

LOCAL MUSLIMS SAY COMMUNITY HAS BEEN SUPPORTIVE

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While Middle Eastern natives and Muslims living in the Charleston area still have questions about America's strikes against terrorist strongholds in Afghanistan, they are convinced about the kindness and tolerance of their neighbors.

Citing a fear of civilian lives lost to American bombs and missiles, many local Muslims said they were concerned about the direction of the response to the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"Any terrorist attack of such a magnitude has to have some kind of response, and, of course, we understand that. We also understand that America has the right to and the obligation to defend itself," Pakistani-born Dr. Raheel Khan said.

"But at the same time we have some very real concerns that, depending on how the attacks are conducted, innocent people could be unnecessarily killed or harmed. I would think that we, as a country, have to be a little more cautious in that regard."

However, Khan, a naturalized citizen and a leader of the local Islamic community, said the current crisis has shown him and his fellow Muslims the true character of their neighbors in greater Charleston.

"When these attacks first happened on the 11th of September, we had concerns that what would happen was the same thing that had occurred after other such events . . . or terrorist attacks. There has usually been some sort of backlash of a limited nature," Khan said.

"I was extremely surprised and very pleased at the support and outpouring of love that we have seen in the past weeks. The messages we have received, the flowers and the cards that we have been receiving on almost a continual basis, all say the same thing – that we are welcome and much loved."

The mixed emotions Khan expressed today represents a middle ground in the local Muslim community, with some denouncing the U.S. action and others giving their wholehearted support.

"I think it stinks, what they're doing over there," said Tabitha Boukhemis, a convert to Islam who teaches pre-school at the mosque in South Charleston. "Bombing is going to kill innocent people who have already been driven out of their homes and starved, and I don't see what good that does."

Boukhemis and others who asked that they not be identified said that any action by the United States - outside of the limited use of ground forces against the upper echelons of the Taliban or Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization - would result in innocent lives lost and further terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, Emile Al-Hajj, an Egyptian-born, retired pharmacist who has lived in the Charleston area for 23 years, said that the first wave of U.S. retaliation was appropriate, and that he hoped the campaign would continue.

"I think it is marvelous that we got started - very good," Al-Hajj said. "We have to go forward. We have to remove all of Afghanistan from the map. I am opposed strongly to Afghanistan because they use terrorism and attack peaceful people."

Many others also expressed the same kind of support for President Bush and the military that Americans of all races and backgrounds have been showing since the U.S. began its counteroffensive.

"I'm behind the U.S. all the way on this. We've got to do this job or they will never let us rest. I understand, to some small extent, the kind of people we are dealing with, and they will not stop or weep about lost civilian lives," said a local Pakistan-born doctor, who asked that his name not be used. "They will have no compromise or peace treaties. Only a war to the end."

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