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Area Muslims eye Obama speech

Leaders ready to bridge religious gaps

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During the Bush administration, Yahya Basha of West Bloomfield was a frequent visitor to the White House, acting as a liaison between Muslim Americans and the U.S. government.

Over the years, the doctor said, he saw a shift in tone as "the Muslim community was pushed away."

Basha, 63, is still a Republican, but the Arab-American Muslim said he hopes President Barack Obama succeeds today in reaching out to the Muslim world with what's expected to be a major speech in Egypt on Islam. It's a talk that will be closely watched by Michigan's sizable Muslim population and one where Obama might mention the contributions of Muslim Americans.

"I think there's a significant new approach," Basha said. "People in the Middle East see the United States now has a president whose middle name is Hussein. He looks more like them. He has the name, the look, and the strongest country in the world behind him."

Obama's speech comes after a year of intense debate over his own relationship with the religion -- which included false rumors he was Muslim -- and over the U.S. government's relationship to the Islamic world.

From detainees at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the issue of Islam has become a major focus of government policies.

And so, Muslims in metro Detroit hope they can act as a bridge to help close the gap between the two.

"America needs its Muslim voices," said Victor Begg of Bloomfield Hills, chairman of the Council on Islamic Organizations of Michigan. "Muslim Americans can be a huge asset in terms of changing attitudes within the Muslim world, and bringing the Islamic world closer to America."

Obama's father was born into a Muslim family and Obama once lived in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world.

But during the election campaign, Obama repeatedly stressed he was Christian. In recent months, though, Obama has shown an increasing willingness to talk about his Muslim past and about Muslim Americans.

In April, he told the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara that Islam "has done so much over the centuries to shape the world -- including in my own country. The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country -- I know, because I am one of them."

And Obama said this week he would bring up the issue of Muslim Americans today.

"One of the points I want to make is, is that if you actually took the number of Muslim Americans, we'd be one of the largest Muslim countries in the world," he told a French television station.

Those comments are encouraging, say local Muslims.

"I would hope that President Obama makes every effort to build bridges of understanding between American Muslims and the non-Muslim community," said Suehaila Amen, 30, of Dearborn. "There is too much hate in the world."

The relationship between Muslim Americans and the government cannot only help Muslims, but America's standing in the world, said Muslim Americans and some government officials.

Imam Abdullah El-Amin of Detroit said that Obama can show that "the United States is not anti-Islam" and "will work with the Muslim world."

Obama's talk also will be watched by local members of the Jewish community, many of whom have strong ties to Israel. Some are concerned about Islamic extremism and hope that Obama will highlight the importance of fighting radical movements such as Hamas.

"Radical forces within the Islamic world need to be silenced" in order for peace to prevail, said Rabbi Jason Miller of Congregation t'Chiyah in Oak Park.

Todd Mendel, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Metro Detroit, said he hopes Obama talks about the threat of Iran and doesn't pressure Israel to stop settlements on the West Bank -- a sticking point in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

"I'm hoping he won't focus on the smaller issues ... like settlements," Mendel said.

Some metro Muslims say that Obama should talk about putting pressure on Israel to help solve the Palestinian issue.

"The entire problem in the Muslim world is because of Palestine," said Taher Rasheed, 69, of West Bloomfield.

Regardless of the differing views, both groups say the speech is important because it comes during a critical time for the United States and the Muslim world.

"I expect to see massive change," Basha said.

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