

Trapped at Ground Zero

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The controversy over the right of Muslim Americans to build community center and mosque a short distance from the site of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is both strange and outright inappropriate. It should never be necessary for law-abiding Americans to justify exercising their right to freely practice their own religion. This right is in accordance to the First Amendment, part of the Bill of Rights that has constituted the foundation of American freedom for over 200 years.

But in the age of Guantanamo-like gulags filled with bearded Muslim men, such principles are disregarded. The very ideals that have been celebrated in the United States for generations are being trampled upon, violated and abused.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton can reference American ideals and speak of democracy while justifying the peculiar elections in Afghanistan, or the bewildering sectarian “democracy” underway in Iraq. However, when President Barack Obama made the seemingly dreadful mistake on August 13 of endorsing the right of Muslims to build a community center near Ground Zero, all hell broke loose.

Representative Peter King, a Republican from New York – echoing the sentiment of numerous others in congress, media and public – immediately denounced Obama’s remarks. The very next day, the president was forced to explain to CNN the underlying intent of his comments. He laboriously delineated the difference between commenting on “the wisdom” of the project and upholding the broader principle that the government should treat “everyone equal, regardless” of religion.

The controversy is odd, as well as embarrassing, because the intention of building the community center and the mosque – which includes a lecture hall and a swimming pool – was meant as a gesture of goodwill, an attempt at cultural and religious dialogue. It signals the Muslim community’s desire for inclusion. It is also an act of defiance.

Those who committed their evil deed in the name of religion, and those who lead major wars also in the name of religion are groups most disaffected by a community initiative aimed at rising over the superficial religious divides that have lead to major crimes and fueled criminal wars.

However, not all of those who against the approval of the mosque project are politically manipulative, ideologically or even religiously motivated. Some have innocently bought into the ridiculous media allegations and insinuations. They have been led to believe that building such a structure would be insensitive, betraying the memory of the September 11 victims (who also include Muslims), and could function as a symbolic message that the terrorists have won.

One fails to understand how a prayer room, a swimming pool and a lecture hall a few blocks away from where the Twin Towers once stood represents a victory in the books of al-Qaeda's grand designs. But more importantly, such language suggests - if not confirms - that what is underway is nothing but a religious war. If that is the case, then Muslims, using the same logic, have the right to curtail the freedom and target minorities in Muslim countries because they profess religions that are supposedly hostile to Islam. But isn't that precisely what al-Qaeda - a group abhorred by most Muslims - among other zealot groups have been arguing, if not practicing?

It's unacceptable that after years of American wars in Muslim countries - which preceded the terrorist attacks of September 11 - and many more wars which killed, wounded and devastated millions, we are still stuck in the same terrible mentality. Many haven't yet matured to see through the tainted lenses of hate and prejudice, the logic of "us" and 'them'. The very mindset that led America to its political, economic, military and moral crises for years continues to prevail. The very same cheerleaders who supervised the demise of their country as a world leader are now carrying the torches and forks of intolerance against a mosque, a lecture hall and a swimming pool.

The Muslim community center project was meant to remain a local affair until Obama afforded his support during a Ramadan meal with members of the US Muslim community. His comments presented the perfect opportunity for a perfectly opportunistic group of politicians and media pundits. His words were twisted and manipulated to give the impression that he cared little about the victims of September 11. The US president was reduced to actually have to state that "the pain and suffering experienced by those who lost loved ones is unimaginable ..."

However, as unbelievable, sad and self-defeating such a debate seems, it is also a wake-up call and a stark reminder of the kind of hatred and intolerance that gave that spot in lower Manhattan its dreadful name. Hatred and intolerance have also created uncountable other "ground zeros" in various Muslim lands, from Baghdad, to Gaza to Kabul and elsewhere.

Perhaps the controversy is a reminder of the issues we still need to urgently confront. We cannot indulge in the rhetoric of change, hope and audacity, while we remain at the same emotional and psychological standstill. We need to realize how such a fragile collective state of mind makes many of us so easily exploited and readily manipulated. This is the discussion that truly needs to commence, as boldly and urgently as possible.

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