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Scrutiny Increases for a Group Advocating for Muslims in U.S.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

With violence across the Middle East fixing Islam smack at the center of the American political debate, an organization partly financed by donors closely identified with wealthy Persian Gulf governments has emerged as the most vocal advocate for American Muslims — and an object of wide suspicion.

The group, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, defines its mission as spreading the understanding of Islam and protecting civil liberties. Its officers appear frequently on television and are often quoted in newspapers, and its director has met with President Bush. Some 500,000 people receive the group's daily e-mail newsletter.

Yet a debate rages behind the scenes in Washington about the group, commonly known as CAIR, its financing and its motives. A small band of critics have made a determined but unsuccessful effort to link it to [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#), which have been designated as terrorist organizations by the State Department, and have gone so far as calling the group an American front for the two.

In the latest confrontation yesterday, CAIR held a panel discussion on Islam and the West in a Capitol meeting room despite demands by House [Republicans](#) that Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), a Democrat, not allow the event. The Republicans called its members "terrorist apologists."

Caley Gray, a spokesman for Representative Bill Pascrell Jr., a New Jersey Democrat who helped book the room, rejected that label in a phone interview and said CAIR held similar meetings when Congress was controlled by Republicans. Still, Mr. Gray called back to specify that Mr. Pascrell did not endorse all of the group's positions.

Last fall, Senator [Barbara Boxer](#) of California issued a routine Certificate of Appreciation to the organization representative in Sacramento, but she quickly revoked it when critics assailed her on the Web under headlines like "Senators for Terror."

"There are things there I don't want to be associated with," Ms. Boxer said later of the revocation, explaining that her California office had not vetted the group sufficiently.

CAIR and its supporters say its accusers are a small band of people who hate Muslims and deal in half-truths. Ms. Boxer's decision to revoke the Sacramento commendation provoked an outcry from organizations that vouch for the group's advocacy, including the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and the California Council of Churches.

"They have been a leading organization that has advocated for civil rights and civil liberties in the face of fear and intolerance, in the face of religious and ethnic profiling," said Maya Harris, the executive director of the A.C.L.U. of Northern California.

Government officials in Washington said they were not aware of any criminal investigation of the group. More than one described the standards used by critics to link CAIR to terrorism as akin to McCarthyism, essentially guilt by association.

"Of all the groups, there is probably more suspicion about CAIR, but when you ask people for cold hard facts, you get blank stares," said Michael Rolince, a retired [F.B.I.](#) official who directed counterterrorism in the Washington field office from 2002 to 2005.

Outreach to all Muslims via groups they support is an important aspect of ensuring that extremists cannot get a foothold here as they have in Europe, Mr. Rolince said.

The cloud kicked up by the constant scrutiny is such that spokesmen at several federal agencies refused to comment about the group and some spoke only on the condition of anonymity.

After a brief interview, Ms. Boxer declined to answer additional questions about the commendation to the Sacramento representative, Basim Elkarra. A spokeswoman, Natalie Ravitz, said in an e-mail message that the senator had decided "to put this entire incident behind her."

Joe Kaufman, who Ms. Boxer's office said first drew her attention to CAIR's reputation, is the founder of a Web site that tracks what he calls the group's extremism, [cairwatch.com](http://www.cairwatch.com). Other critics include the Investigative Project, a conservative group that tries to identify terrorist organizations, and the Middle East Forum, a conservative research center that says its goal is to promote American interests in the region.

"You can't fight a war on terrorism directly when you are acting with a terror front," said Mr. Kaufman, who advocates shutting down the organization.

Founded in 1994, CAIR had eight chapters at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks, said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the group, but has grown to some 30 chapters as American Muslims have felt unjustly scrutinized ever since.

Broadly summarized, critics accuse CAIR of pursuing an extreme Islamist political agenda and say at least five figures with ties to the group or its leadership have either been convicted or deported for links to terrorist groups. They include Mousa Abu Marzook, a Hamas leader deported in 1997 after the United States failed to produce any evidence directly linking him to any attacks.

There were no charges linked to CAIR in any of the cases involved, and law enforcement officials said that in the current climate, any hint of suspicious behavior would have resulted in a racketeering charge.

The group's officials say the accusations are rooted in its refusal to endorse the American government's blanket condemnations of Hezbollah and Hamas, although it has criticized Hamas for civilian deaths.

Several federal officials said CAIR's Washington office frequently issued controversial statements that made it hard for senior government figures to be associated with the group, particularly since some pro-Israeli lobbyists have created what one official called a "cottage industry" of attacking the group and anyone dealing with it.

Last summer, the group urged a halt to weapons shipments to Israel as civilian casualties in Lebanon swelled. In September, it held a dinner for former President Mohamed Khatami of Iran at a time when much of official Washington had ostracized that Islamic republic. In November, the group sponsored a panel discussion by two prominent academics who argue that the pro-Israeli lobby exercises detrimental influence on United States policy on the Middle East.

"Traditionally within the government there is only one point of view that is acceptable, which is the pro-Israel line," said Nihad Awad, a founder of CAIR and its executive director. "Another enlightened perspective on the conflict is not there, and it causes some discomfort."

When Mr. Bush visited a Washington mosque in 2001, Mr. Awad was among the Muslim leaders he met. But Dana M. Perino, a White House spokeswoman, said Mr. Awad had not been invited to any recent iftars, annual dinners to break the fast during the holy month of Ramadan. She offered no explanation.

This year, when Attorney General [Alberto R. Gonzales](#) met with the leaders of half a dozen Muslim and Arab-American organizations in his office, no representative from CAIR was invited.

When Karen P. Hughes, the close adviser to Mr. Bush and under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, started interacting with the group, she was criticized as dealing with "Wahhabis," shorthand for Saudi-inspired religious extremists, a State Department spokesman said.

CAIR has raised some suspicion by accepting large donations from individuals or foundations closely identified with Arab governments. It has an annual operating budget of around \$3 million, and the group said it solicited major donations for special projects, like \$500,000 from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia to help distribute the Koran and other books about Islam in the United States, some of which generated controversy.

The donations are a source of contention within CAIR itself. Several branch directors said they had avoided foreign financing and had criticized the national office for it.

Officials at other Arab-American and Muslim organizations said there was a decided split between how the national office operated and how the branches did. The branch offices, which raise their own money and operate largely as franchises, concentrate on local civil rights problems and hence develop close working relationships with law enforcement.

When the Southern California chapter threw itself a birthday party last November, nearly 2,000 people packed the Anaheim Hilton's ballroom to hear guests of honor praise the organization, including J. Stephen Tidwell, the director of the F.B.I.'s Los Angeles office.

"I am very excited to be here," Mr. Tidwell told a reporter covering the fund-raiser for an Arab-American television news channel, calling CAIR "an important bridge for the F.B.I. into the Muslim, Arab-American community."

The Washington office, the officials at the other Arab-American and Muslim groups said, tends to fight more image battles because its main staff members have backgrounds in public relations. Still, they said, CAIR's contrarian image helps with fund-raising both in the American Muslim community and among Arab governments because both believe that the federal government is biased against them.

Some Muslims, particularly the secular, find CAIR overly influenced by Saudi religious interpretations, criticizing it for stating in news releases, for example, that all Muslim women are required to veil their hair when the matter is openly debated.

But they still support its civil rights work and endorse the idea of anyone working to make American Islam a more integral part of society. One Arab-American advocate compared CAIR to "the tough cousin who curses at anyone who speaks badly about the family."

Some activists and academics view the controversy surrounding the group as typical of why Washington fails so often in the Middle East, while extremism mushrooms.

"How far are we going to keep going in this endless circle: 'You are a terrorist!' 'No, you are a terrorist!?' " said Souleiman Ghali, one of the founders of a moderate San Francisco mosque. "People are paying a price for that."

David Johnston contributed reporting.

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