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Support Mosques to Assist in Muslim Integration in Canada

Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

Based on an oral history project of Toronto's first mosque, which existed from 1961 to 1968 (www.mosqueone.com), this *Tessellate Institute* policy brief contains seven recommendations that all orders of Canadian government (Federal, Provincial and Municipal) provide material and non-material support to mosque associations for their non-religious activities designed to assist in immigrant integration. The policy brief recommends that Canadian governmental agencies, while recognising the importance of government neutrality with respect to the separation of Church and State, nonetheless, play a visionary role by promoting mosques as ideal sites both for incorporating their congregants into the fabric of Canadian society, as well as for providing services for the wider Canadian society.

The Need to Support Mosques to Assist in Muslim Integration in Canada

Governments are concerned about integrating newcomers, while striking a balance between host country values and minority rights. Canada has distinguished itself on the world stage for its immigrant settlement and social welfare services, under a rubric of multiculturalism. By comparison to certain European countries, and even the United States, Canadian policies have been fairly effective in ensuring the majority of Muslims are not living in ghettos alienated from the wider society.

Concern over Muslim youth radicalisation in the wake of the foiled terrorist bomb plot in Toronto in 2006 has led to media, government, and public speculation over the role of mosques in integrating Muslims into Canadian society. Some mosques are singled out in the press as preaching an anti-Western rhetoric, or fuelling Muslim radicalisation.

Much of the fear of mosques is based on speculation and widespread negative stereotypes about conservative Muslims. Some pundits and commentators contribute to this fear of mosques by alleging a nefarious linkage between Canadian mosques and a supposedly anti-Western ideology.

Such assumptions that are not supported by social scientific evidence will only alienate Muslims and will not assist in their integration in Canadian society.

In contrast to these assumptions, *The Tessellate Institute's* oral history project of the first mosque in Toronto (Dundas St.) reveals that contrary to the notion that Canadian mosques contribute to lack of integration, the mosque played a crucial integrative function for Toronto's newcomers. Its spin-off associations have continued this role in the present day.

Therefore Canadian governments can play a visionary role in encouraging a community-based integration network by promoting mosques as ideal sites for incorporating Muslims into the fabric of Canadian society. Just as new Muslim immigrants turned to



the Dundas St. mosque for assistance in settling into Canada, so do today's mosques play this role in assisting newcomers navigate the norms and customs of Canada. Yet, most mosques, their staff and volunteers are not trained or equipped to provide these services effectively.

The Mosqueone.com Project

The Tessellate Institute's oral history project involved interviewing founders and supporters of the first mosque in Toronto, which was a small building on Dundas St, purchased in 1961 by the *Muslim Society of Toronto (MST)*. The MST itself was the first multi-ethnic Muslim association registered in Toronto (1957). Eight of these people were then interviewed on camera. These interviews were edited into small clips and also transcribed. We compiled photographs and legal and academic documents relating to the Dundas Street mosque, and then created a website (www.mosqueone.com) that allows open access to these documents. Mosqueone.com is a virtual museum containing video clips, a photo gallery and other documents.

Lessons Learned

Muslims are often viewed as a monolithic group, even threatening to Canadian values. *The Tessellate Institute's* oral history project reveals that the Dundas Street mosque performed a valuable service to the wider Canadian society. Like other religious groups in Canada, the Dundas St. mosque was concerned with relatively mundane issues, such as how to pray, pass one's religion on to one's children, help others

find work and housing, and create community. Through this, the Dundas St. mosque, like today's mosque associations, assisted their members overcome isolation and homesickness, find work, and adjust to Canadian life.

The Dundas St. mosque experience demonstrates the diversity of Canadian Muslims. The community managed diversity in ethnicity, customs, ideological orientation, and education and economic status, for nearly a decade. A comparatively sudden increase in numbers in the early 1970s led finally to splits, often over relatively minor issues. By 1972 four spin-off groups had been founded. These groups are still operational today, while knowledge of the original Dundas St. location passed into oblivion as the second mosque in Toronto (located on Boustead Ave) became known as Toronto's first mosque.

From this project we learned that:

- All of these mosque associations included in their objects of incorporation a goal to assist immigrants adjust to Canadian life - in nearly identical language to that of the Dundas St. mosque: "to aid in the establishment of Muslim immigrants in Canada and to teach the said immigrants the laws and customs of Canada;"
- women played an integral and important role in the founding and running of the mosque;
- the Canadian Muslim community is incredibly diverse, both in country of



origin, ideological orientation, and level of education and economic status;

- Muslims displayed a high level of civic engagement, devoting countless volunteer hours and finances to the mosque and its activities;
- In spite of some bitter disputes, many Muslims strived to overcome differences and work together for the betterment of the community;
- Muslims were keen to be good neighbours and develop excellent relations with other Canadians.

Implications of Mosqueone.com and Policy Recommendations

Given the important role the Dundas St. mosque played in assisting new immigrants adjust to Canadian society, the *Tessellate Institute's* project emphasises the need to support Muslims immigrants through mosque associations, not in avoidance of them. Spirituality is an important dimension of human existence. Mosques assist Muslim immigrants in Canada by providing deeply felt spiritual satisfaction, which can lead in turn to better integration in the wider society. Mosques provide social association, networks, and cohesion, often leading to civic engagement that contributes to and strengthen the Canadian social fabric.

Therefore, this policy brief recommends Canadian governments (Federal, Provincial and Municipal), without impeding the independence of mosque associations:

- 1) Play a visionary role in assisting the wider Canadian community overcome

its apprehension of mosques. Obviously, while a neutral government cannot give funds to mosques for their religious activities, funding can be given for immigrant settlement services;

- 2) Aim for programme partnerships with mosques that already render immigrants settlement assistance, such as employment services; food bank; housing assistance; English/French classes; pre-school, women's and youth groups; marriage counselling; tax assistance; and tutoring;
- 3) Use such partnerships to create competency and expertise amongst mosque staff and volunteers in service delivery. Measures can be placed to create accountability, cost effectiveness, and transparency of funds received. Such partnerships will also contribute to civic responsibility in mosque communities;
- 4) Support mosque associations in non-material ways, by showing disapproval of anti-mosque discourses in the media;
- 5) Celebrate the diversity of Canada's mosque communities as a microcosm of Canada's multicultural ideals, to contradict public discourse that singles out Muslims as not sharing Canadian values;
- 6) Be impartial and even-handed between the wide spectrum of Canadian mosque associations, and not support only a few select Muslim groups.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this policy paper are those of the author and not necessarily that of the Tessellate Institute or its Board of Directors.