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Public Education Is a Particular Challenge for New Muslim Bar Group

BY THOMAS ADCOCK

FIRST AND FOREMOST, the six-month-old Muslim Bar Association of New York is simply that, a bar group in the business of providing colleagues with the usual menu of networking and mentoring opportunities and CLE programs.

But given the tenor of the times, commiseration becomes an important offering to this particular membership and public education becomes a survival mission.

To be a Muslim attorney in New York City—even one born and bred in the Midwestern heartland of America, as Moushumi M. Khan was—is to know personally the burden of suspicion.

"It's extremely painful," said Ms. Khan, a Manhattan solo practitioner and president of the city's newest specialty bar group whose parents immigrated from Bangladesh. "Muslims are under great scrutiny."

Consider a recent incident recounted by Asim Rehman, a litigation associate at Debevoise & Plimpton and vice president of the Muslim bar group:

Last month during a seminar the organization sponsored at Fordham University School of Law—titled "Five

Years Later: Protecting Civil Liberties and National Security After 9/11"—a non-Muslim law student asked a panelist, "What is someone like me, who turns on the television and sees images of Muslims committing terrorism, supposed to do to counter a fear that I feel of Islam?"

"Yes, the question was painful," said Mr. Rehman, who is of Pakistani heritage. "But in a way, I'm glad it was asked because it is so easy to answer."

Beyond noting the simple fact that the vast majority of Muslim New Yorkers are productive and law-abiding citizens every bit as worried about another terrorist attack as the larger community, Mr. Rehman suggested a deeper malady.

"There is fear of terrorism, yes," he said. "But there is also a fear of individual rights."

Such fear cuts across ethnic and religious divides, given Ms. Khan's recent experience in trying to assist a taxi cab driver from Senegal referred to her by the imam of his Queens mosque.

After an initial conversation, in which Ms. Khan tried to reassure the Senegalese immigrant that he was free to press certain legal rights, the cabby shut down by explaining, politely, "Times are too difficult. I can't talk to you. How do I know you're not the FBI?"

Among the active members of the Muslim Bar Association of New York, which currently has about two dozen dues-paying members and a listserv, or e-mailing list, of about 150, is Farhan Memon, a recent graduate of Golden

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PHOTO BY RICK KOPSTEIN

Moushumi M. Khan, president, and Asim Rehman, vice president, of the Muslim Bar Association of New York

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Gate University School of Law in San Francisco who describes himself as typical of a flood of young Muslims entering the legal profession.

"I recognized that after 9/11 Muslims were going to face enormous civil rights challenges in this country," said Mr. Memon, whose parents are Indian and Pakistani. "Not only I, but countless other young people started going to law school, propelled by the notion that civil liberties—for both Muslims and non-Muslims—were under scrutiny."

In addition to serving lawyers and law students, the new bar group plans to host what it calls "Know Your Rights" seminars for the larger Muslim community. Additionally, the group plans

to establish community legal clinics and an attorney referral system.

Mr. Memon helped organize last week's Iftar—the communal ceremony for breaking the daily fast during the Islamic month of Ramadan that ends on Sunday—offered through the Muslim bar group's listserv. He said the Iftar drew about 55 people of various ethnicities, including Turks, Arabs, South Asians, blacks and whites.

"We're living in a unique situation," said Ms. Khan. "This is America. We have the rule of law. Fear can circumvent that. We're talking about the soul of America."

The Muslim bar can be contacted at www.muslimbarny.org.

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