

LOCAL NEWS

# Riverside Islamic Center says its imam's comments not "anti-Semitic nor discriminatory"



File photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG  
Imam Mahmoud Harmoush, seen in 2011, is accused of anti-Semitic comments in a July sermon. The Islamic Center of Riverside, which he heads, said the comments were taken out of context and not meant to disparage Jews.

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By **STEPHEN WALL** |

PUBLISHED: August 1, 2017 at 1:01 pm | UPDATED: August 1, 2017 at 4:40 pm



The [Islamic Center of Riverside](#), whose imam was criticized by Jewish leaders for a recent sermon that some said was anti-Semitic and promoted violence against Jews, said his comments were misconstrued.

Imam Mahmoud Harmoush's July 21 sermon, posted on YouTube three days later, was blasted for calling Jews "unjust tyrants" and praying to Allah to "destroy them."

After reviewing the comments, the center concluded that [Harmoush's remarks](#) were "neither anti-Semitic nor discriminatory," it said in a Monday, July 31, statement issued after a meeting earlier that day with concerned Jewish leaders.

Formerly the president of the Islamic Center of Temecula Valley, Harmoush took over running the Riverside mosque in April that was overseen for many years by Mustafa Kuko.

The parts seen as objectionable during the nearly 32-minute sermon, delivered in Arabic and English at its mosque near UC Riverside, "were routinely mistranslated and/or taken out of context," the center said.

Harmoush "unequivocally stated in the sermon that Islam does not call for aggression against any peaceful people," the center said. Their statement added that Harmoush "deeply regrets that portions of the sermon caused unintended distress to our respected Jewish neighbors and friends."

The remarks were meant to condemn recent Israeli actions that curbed freedom of worship in Jerusalem and not directed toward the Jewish community, the statement said.

Rabbi [Suzanne Singer of Temple Beth El](#), who said she was “very distressed” after watching the video, repeated her concerns at the meeting, which was also attended by Harry Freedman, president of the temple’s board of directors. Harmoush and Ibrahim Massoud, chairman of the Islamic Center board of directors, also were present.

Singer said she isn’t happy that Harmoush didn’t regret the use of violent language and refused her request to take back the “incendiary” comments in a subsequent sermon.

The sermon, 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.

Harmoush 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.

Rep. Mark Takano, D-Riverside, joined the [Anti-Defamation League](#) and others who condemned the comments as “anti-Semitic.”

Harmoush’s remarks “are dangerous, offensive and entirely inconsistent with the tolerant and respectful views routinely expressed by local Muslim leaders,” Takano said in a Tuesday, Aug. 1, statement. “Trust and respect between diverse communities is fundamental to overcoming the religious, cultural and political differences that divide our country and cause conflict and instability around the world.”

Parts of the sermon “were clearly disturbing and discriminatory,” he added, urging the Islamic center to “forcefully reject these comments and make clear that irresponsible and inflammatory rhetoric have no place in the Inland Empire.”

The center’s statement said Harmoush has a long track record of building bridges between 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.

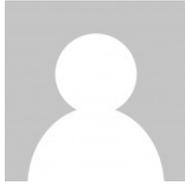
At their July 31 meeting, local Jewish and Muslim leaders agreed to hold in an interfaith forum and “look forward to continuing and strengthening their over 15-year relationship of mutual respect and cooperation,” the center’s statement said.

Singer said both sides should try to bridge their differences, but she’s “a little warier” than before of that happening.

“I’m trying to walk the tightrope between concern and not wanting to be in an adversarial situation with the mosque, especially because that has not been the case before,” she said Tuesday. “Let’s continue our dialogue and work towards understanding each other while at the same time not condoning what was said.”

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