

CHAPTER 2

EAST LANSING'S ISLAM IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICA

Particularities of Islam in East Lansing

Over the past forty years since its foundation in the end of 1970s, the Islamic Center of East Lansing has transformed into *the* local face of Islam. From its humble beginnings as a simple prayer space, the Center became an institution of Islamic authority to which the city's people look for guidance on most matters related to Islam and Muslims. While its original function as a place of worship remains unchanged, the Center has grown to become a facility for community services, social activities, and learning. The Center's founding generation – who are now senior in age – would come here five times a day mainly for prayers, but their children and grandchildren began to use the space to study, play or organize sporting activities.

Very often, especially on the weekends, family gatherings such as birth celebrations, marriages, and graduations were held in the center's gym. Occasionally, the weekends in the center would be enlivened by public events, including fundraising initiatives, health campaigns, political education opportunities, and organizational visits. Numerous politicians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, have visited the Center over the years to introduce their policy programs. Congregations of other faith traditions would frequently grace the space as well: sometimes they came for interfaith meetings, while on other occasions they arranged to borrow the gym for their own rituals. Perhaps most importantly, the Center became a reputable educational facility after it opened an Islamic primary school, weekend classes for Qur'anic and Islamic studies, and language courses. All of these services were rare among Islamic institutions even in the late 1990s.

Several factors characterizing the Lansing area bolstered the Center's steady development, despite the fact that it was started by a minority community. One of these factors was demographic:

the Lansing area gained a small but steady influx of immigrants over the first two decades when the Islamic Center was growing. Michigan overall has experienced zero population growth since the 1980s, and the number was even negative in some years due to economic crises.²⁰ The government tried to alleviate the problem by receiving refugees: Lansing thus became one of three “free case cities” in the state of Michigan, meaning that refugees were permitted to settle there without having a sponsoring family.²¹

Based on a report by Refugee Development Center (RDC) that has operated in Michigan since 2002, between 400 and 700 refugees were resettled in Lansing area each year, and by the time this research was ended, between 10,000 and 13,000 of them live in mid-Michigan.²² Another report by Migration Policy Institute (MPI) of the period between 2007 and 2017 mentioned that around 32% of the refugees admitted to the US reported themselves as Muslims by origin, meaning that we can estimate there were between 3,000-4,000 refugees within the general Muslim population in the mid-Michigan region.²³ Other than refugees, the Muslim population was also augmented by an increase in college students studying at Michigan colleges and universities. For example, in just a little more than two decades, Michigan State University doubled its number of students admitted from Muslim majority countries.²⁴

The second factor was political. Being the biggest mosque, plus being located in the state capital, the Islamic Center turned into a hotspot as public debates over the relationship between Islam and America escalated. A few incidents occurred in which people vandalized or defaced the

²⁰ See: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/michigan-population/>

²¹ See: <http://legalnews.com/macomb/1005977>

²² See: <http://www.refugeedevlopmentcenter.org/about/frequently-asked-questions-about-refugees-in-lansing/>

²³ See Figure 6 in a report by MPI: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states>

²⁴ From the MSU’s record found in URL: <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/ReportView.aspx?Report=UE-GEOForeign> at (07/29/2018), I counted that in 1994 there were 353 students, and in 2018 there were 713 students coming from 28 and 36 countries, with at least 50% of the populations being Muslim.

Center's property to express a negative opinion of Islam or Muslims in the global political scene.²⁵ However, most public relations were positive toward the mosque community. Over these years, the incidents made the Center become an even more obvious symbol of Islam in the area. For example, during this time period the Islamic Center and the cities of Lansing and East Lansing established the Ramadan Dinner. This tradition might have been inspired by a similar feast held at the White House each year, after it was initiated by First Lady Hillary Clinton in 1996. Such a courteous gathering with respect to an Islamic holy month implied that the federal government recognized and appreciated Muslims as citizens of the nation. With that in mind, the Center's other events, such as blood drives, refugee events, and student welcome parties would also strengthen the image that the Center was the ideal place in the area to see Islam and interact with Muslims.



Figure 1. Photograph: Lansing and East Lansing Mayors' Ramadan Unity Dinner of 2015.

²⁵ In September 2010, a burned Quran was left outside of the East Lansing mosque. A subsequent police investigation and pledge to apprehend the culprit led to the doer's surrender. A judge fined him for littering. See: http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-09-14-mosque14_ST_N.htm

The third factor contributing to the Center's steady development was the NOI's transition to Sunni Islam. Following the death of NOI leader Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son Warith Deen Muhammad, the new leader, dissolved the organization and instructed his followers to embrace mainstream Sunni Islam. Minister Louis Farrakhan tried to revive NOI a few years later but the organization has remained marginal. Former NOI members in the Lansing area proceeded with converting their temple into a Sunni mosque; as a result they were converging their activities with the mosque community of East Lansing. With this development, the city's Muslim community expanded, and the Islamic Center of East Lansing's role as the center of Islamic growth was further enhanced.

Geographically, the growth of Lansing's Muslims' population was also influenced by the prior development of two major Midwestern economic hubs: Detroit and Chicago. In the Detroit area of the 1970s - especially the city of Dearborn- there were already-established communities of automotive workers who since the early twentieth century had immigrated primarily from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. The Muslims among them contributed to the growth of Islam in the area, including building mosques as early as the 1920s (S. Howell, 2014).

Meanwhile, Chicago also had many neighborhoods that consisted of Arab, Caucasian, Indian and Pakistani Muslims' businesses whose employees used to be workers and peddlers from the same time as the early Detroit Muslims periods.²⁶ Being in between the two hubs, the Lansing Muslim community included South Asian, Arab and East African immigrants who came to the area either via Detroit or Chicago. As those who stayed in Detroit and Chicago, Muslims of the Lansing area also maintained religious traditions rooted in their geographic origins. This meant that for more than

²⁶ A Bosnian Muslim organization was founded in 1906 in Chicago ("MONOGRAFIJA 100 GODINA BOŠNJAKA U AMERICI," 2006), indicating that the city already had a significant number of Muslims in the early twentieth century.

three decades Sunni Islamic practices were the dominant force in shaping the early development of Islam in the region. The demographic foundations of the Muslim community ensured that Sunni practices would likely prevail for years to come, leaving the minority Shi'ite community of the area to consolidate their religious culture within their own circles.

Overall, the establishment of an Islamic center in an American city during these decades indicates that it was a momentous period for the spread of Islam in America. This trend was a natural consequence of specific political decisions. Long before the turn of the third millennium, the influx of Muslim immigrants that began in 1965 was caused by the Immigration Act of that year, which aimed to end the discriminatory policy of national origin quotas that had been in place since 1924. This influx increased even more when the Immigration Act of 1990 further eased immigration requirements. The next major phase relating to the increasing visibility of Muslims in the United States started in the aftermath of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Previously marginal from the media perspective, suddenly all things about Islam and Muslims became the center of global attention after the tragic and highly televised attack.

It is without question that these and other violent events intensified interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. The resulting attitudes toward Islamic issues varied between shunning the community and seeking out contact with the community. Sometimes the impact appeared paradoxical because the aftermath generated more interest in the religion and, in turn, more conversions to the faith (P. D. Bowen, 2009; Esseissah, 2011).²⁷ Many people converted into Islam after they found out that, contrary to the Islamophobic narratives, Islam brought positivity to their life. Many converts claim that what they found in Islamic beliefs reflected what they already

²⁷ Other than these scientific works, opinions written in public media also echoed this trend, such as in an article by Omar Sacirbey in *The Huffington Post* (Sacirbey, 2011).

had in mind or were already looking for. Thus, embracing Islam was not perceived to be a new conversion, but rather a return to original belief. Hence they called the process “reversion.”²⁸ Therefore, this increase in conversions could be understood as part of a global increase of Muslims in European and American cities, including Lansing.²⁹

However, looking at the fact that the current number of immigrant Muslims is larger than the number of converts, it must be acknowledged that the increasing presence of Muslim in American cities has more to do with political events happening abroad than the attractiveness of the belief system itself to American citizens. Since 1990, a significant number of new Muslim-majority states were founded or gained independence following the breakup of the USSR (Soviet Union) and Yugoslavia. Both countries had suppressed religious freedoms in order to protect the authority of the state communist party system.

To include the birth of other countries in other continents, the number of new countries reached 34 states by 2011 (Rosenberg, 2017), aligned around religion and ethnic borders. Civil wars following the breakups and births of the countries, generating millions of refugees, who brought their religious traditions with them on the road. Once settled in the United States, many revived their traditional beliefs or religions and sought to connect with their coreligionists. In the case of Muslims, The Pew Research Center roughly estimated that from 1992 to 2012 as many as 1.7 million Muslim immigrants legally entered the United States (Pew Research Center, 2013). As a result, sheltering

²⁸ In this thesis, Esseissah refers to his own interviews and the works of Kate Zebiri (Zebiri, 2014, p. 15) and Akbar S. Ahmed (Ahmed, 2010, p. 304) to convey the recorded confessions of numerous converts saying that they had identified with Islam before their *shahada* (declaration of faith), that every person was born with *fitra* (natural goodness), that Islam was foreign and familiar at the same time, and that they had been Muslims even before embracing Islam.

²⁹ An over-dramatized media report had cited a record in the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) to create an image of the increase of Muslims in the US since 9/11. But it was not very accurate since ARDA's report (ASARB, 2010b) of Muslims' population increase from 2000 to 2010, especially for the county of Ingham where Lansing is the largest city, showed just over a twelve percent increase. The increase for whole state of Michigan was indeed high, at 49 percent (ASARB, 2010a). See Meghan Neal's report in the New York's Daily News (Neal, 2012).

cities in Michigan, including Detroit, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, and Lansing, witnessed a significant increase in the number of mosques built since the 1970s. In state capital areas such as Lansing, Muslim began to be more visible with displaying signs in public and occasional observance of certain religious traditions.

Number of Muslims in Lansing

Regarding the number of Muslims in East Lansing, it is difficult – if not impossible – to know the exact number of Muslim in any city in the United States, let alone specific details about those numbers’ shifting dynamics year by year. In the case of the Lansing area, all we can state is that there were definitely some Arab immigrants by the end of the nineteenth century among the settlers who came to develop the city, and thus there might be a certain number of Muslims within this Arab population. Rosina Hassoun (2005) authored a pioneering work that provides a description of the early presence of Arab immigrants in the area of Lansing, as part of a larger history of the Arab-Americans in Michigan. Based on her interviews with the remaining Arab families, she writes:

“The first (Arab) immigrants to the Lansing area were overwhelmingly Syrian/Lebanese Christians. ... The total Arab-American community in Lansing may number as many as two thousand people, but no clear local numbers are available ... In the late 1800s, Lebanese Christians from the village of Deir Mimas in the Marjayoun district of Southern Lebanon began immigrating to the United States and found their way to Lansing to work in the Oldsmobile Plant and the Diamond Reo Truck Company. Perhaps the first Arab American to immigrate to the Lansing area was Sam Solomon in 1897...

Some of the prominent Arab-American families in the Lansing area include the Saad (Saad Furs), Rahail, Shaheen (automobile sales), Adado (Adado Riverfront Park), Kalouch, and Toubia families. Wadih (Woody) Zamel ... of Woody’s Oasis restaurant. ... Another Arab-American family has opened the most upscale Arabic restaurant in East Lansing, Sultan’s restaurant.

The village of Al Bassa was north of Acre and until 1925 was part of Lebanon... (it) was about 40 percent Muslims and 60 percent Christians, ... Israeli forces destroyed the village, ... Their camp

suffered severe damage during the war and this sent waves of Al Bassa refugees fleeing, and eventually a group of families came to Lansing, Michigan. ... (Hassoun, 2005, pp. 33-37)

Thus, we deduce that there were some Muslims among the early Arab immigrants who came to Lansing at the turn of the last century, but the bulk of Muslim immigrants certainly came after World War II. These later newcomers would become the main supporters of the construction of a mosque in East Lansing in the 1970s, long after the construction of mosques took place in Detroit, built by the earlier immigrants of the early 1900s (S. F. Howell, 2009).

As is the case nationwide in America, there is no official record of the number of Muslims in Lansing. A report by Sperling, a digital information compiler of people and places, estimated in 2014 that the percentage of Muslims in Lansing and East Lansing cities was 1.44%, which was larger than the average of 0.87% in the entirety of the capital counties, but still lower than its percentage in Detroit, 3.72%. For the whole state of Michigan, Sperling estimated the percentage of Muslim at 1.22%, or 120,747 out of 9,897,264 total population for the state. These percentages also mean that there were 4,041 Muslims in the three counties, which included the majority of 2,922 in Lansing, East Lansing, and Meridian Township. In the entire United States, The Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2011) estimated that Muslims numbered 3.3 million, or 1% of the population. Although this number represents about one-half of the estimates made by Islamic organizations, the percentage nevertheless shows growth since the Pew's estimation in 2010 was 0.8% (Pew Research Center, 2011). Comparing the number of Muslims by states, one estimate (Barooah, 2012) suggested that Michigan has 1,218 Islamic adherents per 100,000 people, which is ranked sixth after Illinois, Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Texas.

My own observation of the number of Muslims routinely attending the Friday prayers in the Islamic Center of East Lansing seems to agree with Sperling's estimation. After counting the number of the attendees several times, I can say the full capacity of the mosque, both in men's and women's

prayer rooms, is around 700, in which men are about 550 and women approximately 150. As prayers are usually held twice in a single Friday, there should be at least 1400 Muslims attending the Friday prayers each week. The current chief imam of the mosque, Imam Sohail, estimated the actual number of Lansing Muslims could be ten times bigger, which I thought too optimistic. During Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha annual prayers, the number of attendees reached five to six thousand, filling one exhibition hall of the biggest venue of the city, the Lansing Center. They are probably just half of the actual number, because many Muslims were unable to attend due to work, or just failed to come for some other reason. So, if we do not count as Muslim the people who do not longer attend prayers, the resulting number of Muslims in this city is around 5000.

Counting Muslims based on the attendees of Friday prayers, however, may miss quite a significant number of community members who could not come to this weekly gathering due to scheduling conflicts or work obligations. Friday prayer times are working hours, and according to mainstream Islamic teaching, this prayer is obligatory only for adult males.³⁰ So, the actual number of the community's population could be double the number reported for Friday attendees if we consider that attendance at the large Lansing Center venues took place during the annual rituals of Eid Fitr and Eid Adha, the largest two Islamic celebrations.

Muslims in Lansing consist of immigrants, refugees, black African Americans (including both intergenerational Muslims and recent converts) and white converts. In terms of numbers, the immigrants are larger than the other groups. The immigrants also are economically better off than the refugees. This is why the development of Islamic organizations in the area had more to do with the immigrants' roles than was the case for the other the groups. The roles of refugees could also

³⁰ Females are free to join Friday prayers or just hold the noon prayers. Moreover, Shi'i Islam also views this weekly prayer as an optional obligation. See Al-Sistani's view at: <http://www.sistani.org/english/qa/search/29889/> on March 27, 2017. Besides, Shi'i Muslims were mostly reluctant to join Friday prayers with the Sunnis.

not be ignored, since they had a significant impact on the presence of Muslim in general. The annual report of the Refugee Development Center (RDC) (“RDC Newsletters and Annual Reports,” 2016), a collaborative service facilitated by a variety of social organizations, revealed that it had been serving 1,691 clients.³¹ The percentages of the country of origins showed that 48% of them seemed to come from Islamic enclaves of the world, which gives us the number of 811 Muslims solely for the refugee population. If we count this number against the number of Muslims in the three counties, refugees account for as much as 20% of all Muslims in the area.

If a person needed to assess the presence of Muslims in America, then the available entities to count are the identifiable existence of their religion, which includes Islamic institutions and public population figures. Islamic institutions include the mosques, the congregational organizations, the schools, public events, and so on. Public figures are the Muslim leaders and members of those Islamic institutions who declared or expressed themselves as Muslims in public sphere. While the institutional ones could be counted, the membership number was of course unclear. An individual’s choice of religion in the secular West today is not available to count, which is contrary to the most Muslim-dominated countries where a person’s religion is still printed on one’s personal identity document; those were the countable ones because they are the entities that had been claimed as Muslims by Muslims themselves. We could no longer count the number of Muslim individuals in the West the way we counted them in their original countries. In Lansing, the available entities to count regarding the existence of Islam are the organizations and activists of the two mosques, as previously described: the Islamic Center of East Lansing near Michigan State University (MSU)

³¹ The last report made by RDC was from 2016. See its URL: <http://www.refugeedevlopmentcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RDCAnnualReport.pdf> on 4/5/2017

campus and Wali Mahmoud Mosque in the western neighborhood near downtown Lansing. The following sections recount the stories of their beginnings.

The Islamic Center of East Lansing and Muslim Student Activism

The story of Shaikh Omar Sobani reflects how Middle Eastern students were instrumental in funding and developing the Islamic Center in East Lansing. Back in 1972, young Omar Sobani came to America to conduct a short mission. He had to visit American cities in order to study the educational system of the country, after which he had to return to Jordan to continue his work as a chief officer in the education ministry of the Jordanian government. However, he ended up staying with his family in the Michigan city of Lansing as a US citizen. He decided to spend the rest of his life in America and probably to have his last breath here, under the care of his wife and children, who joined him in 1989. Later, he was joined by his grandchildren, who were mostly born in America, and the beloved community of Lansing Muslims who would not forget the devotions and contributions he put forth toward the establishment of the Islamic center, dating from his first arrival in the city in 1973.

Many people I met with in the mosque to talk about the history of the Center would recommend that I first speak with Shaikh Omar Soubani before contacting other sources for more information. There were indeed two features of Shaikh Omar's roles that his fellow activists did not have. First, he was the only person who had dedicated his main activities for the Muslim community development programs, whereas others had secured their own jobs before allocating their spare time to participate in mosque works. Shaikh Omar's main job was to work for mosques, and he was not known to ever have another job as his main occupation. Second, he also was the one who had become an ambassador that connected Lansing Muslim community with national networks of

Islamic movements. Shaikh Omar used to travel to other states either to represent Lansing Muslims or to assist with events of national-level organizations such as the Islamic Society in North America (ISNA).

When I started my research, Shaikh Omar was already too old to take part in the administration of the complex daily affairs of the Center, but nevertheless he was still the person whose attendance could indicate the level of importance of a given public event. He would come to the mosque venues only for Friday prayers, fundraising banquets, the two Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha feast prayers, or certain private parties. Mosque committees always followed the news about his health condition, especially each time he did not appear for an important gathering. Beyond important gatherings, he would spend most of his time taking rest in his duplex apartment unit situated two and a half miles south of the mosque that he used to take care of. To get from one place to another, Shaikh Omar relied on his faithful son, Khaled, who would drive him everywhere. A couple of my interview appointments with him were also cancelled due to his illness.

Omar was born in Palestine in the early 1930s. At the age of 15 he was sent to Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world. He graduated from Al-Azhar after nine years of studying Sharia, teaching skills, and Arabic literature. Within this period, he once went back to Palestine; he found out that his home had been destroyed, and subsequently he migrated with his family to Jordan as a refugee. After settling for a while in the Jordanian city of Amman, he decided to return to Cairo to continue his studies for a master's degree at Al-Azhar University. The dean of the Syari'a College of the university was a relative of Omar's family. This man helped Omar by letting him stay in his house for a while until he was able to find his own accommodations.

Omar finally finished a master's degree in Shari'a and Arabic language in 1955. After a few years working in the city, Omar went back to Amman, the capital of Jordan. In Amman, he was first appointed as a teacher of Arabic literature for middle and high schools. Later, he was appointed to hold a variety of positions, including a school supervisor in the province of Karak, then chief supervisor in the same province. He then moved back to Amman to become a superintendent in a major district of the capital city, and superintendent in a city in the province of Balqa. During his employment in the Jordanian ministry of education, he received additional training, including taking an English language course in England for a couple of months, and international training for higher educators in the Arab world, in Beirut, Lebanon. In general, Omar had spent about 17 years serving a variety of positions in the Jordanian Ministry of Education before his journey to the United States. By the time of his travel to the US, he was a 39-year-old man with six children, dating from his marriage in Amman in 1959.

Then in 1972 Omar went to the United States, leaving his country and family with a special task to explore and study the educational system of America, after which he was supposed to go back and submit report papers. However, after some explorations that included visits to the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, he said he got the feeling that he needed to stay longer in order to develop his own educational career. He extended his stay in the US and decided to enroll at Michigan State University in 1973 for an additional graduate degree.

His first adviser at MSU was Dr. Archibald Shaw, a professor of administration and higher education in the college of education. He completed all required classes and continued to prepare his research for a Ph.D. degree. Unfortunately, Dr. Shaw became ill when Omar was still trying to complete his doctoral candidacy. After nine months struggling with cancer, Dr. Shaw died in 1978. Shocked by Dr. Shaw's death, Omar still tried to continue his studies under the supervision of

another professor of the college, Dr. Philip Cusick. However, Omar's activities in the nascent Islamic Center were on the rise. For several more years, Omar kept extending his stay despite the protests of his family and his Jordanian office. Finally, he ended his contract with the Jordanian government in 1986. He then applied for American citizenship, which he was granted in 1989 under the category of religious scholar. In the following year his wife and children joined him.

As Omar acknowledged himself, he was just one among many without whom the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing would not be as established as it is today. The most important entity in this context was the local branch of Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Islamic movement that had existed in the city before Omar's arrival. The activities of MSA members in the campus had created a circumstance of awareness by which Islamic phenomena were becoming familiar among the people on campus. MSA stories in MSU are interesting in and of themselves, but Omar's next life chapter pertaining to the Islamic Center establishment deserves to first be continued.

In terms of memorable personalities, Omar always recalled the roles of several persons without whom we may not have seen the Islamic Center of East Lansing as it is today. Among them was Dr. Mohamed Abouelseoud, an Egyptian professor who taught science in the college of engineering. Abu Su'ud was instrumental in the early development of the Center, as he provided the young men with information and guidance toward finding the items on sale for the future construction of the Center. Another Muslim professor most remembered by Omar was Muhammad Ashraf Dayyumi, an Egyptian professor of science, whose Friday sermons often touched upon political affairs, mainly with regard to the then-current situations in the Middle East. Lastly, for Omar and others who attended the first Friday prayer to celebrate the opening of the mosque in 1979, the most remembered figure was Salah al-Ayyubi, an older Lebanese man who was appointed to deliver the

sermons. Salah's emotional tone while delivering the sermon made Omar himself and many of the congregants burst into tears.³²

Omar also remembered Dr. August Benson, Foreign Student Advisor at the International Center. Omar said he felt lucky since Dr. Benson was very friendly to foreign students. Dr. Benson gave the MSA permission to use one of large rooms in the International Center for Friday prayers for a few years until the mosque was built and ready in 1979. Omar could not forget that Dr. Benson had actually tried to arrange the attendance of Michigan's state governor and the MSU president at the opening ceremony of the mosque. Unfortunately, their attendance was cancelled due to increasing political tension following the news about the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979.³³

Other fellow activists whom Omar also could not forget were those who had worked in the organization of the students' Islamic activities at MSU during a time before the mosque was built. The first of them was Abdurrazzaq Bashier, a graduate student from the Republic of Sudan. Abdurrazzaq was Omar's collaborator for the program of weekend lectures that took place in the Spartan Village apartment units, as the room in the International Center was used only for Friday prayers. When the mosque was being built, the Islamic student activities were moved to a house located next to the construction site. Then Omar mentioned two students, Daniel Masters and Mar'ie al-Amry, who used to live in a house next to the mosque since its initial construction, and therefore watched the building grow brick by brick. Daniel Masters now lives in Kuwait following his marriage with a woman from that country, while Mar'ie al-Amry returned to his country of origin, Saudi Arabia.

³² Two separate interviews with Prof. Khalil and Shaikh Omar Soubani confirmed this incident.

³³ August Benson's earned his Ph.D. degree in 1969 from MSU with a dissertation in which he studied the function of the foreign student advisor as perceived by knowledgeable MSU faculty members who had foreign students in their classes. This dissertation topic led Benson to a position as foreign student advisor in the Office of International Studies and Programs at MSU, in 1964. Benson died in 2011 ("Remembering August 'Jerry' Benson," 2011).

Construction projects

A construction project is best described by a person who was directly involved in the process from the time of group discussions, to the growth of concrete walls, brick by brick: Daniel Masters. I got in contact with him via Facebook. Daniel Masters was one of the students who lived in the Muslim House, a house next to the site where the mosque was being built. I saw a comment that he had posted in 2014 on the Facebook page of the Islamic Center, as follows:

“East Lansing has a special place in my heart. It was where God guided me to Islam back in 1976. At the time, the Islamic Center was only a dream in the minds and hearts of our small Muslim community. I was fortunate to witness the fulfillment of that dream from the purchase of the land to the re-zoning of the land, to the planning and donation phase, to the actual construction of the mosque. I was living in the house next door and watched the Center go up brick by brick (and have tons of pictures to prove it!) It was truly a groundbreaking event for Muslims in America. I feel so blessed to have been a small part of that monumental project. For those who came and found it there, pray for the brothers and sisters who worked so hard to make it a reality and thank Allah for making their dreams come true.” (July 19, 2014)



Figure 2. Photograph: Daniel Masters (left) on the construction ground. Facebook, ICEL, August 21, 2014

Although this Facebook comment was posted in 2014, I became aware that Daniel was one of the early witnesses only after Shaikh Omar mentioned his name in one of our interviews two years later. So, I had an uncertain feeling when sending him an introductory message with a request to be

a Facebook friend. But surprisingly, he replied enthusiastically and described his story in detail regarding the mosque construction, as if he had known me before through other connections in the city of Lansing. As Daniel recalled, he said he was not there when the MSA was first established. But he did remember how the Islamic Center got started. He remembered discussions about the need for a center as soon as he embraced Islam in May 1976. At the time, the Friday Prayer was usually held in a room on the ground floor of the International Center. Daniel noted that the room was quite cramped and the congregation kept growing. As far as the five daily prayers were concerned, the only congregation on campus was a group of Muslim students in Owen Hall, a dormitory around two blocks to the East. They prayed in a study hall room on one of the floors of the building.

Daniel described that when talks of finding a more permanent place for prayers were brought up, the people were divided into two opposing points of view. One group suggested a conservative proposal, which was to rent a building that they would convert for the intended purpose. The other proposal, which was supported mainly by younger students from the Gulf states, wanted to purchase a piece of land on which they would build a proper mosque. The reasoning behind the conservative proposal came from a pessimistic view of the future. According to this reasoning, the community of students, who were mostly foreigners, one day would go back home to their respective countries and the mosque would be abandoned. So, the idea of having a permanent building for Islamic prayers would seem a bit naïve and too ambitious. But the younger students thought about the future worship place more optimistically. They wanted to have a proper mosque, a building that was to be built permanently, and dedicated especially for prayers. To support their proposal, they even pledged that they would be willing to collect money for the project from generous donators from their countries in the Middle East.

Putting their differences aside, both sides agreed that they needed money to realize the idea upon which they would agree. So, they started intensive donation collections among the Muslims then residing in the city and began to pursue financial resources through parents' connections in the countries of the students' origins, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates. At this point, Daniel's story seemed to emphasize the instrumental roles of the younger students in the establishment of the Islamic Center since they tended to take optimistic attitudes to deal with almost all challenges. "I don't like to get into differences, but it was the young students who were instrumental in the establishment of the Islamic Center," Daniel remembered in an online chat with me. "Some others were skeptical at first and extremely cautious," he added. According to him, most of the donations for the Center came from generous donors from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Very little of these countries' governments money was involved. He said he actually preferred it that way. He did not want any donations with conditions, in order to make it an independent center.

To complement Daniel's story, there is a fragment of Shaikh Omar's story that describes how the early fundraising effort included unforgettable moments. Omar remembered that two sibling sisters were in charge of keeping records of money collection: Nafis Khan, the general secretary of MSA, and Anis Khan, its financial secretary. Both were the daughters of Dr. Muhammad Khan, a local resident. After one year of fundraising, they were happy to report that about \$11,000 had been collected from all sources. With that amount of money in hand, their initial decision was to find a large room to rent. But when such place was found, they had difficulties, as they had to move items away from the rooms before prayers could take place, and afterward put those items back when the prayers finished. Meanwhile, good news came from those who were doing the fundraising from abroad. One of the students, Muhammad Fe'l, was blessed to have received a \$50,000 check donated by a Saudi Arabian businessman named Salih Kamil. Never expecting to receive a donation

that large, the students shouted “*Allahu Akbar*” (God the Greatest) when they heard the information during a routine announcement after one particular Friday prayer.

So, the new community decided to upgrade the plan of buying a building instead of renting one. At that time, there were a few properties on sale on South Harrison Road on the western side of the MSU campus. Supporters were interested in acquiring a place in this area because the section of the road was already known as Church Row due to the presence of three churches directly across the western side of the MSU campus. These supporters were looking at a piece of land with a house on it next to a Baptist Church, which was situated at 920 South Harrison Road, East Lansing. Here, the difference between the old and the young members actually again arose. Shaikh Omar told me that some of the elders, including Dr. Muhammad Khan, the father of Anis and Nafis Khan, advised the students to buy a building located one block to the north from the location of the young group’s preferred location. He suggested buying the building in order to open up the first floor as a place of worship and to rent out rooms on the second floor to fund eventual maintenance costs. The students did not like the building because it was designed for commercial apartments. They wanted to have one specially dedicated for a mosque, a spacious place where more people would come to pray and socialize. They were becoming more optimistic now because the fundraising had reached in excess of \$100,000. Finally, they were able to purchase the property next to the Baptist Church, which consisted of a piece of land and a small house on it at 920 S. Harrison Rd., for around \$35,000.

According to Daniel, Omar Soubani started out in the conservative camp, but very soon became enthusiastic about building the Center. Once he jumped across the line to support the youngsters, Omar definitely became a major guiding force. He was able to convince the doubtful members on board to realize the dream. One of the moments of this burgeoning enthusiasm happened after they purchased the small house on 920 South Harrison Road; many of them immediately wanted to start praying the five prayers in this small residence. There were still some people who told them that before holding worship sessions in the house, they might need to wait for

some time to obtain a rezoning permit to build a non-residential building on the site. Until the permit could be issued, they were not supposed to use the house as a place of worship. But with the excitement already having spread, and, now believing that they owned the land, they believed that they could establish regular prayer there. So, they began praying in the house despite the fear that prayer activities in the house could jeopardize their attempt to receive a permit from the city. That is, prayer activities could bring unnecessary attention to the fact that an Islamic center was going to be built. Some pessimistic members warned that if there were some outsiders who would not like to see an Islamic site in the city, such persons could arise to oppose the building of the Islamic center. That might happen because there had to be a hearing before a zoning change could be made. These anxious Muslims wished that no one would come to the hearing sessions just to challenge the application.

Daniel recalled the feeling of rejoicing among the students when all fears of opposition to the Center eventually came to naught. When the hearing took place, only two people from the community stood up to speak. One was a history professor at MSU of a Lebanese Christian background who enthusiastically welcomed the Islamic Center as a great cultural asset to the community. The second was the neighbor who lived directly behind the property who very politely asked that people dim their lights as they drove into the back part of the parking lot. Therefore, the permit was smoothly granted.

According to Shaikh Omar, the plans for the building were drawn up by a Muslim architect, Mokhtar Khalil, from Chicago. He had to change the construction's designs a few times to adjust the future building details with several requirements and in line with the community's financial prospects. The first design, standard building with a basement for a kitchen and two apartment rooms, would cost around \$900,000. After three years of fundraising they did not have that much

money available and had actually already exhausted much of their financial resources. So, the design had to be adjusted to a lower construction cost while maintaining the restraints of noise, traffic and light exposure, as demanded by neighbors. In one point the architect had to sketch a design to respond to some students who were wondering about creating a type of movable building. These students were also afraid about the future of the mosque, namely, that they thought it might be better if they built a mosque that could be moved to another location. Regarding this idea, the architect's estimation of the cost of constructing this movable type showed a lower price, but was still unaffordable. The architect then redesigned the first plan toward even a lower cost. The final plan did not include a basement, so the main prayer hall, a multipurpose room for social activities, a library, an office, a kitchen, bathrooms, and a living quarters for a manager or imam would be built on the same floor. The hearing at the city office also approved the final plan, thanks to the efforts made by an attorney, the architect and the majority of the neighbors.

The students had used the small house for prayers for about a year when they had to leave to allow for demolition and subsequent mosque construction. Indeed, they had prepared for the transition to keep their religious activities running while the construction was ongoing. While the mosque was still being planned, they had decided to buy another house at 908 S. Harrison Rd., which is next to the first property. Omar remembered that it was Dr. Mohamed Abouelseoud who led them to buy the house, which was finally procured for around \$50,000. After remodeling that added expenses approaching \$79,000, the youths named the second building "Muslim House". So, just before the construction activities began, the students had moved their activities to the Muslim House and continued their prayers and weekend studies there.

In their plan, the Muslim House would also become a future source of income for the Center. The house would be rented out to Muslim students and the income would go toward the upkeep of the upcoming center. Despite being used by other students for daily prayers, the actual tenants of

the Muslim House were Daniel Masters and Mar'ie al-Amry, both of whom were leading MSA members. That is how these two young men had the opportunity to closely watch the construction going up brick by brick. As Daniel remembered it, the building started in the fall of 1978 and most of the construction took place during the winter. Meanwhile, Friday prayers were still using the room in the International Center because the Muslim House's capacity was too small to accommodate all congregants that now numbered more than one hundred.

When the first phase of the construction was completed in the fall of 1979, the project's committee had spent around \$750,000, which included land purchase, administrative preparations and construction. The opening of the mosque was planned to be a grand ceremony on October 16. Shaikh Omar said that Dr. Benson of the International Office had actually prepared to help by inviting the MSU president, the mayors of Lansing and East Lansing, and even the Governor of Michigan. The courage to celebrate the opening was high because the success of building a mosque by a community of students was regarded as a great achievement, particularly at a time when Islamic phenomena in America was barely visible. Unfortunately, the friendly political situation changed unfavorably toward Muslims immediately after the siege of the US embassy in Tehran broke out following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.



Figure 3. Photograph: The main building of the Islamic Center of East Lansing has been the same since its opening in 1979. Facebook, ICEL, August 21, 2014.

The official opening was finally held with a simple ceremony with the attendance of Dr. Benson as the honorary guest. In the first Friday prayer following the opening, out of respect the congregants appointed an older member of the clergy, a Lebanese man named Salah al-Ayyubi, to deliver the sermon. Salah was known as a person who often officiated marriages among local Muslims, and he had been living in Lansing long before Omar had come to the city. In the first sermon, Salah delivered an emotional tone while praising the sacrifices of the young people, bringing many of the congregants to tears. Omar also happened to be a member of the mosque's board of trustees.

Finished with the construction of the first building, the students continued working to provide supporting facilities. In 1981 they purchased another house at 933 Daisy Lane, which also used to belong to the Baptist Church, which was the right-side neighbor of the new mosque, for the price of \$35,000. After spending another \$18,000 for remodeling work, the new owners named it Muslima House, as it was rented to the Muslim sisters. In 1986, the Baptist Church building itself was sold to the Muslim community for around \$80,000. The building was renamed Dar as-Salam, and it was mostly used to accommodate the Sunday School and Farouq School, an education program with

mixed curriculum sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government. In 1992 the community implemented a \$61,000 remodeling project to convert the manager's apartment into meeting rooms and a women's bathroom. The original women's bathroom on the east side of the center was converted into a conference room. In 1996, the community purchased the house at 921 Daisy Lane for \$106,500 and used it for the Greater Lansing Islamic School (GLIS), a full-time private school then in its first two years. This home is currently dedicated to house the imam and his family.

Before the 911 tragedy, donations from the Middle East flowed into the community through a variety of fundraising programs. Omar himself made three trips especially intended for this fundraising task to four countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. In one of his travels to Saudi Arabia a fellow senior member, Yusuf Sulayman, joined him. After his 2000 fundraising travel to Saudi Arabia, Omar stopped traveling abroad due to his health condition. The 911 tragedy generated a negative impact on the Center's development, since many pledges by Arab donors could not be realized or were greatly reduced. The fundraising programs now relied mostly on the donors within the US.

The largest proportion of the monetary outlays for construction expenses were spent when the Center expanded towards the building of GLIS's second floor and the women's prayer room. The school building now included a gymnasium, two stories that included twelve classrooms and two offices, and a full-size basement prepared for future underground expansion. Omar said that the Center had spent around five million dollars over the previous fifteen years, which included \$600,000 for the construction of the women's prayer room, which was completed in 2012. He estimated that the project in the basement would need at least another \$900,000 to make the space legally usable. That was a plan that had been waiting to be realized.

The construction of the women's prayer room had something to do with the increase in women's attendance at certain times. The Islamic Hijri calendar, abbreviated AH (for After Hijra), was among the lunar version, which moved ahead 11 days every year over the Anno Domini (AD) calendar. Ramadan is the month of ritual feasts for Muslims, and the congregation of the East

Lansing mosque would try to come to the mosque with entire families if Ramadan fell on off days such as weekends or holidays. In 2009 the month of Ramadan began on August 21, which was still part of summer vacation, until September 7 (the first Monday of September, Labor Day). This period allowed members of the congregation time to flock the mosque for at least seventeen days, or two weekends. The mosque became crowded every night because approximately one thousand people attended every evening. The stress this caused overwhelmed the workers and volunteers from before sunset occurred at about 8 p.m. when they were preparing meals to break the fast, until midnight, when the night prayers were finished. The need for additional rooms was pressing, because when women came their children would join and create noise the entire evening. The women's prayer room was finally completed three years later, in 2012.

Since the completion of the women's prayer room until I left the community in 2017, there had been no construction expansion. Using the Google Maps' distance measuring tool, I counted the entire area of ICEL site, which turned out to be approximately 90,600 square feet. Of this number, the prayer areas occupied 11,300 square feet, which connected with the school area of 14,000 square feet for a total of 25,300 square feet of main building. Outside of this main building, there are two houses: one for the imam's family and the other, the Muslim House, is rented out commercially. The remaining space is reserved for parking lots and a playground. That was the situation at the time this work was written.



Figure 4. Photograph: Public display of the plan during the expansion project in 2012.

Permits and certifications

The Center has been granted permits and passed certifications from a variety of governmental authorities. A foundational certificate was quite obvious as its letterhead was calligraphic and sealed with a gold color. It was issued by the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth, which reads:

Lansing, Michigan.

This is to certify that **THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF GREATER LANSING** was validly incorporated on December 8, 1980, as a Michigan nonprofit corporation, and said corporation is validly in existence under the laws of this state.

This certificate is issued pursuant to the provisions of 1982 PA 162, as amended, to attest to the fact that the corporation is in good standing in Michigan as of this date and is duly authorized to conduct affairs in Michigan and for no other purpose.

This certificate is in due form, made by me as the proper officer, and is entitled to have full faith and credit given it in every court and office within the United States.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, in the City of Lansing, this 11th day of October 2006. (signature). Director. Bureau of Commercial Services.

It should be noticed that this particular certificate of incorporation was dated October 11, 2006, which was quite close to the issuance of the society's constitution of January 6, 2006. However, the actual date of its incorporation was stated to be December 8, 1980. The government record about the organization seemed to have begun the year after the opening of the mosque, and it might only have been after the submission of the constitution, and probably other complementary paperwork, that the certificate of the institutional incorporation of the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing was finally issued.

The certificates below were taken from the wall openly displayed in the mosque office. Other than the incorporation certificate above, there was also a license of occupancy, two certificates of boiler inspection, a statement of tax-exempt status from the IRS (Internal Revenue Service), an employment equality statement, and so on.

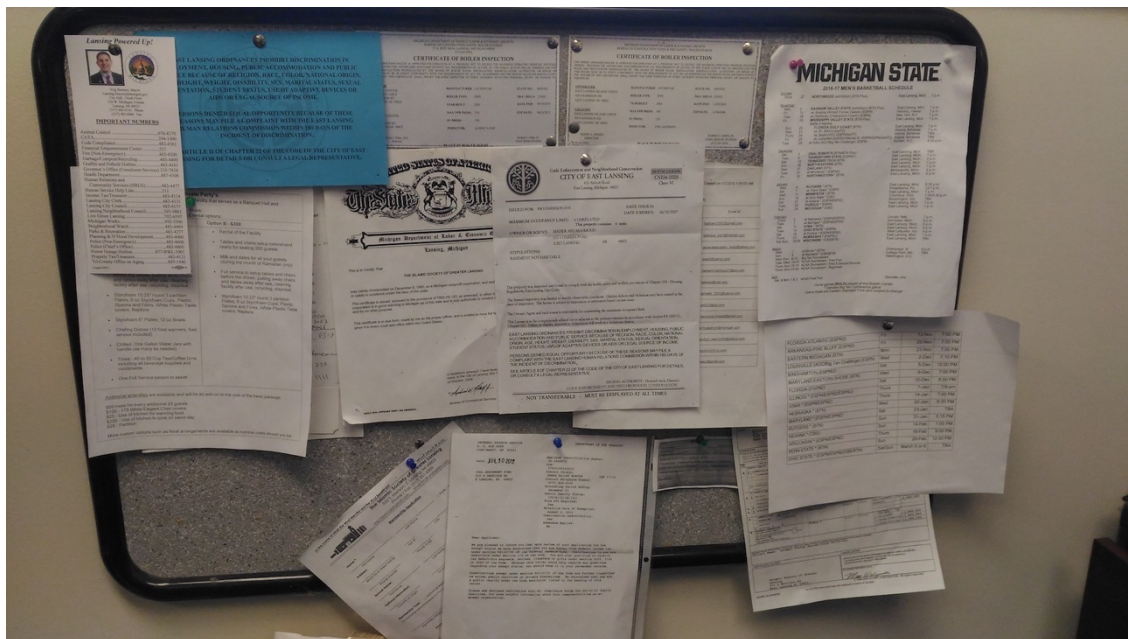


Figure 5. Photograph: Certificates of the organization and the building displayed publicly in the mosque office.

In conclusion, these certificates indicate an important recognition from an existing authority. They were issued by the most powerful political authority: the American government. A previous recognition of the Islamic Center came implicitly from the MSA and ISNA/NAIT because they took part in the foundation and maintenance of the institution from the very beginning. ISNA accepted ISGL as one of its affiliates and recruited at least one of its members, Omar Soubani, to sit as one of the members of the board of trustees of the national body. The ISNA magazine, *Islamic Horizons*, was routinely sent to the ISGL office, which indicates that the largest Islamic place of worship in the city is the audience listening to the messages of ISNA.

NOI and Black Muslims in Lansing

The development of the Islamic center in East Lansing took place concurrently with the dynamics happening among the community of Nation of Islam in the area. The big difference between them was in the makeup of their pioneers. Whereas the initiation of the Islamic Center of East Lansing was pioneered by MSU students, this particular mosque was truly a grassroots movement that resulted from the great transformation within the NOI in 1975.



Figure 6. Photograph: Wali Mahmoud Mosque frontside.



Figure 7. Photograph: Wali Mahmoud Mosque backside.

Masjid Wali Mahmoud used to be the Nation of Islam's Temple No. 16 of NOI. This name was a variation of "Masjid Wali Muhammad", which was previously Temple No. 1, now located on Linwood Street in Detroit.³⁴ The names "Mahmoud" and "Muhammad" had been popular among the black Muslim movements in America even before NOI's time. The father of Elijah Muhammad, the greatest leader of NOI, was renamed "Wali" for his real name, William Poole.³⁵ "Wali" was also a short form of Wallace in Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, the founder and first leader of NOI (Beynon, 1938). Elijah named his son (who would later replace him) Wallace Muhammad, to honor the mentor. Finally, one of his nephews was also named Wali Muhammad.³⁶ Among the languages of Muslim countries, "wali" is similarly meant for noble attributes like sponsor, close associate, patron, guardian, a man close to God, holy man, or saint. The word "Mahmoud" has a similar meaning to "Muhammad," "Ahmad," "Hammad," or "Mohamut(d)," the praised one.

The establishment of Masjid Wali Mahmoud (Temple No. 16) had something to do with the activism of Malcolm X's family. He, with his original name Malcolm Little, came to Lansing in 1929 as the four-year old son in the family of Earl Little, a field organizer of a black movement under Marcus Garvey, the head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). One year later, in Detroit, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, a South Asian peddler, began his mission and founded the NOI, whose complete name actually was *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America*. NOI's Temple No. 1 was the first to be established, albeit in different place from the current location.³⁷ The spread of NOI finally came to Malcolm Little in 1948 through his brothers. Malcolm at that time

³⁴ Masjid Wali Muhammad information can be seen on its Facebook site: www.facebook.com/historicmwm/ accessed on April 6, 2018.

³⁵ See: <https://www.noi.org/hon-elijah-muhammad/> accessed on April 6, 2018.

³⁶ This younger Wali Muhammad was a popular NOI journalist and radio host who died in Chicago in 2015. See: http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/National_News_2/article_102515.shtml accessed on April 6, 2018.

³⁷ The first location of Masjid Wali Muhammad was on Hasting Road, then it moved to Linwood Street in 1954. See the UMICH's website regarding Building Islam in Detroit: <http://biid.lsa.umich.edu/2011/06/masjid-wali-muhammad/> accessed on April 6, 2018.

was serving time in prison the state of Massachusetts for a variety of petty crimes. After going through a time of persuasion, Malcolm repented, joining NOI when he was released from jail in 1952 (French, 1994). Soon he simultaneously became a famous NOI speaker and a notorious public figure. Next, in 1955, Temple No. 16 in Lansing, Michigan, was founded; its ministry was mostly in the hands of Malcolm's brother, Philbert X, a.k.a. Abdul Aziz Omar. Malcolm was never a minister for Lansing Temple but visited it many times. He mostly lived in New York to lead Temple No. 7 in Harlem, which is now known as Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. When Malcolm was shot to death in 1965 in New York, Philbert was working Temple No.1 in Detroit, whereas the Lansing Temple was not in operation. Philbert finally moved back to lead the Lansing temple in 1969 when it acquired a new location at 235 Lahoma Street, a former corner store one mile from his home in the western neighborhood in the city's downtown. Philbert passed away in 1993.³⁸

The new location of Lansing Temple underwent a new development following the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975. Warith or "Wallace" Deen Muhammad, one of Elijah's sons who was appointed as the new leader of NOI, launched a series of fundamental reformation to his father's theological legacy, more in alignment with the doctrines of mainstream Sunni Islam, as predominately embraced in the Muslim world. Subsequently, the beliefs in W. D. Fard as God and Elijah Muhammad as His Messenger were abolished. Worship was to be observed as instructed by the Islamic texts, especially of the Sunni school, which required removal of chairs in the temples and the placement of carpets and *mihrab* directed toward the Ka'ba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. All temples were to be renamed mosque or *masjid*. Finally, Warith Deen Muhammad dissolved the NOI and

³⁸ Among the brothers, Wilfred X (who died in 1998) seemed to be the person who played the major role in the foundation of Temple No. 16 in Lansing. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/21/us/wilfred-little-78-brother-of-malcolm-x.html>, accessed on November 6, 2016.

gave it a new name, the World Community of Muslims in the West.³⁹ Most temples complied with W. D. Muhammad's instructions. Quite a few others, however, balked, and instead followed Louis Farrakhan, a former NOI minister, when in 1977 he revived the Elijah Muhammad's creed.⁴⁰ The Temple in Lansing was among those choosing to follow W. D. Muhammad's reformation in terms of embracing the Sunni Islam, but it stopped short in that regard, as it was then not listed in the Mosque Cares network. This meant that many mosques chose to operate independently and maintained their communications as neutral to either the Mosque Cares or the Louis Farrakhan's NOI.

The mosque building's size was about the same as the houses in the area, as it was 25 feet wide and 65 feet long and was built on a plot sized around 100 by 70 feet square. What might have set it apart was the full rectangle shape of the front part of the two-story building, minus a porch. The front door was always closed, was unpainted, had no light above it, and was not doubled by a storm door, something that could be seen on every other house in the neighborhood. With such a dull front, the main entry was accessed from the back door through a deck, painted white and higher than ground level. Without being able to see the sign with the name of the building, a sign sometimes placed on at ground level, a passerby might not know that the building was a mosque.

Being unattractive and lacking newsworthy events, this mosque tended to be apart from public attention and hence forgotten. I actually missed the location in my first attempts to find this mosque. When I thought I found the building—as I saw a board laid on the ground against the wall that read “Masjid Wali Mahmoud”—I still felt doubtful because the door was locked, there was no bell button to press, and no one responded to my knocks on the door. It was only after a friend

³⁹ The new organization changed its names a few times, and now it is known as The Mosque Cares, led by his son, W. Deen Muhammad II. See: <http://www.themosquecares.com> accessed on April 6, 2018.

⁴⁰ This organization was centered in Mosque Maryam, Chicago. See the website: www.noi.org accessed on April 6, 2018.

drove me to the place later on a Saturday, at noon, that I could finally enter and meet many people who had gathered for a lunch party. This mosque had activity schedules that fell mostly at noon on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Beyond those particular times, no one was there and the door was locked.

A headline published by Lansing State Journal (LSJ) on Sunday, April 15, 2012 (M. Miller, 2012), reported that the Muslim community was evolving. The mosque was now attended not only by African American Muslims, but also African immigrants. The LSJ's front page of the Sunday edition cited above continued to another page and a half in the back section. The reporter, Mathew Miller, described the story with details, including a time line provided in a side column. The newspaper's headquarters was located just a mile away in the downtown area, a proximity which created in my mind the impression that the mosque had been known for so long, and the journalist published the story just to remind the public of its continuing existence and all of its interesting aspects. His main respondents represented all of those of concern, such as Imam Anthony Weatherspoon, a retired forest specialist who came during the mid-1980s and is the current leader of the mosque. Or Muhammad Qawwee, a retired correctional officer who still frequents(?) the mosque, ever since his time as an MSU student in 1967. Both were former members of NOI, so they were among the worthiest to talk with about the mosque's history. The other respondents were Kareemah Hasan, a Lansing resident, and Elam Muhammad, who no longer lived in this city but willing to come to share with the LSJ correspondent stories of their life-changing memories of NOI and its transformation into Sunni Islamic path. And finally, the interviews were taken with the likely future activists of the mosque, the immigrants. One of them was among its youth, Marwa Adawe, a former Somali refugee who had graduated from MSU, and is now teaching Islamic studies to children on Saturdays in the mosque. She was among those who began attending prayers a few years

ago without necessarily being aware of the mosque's history. Finally, it was Mohamud Sheikh, an elder of the Somali community, to whom the leadership of the mosque would count on for his help in maintaining rituals and planning future events.

I have my last memory with the mosque community from when I spent the summer months in 2016 in an apartment located two blocks from the mosque. I had visited the mosque in previous years for Friday prayers, but I missed the schedule many times. So, living near the site provided me with a fruitful experience for my observation. Between our relaxed talks after Friday prayers, I talked with Imam Anthony Weatherspoon and Muhammad Qawwee about the history of the mosque. Muhammad Qawwee, the most knowledgeable person regarding that historical matter, still kept the particular edition in the mosque cabinet. He confirmed the information that had been reported in the newspapers.

Diversity and Tensions amongst Lansing Muslims

The student pioneers of the East Lansing mosque were not homogenous. In the 1980s, during the rage of the Iraq-Iran wars and power competitions among different political movements in the Middle East and the Arab world, a possibility of losing such a hard-earned mosque was lurking. That is because the students came from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, and some of the groups were not happy with the amount of or type of spending for the establishment of a mosque. A special fear came from the student activists of Arab nationalism; their actions and aspirations were mostly oriented toward the political struggle in their respective countries. So, they did not agree to the idea of a permanent place, such as a mosque, that would make it easier for Muslims to settle in America rather than return to their home countries. According to Omar, the students who held this point of view were known as the Ba'thi, Nassirist, Qaumi or leftist Communist students. They had

a tendency to trigger violent debates which often misused religious argumentations to validate their interests. Those politicized students also had spread false rumors, alleging the mosque activists corrupted the donations received from abroad. Such a danger led Omar Soubani and his fellows to secure the mosque by formalizing the ownership of the Islamic Center's property to the trusteeship of the NAIT (North American Islamic Trust), an autonomous body of the ISNA. So, the pro-mosque activists did not want the ownership to be put into their hands to secure the very existence of the Islamic Center's properties from any future misuse of the mosque. By associating the ownership of the institution and the property to the trusteeship of ISNA and NAIT, they had created the idea that there was nothing of worth in the Center to control.

The fear of having this mosque occupied by an opposing group also led the Islamic Center's organizers to set up a restricted(?) membership recruitment. During the annual convention, a conspiracy could have been formed in order to seize the leadership body by means of a democratic election. So, to make sure that the Islamic Center's members consisted of students having the same aspirations, a new membership application required two signatures of two existing members. That procedure remains in place in the Islamic Center of East Lansing to the present.

After all, the development of the Islamic Center was progressing steadily despite the political turmoil happening in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world. While a bitter war was raging between Iraq and Iran, the Islamic Center was expanding through the purchase, in 1986, of the Baptist Church building directly across from the front of the mosque. The building was used for Sunday School for almost ten years before being razed and replaced by a parking lot. In 1992, at the same time of the Bosnian War and the US invasion in Iraq, the community renovated the Center's building to convert the manager's apartment into meeting rooms and a women's bathroom. It also converted the original women's bathroom on the east side of the Center into a conference room. In

1996, the community purchased a house behind the mosque and used it for GLIS (Greater Lansing Islamic School) for two years. After the erection of a two-story building especially assigned for GLIS, this home was now dedicated to house the imam and his family. So, the congregation was aware of the events in the Middle East, but the impact was too slight to be felt by the community of the East Lansing mosque. That is, those events did not impact the peaceful time at the East Lansing mosque, as of its members from that time did not remember anything special, except for continuing construction to accommodate an expanding community.



Figure 8. Photograph: Lansing Muslims demonstrate following the Israeli declaration of Jerusalem as its capital in 1980. (ICEL office album)

It was very rare for Lansing Muslims to launch a public demonstration for a Middle Eastern cause. The only public action regarding a Middle Eastern issue was one centering on the Palestinian cause. In a photo album dated “the 29th of June 1980” on its inner cover, I found the photos shown above. I inquired about speaking with those who might have been members of the community in that year. The only answer I received came from Hassan Khalil, who had not attended the protest and who responded to me by using the Google website. In July 1980, the Israeli government declared

Jerusalem as its capital, which spurred protests around the world, including the Muslims of Lansing mosque.

In relation to Wali Mahmoud Mosque in downtown Lansing, tension could be felt between the indigenous (Black) and immigrant Muslims due to differences of socioeconomic level. The area of western downtown, where the mosque was located, was near abandoned former complexes for automobile assembly, by then razed to the ground, leaving residents unemployed and poorer when compared to those living in the eastern part of the city. Still, the people of Wali Mahmoud Mosque, under the direction of Imam Edward Witherspoon, persevered. He often said that they needed to keep the mosque open in spite of the challenges, by commenting, “We don’t know who would come to the door.” Indeed, when some Somali families could no longer afford the East Lansing Center’s Sunday School and Darul Qur’an that were no longer free after 2010, they began to gather their children at the Wali Mahmoud Mosque on Saturdays and Sundays. They held their own Sunday School and Qur’anic studies. In addition to the spillover of students, Wali Mahmoud mosque also received other types of goods, such as the older carpets that were sent from the East Lansing Islamic Center when new ones were installed there.

The setup of the interior at the Wali Mahmoud Mosque was indeed different. It was as typical as what was said by Jamillah Karim, an African American Muslim who was raised in a former NOI family, and who wrote about the differences challenging a total integration between immigrant and African American Muslims. In one of her articles, she highlighted the survival success of former NOI members, who then became the Warith Deen Muhammad (WDM) community: “... because not only did it resist early Sunni immigrant leadership, but in presenting Islam, it privileged American culture over immigrant Islamic culture” (J. Karim, 2005). An example of how they privileged American culture was their donning of bow ties and having shaved faces, different from those who

wore Arab clothes and beards. In terms of gender segregation, she also pointed how in the mosques of the WDM communities, men and women sat separately, but there was no curtain separating the two groups. She also identified a discriminatory gesture that occurred when immigrant ladies in a mosque avoided a conversation with an African American newcomer (J. A. Karim, 2006). This was contrasted by what Karim said, that the Wali Mahmoud Mosque indeed accommodated men and women in the same room, in which the two sexes were seated separately without any curtain between them. So, the arrangement was Islamic and American at the same time.