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Muslim Leader Forges Interfaith Accord

Popular Imam Boosts Islam in Md., Beyond

By [Fredrick Kunkle](#)

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He is a devout Muslim who speaks both Arabic and Hebrew. He quotes the Torah almost as well as the Koran and once protested the threatened removal of crucifixes at Georgetown University. He is a Palestinian by birth who believes in Israel's right to exist.

He wishes that the media paid more attention to his message that Islam, Christianity and Judaism share more similarities than differences, but he is not always good at returning their calls. He keeps a couple of bottles of cologne in his Toyota Camry because his 14-hour days keep him on the go and, well, you never know when you need a quick splash of Hugo Boss or Gucci.

Yahya Hendi is not your average imam.

At a time when his adopted country is engaged in a struggle with terrorism driven by Islamic extremists, Hendi, senior imam of the Islamic Society of Frederick County, preaches interfaith understanding and calls on fellow Muslims to rescue their religion from extremists.

That message has helped him open doors to senior government officials searching for ways to build better relationships in the Islamic world. The State Department calls on him to host visiting Islamic clergy, and news organizations dial him up for comment, usually after a terrorist attack.

Part of the attention comes with being the first full-time Muslim chaplain at GU, which also was the first such post in the United States. Hendi teaches theology there and also serves as a chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda. And he teaches an introduction to Islam class in Rockville for Johns Hopkins University's Evergreen Society for older adults.

As the senior imam of the Islamic Society, Hendi also has shaped the growing Islamic presence in the outer Maryland suburbs. After years of holding services in a doctor's waiting room, a hotel ballroom and wherever else there was space, his congregation recently opened the doors of its first permanent mosque. Hendi lives with his wife and four children in Frederick.

The Islamic Society's \$2 million mosque -- along with its growing list of activities, including Arabic instruction and classes about the

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Koran -- opened in October. Set in a renovated farmhouse on Key Parkway, the mosque has prompted Muslims to relocate from Gaithersburg and as far away as Baltimore, said mosque members and assistant imam Reda Sallam.

Part of the draw, there and in classes, is Hendi.

"He has such a dynamic personality," said Mary Lou Fox, a Roman Catholic who is a student in his adult education class.

"I went up to the imam and said, 'I'm not getting the feeling Allah would love me. Do you believe Allah loves you?' And he said, 'Yes, Allah does love you,' " said Fox, 62, of Potomac, adding that Hendi then offered passages from the Koran to support his views.

"His ability to understand your religion when you ask questions and relate your questions to your religion and Islam is fantastic," Fox said.

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