



America's First Muslim Congressman is from Minnesota

By DANIEL W. REILLY

With a few short words, Representative Keith Ellison had just stunned a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

In March 2007, Jordan's King Abdullah II had concluded his address in the House of Representatives chambers with the traditional Arabic salutation, "as-salaam 'al-eikum," which means, "Peace be unto you."

Ellison, a freshman Democrat from Minnesota and the first Muslim in Congress, instinctively replied, "wa 'aleikum as-salaam"—"And to you be peace." The assembled lawmakers were hushed.

"It was as quiet as a church," Ellison recalled. "I realized at that moment, wow, there is something about me that is a little different."

In an America post-September 11, Ellison is not just another freshman congressman. In just a few short months, he has become a congressional ambassador to the Islamic world. He has been recruited by the State Department to be a cultural envoy and traveled to Syria with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

When he served in the Minnesota state legislature, Ellison said, his religion had not been a major issue. Now, his every move is scrutinized, sometimes unexpectedly. After his election last November, for instance, CNN Headline News host Glenn Beck asked him to "prove to me that

you are not working with our enemies." And the question made waves throughout the Muslim world.

Ellison, though, is a reluctant spokesman, saying he is "not qualified to represent a world religion." He would much rather talk about his first bill—an ambitious attempt to tackle predatory lending practices by credit card companies—than detail the differences between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam.

"I almost never bring it up," Ellison says of his religion. "Someone else always brings it up for me."

Ellison, 43, took his Minnesota seat from retiring Representative Martin Olav Sabo, easily winning the overwhelmingly Democratic district.

A self-proclaimed "bleeding-heart liberal," Ellison says he wants to make a name for himself not just as a Muslim, but by pushing for better health care, reducing poverty, ending the war in Iraq—and tackling predatory lending practices.

"Barney Frank encouraged me to jump right into deep water," Ellison said of the House Financial Services Committee chairman. "This bill is at the heart of what it means to get to the middle class, to enjoy the great prosperity of this country."

Much to Ellison's frustration, however, it is not the credit card bill that has drawn media attention.

His Muslim religion drew controversy, even before he took office.

In December, a Republican representative from Virginia, Virgil H. Goode, wrote a letter saying America's borders must be tightened or "many more" Muslims like Ellison would flood the country and run for office.

And when Ellison chose to be sworn in on a Quran once owned by President Thomas Jefferson, his religion was again thrust into the spotlight, sometimes in disparaging ways on talk radio.

Still, the incidents helped Ellison quickly earn global recognition.

"Both in terms of symbolism and in terms of historical development, his election means a lot," said Akbar Ahmed, a former adviser on Islam to President George W. Bush and the author of a new book, *Journey Into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*.

Ahmed said that while traveling across the Muslim world researching the book, he found many people had heard of Ellison, viewing him as a symbol of increasing acceptance of Muslims in America.

And in the halls of Congress, Muslim staffers agree.

"He is someone who understands our faith and the things we can accomplish in the U.S.," said Jameel Aalim-Johnson, president of the Congressional Muslim Staffers Association and chief of staff for a Democratic Party representative from New York, Gregory W. Meeks.

For his part, Ellison is simply focused on learning the congressional ropes.

"He is a very studious, very serious guy," said Representative James L. Oberstar, a fellow Minnesota Democrat. "He is investing himself vigorously in the job." On the whole, Ellison said Congress has been a "hospitable place."

In fact, some of the harshest criticism he has faced has come from liberal activists back home, angry with him for not taking a tougher stance on ending the Iraq war; the critics even staged a sit-in in his congressional office.

"I have to be a practical idealist, not just an idealistic idealist," he said of his stance.

Still, the pressure from the anti-war faction is small compared with the weight others place on him to help the U.S. burnish its tarnished image in the Muslim world.

Ellison insists that although he gets requests almost daily to travel to the Middle East and is constantly meeting with foreign journalists, he doesn't feel pressured.

"My focus is right here, right now, what's in front of me," he said. "I don't ever take a moment to think if my (being Muslim) is a big deal or not. ...I just do the best I can with what I got."



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