

Muslim opposition grows to religious freedom nominee

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) More than 50 Muslim and non-Muslim civic and religious groups asked leading senators on Thursday (April 12) to rescind the appointment of an outspoken Muslim activist, Zuhdi Jasser, to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Jasser, a Navy-trained physician, is decrying the effort -- and others to oust him from the independent watchdog panel -- as a "smear tactic." A separate online petition that began circulating last week, also asking for his ouster, has garnered more than 2,000 signatures.

"Their letter is patently dishonest, deceptive, and continues their unprofessional unbridled smear campaign against anyone who chooses to take on Islamic reform against Islamist ideologies and groups regardless of whether we are observant traditional Muslims," Jasser wrote in an email to Religion News Service.

The signatories to the letter, sent to three key senators, argue that Jasser's rhetoric and activism contribute to a culture that treats Muslims as suspects, and that he would subvert the work of the bipartisan commission, which advises federal officials on the status of religious freedom abroad.

"His consistent support for measures that threaten and diminish religious freedoms within the United States demonstrates his deplorable lack of understanding of and commitment to religious freedom and undermines the USCIRF's express purpose," they wrote.

They cite Jasser's effort to prevent the construction of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, his support for the New York Police Department's spying on Muslim institutions, and his defense of anti-Shariah laws, which most Muslim civil rights groups say unfairly paint Muslims as anti-American.

Jasser said his positions are far more nuanced than represented by those who signed the letter, and that his view on the Ground Zero mosque is a "pro-Islamic" one. As for his attitudes toward Shariah, "I have never been against family Shariah laws that, in fact, most of which I practice myself," he wrote to RNS.

The independent commission was founded by Congress in 1998 to monitor and advise federal officials on the status of religious freedom abroad.

Republicans and Democrats take turns making appointments to the commission.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., appointed Jasser. The letter is also addressed to Senate President Pro-Tempore Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, and Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., who chairs the Senate's Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights.

Signatories to the letter include nine individuals and 55 national and local groups, from the well-known Council on American-Islamic Relations to the Islamic Society of Greater Columbus, Ohio.