

# Democrat announces alternate hearings on U.S. Muslims

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Barely two weeks after House Republicans held hearings on the threat posed by radicalized American Muslims, the Senate's No. 2 Democrat announced his own hearings on threats to American Muslims' civil rights.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., made no mention of the March 10 hearings by the House Homeland Security Committee that reduced the first Muslim elected to Congress to tears.

Instead, Durbin cited a spike "in anti-Muslim bigotry," including the burning of Qurans and an increase in hate crimes and hate speech toward Muslims. Durbin will convene the hearings on March 29 as chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights.

"During the course of our history, many religions have faced intolerance," said Durbin, the assistant Senate majority leader, in announcing the hearings on Tuesday (March 22).

"It is important for our generation to renew our founding charter's commitment to religious diversity and to protect the liberties guaranteed by our Bill of Rights."

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, which helped lead the opposition to the House hearings convened by Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., welcomed the change in tone from the other end of Capitol Hill.

"This is a very positive development," said CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper, who called the civil rights of Muslims "a necessary topic to discuss."

Recent years have seen a rise in negative reactions toward Muslims, Hooper said, citing opposition to building the Park 51 Islamic community center near Ground Zero, arson attacks and the bombing of a mosque in Jacksonville, Fla. A civilized discussion on the civil rights of all Americans is long overdue, he said.

And although Durbin did not bill his hearing as a direct response to King's, "it will be perceived that way," at least among U.S. Muslims, Hooper said.

Scheduled witnesses for the hearing include Farhana Khera, president and executive director of San Francisco-based Muslim Advocates; retired Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick; Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Tom Perez and Alex Acosta, who held the same position under former President George W. Bush.