

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

To: Ottawa Muslim Association, Bilal Masjid, Omar Masjid, Ahlal Bayt, Ottawa Muslim Women's Organization, Islamic Information Centre, Darus Sunna, Muslim Professional Network

Copies to other Muslim organizations (whose address I have), individuals

Re: A proposal to bring about better cooperation between Muslim groups of Ottawa

From: Mohammed Azhar Ali Khan, May 28, 2007

Assalam Alaikum wa Rahmatulla wa Barakatoohoo

When the Ottawa Muslim Association was formed in 1962 there were only a few Muslims in Ottawa and they feared that their children would lose Islamic values. Trying to raise their children as Muslims was the foremost challenge. There was no mosque, no halal shops and no Muslim institution. The lack of knowledge about Islam among most Canadians was another, but less pressing, concern. However, we were graciously allowed to use a church for our prayers, which took place on Sundays. There was initially no arrangement for Friday prayers.

The situation now is radically different. Muslims number 60,000 to 80,000 in this city. There are several mosques and Muslim institutions. Islamic organizations arrange frequent lectures. Tableeghi jamaats come from overseas. Islamic knowledge is available from conferences, shops, internet, DVD, CDs, TV and radio programs. Thanks to the freedom of religion, and tolerance, in Canada we have full chance to practice our religion. Even in schools space is usually given to Muslim children for Friday prayers. Young Muslims are showing an admirable attachment to their faith.

The big problem now is that the image of Islam and Muslim is worse today than ever. Where we were once ridiculed for polygamy today Muslims are now often branded as terrorists. The government has tried to be very supportive. The prime minister visited the main mosque after 9/11. Still, Muslims are targeted in the media, scrutinized very closely (some were dubbed terrorist suspects and deported for minor immigration lapses), and sometimes victimized through hate crimes. It has now come out that security agencies do not always tell the truth even to their political masters, or check the reliability of allegations and they treat suspects as guilty. We read frequently in the newspapers about Muslim youth getting in physical fights and ending up in jail.

Despite these formidable problems, there is no sign of Muslims responding energetically to the new challenges. There are many Muslim groups in Ottawa, and no coordination or even consultation between them. We remain dedicated to building mosques but are not as concerned about building relationships that would reduce the possibility of the mosques being vandalized, neighbors seeing us as a nuisance, or Muslims being targeted in terms of physical safety, jobs, education and so on. Our thinking has not kept up with new developments. Our impact on our city and country is close to nil. As a former Pakistani prime minister said, zero plus zero plus zero still remains zero.

I think our biggest challenges today are:

1. To act as a community rather than groups, with clear goals and plans, after closely assessing our situation and our needs. .
2. To work with our youth to ensure that they become useful, exemplary Muslims and Canadians instead of drifting towards hopelessness, petty crime and extremism. We rejoice if someone embraces Islam, but do not act if we lose many youth to useless and even destructive activities.
3. To work with fellow Canadians and exercise our full rights of citizenship, and fulfill our duties as citizens, secure our position in our country, and make Canada an even better country.

I feel strongly that we should pay heed to the Islamic teaching that God will not change the condition of a people till they themselves do so, and also to the need for unity. In the present situation unity seems

elusive. But closer cooperation between Muslim groups is possible and highly desirable. All that is needed is good intentions and hard work and strong faith in Allah. In few countries is bridge-building and volunteer work as easy and rewarding as it is in Canada.

I thought originally of proposing that all Muslim organizations of Ottawa publish a joint newsletter or news magazine four or six times a year. That would inform Muslims of what other Muslims are doing, what their plans and needs are, and nudge them towards close cooperation. I will inshallah submit a detailed proposal on this very soon.

The other area of cooperation could be dealing with the media by having a committee of knowledgeable people to draw up a plan that includes not only responding to inaccuracies but keeping in touch with media personalities, inviting them to our homes and functions, providing them suitable material, and developing personal relations with them. This would not help with those media who seem to hate Muslims. But we should do our best to reach fair-minded people. Some success is better than no effort and no success. Having qualified spokespersons might also discourage those Muslims who rush into prominence and make statements that put us to ridicule and worsen our image.

A third need is dealing with the federal, provincial, and city governments. If Muslim organizations could have a joint representation by competent, sensible people, the results would or should be much better in terms of dialogue and bridge-building and in Muslims having a respected voice in the shaping of policies with local, provincial, national and international implications.

I was one of a few Muslims invited by RCMP to advise them on how to approach Muslims so as to respect their sensitivities, exchange views with Muslims and try to recruit Muslims into the force. I suggested to them to invite leaders of Muslim groups to this committee and to work through them. They agreed and now almost all Muslim communities are represented in that community, RCMP arranges lectures on Islam which CSIS also attends, and RCMP and CSIS officers attend Muslim functions and have come to know many Muslims. This is a big step towards building bridges. But that committee is now huge and unwieldy. It would function more effectively if all Muslim groups cooperated and handled this situation jointly.

The same applies to dealings with universities, colleges, schools and similar groups. OMA had at one time arranged with the University of Ottawa to provide extension courses on Islam. This was very successful and all aspects of Islam were covered. Average Canadians and high officials attended. After about three years, however, the program lapsed. We need all Muslim groups to work together to revive and expand such programs to educational institutions and other institutions.

Muslim groups do not even have a joint religious function to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet (pbuh) by having an informative talk by a learned person that would enlighten Muslims as well as our fellow Canadians of other faiths. Only the Ismaili community arranges such a function every year, and it is usually very good. Why cannot the rest of the Muslim groups join together and hold such a function every year?

Originally, I had thought that it would be nice if Muslim groups could start cooperating in a few fields. But when I discussed this idea with individual Muslims, and with leaders of the main groups, they were very supportive and even enthusiastic. The OMA welcomed the initiative and has authorized me to represent them in this work with other Muslim groups. So I thought that if you start with only limited objectives you will not develop the momentum needed to propel you forward.

We should realize that the challenge is formidable and a half-hearted response would probably fizzle out. If we have good intentions we can inshallah broaden our horizons and achieve much. We have numerous retired people, new technology makes communication easy, and we have bright, dedicated and hard-working youth and sisters who are keen to contribute if only they are given the chance.

I propose that you, the main Muslim groups in Ottawa, jointly invite all Muslim groups based in Ottawa, including schools, ethnic groups and relief groups such as HCI and IRFAN to a meeting at the main mosque on a Saturday or Sunday for a two or three hour session to discuss this proposal. If we circulate this proposal widely this would give time and the opportunity to these groups to submit their own ideas beforehand. The meeting would then likely to be more productive and less chaotic and argumentative.

I think Imams, Muslim organizations which are not Ottawa-based but have a presence in Ottawa and interested Muslims should be welcomed as observers. They should give their ideas in writing to the organizers earlier, at the meeting or later. At the meeting itself the emphasis should be on the Ottawa organizations drawing up a framework for cooperation. If this is done then and we have time we could invite the observers to speak also.

We should try to get started, and then improvements will come. If we strive for perfection or haggle over minor points at the very start we would get bogged down and people will give up. So the focus should be on getting started. I am making some suggestions on how to go about this, but these are only suggestions and you are welcome to making changes.

I am also circulating this proposal widely, and invite the recipients to forward these to their Muslim friends and organizations because I think we should work together with mutual respect and team spirit. Only a grassroots movement with wide participation will succeed. This is a challenge for all of us who live in Ottawa.

Sr. Nazira Tareen and Br. Sulaiman Khan are very good in organizing things. I suggest these two and I be authorized by the main groups to invite all Muslim associations in Ottawa-Hull to this meeting on your behalf. However, you are welcome to have someone else undertake this task on your behalf if you so wish.

I suggest that Br. Anver Malam start the meeting with a prayer. Then Br. Iftikhar Khan, an enthusiastic supporter of this initiative who pushed me to help the community with media and government work, could welcome the delegates and introduce the concept. The delegates should then introduce themselves and preferably give the organizers a page with their names, internet and phone contacts, brief introduction of their organization, and the name and contact of alternate delegates and of their organization's leaders.

He could then take a vote on which organizations wish to join this undertaking. Those prepared to join should elect an executive for the Ottawa-Hull Muslim Coordinating Council – president, vice president, secretary, joint secretary, treasurer, joint treasurer and two members. But slates rather than individuals should be presented in order to have a fair representation of the community. Each slate must include a Shia, a Sunni, a woman, a youth, a man and an Arab, Somali and Indo-Pakistani (the three biggest groups in Ottawa) and as many other groups as possible to make the executive as representative of our diverse community as possible. We should nominate only capable and dedicated people if our work is to proceed.

We should elect a committee to come up with rules and bylaws for the council. The elected president should then take the chair. Each organization should pay a fee of \$100 annually or so to cover the expenses. The slate need not be of people who are representing particular groups. Persons most suited should be nominated. For example, Maher Arar and Monia Mozigh, when they return to Ottawa. They are international icons as fighters for justice and human rights and have wide contacts that could help the Muslim community.

Only delegates representing groups should be at the table. Alternative delegates could sit behind them, but only delegates should speak. The meeting should be open to everyone, but if somebody wants to say something he/she should send a note to the chair. The emphasis should be on discussion by delegates and action. We don't want to end up with lengthy speeches and beautiful words but with no action and just arguments.

We should then devote a half hour or so for a discussion. I think the executive should meet once a month and appoint committees to work in their respective fields. These committees should report every month electronically to the executive on their work and goals. The executive and the committees should send an electronic report to the member organizations on their work. This should include a monthly financial report by the treasurer.

The component organizations themselves should meet every three months to review progress. The executive should be elected every year in the same month. People proposing a slate should list the qualifications of people being proposed. Those not performing satisfactorily should make way for those able and willing to contribute.

The founding organizations should try to identify the areas for cooperation but leave it to the executive to implement them when they are able to, and even leave the choice of areas for cooperation to the executive.

This will depend largely on how many volunteers we get and how serious they are. We should request OMA for permission for the use of their office for record-keeping, secretarial help, mail and so on.

I suggest that the following areas be considered for such cooperation:

1. A joint newsletter four to six times a year. When properly organized this should go to all Muslims in Ottawa-Hull, libraries, schools, colleges and other suitable groups, Muslim organizations throughout the country, main government departments, major business groups, and so on. There is a possibility of Kingston Muslims joining us in this effort.

2. A joint media committee.

3. A joint committee to deal with the various levels of government.

4. A committee to deal with educational institutions, including libraries, providing them books, speakers, possible extension courses, and so on.

5. A committee to deal with non-governmental organizations, including service clubs, aid organizations, etc., for cooperation where possible and needed.

6. A committee to advise and assist in welcoming new immigrants, refugees and students and to assist them with orientation, counseling and so on. Along with the public affairs committee, this committee could arrange for courses on Canadian history, institutions and customs for new comers to orient them to their new home and to make them more responsible citizens.

7. A committee to deal with youth. We keep reading about Muslim youth getting into trouble with the law. How many of us are involved in helping with the most precious resource – our youth. I understand that the Islamic Information Centre is heavily involved in this. I think we should have a joint committee so that all groups are able to help the Centre in this important work.

8. A committee to help women and girls. Sadly, there is domestic violence in Muslim homes and in many instances sisters are discriminated against. We should act jointly on this, and strongly. Maybe instead of having an imam and a deputy imam we should have an imam and a social worker for the community.

9. Sr. Nazira Tareen, Br. Abdul Rashid and Sr. Khadija Haffajee, and others, are doing excellent work in terms of interfaith understanding. But this is done mostly with Christians. The new Council should support them strongly, and try to extend this to Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Aboriginal peoples. All Canadians have a stake in preventing violence, building tolerance, reducing poverty, combating racism, promoting social justice, upholding the rule of law and the accountability of law enforcement agencies, better education system, protection of religious places and promoting peace, justice, security, freedom and democracy throughout the world through the UN and other institutions.

If we work closely together as Canadians perhaps this would help build trust that might even help reduce tensions overseas. For example, Jews and Arabs are working together in Ottawa and other cities through Potlucks for Peace to promote understanding in the Middle East. We should support such efforts and expand it to promote peace friendship between India and Pakistan. Our self-interest, and the brotherhood of man that the Holy Quran and Hadith emphasize, demand no less. OMA once cooperated with Christian and Jewish groups in organizing a Tent of Meeting on Parliament to celebrate the heritage of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham, peace be upon him). Our scholars the late Taufiq Shaheen and Imam Gamal Badawi, among others, shared the podium with priests and rabbis. People who know little about Islam got a good glimpse of our faith through our Imams and other learned speakers.

10. We need a competent public affairs committee. Such a committee would arrange sessions in different mosques on local, provincial and federal topics and guide Muslims, especially new arrivals and youth, on responsible citizenship. It might even identify and support Muslim candidates for various local, provincial or federal boards or elected offices. At election time it could suggest to various candidates what the Muslim community would like in particular – justice, less red tape in delay in visas, better assessment of foreign qualifications, equality for all citizens, support for the UN and a foreign policy that promotes peace, security

and justice for all people, and so on. Such a committee could invite candidates to address Muslims. It could also take up the case of wronged people (not just Muslims) with the appropriate authorities.

This committee could also search for Muslims for suitable city, municipal, provincial or federal awards. Such awards inform our fellow Canadians of the contributions Muslims are making to our country. They also provide role models for Muslims and boost their confidence. The committee could also identify Canadians whose record in various fields makes them suitable for awards from the Muslim community. This would show that Muslims are active in civic affairs and would win friends for Muslims. It could recommend to Muslims to support candidates whose records and programs are likely to most benefit all Canadians.

11. A think tank. We have highly educated and competent people in the community. We have hardly made good use of them. OMA had set up a think tank of able people to meet from time to time and reflect deeply on the community's challenges, opportunities, priorities, etc. and make recommendations to the Board. That, too, fizzled out. I think we should set up a Think Tank jointly for all Muslim groups to pursue this objective.

12. A brotherhood or friendship committee. Our religion teaches us strongly not to carry malice in our hearts and to try to remove misunderstandings. But we seem to bicker a great deal, expend energy on fringe issues, and spend big amounts of money fighting each other in court when the same money could be used to help poor orphans, widows and others eat, get shelter, education, medicines and other needs. This is appalling. We need a strong committee of respected men, women and young people to work on preventing and solving such disputes and to promoting a sense of brotherhood and mutual respect among all of us.

13. Zakat committee. Helping Muslims and non-Muslims, and animals, is an integral part of our faith. We need a zakat committee with broad goals. We should be helping the destitute and the needy. But we should also provide loans to students in dire need, or people wishing to start a business. We should work with relief agencies such as HCI, IRFAN, Mercy International, Interfaith Housing and others to raise funds to help the poor in Canada as well as overseas. I understand that Islamic Information Centre is doing good work in this area and also South Nepean Muslim Community undertakes such projects in cooperation with other groups. This is what Islam teaches us, and this is good citizenship. We should work together on a bigger scale to achieve this.

OMA used to participate in a Tulipathon walk to raise funds for good causes. We should cooperate with Canadians of other faiths to jointly sponsor such walks and raise money for the needy in Canada, including hospitals, housing and soup kitchens, and for the poor overseas (orphans, widows, elderly, destitute, displaced people) who lack adequate food, water, medicine, shelter or jobs.. All Muslim groups should help them through this committee. Perhaps we could arrange a walk this year in September, just before Ramadan, and have it regularly every year in the spring.

14. Electronic mailing list. We should compile and maintain an electronic mailing list of all Muslims in the National Capital Region. We should send a weekly note to them of upcoming events, or anything else they should know, including people in the hospitals, births, deaths, job vacancies, scholarships or other opportunities.

15. We should have a list of specialists – businesses, professionals, etc. so that people may turn to them when they are looking for an electrician, or lawyer, or social worker. This should be updated regularly. Professionals – doctors, engineers, social workers, psychologists, etc. – should be asked if they could devote two or three days of service for free consultations by people in the community.

16. All groups conduct their annual dinners. If we could join together to have a meticulously arranged annual dinner, with a first-rate speaker, attended by at least 1,000 people this would show our government, media and others what the Muslims believe, who they are and how they are contributing to Canada. It would galvanize the youth and have a great impact on our fellow Canadians. We could invite top political, media, bureaucracy, academic, security services and business people to it, enabling them to mingle with Muslims for the benefit of both. They would learn about Islam, and about the strength Canadian Muslims represent for Canada. That would be a great boon to us. Kingston Muslims might join us in this project. So might some Montreal Muslims if we arrange the function really well. This would build bridges.

17. Bilal mosque (Cumberland association) used to publish an annual directory of Muslims. If all Muslim groups join hands, perhaps this useful project could be resumed.

18. Coordination between schools. Many Muslim organizations run weekend Islamic schools. There is no coordination between them, or between them and the full-time Muslim schools. At one time there used to be an annual picnic of Muslim schools. We need to revive and expand this, through a joint effort. We should recognize the best students and encourage them. We should assist students needing guidance. We should give awards to the best students, and write about them in the newsletter. We should recognize good teachers and administrators also.

We should exchange visits between schools, and picnics, and student visits to museums, libraries, parliament and the Governor General's House when there is an open house. We should make the school experience more meaningful to our students so that they learn a great deal about Islam, Canada, fellow students and others and they cherish these memories. We should invite good speakers to stimulate them from time to time and answer their questions.

Not all of these can be done straight away. But if all of us are serious about contributing to our faith, community, city and country, and making the world a better place, we can implement this proposal and in a shorter time than we think.

Canada is highly respected globally. It is democratic, free and welcoming. It encourages all Canadians of diverse faiths to participate in all aspects of life. There are Hindu, Muslim and Sikh members of Parliament. There have been Sikh ministers in the federal cabinet. But from our side sometimes people run for offices, in Muslim organizations or in local, provincial or federal elections, whose ambitions far exceed their capabilities. This harms the community. We need to put in place a system where people will do what they are qualified to do, and where they will think not only of themselves but of the community, their city and their country because they love and fear their Creator.