

Fresno panelists decry ISIS' impact on perceptions of Islam

By Carmen George
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Speaking on a panel last week, Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer said because of the terror group ISIS many Muslim Americans are unfairly being treated with hostility — a hostility similar to post-9/11.

“That stemmed from a lack of awareness, a lack of education, and ignorance,” Dyer said to about 200 people who gathered at the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno on Wednesday night.

During the forum titled “ISIS vs. Islam: How ISIS Contradicts the Principles of Islam,” community leaders in law enforcement, religion, education and government stressed the importance of recognizing the difference between terrorists and peaceful Muslim allies.

Moderator Darius Assemi, president and CEO of Granville Homes, helped assemble the long lineup of distinguished speakers.

“ISIS is a terrorist organization that is using Islam as a tool to recruit,” Assemi said. “Muslims have denounced this barbaric organization.”

Rep. Jim Costa, who participated by phone, said, “Islam is a religion of peace and these terrorists do not reflect the heart and soul of a major religion of the world.”

Faith leaders: Islam is not to blame

Imam Seyed Ali Ghazvini, the spiritual leader of the Fresno center, discussed differences between ISIS and Islam, a religion followed by an estimated 4.7 million Muslims. Among them: Islam respects people of different faiths and cultures. ISIS does not.

They are good at creating fear.

Imam Seyed Ali Ghazvini about ISIS

Rabbi Rick Winer of Temple Beth Israel in Fresno said, “What people do and have done throughout the centuries in the name of religion, when improperly used, is how religion gets horribly abused. ...

“I have a horrible, graphic image that makes sense to me. I can take a screwdriver and fix something with it, which is what it is intended for, or I can jam it into somebody’s chest. Religion is worthwhile when it is used to fix the world in which we are upon.”

Rev. Norman Broadbent, senior minister of First Congregational Church in Fresno, said Christians and Muslims have lived side-by-side as neighbors for hundreds of years and that both religions value grace, service and faith. He said Christians should remember they are called to, “Love one another and fear not.”

Educators: We need to do more

“Generally, calling ISIS an Islamic group is like calling the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) a Christian fraternity,” said Fresno County Supervisor Andreas Borgeas, who spoke in his role as a professor of international and comparative law at San Joaquin College of Law. He specializes in the study of Islamic extremism.

Vincent Biondo, an associate professor at Fresno State who teaches philosophy, religion and Middle East studies, said learning about Islam and the “difference between a terrorist and an ally” is only becoming more important — especially since researchers estimate Islam and Christianity will each have 3 billion followers in the next 20 years.

Biondo is saddened by conditions in the Middle East.

“There’s been 30 to 40 years of war in Iraq now, so you have three generations of people who have grown up in warfare and conflict and that’s psychologically very difficult, very damaging,” he said. “We’re talking 3 million displaced people, at least, and 1 million orphan children in Iraq.”

To stop ISIS, he said, “It’s going to take time and it’s going to take work.”

Locally, Jim Yovino, superintendent of Fresno County Office of Education, said, “We need to do a better job of educating all of our students (200,000 students in 32 school districts) about different cultures in our community.”

He said he wants to work with the Muslim community in “eradicating ignorance.” His office recently partnered with the Sikh Coalition to produce a five-minute video about Sikh culture after a study showed a number of Sikh students in Fresno were being bullied.

Yovino said the video is about promoting this message: “Just because someone wears a turban or dresses a certain way or has a beard, it doesn’t mean you should be fearful of that person.”

Law enforcement: Stand together

Leaders in law enforcement pledged to do all in their power to protect all people from violence and to stop Americans from joining ISIS.

“We really do need to stand shoulder to shoulder because we know there are individuals in our community today who are easily influenced,” Dyer said of ISIS recruiting members, largely through social media. “There are people with low self-esteem who are looking for a cause.”

Fresno County District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp said “being a mom is my No. 1 job and being district attorney is No. 2” to emphasize her commitment to working with children to encourage them to grow up to contribute to society instead of turning to crime or a group like ISIS.

Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims said residents should report anything suspicious to law enforcement, “no matter how small the piece of information is, let us determine whether it (the perceived threat) is real or not.”

Mardee Robinson, a special agent with the FBI, made a similar plea: “Please call us, even if you don’t think it’s a big deal. We are here to help and make sure our communities stay safe, but we can’t do it without your involvement.”

But, Dyer cautioned, make sure you are reporting a suspicious action, not just “based on appearance.”

Mims said local and federal law enforcement now communicate regularly — unlike before the terror attacks of 9/11 — and the partnerships have improved domestic security.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Cullers said many people mistakenly think most who join ISIS are Muslim and that’s “not necessarily true.” He said recruits — both men and women — come from many religions.

Thomas Knowles, CEO of Justus Consulting and Investigations who previously worked for the FBI in the Middle East, said too many Americans “stereotype” Muslims, what he saw clearly after 9/11.

“When emotions get involved,” he said, “common sense gets thrown out the window.”

Knowles said ISIS is a real threat, but one that can’t be beat with guns.

“You have to win it by beating the ideology,” he said, “and that’s through education.”

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