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Latest mosque issue: The money trail

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First there was the battle over the mosque. Now there's the battle over who's funding the mosque and the campaign against it.

The fact that it's not easy to figure out where proponents and opponents of the mosque project in lower Manhattan are getting their money has given each side the opportunity to cast the other's finances — and motives — in a sinister light.

The mosque money trail became an issue in its own right when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi outraged Park51 opponents by questioning their motives and calling for an investigation of their finances, later clarifying that the finances of both sides should be transparent as the Park51 plan to build an Islamic cultural center and mosque near ground zero has become the subject of a national debate.

"If I were a Democrat, I would be ashamed of what Pelosi said and embarrassed by it," said David Horowitz, the former-leftist-turned-conservative, whose David Horowitz Freedom Center has steered nearly \$1 million over the past three years to Robert Spencer's Jihad Watch group, one of the leading opponents of the lower Manhattan mosque plan.

Horowitz bristled when asked about the source of those funds, asserting the media's time would be better spent delving into the recent refusal by Park51's developers to rule out accepting contributions from Saudi Arabia and Iran to help pay for the \$100 million project, which would be located blocks from where the World Trade Center once stood.

"You ought to find out if Syria or Iran — whose president, or whatever the hell he is, has called for the wiping of America from the face of the earth — is behind [the mosque], but you're doing an article about my funding," Horowitz said. "I have nothing to hide about my funding. But it's not parallel."

Mosque opponents have seized on the donations, totaling \$900,000, that the government of Qatar and a foundation run by Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal have made to nonprofits or projects headed by Feisal Abdul Rauf, the would-be imam of the Manhattan mosque.

Former Rep. Rick Lazio, who has made his opposition to the mosque a centerpiece of his campaign for New York's GOP gubernatorial nomination, has repeatedly called on his likely Democratic opponent, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, to investigate the financiers of the mosque project.

"Are they radical organizations?" Lazio asked at a recent campaign stop. "Are they a foreign government?"

The website of the Coalition to Honor Ground Zero — a loose alliance of anti-mosque groups that sponsored a protest against Park51 in New York last month — features a "Follow the Money" page scrutinizing Rauf's financing.

And blogger Pam Geller, who with Spencer, director of Jihad Watch, is organizing a controversial anti-mosque rally for Sept. 11, alleged that the Obama administration was helping Rauf raise money for the mosque from "Muslim countries that are rife with jihad, jizya and delusions of a global Islamic state" by bankrolling his recent trip to the Middle East. The State Department has said the purpose of the trip was to promote religious tolerance and pointed out that the imam was first recruited for the work by the Bush administration.

Mosque backers contend the allegations of nefarious foreign funding are an effort to apply a more politically palatable veneer to opposition that is based, at its core, on religious intolerance and is part of an effort to stoke Islamophobia and national security concerns to boost the GOP in the midterm elections.

"Today, it's the funding; tomorrow it'll be some other smear," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American Islamic Relations, which this week rolled out an ad campaign addressing the mosque controversy.

CAIR, too, has come under fire from opponents for accepting \$500,000 from bin Talal, among other foreign interests. Hooper said mosque opponents "will use any talking point that they can muster to put forward their agenda of hate and to help those who share their beliefs," including "a certain segment of the Republican Party."

The left has made its own charges of deception against those financing anti-mosque efforts. The White House-allied Center for American Progress last week suggested in a blog post that the registration of the Coalition to Honor Ground Zero's website to a well-funded hawkish think tank indicated that defense contractors and deep-pocketed conservative donors were bankrolling the mosque opposition.

The think tank, the Center for Security Policy, which also produced an ominous Web ad opposing the mosque for the ground zero coalition, had a \$4 million budget in 2008 (the last year for which it has filed tax returns).

Its chief operating officer, Christine Brim, declined to discuss her group's donors or its support for the coalition but, in a blog post, criticized POLITICO for asking about funding for both mosque supporters and opponents — which she said "implied a moral equivalency between 'both sides.'"

In fact, neither side's funding is quite so clear-cut or ominous as their critics allege.

In addition to the donations from Qatar and the Saudi prince, Rauf's nonprofits — the Cordoba Initiative and the American Society for Muslim Advancement — also received a healthy dose of funding from mainstream American foundations that bankroll countless apolitical organizations.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Deak Family Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Swanee Hunt Family Foundation and the William & Mary Greve Foundation combined to give \$650,000 from 2006 to 2008, according to foundation grant reports reviewed for POLITICO by the conservative Capital Research Center.

A similar Capital Research Center review of grants to CAIR found that it accepted \$755,000 from 2002 through 2006 from the California-based Sabadia Family Foundation, though Hooper said it also has accepted smaller contributions from the Embassies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have purchased tables at CAIR fundraising events.

"As an American Muslim organization, we have to be extremely careful on [funding] issues because of the tactics used by the Muslim bashers out there," Hooper said.

He asserted that rebutting allegations about the mosque and Muslims more generally "is sometimes more difficult and expensive than what Robert Spencer and Pam Geller do, which is the promotion of hate. They throw stuff on a blog, make accusations, spread disinformation and feed into existing veins of bigotry. And it doesn't take a big budget to do that."

Debra Burlingame, who runs the group 9/11 Families for a Safe & Strong America and has played a leading role in the Coalition to Honor Ground Zero, said her group has received administrative assistance from Brim's, including for its anti-mosque efforts.

"It takes manpower to do that. I'm not even sure what that costs them," said Burlingame, who stressed that the organization is "literally run out of our own pockets" and does not accept donations. "It is the reason why I believe we are so effective — because we can't be bought."

But there's also big money behind the mosque opposition, as highlighted by the relationship between Horowitz's Los Angeles-based nonprofit, Jihad Watch — the website run by Spencer "dedicated to bringing public attention to the role that jihad theology and ideology play in the modern world" — and Joyce Chernick, the wife of a wealthy California tech company founder.

Though it was not listed on the public tax reports filed by Horowitz's Freedom Center, POLITICO has confirmed that the lion's share of the \$920,000 it provided over the past three years to Jihad Watch came from Chernick, whose husband, Aubrey Chernick, has a net worth of \$750 million, as a result of his 2004 sale to IBM of a software company he created, and a security consulting firm he now owns.

A onetime trustee of the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Aubrey Chernick led the effort to pull together \$3.5 million in venture capital to start Pajamas Media, a conservative blog network that made its name partly with hawkish pro-Israel commentary and of late has kept up a steady stream of anti-mosque postings, including one rebutting attacks by CAIR against Spencer — who Pajamas CEO Roger Simon called "one of the ideological point men in the global war on terror."

The Chernicks did not respond to messages relayed through Horowitz and a spokesman. But according to Horowitz, Joyce Chernick offered four years ago to fund Spencer and Jihad Watch, then functioning as a standalone nonprofit, under the Horowitz Center's organizational umbrella.

Horowitz said Spencer, who is writing a pamphlet on the mosque for the Horowitz Center, is "part of our small but evidently effective family."

The David Horowitz Freedom Center had a budget of \$4.5 million last year, according to its tax filings, of which \$290,000 came from the conservative Bradley Foundation, which also gave \$75,000 to the Center for Security Policy last year. Horowitz has received an average of \$461,000 a year in salary and benefits over the past three years, while Spencer has pulled in an average of \$140,000, according to the center's IRS filings.

But, Horowitz said, "Robert Spencer, David Horowitz, Pam Geller — we don't do this for the money — we do this because we believe in it."

The Freedom Center funds the Jihad Watch website and is paying for events promoting Spencer and Geller's recently released book, but Horowitz said it is not paying for Spencer and Geller's Sept. 11 protest or the controversial ads they placed on New York City buses, depicting a plane flying toward a burning World Trade Center next to a rendering of the Park51 building.

The ads were placed by a group called the Coalition for the Preservation of Ground Zero for a one-month run starting Aug. 16, at a cost of \$8,000, according to New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

That coalition, which is separate from Burlingame's, is a project of the American Freedom Defense Initiative, a nonprofit run by Geller and Spencer and incorporated at the same Bedford, N.H., address at which Jihad Watch was first registered in 2005.

Geller said the AFDI has raised money from individual donations and grants from nonprofit organizations, and Spencer last month told The Washington Post that he and Geller were able to raise \$50,000 in recent months for taxi and bus ads.

In a Jihad Watch posting this week, Geller and Spencer called for donations to help fund their Sept. 11 rally and predicted costs could exceed \$50,000.

The post concluded that "POLITICO is answering Nancy Pelosi's authoritarian, un-American call to investigate opponents of the mosque and is nosing around our finances — all they'll discover is that we have no huge donations and are relying on the support of free Americans to make this rally a reality."

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Aubrey Chernick had been a trustee of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

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