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Web-inspired parade protest

Florida-based group says city's Muslim Day event is a "threat," prompting barrage of phone calls, letters and e-mails to City Hall

BY DANIEL MASSEY.Special to Newsday

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City Hall has been bombarded with phone calls, letters and e-mails generated by an Internet campaign aimed at stopping Sunday's 22nd annual United American Muslim Day Parade along Madison Avenue, city officials said.

Many of the blogs and online news sites decrying the parade as a threat to national security also targeted the opening of the Arab-language Khalil Gibran middle school in Brooklyn earlier this week. One of the Web sites is calling for a protest rally at Madison Avenue and 26th Street, a block south of where the parade ends.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg responded to the critics with a form letter in which he noted that Muslims are a "vital part of our city."

"It would be a terrible mistake for anyone to implicate a whole group of innocent individuals - no matter what their faith - with the terrible acts committed on September 11, 2001," the mayor wrote.

A Police Department spokesman would not say how many officers are assigned to cover the parade and protest.

Organizers called the parade a chance for Muslims to share their culture with other New Yorkers and predicted that the protest campaign would swell the ranks of attendees. Past parades have been peaceful.

"People who oppose this parade in fact have unified the Muslim community," said Imam Shamsi Ali, co-chairman of the parade, which is run by the Astoria-based Muslim Foundation of America. "In the past, people have been hesitant to come because parades are a new thing in Islam. This year, everybody is willing to come. We expect a huge crowd."

Muslims from throughout the metro area, including busloads from Long Island mosques, plan to gather at Madison Avenue and 41st Street at noon and march south to 27th Street, according to Ghazi Khankan of Long Beach, a Muslim leader who will be the master of ceremonies. The expected crowd of more than 15,000 will include leaders from New York's Jewish, Buddhist and Christian communities, organizers said.

The Web sites' characterization of the event's organizers and supporters as extremists has spurred hundreds of phone calls and e-mails to City Hall demanding that the parade's permit be yanked.

"We believe this parade is a threat to New York and a threat to national security," said Joe Kaufman, chairman of the Coral Springs, Fla.-based Americans Against Hate and the organizer of the protest.

Kaufman also said holding the parade two days before the sixth anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks was offensive, calling the event "a pre-9/11 celebration of sorts taking place in New York City" in an article on the Web site frontpagemagazine.com. His group's protest is set for 12:30 p.m. Sunday near the parade route's end.

Ali said the parade customarily was held on the last Sunday in September. For the past three years, the timing of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, forced the change. He said the earlier date gives Muslims a chance to commemorate the 9/11 attacks, and that this year's parade will begin with a prayer and moment of silence for the victims.

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