

CAIR taps Jewish filmmaker to lead Philadelphia chapter

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(RNS) The Council on American-Islamic Relations has hired a Jewish filmmaker and interfaith activist as executive director of the advocacy group's Philadelphia office.

Jacob Bender is the highest ranking non-Muslim in the Washington-based organization, and the first to lead one of its chapters.

"Many Muslims face daily suspicion, not unlike other immigrant groups throughout history," said Bender, explaining that he felt people had a responsibility to confront bigotry. "When one group of Americans is attacked, it lessens the quality of democracy for all of us."

Bender acknowledged it will be challenging to represent Muslims as a non-Muslim, but said his Jewish background had some advantages.

"As part of a community that has historically faced persecution in Europe and the United States as well, I hope that I would bring a certain amount of sensitivity."

For the last few years, Bender directed and produced a documentary film, "Out of Cordoba," which explored Muslim-Jewish relations and the "clash of civilizations" theory through the writings of two medieval thinkers, Averroes, a Muslim, and his Jewish counterpart, Moses Maimonides.

At CAIR, Bender said his work would focus on fighting civil rights violations, discrimination, and hate speech, and promoting relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

At least a few Jewish Americans greeted the move with caution.

“The fact that he is Jewish does not indicate, necessarily, a change of attitude and activity at CAIR,” said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, in a statement. “Unfortunately, there are Jews who are anti-Jewish and anti-Israel. But we will wait and see.”

In a 2006 report, the ADL accused CAIR of associating with people who have supported terrorism, and of having extremist views on Israel.

Bender, who started Oct. 1 but whose appointment was announced on Oct. 15, the day Muslims celebrated Eid al-Adha, dismissed charges of extremism.

“Those attacks on CAIR are totally unfounded,” said Bender. “Many people equate extremism with any criticism of Israel.”

Ibrahim Hooper, a CAIR spokesman, said Bender’s appointment should not come as a surprise, and noted that CAIR employs many non-Muslims in its roughly 30 chapters across the country.

“If anyone judges us on the work we do and not on anti-Muslim stereotypes, they would see that we defend the civil liberties of all Americans,” he said “Diversity of experience and perspective is healthy for any organization.”