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Institute Chairman Meets with Treasury Secretary

Islamic Institute Chairman Khaled Saffuri and leaders from three Muslim and Arab American organizations attended a closed lunch meeting Thursday with Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill to discuss the recent raids of Muslim organizations, businesses, and homes in Northern Virginia. The raids were conducted by a Treasury Department counterterrorism financial task force, and involved several instances of civil rights violations and harsh treatment of the individuals involved in the raids. The luncheon was followed by a larger meeting with 15 other Arab and Muslim American leaders.

The meeting was constructive, and the leaders expressed their concerns to Secretary O'Neill regarding the insensitive actions of Treasury agents during the raids against the Muslim American organizations, and concerns of the community that civil rights violations occurred. Secretary O'Neill promised that these concerns would be investigated.

Islamic Institute Attends a Meeting with Secretary of State Powell

Khaled Saffuri, Chairman of the Islamic Institute, along with other national Arab and Muslim American groups attended a meeting Wednesday initiated by the office of Secretary of State Colin Powell to discuss the role of the United States in the current crisis in the Middle East.

The meeting at the State Department was a frank and substantive discussion with the Secretary. The participants expressed their support for a U.S. effort to end the violence and to ensure a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act

Legislation is currently before the House of Representatives to lift the Internal Revenue Service ban on political speech by mosques, churches, and other houses of worship in the United States. Sponsored by Representative Walter Jones (R-NC), H.R. 2357, or the Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act, will help restore the first amendment rights of our country's religious organizations.

An amendment dating from 1954 regulates the speech and teachings of religious organizations, which hold 501(c)(3) non-profit tax status. Under this section of the tax code, houses of worship cannot engage in an activity that might be regarded as participating in a campaign on behalf of or in opposition to a candidate for public office. It restricts freedom of speech by threatening to revoke the tax-exempt status of any house of worship whose leaders speak out on moral or political questions. As well, the IRS is arbitrary in how it enforces the law, seemingly allowing some religious organizations free reign with regard to political speech while others are strictly policed.

By lifting the IRS's ban on political speech, H.R. 2357 will allow religious organizations in America to participate in the democratic process without fear that the government will penalize them for doing so. It will standardize the tax code by allowing houses of worship to engage in an "insubstantial" amount of political activity, and will clarify it to prevent legal confusion.

H.R. 2357 currently has 113 sponsors and co-sponsors in the House. It has been referred to the Ways and Means Committee for debate.