

MY SAY: Healing the divisiveness of Sept 11

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Anything to do with the 9/11 incident has been divisive from the start, be it religion, politics or even development issues on what is now known as ground zero. The decision to build the Freedom Tower — the main building of the new World Trade Center complex in lower Manhattan in New York City — was criticised at one point because it was "too tall and too attractive to terrorists to attract corporate tenants". Others called it a "speculative white elephant".

So, when it comes to building a mosque-cum-cultural centre just two blocks away, one can imagine the outcry. In short, the divisiveness has not healed after all these years. The only difference is that the division this time is not starkly religious, racial or political.

Appropriately named the "Cordoba House", the mosque complex reminds one of a time when society was enlightened, tolerant and highly educated. As a city, Cordoba had no rival for wealth and civilisation in its time.

Indeed, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who is deeply connected to the project, says he chose the name "Cordoba" to remind people that when the rest of Europe had sunk into the Dark Ages, the Muslims, Jews and Christians created an oasis of art, culture and science.



Demonstrators who support and oppose the proposed Muslim cultural centre and mosque Cordoba House stand with signs in front of the site in New York

Fareed Zakaria, the well-known *Newsweek* writer, CNN host and recipient of the coveted Hubert H. Humphrey First Amendment Freedoms Prize in 2005 too recognises the good in developing the mosque (he refers to it as an institute). "If there is going to be a reformist movement in Islam, it is going to emerge from places like the proposed institute. We should be encouraging groups like the one behind this project, not demonising them. Were this mosque being built in a foreign city, the chances are that the US government would be funding it."

Also to be applauded is US President Barack Obama who, as reported by AP, has endorsed the building of a mosque near Ground Zero, saying the country's founding principles demanded no less. When he spoke on the issue for the first time, he said: "As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practise their religion as anyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community centre on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable."

Later, he reiterated that Muslims have the "right" to build the mosque.

New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has been a strong supporter of the mosque, welcomed Obama's White House speech as a "clarion defence of the freedom of religion".

Detractors of the project claim that the site is their "sacred" ground and that the construction of the mosque somehow violates that. They choose to ignore the fact that Muslims were also killed in the 9/11 tragedy.

Furthermore, "Ground Zero Mosque" is something of a misnomer because it is situated a distance away on the site of an old, disused coat factory in Park Place. The complex has also been called Park 51 mosque because a makeshift mosque was located there, which did not raise any questions.

The new emotive name (intentionally or otherwise) seems to have distorted the perception of the mosque's exact location and created unnecessary bitterness. Thus far, attempts to block the redevelopment have failed.

Most unprecedented this time is perhaps the fact that the auspicious Muslim festival of Aidilfitri, following a month of fasting, coincides with the infamous date of 9/11. But the contrast could not be more glaring — Aidilfitri is all about goodwill and forgiveness, a celebration of the victory over human desires, both in thought and deed, throughout the month of Ramadan. 9/11 is just the opposite. It was fuelled by feelings of hatred towards what could collectively be a symbol of good interfaith bonding based on the spirit of accommodation and sharing, as it is intended to be.

The difference in opinion between himself and the organiser of the Hubert H. Humphrey Prize on the mosque issue is what made Fareed Zakaria return the well-deserved prize. "I have returned both the handsome plaque and the US\$10,000 honorarium that came with it," he said.

Just when we were beginning to believe that the "war on terrorism" had nothing to do with Islam and Muslims in general — as the US administrations, past and present, have led us to believe — the "Ground Zero Mosque" has rekindled our doubts. Should we not embrace the spirit of Aidilfitri that seeks to heal, forgive and forget rather than continue to fuel divisiveness?

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