

Got questions about Islam? Hotline has answers

by [Alice Speri](#)

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) Like many American Muslims, Asim Khan is tired of the prejudice against his religion.

The president of the New Jersey chapter of the Islamic Circle of North America welcomes the curiosity. But he wishes those with questions about Islam would ask him or other Muslims before jumping to conclusions.

"Rather than absorb knowledge from Fox News, we invite people to come hear it from the horse's mouth. We invite them to ask us what our faith is about," Khan said. "There is a lot of curiosity about Islam, but also misinformation, uncertainty, and a sense of fear in approaching us."

As the 10th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, asking a Muslim about Islam is now as simple as making a phone call. Two new 48-foot billboards along the New Jersey Turnpike direct drivers with questions about Islam to dial 877-949-4752 -- a 24/7 toll-free hotline sponsored by the Islamic Circle of North America.

The New Jersey billboards are among more than 50 going up on highways around the country from El Paso to Daytona, from Wichita to Albuquerque. The ads -- which began appearing on the Aug. 1 start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan -- encourage anyone with questions about Islam to speak to those who experience the faith firsthand.

One of the New Jersey billboards features a U.S. flag and a message:

"877-WhyIslam -- Get the Facts." The other reads: "Ramadan -- 1.57 Billion Celebrating. Find Out Why."

Callers may find themselves on the line with Nahela Morales, a Union City, N.J., resident and one of eight volunteers answering the phone.

Morales, 35, was born in Mexico City, grew up in California and moved to New York two months before 9/11. On that day, she began asking questions about Islam and searching for answers online.

"My curiosity started with 9/11. I couldn't believe that a religion that's called 'peace' could kill so many people," Morales said, referring to one of the meanings of the word 'Islam.' "I wish I had known about WhyIslam then."

Morales, who grew up Catholic, started befriending Muslim women on Myspace and turned her questions to them. She got answers and converted to Islam five years later.

Now Morales is the one taking questions, often from Spanish-speaking callers.

"Today I got a call from a woman asking what Shariah is," she said, referring to Islamic law. "She was very curious, and told me, 'I want to understand.' I told her that Shariah is a code of conduct. We have rules. Like, if you see a sign that says 30 miles per hour, you stick to it."//

Morales said that while most callers are genuinely curious, some confront her in an accusatory tone.

"Sometimes they're rude but it's rare," she said. "Those who pick up the phone are the ones that really want to know."

WhyIslam was founded in 1999. Calls to the hotline skyrocketed after 9/11 and later dropped to an average of 400 a month. One of the initiative's founders, Tariq Amanullah of Metuchen, N.J., was killed during the 9/11 attacks while working at the World Trade Center.

WhyIslam has launched similar advertising campaigns in the past with ads on subways, buses, radio and TV. The turnpike billboards are the first such initiative in New Jersey.

Every ad campaign has led to a huge volume of calls, Khan said. A few curious conversations have later turned into conversions to Islam -- sometimes directly over the phone. But organizers say recruiting for the religion is not the objective.

"We're not here to convert people," Khan said. "We're here to educate people."