

Reform leader reaches out to Muslims, but some Jews say effort naive

By David Spett and Ron Kampeas
Jewish Telegraphic Agency

ROSEMONT, Ill. — The delegates trickling into the massive convention center chatted, renewed acquaintances, greeted each other with traditional Muslim blessings and largely ignored the endless words of welcome from the podium.

Until the rabbi spoke.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie's fiery indictment of "Islamophobia" at last month's annual conference of the Islamic Society of North America in this Chicago suburb turned heads, silenced chatters and, finally, earned an extended standing ovation.

"The time has come to put aside what the media says is wrong with Islam and to hear from Muslims themselves what is right with Islam," said Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism. "The time has come to listen to our Muslim neighbors speak, from their heart and in their own words, about the spiritual power of Islam and their love for their religion."

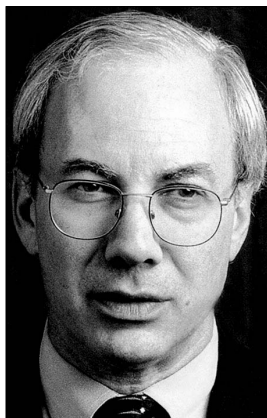
The outreach was long overdue, said the associate director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, Mark Pelavin, who facilitated the address.

"This is a recognition, particularly on Rabbi Yoffie's part, that we're communities that need to be speaking to each other and we're clearly not," Pelavin said.

Yoffie addressed not only how Muslims are perceived but also how U.S. authorities treat them.

"The time has come to end racial profiling and legal discrimination of any kind against Muslim Americans," he said. "Yes, we must assure the security of our country; this is absolutely our government's first obligation. But let's not breach the Constitution in ways we will later regret. After all, civil liberties are America's strength, not our weakness."

Daniel Pipes, the historian who directs



Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, last month delivered a fiery indictment of 'Islamophobia' at the Islamic Society of North America.

the Middle East Forum, criticized Yoffie's speech as naive.

"I found it profoundly ignorant and terribly superficial in its analysis," said Pipes, who added that he "reluctantly" has concluded that "there must be special scrutiny of Muslims."

"If the police are looking for a rapist, you look exclusively at male, not female, suspects," he said. "If you look out for Muslim terrorists, you look at the Muslim population."

The Islamic Society of North America has been named as "an unindicted co-conspirator" in federal investigations of the Holy Land Foundation, a charity believed to have funneled funds to Palestinian terrorists.

The society acknowledges this on its Web site, but adds that its listing "was not to imply that ISNA was part of a criminal conspiracy or that it acted with any criminal intent, but rather, it was a legal tactic to permit the government to seek the admission of evidence that would otherwise be excluded. ISNA is confident that its name will be removed from the list so that the organization's reputation is cleared."

Organizers of last month's conference appeared to see a need to clear the air.

"ISNA remains consistent in its rejection of terrorism and violence," the

society said in a statement timed for the conference. "ISNA rejects all acts of terrorism, including those perpetrated by Hamas, Hezbollah and any other group that claims Islam as their inspiration. ISNA has encouraged and continues to encourage a just and fair settlement of disputes between Israel, the Palestinians and their neighbors through diplomacy and other peaceful means."

Naming Hamas and Hezbollah was something of a breakthrough. U.S. Muslim groups have condemned terrorism generally and have named groups targeting Americans, such as al Qaeda, but until now have abjured naming Palestinian groups.

Nevertheless, the American Jewish Committee blasted Yoffie for choosing to address the Islamic Society, saying the group had not sufficiently disassociated itself from the Holy Land Foundation.

"This is not the right organization and not the right time," said Yehudit Barsky, AJCommittee's counterterrorism specialist. "Had they repudiated their association with the organization or its activities, this would have been welcome."

But Abraham Foxman, the Anti-Defamation League's national director, defended the Islamic Society, calling it the "most appropriate umbrella organization in the American Muslim community" and saying it "has spoken out against terrorism."

At the convention, the effect of Yoffie's speech was galvanizing.

"Excellent, excellent for the humanity of the world," said Khaleel Rahman, who came to the conference from Houston. "We were very impressed. He is extremely judicious. He understands most of the religions really well, and the needs of human beings, and he presented the humanity involved, not only the religions."

Conference organizers wanted Yoffie to speak at prime convention time, but a scheduling conflict had him addressing

about 1,500 delegates at the conference. The conference drew about 30,000 people.

The speech was of a piece with Yoffie's outreach effort last year to Christian evangelicals, when he spoke at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. But Yoffie's speech to American Muslims had a subtler goal: to roll back the perception that Jewish groups had left behind a commitment to civil liberties in the wake of 9/11.

Yoffie's speech was welcome because it returned the Jewish focus to freedoms, said Steve Gutow, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. He called the speech "healthy" and "positive."

In the speech, Yoffie touched briefly on the problem of Muslim anti-Semitism, focusing primarily on bigotry and discrimination against Muslims.

"We are especially worried now about anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial," he said. "Anti-Semitism is not native to Islamic tradition, but a virulent form of it is found today in a number of Islamic societies, and we urgently require your assistance in mobilizing Muslims here and abroad to delegitimize and combat it."

Yoffie ended his speech with an appeal to unite in a commitment to bring peace to Israelis and Palestinians.

"Let us work toward the day when a democratic Palestinian state lives side by side, in peace and security, with the democratic State of Israel," he said.

It was an appeal that resonated.

"I'm Palestinian and I think the Palestinian people are entitled to their land, but I also see the Jewish perspective of why they deserve a national state, and I think honestly that they should come to a compromise between the two," said Mohammed El-Natour of Orland Park, Ill. "The Palestinians can have their land, become friends with the Jewish people and have a state, but more peacefully, in a way that doesn't transgress on people's rights."

Austin rabbis respond to Yoffie's speech to Islamic Society

By Tonyia Cone

Special to The Jewish Outlook

Two Austin rabbis were available by deadline to comment on Rabbi Eric Yoffie's statements made at a recent Islamic Society of North America conference.

RABBI KERRY BAKER

Baker, with Congregation Kol Halev (post-denominational/independent), cited a tendency to over-characterize Muslims. While some say those who belong to the Islamic faith are dangerous extremists and fundamentalists, others point to moderate Muslims, urging Americans to reach out to dialogue with them.

Discussing the Muslim community without addressing the complicated nature of the population, Baker said, is problematic.

Modern, moderate Muslims would like to share some Western democratic values, Baker said, and Americans should form a relationship and engage in dialogue with them. But, he said, this should occur quietly and behind the scenes because a public splash, like Yoffie's, makes them suspect in the eyes of extremist Muslims; they lose legitimacy in the Muslim world.

"It's undercutting the possibility that moderates would become more influential in the Muslim world, which is

what we want them to do," Baker said. "I understand that what he wanted to do is change the perception of Muslims by Americans, but I'm not sure that it's entirely positive unless it's done carefully."

Baker noted that at least three groups of Arab-Americans and other Americans, including Jews, in Austin have formed a low-level, quiet dialogue. This kind of communication, he said, will have a longer lasting, more positive effect than Yoffie's high-profile comments at the public meeting in the Chicago area last month.

"The main advantage of a speech like Yoffie's is that it gives permission to other folks to speak in the same way," Baker said.

RABBI MONTY ELIASOV

Eliasov, with Congregation Shalom Rav (Reconstructionist, sponsoring Jewish Renewal), submitted the following statement to *The Jewish Outlook* via e-mail:

"With leaders such as Yoffie and (ADL's Abraham) Foxman, who needs enemies? The American Jewish community is now witnessing deeply negative political consequences after decades of single-mindedly worshipping on the altar of liberalism!

"Foxman is responsible for genocide denial, retrac-

tion of his denial, and then subsequently not supporting Congress in the matter of the Turkish Genocide of the Armenian Christians (HR106), culminating in a major embarrassment for Jews of conscience everywhere.

"Meaningless declarations notwithstanding, Yoffie is responsible for undercutting Muslims with intellectual integrity (such as Wafa Sultan, Nonie Darwish and Tawfik Hamid) who deeply believe that a secular form of Islam must take root both in America and in Islamic countries. They deplore discrimination against non-Muslims and women; uphold the primacy of the values of free speech, freedom from political intimidation, justice and religious freedom for all in Islamic countries; insist on having the freedom of intellectual inquiry and the right to critique the Koran and the history of Islam without being threatened; and uphold the individual's freedom to convert freely from one faith to another without coercion.

"Why are our leaders not supporting those who sincerely support our most cherished values of freedom? I dread to contemplate this but we are now getting the leaders we deserve."

— — —

An Austin writer, Tonyia Cone is a regular contributor to *The Jewish Outlook*. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com or visit the Web site www.tonyiacone.com.