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London's Mega-Mosque Stirs Controversy

By Mandy Clark
London

28 January 2008

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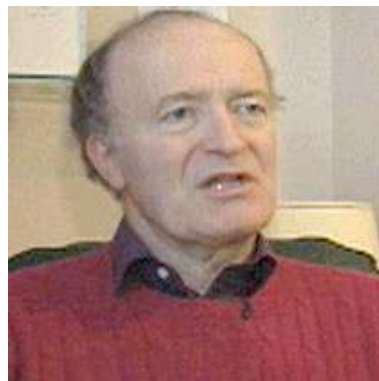
Britain already has more than 2,000 mosques. No other country in Western Europe has more. Now, London may become home to a mega-mosque and many people are raising a fuss about it. Two hundred thousand people have signed a petition to stop construction. VOA's Mandy Clark reports from London.



Model of modern metallic Islamic mosque

The battleground is a derelict piece of land with a makeshift mosque. It is where the ultra-conservative Islamic sect called Tablighi Jamaat plans to build a sprawling \$200 million, modern metallic mosque. It would be the largest in the Western world, holding 12,000 people alongside schools and a library. In effect it would be an Islamic village.

But the plan has sparked controversy. Two hundred thousand people, including many moderate Muslims, have signed petitions against the project.



Alan Craig

A local councilor, Alan Craig, is leading the fight. "If you look at the effect of Tablighi Jamaat with this radicalizing, fundamental approach they love, and this separatism that they preach, it's no wonder that various intelligence services, the French and U.S. and so on, have referred to them as a fertile breeding ground for terrorism," he says.

Tablighi Jamaat officials turned down repeated requests for an interview with VOA News. But

Inayat Bungawala, from the **Muslim Council of Britain**, told VOA the allegations against the group are baseless. "I certainly do not accept any association with terrorism and Tablighi Jamaat. Everything that I have heard is smear-mongering and of no actual evidential basis whatsoever."

The infamous shoe bomber, Richard Reid, was linked to Tablighi Jamaat, as were two of the bombers who struck London's transport system in July 2005.

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Massoud Shadjareh

Massoud Shadjareh, from the **Islamic Human Rights Commission**, says the group's link to high profile terrorists is tenuous at best. "This is outrageous. There is no linkage here, but we are creating a linkage that somebody went and prayed in one of these mosques. Well, so what?"

Still the mega-mosque has become a lightning rod for a wider debate in Britain over how best to integrate the country's growing Muslim population. Many say the mosque's

construction will cement London's reputation as the Muslim capital of Europe.

That leaves many Britons uneasy, says sociologist Sara Silvestri from London's City University.

"People fear any activity or statement made in the name of religion in the society. It may compromise or might damage completely the fabric of society and the fabric of political institutions," she explains.

The proposed mosque would stand next to the Olympic Park and be the city's predominant religious building as London welcomes the world to the 2012 Games.

All of this has made the debate more emotional and nasty. A mock obituary on the YouTube Web site targeted Alan Craig and other opponents of the mosque. "The thing that was really offensive to me is that it wasn't just me in the video, but they put my wife and my young daughters in it," said an upset Craig. "They were up there, filmed and photographed and they became part of the obituary and I just thought that was completely offensive, completely over the top and completely unacceptable."

The mega-mosque plans still need city approval. But already it has become a symbol of Islam's burgeoning growth in Britain and the country's struggle to deal with it.

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