

## The Mosques of Metropolitan Chicago, 2010

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#### About the project

Before 1960, only five mosques could be found in metropolitan Chicago, all within the city limits. From research conducted in the late 1990s, I estimated that there were 67 mosques in the six-county region (cf. Numrich 2004). In a 2010 research project, I verified the locations of the 91 mosques shown on the accompanying map. This essay describes my research methods and findings for the 2010 project and discusses some implications of Islam's growing institutional presence on Chicago's (and America's) religious landscape.

#### Research Methods and Findings

My first methodological issue was to decide which organizations should be included on a list of mosques. I defined a mosque (Arabic, *masjid*) as a locally based organization that provides multiple religious activities and programs to a relatively stable and long-standing constituency (i.e., a "congregation"). This excludes some types of organizations that often appear on published lists, like prayer places in institutional settings, Muslim Students Associations on college campuses, and limited purpose Islamic organizations. Some cases require informant input to determine whether they qualify as a mosque, such as Inner-City Muslim Action Network ([see map](#)), which functions as a mosque in addition to providing social services and advocacy programming. Other cases require an educated guess, such as Inner-City Islamic Center and Market ([see map](#)), which appeared to be a functioning mosque on my site visit. Once I determined which organizations qualified as mosques, I next had to decide which mosques qualified as "Muslim." I included Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi mosques as representatives of mainstream Islam and followed scholarly convention in including mosques of non-mainstream groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam.

I compiled a list of more than 170 addresses of potential mosque locations from Internet sources and local Muslim informants and then logged more than 2,400 driving miles to verify them. That I could verify barely more than 50% of these initial addresses indicates the tenuousness of any single source of mosque locations. Internet sources vary widely in accuracy, as measured by the percentage of my 91 verified locations that they list correctly: [islamicfinder.org](#), 68%; [salatomatic.com](#), 56%; [ciogc.org](#), 54%; [pluralism.org](#), 43%; and [islamicvalley.com](#), 34%. Moreover, these sources tend to underreport non-Sunni mosques. For instance, [salatomatic.com](#) includes the largest number of Shi'a mosques yet it lists only four of at least seven in the region. Only two of the sources ([pluralism.org](#) and [salatomatic.com](#)) include even a single Ahmadiyya mosque (there are four in the region) while none of the sources comes close to including all 21 African American mosques, several of which are non-mainstream ([islamicfinder.org](#) comes closest with nine, less than half of the total).

Although my own list may be the most accurate available, it cannot be considered exhaustive. The pool of mosques in any metropolis is too fluid to be captured definitively. I

was not able to verify the locations of three mosques that I believe exist and I discovered four mosques by happenstance as I searched out nearby addresses. New mosques open and established mosques disband or move with regularity. Some mosques are little known beyond their own constituencies, others have minimal or no exterior indications of their identity. In four cases, it took multiple attempts to verify the existence of mosques for which I had correct addresses. Al-Masjid E-Mohammedi / Masjid Al-Jameel, for example, displays signage that is barely visible from the street ([see photo on map](#), courtesy author). The mosques of suburban Plainfield, Illinois further illustrate the tenuousness of lists. Only [salatomic.com](#) listed a mosque there during my research period, Islamic Foundation of Southwest Suburbs ([see map](#)). In August of 2010, I verified the location but the structure had been condemned as unsafe by the Village of Plainfield Building Department just two days earlier. Fliers at the entrance stated that mosque leaders intended to make the necessary repairs and gave a temporary location for prayers. I decided to include the address of the condemned structure on my list even though it was not functional at the time, assuming that the dislocation was only temporary. Since then, another mosque has opened in Plainfield, Al-Aqsa Community Center, which now appears on [salatomic.com](#) but not on my list.

Following are selected quantitative findings from my 2010 research of metropolitan Chicago's mosques:

- 91 verified mosques in the six-county region (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, Will). This marks a 36% increase over my estimate in the late 1990s. During approximately the same time period, the national increase was 57% (<http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/controversies-over-mosque-and-islamic-centers-across-the-us.html>, accessed February 8, 2011).
- 53% of the mosques (48 of 91) are located in the city of Chicago, 47% (43 of 91) in the suburbs. Notable clustering of mosques can be found on the city's north and south sides (due to residential patterns of immigrants and African Americans, respectively) and in suburban Cook and DuPage Counties, the latter one of the wealthiest counties in the nation.
- 23% of the mosques (21 of 91) are predominantly African American, including three affiliated with The Mosque Cares organization founded by the late Imam W. D. Mohammed and three affiliated with Minister Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, whose national headquarters is Mosque Maryam on the city's south side ([see photo on map](#), courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#)).
- 8% of the mosques (7 of 91) are Shi'ite, compared to 19% nationally (Sabir n.d.). There are four Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam mosques, including the newly built Al-Masjid-Ul-Jaamay in west suburban Glen Ellyn ([see photo on map](#), courtesy Edgar Hiestand.).
- 77% of the mosques (70 of 91) have adapted their facilities for use as a mosque. These include several former Christian churches, such as Islamic Community Center of Illinois on Chicago's north side ([see photo on map](#), courtesy author). Two mosques meet in functioning churches, including Batavia Islamic Center in the western suburbs ([see map](#)), which is featured in my book, *The Faith Next Door* (Numrich 2009: chapter 4).

- 23% of the mosques (21 of 91) are newly built. This is a much higher percentage than the national rate of 8% (Smietana 2010). The first newly built local mosque, Mosque Foundation in southwest suburban Bridgeview, opened in the early 1980s ([see map](#)). 15 of the 21 have been built since 2001, including the latest under construction, DarusSalam Foundation in west suburban Lombard ([see map](#)).
- Nearly two-thirds of the mosques (58 of 91) have some exterior indication of their Islamic identity that would be recognizable to the average American passerby, such as domes, minarets, Islamic symbols, or English signage. All but two of the 21 newly built mosques have such recognizable Islamic markers, such as Masjid Al-Faatir on Chicago's south side with its impressive dome and minarets ([see photo on map](#), courtesy Frederick J. Nachman).

### Implications

Islamic Chicago opens a window on Islamic America. What can we learn from this field research?

First, the growing number of mosques bespeaks the social and institutional maturity of Islamic America. National estimates of mosques range from 1,660 (<http://pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php#Islam>, accessed February 9, 2011) to 1,897 (<http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/controversies-over-mosque-and-islamic-centers-across-the-us.html>, accessed February 9, 2011) to 2,500 (Smietana 2010). Every major metropolitan region in the country has dozens of mosques while other regions have more mosques than most local residents realize (see the Pluralism Project's online directories at <http://pluralism.org>).

Second, new mosque construction has continued—even accelerated in Chicago—since the watershed of September 11, 2001. This has occurred in spite of—perhaps because of, in some sense—growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. This is no trivial fact as it bespeaks the civic maturity of American Islam. Building a new mosque requires interaction with government authorities, neighbors, local community interests, contractors, vendors, and others. In today's hypertense atmosphere, the lesser known story is that of the successful construction of new mosques across the country.

Third, the increasing visibility of mosques on the American religious landscape provides an important opportunity for civil discourse. As I write this essay, DuPage County has denied a height variance for a 69-foot dome and a 79-foot minaret on the proposed new facility of Muslim Educational Cultural Center of America or MECCA (Sanchez 2011; see [MECCA's website on map](#)). Domes and minarets are the most recognizable recurring elements of classical mosque architecture and often appear on newly built mosques in the United States. Public conversation about what these symbolize for Muslims can reveal analogies to Christian churches.

Without a dome and a minaret, the new mosque would look like “any other building,” says MECCA's president. “It wouldn't look like a mosque. It's like building a church without a steeple.”

Whether or not DuPage County reverses its decision and allows a variance, whether or not MECCA settles for a scaled-down dome and/or minaret, public conversation would benefit from exploring the significance of sacred architecture across America's religions.

## References

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