

Congressman says he's not "anti-Islam"

by [Richard Yeakley](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A freshman congressman said he is "neither anti-Muslim nor anti-Islam" after religious leader criticized him for saying the first Muslim in Congress represents the "antithesis" of American values.

Rep. Allen West, R-Fla., a prominent Tea Party freshman, on Wednesday (Feb. 2) defended his remarks directed at Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., who in 2006 became the first Muslim member of Congress.

West said he wasn't criticizing Ellison's Muslim faith, but rather his support of the Council on American-Islamic Relations and its history of "supporting violent anti-American and anti-Israel terrorist organizations."

"I am neither anti-Muslim nor anti-Islam," West said in a letter to his critics. "I respect every religion, and the constitutionally protected right to practice that faith in a peaceful manner."

In a recent interview with "Shalom Show" host Richard Peritz, West said Ellison represents "the antithesis of the principles upon which this country was established. You have to just be able to challenge each and every one of their assertions."

Leaders from the Interfaith Alliance, The Rabbinical Assembly, the

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty had blasted West over those comments.

"Although your laudable decision to offer yourself for public service in no way disqualifies you from discussing your own faith, we urge you not to use the prestige of your position ... to proselytize for one religion or demonize another," the leaders said.

Ellison's office was unavailable for comment, but CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper said he was not surprised by the attacks on his organization.

"When you are in office and have a responsibility to your voters, which include Muslims, the inflammatory rhetoric that appealed to your base in the past becomes dangerous," Hooper said.

West, a decorated Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, said he has worked with Muslims in the Middle East and at home, and "have known these people to be peaceful, patriotic Americans."

Although the religious leaders asked West to apologize to Ellison and West's own Muslim constituents, West's response stopped short of an apology.

"It appears to me that you have the very same goals as I do," West wrote back, "To keep our freedom intact and ensure that the foundations upon which this country was founded are never jeopardized."