



Article

Olympic Proportions: The Expanding Scalar Politics of the London 'Olympics Mega-Mosque' Controversy

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Abstract

When cities host mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, these events change the context in which conventionally local political decisions are considered and made. This article follows Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat's proposed plans to build the large Abbey Mills Mosque in Newham, East London, and the controversy that followed. The analysis builds from media accounts, interviews with a leading mosque opponent, and ethnographic observation from religious gatherings at the Abbey Mills site. Taking a scalar politics approach, we investigate how the 'mega' scale of the mosque was framed and debated in media and opposition campaign accounts, and how Tablighi Jamaat belatedly responded with counterframes of its own. The 'Olympics mega-mosque' controversy would grow to encompass an increasingly broad public sphere and larger anxieties about national identity, government competence, and the integration of Muslims in Britain. We conclude with implications of the case for studying contentious politics, Islamophobia, and contemporary governance.

Keywords

mega-events, mosques, Muslims in Britain, Olympic Games, scalar politics

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Introduction

On 6 July 2005, following three consecutive failed Olympic bids by the United Kingdom (Birmingham 1992, Manchester 1996, 2000), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) at its 117th session in Singapore announced that London had won the bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. London had triumphed over Paris, the assumed favourite, by 54 to 50 votes. It was to be the first city in the history of the modern contests to host the Games three times. A jovial mood spread through London and the country at large. The scene was well captured by the *Times* newspaper (Naughton, 2005):

Trafalgar Square erupted in cheers as thousands gathered there to watch the proceedings on giant television screens saw Jacques Rogge, the IOC president, open the result envelope and utter the words that seemed so unlikely only a few months ago – that the Games of the 30th Olympiad were ‘awarded to the city of London’.

These celebrations were cut short by the macabre events of the very next day. On 7 July 2005, the country awoke to find that terrorists had detonated bombs at several London locations in the name of Islam. The three bombs in the underground transport system and one on a bus killed 56 people (including the four suicide bombers), injured hundreds more, and brought the capital’s public transport system to a standstill. These atrocious acts of terror had been impeccably timed, as they simultaneously silenced London’s celebrations and revealed international security concerns about hosting the Olympic Games there. That being so, government, media, and public attention turned to focus on Islamic groups and Muslims as a whole in Britain. The previously little known transnational Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat was to come under scrutiny for its plans to construct a mosque, the Abbey Mills Mosque, adjacent to the main site of the 2012 Olympic Games.

In this article we investigate the public controversy that arose from Tablighi Jamaat’s mosque construction plans. We build on Danny MacKinnon’s (2010) theoretical formulation of ‘scalar politics’ to analyse the ways in which the size and scope of the issue was politically contested. We argue that local Tablighi leaders, being inexperienced political actors, were ill prepared for the public debate that engulfed their mosque project after the Olympics announcement and 7/7 terrorism. In particular, the Tablighis’ commissioning of ambitious architect Ali Mangera to design the mosque would unwittingly consign the project to failure. Mangera designed a mosque of ‘Olympic proportions’. The sheer scale of the project gained widespread national and international publicity and would transform the arena of political contention. Although the debate on the mosque project is still ongoing, Tablighi Jamaat’s strategic position and construction options have significantly lessened. As we narrate in our account of the controversy, the construction of the Abbey Mills Mosque was to be hampered more by scale than by substance.

The Contentious Politics of Mosque Construction

A substantial literature has investigated controversies over mosque construction in European cities. These controversies are important because they reflect wider issues of integration, governance, security, and community cohesion that arise from the growing

visible presence of Muslims in European urban centres. Notable recent studies of the topic include Marcel Maussen's comparative work on mosque contestation in France and the Netherlands (2009), Jocelyne Cesari's (2005) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* special issue on mosque conflicts, and Stefano Allievi's (2009) collaborative policy report on *Conflicts over Mosques in Europe*. From these and other recent work we can derive common patterns in mosque construction and contestation.

A widespread observation about Europe's Islamic religious buildings is that they are of several different kinds and at different scales. Stefano Allievi (2009) differentiates between three main types: Muslim community centres (often in converted buildings), purpose-built mosques, and Muslim prayer rooms (a loose category, often in less noticeable storefronts or residential buildings). The construction of purpose-built mosques is much more likely to be contested than the conversion or use of a pre-existing building. Allievi also explains that a further distinction between mosque types is frequently invoked in French debates, between the small local *mosquée de proximité* and the *mosquée cathédrale*. *Mosquées cathédrales*, the category to which the proposed Abbey Mills mosque belongs, have a far greater role in symbolic and community representation.

Purpose-built mosques, especially *mosquées cathédrales*, are controversial in large part due to their visibility, religious symbolism, and claim to public space. Katy Gardner (2002: 109) describes the 'Islamicization' of urban spaces in Britain during the process of mosque building:

Increasingly, specific areas of Britain were becoming viable places in which to be a Muslim. In Tower Hamlets, for example, not only is the East London mosque a striking example of Middle Eastern architecture, but with its prominent position on the Whitechapel Road, and the broadcast of its *azan* (call to prayer), it is a graphic claim to British space by local Muslims.

Also writing about the East End and the East London Mosque, John Eade (1993) considers the creation of Islamic spaces as a process of politically articulating community. Such articulations may threaten the national and community imaginaries of other local residents and political actors, as they can be perceived as alien intrusions into national, cultural, or 'secular' space. The Swiss referendum banning the construction of minarets successfully mobilized a mass resistance to the symbolic expansion of Islamic space, passing with 57.5 per cent of the vote (Schindall, 2009). Another potent example of a perceived spatial threat is the controversy over the proposed Park51 Muslim community centre in New York City. It has been branded the 'Ground Zero Mosque' by opponents, touching a nerve of the September 11 tragedy, even though the proposed building is not actually a mosque and would be located at a two-block distance from the Ground Zero site (Ash, 2010).

Negative public reactions to mosque construction are frequently understood as manifestations of xenophobia, Islamophobia, or colonialist sensibilities (Maussen, 2009). A frequent theme in research on opposition to mosques is the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) movements led by local residents and 'concerned citizens'. Some NIMBY movements justify their opposition to mosques on procedural grounds that belie underlying cultural sentiments. In other cases, far right political mobilization becomes more open and explicit. One of the most sophisticated treatments of these issues is Kevin Dunn's (2001)

explanation of opposition to mosque developments in Sydney, Australia, in the 1980s and 1990s. Dunn demonstrates how NIMBY movements in Sydney articulated themselves as concerned local citizens and portrayed Muslims as a violent and misogynistic other. He found that some Muslims attempted to counterframe themselves as family-orientated neighbours and contributing citizens in order to regain legitimacy in public debates.

Previous research has found mosque construction to be relatively unproblematic in Britain, at least when compared to elsewhere in Europe. Seán McLoughlin (2005) studied the minutes of the Bradford Council planning committee from 1999 to mid 2003, finding no evidence of public mobilizations against mosque renovation or construction.¹ Richard Gale (2005) studied Birmingham City Council proceedings and found that mosque construction is somewhat more likely to be contested in the urban planning processes than other religious buildings. However, in his case studies of particular mosque projects, Gale notes a transition in the Birmingham City Council's approach over time from 'ambivalence – even hostility – towards such projects, to more recent endorsement, as [mosques] have been increasingly celebrated as signifiers of Birmingham's cultural diversity' (2004: 31). Mosque construction tends to be accommodated in British cities due to Britain's multiculturalist approach to governing diversity. In terms of the acceptance of visible articulations of Islam such as mosques, 'the United Kingdom may be the most advanced nation in Europe' (Allievi, 2009: 29).

It is worth noting that in recent years multiculturalism has come under fire from an increasing number of politicians and commentators in the West (Hamilton, 2010). Christian Joppke (2004) argues that multiculturalism is now 'in retreat' in favour of civic integration. In the case of Britain, however, Meer and Modood (2009) observe that while political discourses have shifted towards the civic, this trend is a 'civic re-balancing' of inbuilt British multiculturalism rather than the charting of a new non-multiculturalist direction. Modood writes elsewhere (2010) that multiculturalism has actually expanded in recent years in terms of the growth of faith schools, new laws against discriminating on the basis of religion and inciting religious hatred, and partnerships with Muslims in the Prevent counter-terrorism agenda. Britain tends to retain multiculturalism in practice, even when not in name.

We are persuaded by Meer and Modood's analysis of contemporary multiculturalism, because it helps make sense of Britain's generally high degree of accommodation to mosque construction, even during times of shifting policy rhetoric. Yet their work also reveals the Abbey Mills Mosque controversy addressed in this article to be an outlier from British norms. One would have expected the mosque to be welcomed with open arms as a multicultural Olympic landmark. Some mosque supporters, such as former London Mayor Ken Livingstone, took just this kind of positive 'cultural landmark' position. Why, then, would the mosque be so strongly and effectively opposed? Answering this question requires understanding how the 2012 Olympics as an anticipated 'mega-event' would fundamentally alter the context of the Abbey Mills site.

Mega-events and their Mega-extents

Olympic Games are the paradigmatic example of what social researchers have classified as 'mega-events'. According to Roche (2000), mega-events are 'large-scale cultural

(including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance'. There is a substantial literature in sociology and in the interdisciplinary field of sport studies regarding mega-events in general and the Olympic Games in particular (e.g. Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006).

It will be helpful now to briefly review the components of Roche's definition, to understand the various ways in which an event must be 'mega' to qualify for analysis as a mega-event. First, all mega events must be 'large-scale' in terms of their budgets, publicity, ambitions, etc. Second, they must have a 'dramatic character': the event must be cast into a narrative intended to captivate and excite, such as the pursuit of a gold medal excellence or the display of the greatness of nations. Mega-events must have a 'mass appeal', drawing large audiences, both those physically present and those following the event via television or other media. Finally, Roche defines mega events as having 'international significance', attracting people from many nations to the physical venues and generating discussion in national-level or even macro-level public spheres (Keane, 1998).

Based on Roche's definition, events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the World Expo (in Shanghai in 2010) can be classed as 'mega'. Other events, such as the US Super Bowl do not qualify – in this case because although the Super Bowl has 'mass appeal' among a viewing public, this public is almost exclusively within American nation-state borders and thus diminishes the event's 'international significance'.

In summary, mega-events take place on a mega-extent. The sheer massive scale of these events and of the international publics that engage with them has meant that they are highly salient exemplars of globalization processes, including the cultivation of cosmopolitan or global identities alongside the countervailing strengthening of nationalisms and regionalisms. Mega-events like the Olympic Games are among the most analytically valuable spaces in which to study simultaneous global and local (or perhaps 'glocal') framing and counter-framing (Robertson, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997).

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001 – which themselves had a highly dramatic character and reached a mass public – the Olympic Games and events of similar magnitude have become a greater focus of security concerns (Atkinson and Young, 2005). Toohey and Veal (2007) write that the Olympics are infused with more 'terrorism capital' than ever before. The 1972 Munich massacre that killed 11 people remains the most devastating terrorist attack on an Olympic Games. Yet the Atlanta 1996 Olympic bombing, the increased security measures since Salt Lake City 2002, and the high level of media attention to radicalism and terrorism have kept Olympics haunted by the spectre of easily conceivable terrorist violence.

Events and projects of a 'mega' scale are more susceptible to media overstatement, political manipulation, and public hysteria (Toohey and Veal, 2007). Les Back (2007), quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt, observes that political invocations of the War on Terror have imbued our times with '[n]ameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror'. The tone of media reporting on Muslims perpetuates this climate of fear (Altheide, 2006). Contemporary fears of Muslim terrorist violence could be readily associated with a mosque of 'mega' proportions, all the more given its proximity to the 2012 Olympics mega-event.

In this article, we draw on Danny MacKinnon's (2010) recent theoretical work to understand how the 'mega' scale of the Abbey Mills Mosque project influenced its

political contestation and the associated sense of fear. Scale is often taken for granted when sociologists employ terms such as 'local', 'global', 'transnational', or 'mega'. We propose taking a leaf from human geographers, for whom the dynamics of scale have been a major area of inquiry. There is a substantial research tradition in geography on the politics of scale (e.g. Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997). MacKinnon's contribution is to reformulate this as 'scalar politics' to emphasize that politics is rarely about scale per se, but rather that political processes occur at different scales. He builds his articulation of scalar politics on a critical realist ontology in order to recognize that, on the one hand, scales are socially constructed and strategically deployed and yet, on the other, these deployments of scale can (perhaps loosely) refer to emergent power relations and material realities. In other words, a discursive construct of scale and the 'actual size' of scale are dynamically interrelated.

We apply a scalar politics perspective to our research design and analysis. As we delineate in the next section, we have followed three kinds of scale shifts in the mosque controversy. These include the socially constructed framing of the mosque's scale, the scale of the mosque plans, and the scale of public spheres in which the project was contested. We are able to observe the 'mega'-scale framing of the mosque by media and anti-mosque campaigns, and how this framing would simultaneously expand the scale of public debate while dramatically downsizing Tablighi Jamaat's actual construction scale options.

Research Methods

We base our analysis for this article primarily on press releases, news coverage, website and YouTube content, and statements made by key figures involved in the Abbey Mills mosque controversy. We compiled a database of these sources, beginning with the initial breaking news story from the *Sunday Times* on 25 November 2005. Using these sources, we traced the development of discourses of support and opposition to the mosque project. Our central analytical interest is in scalar politics. We traced three kinds of scale shifts: Changes in 1) actors' rhetorical framings of the scale of the mosque; 2) the size and scope of the mosque construction plans; and 3) the scale of the public sphere in which the controversy was debated.

Our understanding of this case is grounded in author Pieri's doctoral dissertation research (forthcoming) on the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. Thousands of Muslims meet in Tablighi Jamaat gatherings on Thursday evenings each week at the Abbey Mills site, in a makeshift portacabin mosque structure.² Both authors have visited these Thursday night missionary gatherings at the structure. DeHanas attended a gathering on 30 August 2007. Pieri attended these weekly for ethnographic observation from October 2009 to October 2010. We draw on our experiences from these Tablighi activities at the proposed mosque site and also from our relationships with individuals in the religious movement to understand the group's orientation and activities in London.

We have also sought to understand opposition to the mosque through our contact with former Newham Councillor Alan Craig, the leader of the 'Mega Mosque No Thanks' campaign. Pieri has met with or interviewed Craig at various times over the course of the

controversy. The most recent informal meetings with Craig were on 11 February and 11 March 2010, with a more focused interview taking place on 10 June 2010.

Tablighi Jamaat and the Abbey Mills Site

Tablighi Jamaat (Arabic for 'proselytising group') was founded in 1926 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalwi in the Mewat province of India southwest of Delhi, as a reaction to what he perceived to be a depraved state of Islam in the region. Ilyas was dismayed by the syncretic practices of the local population who seldom distinguished between Muslim and Hindu customs (Sikand, 1995). British colonial administrators had endowed categories of religious identity with greater salience through an identity-based system of political representation, further facilitating the growth of religious movements including Tablighi Jamaat (Hardy, 1972; Jones, 1989; Sikand, 2002).

Tablighi Jamaat has expanded from its humble origins to become a transnational movement, encompassing approximately 80 million Muslims worldwide. The size and scope of the Tablighi movement has prompted comparisons with global Pentecostalism (Levitt, 2007). Annual Tablighi gatherings in Pakistan and Bangladesh attract the largest number of Muslims to any single location outside of the annual Hajj (Hicks, 2009). The six points of the *Tablighi Nisab*, which every member of the group is required to consult and study on a regular basis, constitute the core, ethos, and *raison d'être* of the group (Ilyas, 1967; Kandhalwi, 2007). These points are:

- 1 Recitation of the *Kalimah* (Article of Faith)
- 2 *Salat* (obligatory prayers)
- 3 Knowledge (of the principles of Islam) and remembrance (of God)
- 4 Respect for Muslims
- 5 Sincerity of intention
- 6 Donation of, and good use of spare time in the path of God

The primary objective of Tablighi Jamaat is to draw every Muslim back to the central tenets of Islam as delineated in these six points. The Tablighi lifestyle is thus one of *tabligh* (proselytic preaching) and *da'wah* (invitation) to fellow Muslims. Thursday evening gatherings at Tablighi mosques and in prayer rooms across the world are times for prayer, preaching, and the organizing of missionary tours of *tabligh* and *da'wah*. Tablighi preaching is predominantly directed to fellow (lapsed) Muslims, while preaching to non-Muslims will only become more relevant if and when a grand scale revival of Muslims is realized. Barbara Metcalf (2002) compares the Tablighi regimen of personal and ethical renewal to 'Twelve Step' programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous. There is a general agreement among most scholars of the movement that it is inward-looking and quietistic, with many characterizing Tablighis as apolitical (e.g. Roy, 2006).

At various points during the Abbey Mills Mosque controversy, media coverage has speculated that Tablighi Jamaat may be a cover for a terrorist network that included the 7/7 bombers. Yoginder Sikand, a foremost researcher of the movement, disputes such speculation. He argues instead that:

The [Tablighi] leadership is quite opposed to what would be defined as terrorism. This [movement] is extremely loosely structured, they have no control over people who come and go ... it's not the association with Tablighi Jamaat that makes them radical. (quoted in Agence France-Press, 2007)

Our own ethnographic research with Tablighi Jamaat confirms Sikand's assessment. We have been able to observe the very loose structure of the movement, which is very easy to enter or leave. The Thursday evening teaching is resolutely grounded in the six points of *Tablighi Nisab* and as such is certainly not a motivation for terrorism or violence.

In 1996, Tablighi Jamaat's charitable foundation purchased the 18-acre Abbey Mills site in Newham, London at a cost of £1.6 million. Tablighi Jamaat already had a significant presence in East London at that time, including a centre for their missionary meetings at the Christian Street Markazi Mosque (Husain, 2007). Abdul Khaliq Mian, a businessman involved in Tablighi Jamaat, drove forward the fundraising and the purchase of the Newham site. Mian, who came to Britain from Pakistan at age 11, was encouraged by Muslim members of the Newham Council to invest in the property: 'I was told it was a very, very strategic site. They said, "Get a planner and the best architect you can and build the biggest mosque you can"' (Perlez, 2007).

The land purchase, despite its large cost, was not seen as controversial at the time. The Tablighis were understood to be an apolitical movement. The site was located significantly far into East London, in the West Ham area of the London Borough of Newham. It was out of the public eye and at the premises of the former Abbey Mills chemical works, making it not particularly desirable for commercial developers. The land remained unused by the Tablighis for almost a decade, and there were no stirrings of the controversy to come.

Not to Scale: The Expanding Controversy

The successful London Olympic bid gave the Tablighis impetus for action. Entrepreneurial Abdul Khaliq Mian moved the process forward as the Tablighis commissioned respected architecture firm Mangera Yvars to design plans for the mosque complex.

Architects Ali Mangera and Ada Yvars saw the commission as a creative opportunity for forward-thinking Islamic architecture. Mangera, a South African born Muslim, would publicly release the plans and frequently spoke with media outlets about them in the months that followed. The mosque was designed on a large scale indeed: a permanent structure with the capacity for 40,000 worshippers, with tent-like extensions increasing the space to accommodate up to a total of 70,000 during festivals such as *Eid al-Fitr*. The mosque style was contemporary, 'a sinuous wave of a building that folds and flows into and out of the old industrial landscape from which it rises' (Glancey, 2006). The mosque design included exhibition and meeting spaces, residential areas, a school, and other features. A memorable aspect of this design was the attempt to create a 'green' mosque that incorporated wind turbine minarets, solar power, and water-generated power alongside peaceful settings of Islamic gardens inspired by those in Isfahan. The mosque architecture was meant to blur boundaries between worshippers and public visitors. In

Mangera's words, 'The whole complex is designed as an invitation' (Glancey, 2006). This idea of 'invitation' (i.e. *da'wah*) to outsiders is an intriguing one, especially considering the intra-Muslim focus of Tablighi Jamaat's customary *da'wah* efforts.

On 27 November 2005, the *Sunday Times* became the first to break the news of the proposed mosque with the headline: 'Giant Mosque for 40,000 May Be Built at London Olympics'. This article set the precedent for news coverage in the following months and years. The *Times* described the mosque's 'futuristic design features [including] wind turbines instead of minarets ... and a translucent latticed roof'. Its main focus was on the sheer scale of the project. The article mentioned that the mosque complex could hold 70,000 people, which it noted is 'only 10,000 fewer than the Olympic stadium'. The scale was compared with that of the current largest religious building in Britain, the Baitul Futuh mosque in Surrey, which holds 10,000 people, and also with 'Liverpool's Anglican cathedral, the largest Christian place of worship, [which] has a capacity of 3,000'.³ The scale of the construction project was further conveyed in its physical description as a 'three-storey mosque' that would 'become the "Muslim quarter" for the Games, acting as a hub for Islamic competitors and spectators'. Interspersed within this main narrative of the grand scale were concerns that Tablighi Jamaat may have ties to terrorism. The mosque would cost more than £100 million to build, which the article stated would be based on donations 'from Britain and abroad'.

Two days later, the story was picked up by Mark Steyn of *The Telegraph* in his article 'Wake Up and Listen to the Muezzin' (Steyn, 2005). Steyn continued the theme of the size of the mosque, noting that it 'will be the biggest house of worship in the UK: it will hold 70,000 people – only 10,000 fewer than the Olympic stadium, and 67,000 more than the largest Christian Cathedral'. Steyn's comments emphasized the parallel nature of the Olympic stadium and Tablighi mosque projects, as he wrote that the two projects will 'go up side by side in Newham'. He picked up on the wording from the *Times* to emphasize the foreign nature of the mosque: 'Tablighi Jamaat plans to raise the necessary £100 million through donations from Britain and "abroad"'. Yet at the same time Steyn played on debates about Britishness sparked by then-Chancellor Gordon Brown,⁴ writing that 'Whatever one feels about it, the London Markaz will be a more accurate symbol of Britain in 2012 than Her Majesty pulling up next door with the Household Cavalry'.

In these initial stories, the Abbey Mills Mosque project gained newsworthiness in large part because of its massive scale and its location next to the Olympics site. The stories originate themes that would run through much future press coverage of the issue: the Muslim quarter established by the mosque; the national image broadcast to the world in 2012; connections of the mosque to funding from 'abroad'; and suspected links of Tablighi Jamaat with terrorism.

Alongside the early news reporting in 2005, a grassroots campaign began. Alan Craig, then a Newham local councillor with the Christian People's Alliance Party, would spearhead local (and eventually national) activism against the construction of the mosque. Craig formed 'Newham Concern', a group of London citizens who 'want our capital to be a model of social harmony between our many communities'. The campaign's website MegaMosqueNoThanks.com became a central source for information and opinion on the controversy. The website portrays Tablighi Jamaat as a closed separatist group, the very

antithesis of a modern and vibrant multicultural Britain. It provides resources for site visitors ranging from FAQs on the mosque project, to press article links, to YouTube videos against the mosque featuring Alan Craig. In one such video, Craig talks specifically about the relationship of the mosque project to the Olympics:

It will be very much part of the Olympics scene. The heart of an 'Islamic quarter'. This is precisely and diametrically opposed to the Olympic ideal. The whole purpose of the Olympics is people come from all backgrounds, all races, all colours, all religions and meet together with mutual respect, equally, in the name of sport. That's the Olympic ideal. So we don't want a Muslim quarter ... [But this mosque project] is classic Tablighi Jamaat. They themselves by their values will undermine the Olympics.

Craig is a committed Christian and leads the Christian People's Alliance Party. In his activism against the mosque, he balances his faith with more broadly unifying narratives of the 'Olympic ideal' and the concerns of locals ('we'). Craig contrasts these ideals with his characterization of Tablighi Jamaat as a separatist group whose values will 'undermine the Olympics'.

The genius of Alan Craig's campaign has been the popularizing of the term 'Olympics mega-mosque' as the scale frame for the issue. The first press accounts did not use the term 'mega-mosque', but during 2006 this quickly rose to become the most common designation.

Opposition to the mosque intensified under Craig's leadership, while Tablighi Jamaat seldom responded to media requests. As the mosque controversy developed over 2006, the tone of news stories on the proposed mosque shifted from inquisitive reporting to more concerned or even confrontational accounts. A September 2006 story 'The shadow cast by a mega-mosque' (Johnston, 2006) illustrates this change well. In contrast to the 10 months' earlier *Telegraph* story that half-jokingly elevated the mosque above Queen and cavalry as a national symbol, this late 2006 story was much more pointed. It identified the mosque as an Islamic 'coup' over English national identity:

[I]t is intended to be a significant Islamic landmark whose prominence and stature will be enhanced by its proximity to the Olympic site. When television viewers around the world see aerial views of the stadium during the opening ceremony in six years' time, the most prominent religious building in the camera shot will not be one of the city's iconic churches that have shaped the nation's history, such as St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey, but the mega-mosque. Its arrival in London will be a significant coup for Islam and a major event for the country as a whole.

Another example from September 2006 is the *Guardian* story by Jamie Doward: 'Battle to block massive mosque: Project for 40,000 worshippers "has links to radical Islam"'. The story foregrounds worries of terrorism in its headline quote, though the quote is never attributed in the text. The article focuses primarily on speculation that the mosque project would look for Saudi Wahhabi funding and that it could be linked with terrorists.

By this time, the mosque's scale as a public issue had grown from an intriguing London development into a national level security and identity threat. Indeed, by early

2007 there was evidence that the British government was prepared to intervene. A story in *The Sunday Telegraph* (Leapman and Wynne-Jones, 2007) noted that a 'senior security source' expected ministers to block the mosque construction. A 'senior Government source' confirmed this intention, and was quoted as saying: 'We are going to stop it ... to give the Olympics a clear run.' It was at this point that the government's community cohesion and domestic counter-terrorism agendas became most clearly implicated – the objective of providing an Olympic environment that is both culturally inclusive and secure now seemed to require halting the mosque construction plans altogether.

The scale of the mosque's importance continued to expand in media accounts through 2006 and 2007, meriting increasing attention from the government and the public. A petition was launched on the 10 Downing Street website to lobby the Prime Minister for action against the mosque. The petition was worded as follows:

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Abolish plans to build a £100 million mega Mosque.

Details of Petition:

We the Christian population of this great country England would like the proposed plan to build a Mega Mosque in East London Scrapped. This will only cause terrible violence and suffering and more money should go into the NHS.

The online anti-mosque petition demonstrates just how much public fears had been inflated by regular news coverage of the 'mega-mosque'. The identification of petition signatories as 'We the Christian population of this great country England' expresses the perceived threat to religious and national symbolic boundaries that had been emerging in media accounts. The petition's statement that the '£100 million mega Mosque' funds should be diverted to the NHS implies that public monies were being put towards the project, which had never actually been the case. Finally, the words 'terrible violence and suffering' evoke feverish images of the mosque causing large-scale terrorist attacks, demonstrating how much power the 'mega-mosque' (as a social construction) now held for animating Islamophobia.

A total of 281,882 people signed the online anti-mosque petition. It became the most popular petition on the 10 Downing Street website at the time (BBC News, 2007a). The petition would be discredited first by its factual errors and later when it came to light that its author, Jill Barham, was connected with the British National Party. Even so, the online response provides a sense of the expanding segment of the public engaged in the issue as well as the expanding scale of the mosque's perceived significance. Public imaginaries of the 'mega-mosque' by this time encompassed a phantasmagoria of national fears of terrorism, Islamic cultural incursions, and government incompetence.

Tablighi Responses: Downsizing the Mega-mosque

Tablighi Jamaat had allowed their mosque project to be defined by its enemies. Their own public silence during most of this period only perpetuated their image as an isolated and

secretive network. Such a lacklustre defence of the mosque construction can be attributed to the Tablighis' inexperience and general disinterest with engaging in political affairs. At one public debate on the issue, Tablighi Jamaat representatives failed to appear and their opponent Alan Craig 'was left to vent against the group' (Amanullah, 2007).

However, in March 2007, while public anxieties about the mosque were expanding, Tablighi Jamaat made an attempt to take control. They hired Indigo Public Affairs to manage their communications and image. Through this firm the Tablighis embarked on a concerted campaign to counterframe the scale of the mosque. The Tablighi leadership decided to drop Ali Mangera and his vast mosque complex plan in favour of architectural firm Allies and Morrison. Tablighi Jamaat also announced that the mosque construction had been scaled down from the original 40,000 or 70,000 capacity to what they described as 'medium sized', at a 12,000 capacity (BBC News, 2007b). The mosque would still be the largest religious building in the UK, but it would not be 'Wembley Stadium' (Amanullah, 2007).

Tablighi spokesperson Abdul Rashid Bhatti was interviewed about these changes in the BBC story 'Mosque plans downsized' (BBC News, 2007b). Indigo Public Affairs created an attractive mosque website (Abbeymillsmosque.com) to counter Alan Craig's popular MegaMosqueNoThanks.com. The Abbey Mills Mosque website presented Tablighi Jamaat as an open-minded and tolerant spiritual movement. It included a FAQ to answer enquiries about the mosque construction as well as YouTube videos to respond to Alan Craig's videos. Perhaps most important, the mosque was now designated as the 'Abbey Mills Mosque' on the website and on all PR materials. In contrast to 'Olympics mega-mosque', the counterframe of 'Abbey Mills' connotes a project that is modest, local, and manageable.

Despite their efforts at reframing, Tablighi Jamaat proved incapable of quelling the controversy. Indeed, some of the rhetoric on the mosque website about the religious movement's diversity and inclusiveness was substantially overstated. More controversially, a link was found on the Abbey Mills Mosque website to a YouTube 'obituary' showing Alan Craig and his wife and children, and ending with the words 'the mosque will be built in time for the 2012 Olympic Games. We must ask Allah to strengthen us.' The video had been posted online by 23-year-old 'Abdullah1425' from Stevenage, who appears to have been an independent supporter. Nevertheless, the episode heightened tensions.

It proved impossible to downsize the mega-mosque controversy, in part because of the scale of the public sphere engaged with it. Most mosque debates in Britain are highly localized, but this 'mega' project had generated responses from a macro-public sphere across Britain and beyond (Keane, 1998). Prominent British Muslim voices against the project included the Muslim Public Affairs Committee and Ghayasuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Parliament. Another blow came from Philip Lewis, respected academic and interfaith advisor in Bradford, who voiced his opposition on the grounds that 'such a mosque would lead to a ghetto' (Wynne-Jones, 2008). Tablighi Jamaat had little scope for controlling a debate that was making headlines in international media such as *The Economist* (2007) and *The New York Times* (Perlez, 2007).

In January 2010, the Newham Council presented Tablighi Jamaat with an eviction notice. The Tablighis appealed against this eviction, requesting a two-year extension in

their use of the temporary mosque structure. A public inquiry was held in the Newham Town Hall in early 2011. The inquiry included testimonies against Tablighi Jamaat from Alan Craig's Newham Concern, Taj Hargey of Oxford, and Tehmina Kazi of British Muslims for Secular Democracy, all of whom argued that Tablighi Jamaat contravenes liberal democratic values. On 23 May 2011, planning inspector Graham Dudley announced his decision: he was conditionally granting Tablighi Jamaat's extension request due to a 'substantial need' for worship facilities in the area. This was an important, though temporary, victory for Tablighi Jamaat. Opposition continues unabated and the future of the Abbey Mills Mosque is far from certain.

Conclusion

How did an undesirable Newham land purchase in 1996 by a supposedly mild-mannered group manage to grow, within a decade, into a centrifuge of public anxieties on national identity, government negligence, and Islamic conspiracy? We have argued that scalar politics provides a lens for understanding this transformation. The 'mega' scale of the 2012 Olympic Games reshaped the context of the Newham site. The framing of the 'Olympics mega-mosque' controversy would justify its entry in ever widening realms of public debate. As opposing voices increased from government, academia, Muslim elites, international media outlets, and a large-scale petition, Tablighi Jamaat was left with a shrinking range of construction options. It is not inevitable that the project will be defeated, but Tablighi Jamaat's reluctant late involvement in the debate has left them with significant barriers to overcome.

In this article we demonstrate how a scalar politics perspective can be applied to research on controversies and contentious politics. Although earlier studies have shown the utility of this kind of approach (e.g. Kurtz, 2003), we argue that MacKinnon's (2010) work provides a particularly coherent basis for understanding the different interrelated forms of scale in political contestation. We traced the relationship between three forms of scalar politics: rhetorical scale framings of the mosque; the scale of construction plans; and the scale of public spheres in which the controversy was debated. Future research could build on and further develop this multileveled approach.

In particular, this article demonstrates the importance of 'scaling up' in the reception of multiculturalism and the cultivation of Islamophobia. Alan Craig's designation of the Abbey Mills Mosque proposal as a mega-mosque would prove to be an effective strategy for widening attention – and objection – to the project. The power of scaling up became most evident in the anti-mosque petition that adopted Craig's mega-mosque framing and associated it with much inflated Islamophobic imagery. Many cases of opposition to mosques in particular and multiculturalism in general seem to involve scaling up as an obstructionist strategy. It is notable, for instance, that the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque' in New York has also been labelled a mega-mosque by conservative blogger Pamela Geller, its leading opponent. Geller and her co-belligerents deploy their own scalar politics of sensationalist blogging, high visibility protests, and frequent media appearances that have successfully scaled up the issue to the international macro-public sphere. This scaling up has increased fears and suspicions associated with the New York project and made voicing support for it increasingly controversial and politically costly.

Michael Keith (2005: 166) writes that contemporary urban life is characterized by ‘an ambivalent stew of cosmopolitan hope and racist intolerance’. Our account of the Abbey Mills Mosque controversy should not ignore the hope within this ‘ambivalent stew’. While Alan Craig has remained stalwart in his opposition to the Abbey Mills Mosque, he has done so on the basis of a positive Olympic cosmopolitanism that he believes Tablighi Jamaat would compromise. Likewise, it is important to note that none of the major opponents of the mosque, including Philip Lewis and Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, have been willing to sign or associate themselves with the Islamophobic anti-mosque petition. Uncovering the full motives of these mosque opponents would require investigation beyond the scope of this article. Even so, our case study demonstrates the need for analytical pause before attributing any given instance of mosque opposition to crude prejudice or Islamophobia (Astor, 2010).⁵

Finally, the scalar politics in the ‘Olympics mega-mosque’ controversy is intriguing because the Tablighi Jamaat leaders in Newham were inexperienced political actors. Their low political fluency and reluctance to reframe debates left them outsiders to their own mosque debate process. An article about the Newham ‘mega-mosque’ in *The Economist* (2007) quotes a Muslim local resident as saying that Tablighis are ‘not radical at all. It’s impossible to get them to vote, become school governors, or anything.’ *The Economist* concludes by posing a question: ‘There is an endless panic about political Islam. Is apolitical Islam much better?’

The Economist’s question may be of decreasing relevance to the future of Tablighi Jamaat in Newham. Our ethnographic research (Pieri, forthcoming) suggests that the local Tablighi leadership is learning from the mosque controversy and developing increasing political sophistication within a traditionally ‘apolitical’ movement. Instead, the mosque controversy is more demonstrative of the complexity of contemporary forms of governance (Newman, 2005). As power is devolved from central and sometimes from local government to allow greater participation from civil society and the public, ambiguities arise as to whose opinion really matters. These ambiguities are exacerbated in the glocal context of a mega-event. In the ‘Olympics mega-mosque’ controversy, civil society actors, national and international media, and hundreds of thousands of online petitioners all added their weight to what may have otherwise been a more conventional local decision process.

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Notes

- 1 McLoughlin found four instances in city council minutes of concerns raised over mosques due to issues such as parking, but none of these amounted to significant or sustained contestation.
- 2 Our estimate from Pieri’s weekly research at these Abbey Mills events is that 2000 to 3000 Muslims attend, although not all would identify themselves as Tablighis. In theory these meetings are illegal, but in practice they are allowed while the mosque construction planning permission remains in limbo.
- 3 Liverpool Cathedral is the largest Anglican church building in Britain. The largest British Christian church building (of any denomination) at the time of the *Sunday Times* article was

actually Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), a Neo-Pentecostal church with a capacity of 4000 that was located near the Olympic site. The KICC was requested to move in anticipation of the 2012 Games, a contrast to the plans for a 'mega-mosque' that was noted with irony by several commentators. KICC is now located in Walthamstow.

- 4 As Chancellor, Gordon Brown raised the issue of 'Britishness' in a panel discussion in *Prospect* magazine (April 2005) and a speech to the Fabian Society (14 January 2006).
- 5 We take the view that Islamophobia is a critical concern, yet specific cases of opposition to Muslim politics and projects are not inevitably Islamophobic. Our argument in this case study distinguishes between the anti-mosque petition which was Islamophobic and the actions of the prominent mosque opponents which were not evidently so. See Sayyid and Vakil (2010) for the academic state of the art on Islamophobia.

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