

PARK51 COMMUNITY CENTER

Fact Sheet/Timeline

KEY FIGURES

Sharif El-Gamal is the Chairman and CEO of Soho Properties, a Manhattan real estate firm. El-Gamal was born in Brooklyn and is an American citizen. Soho Properties purchased 45-47 Park Place for \$4.85 million in July 2009, and also assumed a lease for 49-51 Park Place that runs until 2071. According to El-Gamal, the purchasing process took four years. He is one of the founders of Park51, and currently serves as its Trustee and President, and is on its Board.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is a Kuwait-born imam, and is an American citizen. For many years, he has been involved in multi-religious and intercultural work. Since 1983, he has been the imam at a Sufi mosque in lower Manhattan, Masjid al-Farah. In 2003, Imam Feisal founded the Cordoba Initiative, a multi-faith nonprofit organization, where he serves as its Chairman. The Cordoba Initiative has no formal or legal connection to Park51. In December 2010, Imam Feisal and the Cordoba Initiative launched a new initiative called the Cordoba Movement. It is intended to expand the work of the Cordoba Initiative multi-nationally. Imam Feisal is also a founder of Park51. During much of the time Park51 has been in the media, Imam Feisal was also the recognized “face” of the community center. A press release issued by Park51 on January 14, 2011 stated that this is no longer the case.

Daisy Khan is Imam Feisal’s wife and a Board member of the Cordoba Initiative. She was born in India and is an American citizen. She is also the founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), whose mission is to foster an American Muslim identity through interfaith, youth and women’s empowerment, and arts and culture initiatives. In the late summer and early fall of 2010, the media turned to Ms. Khan as a spokesperson for Park51, while Imam Feisal was traveling abroad on a State Department sponsored trip for interfaith initiatives. She had no official role with Park51.

PARK51 AND THE MEDIA

Between May and November, 2010, Park51 had over 8 billion media impressions. Had they paid for this media exposure, the estimated advertising cost would have been \$75 million.ⁱ

Time magazine ranked Park51 the Top Religion Story of 2010.ⁱⁱ

TIMELINE

Information for this Timeline was gathered from news reports as well as conversations with Sharif El-Gamalⁱⁱⁱ and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf.^{iv}

Shortly after September 11, 2001 Sharif El-Gamal began attending services at Masjid Manhattan, a 40 year-old mosque located a few blocks from Ground Zero, where he noted that there were many congregants and overflow attendance.

2003 Imam Feisal founded the Cordoba Initiative. This organization's name was a reference to Cordoba, Spain, a city that was a center of intellectual, spiritual, cultural and commercial life during the 10th and 11th centuries, and a place where Muslims, Jews and Christians coexisted peacefully.

2006 Sharif El-Gamal attended Masjid al-Farah, where he noted overflow as well. As a real estate developer, he states that he began to think about where larger spaces for a mosque in the neighborhood might be available. In addition, he notes that he began to think about Muslims from a variety of practices coming together in one space – similar to the model of a Jewish Community Center (JCC) – both for worship and community activities.

Sharif El-Gamal and Imam Feisal met at Masjid al-Farah. Imam Feisal states that he had long hoped to develop an interfaith community center, open to everybody, which would reflect the evolution of the American Islamic identity. He states that he and Daisy Khan had written a proposal for this, which had been shared with interfaith leaders.

Imam Feisal and Sharif El-Gamal shared their visions with one another, and began working together, with El-Gamal conducting the real-estate search.

May 2008 Masjid Manhattan was evicted from its space and found a smaller space to rent two doors from its previous location. This resulted in people having to pray in the streets outside the masjid.

July 2009 Soho Properties purchased 45-47 Park Place, and acquired a 70+ year leasehold on 49-51 Park Place. This property is two and a half blocks from Ground Zero, and is a former Burlington Coat Factory which was damaged in the 9/11 attacks. At this time, the vision was to build a multi-story interfaith community center with a mosque taking up one floor.

Spring 2010 Sharif El-Gamal states that he and Imam Feisal embarked on a “Campaign of Awareness” with various New York City Council members, political figures and Community Board No. 1 (initial presentation on May 5, 2010) to inform them of their plans for the community center; he reports that the project was supported by these representatives. The public name of the community center at this time was “Cordoba House.”

May 19, 2010 Tea Party leader Mark Williams sparked controversy by protesting Cordoba House, calling it a mosque and blogging, “The monument would consist of a Mosque for the worship of the terrorists' monkey-god.”^v

May 20, 2010 A press conference was held at the project's site with Imam Feisal, City Council representatives, State Senators, the Manhattan Borough President and a number of community members to denounce Mark Williams' comments and to express unequivocal support for the project, both from a legal and ethical standpoint. Organizations throughout the city wrote letters of support for the community center.

May 25, 2010 Blogger and founder of the Stop Islamization of America organization, Pamela Gellar, and various Tea Party members joined hundreds of people protesting against Cordoba House outside of a Community Board No. 1 meeting. It was at this meeting that a resolution was passed with overwhelming approval for the building of Cordoba House at the proposed site. In speaking of this occurrence, Sharif El-Gamal says it was then that he realized he had to build the community center at the proposed location, to combat ignorance.

July 2010 The community center's name was changed to Park51. Imam Feisal continued to refer to the project as "Cordoba House."

August 3, 2010 New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission voted 9–0 against granting landmark status and historic protection to the building, thereby allowing Park51 to be built.

August 2010 Widespread and internationally publicized protests and counter-protests around the community center took place in lower Manhattan, and across the U.S. Though much of the controversy focused on the community center's proximity to the Ground Zero site, anti-Muslim sentiment was also expressed across the country. Many people condemned what they viewed as xenophobia and an effort to stop freedom of religion.

Imam Feisal was out of the country during much of the controversy, and Daisy Khan acted as a spokesperson for him and the community center.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg endorsed Park51 on the basis of freedom of religion.

August 13, 2010 President Barack Obama stated, "Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances."^{vi} The following day, after varied reactions to his statement, President Obama clarified and said he was speaking from a legal standpoint and "was not commenting...on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there."^{vii}

September 10, 2010 Sharif El-Gamal clarified that the "Cordoba House" at Park51 was the name only for the interfaith space in the community center, and not the name for the community center itself.

November 2010 Park51 applied for a Lower Manhattan Development Council grant, intended in part for funding social service programs, Arabic and other foreign language classes, programs and services for homeless veterans, multi-cultural art exhibits and immigration services. This resulted in some negative attention from critics in the public and the media.

Additionally, Park51 applied for non-profit tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.^{viii}

December 8, 2010 Imam Feisal officially announced the launch of his Cordoba Movement, a multi-national, multi-faith organization dedicated to improving understanding and building trust among people of all cultures and faith traditions. Imam Feisal describes the movement as comprised of and representing moderates who oppose hard-line extremists from all walks of life. Imam Feisal has referred to the movement as a "coalition of moderates." Domestic and international speaking tours are part of the work of the movement.

Imam Feisal explains that his idea for Cordoba House(s) represents a separate project, which is to be part of the Cordoba Initiative. It is a concept for interfaith space(s) and programming, which Imam Feisal envisions will be established in a number of cities across the world.

January 2011 Park51's new website was launched. It included a link to a separate organization called PrayerSpace. PrayerSpace is a separate non-profit entity from Park51, and its function is to house a Muslim prayer space, located at 51 Park Place. Some would consider a PrayerSpace to be a mosque while others would not, based on varied interpretations of what constitutes a mosque. PrayerSpace's landlord is Soho Properties. According to Sharif El-Gamal,

the intention is that Park51 and PrayerSpace will each obtain its own 501(c)(3) status. They will have separate boards, employees, missions, visions and governing statements. Park51 will be the community center with an interfaith space, and PrayerSpace will be the space for Muslim prayer services and religious programming.

According to El-Gamal, by April 2011, approximately 1,000 people were attending PrayerSpace on a weekly basis, with at least 600 attending Friday prayers.

In an interview with the *Buffalo News*, Imam Feisal stated that if another site for the community center were available, "I would move; I would move because my whole life is about improving relationships with people."^{xix}

January 14, 2011 Sharif El-Gamal issued a press release on behalf of Park51 stating that, due to Imam Feisal "focusing most of his energies and passion on launching this new and separate initiative, it is important that the needs of Park51...take precedence. While Imam Feisal's vision has a global scope and his ideals for the Cordoba Movement are truly exceptional, our community in Lower Manhattan is local. Our focus is and must remain the residents of Lower Manhattan and the Muslim American community in the Greater New York area."^{xx} The press release also stated that Imam Feisal and Daisy Khan would no longer speak for Park51, though Imam Feisal would remain on the Board. Imam Abdallah Adhami took over primary prayer service responsibilities from Imam Feisal, and was named a Senior Advisor of Park51. The press reported that Imam Feisal was unaware of this change.

February 4, 2011 Imam Abdallah Adhami stepped down from his position as Senior Advisor of Park51 to devote more time to completing a book. Between January 14 and February 4, 2011, there had been some controversy around Imam Adhami's comments around homosexuality. Park51 stated that Adhami's comments did not represent the views of the community center.

March, 2011 Fundraising for Park51 and PrayerSpace was in the beginning stages.

The estimated cost of the project was \$120 million.

March 29, 2011 Imam Feisal and Daisy Khan announced their plans to develop a new interfaith cultural center that is "larger in concept" than Park51.^{xi}

August 2011 The Board of Park51 consisted of Sharif El-Gamal, Nour Mousa (a partner in Soho Properties) and Sammy El-Gamal (Sharif El-Gamal's brother). Imam Feisal was no longer listed as a member.^{xii} Sharif El-Gamal's vision was that the Board would eventually consist of 23 members, with 51% Muslims and 49% diverse members of the community so as to maintain the Muslim heritage aspect of the center. Sharif El-Gamal stated that he would not accept money from donors whom he believed did not reflect "American values." He also said he would no longer have an imam as the public face of the center.

Park51 had five paid staff members^{xiii} and 501(c)(3) status was reportedly pending.^{viii}

Sharif El-Gamal said Soho Properties hoped to break ground on the community center in three to five years.^{viii}

Sharif El-Gamal stated his intention to consult with residents of Lower Manhattan and Muslims living in the tri-state area to determine the ultimate form of the Park51 building and community center to ensure it met the needs of community members. His long-term plans for the center were also to depend on assessments of the community's response to programs it was offering at that time, which included various classes, leisure activities, art exhibits and Muslim holiday

observances. The center also hosted discussions for both Muslim and non-Muslim children about bullying.

According to its website, Park51 planned to offer a wide variety of services and activities upon completion of the community center building, which would be open to all. Offerings would include:

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Recreation Spaces | Culinary School | Art Studios |
| Fitness Facilities | Cultural Exhibitions | Childcare Services |
| Auditorium | Education Programs | 9/11 Memorial |
| Restaurant | Library | Contemplation Space |

October-November 2011 Soho Properties became involved in a rent dispute with Consolidated Edison, the owner of part of the site. The *New York Times* reported that Con Ed's attempts to terminate the lease threatened to derail the plans for an Islamic community center.^{xiv} In November a Manhattan judge ruled that Con Ed could not evict Soho Properties, but that the developer would have to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in back rent.^{xv}

April 2014 Sharif El-Gamal announced that he was now planning a three-story museum "dedicated to exploring the faith of Islam and its arts and culture" instead of a fifteen-story Islamic community center and prayer space. In his statement he said that he had commissioned Pritzker Prize-winning French architect Jean Nouvel to design the museum, which would include a sanctuary for prayer services and community programs, as well as a public green space. Although he provided no timetable for completing the museum, he filed plans with the Buildings Department to demolish 45 Park Place and 51 Park Place in preparation for the project. A spokesman said that Park51, which has continued to hold daily Islamic prayer services and cultural events at the site, will temporarily relocate elsewhere in the neighborhood.^{xvi}

August 2014 Soho Properties purchased 49-51 Park Place from Con Ed, clearing an important hurdle in building the planned museum.^{xvii}

For more information: www.park51.org

ⁱ The TASC Group, "Park51 Media Report," January 24, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Howard Chua-Eoan, "Park51: The 'Ground Zero Mosque,'" *Time* December 9, 2010 <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2035319_2034971_2034944,00.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sharif El-Gamal, Personal Interview February 7, 2011.

^{iv} Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Personal Interview March 2, 2011.

^v "Mark Williams, Tea Party Leader, Says Muslims Worship 'Monkey God,'" *The Huffington Post* May 19, 2010 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/20/mark-williams-tea-party-l_n_582591.html>.

^{vi} "Remarks by the President at Iftar Dinner," *The White House* August 13, 2010 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/13/remarks-president-iftar-dinner>>.

^{vii} Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama Enters Debate With Mosque Remarks," *The New York Times* August 14, 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/us/politics/15mosque.html>>.

^{viii} Margot Adler, "Developer: Plans for N.Y. Mosque Moving Forward," *NPR* May 5, 2011 <<http://www.npr.org/2011/05/05/135951856/developer-plans-for-n-y-mosque-moving-forward>>.

^{ix} Jay Tokasz, "Cleric open to new site for Islamic center," *Buffalo News* January 30, 2011 <<http://www.buffalonews.com/city/article327927.ece>>.

^x "New Imam Joins Park51, Islamic Community Center Launches New Website," Park51 Community Center January 14, 2011 <<http://park51.org/2011/01/press-release/>>.

^{xi} Paul Vitello, "Planners of Mosque Considering New Project," *The New York Times* March 29, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/nyregion/30mosque.html?_r=1&ref=feisalabdalrauf>.

^{xii} *Park51 Community Center* June 27, 2011 <<http://park51.org/organization/>>.

^{xiii} Anne Barnard, "Developers of Islamic Center Try a New Strategy," The New York Times August 1, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/02/nyregion/new-quiet-effort-for-big-islamic-center-near-ground-zero.html?_r=1&emc=eta1>.

^{xiv} Matt Flegenheimer, "Rent Dispute Endangers Mosque Plan," The New York Times October 16, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/17/nyregion/islamic-center-and-mosque-near-ground-zero-imperiled-by-rent-dispute.html?_r=0>

^{xv} Matt Flegenheimer, "Judge Says Islamic Center Can Stay, but Owes Rent," The New York Times November 29, 2011. <<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/29/judge-rules-that-islamic-center-can-stay-but-owes-rent/>>

^{xvi} Sharon Otterman, "Developer Scales Back Plans for Muslim Center Near Ground Zero," The New York Times, April 29, 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/30/nyregion/developer-scales-back-plans-for-muslim-center-near-ground-zero.html>>

^{xvii} Patrick McGeehan, "Con Ed Sells Building Near Ground Zero Where Plans for Mosque Caused Uproar," The New York Times, August 20, 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/21/nyregion/con-edison-sells-lot-near-ground-zero-where-plans-for-mosque-caused-uproar.html>>

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