

LOCAL NEWS

Riverside imam accused of anti-Semitic sermon that called Jews 'tyrants'



File photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG

Imam Mahmoud Harmoush, seen in 2011, is accused of making anti-Semitic statements during a recent sermon at the Islamic Center of Riverside.

By **STEPHEN WALL** |

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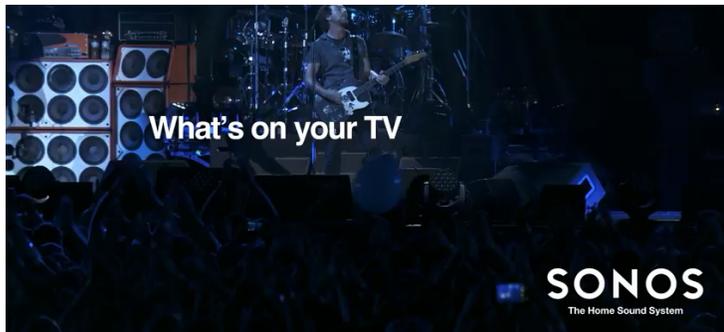


Local and national Jewish leaders are denouncing comments from a Riverside imam who they say called Jews “unjust tyrants” and prayed to Allah to “destroy them” in a recent sermon.

Imam Mahmoud Harmoush made the statements July 21 at the [Islamic Center of Riverside](#), which posted a 31-minute video of the sermon on YouTube three days later. He was set to meet with concerned Riverside Jewish leaders Monday evening, July 31.

The remarks came the same day as an imam in Davis was criticized for delivering a sermon urging Jews to be annihilated.

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[Rabbi Suzanne Singer](#) of [Temple Beth El](#) in Riverside said she was “very distressed” after watching the video. She said she and Harry Freedman, president of the temple’s board of directors, planned to discuss the issue Monday evening with Harmoush and Ibrahim Massoud, chairman of the Islamic Center board of directors.

Harmoush, who leads the mosque overseen for many years by Mustafa Kuko, said Monday afternoon that he would issue a statement later that day.

Singer said the local Jewish and Muslim communities have built a harmonious relationship despite their political differences.

“I have not heard this kind of hateful speech on the part of the Muslim community in Riverside before,” Singer said. “I was really shocked.”

Harmoush’s sermon was in Arabic and English. The video, which was translated into English and published by the nonprofit [Middle East Media Research Institute](#), talked about a Jewish plot between World War I and II to steal the land of Palestine from Muslims through “killing, crime and massacres,” according to a transcript of the sermon on the group’s website.

He said that Jews want to extend that conflict to Muslim holy cities Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia and to “most of the Middle East” next, according to the group’s translation. He ended the sermon with a call for Allah to “destroy them ... disperse them and rend them asunder. Turn them into booty in the hands of the Muslims,” the translation said.

Brian Levin, director of the [Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism](#) at Cal State San Bernardino, blasted the “incendiary and anti-Semitic remarks” as “retrograde and “deserving of our strongest condemnation.”

Levin called on local faith communities to use the situation to work “peacefully and cooperatively” to promote religious tolerance.

“While recognizing the real pain and harm that has occurred, we should not use this specific manifestation of bigotry, as a license to promote more of it in response,” Levin wrote in a statement.

The [Anti-Defamation League](#) condemned the two sermons it said were in response to recent violence in Jerusalem and Israel's decision to install temporary security measures at Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount.

"These statements are anti-Semitic and dangerous," Jonathan A. Greenblatt, the Anti-Defamation League's CEO, said in a news release. "We reject attempts to cast the conflict in Jerusalem as a religious war between Jews and Muslims."

He called on followers of both religions "to rebuild trust so that people of all faiths can coexist with mutual respect in the Holy Land and around the world."

Arbazz Mohammed, a Riverside resident and a board member of the newly formed Islamic Council of Riverside, denounced the comments. He said Harmoush should correct his remarks to clarify that he was directing his criticism at the Israeli government specifically, not Jewish people in general.

Mohammed said that Harmoush, formerly president of the Islamic Center of Temecula Valley, has a track record of working with people of different faiths. While Harmoush was in Temecula, [efforts to build a mosque in the city](#) drew protests, but the project eventually won city approval in 2011.

"He has spoken at synagogues," said Mohammed, who usually attends Friday prayers at the Riverside mosque but was not present for the July 21 sermon. "Clearly, he doesn't hate the Jewish community. The way he was speaking was very inflammatory and very irresponsible."

Singer, the rabbi, wants more than an apology.

"It's not enough to say, 'I'm sorry,'" she said. "I would like him to give another sermon to take back what he said. He needs to change what he's saying or not be there."

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Stephen Wall

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