

Obama report excites Muslims

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Possible speech by president-elect gives boost to community that felt slighted during election.

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Reports that President-elect Barack Obama will deliver a speech in a major Muslim city during his early months in office were greeted enthusiastically Thursday in Metro Detroit, among one of the largest Muslim populations in the country.

"I would be euphoric," said Chuck Khalil Alawan, one of the founders of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, the largest mosque in the country. "If that in fact does happen, it would be a very significant occasion because the Islamic world, long before 9/11, has viewed the United States more as an antagonist than a friend.

"It also would be very brave of him, considering the response he would get from some," Alawan said.

The development was first reported by the New York Times, with the tongue-in-cheek assertion that if arrangements could not be made in Cairo or Riyadh, that Obama might select Dearborn.

"If that's really true, then I appreciate the sense of him going out of the way to get things back to normal," said Asim Khan, a member of the board of the Taweed Center in Farmington Hills. "An approach like this by President Obama would encourage peace-loving people to come forward and basically not let a few people, who the vast majority of Muslims criticize with the strongest possible language, take this religion hostage."

Muslims criticized Obama for failing to appear in their communities, as candidates had in previous presidential elections. But exit polls suggest he garnered a huge majority of Muslims' votes. Some said they understood that with extremists continually promoting the deception that Obama is Muslim, he was forced to handle some aspects of electoral politics by keeping their community at arm's length.

"We think Obama is an opportunity to set things right," said Imam Mohammad Ali Elahi, leader of the Islamic House of Wisdom in Dearborn Heights, who urged Obama to foster better relations with Iran, in particular. "That does not mean we should submit to terrorists like al-Qaida and those people who choose to be criminals and who commit crimes against Muslims and humanity, and who hijack the Islamic faith.

"But it does mean we can try to really correct some of the things that have been wrong in the last decade, which has brought war-mongering and problems that harm international relations," Elahi said.

"It is our American image, and anything we can do to advance it and contribute to a decrease in the anti-American sentiment that has been building over the last several years would be

definitely a step in the right direction," said Imad Hamad, regional director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

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