

Muslims battle to be official voice of U.S. Islam

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(RNS) As president of the Phoenix-based American Islamic Forum for Democracy, an eight-year-old group that twins conservative and Islamic values, Zuhdi Jasser is no fan of the more visible Council on American-Islamic Relations.

CAIR and too many other U.S. Muslim groups, Jasser says, are soft on extremism and advocate a form of "political Islam." The leadership of most U.S. groups is, as he puts it, "malignant."

But there is one CAIR official Jasser can work with: Ahmed Banna, a CAIR chapter president in Cleveland, who happens to be his father-in-law. They just try not to talk about religion and politics at the dinner table.

"He calls me Dad," said Banna, a cardiologist from Syria who came to America in 1980, and became Jasser's father-in-law in 1998.

The Jasser/Banna family feud offers a window into a long-simmering debate over who gets to speak for American Muslims, who are more diverse -- racially, ethnically, ideologically -- than many people assume.

In addition, Islam is a decentralized religion with little to no hierarchy; in America, surveys indicate that roughly half or fewer of the estimated 3 million to 6 million Muslims attend mosques regularly.

Before 9/11, the best known Muslim American groups were CAIR, the Islamic Society of North America, the Muslim American Society, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council. In the years since, leading Muslim groups have been deemed by some as too orthodox, not orthodox enough, too sympathetic for terrorists or too closely linked to Washington.

For many Muslims, including Jasser, the answer was to form their own organizations. And now they are competing to be seen and heard as authentic voices for American Islam alongside CAIR and other established groups.

When the House Homeland Security Committee held recent hearings on the "radicalization" of American Muslims, Jasser was called to testify. When the Senate convened hearings on Muslim civil rights, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., summoned Farhana Khera, president of the group Muslim Advocates. CAIR was not asked to attend either one.

"9/11 was an awakening moment for all Muslims," said Ani Zonneveld, a Los Angeles musician and co-founder of Muslims for Progressive Values, an umbrella group of Muslim groups around the country.

"The reason for a progressive Muslims (group) was the people who were supposedly speaking on behalf of Muslims were not really representing our values."

Because nearly everything about post-9/11 American Islam is viewed through a political lens, many groups advocate for specific causes, such as civil liberties, interfaith relations, security concerns or education.

The American Islamic Congress was founded in 2003 by an Iraqi immigrant as a "nonreligious civil rights organization." The Washington-based AIC says its mission is to combat negative stereotypes by promoting Muslim civic participation through education talks for policymakers, educational materials on interfaith work, and even hosting Muslim film festivals.

"Muslims are misunderstood as a group because of the overfocus on religion," said Nasser Weddady, the civil rights outreach director at AIC, which now has a \$780,000 annual budget and employs more than 10 full-time employees -- all under 40 -- in four cities.

"When people say Islam, the question is which Islam, whose Islam?" said Weddady.

Like many young organizations, U.S. Muslim groups often struggle for community support, not least of all because many Muslims prefer to keep a low profile.

"Swaths of Muslim Americans are not comfortable identifying as Muslims because it's a burden," said Weddady.

Some groups also weather accusations that they have no legitimacy among Muslim Americans. While Jasser, who's also a doctor, has four employees and an annual budget exceeding \$300,000, he's also been accused of being a "self-hating Muslim" because of his frequent appearances on Fox News and association with the conservative Clarion Fund, which many accuse of demonizing Muslims.

"His group is not really well-known among American Muslims, and the reason is himself, when he's standing up in the media and attacking Muslim organizations," Banna said of his son-in-law. "It's not making him popular among the Muslim community."

That's not to say, though, that he doesn't have supporters.

"For those like Dr. Jasser, who realize the toxicity of this totalitarian ideology, they have no choice but to oppose and uncover its true form and its noxious agenda at the risk of alienating close family members," said Ahmed Vanya, a Muslim in San Francisco.

Many new groups say visibility is key -- especially in the media, which is attracted to sensational stories or personalities while often overlooking or not hearing mainstream views.

Many large established groups -- such as The Mosque Cares, a group of mostly black Muslims founded by the late W. Deen Mohammed; or the 5,000-member Council for the Advancement of Muslim Professionals -- sometimes don't get much notice from Muslims themselves.

"It seems like every time (the media) want to get a Muslim perspective, they find the most vocal or most extreme elements in the community," said Zonneveld of Muslims for Progressive Values.

For all the criticism, CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper said his outfit welcomes different groups.

"There will always be a variety of groups with different focuses. I don't see a problem with that," Hooper said. "No one has ever claimed to speak for the whole Muslim community."

As for Jasser, he said he can live with a father-in-law who belonged to an organization he accused of having extremist roots.

"I don't know what to tell you other than that it's a sign of diversity in our community," Jasser said. "I have the deepest of love and admiration for my father-in-law."

And if dinner table debates get too heated, Banna sometimes turns to his daughter to play mediator.

"Most of the time she's on my side, in fact, more than his side," he said.