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Poll: Majority opposes mosque near Ground Zero

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Aug. 27, 2010

A sign at a rally supporting the proposed Muslim community center and mosque that would be built near the World Trade Center site in New York (CNS/Jessica Rinaldi, Reuters)

The outcry over the proposed Islamic community center near Ground Zero should not be lumped together with protests against planned mosques in other parts of the country, a new poll suggests.

Nearly 60 percent of Americans oppose building an Islamic center or mosque two blocks from the site of the 9/11 terror attacks, but 76 percent would support one in their own communities, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Aug. 26.

The strongest opposition to the New York project, called Park51, came from Republicans (85 percent) and white evangelicals (75 percent opposed the New York project, and 24 percent don't support mosques in their own communities), according to the poll conducted by Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service.

The numbers suggest that the negative reaction to what's been dubbed the "Ground Zero mosque" stems more from its proximity a site that's considered "sacred ground" by a majority of Americans rather than the general Islamophobia exhibited in the nationwide protests, researchers said.

"Our findings indicate that while the vocal opposition around the country we've seen covered is real, it may not represent the views of the vast majority of Americans," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute, a nonpartisan research firm in Washington.

"People are drawing a distinction between support for a (hypothetical) mosque in their local community and support for the particular mosque a few blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center."

Among other findings from the PRRI/RNS poll:

- Fifty-six percent of Americans consider the site of the 9/11 attacks "sacred ground," including 68 percent of Catholics, 53 percent of white evangelicals, and 48 percent who claim no religious affiliation. Thirty-eight percent disagreed.

- Sixty-three percent of Catholics, 58 percent of black Protestants and 55 percent of mainline Protestants expressed opposition to the New York Islamic center. The only group that was marginally supportive was religiously unaffiliated Americans, of whom 43 percent supported the project and 40 percent opposed it.

Mark Silk, professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., said the poll may reflect the success of Park51's opponents in getting their message across earlier and louder.

"You first hear `they're building a giant mosque on the site of 9/11,' and of course your first thought is that it's not a good idea. Then you hear that it's a few blocks away ... but you've already been thinking that it's not a good idea," he said. "It's a matter of public relations."

In recent weeks, Park51 organizers have tried to revamp the project's image, including changing its name from Cordoba House and assembling a supportive coalition that includes interfaith leaders and families affected by 9/11.

Park51 organizers Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan have rejected suggestions that they relocate the project, a compromise move pushed by New York Gov. David Paterson and New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg maintained his support for Park51 at a Ramadan Dinner at Gracie Mansion on Tuesday, calling the project "a test of our commitment to American values."

Relocating Park51 would not resolve the conflict, and it would send the wrong message to Muslims at home and abroad, added Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"This is a manufactured controversy that is exploiting legitimate emotions generated by the 9/11 attacks, by a vocal minority of individuals with an agenda to marginalize Muslims and demonize Islam," he said. "I don't think hate-mongers should be handled a victory."

A separate study released by the Pew Research Center found that American opinions of Islam have dropped from 41 percent favorable to 30 percent favorable since 2005. On the other hand, only 35 percent said they believe Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence, compared to 38 percent last year.

Hooper called the polls consistent with CAIR's position that the mosque protests across the country represent a minority, however vocal, of public sentiment.

"We need to promote educational initiatives and outreach initiatives in the local communities," he said. "When people know more about Islam, prejudice goes down. And when they interact more with Muslims, prejudice also goes down."

Silk found some reason for optimism in the fact that a strong majority of Americans reject the idea of treating minority religions with fear and suspicion, even at a time of war.

"The history of the country has not been so great on a lot of feelings towards minorities, whether they're blacks or Jews or Catholics, and of course the Japanese during World War II," he said. "Yet three-quarters of the American people acknowledge the right of Muslims to build religious centers in their own communities. I think that's not too bad, really."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews of 1,005 U.S. adults between August 20 and 22. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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