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From Muslim Youths, a Push for Change

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Participants at Unprecedented Summit With U.S. Officials Confront Extremist Images

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Attending what Muslim American activists say is the highest-level meeting ever between Muslim American youths and U.S. officials, Mohamed Sabur couldn't help but notice a frustrating paradox.

Part of what motivated the 23-year-old to leave computer science for politics was anger at seeing his community constantly defined by extreme topics such as religious violence. And yet Sabur sat last week through unprecedented meetings with officials from the departments of Homeland Security, State and Justice, and one subject kept coming up: Muslim American youth radicalization.

"I'm trying constantly *to* figure out: How can I be a civically involved Muslim, interact with other Muslims as well as the government while not seeming like a sellout, like my allegiance is in one camp or another?" the native Minnesotan said Friday, just before dinner on [Capitol Hill](#) with the two dozen other participants of the first National Muslim American Youth Summit, which ended yesterday. The summit was organized by the Muslim Public Affairs Council, one of the largest U.S. Muslim advocacy groups, to expose future leaders to the workings of a government many Muslims feel speaks *about* them but not to them.

Six years into a serious political and religious awakening prompted by the Sept. 11 attacks, American Muslims know why such meetings haven't happened before. The community, 65 percent foreign-born, is just starting to build the type of institutions that can produce young Muslim civic leaders (some call this period "embryonic"). On the government side, things were just too brittle for a lot of invitations to be extended, officials say.

But what young Muslim Americans don't know, summit participants said, is precisely what to do with their newfound drive. Anxious to take the reins from their immigrant parents, they have questions unique to them and to today. Do they see themselves working on Capitol Hill, even though there are so few Muslim staffers? What is the overlap between Islam and the U.S. Constitution? Can they maintain credibility with their peers if they team up too much with an administration many Muslim and Arab Americans see as hostile?

The last question is familiar to the 27 participants of the summit, as the Muslim council is viewed as having the coziest links to law enforcement and the Bush administration among the handful of major Muslim American advocacy groups, other groups and summit participants say.

"When we go to [the Pentagon](#), the community goes nuts; people are like, 'Are you guys becoming the Muslim mouthpiece for these agencies?'" said Safiya Ghorri, the group's government relations director. "We are trying to be very transparent, but it is important for us to be here. There are always people who don't feel like engaging [with the government], but we feel that is our strategy."

The issue of acceptance flips quickly to that of language, and a term that many young Muslim Americans find loaded: "moderate." While Muslim council Executive Director Salam al-Marayati liberally uses the term, some members of younger generations bristle at the notion of getting an official stamp of approval and prefer "mainstream" -- though that, too, they say, is not well-defined and has become politicized.

An essay making the rounds among summit participants, "Why I Am Not a Moderate Muslim," argued that the push for "moderate" Islam implies that orthodox Islam entails violence.

"To be a 'moderate' Muslim is to be a 'good,' malleable Muslim in the eyes of Western society," read the essay by [University of Cambridge](#) master's student and [Indiana](#) native Asma Khalid that was published in the [Christian Science Monitor](#).

Omar Sarwar, 25, came to the summit on a mission. Driven after terrorist attacks in the United States and [Europe](#) to "contribute to the future of this country," the [Columbia University](#) graduate ditched a career in banking to go back to school and study politics and religion. After two days of meeting with agency staff members, he was thinking he might have more influence at a think tank than in the government.

"These people aren't making policy. They're carrying it out," said the New Yorker, whose parents are from [Pakistan](#).

"For me, this conference is about trying to find out what it means to be an American Muslim in terms of political and civic engagement. Trying to find out what it means to be a political Muslim but not the one on the cover of a magazine with a gun," he said.

Young Muslim Americans have a limited number of role models in top-level politics. There are none in top positions in the agencies represented at the conference. The summit met with U.S. Rep. [Keith Ellison](#) (D-Minn.), the first Muslim elected to Congress, and the Congressional Muslim Staffers Association, which started about two years ago and estimates there are 25 Muslims working on Capitol Hill.

The event comes, not by accident, as attention is turning toward Muslim American youths. A [Pew Research Center](#) report released in May found a quarter of American Muslims ages 18 to 29 believe suicide bombings against civilians can sometimes be justified to defend Islam, while only 9 percent older than 30 believe that. Congress began holding hearings this spring on homegrown Islamic terrorism, which prompted the Muslim council to release a policy paper last month pressing for Muslim chaplains on every college campus, more influence for young Muslims in large organizations and the government to publicize its cooperation with Muslim leaders.

Watching recent reports about alleged terrorist plots in [Fort Dix, N.J.](#), and at [New York's JFK Airport](#), "we began to get really nervous," and planned the paper and the summit, Ghorri said. The Muslim council picked participants the organization learned about through Muslim activists and groups.

Summit participants said they were frustrated by the fact that Homeland Security staff members, despite expressing concern about homegrown terrorism, admitted to the group that they don't know enough about the threat to offer suggestions on how to help counter it.

Despite the heavy topic, the tone at the summit was also upbeat with the vibe of hopefulness that comes with a gathering of go-getters. On Thursday night, the group met at a [Georgetown](#) office for a coffee hour, to analyze the summit and play an ice-breaker game in which young people raced around the room to find people with whom they shared something in common. After 10 minutes, pairs shouted out their shared interests:

"We both like the Red Sox!"

"We're both Palestinian and we like [Mos Def!](#)"

"We both love property management!"

Sabur, whose parents grew up in [East Africa](#), said he ultimately felt energized by the summit.

"Maybe this government isn't ready to seriously dialogue, but Muslim Americans need to continue to advance, to learn the importance of civic engagement," he said, "to make sure our youth grow up the way we want them to be, and [are] respected for who they are."

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