

President Obama to American Muslims: 'You fit in here'

by [Harry Bruinius](#)

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* As Colin Christopher sat among a diverse group of American Muslims meeting with President Obama on Wednesday, the young environmental activist could only feel inspired as so many people talked about protecting the country's tradition of religious liberty.

Six years ago, Christopher found his own solace and spiritual inspiration in a faith many Americans still find foreign, if not dangerous. Growing up in a nonreligious, "agnostic" home in Madison, Wisconsin, surrounded by the lakes and winter landscapes of the Midwest, he said he felt a profound, almost unexplainable connection to creation. And after years of spiritual seeking, he found answers in the tenets of Islam.

For Christopher, who helps lead Green Muslims, a faith-based environmental group in Washington, D.C., that freedom to seek and discover faith is part of what makes America a great nation. Yet as a white, native-born male Muslim convert, Christopher was a conspicuous minority in Wednesday's gathering at the Islamic Society of Baltimore—where Obama made his first visit to a mosque on U.S. soil.

But the president emphasized that Islam "is as diverse as America itself." And he noted that the country's Founding Fathers explicitly included "Mahometans" in their statements about religious liberty.

Obama's visit to the mosque comes at a time "of concern and, frankly, fear" for many Muslim communities across the country, the president said. Threats, bullying at schools, and acts of violence have risen to levels not seen since 9/11. He also referred to "inexcusable political rhetoric" during the presidential campaign.

And yet despite the rise in troubling acts and inflammatory rhetoric, many Muslims still have faith in the country's traditions of religious liberty.

“This is a country where religious freedom and the right to worship is guaranteed to everybody,” said Mohammad Abu-Salha, a psychiatrist in Clayton, North Carolina. “We feel that we belong here, and even though we’re fighting prejudice and hate, we feel that we will continue to represent our faith in the best way we can in this country that we believe in.”

As Obama met with an array of professionals, athletes, and students on Wednesday, as well as Muslim faith leaders and advocates, Abu-Salha was seeing patients at his office in Clayton. Next week will mark the first anniversary of the murders of his two daughters, Yusor and Razan, who police say were gunned down in their apartment by a man ostensibly upset about a parking dispute. But many consider the shooting to be an anti-Muslim hate crime.

The murders of his daughters, as well Yusor’s husband, Deah Shaddy Barakat, caused an outpouring of community support, Abu-Salha said. Thousands attended his daughters’ and son-in-law’s funerals, the University of North Carolina and other organizations created scholarship funds in their names, and the government’s response to his tragedy “has been very good—powerful and sophisticated,” he said.

His surviving son is currently in medical school.

“We discovered that we raised giants,” Abu-Salha said. “We did not know how big they were, and we cannot fill their shoes, and they exceeded our expectations.”

Advocates continue to say that the current climate is one of the most dangerous they’ve ever seen, citing FBI statistics that show an uptick in reported hate crimes and more and more complaints of workplace discrimination to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

But some still see strength in the country’s legal institutions, despite the problems grappling the country.

“Perhaps this is the lawyer in me, but I think the major reason why I believe that I’m more bullish on the future for Muslims in America is our legal system,” said Farhana Khera, executive director of Muslim Advocates and a former counsel to the US Senate Judiciary Committee. “Our Bill of Rights at its core guarantees equal rights under the law, regardless of faith, race, or ethnicity.”

And compared with some of the enforced secularism of European countries like France or of Turkey, where headscarves, religious caps, and turbans are often banned in civic spaces, the traditions of religious liberty in the United States offer protections like nowhere else in the world, she said.

Khera was part of the legal team that successfully reinstated a lawsuit brought by New Jersey Muslims against the New York Police Department. A group of individuals, businesses, and student groups claimed the NYPD had illegally infiltrated and surveilled them with no cause other than their faith identity.

An earlier federal court ruling had dismissed the case, and Khera and her colleagues had to argue the matter before the federal court of appeals in January 2015, just one week after Muslim terrorists killed 12 people in the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

“So walking into the courthouse that morning, as you can imagine, I was very concerned about how the judges were going to view our case,” she said. “And in fact, it was the second question from the panel of three judges to our legal team: ‘In light of Paris, shouldn’t the NYPD have this kind of blanket surveillance authority?’ ”

It’s an issue that remains in play, and many members of Congress and other leaders still say such blanket surveillance, even without specific cause, is essential in the ongoing efforts to combat terror on U.S. soil.

It was an argument unanimously rejected.

“What occurs here in one guise is not new,” wrote Judge Thomas Ambro for the three-judge panel. “We have been down similar roads before. Jewish-Americans during the Red Scare, African Americans during the civil rights movement, and Japanese-Americans during World War II are examples that readily spring to mind.

“We are left to wonder why we cannot see with foresight what we see so clearly with hindsight . . . that loyalty is a matter of the heart and mind, not race, creed or color.”

New York mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration of settled the suit last month, and it included an independent civilian to monitor the NYPD’s counterterrorism activities.

Still, much remains to be done, advocates say.

“I do think it’s important, in addition to President Obama’s symbolic visit, that there are better policies and protections in place—particularly around hate crimes,” said Lakshmi Sridaran, director of national policy and advocacy at South Asian Americans Leading Together, an advocacy group in Takoma Park, Maryland.

“Hate crimes need to be properly reported so that communities can feel like they can trust law enforcement in reporting these crimes—and not actually be profiled by law enforcement,” she continues.

On Wednesday, a new poll by the Pew Research Center offered some reason for optimism. It found that nearly seven out of ten Americans see the problem of religious violence as caused by “violent people using religion to justify their actions”—while only 22 percent said some religious teachings promote terror and violence. But among the latter respondents, Islam was by far the religion cited as promoting violence.

“The president told us to have hope in our meeting before his speech,” said Christopher, the environmental activist. “And our faith allows us to have hope. Faith allows us to see in the darkest of times.”