

## New Muslim College Welcomes Freshmen In California

by The Associated Press



Associated Press -Imam Zaid Shakir, rear, lectures during Islamic History Class at Zaytuna College in Berkeley, Monday, Aug. 30, 2010.

BERKELEY, Calif. *September 9, 2010, 05:44 am ET*

Amid the uproar over the proposed mosque near ground zero in New York, a new Islamic college recently opened its doors in California with plans to educate a new

generation of Muslim-American leaders.

Founded by three prominent Islamic scholars, Zaytuna College in Berkeley is a small school with just five faculty members and 15 students in its inaugural freshman class. The school wants to become the country's first fully accredited Muslim academic institution.

Zaytuna College is opening at a time when fierce opposition to the proposed Islamic community center and mosque near the former World Trade Center has left many American Muslims feeling under siege.

Many mosques are boosting security this week ahead of the Sept. 11 anniversary that some fear could bring trouble to Muslim communities. And the leader of a small Florida church that espouses anti-Islam philosophy is determined to burn copies of the Quran on Sept. 11.

Zaytuna has generated little controversy in this famously liberal college town, but some conservatives question the founders' motives. Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, a conservative think tank, accuses the school of seeking to indoctrinate students and spread Islam in America.

"This is stealth jihad in the sense that it is about promoting in the United States incubators for sharia," the religious law of Islam, said Gaffney, who served as deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration.

Zaytuna's founders dismiss such criticism, saying it represents the views of a small minority of Americans who don't understand Islam.

"I think Zaytuna College over time can help contribute to a healthier understanding of Islam by removing ignorance," said co-founder Zaid Shakir, an Air Force veteran and California native. The college is seeking to "prepare morally committed human beings that can go out and make a difference in the world as Muslims."

Zaytuna, which means "olive tree" in Arabic, offers an education that combines training in Arabic language and Islamic scholarship with courses in the humanities and social sciences. There have been other attempts to start Muslim colleges in the U.S., but those schools have closed or remained obscure.

Students of all faiths are welcome at Zaytuna, but its first freshman class is made up of an ethnically diverse group of nine women and six men who are all Muslims. Most students wear head scarves or skull caps and participate in afternoon prayer.

Zaytuna is housed in rented classrooms at the American Baptist Seminary of the West, just a few blocks from the UC Berkeley campus.

"Religion is the main part of my life. I have religion and then everything else comes around that. So that was definitely the main reason I wanted to come to Zaytuna," said Sumaya Mehai, 21, who spent two years at community college in Santa Barbara before enrolling at Zaytuna.

The college is working toward earning accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, one of six regional accrediting associations in the U.S., a process that is expected to take four to eight years.

The founders hope to build an institution that will train scholars, professionals and religious leaders to serve the country's fast-growing Muslim population, which now numbers in the millions.

With few Islamic seminaries or colleges in the U.S., many American mosques have brought in imams from countries including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which can lead to a disconnect between religious leaders and their congregations.



Associated Press - Zaytuna College co-founder Dr. Hatem Bazian is interviewed at Zaytuna College in Berkeley, Monday, Aug. 30, 2010.

The three founders of the school are all leading Islamic scholars. Hatem Bazian is a Palestinian-American who teaches Islamic studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Shakir and Hamza Yusuf are American converts who spent years studying

Islam overseas before becoming leading Muslim scholars in the U.S.

Zaytuna, where tuition is \$11,000 a year, offers a bachelor's degree with two majors: Arabic language and Islamic law and theology. Students take classes in subjects such as Islamic ethics, Islamic finance and Muslims in America, as well as courses one finds at a traditional liberal arts college — sociology, philosophy, linguistics, astronomy.

Zaytuna's opening is "one of the signs that Muslims have come of age in this country" and will be "a unique contribution to higher education," said Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University.

But Moosa said the bachelor's degree curriculum seems more like that of a theological seminary than a liberal arts college because most of the required courses are related to Islam.

"From where I'm sitting, it's heading in the direction of becoming a theological seminary, unless there will be a radical rethinking of the program," Moosa said.

In the years to come, Zaytuna's founders hope to enroll more students, add more majors, offer graduate programs and have its own campus. The school is raising money from Muslim communities in the U.S. and trying to build an endowment.

Freshman Hadeel Al-Hadidi, 24, completed her bachelor's degree in communications at the University of Michigan-Dearborn before enrolling at Zaytuna. She hopes to pursue a career in film.

"Zaytuna College is more of a personal thing," she said, "to make myself a better person, to better myself in my religion."

---

Online: <http://www.zaytunacollege.org/>