

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* diverse cities in the U.S.¹ and Iowa, a largely agricultural state, has more cows than people.² 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 and later established small stores. 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. The early Muslim and Christian immigrant families were close-knit, so much so, that 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.



Imam Taha Tawil

Today, the “Mother Mosque of America” is on the National Register of Historic Places. This simple structure is an unassuming landmark, surrounded by a chain link fence, tucked into a modest neighborhood. The 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 to build a new center; the original structure later fell into disrepair and was abandoned. In the 1990s, the Islamic Council of Iowa restored the 1934 structure as “the Mother Mosque of America.”

¹ <https://wallethub.com/edu/cities-with-the-most-and-the-least-ethno-racial-and-linguistic-diversity/10264/#city-size>, accessed July 2016.

² http://www.iowacaucus.biz/ia_caucus_iowa.html, accessed July 2016.

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



Syrian and Lebanese Immigrants to Iowa

The Mother Mosque now serves 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.

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, 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

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 Muslim American community. Igram helped to establish the first 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. “He’d be turning in his grave right now because these ISIS, they’re not Muslims, says Betty, “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

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

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

prejudice until the time of the 1990 Gulf War. After that, even with 9/11/2001, problems were rare; but today, she notes, “it is getting worse.”



Betty isn't one to dwell on the negative. 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 Taha Tawil came to Iowa from Palestine in the 1980s to serve at the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids, cherishing 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 to me in Jerusalem.” When a local clergy group, Churches United, refused 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 a constructive role in Cedar Rapids. Imam Tawil also 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.

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 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.

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. Tawil notes, “We love our neighbors, we are part of the community. He added, “Like a tree that grows in your yard.”

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Miriam Amer, Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

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

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

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 health problems, the pace of life suited her. Yet Amer wasn’t in Iowa long before the terror attacks of 9/11. 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.” 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 in the aftermath of another devastating event: the floods of the Cedar River in 2008. Around the city, it is still 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 6th largest FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) 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. “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.”

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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,” www.cedar-rapids.org/discover_cedar_rapids/flood_of_2008/2008_flood_facts.php, accessed July 2016.