

# Middle Tennessee confronts Islamophobia

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For the past month, xenophobic and anti-Muslim forces have stirred up controversy around a proposed mosque outside Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Considering the Bible Belt location and context of two major wars against majority-Muslim countries, opponents have drawn from some of the most right wing and backwards elements of the region's culture. But local activists have drawn on other traditions: the democratic freedoms in the Bill of Rights and the Civil Rights movement.

On Thursday, Middle Tennesseans For Religious Freedom (MTRF) delivered a blow to these Islamophobic right wingers and managed to pull out more people into the streets of Murfreesboro than the well-funded opposition. Roughly 450-500 showed up to defend the rights of Muslims against the 300 or so on the other side — stunning organizers and the entire state of Tennessee. We made it on national and international news. The chances that the County Commission will reverse its decision — especially now since the mayor has switched his position on granting the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro the right to construct its new facility — have been seriously diminished.

Solidarity organizers worked very hard to make the event community-wide, while not shying away from informing others of our political affiliation. Roughly 15-20 organizers (with 4 or 5 Solidarity members) created the Middle Tennesseans For Religious Freedom grassroots network and spent a week handing out flyers, making phone calls, going door to door, and contacting allied organizations.

The MTRF rally began gathering around 2:30. When the organizers arrived, there were already 150 or so present. After an hour or so, mosque opponents marched down Main Street, escorted by police as well as some questionable looking bikers. They then curled around the square to come to the opposite side of the court house, opposite from where we were gathering. The MTRF group moved across from the opposition march, keeping completely silent as they hurled insults at us. We remained silent until one Solidarity and MTRF member tried to present the opposition's leader with a flower—which he rejected.

Following that rejection we began the chant: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew - First Amendment applies to you!

They responded with "Amazing Grace," to which we responded with the Star Spangled Banner. An hour or so of tense standoff ensued, with MTRF organizers holding a line between the opposing sides in order to prevent violence (the opposition worked really hard to provoke us, to no avail).

After the event, folks from the Islamic Center and the community in general thanked us for our efforts, one local business even provided organizers a free meal. At least in this case, the forces of bigotry and hate in the American South have been met with a strong, vibrant force of democratic power. Although started by socialists, MTRF became a broad alliance of progressive folks. We do not know what comes next, as the opposition has been silent since their resounding failure, but undoubtedly they have not given up... and neither have we.

**Article authored by lifetime Tennessee resident and local MT Solidarity branch member Jase Short**

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**P.S.**

\* From Against the Current:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/2954>