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Tuesday November 13, 04:01 AM

London mosque row highlights Muslims' struggle for status

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LONDON (AFP) - A bitter row has blown up in east London over a secretive Muslim organisation's plans to build Europe's largest mosque a stone's throw from the city's 2012 Olympic zone.

If officials grant planning permission the mosque, in the deprived but diverse district of West Ham in east London, will hold up to 12,000 worshippers and feature facilities including a school and conference centre

It is, though, a big if.

The plan has drawn furious opposition from some politicians and locals, with 280,000 people signing a petition against it on Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Downing Street website earlier this year.

Many complaints focus on Tablighi Jamaat, the media-shy Muslim group behind the proposed development of the 18-acre Abbey Mills site, and which mosque opponents and some British press reports claim has links to Islamic extremism.

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The movement strongly denies the allegations, but a fog of mutual hostility whipped up by the row has increased both the alienation of Muslims who feel their religious needs are not being met and the anger of opponents who accuse them of insularity.

It also taps into Britain's agonised debate over the position of Islam in a Christian, though increasingly secular, society which began in earnest after 2005 London bombings, when four British-born suicide bombers killed 52 people.

"I'm not anti-Muslim -- I want to engage with Muslims rather than just shouting at each other through megaphones on

the issue," said local councillor Alan Craig, who is leading opposition to the plans.

While its opponents are eager to discuss why what they call the "mega-mosque" should not be built, the arguments in favour are less easy to uncover.

Reporters and photographers are barred from the proposed site, a former chemical plant currently home to a temporary mosque in a shabby building with a plastic roof. It is located near the main park for the London 2012 Olympic Games.

The gatekeeper referred press queries to mosque elder Saalat Sikander, who failed to respond to an interview request. Nick Kilby of Indigo Public Affairs, which is handling media calls on the mosque, also declined to talk, referring queries to its website.

Some answers were available a few minutes away on Green Street, a busy shopping road dotted with halal butchers and fabric shops and in the shadow of English Premier League football side West Ham United's ground.

The area is heavily Muslim -- accounting for roughly a quarter of the local borough's population, according to the most recent census in 2001, although there are also significant Hindu and Sikh populations.

Many Muslims in the street declined to comment on the plans, with some citing suspicion of how Islam is represented in the British media.

But a local Islamic bookshop worker who declined to be named said the new mosque was needed because of chronic overcrowding.

"There are thousands of people in this area -- they're praying in houses, in sheds, in portakabins," he said.

Two other large mosques built in the area in recent years had rapidly become overcrowded, he said, predicting that a new one would draw worshippers from across the capital.

A young Muslim man, who also declined to give his name, echoed this view.

"We pray five times a day. We want somewhere to go and put our heads down and pray," he said.

Asked about why he thought there was such strong opposition to the plans, the bookshop



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worker responded: "What they're saying is why do we need such a big mosque?"

Councillor Craig -- a committed Christian who is a member of the Christian People's Alliance Party -- stressed that his objection was not to Islam, but specifically to Tablighi Jamaat.

"Muslims have rights to mosques like Christians have rights to churches," he said.

But he described Tablighi Jamaat as "backward" and "fundamentalist," comparing its "hostile and separatist viewpoint" to the Branch Davidian sect, around 80 of whose members died alongside their leader David Koresh after a 1993 siege in Waco, United States.

Some have gone even further in their allegations about Tablighi Jamaat.

In the House of Commons last year, lawmaker Michael Gove of the main opposition Conservatives said two of the men behind the 2005 London bombings had "direct links" with a Tablighi Jamaat mosque in Dewsbury, northern England.

He also claimed shoebomber Richard Reid and the "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh had links to the organisation.

On the mosque website, organisers said they "utterly refute any links to terrorism or terrorists" and described Tablighi Jamaat as "a Muslim missionary and revival movement".

"We do not teach an extremist line, but we clearly can't speak for every single one of those who has ever attended our mosques," it said, adding that the movement has up to 80 million followers worldwide.

Professor Yoginder Sikand, of Jamia Millia Islamia, a university in New Delhi, who is an expert on Tablighi Jamaat, also questioned some of the more lurid claims about it.

"The leadership is quite opposed to what would be defined as terrorism," he said.

"This is extremely loosely structured, they have no control over people who come and go...it's not the association with Tablighi Jamaat that makes them radical".

Tablighi Jamaat also denies reported links to the Saudi royal family, saying the money for the mosque, whose construction costs have not yet been estimated, will be raised through donations from Muslims in London.

Despite the storm over the plans, the proposed mosque does have some powerful supporters -- a spokesman for the Greater London Authority, headed by Mayor Ken Livingstone, hit out angrily at the Downing Street petition.

"The particularly vicious nature of the campaign against a possible Muslim place of worship in east London should be condemned by all of those who support the long-established right of freedom of religion in this country," he said.

The rows, though, go on. This week, Craig discovered that a mock obituary for him, featuring his wife and two young daughters, had been posted on Internet video site YouTube, apparently by mosque supporters.

Trying to explain the emotions which the planned mosque has aroused, professor Sikand said it was not just a building project but also a potent symbol of Islam in Britain at a time when some Muslims feel their identity under threat.

"The very fact that they want to build the biggest mosque -- maybe they don't have enough people to fill it but in the context that they are marginalised, I think it's more of a statement," he said, comparing the project's ambition to that of the Taj Mahal in India.

"The statement being made in the UK (is) that OK...sectors of the public might be against the Muslims, but we're not going to hide our identity."

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