

THE RADICALIZATION HEARINGS

IMPACT: The radicalization hearings were a series of five congressional hearings held between March 2011 and June 2012 on the purported “radicalization” of American Muslims by then-Representative Peter King. Prior to the hearings, King erroneously claimed that “80-85 percent of mosques in this country are controlled by Islamic fundamentalists.” The hearings focused on radicalization and recruitment in the American Muslim community, US prison system, and US military. The hearings were dubbed McCarthyism 2.0 by critics and were denounced by interfaith and civil rights coalitions.

- The radicalization hearings were a series of five congressional hearings on the “radicalization” of American Muslims held by then-Representative [Peter King](#). The hearings occurred between March 2011 and June 2012 while King served as chair of the US House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee. The first [hearing](#) centered broadly on “Radicalization in the American Muslim Community,” the second focused on the US prison system, the third focused on “Al Shabaab Recruitment and Radicalization,” the fourth focused on military communities, and the fifth [focused](#) on the “American Muslim Response” to the previous hearings. **The hearings were labeled “McCarthyism 2.0” in a March 2011 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) blog post and were denounced by [interfaith](#) and [civil rights](#) coalitions.**
- **King previously [claimed](#) in a 2004 radio interview with Sean Hannity that “no American Muslim leaders are cooperating in the war [on] terror” and “80-85 percent of mosques in this country are controlled by Islamic fundamentalists.”** The claim was [countered](#) by academics including historian and anthropologist Karen Leonard from the University of California Irvine, who stated: “85%. Nonsense. American Muslim mosques are run very differently from those in many of the immigrants’ home countries, and by adopting a ‘congregational’ model in order to qualify for tax exemption in the U.S., most immigrant mosques now have constitutions and elected governing boards and the elections are open to public scrutiny ... If an imam is too extreme he will not be hired or retained, in my experience; I know of no extremist mosque in southern California.”
- King [announced](#) his intentions to hold the hearings in December 2010 as the incoming chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, and **claimed to be responding to “frequent concerns raised by law enforcement officials that Muslim leaders have been uncooperative in terror investigations.”** He defended previous statements on American Muslims and mosques in the months leading up to the first hearing. In January 2011, **the Washington Post reported that King “[said] in an interview that he has no idea if the [85%] estimate is correct,” however, he did state that “I do think there is an inordinate amount of radical influence in mosques.”**
- Officially [titled](#) “The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and that Community’s Response,” the first hearing was held on March 10, 2011. Among the witnesses were [Zuhdi Jasser](#), founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy; [Abdirizak Bihi](#), director of the Somali Education and Social Advocacy Center; [Melvin Bledsoe](#), a private citizen; [Leroy Baca](#), a sheriff at the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department; and Representatives [John Dingell](#), [Keith Ellison](#), and [Frank Wolf](#). **Although King had previously claimed that Muslims do not cooperate with law enforcement officials, he did not [invite](#) any law enforcement officials to testify.**
- In his opening [statement](#), King addressed opposition to the hearings, stating that there was “nothing radical or un-American” about holding them. He also clarified why he was not holding hearings on other forms of terrorism, a common point of [criticism](#) from Democrats: “There is no equivalency of threat between al-Qaeda and neo-Nazis, environmental extremists, or other isolated madmen. Only al-Qaeda and its Islamist affiliates in this country are part of an international threat to our Nation.”

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- King also cited a report of the Senate Homeland Security Committee which concluded “Muslim community leaders and religious leaders must play a more visible role in discrediting and providing alternatives to violent Islamist ideology.” However, a February 2011 study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on terrorism committed by American Muslims revealed that **the “single largest source of tips about terrorist plots came from the Muslim American community,” dispelling King’s claims that Muslim leaders were uncooperative in terrorism investigations.**
- Then-Representative John Dingell asked that in the hearings, the committee “not blot the good name or the loyalty or raise questions about the decency of Arabs or Muslims or other Americans en masse.” Representative Keith Ellison—the first Muslim representative in Congress—stated that “targeting of the Muslim American community for the actions of a few is unjust,” and affirmed the value that American Muslims have in the United States: “Muslim Americans have been part of the American scene since the Nation’s founding ... Muslims serve our Nation as doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, cabdrivers, and even Members of Congress. Muslim Americans live in every community in America, and they are our neighbors. In short, they are us.”
- Representative Frank Wolf expressed his belief that the hearings would “provide the Congress with a starting point for a new dialogue about fighting extremism and radicalization.” Jasser also expressed his support for the hearings and stated that “the United States has a significant problem with Muslim radicalization.” He also praised the NYPD’s Radicalization in the West, **a now discredited report that “purported to describe the process that drives previously ‘unremarkable’ people to become terrorists.”**
- Titled “The Threat of Muslim-American Radicalization in U.S. Prisons,” the second hearing was held on June 15, 2011. In his opening statement, King stated that the “issue of Islamic radicalization in U.S. prisons is not new” and addressed critics of the previous hearing in March: “[T]he first radicalization hearing which this committee held in March of this year was met by much mindless hysteria led by radical groups such as the Council [on American] Islamic Relations and their allies in the liberal media, personified by the New York Times. Countering Islamic radicalization should not be a partisan issue.”
- Several letters of concern from organizations were entered into the record. A letter signed by a coalition of civil rights organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Sentencing Project, and Muslim Advocates stated that “there is no credible evidence or expert research that Muslim prisoners pose a unique or particular threat.” **The organizations also expressed concern that there were no witnesses from the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and that instead “the invited witnesses [would] focus on isolated instances of violent extremism by former or current inmates who are Muslim, without the proper context of the threat of recidivism and violent extremism by all former or current inmates, regardless of faith background.”**
- According to an article published in Politico, “While many witnesses acknowledged that there have been incidents where U.S. prisoners have been radicalized, they all seemed to emphasize the low occurrence of such cases, especially given that America has the largest incarceration rate and prison population of any country in the world.”
- **A January 2013 report by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) revealed that “despite the existence of an estimated 350,000 Muslim prisoners, there is little evidence of widespread radicalization or successful foreign recruitment, and only one documented case of prison-based terrorist activity.”** Furthermore, findings “reveal[ed] that radicalization to the point of adopting violence is a rare event. But to the extent that it does occur, it corresponds to concerns about the conditions of Muslims in the United States rather than to recruiting efforts launched by foreign networks in Muslim-majority countries ... cases to date show that radicalization in prison has little to do with groups like al-Qa’ida, Saudi-based charities, or other foreign sources.”

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- The third hearing, titled “Al-Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland” was held on July 27, 2011. In his opening statement, King again directly addressed the New York Times, stating: “If they even had a semblance of intellectual honesty, the Times and the others would know and admit that there is no equivalency in the threat to our homelands from a deranged gunman, and the international terror apparatus of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, such as al-Shabaab ... Let me make this clear to the New York Times and their acolytes in the politically correct moral equivalency media. I will not back down from holding these hearings.” **The statement was in part a response to a July 2011 New York Times op-ed which identified King as an “ideological fellow [traveler]” of Anders Breivik, a Norwegian terrorist and white supremacist who murdered seventy-seven people and held anti-Muslim views.**
- Like the previous two hearings, the third hearing was divided along partisan lines. According to reporting in CBS, Representative Yvette Clarke “argued that radicalism is ‘cross cultural, cross religious, cross ethnicity’ and that focusing only on Muslim radicals would leave America vulnerable to the unexpected. She [also] argued that holding hearings on Muslims would risk ostracizing communities, leaving them more vulnerable to extremist influence.” Representative Michael McCaul dismissed the criticism because “they are investigating radicals, not Muslims” and “insisted, ‘I am mystified by the controversy that has been caused by this.’” **No Somali Americans were included among the witnesses who provided testimony.**
- In September 2011, King traveled to the United Kingdom to testify before the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee’s inquiry titled “Roots of Violent Radicalisation,” **becoming the first member of Congress to testify before a Parliamentary hearing in Britain.** King denounced the “mindless criticism” directed at his hearings and stated “Undoubtedly, Congressional investigation of Muslim-American radicalization is the logical response to the unquestionable fact that homegrown radicalization is part of Al Qaeda’s strategy to continue attacking the United States and its allies ... [and] I would not back down to political correctness.” **He also offered his praise for Prevent, one of the four components of the UK’s multi-pronged “counter-terrorism” strategy.**
- The fourth hearing, titled “Homegrown Terrorism: The Threat to Military Communities Inside the United States,” was held on December 7th, 2011. A joint investigation between the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, the hearing addressed “the two-fold threat from within the military and against the military.” Speaking to The Hill about the purpose of the hearing, King stated “There is an attempt by Islamists to join the military and infiltrate the military, and it’s more of a threat than the average American is aware of right now.” During his opening statement, Representative Bennie Thompson expressed concern over the nature of the hearings, stating that the picture being drawn was “not likely to be accurate, nuanced, or subtle.” He continued: “Focusing on the followers of one religion as the only creditable threat to the Nation’s security is inaccurate, narrow, and blocks consideration of emerging threats. Our military is open to all faiths.”
- Titled “The American Muslim Response to Hearings on Radicalization Within Their Community,” the final hearing held on June 20, 2012, was an attempt to “to draw conclusions from the previous four hearings.” According to King, the hearing provided witnesses with the chance to “examine the impact the previous hearings have had on ‘the Muslim Community’s ability to address [the] issue and on U.S. efforts to counter al-Qaeda and affiliated groups’ radicalizing of Muslims in this country.”
- Zuhdi Jasser was recruited a second time to provide testimony to the hearing. **In his testimony, Jasser dismissed criticisms of the initial hearing, denounced the term Islamophobia, and called on the armed services to “declare a moratorium on all Muslim requests for conscientious objector status claimed on the basis of their Islamic faith.”**

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- The witnesses also included self-described Muslim reformer, writer, and activist [Asra Nomani](#). In her testimony, which was [published](#) in the Guardian, Nomani claimed “the hearings [did] not represent a witchhunt and Congressman King is no Joe McCarthy” and that she “will argue that many in our Muslim society have adopted a culture as ‘wound collectors’, a term coined by former FBI agent Joe Navarro to describe terrorists of all identities, holding onto grievances and responding to scrutiny with a strategy characterized by four distinct elements: denial, deflection, demonization, and defensiveness.”
- In a June 2012 [report](#) on the hearings, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)—which also submitted written testimony for the first hearing—reported that “after eight years, four hearings and eighteen witnesses, King [had] failed to produce the promised evidence to support his stigmatization of America’s Muslims ... [and] Not a single witness attempted to factually validate the allegation of a Muslim community run by extremists. King made only one foray into backing up his allegation during the entire series of hearings.” **Furthermore, “Five of the six law enforcement representatives who testified did not support King’s assertion that Muslims do not cooperate with law enforcement.”**
- After the hearings, King continued to amplify anti-Muslim rhetoric and call for measures to discriminate against American Muslim communities. In a March 2013 [statement](#) to Politico, and while leading the House Committee on Homeland Security’s subcommittee on counterterrorism and intelligence, King “call[ed] for greater law enforcement focus on Muslim communities, arguing that authorities should put aside what is ‘politically correct’ and recognize that America faces major threats from Islamic terrorism.” **He also claimed “the main international base, [and] the terrorist threats are coming from the Muslim community.”**
- **In March 2014, King called for increased surveillance in Muslim communities and castigated the New York Times, AP, and ACLU for criticizing the NYPD surveillance program.** After a meeting with then-president-elect [Donald Trump](#) in 2016, King further [claimed](#) that the surveillance program under then-Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly was “aggressive and forward-leaning” and “should be a model for the country.”
- In November 2019, King [announced](#) that he would not be seeking reelection.