Five years after terror attacks, U.S. Muslims look within

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK—After the Sept. 11 suicide hijackings, distraught U.S. Muslim leaders feared the next casualty would be their religion.

Islam teaches peace, they told anyone who would listen in news conferences, at interfaith services and, most famously, standing in a mosque with President George W. Bush.

But five years later, the target audience for their pleas has shifted. Now the faith's American leaders are starting to warn fellow Muslims about a threat from within.

The 2005 subway attacks in London that investigators say were committed by Muslims born and raised in Britain, and the relentless Muslim-engineered sectarian assaults on Iraqi civilians, are among the events that have convinced some U.S. Muslims to change focus.

"This sentiment of denial, that sort of came as a fever to the Muslim community after 9-11, is fading away," said Muqtedar Khan, a political scientist at the University of Delaware and author of "American Muslims." "They realize that there are Muslims who use terrorism, and the community is beginning to stand up to this."

Muslim leaders point to two stark examples of the new mind-set:

• A Canadian-born Muslim man worked with police for months investigating a group of Islamic men and youths accused in June of plotting terrorist attacks in Ontario. Mubin Shaikh said he feared any violence would ultimately hurt Islam and Canadian Muslims.

• In England, it's been widely reported that a tip from a British Muslim helped lead investigators to uncover what they said was a plan by homegrown extremists to use liquid explosives to destroy U.S.-bound planes.

Cooperation isn't emotionally easy, as Western governments enact security policies that critics say have criminalized Islam itself.

Safiyyah Ally, a graduate student in political science at the University of Toronto, wrote recently on altmuslim.com that Shaikh, the Canadian informer, went too far.

She said the North American Muslim community "is fragile enough as is" without members "spying" on each other. Leaders should counsel Muslims against violence and report suspicious activity to police—but nothing more, she argued.

"We cannot have communities wherein individuals are paranoid of each other and turned against one another," Ally wrote.

Yet some leaders say keeping watch for extremists protects all Muslims and their civil rights.

Salam al-Marayati, executive director of Muslim Public Affairs Council, an advocacy group based in Los Angeles, says working closely with authorities underscores that Muslims are not outsiders to be feared. It also gives Muslims a way to directly air their concerns about how they're treated by the government.

"We're not on opposite teams," al-Marayati said. "We're all trying to protect our country from another terrorist attack."

In 2004, his group started the "National Anti-Terrorism Campaign," urging Muslims to monitor their own communities, speak out more boldly against violence and work with law enforcement. Hundreds of U.S. mosques have signed on, al-Marayati said.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, a civil rights group, ran a TV ad campaign and a petition-drive called "Not in the Name of Islam," which repudiates terrorism. Hundreds of thousands of people have endorsed it, according to Ibrahim Hooper, the group's spokesman.

After the London subway bombings, the Fiqh Council of North America, which advises Muslims on Islamic law, issued a fatwa—or edict—declaring that nothing in Islam justifies terrorism. The council said Muslims were obligated to help law enforcement protect civilians from attacks.

"I think everyone now agrees that silence isn't an option," Hooper said. "You have to speak out in defense of civil liberties, but you also have to speak out against any kind of extremism or violence that's carried out in the name of Islam."

But many Muslims say they're being asked to look out for something that even the U.S. government struggles to define: What constitutes an imminent threat?

Khan said he has heard of cases in American mosques where imams have expressed extreme views in sermons and worshippers have confronted the prayer leaders about it.

"But beyond that what else can we do?" Khan said. "Do we need to hire a private detective to put on this guy? If five guys came to me and said, 'Muqtedar, let's get together. Let's blow up this and that,' then I would call the police. But the community does not understand surveillance."

Imam Muhammad Musri, head of the Islamic Society of Central Florida, said he has tried to address this problem in the eight mosques he oversees in the Orlando area.

He regularly invites law enforcement officials to speak with local Muslims and encourages mosque members to come to him with any suspicions, even if they overhear something said in jest. Musri says he also speaks regularly with local FBI and police to establish a relationship in case a real threat emerges.

"Here in Central Florida, talking to most people, they are literally upset by the actions of Muslims-or so-called Muslims—overseas in Europe and the Middle East, because they say, 'We wish they would come and see how we're doing here,'" Musri said. "We know who the real enemy is—someone who might come from the outside and try to infiltrate us. Everybody is on the lookout."

On the Net:

Muslim Public Affairs Council: http://www.mpac.org/

Muslim women asserting their rights

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK—Should anything go wrong in her marriage, Zaynab Abdul-Razacq is confident her rights will be well-protected. Her husband has guaranteed it—in writing.

The young Muslim couple chose a path advocated by Islamic scholars concerned about women's rights: drawing up a Muslim marriage contract that takes into account modern needs.

Abdul-Razacq's agreement states that she is in charge of the household finances and that if her husband abuses her in "any dimension of wellness" she can automatically divorce him. Her husband, Salahud-Din Abdul-Razacq, stipulated that he could make decisions about their life together without interference from in-laws and other relatives.

"At the outset, we agreed these are things that are pretty important to us," said Zaynab Abdul-Razacq, who lives in Georgia, and married three years ago.

The contract has long been a Muslim tradition. Most, however, contain just one key provision, that of the "mahr," a gift usually of money, that the man gives the woman.

Islamic law experts who advocate for better treatment for women say the documents can help them assert rights under religious law that have long been played down by men. Advocates contend their approach is well within Islamic law, even though skeptics say the interpretation is too influenced by Western thinking.

The contract is especially useful in the United States, where Muslims come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and follow different customs and levels of observance. The document can accommodate views ranging from liberal to conservative.

Karamah, an organization of Muslim women lawyers based in Washington, is developing a "model" marriage contract that can be adjusted to meet the requirements of family law in different parts of the country, said Azizah al-Hibri, a founder of the group, whose name means "dignity" in Arabic. In the United States, civil law governs divorce, but judges have taken Muslim marriage contracts into consideration, sometimes viewing them as prenuptial agreements.

Al-Hibri, a law professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia, said the contracts also help couples prepare for the challenges of married life.

"Couples need to define their relationship as they enter the marriage, so that they do not get disillusioned later," al-Hibri said. "They need a meeting of the minds on what their family life will look like. The contract helps them do that by discussing the issues up front."

It's generally accepted that Islamic law gives women the right to property and financial independence within marriage. Some Muslims scholars contend women are not even obligated to do housework. These and other details about running a house can be specified in the contract.

Negotiating the agreement, "brings an air of reality and rationality to a process that is often fraught with emotion," said Aminah McCloud, professor of Islamic Studies at DePaul University in Chicago. McCloud's own marriage contract says that her husband must accompany her when she travels and that she is not obligated to cook.

Much of the negotiation involves the "mahr," whose dollar value ranges widely.

Some Muslim women consider the gift archaic in an age when women can earn their own salaries. Others, however, view it as a symbol that the man values the woman, similar to an engagement ring; it's also a gift that is hers alone.

"We both know one another so well, we have an understanding," said Sayar, 26, and a law school graduate. "I feel like there will not be any breach of any sort, because he understands my expectations of life and from the marriage as well. I similarly have an understanding of his expectations of life and marriage."

Beyond the "mahr," the marriage contract can help address concerns about certain practices allowed in Islam, even if the behavior is forbidden by U.S. civil law.

Democrats push for their own religious voice with an Internet site

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON —Thirteen years ago, David Wilhelm, then chairman of the Democratic Party, told the conservative Christian Coalition that good Christians could belong to either major political party.

He was hissed.

Today, Wilhelm wants to spread that message to a different audience _ Democrats. He's hoping for a better response.

With a leading poll showing only one in four Americans viewing the Democratic Party as friendly to religion, Wilhelm and a broad-based group of Christian Democratic activists are starting an Internet effort to organize religious voters whose views might be compatible with Democrats.

The site, www.FaithfulDemocrats.com, will go online Tuesday and showcase theologians, party strategists, political leaders and bloggers in hopes of conducting a national discussion on politics and faith.

"It struck me as strange that people whose political world is motivated by faith had to be Republican. Democrats need to be on the playing field," Wilhelm said.

He said the site will give religious Democrats "the moral support and some language they can use."

The nonprofit Web venture was conceived by Wilhelm and Chicago-based Democratic activist Jesse Lava. Tennessee state Sen. Roy Herron, a former minister, and Rev. Romal Tune, founder of the Washington D.C.-based Clergy Strategic Alliances, are co-chairmen.

By venturing into the unrestricted and free-wheeling world of the Internet, however, FaithfulDemocrats are just as likely to find an full-throated blowback as an amen chorus.

Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., caused a furor in the liberal blogosphere this summer when he warned liberals and progressives in a speech that "we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse."

The Web site and its place as an alternative to Christian conservatism comes as churchgoing voters who consider themselves politically liberal have tried to link their religious values to causes such as social justice, opposition to the Iraq war and the environment.

Over the last 30 years, the GOP has found common ground among traditional pro-business, anti-tax Republicans, small government advocates and social conservatives. Democrats, on the other hand, have been influenced by a secular, liberal bloc that advocates separation of church and state. The party's disparate groups have had more trouble finding a single voice.

A poll by the Pew Research Center found that the proportion of Americans who considered the Republican Party friendly to religion dropped from 55 percent last year to 47 percent

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The Charlotte – Mecklenburg NAACP will again host the annual Ashanti Awards and Scholarship Celebration on September 15 and 16. The weekend will start with the Ashanti Golf Challenge at Highland Creek Golf Club on Friday, September 15 and culminate with the award celebration on Saturday starting at 6pm at the beautiful Westin Hotel in downtown Charlotte, NC.

This year, Mel Watt, U.S. Congressman will receive the Meritorious Public Service Award. Public Service Awards will also be bestowed upon NC State Representatives Becky Carney and Beverly Earle. The Hall of Fame Award recipient will be Mecklenburg School Board member George Dunlap. Our corporate sponsor this year, Bank of America will receive the Corporation of the Year Award. The 2006 scholarship recipient will be G.K. Moss, Jr of Sun Valley High school.

Kenneth White, President of the Charlotte Branch said this is the premier annual event of the year for the branch. A fabulous Silent Auction attracts many attendees to bid on a vast array of art work, crafts, fine jewelry, hats and other wonderful items.

Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its half million members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in public and private sectors.

Golf green fees are $100.00 per person with several sponsorship levels available that include green fees. Please send golf checks to NAACP, PO Box 480540 Charlotte, NC 28269, att: Kenneth White. Call 704-517-1877 for additional information.

Ashanti Awards celebration tickets are $75.00 each. Please make checks payable to NAACP, P.O. Box 25774, Charlotte, NC 28229, Att: Yvonne Pettis, Ashanti Chairperson.