

The Mother Mosque and the Muslim Community in Cedar Rapids, Iowa: An American Story

One of the oldest mosques in America, and the first Muslim cemetery in the U.S., can be found in a surprising place: Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Cedar Rapids is one of the least ethnically diverse cities in the U.S.¹ and Iowa, a largely agricultural state, has more cows than people². Here, in the “heartland” of America, is home to five generations of Muslim Americans.

In the late 1800s, immigrants from Syria and Lebanon made their way across the U.S. Their main business was selling goods to the farmers as pack-peddlers; they later established small stores, and many settled in Cedar Rapids. These early Syrian-Lebanese immigrants, both Christian and Muslim, slowly grew in number; once they began having families, they recognized the need for places of worship in Cedar Rapids. The early Muslim and Christian immigrant families were close-knit and supportive of each other: after the completion of St. George’s Orthodox Church, the Muslim community purchased a cross for the new building; shortly after, the two communities would celebrate the establishment of the mosque in 1934.

Today, the “Mother Mosque of America” is on the National Register of Historic Places. The small, simple structure is an unassuming landmark, surrounded by a chain link fence and tucked into a modest neighborhood of Cedar Rapids. The green awning, dome, and crescent announce its presence as a mosque, yet the one-story building evokes a prairie schoolhouse. Over the years, the building went by many different names: in the early days, some referred to it as the *nadi* (“club” in Arabic), “The Rose of Fraternity Lodge,” and “The Moslem Temple”; later, it was known as “The Islamic Center.”³ The community sold the building in the 1970s in order to build a new center; the original structure later fell into disrepair and was abandoned. In the 1990s, the Islamic Council of Iowa repurchased and restored the 1934 structure as “the Mother Mosque of America.”

The Mother Mosque now serves primarily as a cultural center, and for some, as a symbol of the presence of Islam in America. The multi-generational Muslim community in Cedar Rapids continues to grow and diversify, and offers a vital counter-narrative to those who would characterize Islam as “other” or “new.” It is a uniquely American story, as told by Aziza (Betty) Igram, a member of one of the founding families; Taha Tawil, the imam at the Mother Mosque of America; and Miriam Amer, a community member and advocate.

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The history of the Cedar Rapids Muslim community might best be told by one of the elders; if you want to hear it from **Aziza (Betty) Igram**, it is best to come hungry. As her daughter Fatima explains with a laugh, “You won’t get out of there without having something to eat.”⁴ Aziza, also known as Betty, is a member of one of the founding families of the Cedar Rapids Muslim community, the Igrams. Now a great-grandmother, she remembers first arriving in Cedar Rapids as a newlywed in the 1940s: “I saw nothing but fields of corn.”⁵ When she and her new husband first arrived into town, their first stop was to what is now known as “the Mother Mosque”: it was a center for social gathering as well as for religious education and prayer.

In the 1940s and 1950s, she explains, many of the men ran local grocery stores, started small businesses, and served in the military; the women raised the children and, in their free time, helped

teach at the mosque and cook food for fundraising dinners and bake sales. Those who were children in the early years of the community wistfully remember swinging on the willow tree, playing baseball in the yard next to the mosque, and gathering for picnics; inside, they would study Qur'an. When friends at school would ask, "What church do you go to?" the answer was simple: "The mosque."

Betty's husband, Abdallah (Ab) Igram, was a pioneer in the American Muslim community. Igram helped to establish the first Muslim umbrella organization in the U.S., the Federation of Islamic Organizations, and, as veteran of the U.S. Army, he lobbied to have the "M" for Muslim designation added to military dog tags. Today, in Betty's tidy condo, in addition to the prominent display of photos of her great-grandchildren, are neat stacks of albums and scrapbooks filled with the letters, awards, and commendations of her late husband. He spoke at churches across Iowa, participated in the Rotary Club, served on city boards and councils, and raised funds for charities.

Betty remembers: "He always said, 'Don't be like an ostrich, and just bury your head in the sand. Go out and speak to others. Be involved in your community. That's the only way they are going to know who we are.'" Betty continues, "He just wanted the people to know what Islam stands for. That's why he'd be turning in his grave right now, because these ISIS, they're not Muslims. ...But you see, people look at these things and think, 'Those Muslims, they are really bad.' They are not looking at Aziza or looking at Fatima, or they aren't thinking about Ab who is long gone."

After her beloved husband passed away, and with her four kids grown, Betty took a job at Younkers Department Store in downtown Cedar Rapids. She enjoyed working in the China department, helping to register young couples about to be married; she continued to work there well into her 80s. Some of her co-workers and customers knew she was Muslim; many did not. Growing up in what is now Lebanon, she explains, none of the women wore headscarves, and Betty doesn't cover her neatly styled hair. Her faith wasn't an issue, she explains, until one day in the break room, when a co-worker expressed a fear of Muslims. Before Betty could respond, their supervisor chided: "You're afraid of *Betty*?" She laughs as she remembers the story, explaining that she never really experienced prejudice until the time of the Gulf War. After that, even with 9/11, any problems were rare; but today, she notes, "it is getting worse."

Betty isn't one to dwell on the negative; instead, she moves on, remembering something she wanted to share from one of her scrapbooks and albums. She continues to be active at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids, where her daughter Fatima serves on the board and her great-grandchildren now regularly attend. In between stories, Betty adds, "Honey, would you like some baklava?"

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For **Imam Taha Tawil**, the Mother Mosque is a vital symbol of Islam in America: "...of freedom, respect, integrity, and hard work."⁶ When Taha Tawil came to Iowa from Palestine in the 1980s to serve at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids, he cherished the opportunity to work with an established community and welcomed the chance to engage in interfaith relations. "Unfortunately the openness and communication wasn't available in Jerusalem. ... We didn't have this opportunity." When a local clergy group, Churches United, refused full membership to Tawil and the local Rabbi, they worked together with a Christian minister to establish a new organization: the Inter-Religious Council of Linn County (IRC), open to all. More than twenty years later, Churches United is defunct, but the IRC continues to play an active, constructive role in the Cedar Rapids community.

Imam Tawil played a key role in re-establishing the Mother Mosque, upon learning that the historic building – the first built by the Muslim community in Cedar Rapids, and one of the first purpose-built mosques in the U.S. – had been sold years before. He saw the potential for the building to serve as a symbol of Islam in America, explaining: "We need the Mother Mosque to prove our

contributions to America. To prove the freedom of religion that we have.” For almost 20 years, he has served as the Imam of the Mother Mosque, offering tours and workshops about Islam. In addition, he serves as a chaplain for the local police department and works for the state’s department of corrections, while continuing to be active in the local Inter-Religious Council. Not long after the building was re-established as a cultural center, the historic floods of 2008 devastated the structure’s lower level. Imam Tawil placed an ad in the local newspaper asking for help from his neighbors to help clean out and restore the mosque. Tawil emphasizes, “So they all came.” He met Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, all helping to clean out the mosque. “It was a community effort. That makes me believe that this mosque is not just an Islamic Mosque, it is American. ... We didn’t come from outside to build a mosque here. We have been here, and we built it..” He added that the experience after the flood reminded him of the mosque’s beginnings in the 1930s: “That revived the memory of the old generation, how they built the mosque: because without the help of the Christian community, the Muslim community would not [have been able to] do it.”

Tawil observes that while anti-Muslim sentiment has arisen in other parts of the U.S. in recent years, it has rarely come up in Cedar Rapids. He explains, “...the soil of Iowa is not fertile for the seeds of Islamophobia.” Recently, when presidential candidate Donald Trump made negative statements about Muslims during the Iowa primaries, Imam Tawil had a unique response: he invited him for tea at the Mother Mosque. While Tawil received no response to the invitation, it generated positive press coverage about this historic, multi-generational Muslim community in the heartland.

As Imam Tawil looks to the future, he hopes to expand the “Mother Mosque of America” with a museum and library. Not far from the Mother Mosque, the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids (ICCR) serves as the primary place of worship and gathering for Muslims in Cedar Rapids. The ICCR’s imam, Hassan Selim, jokingly refers to the building as “the Daughter Mosque of America”: while many members of the congregation are Syrian-American, it now reflects the diversity of the global Muslim community (*ummah*), with 200 families from over 20 countries of origin. Imams Selim and Tawil share keys to each other’s buildings, as well as a dedication to interfaith activity. In 2015, the ICCR hosted the Inter-Religious Council of Linn County’s Thanksgiving Service. It was the first time the event, which raised funds for a local food bank, was held in a mosque – and the room was filled to capacity. Reflecting on the Cedar Rapids Muslim community’s interfaith relations, Tawil notes, “We love our neighbors, we are part of the community. We never felt that we are foreigners, or we are outsiders... because of the old, old relationships we have.” He added, “Like a tree that grows in your yard.”

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When **Miriam Amer** first moved to the Cedar Rapids area, she didn’t realize that the founding families of the Muslim community, much like her own, came from Syria-Lebanon in the 1800s. She was born at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and grew up in and around the Northeast; her father was a career Marine. In 2000, she moved to Iowa from Connecticut with her husband and two children. “We wanted to slow down. It was a great place to raise kids. We wanted quiet.”⁷

Although there was some culture shock, Amer welcomed the peaceful surroundings. With the recent loss of a child, and contending with serious health problems, the pace of life suited her. Yet Amer wasn’t in Iowa long before the terror attacks of September 11. Like many Muslim Americans who look back on that day, she considered it a double tragedy: as an American, to suffer the loss of life in the brutal attack; and as a Muslim community, to endure backlash and discrimination. She remembers, “The world fell apart that day.” Looking back, Miriam’s strongest memory of that day was the response of her neighbors: some brought food; some put flowers on the steps of the Mother

Mosque; and five hundred people who came to Friday prayers at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids to show their solidarity and support.

Amer witnessed similar solidarity and support in the aftermath of another devastating event: the floods of the Cedar River in 2008. She notes, “You can’t talk about Cedar Rapids and not talk about the flood. Everybody talks about the flood still.” Around the city, it is common to see signs indicating the high water mark inside buildings: when the Cedar River crested above 31 feet, it covered more than 10 miles of the city. Referred to as a “500 year” flood, it ranks as the sixth largest FEMA disaster declaration.⁸

With experience in relief work, Amer was eager to become involved. She was employed by a Christian relief organization that was contracted by FEMA, and assigned to a small farming town outside of Cedar Rapids. Amer, who wears a hijab, was an unfamiliar sight in rural Iowa. Some of the farmers refused to work with her or called her a “terrorist”; others worked with her grudgingly. But Miriam, a self-described “military brat” with a no-nonsense manner and a desire to help, was undaunted. She focused on doing her job, and providing the assistance that was needed. Along the way, she forged real friendships. She recalls with a laugh that one farmer honored her afterwards by naming one of his milking cows “Miriam.”

Today, Miriam leads CAIR-Iowa, a grassroots Muslim advocacy group, and is active in interfaith activities and at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids. She cherishes the unique community of Cedar Rapids and its diversity. “I go to the mosque, and when we have our potluck dinners, it’s the best restaurant in town. You’ve got every nationality... you’ve got mac and cheese; you’ve got biryani. It’s fantastic.” She adds: “We are everybody. Our community is representative of every generation, every nationality, and every political spectrum. People look at Muslims as a monolithic group, and we’re not. We’re so diverse, and we all have different ideas.”

1 “2015’s Most & Least Ethno-Racially Diverse Cities,” Wallethub Web site, <https://wallethub.com/edu/cities-with-the-most-and-least-ethno-racial-and-linguistic-diversity/10264/#city-size>, accessed July 2016.

2 “Cornfields, Cows, and the Iowa Caucus,” Iowa Caucus Web site, http://www.iowacaucus.biz/ia_caucus_iowa.html, accessed July 2016.

3 Interviews with community members and U.S. Department of the Interior National Register of Historic Places, “Moslem Temple,” <http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/nrhp/text/96000516.PDF>, accessed July 2015.

4 Fatima Smejkal, interview by author, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, August 1, 2015.

5 All quotes by Aziza (Betty) Igram: Aziza Igram, interview by author, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, August 1, 2015.

6 All quotes by Imam Taha Tawil: Taha Tawil, interview by author, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, August 1, 2015.

7 All quotes by Miriam Amer: Miriam Amer, interviews by author July 7, 2015 (phone) and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, July 31, 2015.

8 “Flood of 2008 Facts & Statistics,” City of Cedar Rapids Web site, http://www.cedar-rapids.org/discover_cedar_rapids/flood_of_2008/2008_flood_facts.php, accessed July 2016.