

Muslim cops put faith, lives on the line

by [Omar Sacirbey](#)

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(RNS) When Los Angeles County Sheriff Leroy Baca asked Sgt. Muawiya "Mike" Abdeen to set up a liaison unit to local Muslims in 2008, the idea was to build bridges to a community that is often fearful of, or unknown to, law enforcement.

It was tough going at first, said Abdeen, a 23-year veteran of the Sheriff's Department.

"When we used to drive up to a mosque or a Muslim school, people would get scared, they walked away, they closed the doors," said Abdeen, 48.

But the officers kept returning, helping with parking during Friday prayers, giving talks to Muslim youths about safe driving, and meeting with local and national Muslim groups.

Now, Abdeen said, deputies are welcomed with hugs and tea.

"I always tell other officers, 'If you expect the community to talk to you, you have to talk to them, too,'" said Abdeen, who was born in Jerusalem and came to the U.S. at age 20. "Terrorism is just a small part of it. The community wants to see that the local police department is genuinely interested in helping them solve the daily quality-of-life

issues."

As hearings on Capitol Hill raise the specter of "extremist" Muslims who don't cooperate in terror investigations, the thin blue line of Muslim cops and deputies offer a glimpse of American Muslims who put their lives -- and sometimes their faith -- on the line in the interests of security.

Baca said he has no doubts about Muslims' loyalty to America after deputy trainee Mohamed Ahmed was shot and nearly killed by an alleged gang member earlier this year.

"I've worked with Muslim deputies, and I know that Muslim deputies are as courageous as any other deputies," said Baca, who had recruited the Somali-born Ahmed as part of his effort to improve relations between law enforcement and local Muslims.

It's not just Muslims who need to overcome fear and suspicion: Muslim officers often have to brief their comrades on Islamic beliefs and etiquette, which is why Abdeen recently worked with the Muslim Public Affairs Council to develop a 15-minute training video.

In February, Capt. Paul Fields of the Tulsa, Okla., Police Department was disciplined for refusing to attend a "Law Enforcement Appreciation Day" at a local mosque. He quickly filed suit, alleging a violation of his religious rights because he said visiting a mosque to make nice with Muslims is not a police duty.

The greater challenge, however, is forging positive relationships with local Muslims who are wary of undercover FBI agents inside their mosques, or dragnet prosecutions in the wake of 9/11.

House Homeland Security Chairman Peter King, R-N.Y., who will convene the hearings on homegrown extremism, has charged that "the leadership of the (Muslim) community is not geared to cooperation."

Baca, who is scheduled to testify at King's hearings, disputes those charges, saying Muslims have several times led officials to extremist individuals. When there is a lack of cooperation, it doesn't necessarily imply terrorist sympathies.

"It's not that they don't want to cooperate, but because they either don't know that we are there for them, or often because they're scared to reach out to us," said Imam Khalid Latif, a chaplain for the New York City Police Department, which has a few hundred Muslim officers and staff.

Many Muslims are immigrants who come from countries where police are corrupt and brutal, and whose fears are amplified by what some perceive to be an anti-Muslim atmosphere in the United States.

Not that long ago, the idea of a Muslim seeking a career in law enforcement was "something you did not do," said Mubarek Abdul-Jabbar, vice president of the New York City Policeman's Benevolent Association

"They were seen as the enemy and doing that was bordering on treason."

When Abdul-Jabbar joined the department 28 years ago, finding a partner was hard. "A lot of guys didn't want to ride with me because they said you can't trust a man who didn't drink and smoke," said

Abdul-Jabbar, 55, whose son is also a member of the NYPD.

Often times, in their quest for acceptance, some Muslim officers will engage in what Abdul-Jabbar calls non-Islamic behavior, like drinking alcohol or swearing.

"You spend a quarter of your life with these guys, so you want to fit in," he said. "These are the guys that are going to back you up. You have to have their support, you don't want anyone thinking, 'Oh he's not a good guy.'"