

# Muslims wary of closeness between holiday and 9/11

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(RNS) For this year's Eid al-Fitr, the Islamic holiday that concludes the holy month of Ramadan, Nakia Jackson received an unusual present from a Jewish friend: cab fare.

"She doesn't want me taking the bus," said Jackson, of Wichita, Kan., whose headscarf clearly identifies her as a Muslim. "She recalls not only violence against black churches during the civil rights era, but the security that synagogues have needed for decades."

While most American Muslims will celebrate Eid al-Fitr on Friday (Sept. 10), in this time of inflamed tensions and rampant anti-Muslim sentiment, some are worried that outsiders might mistake the holiday festivities for celebrations of the 9/11 attacks, and see it as a provocation.

In most Muslim-majority countries, Eid al-Fitr lasts a few days and virtually consumes society.

In America, Islam's minority status means festivities are less pronounced, with work and school responsibilities limiting time for celebration.

Still, in many cities, Eid observances are easy to spot. Muslims don their best clothes, from traditional ethnic garb to three-piece suits, and fill mosques and rented ballrooms beyond capacity. To contend with traffic, many municipalities dispatch extra police officers to direct. Prayers are followed by visits with friends and families.

While this is the first time that a major Muslim holiday and 9/11 have overlapped since the 2001 terrorist attacks, similar

misunderstandings have occurred. Last year, Sajid Master, a perfume store owner in Houston, posted a flier on his door announcing he would be closed on Sept. 11 to observe the death of Imam Ali, a revered figure in Shia Islam.

Someone took a picture of the flier and sent it around the Internet claiming that Imam Ali was one of the 9/11 terrorists. In fact, none of the 9/11 terrorists was named Ali, but Master received angry phone calls and death threats.

More recently, the proposed construction of an Islamic cultural center two blocks north of Ground Zero has sparked vitriolic opposition, drawing mosques -- and Muslims -- around the country into similar conflicts.

Indeed, the list of Islamophobic acts is long and getting longer. In August, a mosque construction site in Tennessee was torched and shot at, as was a small-town mosque in western New York. Also in August, a Muslim New York City cab driver was knifed in what police are calling a hate crime. A Florida church plans to burn Qurans on Sept. 11.

It's no surprise, then, that Muslim American advocacy groups are urging caution this year.

"I don't think anybody is suggesting prayers be moved, but social gatherings and other community events probably shouldn't be held on 9/11," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council has alerted police departments and the FBI about the overlap.

"The recent spike in hate crimes against Muslims has underscored the dangers," said Alejandro Beutel, the council's government affairs officer, adding that law enforcement is taking seriously the potential for violence.

The Islamic Society of North America is urging Muslims to clean up parks, volunteer at soup kitchens, and do similar charitable acts on

9/11.

"On Sept. 11, let's show that we can rise above prejudice and hatred and be the kind of conscientious citizens who give back to our country through a national 'Muslim Serve' campaign," the organization said in an announcement.

And the New York-based Islamic Circle of America is telling local chapters not to schedule annual "Muslim Family Days," traditionally held at Six Flags Amusement Parks on Eid weekends, on 9/11. Instead, Muslim Family Day will be held later.

Muslims are divided on whether to make the adjustments.

On ICNA's website, many Muslims accused the group of being weak and encouraging people to mute Eid celebrations. Some observed that many Americans will be at weddings, birthday parties, and college football games on the ninth memorial of the attacks.

"Do you think Americans will be absent from Six Flags on 9/11?" asked one commentator, who called himself "Asif."

But "Suzanne" disagreed: "9/11 represents the worst misinterpretation of Islam imaginable. If you agree, then we have to act in ways in the U.S. that separate us from the terrorists," she wrote.

"Pray, enjoy your family ... but public amusement-park festivals on 9/11? Are you nuts?"