

US Jewish-Muslim alliance formed against bigotry

Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service, NCR, 15 November 2016

The day after President-elect Donald Trump appointed a man accused of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as his chief strategist, two of the nation's largest Jewish and Muslim advocacy groups formed an unprecedented partnership to fight bigotry.

On Monday, the American Jewish Committee and the Islamic Society of North America launched the new national group: the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council. Though Jewish and Muslim groups have cooperated before, the size and influence of these two particular groups — and the prominence of the people who have joined the council — mark a milestone in Jewish-Muslim relations.

"Our council is coming at the right time," said Eftakhar Alam, senior coordinator at the Muslim society's Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances.

"We have to show the administration that as American Muslims and Jews — people of the faiths of Abraham — we are uniting to help the administration navigate in the proper constitutional manner, to uphold freedom of religion and constitutional rights for all American citizens."

The idea for the council was hatched months before last week's election, when pollsters and much of the country were convinced that Trump would lose. But even if Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton had won, said Alam and others, the vitriol of the election calls for such a coming together of Muslims and Jews.

Separately, Jewish and Muslim groups have expressed outrage over Trump's appointment Sunday of Stephen Bannon as his chief strategist and senior counselor. Bannon edited Breitbart News, a right-wing website popular among those who embrace alt-right views and those who fan hostility toward Muslims, Jews, immigrants and other minorities. The new council may give Muslims and Jews a way to critique Trump and his advisers' rhetoric and policy with a single voice. Members of both groups worry that the campaign revealed deeper seams of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in America than many had realized.

"The Council's formation shows that American Muslim and Jewish leadership are now working together, focused on domestic developments. This is a first and is good news for the entire country," said Robert Silverman, the American Jewish Committee's director of Muslim-Jewish relations.

As he ran for president, Trump called for restrictions on Muslim immigration. His campaign ads trafficked in what racism watchdogs said were anti-Semitic tropes. And some Trump supporters, at rallies and on social media, blamed Muslims, Jews and other minorities for the nation's ills.

Among the goals set by the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council at its first meeting: to combat bigotry against Muslims and Jews in the U.S., to highlight each group's contributions to American society and to protect the rights of other religious minorities.

Members of the new council include clergy, businesspeople and current and former government officials. Among them:

- Former U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman;
- Imam Mohamed Magid, All Dulles Area Muslim Society;
- Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles' Sinai Temple;
- Farooq Kathwari, president and CEO of Ethan Allen Interiors;
- Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly;
- Imam Talib M. Shareef of the Nation's Mosque, Masjid Muhammad.