

## Why Texas Muslims remained calm in face of angry hecklers

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Every other year since 2003, hundreds of Muslim Texans— families, young students, community leaders—caravan in from around the state to meet on the steps of the august Texas State Capitol building in Austin. They hope to meet lawmakers, advocate for issues important to them, and just learn about the American political process.

Previous gatherings have mostly gone without a hitch, organizers say. But last Thursday (January 29), during the seventh biennial Texas Muslim Capitol Day, the hundreds who gathered were met by a group of angry protesters, who heckled and jeered the crowd as they began—as Texas political events often do—with prayer and the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Emotions have run high as world events, including the rise of the Islamic State militant group and the terrorist massacre in Paris, have sparked pockets of anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the Western world. On Thursday, the protesters, about two dozen members of the Patriot Defense Foundation, shouted slogans such as "Mohammed is dead," "Go back to Baghdad," and "Remember 9/11." Some of the group's signs read "Save America, Stop Islam" and "Go Home and Take Obama with You."

The gathering of about 300 Muslim Texans, a majority of them women dressed in a colorful array of hijab head coverings and groups of young middle and high school students, were stunned, too, when one of the protesters pushed aside one of the organizers, grabbed the mic, and angrily shouted, "Islam will never dominate in the United States, and by the grace of God it will not dominate Texas!"

"I think we now know why we're here today," said Ruth Nasrullah, communications director of the Houston chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, sponsor of this year's event, after the protester left the podium.

As vitriolic chants continued, six teenage girls in hijab sang the national anthem, and attendees maintained their poise. Speakers urged the group to ignore the “haters,” and paraphrasing a pop song, one said, “In the words of the teenagers, they’re just like dust, just brush them off.”

Some attendees were frustrated by the protesters, but voiced support for their First Amendment rights—and the messy tumble of American politics.

“They have the right to say what they want to say, and feel what they want to feel,” said Sana Ali, who drove in from Sugar Land, a two-hour drive from Austin, according to a local ABC affiliate. “That’s the the beauty of this country.”

CAIR chapters often organize events such as Texas Muslim Capitol Day, officials say, not only to promote understanding of the Muslim community and protect its civil liberties, but to teach its communities about how to be a part of the American political system.

“When you have folks who are immigrants who come from countries where there isn’t that sort of a participatory tradition, it’s very important for both the adults—and I came up on a bus of students—for them to learn that this is their Capitol, and these are their representatives,” said Annette Lamoreaux, vice president of the Texas chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. “And they need to participate in the democratic process and let their voices be heard.”

But one Texas representative, Molly White (R.), of Belton, sparked controversy with a Facebook post about the event and the group’s hope to meet its legislators:

“I did leave an Israeli flag on the reception desk in my office with instructions to staff to ask representatives from the Muslim community to renounce Islamic terrorist groups and publicly announce allegiance to America and our laws. We will see how long they stay in my office.”

On Thursday, CAIR officials wrote to Texas House Speaker Joe Straus (R.), the state’s first Jewish representative to hold the position, and asked whether state Representative White violated any of the House’s ethics rules with her provocative post.

On Friday, Speaker Straus released a statement in response: “The Texas Capitol belongs to all the people of this state, and legislators have a responsibility to treat

all visitors just as we expect to be treated—with dignity and respect. Anything else reflects poorly on the entire body and distracts from the very important work in front of us."

Those who attended the Texas Muslim Capitol Day event also came to voice their support for the Dream Act, which grants certain undocumented students residency. They also voiced support for two bills requiring police to wear body cameras and to support a conservative effort to prohibit courts from interpreting religious law.

"Many of our folks have come from places where they never had any contact with government and if they did it wasn't always good," said Mustafaa Carroll, executive director of the Houston CAIR chapter. "So many of them are afraid to even be here, and this was a way of opening that up so that this mystique about government wouldn't affect them."