

# Muslim leaders probe problem of disaffected youths

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LOS ANGELES (RNS) Muslim leaders are admitting disaffected Muslim youth such as the alleged Oregon bomber arrested last month are ripe for online recruitment by extremists.

"Why do we in Muslim communities not have centers for at-risk youth?" said civil rights attorney Reem Salahi at the annual national convention of the Muslim Public Affairs Council on Saturday (Dec. 18) in Los Angeles.

Speakers discussed the November arrest of 19-year-old Somali-born Mohamed Osman Mohamud, caught in an FBI sting after trying to blow up a bomb in a van parked near a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in downtown Portland, Ore.

Salahi said Mohamud apparently felt isolated and found solace on extremist web sites whose radical owners are "exploiting the grievances of young people and getting to them in very sophisticated ways."

The annual MPAC event drew about 900 people and was unique this year for showcasing first-generation Muslim-Americans born and raised in the U.S., many of them seeming to lack the emotional baggage carried by immigrants from global hotspots.

"We are no longer in an era where faith can be forced on anyone," said Suhaib Webb, a young imam from San Jose, Calif.

Muslim leaders not only are re-assessing their own communities' shortfalls but also trying to broaden national conversations about Islam beyond security and terrorism issues -- "to talk about what Islam is and not constantly be talking about what Islam isn't," said Rashad Hussain, President Obama's special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

"The conflation of terrorism and Islam is something that's dangerous," said the Wyoming-born, Texas-raised Hussain. "Those aren't the only concerns by which we engage our Muslim communities ... They're worried about their jobs. They're worried about health care for their families."

U.S. Attorney Andre Birotte of Los Angeles said the Department of Justice will keep relying on confidential informants and surveillance in federal cases ranging from terrorism to narcotics. But "the key is maintaining a constant dialogue. Meeting with people not in times of crisis but in times when things are calm such as events like this."