

Muslims call new religious freedom appointee a 'puppet' for Islam foes

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WASHINGTON (RNS) One of two new members of the U.S. Commission on International

Religious Freedom has Muslim civil rights groups crying foul.

Zuhdi Jasser, who lauded a controversial New York City police surveillance program that targeted Muslims and helped lead the opposition to an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, has been appointed to the commission, which advises the president, Congress and State Department on religious rights abuses internationally.

"It would have been better to appoint someone who has some measure of credibility with Muslim Americans," said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"He has long been viewed by American Muslims and the colleagues in the civil liberties community as a mere sock puppet for Islam haters and an enabler of Islamophobia."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., appointed Jasser and House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, appointed Robert P. George, a philosophy professor at Princeton University and top adviser to the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Democrats appoint five of the commission's nine members, because they are the party in the White House; the other four are appointed by Republicans. With the Jasser and George appointments, three commission spots remain vacant.

Jasser, an activist and cardiologist from Phoenix, addressed the first in a series of hearings last year called by the House Homeland Security Committee to investigate the threat of homegrown terrorism.

Jasser's group, the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, has called the leadership of most established U.S. Muslim groups "malignant" and accused them of preaching a form of "political Islam."

Jasser won praise from conservatives for his willingness to testify about his co-religionists, but gained the ire of Muslims who said he fuels anti-Muslim prejudice.

George, well respected in conservative circles, comes to the commission with a less controversial profile.

A political philosopher and constitutional scholar, he is a board member of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a Washington-based non-profit that has provided much of the legal defense for churches in high-profile religious freedom cases.

Many Catholic bishops rely on George as "a touchstone" and consider him "the pre-eminent Catholic intellectual," Bishop John Myers of Newark, N.J. told the New York Times in 2009.

Most recently, George has helped rally opposition to President Obama's contraception mandate. He is also one of the principle drafters of the "Manhattan Declaration," a 2009 conservative manifesto that encouraged Christians to resist abortion, same-sex marriage and threats to "religious liberty."