



Our Origin Story. Where Did We Come From?

Key Questions: Why is building a mosque controversial?

Background: Islam is the second largest religion in the world, only after Christianity. It is also the [fastest growing religion in the world](#), and according to the World Population Review, in 2020, there were over two billion people who practiced and lived by its teachings. In the United States (U.S.), approximately 1.1% of the population, (3.45 million) is Muslim. While the number is still small compared to those who are Christians, Islam has a long history in this country with the oldest mosque in the U.S. erected in Ross, North Dakota by Syrian and Lebanese pioneers [back in 1929](#). But following the 9/11 attacks, the War on Terror,

and more recently, the Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric from the White House and the Muslim travel ban, Islamophobic sentiments have grown and Muslim-Americans are major targets of hate crime and violence.

Interestingly, building mosques in the U.S. has [historically been controversial](#). In 2000, Congress sought to help churches and other religious institutions from irritating zoning requirements with the passage of the [Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act](#). This federal law banned religious organizations from being discriminated against when it came to what they used their land for and in recent years, it has become the only “[legal tool](#)” available to Muslims against land-use discrimination. Unfortunately, despite this law, government officials often disregard the protections under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, and [deny permits](#) for mosques building anyways.

Case Study: Approximately 2% of Tennessee's population is Muslim and a vibrant community arose in [Chattanooga](#). Mosque President Bassam Issa envisioned an Islamic center in 2007. That same year, the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga embarked on a campaign to build a mosque to accommodate the growing community there. This process was met without controversy.

Before building could take place, the proposed center needed to raise money, which took around three years. In 2011, the [construction](#) began. The center was built gradually, quickly becoming a place for the community, with a religious school and multipurpose room, in addition to the mosque. Hundreds attended the Ramadan celebrations. And continually, almost 200 people attended the [Friday prayer services](#) leading up to the mosque's opening in [August 2012](#).

The Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga was welcomed openly, especially with relations created in the area. When the Islamic Society first opened its mosque, around [150 members from local churches joined in the opening celebrations](#). Regularly, the mosque serves around [1,000 to 1,200 people](#) who come from all over the world. [Bassam Issa, a former member of the board of directors](#), and current president of the mosque, credits the mosque's success and lack of controversy to its [community support, location, and openness](#) between the development efforts and community members. He stated that the community had always been “[tolerant](#)” and the center organizers were always “[up front from Day One](#)” about their plans for the Islamic center and mosque. Regarding the location of the mosque, it is placed in between two churches, where it holds strong relations. Issa believes that all three contributed to the mosque's success.

Questions to Think About

- Who were the stakeholders and what tactics did the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga use to grow support for building a mosque?
- How did the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga interact with elected officials and other decision makers in getting the mosque built?
- Why did the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga succeed in getting a mosque built, when other campaigns in Tennessee failed?