

Azhar-affiliated religious institution in the Chicago area, possibly in the now-defunct American Islamic College building on the city's North Side. Tantawi seemed enthusiastic about the proposals, Elghawaby said. "He told us, 'Anything we can do, we'll do.'" Elghawaby said.

The sheik told his visitors that Al-Azhar was ready to proceed immediately with a three-month training program and would begin developing curriculum for a year-long program. However, Tantawi specified that any program to send imams to the U.S. would have to be controlled from the American end. He offered the university's services to help assemble lists of potential candidates but said any mosque that wanted an Al-Azhar imam would have to do the final interviews and be responsible for the imam's salary and oversight.

"He said 'You have to pay them and you have to control them,'" Elghawaby said. Elghawaby said he came away particularly impressed with Tantawi's open and comfortable demeanor. Tantawi tends to speak highly formalized, classical Arabic during his sermons and public appearances, and Elghawaby said he was surprised to hear the sheik address them in rural-accented conversational language.

"I didn't expect [Tantawi] to be that open," he said.

Tantawi told the group he was impressed by the efforts of American-based Muslims to hold onto their faith. When told that Chicago-area Muslims often drive nearly an hour through snow to attend group prayers at the nearest mosque, he replied, "No one here would do that."

The Chicago-area delegation plans to start assembling and screening a list of aspiring young imams for overseas training. The group purchased a six-acre plot of land in Barrington in July and is remodeling the house on the property for use as a religious center. The group received a "special use" designation from the Barrington City Council in early December and during the holy month of Ramadan--which ended Dec. 27--were able to use the property for nightly prayers and weekend potluck meals to break the daily Ramadan fast.

The group's application was approved by the Barrington City Council in near-record time, Elghawaby said. He speculated that the council was eager to avoid the kind of public relations nightmare that occurred last summer in Palos Heights, when a Muslim group purchased a defunct church building only to have the City Council decide it wanted to use the building for a community center.

The case became the subject of media scrutiny amid claims of religious discrimination. The Palos Heights controversy "definitely helped us when we got into Barrington," Elghawaby said. "When we went for our special use status, they were definitely aware of it."

Fiqh-e-Islami Newsdesk.

CHICAGO-AREA MUSLIMS, ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY FORGE JOINT VENTURE

By Ashraf Khalil Special to the Tribune January 16, 2001

CAIRO A group of Chicago-area Muslims is working to establish a partnership with the Islamic world's most prominent educational institution to help train and educate the next generation of American Muslims.

A small delegation of Egyptian-born Chicago-area residents recently met in Cairo with Sheik Muhammed Sayed Tantawi, head of Egypt's Al-Azhar University. The delegates' goal is to establish cooperation between Al-Azhar and the American Muslim community, including bringing Azhar-trained imams to serve in American mosques and sending U.S.-born Muslims to Egypt to study religion and Arabic.

"The Islamic community in the U.S. in general is lacking educated, professional imams," said Chicago accountant Taha Elghawaby, a member of the group that met with Tantawi earlier this month.

Al-Azhar is the Muslim world's largest and most respected university and the flagship of moderate Sunni Muslim thought. Al-Azhar graduates are regarded as some of the most respected scholars in the Muslim world. Islam does not possess a formal clerical hierarchy, but Tantawi, a government appointee who holds Cabinet-level rank, is considered one of the top three Muslim scholars in the world. His decrees, or fatwas, on subjects such as mortgage laws and organ transplants carry considerable influence on law and jurisprudence throughout the Muslim world.

The American delegation that met with Tantawi represented the Al-Azhar foundation that recently purchased land in the northern Illinois suburb of Barrington to establish a new mosque. The group, founded in 1995, took its name from the university and was formed with the intention of serving as a liaison between Al-Azhar and the American Muslim community. In its meeting with Tantawi, the delegation proposed several study-abroad programs for American-born aspiring imams. The programs would be geared toward non-Arabic speakers and would provide U.S. college credits.

The delegates also discussed creating procedures to bring Azhar-trained imams to work in U.S. mosques. Another proposal was establishing an