



# “Have you looked into my heart?”

Daisy Khan has been hailed as a healer, a link between moderate Islam and the West, and a force for equality for Muslim women. But since she and her husband proposed building an Islamic center near ground zero, Khan has been under siege: her Americanism questioned, her religious devotion examined, her life threatened. Who is the woman behind the headlines, and why is she refusing to back down?

By SUZANNA ANDREWS

Photographed By  
MARTIN SCHOELLER



the vehemence of the reaction: the death threats, the vicious blog posts, the public statements from opponents darkly questioning the couple's motives, some even suggesting that they are a front for radical Islamists bent on imposing Sharia law on U.S. soil. These days she hesitates before turning on the TV or getting on the Internet. "I mean, like, I'm *scared* to see some of the stuff that's out there," she says.

Since that initial media eruption, the center has become the focus of a blazing national debate over the nature of Islam and its role in America, and Khan has become the project's public face, appearing on CNN, Fox, *This Week with Christiane Amanpour*. Usually dressed casually—pants, jacket, T- or man-tailored shirt, her lustrous brown hair worn loose to her shoulders or clipped into a messy bun—she looks like everyone's friendly neighbor. In a soft voice, her pronunciation melodiously tinged with the English accent she picked up as a child in India, Khan passionately defends the project that has been her long-standing dream. At stake, she says, is nothing less important than the First Amendment right to religious freedom and the bedrock American principle of tolerance. As she said on Amanpour's debate "Holy War: Should Americans Fear Islam?" last October, "I am now fighting for American values." And, she suggested, for America's security as

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# Until last summer, Daisy Khan's life was a study in compromise.

As a teenage **immigrant** from India, she unbraided her hair and donned bell-bottoms to fit in at her Long Island, New York, high school. As a successful corporate **interior architect**, she translated her creative vision into designs acceptable to her more conservative clients. As an **imam's wife**, she counseled young Muslim couples on how to balance Islamic traditions with American customs.

Later, as an advocate for Muslim women's rights, she sought to reconcile feminism with the Koran. And as a self-described bridge builder between Islam and the West, she sought to forge alliances and eradicate fear. But now, at 52, Daisy Khan is shocked—some say naively so—to find herself in the middle of a raging national controversy surrounding a Muslim community center and prayer space that she and her husband, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, want to build two blocks north of where the twin towers fell. Opponents have asked the couple to stop the project or at least move it elsewhere. But on this point, Khan insists there can be no negotiation and no concession. The compromiser is refusing to budge. The question is, why?

It is early November, and a warm afternoon light bathes the conference room of Khan's offices on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Filled with books and photographs, the space is cozy, a sanctuary from what she refers to as "six months of an onslaught" since the couple's plans to turn a shabby, four-story building worth about \$4.5 million into a 15-story, \$100 million complex first exploded in the headlines in May. Nothing, Khan says, prepared her for

well. The center, she said, would be a bulwark against Islamic terrorists, "amplifying the voices of moderate Muslims" and creating "a countermomentum against extremism so that another 9/11 does not ever happen again."

Khan's arguments have won her many supporters, including retired Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens; New York City's mayor, Michael Bloomberg; and numerous 9/11 survivors who have embraced her message of tolerance and healing. Leaning against the wall of her conference room are several large poster boards, crammed with signatures from some 8,000 sympathizers, that have been delivered by representatives of the Quaker Friends Committee on National Legislation. But she has equally passionate detractors—among them the Anti-Defamation League's director, Abraham Foxman; politicians such as Senator John McCain; and scores of 9/11 survivors. As Sally Regenhard, who lost her firefighter son in the attack, told Khan during a recent PBS debate about the center, "It's too painful. It's too soon. I'm still trying to find the remains of my son." Other survivors have been harsher, calling the planned center "an insult" and "intentionally provocative."

**KHAN HAS HANDLED** even her sharpest critics calmly—for the most part. "So far I haven't really seen her rattled," says her good friend Ann Nicholas, who was Khan's boss in the design department at Shearson Lehman. But everyone has a breaking point, and Khan seemed close to reaching hers on Amanpour's show when the Somali-born writer and activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a fierce critic of Islam who is living under police protection, lashed out at Khan for presenting herself as a victim.

"Stop calling me that!" Khan snapped. "*You're* the one running with all the bodyguards." It was a stunning reaction, this swipe at a woman who fled an arranged marriage and her homeland and whose filmmaking partner, Theo van Gogh, was assassinated by a Muslim extremist after the release of their movie about the abuse of women in Islamic societies. But the exchange offered a window into the complexity of Daisy Khan, because today it is not just the Islamic center that polarizes people; it is Khan herself. Admired for her courage, vision and sheer savvy—her ability, as one New York real estate investor notes with



Khan at New York's Islamic Cultural Center, the first structure in that city to be erected as a mosque.

a laugh, “to take a \$4.5 million building, wrap it in the American flag and get the whole country involved”—she is also criticized for her tin ear, for what some perceive as her tendency toward self-promotion and solipsistic righteousness, or as Thane Rosenbaum, director of Fordham University Law School’s Forum on

Law, Culture and Society, puts it, “a one-way track on victimhood, a one-way track on sensitivity, a one-way track on tolerance.”

The criticisms sting. “Have you looked into my heart?” Khan challenged Peter Gadiel, whose son died in the World Trade Center, when he suggested in the “Holy War” debate that Khan’s claim that she was a moderate Muslim might be a lie. “Have you cut my chest and looked into my heart to see what my intention is?” And she’s still smarting over a barb by a Muslim fundamentalist who mocked her on the same program for not wearing a veil.

“He said, ‘And this woman here, she’s not even covering herself,’” she recalls. “That was a big, *big* stab at me. He was saying, ‘You are not even a Muslim.’” Because she does not veil herself except when praying—believing that public veiling for women is a matter of personal choice and not required by the Koran—it’s a remark she took very personally. But for Daisy Khan, a woman who has taken a long and sometimes painful journey to find not only her faith and her mission but also her identity, the fight is a very personal one. Perhaps more so than she realizes. Almost certainly more so than she lets on.

**IF KHAN** triggers so many conflicting emotions in people, it may be because so much of her life has been made up of conflicting parts. Born in 1958, in Srinagar, the capital of the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Khan was raised in a prosperous Muslim family that was both traditional and remarkably progressive. Her grandmothers, she says, wore the burka; her paternal grandparents were wed, in an arranged marriage, when they were nine and 12. Daisy—whose given name is Farhat—was her parents’ third daughter, and her birth, she says, “was not welcomed by everyone.” One of her sisters had already been given away, adopted by Daisy’s maternal grandmother, who wanted to spare her child, Daisy’s mother, the social ostracism that was meted out to women who bore too

many daughters. And Daisy, too, might have been given away—or worse—if it hadn't been for her father's father, Ghulam Hassan Khan.

The extended Khan family all lived in his home. Daisy was born there, so prematurely that her grandmother dressed the house in mourning and left her alone to die. As Khan has told the story, it was her grandfather who, on arriving home from work, demanded to know what was going on, then ran into the baby's room, picked her up and said she was a "gift from God."

A powerful force in Daisy's life, Ghulam Khan was a man with his feet planted in two seemingly opposite worlds. The chief engineer for the state of Kashmir, he was married to a woman with no education. He was an Islamic scholar and a devout Muslim. But he also went to Harvard in the 1920s, where he studied engineering. And he sent all his children to college in the United States, including Daisy's father, Nazir, who graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and became Kashmir's director of transportation. "My grandfather was always regaling us with tales of America," Khan recalls. "He just felt it was one of the greatest nations on earth." In some ways, his was an idealized vision of America—a land whose people were tolerant, charitable, honest and hardworking, with a strong sense of civic responsibility. He raised his family with the belief, says Khan, that "Islam was practiced in the highest way in America."

In those early years, though, Islam did not play much of a role in Daisy's life. The Khans, who revered education, sent her to a Catholic school, Presentation Convent, "because it was the best in Srinagar," she says. It was run by missionary Irish nuns, which meant that although most of the students were Muslims, there was daily chapel service, carols at Christmas and a huge celebration on St. Patrick's

Day. Daisy did well academically and socially. "I was like the Pied Piper: Everyone followed me," she says. The only problem was that she didn't want to take the road that had been mapped out for her. In India in the 1970s, there were only two respectable professions for an educated Kashmiri woman: doctor and teacher. But Daisy wanted to study art. "I started drawing at a very young age," she says. "I used to draw murals on the walls, which almost looked like Picasso. Very abstract stuff." Faced with their daughter's adamancy, her parents decided to send Daisy to live with an uncle on Long Island, where she could finish high school and then study art and design in college.

"Everybody wanted to go to America," she says. "Are you kidding? The guitar, the daisies, the peace signs. I couldn't wait."

Daisy was 16 when she entered Jericho High School as a senior in 1974. "I was the only foreign student. I was the only Muslim student. And it was a mostly Jewish school," she says. "I was a complete misfit." Her clothes were all wrong, her braids were unfashionable—and she changed them both very fast. She dropped the name Farhat and used Daisy, which had been her nickname back in India. "I noticed right away that I had to change my ways. I had to get accepted," she says,

laughing at the memory. "There was *no way* I was going to be a misfit." The Americanization of Daisy had begun. She went on to college at Long Island University's C.W. Post campus and to graduate school at the New York School of Design in Manhattan. She became an interior architect. Her first big project was helping design the Islamic Center of Long Island, now one of the New York area's most prominent mosques, which her uncle, Faroque Khan, cofounded. "My carpet that I designed for that mosque? It's still there," she says proudly, adding that she encouraged the female worshippers to demand that their prayer space be moved "out of the basement and on the same floor as the men."

Khan went on to design restaurants and nightclubs and in 1987 began working for what was then Shearson Lehman, designing their brokerage offices around the country. "She was just always very spot-on in the way that she related with people of all different types," says her former boss, Ann Nicholas. "She had vast communication skills." At Shearson, Khan had an office on the 106th floor of

the World Trade Center, with a breathtaking view; a huge salary; and a 70-hour workweek. She traveled constantly. Today she says, "I learned everything about America. Name any city, and I can tell you what state it's in."

In 1988, what Khan has called a "very, very dark" stage of her life began. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* had just been published, triggering riots and book burnings in several Muslim countries. Death threats were made against the author, and a fatwa calling for his assassination was issued; eventually he went into hiding. "I was moving around in intellectual circles. I loved books. I was very troubled by that. It upset everything internally, everything I believed in," Khan says. "I didn't know how to deal with that. There were no blogs, no chat groups. There were very few Muslims that I engaged with. It was a very lonely existence." None of her colleagues in New York knew she was a Muslim: "If you were working in an office in those days, you didn't discuss politics and religion."

"I just  
thought  
of myself  
as a career girl . . . a  
New Yorker  
and an American.  
Muslim  
was just my own  
spiritual identity."



It was a crisis of identity for which there seemed to be no easy resolution. “I had to make a choice: Am I going to be associated with this thing [Islam] or disassociated? It was easier to just abandon my religion, to leave the whole faith thing. But there was something constantly calling.” Desperate for answers, Khan stopped into the Masjid al-Farah mosque in Tribeca one day during her lunch break. The imam was Feisal Abdul Rauf, 10 years her senior. The Kuwaiti-born son of a prominent Egyptian cleric, Rauf studied physics at Columbia University and then became a Sufi, shedding his father’s conservative Islam for a more spiritual, liberal form of the religion.

In Rauf, Khan found the compromise—a way of practicing Islam that she could embrace, one that fit with her view of the world and of herself. Khan immediately “fell in love with his sermons,” and then with Rauf himself. When they married, in 1996, her friends were stunned. “We were like, ‘Daisy, you’re marrying an imam? Are you nuts?’” recalls Halima Mohidin Tiffany, a retired U.S. Army colonel who has known Khan since the first grade in Kashmir. She laughs. “But you know, love is love.” Rauf—a “gentle, almost ethereal man,” as Khan’s friend, the producer Abigail Disney, puts it—was the introvert to her extrovert. He’d been married twice before, but they seemed a good match. Tiffany was enchanted by the wedding: a Sufi ceremony, with a Taj Mahal-shaped wedding cake and a whirling dervish dressed in white—“this gal,” Tiffany recalls, “who just spun and spun and did not fall. And Daisy got all of us out on the dance floor.”

**KHAN KEPT** her day job—after Shearson she worked for the publishing company Primedia, where she oversaw the design of *Seventeen* magazine’s offices, and then later joined a telecommunications firm—but in her spare time threw herself into the role of cleric’s wife. She organized weddings and funerals. She also counseled Muslims, especially younger ones, on how to balance their lives as Americans with their religious traditions. “I made myself accessible to people who wanted to ask very tough questions about their faith,” she says. “I was the one they came to because I was nonjudgmental and because I had gone through the journey myself.”

In an effort to promote their vision of a more progressive form of Islam, in 1997 the couple established the nonprofit group that is now called the American Society for Muslim Advancement. Today Khan runs ASMA, which has a staff of 10 and an annual budget of about \$1 million. But for many years, while she worked full time, it was her husband’s project. “I had no real leadership role,” she says. “I was just the imam’s wife.” It wasn’t until 9/11 that Khan emerged from her husband’s shadow and became an activist in her own right.

If not for that earlier, Rushdie-related phase of soul searching, Khan says, she isn’t sure how she would have gotten through the horror of 9/11. “Everything changed,” she says. Some people she knew abandoned their religion completely, as did Tiffany, whose cousin was on United Airlines Flight 175 with his wife and two-year-old daughter when it was flown into the south tower of the World Trade Center—and whose uncle Lee Hanson is today a vocal opponent of the community center Khan and her husband want to build. Meanwhile, Khan found herself in demand after 9/11 as calls asking her to speak about Islam “as a Muslim woman” came rolling in from churches, synagogues and organizations around the country.

## ISLAM IN AMERICA

### ► 7 million

Estimated number of U.S. citizens who are Muslim

### ► 0.6%

Approximate percentage of American adults who are Muslim. 78.5% are Christian, 1.7% Jewish, 0.7% Buddhist, 0.4% Hindu, 2% other faiths/don’t know, 16.1% unaffiliated

### ► 170

Approximate number of mosques in New York City (up from 10 in 1970). There are some 2,800 churches and 350 synagogues

### ► 67%

Percentage of Americans who believe developers have the right to build a mosque near ground zero

### ► 71%

Percentage of Americans who believe it is inappropriate to build the mosque

“There was a lecture every night,” she says. “It was overwhelming, the kind of outreach we had to do because Americans were so confused. They wanted to know what Islam is and ‘Why do you hate us?’” Khan also oversaw a handful of interfaith art and performance projects in Manhattan, including the Cordoba Bread Fest, a gathering of Muslims, Jews and Christians at St. Bartholomew’s Church. “One imam wouldn’t come because one of the Christian women was going to do a liturgical dance,” she recalls, laughing. “He could not be convinced that it wasn’t a belly dance. But two days before the event, the woman tripped and broke her leg. So we called the imam and told him we decided the dance was not so important. We never told him she broke her leg.”

At first Khan was tapped because of her husband’s connections: After 9/11 he was enlisted by the State Department and the FBI to consult on Islamic issues. But she soon developed a reputation in her own right, giving interviews, lecturing at the Aspen Institute, traveling to the World Economic Forum.

“I kind of got defined as a Muslim woman by 9/11,” Khan says. “Until then I just thought of myself as a career girl who’s an imam’s wife whose name is Daisy who is a New Yorker and an American. Muslim was just my own spiritual identity.” In 2005, Khan quit her corporate job and turned to full-time activism as she and her husband became leaders in what some have described as the industry of moderate American Islam. After 9/11, says one American Islamic specialist, the money from governments and foundations came pouring in to groups that promoted dialogue and moderation. Rauf had his consulting contracts, and there were grants for ASMA from such donors as the United Nations, the Carnegie Corporation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Dutch and Qatari governments—amounting to some \$1.37 million in 2009, according to the group’s financial report for that year, the latest that is publicly available. Such funding enabled ASMA to expand; in 2004 it started the Cordoba Initiative, a subsidiary

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**KEY LIME BARS**

*Prep time: 45 minutes*

*Cooking time: 27 minutes, plus 4 hours to chill*

Makes 16

*1 cup finely ground graham cracker crumbs (about 7 full boards)*

*1 cup granulated sugar, divided*

*¼ cup toasted coconut (Baker's Angel Flake)*

*5 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted*

*3 large eggs*

*Zest of 2 limes*

*1 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk*

*⅔ cup regular or Key lime juice (about 6 limes)*

*Pinch of salt*

1. Preheat the oven to 350°. Line an 8-by-8-inch square baking pan with two pieces of foil, creating an inch overhang on all sides. In a medium bowl, stir together the crumbs, ¼ cup sugar and the coconut. Stir in the melted butter. Press evenly into the bottom of the prepared pan. Bake for 10 minutes. Set aside.

2. Separate the eggs, reserving the whites. Place the yolks in the bowl of a mixer. Add the lime zest. Beat for 5 minutes on high until thick. Reduce the speed, and add the milk in a steady stream. Add the lime juice, and beat until just combined. Spread over the crust, and bake until just set, about 10 minutes. Cool completely on a rack. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours.

3. Heat the broiler. Bring a pot of water to simmer. Place the egg whites, a pinch of salt and ¾ cup sugar in a clean mixer bowl, and set atop the water while stirring with a whisk to dissolve the sugar. When the mixture reaches 160°, return the bowl to the mixer stand. Beat on high with the whisk attachment until the bowl is cool to touch and the meringue is stiff, thick and glossy, about 6 minutes. Spread it on top of the chilled tart; rake decoratively with a fork. Slide under the broiler, and brown it quickly, 1 to 1½ minutes. Chill until ready to serve. Cut into 16 squares. 🍴

focused on improving relations between Islam and the West.

Two years later, Khan founded the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, or WISE, a group whose stated mission is to “empower” Muslim women around the world. The idea had come to her suddenly. She was 48 and had never thought of herself as a feminist. “I was never disempowered by anyone,” she says. But she had grown increasingly disturbed by the questions people kept raising about the treatment of women in the Islamic world—the stonings, honor killings, forced marriages, restrictions on women's education. Her response was that these practices were un-Islamic, a distortion of the Koran by patriarchal societies and governments. She says her wake-up call came when a woman approached her in a church and said, “You tell us this is a distortion of your faith, but what are you doing about it?” Says Khan: “I realized if I, sitting in America, don't do something, then who will?”

Her first thought was that Muslim women needed to organize. There were “750 million of them around the world,” she says, and they needed to make their voices heard. “There was no congress of Muslim women. There was no representation. And if you are not sitting at the table with those who are making the decisions, then you cannot effect change.”

Tapping into her huge network, reaching out to her contacts around the world, Khan in just three months organized the first WISE Congress—a meeting of 150 Muslim women leaders from 25 countries, which took place in November 2006 at the Westin hotel in Times Square. “We didn't know what was going to happen because it was simply my own brainchild,” Khan says. “But people say there was electricity in the room. One woman said, ‘Oh my God, this is like Seneca Falls!’ And then we realized we were creating the modern-day Muslim women's suffrage movement.”

Today WISE is still in its infancy. But there have been some noteworthy accomplishments. A website

highlights Muslim women's achievements throughout history, disseminates information and relevant news and helps Muslim women communicate with one another. In the planning stages is an international project to train Muslim women jurists; however, an all-woman WISE Shura Council—modeled on the shura, or consultative, councils widely used in the Muslim world—is already at work. A group of Muslim scholars, lawyers and politicians, the council acts as a sort of theological body, issuing opinions and interpretations of Islamic legal and religious texts that promote women's rights. Working with—not against—the tenets of Islamic law is WISE's approach.

So far, with its limited budget, WISE has been able to fund two significant on-the-ground projects, both faith based. In Afghanistan the organization is working with village imams, creating study groups and providing sample sermons in an attempt to expose clerics to interpretations of the Koran that endorse rights for women. In Egypt, WISE is working in several villages to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation. Backed by an incentive program to provide new jobs for practitioners of genital cutting—often the village midwife or even a barber—WISE is using the Koran to convince people that cutting violates Sharia law. There are many, including members of WISE, who question the validity of this strategy, arguing that accepting the Koran as the framework buttresses the very system that oppresses women. But the idea of using civil law and U.N. resolutions to protect women and fight cultural oppression is, for Khan, a Western strategy that will not work.

"The human rights argument falls on deaf ears," she explains. "It doesn't translate into what people believe. When you use faith-based language, Koranic language, people understand that. They trust it. They see it as the highest authority for Muslims.

"We don't shy away from faith," she adds. "We deploy it."

It is this kind of accommodation, this kind of compromise, that helps explain why Khan finds herself so con-

troversial today: Some see her as performing intellectual pirouettes in an attempt to reconcile things that may not be reconcilable. Khan sees herself as a critic of radical Islam, but she is what most people might consider to be a rather gentle one. An open letter from the WISE Shura Council to the Supreme Court of Abu Dhabi, for example, "respectfully protests" a court ruling implying that Islamic law could permit a husband to "forcefully discipline" his wife and children as long as he leaves no physical marks.

But not every opinion of the Shura Council or its members reflects Khan's views. At the council's October meeting at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, she seemed distracted—texting, reading e-mails, taking cell phone calls—as 18 women sat around a table in an oak-paneled room for nearly 10 hours straight, parsing the Koran in excruciating detail. Then the result of a recent poll of WISE's members on the subject of female genital cutting was announced. The question was, "Is cutting harmful to women?" Khan was standing when she heard that four women had responded no. Khan was so stunned, she almost dropped her cup of coffee. "Who are those four?" she asked sharply, and then, seeing the discomfort on several women's faces, she smiled, rolled her eyes and shrugged.

Khan's ability to put a mask over her true feelings—a mask that occasionally slips, as it did in the Shura meeting—sometimes makes it difficult to know what Khan herself believes. Take polygamy, a problem she has encountered even in New York, where it is practiced secretly, she has said, mainly by conservative Muslim immigrants from Africa and Asia. She always raises the issue with engaged couples in her husband's congregation. "I also explain to them that as a woman, you have certain rights, and as a man, he may one day exercise his right to have a second wife," she told NPR in 2008. "And usually the man says, 'No, no, no, I'm never going to do that.' And I say, 'Well, in case you ever get tempted, how about we put that [promise] in the [marriage] contract?'"



Still, her reform-from-within approach has earned kudos. WISE's project in Afghanistan has been cited as groundbreaking by the Clinton Global Initiative; she has won several awards from small interfaith groups extolling her work; *Newsweek* put her on its cover in 2007, along with other progressive Muslims. The White House Project's Marie Wilson calls Khan "a very original and visionary thinker" and credits her with pushing the organization to reach out to the large population of Muslim women in Dearborn, Michigan, to train them to run for office.

"She is swimming against the tide here, trying to change everyone's perception," says Halima Tiffany. Her gentle style, friends say, is simply a reflection of Khan's fundamentally hopeful view of the world. What her critics call her arrogance and tin ear is, according to friends, just a dazzling confidence—that her view of the world is the correct one and that everyone will eventually come around to seeing things as she does.

**THAT ROSY** outcome was certainly what she expected for the community center. It was a project she and her husband had dreamed of for years. They were inspired by the Jewish Community Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side, with its classes, athletic facilities and meeting spaces open to people of all faiths, because, Khan says, "we knew the evolution of all religions included creating institutions that intersect with the public." When a real estate developer who worshipped in her husband's mosque in New York's Tribeca neighborhood bought the run-down building on Park Place, near ground zero, in June 2009—because the congregation needed more prayer space—Khan jumped at the chance. The architect in her immediately saw the opportunity the space would provide for a theater, classrooms, galleries, a swimming pool. The public relations woman—and perhaps the romantic—in her immediately saw the proximity to the World Trade Center site as a symbol of

"much-needed healing," a chance to show that American Muslims shared the country's grief and were also part of the recovery, helping to revitalize the neighborhood. Khan did virtually no advance research or community organizing. She didn't imagine that anyone would object.

If that sounds incredibly naive now, she says the big mistake was going public too soon, "not getting our board lined up, the people who would be able to speak on our behalf." In Khan's telling, the opposition came from a hard core of virulently anti-Islamic activists. And to a certain extent that is true. The first frenzy of protest was whipped up by two bloggers—Pam Geller and Robert Spencer—who head an organization called Stop Islamization of America. They hit the television shows and organized protests. In May a contentious community-board meeting resulted in a vote in favor of the project, but in the weeks and months after that, Geller and Spencer's heated rhetoric helped define the debate in its extremes—good versus evil, religious tolerance versus bigotry, First Amendment rights versus the rights of those in pain. In the middle, however, were a considerable number of opponents and undecideds who were not so extreme. Among them were many Muslims, including Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, the Saudi billionaire, who has supported ASMA financially but who objects to the center, not only because the 9/11 "wound" is still healing but also because he feels that a mosque should not be built in a neighborhood that also houses bars and a strip club. And there were many Americans wrestling with legitimate concerns about Islamic extremism and how to balance rights to free expression in a democracy with emotional sensitivities. All questions that Daisy Khan herself had wrestled with.

In 2005 a Danish newspaper published a series of cartoons that portrayed the Prophet Muhammad unflatteringly and linked Islam with terrorism. Muslims around the world rioted, and more than 130 people were killed. Khan struggled. "As an artist, I

believe in complete freedom of creative expression,” she says. As an American, she believed in freedom of the press. But as the head of a Muslim organization, she agonized about what public position to take. In the end, she decided that publishing the cartoons was wrong. “Freedom of expression comes with social responsibility,” she says, explaining her stance against the cartoons. “There are some things we don’t do. We don’t yell ‘Fire’ in a crowded theater. So is it wise to do what we are doing? Does one have to provoke?”

There is more than a little irony in Khan’s remark, because her argument—that emotional sensitivities are important—is precisely the argument that people have made against the Islamic center. “There are no legal impediments to putting up a mosque,” says Fordham Law School’s Thane Rosenbaum. “But just because you can do it, does it mean you *should*?”

If Khan has grappled with the sensitivity question raised by the center’s proximity to ground zero, she does not show it. Although she has expressed deep sympathy for the pain of 9/11 families, in person and in public she generally dismisses those who oppose her as “uninformed.” And although she has struggled with the issues of Islamic extremism and the violence done in the name of the Koran, trying to resolve her own conflicting emotions, she bristles when those subjects are brought up in debates about the center. She often seems to dodge and weave when the subject of jihadi violence is raised, deflecting the problem onto the American media or her opponents’ prejudices. When I ask her how much of the controversy over the center has to do with Islamophobia—she has often said the two are connected—and how much has to do with real fears raised by incidents like the Fort Hood killings and the bomb planted in Times Square last May, just one week before the furor over the center erupted, she looks at me with a blank stare. Her lips are pursed. She is silent for a long moment and then blinks, arranges her face in a tight smile and responds: “It is a *huge* burden, because

that is the image of Islam that is presented to the American public. What is not fair is that there is no portrayal of what Muslims are doing about it.”

“Islamic terrorism,” especially against the United States, “is very difficult for people like Daisy,” observes a colleague. “Like a lot of immigrants, she very much wants to be ‘American,’ and this puts a painful shadow over the narrative. And Daisy compartmentalizes, so she doesn’t address it.” But that reluctance, coupled with the aggrieved tone she often marshals, has led people, including Muslims in the West, to accuse her of soft-pedaling the problem of terrorism.

“I never set  
out to assume  
**leadership,**”  
Khan says.  
“I feel like  
I’m a **channel**  
for something  
that needs  
to be done.”

Which, when all the noise and shouting are put aside, is not what Daisy Khan wants. What she wants, she says, is for people to see “that Muslims are part of the solution, that they are fighting side by side with non-Muslims, that our collective enemy is extremism.” Khan has said that the “whole religion” of Islam, not just four planes, was hijacked on 9/11. And in her role as a Muslim spokeswoman, she must constantly beat back against the stigma and stereotypes. But one has to wonder if she hasn’t beaten herself so far back into a corner that she’s left herself no clear way out.

It is late in the afternoon. Daisy Khan looks exhausted. She’s just returned from Qatar and Madrid, where she has spoken to women’s groups. She’s leav-

ing soon for conferences in London and Switzerland. But she is upbeat. “I never set out to assume leadership,” Khan says. “I just never have been able to plan my future for me. I feel like serendipity is always there, that things are just going to get shaped for me, because there is so much need out there. I feel like whatever is the big need of the day comes at me and says, ‘OK, now do this.’ And somehow the resources come.” For the center, Khan will need that serendipity in spades—at least \$100 million worth. Because as of early December, Khan and her husband had almost no money to pay for its construction.

But here again Khan sees providence riding to the rescue. “I think that the center has become so public,” she says with a laugh, “that fund raising is now much easier than we thought.” So much easier, it seems, that in recent weeks Khan and her husband have increased their fund-raising target, to \$150 million. There have been rumors that the couple were trying to recruit backers in the Middle East and that they have gotten commitments from the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia, but Khan says only that some countries have expressed “an interest in the vision.” Except for their application in November for about \$5 million in federal grant money earmarked for the redevelopment of lower Manhattan after 9/11—another tin-ear moment that prompted a small uproar—she insists that no fund-raising campaign has yet been organized. She hopes, though, to “reach out to every person of conscience and faith” in America who “wants to be part of building the center.” Whether this will happen—and whether it will succeed—is anyone’s guess.

“I feel like I’m a channel for something that needs to be done,” she says. “And because of that, I’ve allowed myself to remain that channel—open.” After all, the fight, she says, is no longer “just for the center. The struggle is now a struggle of acceptance.” For Muslim Americans, to be sure. And after years of contradiction and compromise, for Daisy Khan as well. 🐦

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