

'Radicalization' hearings worry U.S. Muslims

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Mass protests against planned mosques in New York City and Tennessee. An Oklahoma referendum to ban Islamic law. A media circus around a Florida pastor's threat to burn Qur'ans. An upsurge in homegrown Islamic terrorists. Two U.S.-led wars in predominantly Muslim countries.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council had no shortage of topics to discuss at its annual convention in Los Angeles. But the prospect of congressional hearings on the "radicalization of the American Muslim community" topped the list.

"There were so many different responses to it," said Salam al-Marayati, the council's president, "starting with disbelief that this is happening now."

Some of the 1,000 Muslim-American attendees at the December meeting wanted to combat Rep. Peter King, the new GOP chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, in the media. Others wanted to consult with antidiscrimination groups. A team of lawyers recommended that American Muslims "not take King's bait," al-Marayati recalled.

Now in control of the House of Representatives, Republicans have pledged to hold public hearings on everything from the new health-care law to WikiLeaks. While such hearings often elicit little interest beyond the Beltway, King's announcement immediately drew suspicion from many American Muslims.

Rep. Keith Ellison (D., Minn.), the first Muslim elected to Congress, had sounded the alarm. "It is worthwhile to find out what turns somebody from a normal citizen into a violent radical," he told MSNBC. "But to say that we're only going to do it against this community, and . . . to change the debate to vilify this community is very scary and clearly has McCarthyistic implications."

A nine-term incumbent from Long Island, King has a sharp tongue, little patience for political correctness and a history of controversial statements about Muslims.

"There are too many mosques in this country," King told Politico in 2007. "There are too many people who are sympathetic to radical Islam. We should be looking at them more carefully and finding out how we can infiltrate them."

On Fox News a year ago, King said 85 percent of American mosques are led by extremists. "This is an enemy living among us," he added.

A number of Muslim scholars and advocates have sharply disputed King's statistics, calling them evidence of bias or ignorance.

"That figure frankly smacks of prejudice against the Muslim community," said Akbar Ahmed, a professor of Islamic studies at American University in Washington who recently completed a yearlong study of American Muslims.

Ahmed said he shares King's concerns about homegrown Islamic terrorism. "But what concerns me is that these hearings will become a media spectacle, and that the information given to the American public will not be correct," Ahmed said. "It will just be a lot of guys giving their opinion."

King's office did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the hearings.

To be sure, a number of government reports and high-ranking officials see

homegrown terrorism as a lethal and growing threat. In the past two years, 50 Americans have been indicted on terrorism charges, according to Attorney General Eric Holder.

"The threat has changed from simply worrying about foreigners coming here, to worrying about . . . American citizens raised here, born here, and who for whatever reason have decided they are going to become radicalized and take up arms against the nation in which they were born," Holder told ABC News in December.

Two young Muslims were arrested that month on charges of attempting to detonate deadly bombs in Oregon and Maryland. Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum and a scholar whose work has been cited by King but heavily criticized by others, called the upcoming hearings "an important step."

King has said most Muslims in America are "hardworking, dedicated Americans." But, he insists, local and federal law enforcement officials complain that Muslim leaders and imams refuse to cooperate with their investigations.

The congressman and al-Marayati disagree on that point. Al-Marayati said American Muslims have helped law enforcement officials foil nearly 40 percent of al-Qaeda-related terror plots on U.S. soil since 9/11, including seven of the last ten, according to an MPAC study of government records and media reports.

Former Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff, FBI director Robert Mueller and a host of other law enforcement officials have praised Muslim leaders for helping identify and root out extremists, al-Marayati said. —RNS