

Muslims watch warily as House holds hearing

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This article appears in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue.

They were moved when the first Muslim elected to Congress shed tears discussing a Muslim who died trying to save others on 9/11. They were irked by accusations from House members and annoyed when fellow Muslims maligned their faith.

At times they constituted an Amen corner. At other moments, they jeered and glared at the images beamed live from Capitol Hill.

But

for the most part, the dozen Muslims gathered in Sterling, Virginia, on March 10 at the home of a local grassroots activist sat silently as they watched the House Homeland Security Committee's hearing on "the extent of radicalization in the American Muslim Community."

The

hearings, spearheaded by chairman Peter King (R., N.Y.), drew loud protests from many U.S. Muslims before they even started. Too many politicians are blaming too many Muslims for the heinous actions of a few, they said.

In Boston, Aatif Harden went to watch at New England's largest mosque, a facility that opened in 2009 after years of resistance from locals. Harden, active in the Muslim American Society, had anticipated that at least a few friends would join him at the mosque. But they were too busy with work or school, he said, to spend time watching Washington.

Malik Khan, president of the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland, Massachusetts, was among those who skipped

the viewing party. "Sometimes I think the hell with it," he said. "We do so many good things, and people still just want to demonize us."

So

Harden watched the hearings alone. He didn't say much, until Rep. Frank Wolf (R., Va.) accused the Council on American-Islamic Relations of terrorist sympathies. "All of this stuff is old," he said. "What's an unindicted co-conspirator anyway? What the hell is that?"

The

feeling was much the same back in Virginia, where 28-year-old Salah Ayoubi called similar charges from King "ridiculous." Saba Baig, a 34-year-old homeschooling mother, called CAIR, a Muslim civil rights group with chapters across the country, "our biggest voice."

The

gathering was hosted by attorney Hassan Ahmad and his wife, Rabiah Ahmad, an organizer with the grassroots Muslim group My Faith My Voice. One of their guests was Ayah Ibrahim, a 26-year-old graduate student in political science at George Mason University. Ibrahim wished Muslim leaders had been invited to testify at the hearing.

"They need to bring in Islamic scholars," Ibrahim said, "someone who actually knows what they're talking about."

When

King cut off a request for more opening statements from committee Democrats, Ayoubi criticized the congressman. "He doesn't want more of that good stuff to be said," Ayoubi said.

Ayoubi's father, Mazen

Ayoubi, 57, was particularly frustrated with witness Zuhdi Jasser of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, who he said dwelled on the few radicals and ignored the many law-abiding Muslims. Ayoubi's seven children, for example, include doctors, lawyers and engineers. "It's only [Jasser] who thinks that there's a problem," he said.

Hassan

Ahmad accused Jasser of maligning the faith as much as any terrorist.

"That's what he's doing, he's hijacking our religion and he's making a statement on our behalf," said Ahmad.

Up in Boston, Harden also had choice words for Jasser. "In the African American community, we have a term, Uncle Tom. They're so full of self-loathing and self-hatred," Harden said. "I'm not saying he's that, but he's right on the edge of it."

Harden is part of a group of Muslims who meet monthly with the FBI, and when Jasser said Muslims don't cooperate with law enforcement, Harden snapped at the screen. "I work with the FBI every month," he said. "For him to say Muslims aren't working with the police is a lie, it's an insult."

In both Boston and Virginia, viewers seemed particularly troubled by perceptions that the hearings tarred all Muslims as guilty by association.

"Don't make the whole Muslim community responsible for the acts of a few idiots," Harden said. "Suppose we did that with the African-American community, or the Italian community? Suppose we had hearings about the Italian community being responsible for the mafia?"

When the hearings wrapped up in early afternoon, Harden still thought they were a bad idea. But he was heartened by support from some members of the panel, including Los Angeles County sheriff Lee Baca, who has hired Muslim deputies and built bridges to the local Muslim community.

Given what he had feared or what could have happened, Harden said it could have been worse. —RNS