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Quincy Mosque Gives Explanation of Islam Center Reaches Out To Neighbors

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QUINCY -- "I greet you with peace," leaders of the Islamic Center of New England each said yesterday in opening an effort to make their religion better known among Greater Boston neighbors.

Finally incorporated in 1964 by a handful of Moslem families who began settling in Quincy at the turn of the century, the Islamic Center now has a constituency of as many as 5,000 people of several races and languages and 25 nationalities. This week, as they celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, members of the mosque, on South Street near the former Fore River Shipyard, invited reporters to hear a basic presentation of Islam and their community's wish for cordial relations with other Americans.

Yet presenting the basics of their religion meant calling into question basic Western understandings that Islam was spread by conquest, beginning in the lifetime of Mohammed, and the news conference showed significant difference of opinion over the American hostages in Lebanon.

"When people hear the word Islam, many associate it with terrorists or killers, but that is wrong," said Imam Talal Eid, religious director of the center.

"If some who follow Islam act wrongfully that does not mean that Islam as a religion is not good," said the Lebanon-born clergyman, who was educated at Al Azhar University in Cairo.

Islam reveres the Hebrew prophets and scripture, as well as Jesus and the New Testament, explained the imam and other leaders of the Islamic center. During the expansion of Islam, beginning in the seventh century, those who did not accept the religion were able to live in peace in Islamic nations, said Mohammed Yusuf Siddiq, the assistant religious director, who was trained in Islamic art and architecture in Saudi Arabia.

The Arabic word Islam has strong connotations of "greeting one another with peace," explained Imam Talal, which is why the religion's followers greet others with a wish for peace.

While the common English spelling for a follower of Islam is Moslem, A. Karim Khudairi, president of the mosque, said his coreligionists prefer Muslim because it more faithfully renders "the sound of the word as it is pronounced in Arabic."

While Islam values Moses and Jesus as prophets, Moslems' understanding of faith is determined by the Koran, which is "the last revealed word of God," in Imam Talal's words.

"Each Muslim is bound by the five pillars of Islam," Imam Talal said: profession of faith in one God, prayer five times daily facing Mecca, the annual giving of alms for the poor, dawn-to-dusk fasting during the month of Ramadan, and for all who are able, a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

The two principal holidays of the Islamic year are Eid al Fitr, the feast of sacrifice, or alms giving, at the end of the Ramadan fast, and Eid al Adha, which follows the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.



The Quincy mosque, with the 15 other mosques of the New England Islamic Council, has sought to bring the holidays to the attention of school authorities and employers so they will excuse the absence of Moslems, said Khudairi, professor emeritus of biology at Northeastern University.

This year those holidays fell on May 20 and July 24. Since the Islamic calendar is lunar and contains only 354 days, the dates change each year.

Although in the West Islam is often depicted as intolerant and backward, the Islamic leaders emphasized that the religion was spread more often by merchants and travelers than by force of arms and that Christian minorities such as the Copts, Nestorians and Greek Orthodox found greater tolerance among Moslems than in the Christian West.

Relations with the West were exacerbated by European colonization of the Middle East after World War I, said Khudairi.

The resulting resentment among Moslems is background for the hostage-taking in Lebanon, said Khudairi. "Those who are holding hostages do so for political reasons and say when asked about the American hostages, 'Let them release the people in the concentration camps in Israel.'

"We could have a resolution if there is compromise on both sides -- it could happen tomorrow," he said. This brought objections from other members of the mosque that such a view was political and not religious and drew a strong response from Imam Talal.

"Islam condemns all acts of terrorism, all acts against innocent people," said the imam. "Whether the hostages have been treated fairly or not, taking them is an unjust act."