dropped them."

While the litigation has ended and the construction of the mosque is again under way, the question now is where the community is headed. The David Project gives indications of continuing the fight on other fronts. And some

of its very wealthy members provide important resources for the area's Jewish organizations.

For the mainstream Jewish community, the challenge is how they will address the concerns some people still hold.

"Our goal is to work with people who repudiate the kind of bigotry that exists in the extremist world, whether virulent anti-Semitism ... or anti-Muslim sentiments that characterize all Muslims as terrorists or sympathizers," says Alan Ronkin, deputy director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. Yet he still voices qualms about "the ISB's 'potential' relationship with Sheikh Al-Qaradawi."

Helping Muslims out of insularity

Dr. Gordis of Hebrew College sees Boston as having the opportunity to become a model for other parts of the country, including helping Muslims move out of insularity.

"Our role in a world which is so torn and so much at risk is to encourage the moderate voices among Jews, Christians, and Muslims," he says. "Suppose there were unhappy things said by some who were leaders of that mosque. The important thing is to make the rank-and-file membership and current leadership participants in community conversations that contribute to an atmosphere of respect for 'the other.' That's not going to take place by vilification or castigation or isolation, but only by reaching out to them."

The Islamic Society itself has embraced the opportunity. On June 27, it hosted an "intercommunity solidarity day" at the new mosque, which is expected to be completed in six months. Representatives from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities prayed together for tolerance and understanding, and planted a "tree of peace." Young Jews from supportthemosque.org presented a check for money donated via their website.

"Worship services may be only 50 percent of what this mosque is for," says M. Bilal Kaleem, ISB spokesman. "The rest involves building interfaith relationships. Our biggest hope goes beyond dialogue to real cooperation on issues of shared interest."

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