

American Muslims work to counter backlash

by [David Cook](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Muslim leaders in the United States are mounting a multifaceted campaign to counter Islamophobia.

The effort comes out of a meeting December 20 in Sterling, Virginia, of about 100 Muslim leaders. The campaign will include efforts to register 1 million additional Muslim voters before the 2016 election, more fully engage young Muslims in mainstream communities, and forge stronger alliances with civil rights and interfaith groups.

The impetus for the gathering was “the unprecedented rise in violent incidents targeting American Muslims in the wake of the Paris terror attacks and the San Bernardino killings and recent inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and political incitement,” said Oussama Jammal, secretary general of the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations.

Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, commented on the potential perceptions of the self-described Islamic State.

“ISIS leaders know that they cannot destroy the United States,” Awad said. “What they hope to do is to divide the American people and scare us.”

Hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques across the United States have tripled since the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, according to a study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, which was first published by the *New York Times*.

Since the November 13 Paris attacks, 38 anti-Muslim attacks have occurred, including violence against hijab-wearing students, death threats at Muslim-owned companies, and arson and vandalism at mosques, the California State University study found. Yet the level of violence against Muslims is not as high as it was immediately after 9/11, when there were hundreds of attacks against Muslims, according to researchers.

The role of Muslims has been a major topic recently in the presidential race. After the San Bernardino attack, Donald Trump called for a temporary ban on Muslims who are not U.S. citizens entering the United States until the government can “figure out what is going on.”

Hillary Clinton addressed the topic during the December 19 Democratic debate.

“I worry greatly that the rhetoric coming from the Republicans, particularly Donald Trump, is sending a message to Muslims here in the United States and literally around the world that there is a clash of civilizations,” Clinton said, “that there is some kind of Western plot or even war against Islam, which then I believe fans the flames of radicalization.”

Muslim officials speaking at a press conference December 21 about the campaign to counter Islamophobia cautioned that many of their organizations had a tax status that barred them from directly or indirectly participating in any political campaign.

However, Awad of CAIR commented on Trump’s language about Muslims.

“He knows better,” Awad said. “We feel the heat.”

The Muslim officials said a key component of their work together would be finding ways to counter the appeal of ISIS among young American Muslims.

“We have to do a better job of reaching out to our young people from the pulpits of the mosques in America and teaching them how they can avoid the seductive approaches that are found on the Internet from groups like ISIS and others,” said Johari Abdul-Malik, an imam and governmental affairs director for the Muslim Alliance in North America. “We believe that the issue is bigger than ISIS. It is a conspiracy to take advantage of our young people, and we are redoubling our efforts as a community.”