

# White House praises Muslims ahead of hearing

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Days ahead of a controversial congressional hearing on Islamic extremism, the Obama administration is highlighting the role Muslim Americans play in combating radicalism in their communities.

"I am here to talk to you about how our communities -- your communities -- contribute to keeping our country safe," said Denis McDonough, deputy national security adviser, in a speech to the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Virginia on Sunday (March 6).

In a lengthy address, McDonough affirmed U.S. Muslims as "our neighbors and fellow citizens," as he sought to separate the White House from the hearings, which are scheduled to begin on Thursday (March 10).

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security, has called for the hearings to investigate "the extent of radicalization in the American Muslim community."

"I support his speech. I welcome it," King told Politico on Sunday.

"By making a speech like that, not making one word of criticism about the hearings, to me speaks volumes. He had every opportunity to criticize our hearings and didn't."

McDonough did not mention the hearings, but did say that extremism is not the product of one faith.

"We must resolve that, in our determination to protect our nation,

we will not stigmatize or demonize entire communities because of the actions of a few," he said, according to a prepared text issued by the White House.

A White House official said the administration welcomes "congressional interest" but the speech highlighted "our long-term strategy and what works, based on evidence and careful consideration."

Imam Mohamed Magid, leader of the Virginia mosque, welcomed the speech, and its timing.

"With all these negative things that the hearing has generated in terms of bad publicity about Islam and Muslims, it actually is a positive message coming from the White House," said Magid, who also is president of the Islamic Society of North America.

He said Muslims in his community work closely with law enforcement, and Muslim leaders plan to soon announce new strategies for Muslim communities to counter Islamic extremism in the U.S.

McDonough told the audience at the Islamic center that the administration would also soon be releasing plans for preventing violent domestic extremism.

"The bottom line is this -- when it comes to preventing violent extremism and terrorism in the United States, Muslim Americans are not part of the problem, you're part of the solution," he said.

Shaun Casey, who advised Obama on religious outreach in the 2008 campaign and attended McDonough's speech, said the address gave the

administration a chance to clearly state it has and will continue to work with Muslims.

"Clearly, the White House does not want to be passive in the face of the hearings," said Casey, an ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington. "They felt like there was a larger story to be told."

John Esposito, an expert on Muslim-Christian relations at Georgetown University, said McDonough's speech contrasts sharply with King's statements. The deputy national security adviser focused on the majority of Muslims, who like other Americans, have thrived in business or serve in the military, he said. Esposito said it was necessary for the Obama administration to provide that context before congressional testimony began.

"It's especially urgent when you've somebody who's engaging, in effect, in a witch hunt," said Esposito. "To me, the president had an obligation to speak out."

Magid said Obama's sending a key administration official to his mosque can only enhance future work between the government and American Muslims.

"It will encourage the community to do more," he predicted.