

Jewish groups step up efforts to combat anti-Muslim bigotry

By Sue Fishkoff · September 7, 2010



Rabbis Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer and David Saperstein taking part in an interfaith summit in Washington, Sept. 7, 2010. (Vince Isner)

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) -- Jewish groups have stepped up efforts to combat anti-Muslim bigotry, with several national initiatives announced this week and supporting statements coming in from a range of Jewish voices.

In Washington, officials from several Jewish organizations took part Tuesday in an emergency summit of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders that denounced anti-Muslim bigotry and called for a united effort by believers of all faiths to reach out to Muslim Americans.

Also Tuesday, the Anti-Defamation League announced the creation of an Interfaith Coalition on Mosques, which will monitor and respond to instances of anti-Muslim bias surrounding attempts to build new mosques in the United States.

Meanwhile, six rabbis and scholars representing the Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox streams have launched an online campaign urging rabbis to devote part of their sermons this Shabbat to educating their congregations about Islam.

The efforts come in response to what organizers describe as a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment resulting from the impending ninth anniversary of 9/11 and the controversy surrounding efforts to build a Muslim community center and mosque near Ground Zero in Manhattan. Jewish bloggers and pundits, mostly on the right, have become more vocal in opposing the center and calling for greater scrutiny of American mosques.

Among the Jewish leaders at the emergency summit was Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

“As Jews, we could be nowhere else today,” said Saperstein, whose organization co-sponsored Tuesday’s interfaith summit with the Islamic Society of North America.

“We have been the quintessential victims of religious persecution ... and we know what happens when people are silent,” he said, explaining why clergy and believers of all faiths need to be more forceful in speaking out against anti-Muslim bigotry. “We have to speak more directly to the anti-Muslim bigotry in America today.”

Leaders of the mainstream Protestant, evangelical Christian, Baptist and Catholic churches, Muslim organizations and several Jewish streams issued a joint statement Tuesday after their summit “to denounce categorically the derision, misinformation and outright bigotry being directed against America’s Muslim community.”

In addition to the Religious Action Center, representatives from the Reconstructionist and Conservative movements, the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella organization of more than 125 Jewish community relations councils and 14 national agencies, including the four major Jewish streams, also attended the summit.

The National Council of Jewish Women released a statement Tuesday denouncing Islamophobia, decrying anti-Muslim bigotry and noting that “extremists who use Islam as a justification for their heinous acts of terrorism should not be allowed to dictate the character of the entire religion.”

The group of interfaith leaders met later in the day with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to coordinate parallel efforts with the government to combat anti-Islam sentiment.

The joint statement calls upon clergy of all faiths to denounce anti-Muslim bigotry and hate violence from their pulpits, and asserts that “leaders of local congregations have a special responsibility to teach with accuracy, fairness and respect about other faith traditions.”

In a similar vein, Jewish interfaith leaders in an online letter called upon pulpit rabbis to use part of their sermons on Saturday to address the need for understanding Islam. Professors and deans of the rabbinical seminaries of the Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements, as well as the independent Hebrew College, signed the letter.

“The proposal for the ‘mosque at Ground Zero’ that turns out not to be a mosque and not at Ground Zero has brought to light this simple fact: We Americans need to know a whole lot more about Muslims and

their religion,” said Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, director of multifaith studies and initiatives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and a main organizer of the appeal.

Organizers say a number of rabbis from various streams have indicated they will take part.

The ADL’s initiative underscores the shifting tide within the organized Jewish community.

Several weeks ago the organization generated national headlines when its national director, Abraham Foxman, came out against placing the Islamic center so close to Ground Zero. Foxman said the sensitivities of families who lost loved ones in the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks should be respected.

Its new coalition is focused on helping Muslim communities that face bigotry when they attempt to build local mosques.

Foxman told JTA that within two weeks, the Interfaith Coalition on Mosques will begin its work collecting details of incidents in which mosques are being challenged, determining whether bigotry is involved and, if so, whether public or legal responses are warranted. Mosques that are opposed due to zoning problems will be outside its purview.

The coalition's charter members, the ADL said, will include a diverse collection of religious scholars and leaders, including representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church.

Despite creating the coalition, the ADL has not changed its position on the Islamic center near Ground Zero, Foxman told JTA.

“Our position is very clear: They have a legal right, but the location is not sensitive to the victims,” he said, noting that not everyone in the coalition agrees with the ADL position.

One Jewish observer who rejected what he described as a strategy by Islamist groups to "cry Islamophobia" is Steve Emerson, who directs the Investigative Project on Terrorism that tracks such groups.

Noting that the most recent FBI list of hate crimes includes many more attacks against Jews than against Muslims, he suggests that talk of anti-Muslim hatred plays into the hands of anti-American radicals.

"Given this significant disparity in real world hate crime incidents, is there truly a 'surge of Islamophobia' occurring, or is it more perception generated in and by certain media in cahoots with the Islamists?" he asked.

Foxman said that defending the rights of Muslims to build mosques “does not obviate” the need to continue to monitor mosques and churches for instances in which they preach hatred.

“We have to do that as well,” he said.