



MUSLIM-AMERICAN LEADERS INTENSIFY ANTI-TERRORISM YOUTH OUTREACH INITIATIVES

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A coalition of national and community-based Muslim groups have announced an anti-terror campaign geared toward Muslim-American youth.

The announcement comes on the heels of the recent attacks on London's mass transit system carried out by British-born suicide bombers, which raised concerns about the vulnerability of American-born Muslim youth to recruitment by terrorist groups.

"I think if anything what London has shown is that we're all vulnerable. Young people who are very passionate and open are always vulnerable to madmen and extremists," said Mahdi Bray, executive director of the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation.

"We're not immune to that, so we have to be vigilant. It requires a lot of community effort."

Young Muslim-Americans mobilize

Following the second attempted terrorist attack in London, the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the Islamic Society of North America issued a statement on behalf of young Muslim-Americans condemning the distortion of Islam into an ideology of hatred.

"This afternoon, the world witnessed a second terrorist attack on London. In light of these hostile events, we Muslim American students and youth stand united in condemning all acts of terror and the burgeoning war on ideas. We refuse to remain silent while others claiming to represent Islam preach an ideology of hatred."

The statement was signed by over 50 Muslim student and community groups nationwide and marks the beginning of the first national campaign launched by Muslim youth.

Though still in the developmental stages, the group has drafted a vision statement and hopes to use Internet outreach, youth summits, and other activities to encourage young Muslims to be involved, politically and socially, in their communities.

"I think a lot of times there are members of the community that really fall into a mentality where it's almost like it's us versus them. We want this to be a diversification process," Amin Al-Sarras, a college student and leader of the new initiative, said.

Al-Sarras also serves as D.C. project coordinator for the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

Youth outreach initiatives

Other national youth outreach initiatives are in the works around the country.

The Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit organization that represents the needs of the Islamic community, is prioritizing funding for youth activities.

The group currently runs eight free-standing Muslim youth centers in different cities and has plans in the works to open six more.

They will also encourage more mosques to be involved in the Boy and Girl Scouts, broaden recruitment efforts for youth outreach workers, and train psychiatrists and psychologists to work with Muslim youth.

In an effort to increase dialogue and activity within Muslim families, the foundation also plans to sponsor more parent-youth retreats.

Mahdi Bray, the MAS Freedom Foundation's executive director, emphasizes the importance of open communication for pre-teens, teens and adults.

"I'm always worried about teen alienation. Would it have made a difference if the kids from Columbine had someone to talk to?" Bray said.

Next month, thousands of Muslim-Americans will gather in Chicago for the Islamic Society of North America's annual convention. Organizers are planning a special session on terrorism and extremism, which will also be a central theme at the ISNA's concurrent youth conference.

American or Muslim

Muslim leaders are aware that there are unique issues facing American-born Muslims struggling to balance the values of American society with the teachings of Islam.

For some, carving out an identity that incorporates both religion and culture can be challenging and confusing.

"The most predominant feeling is confusion. It's like someone is saying one thing about what it means to be a Muslim and someone else is saying another," Al-Sarras said.

But Al-Sarras emphasizes that American life and Islam do not conflict.

"There is no friction between American society and Islam. The problem comes when pop culture icons are being defined as what it means to being American. There's so much more to our culture than that, and we have to realize that," Al-Sarras said.

In an effort to integrate Islam and American culture, the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation plans to increase its offering of scholarships to Muslim-American youth interested in pursuing theological studies. Their hope is that these young theology scholars will be future Imams, Islamic religious leaders, who have grown up in the United States and understand the young Muslim-American community.

"We need Americans who were born here, who watched MTV and understand American culture to be Imams," Bray said. "We need the authentic American Islamic voice. It's unique."

--Compiled by Monica Villavicencio for NewsHour Extra

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