

Madison Muslims Initiate Anti-terrorism Pact

By Laura Salinger



Amir Salih Erschen of the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle spoke about breaking down the stereotypes that surround area Muslims.

In response to recent warnings of possible terrorist attacks in the United States, Madison-area Muslims held a press conference to speak out against terrorism. The Madison Muslim Dawa Circle and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Muslim Student Association released a "Madison Muslim Anti-Terror Pact," in an effort to dispel the myth that Islam is somehow tied to terrorism.

"In lieu of the recent announcement of an 'imminent' act of terror, the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle [is] initiating a grass-roots movement against terrorism in any form," reads the anti-terror pact. "Many Muslims were counted among the victims of September 11, 2001; and it should not be forgotten that a large number of Muslims have fallen in the unconstitutional 'war on terror' that has followed. It should be equally noted that Muslims and Islam have been the victims of an overall misrepresentation. To avert any further misunderstanding, we feel it is important to make our condemnation of terrorism clear."

Amir Salih Erschen of the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle spoke to a modest group recently and attempted to break down the stereotypes that surround area Muslims. He said he hoped the anti-terror pact would also spread the word that Islam does not condone terrorism.

"Our intention is to help the people of Madison understand that they don't have to be suspicious of their Muslim neighbors," Erschen said. "Islam does not condone or allow for any kind of terrorism."

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world, with an estimated 0.7 to 1.2 billion followers. There are up to 7 million Muslims and over 1,200 mosques in the United States. Muslim is an Arabic word which means submission to the will of one God. Most Muslims believe that media-coined phrases like "Islamic terrorist" or "Muslim terrorist" are oxymorons. Islam, according to the majority of its followers, is a religion of peace.

"As Allah says in the Quran, if one person is killed unjustly, it is as if all of humanity had been killed," the anti-terror pact reads. "Life is sacred. The path of Islam naturally rejects the premise of terrorism by enjoining just behavior and forbidding injustice. All acts of terror, whether suicide bombing or any other indiscriminate act of terror, are outside the limits of Islam."

Since Sept. 11, 2001, American Muslims have been forced to defend their religion because of the atrocious actions of a very few. Muslims are defining their political and social roles in the United States in a climate often fraught with fear.

Erschen said that although he personally has not faced outspoken criticism of his religious beliefs, he has sensed uneasiness in those around him when he wears traditional Muslim dress. The mainstream media, he said, has played a large role in perpetuating this climate of fear.

"There should be a high sensitivity in reporting ... about Muslims," Erschen said. "In these ... trying times, it is important to gain a real understanding of what Islam is truly about. This will help people to be more informed and less fearful of what they do not understand. Islam is growing, so the need for good information about it is growing as well."

The Madison Muslim Dawa Circle was formed several years ago to help Wisconsin residents understand more about Islam. Members provide literature and give lectures; they have been invited to church and business groups, schools, community gatherings, state offices, prisons, and other places.

"We are actively working to help bridge the gap of misunderstanding about America's and the world's fastest growing faith," Erschen said. "The Madison Muslim Dawa Circle would like to initiate an invitation [to others] to share in understanding the dynamics of living in submission to the One God: Islam."

Madison Muslim Dawa Circle members make it clear that they are accepting of other religions and beliefs. Their anti-terror pact stems from a desire to live in peace and understanding with other area residents.

"We stand against terrorism in hopes of protecting our families, friends, and neighbors, while at the same time hoping to promote a proper understanding of Islam and the Muslims in this difficult time," the anti-terror pact reads. "It is also our hope that this document will further the understanding that true Muslims seek to be a positive factor within the community by helping to improve the circumstances of everyone in the community, regardless of race, gender, or religion."

