

A Nomination to Controversy (A)

The Jacksonville Human Rights Commission (JHRC) rarely made the news, let alone the headlines. Few in the sprawling city of Jacksonville, Florida seemed to know what the JHRC did. But in April 2010, the nomination of Dr. Parvez Ahmed to a volunteer position on the JHRC was featured on local newspapers and newscasts, debated online and in city hall, and became the subject of significant --and heated-- email traffic. Some questioned Ahmed's ties to the Council on American-Islamic Relations and made allegations of links to terror, and a few publicly asked whether a Muslim should be allowed to hold public office; others were dismayed that the professor with a long history of interfaith involvement was subject to "guilt by association."

Optimistic by nature, Parvez Ahmed is quick to smile and direct in his gaze; his accent carries faint traces from his birthplace of Kolkata, India. Although he admits to a fondness for Bollywood movies, his own temperament is not prone to dramatic or emotional responses: the professor of finance is more likely to take an analytical approach. When Ahmed heard that he was nominated to the City of Jacksonville's Human Rights Commission, he recalled, "I was happy; this is something I wanted to do. ... I hoped that it would set a good example for members of the Muslim community that have often expressed grievances about being excluded from public life."¹ As the controversy over his nomination to the volunteer post began to grow, Ahmed, who taught at the University of North Florida and had been active in interfaith work for nearly a decade, was surprised:

I'm not a person whose views are really a secret. I write, I speak, I'm in private dialogues with people, I'm in public dialogues with people, I'm in churches, I'm in synagogues, I'm in schools, I'm in mosques, how come none of the people who ever interacted with me ever came up with this viewpoint?

Ahmed's op-eds appeared in conservative newspapers like the local *Florida Times-Union* as well as more liberal papers like the *Miami Herald*; within the Muslim media, he is among the few whose views find a home in mainstream Muslim publications such as *Islamic Horizons* and *The Message*, as well as the progressive blog *AltMuslim*. Before his nomination, Ahmed wrote about the importance of civic engagement and expressed his views on extremism:

Despite the many setbacks on civil liberties, America remains a land of the free. Muslims must use this freedom to effectively respond to the vigorous challenges to some of their deeply held beliefs. While speaking out against perceived affront to their religion or way of life they must uphold the right of others to offend without backing down from seeking ways to defend their own rights. This, of course, entails an unequivocal commitment to the rule of law. Citizens have the right to protest unfair treatment; and when they believe the law is unjust, they should work to change such laws. Promising integration lies in civic participation and political mobilization. Random violence targeting innocent civilians is immoral and ineffective. It can never be justified no matter how severe the underlying grievance. This message needs to be reinforced from the mosque pulpit to the kitchen table.²

On April 10, 2010, Ahmed learned of a growing controversy over his nomination when a local reporter asked him to comment on concerns from a group called ACT! for America (ACT). In late March, he encountered ACT for the first time at a screening of the film *What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. When Ahmed arrived,

he found picketers outside: as he walked through with his young children, he felt a mix of fear and surprise. Some held signs; others held cameras. “It was intimidating.” The picketers, who identified as members of ACT, later made “aggressive and accusatory” statements during the question and answer period. Although he considered most of their claims “incoherent,” it was still “troubling.” When Ahmed returned home that night, he Googled “ACT for America” and quickly recognized the rhetoric and references: the anti-Muslim narrative was all too familiar.

One of the protestors from the film screening, Randy McDaniels, contacted the Mayor and City Council of Jacksonville with an email on April 9: “I respectfully request you review the attached intelligence brief on the candidate Parvez Ahmed. It will [be] very evident as to why this man should not be considered for this position and may also raise questions [on] additional positions he holds in the community.”³ His email identified him as the chapter leader of Jacksonville ACT. The footer of his message included a quote from Edmund Burke: “All that it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” Later that evening, McDaniels sent a second email with a corrected copy of the intelligence brief and a new message at the end: “First comes Saturday; then comes Sunday!” A note explained: “Islamic saying meaning: First we kill the Jews; then we kill the Christians.”⁴

To Ahmed, ACT was clearly a hate group. Why, he wondered, were some members of the City Council listening?

Jacksonville, Florida

Jacksonville, Florida is the biggest city by area in the United States, yet it retains a friendly Southern, small town feel. Locals regularly refer to the area as “South Georgia,” perhaps because it shares more with the Bible Belt than Boca Raton. A port city on the northern coast of Florida, Jacksonville boasts a stunning array of bridges and waterways, pristine beaches, and marshlands. The port brings industry as well as a significant military presence, including a naval submarine base, naval air station, and Marine base.

The city is home to the headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention, and First Baptist Church occupies eleven blocks of the city’s downtown. In Jacksonville, one resident explained, religion is like the sugar in sweet tea: “It permeates every aspect of life. . . . I can’t think of much that isn’t touched by religion in one way or another.”⁵ It is predominantly Christian: the local *Times-Union* newspaper regularly includes a Biblical quotation on its editorial page. The city has a small but vital stream of interfaith activity and an historic Jewish community dating back to the late 1800s. In recent years, Jacksonville has seen increasing religious diversity, which has energized interfaith activity but has also been met with hostility. Pastor Gene Youngblood unapologetically posted messages such as “God Loves You, Allah Hates” on the sign in front of the First Conservative Baptist Church; yet numerous other local churches and synagogues invited guest speakers to learn about the religious beliefs of their new neighbors.

For many in Jacksonville, “diversity” continues to be understood primarily in terms of race. The city -- which as of 2010 was 60.9% White, 29.5% African American, and 4.1% Asian⁶ -- has long struggled with issues of inclusion and discrimination. Jacksonville was known to be a stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan (KKK): during the civil rights movement, it was the site of the infamous “Axe Handle Saturday,” in which many teenage protesters were brutally beaten in a city plaza. Integration was slow, with divisions along race lines persisting in clubs and schools into the 1970s. More recently, the city was divided over a proposal to rename Nathan Bedford Forest High School in 2008. The school, which today has a largely African-American student

population, was originally named after a Confederate hero and Grand Wizard of the KKK. After much contention, the name of the high school remained unchanged.

City Council Meeting, April 13, 2010

The April 13 meeting of the Jacksonville City Council opened, as it always did, with prayers. Council Member Don Redman concluded, "...in Jesus' name, I pray."⁷ Although Redman was not as articulate and polished as some of his fellow members, he was liked by his colleagues and constituents, and had a great desire to serve. On Redman's suit lapel, he wears a small golden cross; he is an usher with the First Baptist Church in addition to serving as the Council's chaplain. When not in Council, the grandfather of eleven runs a barbershop.

The first 45 minutes of the meeting was standard city business before the floor was opened to public comment. Many of those who spoke that night were concerned about other issues, from a broken street light to a sign for a business; in addition, a number of citizens spoke out about the loss of jobs in Jacksonville and about police racism and misconduct. But the first speaker that night, and many who followed, were there because of the Ahmed nomination. David Beamer, the father of a 9/11 hero, spoke powerfully of the losses on 9/11 and in the wars that followed. He said, in part:

We're engaged in a war on terror. But that's not their only tactic. An additional tactic of our enemy is to infiltrate our organizations, our country, our councils. Everywhere. To effect a change from within. While others fight the war on terror abroad, we – that would be me and thee – must fight the war on infiltration here in our homeland. Even in Jacksonville. Council Members: of all the candidates for the position on the Human Rights Council, why? Why Mr. Ahmed? ... Why would you give the benefit of the doubt to this man? There can be no doubt about his past, his affiliations, his allegiance, his record: it's public. None of these facts would suggest that he should be anywhere near a position of influence or power in our community or in any other for that matter. I implore you. Do not select Ahmed for this position.

After Beamer spoke, applause rose from the audience until Council President Richard Clark offered a stern reminder against demonstrations of any kind.

John Perry, a gray haired businessman, read aloud from an email he wrote to Council earlier that day: "CAIR is described as '...the spearhead of a malignant effort to support Hamas, to support menacing Islamic jihad and Shari'ah theocracy in North America while helping to fund the growth of homegrown terrorism.'"

Randy McDaniels introduced himself as a former Marine, the local chapter leader of ACT! for America, and the author of a 20-page intelligence brief on Ahmed. McDaniels stated: "ACT! for America is the largest grassroots organization devoted to countering radical Islam, not Muslims." After raising numerous links, charges, and concerns between CAIR, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas, he concluded:

And I ask you, do you want that hanging over your head, when and if he is indicted on these charges and found guilty? Not to mention the 12,000 pages of documents the FBI has just sent warrants out to find on CAIR. Who knows what else we're going to find when this is exposed?

Next to the podium was a tall, bearded man who wore a colorful tie emblazoned with an eagle and the American flag. He explained that he was representing himself “as a concerned citizen, and also as a member of the People’s Tea Party.”

We’re a group who is very concerned about our nation. What we do not support, however, are radical groups who want to take those rights away. And the Council [on] American Islamic Relations is one of those groups. ... We oppose his appointment to any board of authority in our city.

A few of the speakers that evening were local pastors, offering scriptural references for guidance on the Ahmed matter. Raymond Johnson, founder of a ministry dedicated to bringing Biblical principles to schools and community organizations, encouraged the council to vote no on Ahmed. “And the reason I’m doing so is based on scripture.” Johnson quoted from Exodus 18:21:

‘Choose ye out from among the people able men such as fear God, men of truth, and hating covetousness. And place them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.’ And I just ask you to consider this scripture, and apply this, when considering Mr. Ahmed. Is he an ‘able man’? Does he ‘fear God’? The one true God. And is he a ‘man of truth’?

Next, Pastor George Harvey approached the podium and offered thanks in Jesus’ name for a number of blessings. He never directly referenced the Ahmed nomination.

The framers of our Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Pledge of Allegiance were focused on the God of the Bible when preparing such critical documents. When they said ‘In God We Trust’ and ‘One Nation Under God,’ they were contemplating the Judeo-Christian God, Elohim. ... These framers were not referring to or contemplating a Pagan Moon God.

Dr. Gene Youngblood introduced himself as founder and president of the Conservative Theological University, established some 28 years ago in Jacksonville. He held a Qur’an in his hand, with yellow post-its marking many of its pages. Youngblood explained:

If you have an individual that is faithful to the Qur’an, he is also faithful to jihad. In fact, in the Qur’an, out of the 3,000 Surahs, the majority of them teach jihad. And in jihad, that is the murder of every Christian and Jew, called the infidel, the non-believer, that is their prerogative to do so, if they want to spend eternity, in the—what is called paradise, with Allah, which is the moon God of the Bedouin Islamic people of that era. Now say to us, he has also been involved with CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations. CAIR is the most vile, wicked, evil, damnable organization on the face of the globe.

Youngblood added that Ahmed was involved with CAIR when the organization faced indictment on international terror links and dismissed those who would say that opponents of the nomination are “bigots” or a “hate group.” “We’re commanded in the scripture to love everybody, but God hates the murderer. And Islam [has] the most murderous record of all the religions around the globe.” He quoted from Surah 9:28-30:

‘Fight against those that believe not in Allah, nor in the last days, nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and his Messenger Muhammad. And those who acknowledge not the religion of

Islam among the people of the scripture, that is the Jews and the Christians, until they pay taxes and willingly submit and feel themselves subdued, or behead them.’

As the bell rang to indicate that his three minutes were up, Youngblood added: “Now it’s an impossibility as an Islamic not to follow the words of the Qur’an. I plead with you. Do not, do not confirm this gentleman.”

The only Muslim voice was heard towards the end of public comment, when a woman approached the podium shrouded in black, her face veiled, only her eyes visible. She didn’t mention the nomination but spoke of her conversion to Islam from Christianity. “I really feel like people are being misled and mass manipulated. Especially when they call people like me terrorist when really my only goal is to praise the Almighty and do good works.”

One citizen, who seemed upset about a number of issues in the city, added a comment on the ministers’ presentations. “I’ve been hearing so much mess tonight, I don’t know where to start.” He suggested that the “Bible-toting” preachers needed to worry more about what was happening with the youth in their community who need jobs. ... “My religion is better than your religion’, ‘my religion is this’, and all that crap...” He asked where the religious people were in 1562 when his people were brought here as slaves, or even 40 years ago when African Americans were lynched. “Very few religious people stood up. We’ve got a mess in this city, people. A serious mess.”

In the end, the Council voted with a strong majority, 13 to 5, to refer Ahmed’s nomination back to the Rules Committee.

Emails to City Council

While some citizens wrote letters of support for Ahmed, the majority of the emails, phone calls, and letters received by City Council – like the chorus of voices at the April 13 Council Meeting – strongly opposed his nomination. Many citizens forwarded messages from ACT or other organizations or attached a report from the Internet. Many were afraid; some were angry. One citizen wrote: “... Diversity is Un American! We try to assimilate them, not them us. All must be Americans First[.] WE no longer tolerate hyphenated Americans... We no longer condone your placing anti Americans on any board or panel. WAKE UP!”⁸

Another citizen opposing the nomination stated: “...we the people of Jacksonville do not want this man appointed to a ‘human rights’ position, or any position, for that matter, in our city!” She continued, “Please stop this nonsense.” She added, “Further I request he be removed from the UNF teaching staff as we do not need vulnerable students being subtly brain-washed into this ideology of Islam. Please STOP the [I]slamization of America NOW!”⁹

Some clarified that their opposition was based on extremist links to organizations like CAIR. One writer emphasized: “Please understand that I fully respect the appointment or election of a Muslim to any agency or office that any other citizen of the US is eligible to be a part of. However, the appointment of someone with ties to a terrorist organization, is not. I hope you will find another candidate from the Muslim community.”¹⁰

In addition to a steady flow of email and phone calls from constituents, a number of those weighing in represented organizations outside of Jacksonville. Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy, based outside of DC, wrote: “It is our opinion that CAIR’s influence operations intimidate Americans, including Muslim Americans, endanger the First Amendment right to free speech, and threaten national security.”¹¹

The Florida Security Council contacted the Mayor and Council with a list of questions for Ahmed to answer: it began with “Do you condemn Hamas?” and continued by asking if he supported what were described as “[Shari’ah] accommodations” ranging from Muslim schoolchildren being permitted to pray in schools, to public facilities being obligated to provide halal food, prayer rooms, or footbaths.¹²

Other organizations, such as Faith Freedom International and Former Muslims United, emailed to refute claims that opposition to Ahmed was coming from hate groups.

Anyone who reads the Quran can see that Islam is the ultimate hate group. ... No Muslim should ever be accepted in any position of authority. Since the loyalty of Muslims is to Islam and Islam is in perpetual war with non-Muslim countries (*dar al harb*), no Muslim should be allowed to serve in the military, hold political office, or be nominated to any committee.¹³

Parvez Ahmed: A Letter to the Council

In Ahmed’s office at the University of North Florida, tidy stacks of papers and journal articles are piled on his desk; on overflowing bookshelves, a prayer rug and paperback Qur’an are tucked in between books on Asset Pricing and Islamic Finance. His newest interest, environmental sustainability, grew out of his recent Fulbright year in Bangladesh. At home with his wife and two children, the primary language is Bengali, and the conversation is equal parts NPR and NFL. In person, and as a principle, Ahmed resists easy characterization. Ahmed chose an academic path rather than pursuing a more lucrative career on Wall Street because he loved teaching, research, and writing, and because it gave him the freedom to pursue his diverse interests. In mid-April, Ahmed was at the end of the semester, busy grading papers, attending meetings, participating in community events, and writing a book. He didn’t want to dignify the accusations and public statements with a reply, yet he knew he had to respond.

On April 14, the day after the City Council meeting, Ahmed wrote a letter to Council Members, which read:

By now you have heard a lot about me, but from others. Some of the people you heard from have had years of associations with me. I am thankful that my work and views have made a positive impression on them. While others who wrote or spoke using snippets of disjointed information gathered from the [I]nternet painted a distorted picture of my record and views. The irony is not lost on anyone that those who never met me seemed loudest in their condemnation.

I know you have been receiving many emails from folks, some favoring my nomination and others against. I hope at the end of the day your decision is not based on a count of the emails but rather an objective analysis of their content and most importantly your independent and reasoned judgment.

Should the views of the former head of the FBI in Jax (perhaps the one person most likely to know if I had any “extremist” ties), a respected Christian clergy in the city, the former head of a major civil rights group in town, the former head and current head of OneJax (one of our city’s most respected inter-faith organization[s]), and the numerous other emails from doctors, professors, lawyers and other ordinary citizens mean something? These are the people who work with me and are obviously in a position to know me and my views best. You should give preference to their voice over the voices of hate and discord.

ACT believes that Muslim-Americans shouldn't be allowed to hold public office and instructs people to contact the FBI if they see a mosque being built in their neighborhood. Their leader also said, "Every practicing Muslim is a radical Muslim." Educational materials available on ACT's website makes ridiculous claims such as "Islam does not coexist well with other religions," "[Islam] Co-opts the moon god Allah," "Islam was spread by the sword, not conversion."

If the words Muslim in those quotes were replaced by the words African-American or Jewish or Buddhist will the Council treat information from such a source with credibility?

You should not rely on hate groups like ACT to tell you who I am. You can find out more about my views by reading my blog, which archives dozens of articles that I have written and published over the past 5 years. Most of my writings have been published in major newspapers and blogs, nationally and internationally. ...

Just one final note, during Tuesday's City Council meeting some folks at the behest of ACT made Islamophobic comments. Among those speaking was a pastor named Youngblood who has a record of defaming Islam. In 2005 he infamously put up a sign in front of his church that read "Islam is evil and believes in murder." Earlier in 2003, an umbrella group representing 3,500 Florida churches "led a chorus of denunciations" aimed at Rev. Youngblood's church for displaying a sign saying that Islam's founder approved of murder.

Has our City Council Chamber become a place where hate speech gets a free pass and minority faiths get pilloried and ridiculed with impunity?

Beyond my already public denials, I have no intention of responding to the baseless accusations from hate groups. Doing anything else will give aid and comfort to the purveyors of hate.

I do remain committed to respectful dialogue and once again extend my offer to meet or talk with you to help this process move forward. On Friday, I will be at City Hall to meet with a couple of Council members. I will welcome the opportunity to meet with others.¹⁴

Ahmed posted an expanded version of the letter on his blog, along with a chronology of events and links to local media coverage. His aim was not to editorialize, but just to present "the bare facts." He included a link to the public comment at the City Council meeting and quoted statistics on prejudice against Muslims. Yet his blog post also emphasized the support he had received and affirmed his optimism by quoting Martin Luther King Jr. "...our finite disappointments should not make us give up on the infinite hope of equality for all people."¹⁵

As the controversy continued, Ahmed would post commentary, letters of support, and links to news article on his blog. Ahmed recalled, "With the barrage of accusations going back and forth it is easy for casual observers to lose sight of the facts." No matter what accusations and anger he faced, Ahmed calmly stated that he would not consider quitting. He recalled:

If I withdrew, it would confirm ACT's accusations. So there was no room—also, my own mindset is that I'm not going to let hate groups get away with such nonsense. If it gets voted down, I can accept

that result, but I would like to see it to the end. And I would like to hear the City Council members justify their vote.

VIEWS FROM CITY COUNCIL

In April 2010, the Jacksonville City Council had 19 members, including Richard Clark, President; Jack Webb, Vice President; and Council Members Warren Jones, Don Redman, and Clay Yarborough. At the City Council meeting of April 13, 2010, the majority voted to refer Ahmed's nomination to Rules Committee for a meeting on April 19. The Mayor of Jacksonville, John Peyton, was abroad during much of the controversy. The city's former mayor, John Delaney, was now the president of the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.¹⁶

Richard Clark, City Council President

Richard Clark, Jacksonville's City Council President, was among those on the City Council who voted to refer Ahmed's nomination back to the Rules Committee. Clark was surprised that any nomination to the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission (JHRC) would get attention. He explained, "I tried to get the Human Rights Commission thrown out of our city system: I think it is a waste of time, effort, and energy. ... So the idea that it even matters is ridiculous."¹⁷

For Clark, Jacksonville's Human Rights Commission was a waste of 1.2 million dollars a year in a city that, like many, struggled with the economic downturn. Clark understood that the JHRC's mission was "to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to fully participate in the privileges of complete membership in the community and for taking action to eliminate discriminatory practices in Jacksonville."¹⁸ Yet, he noted: "We've got state and federal laws that are anti-discrimination. We don't need it." Clark takes a business-like approach to his work on the council: he had a successful corporate career before returning to Jacksonville and joining his family business. Clark's communication style is direct, yet he is also polite and personable.

With his clean-cut appearance, one can readily imagine him as the president of the student body at his Jacksonville high school. Clark joked, "Heck, my friends like to think politics is just a gene mutation."

Like most on Jacksonville's City Council, Clark includes his church affiliation on his Council Member web page. Clark came to the Baptist faith – and the First Baptist Church – at the age of 17. He was drawn in by a charismatic pastor and a church that was "bringing people to Jesus, bringing them in and opening your arms, and having them be a part of what you believe." Yet as the years passed, Clark struggled to make sense of some messages that sounded absolutist and exclusivist, especially when Rev. Jerry Vines infamously referred to the Prophet Mohammed as "a pedophile." It didn't resonate with his understanding of his faith: Clark explained, "The idea is very simple: go out, live your life as close as you possibly can to the life Jesus led. Show people you're Christian. Show people your faith. That's the best testimony you can give."

Clark recalled that an interfaith group once approached him, as the chairman, to consider offering "neutral" prayers at the beginning of City Council meetings. Yet, Clark observed, "Every member of the City Council was Christian. Every member." Accordingly, he argued, it seemed appropriate to continue to offer prayers "in Jesus' name." He felt that the prayers that opened each session were to provide guidance to the members of the council, not for the audience or the larger community. If a non-Christian member joined the Council, he would gladly reconsider. Clark explained that he was not one for "political correctness" or "absolutism" – in any form.

As City Council President, many of the issues before Clark seemed straightforward; however, the controversy over Ahmed was not. In early April, Council Members began receiving emails and calls, including many from a group called “ACT! for America” (ACT). ACT asserted that Ahmed’s affiliation with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) until 2008 made him unfit to serve; others insisted that ACT was Islamophobic. Clark explained:

I’m not going to characterize [ACT] as a hate group; I don’t think that is fair -- I don’t know them -- any more than I’m going to characterize CAIR as a fundraiser for Hamas. I don’t know if either of those statements are accurate. If you read each of their mission statements, neither of them have anything to do with hate.

Indeed, CAIR’s website listed their mission as “to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.”¹⁹ The website for ACT! for America describes their mission as:

...combining the power of truth about Islamofascism with a mission to build the best-organized grassroots network in America to resist it. The truth about Islamofascism is indeed jarring. But to effect the kind of policy changes necessary to fight the rising tide of Islamofascism and the political correctness that aids and abets it, this truth needs the force of collective action that comes when placed in the hands of an organized network of citizens.²⁰

As Clark studied the issue before the April 13 Council Meeting, he was surprised to receive a call on his cell phone from Rep. Adam Hasner, the ranking Republican in the Florida House. Clark recalled, “[Hasner] said, ‘Richard, you need to take a look at this guy.’” Clark thought, “...there is no harm in it. I said ‘OK, let’s take a deep breath.’”

While Clark voted to refer Ahmed’s nomination back to the Rules Committee, the tenor of the comments made by citizens and preachers at the meeting were of great concern: their words echoed the absolutism that strained his own faith commitment. And, after the meeting, Clark recalled, “I was absolutely, positively amazed at the influx of emails and phone calls and letters.” The two weeks before the next City Council meeting would give Clark time to meet with Ahmed and discuss the issue with others he trusted. “And,” Clark explained, “in those two weeks it got ratcheted up to something I had never seen.”

Warren Jones, City Council Member

Many on the Jacksonville City Council considered Warren Jones to be the group’s “elder statesman”: often, they turn to the graying, gentlemanly Jones for calm during difficult moments. Yet as the Ahmed controversy unfolded, Council Member Jones became increasingly angry. He saw no reason to delay, or to re-refer the nomination to the Rules Committee. Jones recalled, “...it was personally disappointing. I had hoped we had gotten beyond religion and race as a reason to deny someone an appointment.”²¹ Jones speaks in a soft voice, but with a gravity and clarity that prompts others to lean in to listen. “I had flashbacks of what so many black individuals in Jacksonville went through.” For Jones, it was simple: “...there are some in our community who are not very open to other religions and I think that therein lies the problem. There were some undercurrents about his religion, and I think his association with that CAIR group gave the ammunition, the excuse, to oppose his nomination.”

Jones was surprised by the “amount of traction that they got so quickly.” Generally, he recalled, if Council Members receive email and calls on a topic, they do their own research. Before April 2010, Jones wasn’t aware of ACT, but after reading their materials “I thought that they were misguided, misinformed, and just fearful of everyone with a Muslim background.” He noted that ACT convinced the public, and some council members, that Ahmed’s nomination was an attempt of terrorists to infiltrate the government. Jones laughed, with a touch of sadness, “It wasn’t true.” He added, “Just because it is on the Internet does not mean it is true.”

Jones felt it was important not to overreact to claims from any group, especially given that the Mayor’s office had already completed a background check on Ahmed. The Mayor’s office stood by the appointment and demonstrated that many of the claims were simply untrue. But Jones understood that much of the opposition operated at the level of fear. He remembered the fears about race during the long and painful desegregation process:

When they said the schools should be integrated in ’54, we didn’t do it at all until the judge forced us to do it in ’71. The schools did everything they could, with the support of the church and their constituents, to *not* integrate the schools. They built new schools in the black community to keep them from being integrated. ... It’s taken a generation to get beyond that, to get beyond our fears and concerns, and not just in Jacksonville.

Now, a generation later, Jones is one of many African Americans on the City Council; he believes it will be another generation before there are Muslims elected to public office in Jacksonville. Jones, a Christian, explained: “I have several classmates who are Muslims. I’ve gone to mosques, and worshipped in them. I don’t agree with the religion, but I still have an appreciation of it. I think many people have that appreciation of it.” Yet some in the community remain fearful, Jones noted. As Jacksonville and the rest of the country struggle through difficult economic times, such fears may grow: “Historically, whenever the economy is doing poorly, people look to blame someone – overreach, overreact in a negative way.”

Jack Webb, City Council Vice President

Council Member Jack Webb’s Bronx accent, quick and colorful speech, and hearty laugh echoes through Jacksonville’s city hall. Webb is fast and brash, an unapologetic Northerner in the South. In between sips of Diet Coke – he goes through some fifteen cans a day – Webb explained he is “contrarian by nature.”²² Proud of his Irish Catholic heritage, Webb plays the penny whistle and bagpipe and wears a Claddagh ring. Webb feels at home in the Mandarin neighborhood of Jacksonville where he chose to live; like the Bronx, it is home to a significant Jewish population. Unlike the Bronx, Mandarin is verdant and lush, with Spanish moss climbing towering oaks. Two large and vital synagogues are located in Mandarin, the district Webb has represented since 2007. Since that time, Webb has been seen as an unlikely – and perhaps unstoppable – rising star.

Shortly after Webb returned from an Easter trip in early April 2010, he had numerous emails about the Ahmed nomination. Soon, he began receiving phone calls from his constituents. These calls, he emphasized, were not from “intolerant people”; these were people Webb respected, from across the political spectrum. Calls came from “doctors, lawyers, people who live in my district who I’ve known for many years who say ‘hey, we’re not telling you what to do on this thing, but you may want to take another look at that.’” Webb explained:

...the calls that were coming in to me had nothing to do with his religion. You get the crazies out there, you get the crazy people who are just totally intolerant; you're going to have that in any environment, though. Whatever, I just ignore those idiots and move on, but these questions related to Dr. Ahmed's involvement in CAIR.

CAIR, they explained, had a bad track record. They were previously investigated for links to terror, and some leaders made statements in support of Hamas and Hezbollah. Ahmed served as the Florida Chair for CAIR, and later as the group's National Chairman. Was this really the right person for the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission? A few emails began streaming in as well: some from constituents, some from out of state, all expressing concern about Ahmed. Webb knew he needed to learn more: "My job is to know the facts, learn the facts, analyze the facts, think about it, analyze it, and then pray for the wisdom to make the right decision. That's all you can do. And sometimes you're going to please people, sometimes you're not."

Yet many of the others who were asking questions about Ahmed were making things difficult for Webb. Council Member Yarborough, whom Webb liked and respected, but felt was "young," made statements to a reporter about Muslims not being appropriate for public office. A local journalist interviewed Yarborough, which was published in the *Times-Union* on April 17, 2010.

OK, but do you believe Muslims should be able to hold a public office in Florida?

I would have to think about that. I would have to think about that. What kind of office? An elected office? Would you consider the human rights commission to be a public office?

Just in general, do you believe Muslims should be able to hold any public office in Florida?

I don't know.²³

Webb was exasperated. The issues around Ahmed's nomination – and the necessary research – were taking Webb away from his "day job" at a law firm, and he wasn't billing enough hours. The research on CAIR did not put his mind at ease. Moreover, he resented the sense that somehow it wasn't OK to ask questions. Webb's concerns were about CAIR, not Islam, but he felt that his position became "tarnished" by some of the others opposing Ahmed. He recalled, "I was not comfortable being identified with individuals that were being labeled as bigots and intolerant. I was not comfortable with that at all."

Webb met with Ahmed one on one and liked him. He went into their meeting wanting to support his appointment but decided he couldn't. Webb still had doubts, and reading Ahmed's academic paper "Terror in the Name of Islam: Unholy War, Not Jihad"²⁴ raised more questions than it answered. He would pursue these issues with Ahmed at the next Rules Meeting, to be held April 19.

John Delaney, Former Mayor of Jacksonville

In Jacksonville, John Delaney is as well-known as he is well-respected: he served as Mayor from 1995-2003, running unopposed for his second term. While he possesses the toughness and mental agility of a prosecutor, Delaney is charming, accessible, and likable. Delaney left a legacy in the city: his "Better Jacksonville Plan" supported extensive capital improvements and created jobs through a half-cent sales tax; his "Preservation Project" created the largest urban park system in the U.S. He is understood to have a bright political future in the Republican Party for his positive and non-partisan leadership, and later served as the President of the University of North Florida.

Beyond a few faculty meetings and functions at the university, Delaney didn't know Ahmed personally. What he knew of him by reputation was positive: Ahmed had recently returned from a Fulbright Scholarship, and he was collegial and active in the community with interfaith relations. From time to time, Delaney received letters or emails protesting Ahmed's employment at the University: "Why have you got this terrorist on your staff?" Delaney acknowledged that "CAIR has a couple of warts on it," but, based on what he knew of Ahmed, felt "they had the wrong guy."²⁵ Since the nomination in April, Delaney was receiving more and more emails. As a matter of principle, Delaney tried to answer the correspondence he received, to develop a dialogue and deeper understanding. In one exchange, Delaney responded to concerns about Ahmed by referencing his own faith: "...I'm Catholic, and my church has come under some well-deserved criticism as well of late. Do I own all of that?"²⁶

Back when Delaney was mayor, he made hundreds of appointments to the city's various boards and commissions. The process was standard, even perfunctory: after the mayor makes a nomination, a basic background check is completed, and the nomination goes before the Rules Committee. Generally, the nominee is then confirmed at the next City Council meeting. Delaney was concerned that many council members – including Clark and Webb, both of whom Delaney respected – recommended that Ahmed's nomination go before the Rules Committee for a second time. While Delaney thought that many opposing Ahmed's nomination were raising legitimate questions about CAIR, he was concerned that a few were "religious bigots." He recalled watching the local news with his wife, when a local minister claimed that Ahmed "believes in the annihilation of Christians and Jews."

I'm sitting there drinking my coffee, thinking, 'Where in the hell is this guy getting this?' [The minister] said, '...the Qur'an calls for the annihilation of infidels, which are Christians and Jews. Parvez believes in the Qur'an, so he believes in the annihilation of Christians and Jews.' It was dumbfounding.

As Delaney read the newspaper the day before the second Rules meeting, he grew more worried: "A lot of things are controversial, but maybe this is going to go the wrong way." He thought of the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which his son was reading, and thought something of a mob mentality was developing. Delaney emailed his secretary and asked her to clear his calendar.

The next day, April 19, Delaney sat in the front row of the Rules Committee hearing. Although Clark had closed public comment, Delaney, as the former mayor, was given special permission to speak. He challenged the committee and the community with his words:

...And there are some here that believe that they've caught somebody, that's an evil person; that's simply not the case here. This has the feel of a lynching. It has the feel of what happened to Japanese citizens on the West Coast in World War II, who were incarcerated simply for being who they were.²⁷

As he spoke, a shout rang out from the audience from a citizen who had spoken against Ahmed at a previous meeting: "Sir! I am not a racist!" Clark called for a bailiff to escort the man out of the chambers. He angrily pointed at Delaney as he walked out: "I am not a racist. I am not going to be called a racist! It's not going to happen!"²⁸

Towards the end of the Rules meeting, Delaney went into the "green room" off of the Council chambers to find Webb, who had stepped out for a Diet Coke. Webb was among many of those on the Council who

Delaney considered to be both a colleague and a friend. Delaney politely but persistently encouraged Webb “not to get on the wrong side of this.” As they spoke, they heard the vote pass. Ahmed’s nomination would move forward.

“A Breath of Fresh Air”

For Ahmed, Delaney’s words represented a turning point in the nomination controversy. Ahmed had many colleagues and friends writing letters and working behind the scenes, and he felt a deep sense of appreciation for those who took a stand. “The moral aspect of this is quite clear. The political aspect is not as black and white.” When Delaney spoke up at the rules meeting, Ahmed described it as “a breath of fresh air ... in a conversation that had become so poisonous.”²⁹ He believed that Delaney demonstrated true leadership at a critical point in the public conversation.

While the external challenges to the Muslim community were vividly articulated by those who opposed his nomination, Ahmed remained aware of the internal challenges related to leadership: “I hate to be pessimistic about these issues, but I do feel the Muslim community is at an important crossroads, and maybe even a moment of crisis.” In Jacksonville, the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida does not have an imam, nor an executive director to do community outreach. He explained that many American mosques have yet to decide the function of an imam, and added: “perhaps the biggest mistake a community can make, particularly now, is to try to import an imam from a foreign country... Yet at the same time, there are not enough institutions that can produce American imams. So we’re really caught in a difficult position.” Community members are called upon to fill some functions, as Ahmed has done in his Friday sermons and interfaith outreach. Ahmed continued, “At some level, the Muslim community has to rise to that pressure. You can say it is an existential crisis.... What kind of community will exist? The type of community that [we] are envisioning, or the kind of community that will remain a vision but never a reality?”

Ahmed understands his faith as “a *deen*, a way of life, not a religion.” He explained, “Islam should inform my life in as many aspects as it is possible. Wherever possible I have to be as true to the ideals and values, as much as I can humanly do.” Accordingly, he continued:

That means you have to have a much more holistic view on these issues. And that’s where I find it easy to kind of integrate my social life, my community life, my family life, and my professional life. I do not compartmentalize things. So things that I may learn as a member of a community I may find it useful to transfer that information in the context of my teaching. What I may learn as a teacher, I may transfer that information when I am maybe giving a sermon.

In a recent sermon at the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida, Ahmed asked the community why they didn’t fly an American flag or open their events by saying the Pledge of Allegiance. “As Americans, why don’t we do it? I don’t see any religious barrier to doing it. ... By not doing it, are we implicitly sending the wrong message?” As his sermons become more provocative, Ahmed’s friends joke that he is trying hard to get off the rotation. “But I am not succeeding,” he laughed. Although Ahmed regularly gives sermons and often comes to the mosque for his evening prayers, he refused an official leadership role. Ahmed explained that he is “too independent minded... in some sense it is difficult for me to conform to groupthink.”

This, he explained, was part of the reason he quit as board chair of the Council on American Islamic Relations. Ahmed did not seem eager to discuss the topic and was rarely asked about it during the controversy. He

explained that, over the years, the organization was shifting its focus from civil rights concerns in America to issues in the Middle East. “One of my disagreements was that I wanted the organization to be more transparent. I view transparency to be an Islamic issue.” Ahmed began to cite examples from the life of the Prophet, and then added, “It is also an issue of American public life. We expect our institutions to be transparent.” He clarified that the lack of transparency did not imply wrongdoing; however, he felt that the organization was “stagnating.” He later explained, “There was ultimately a difference in vision.” Two years later, Ahmed felt that his vision, “of making the organization more accountable while infusing it with a new generation of leaders,” was “constantly thwarted by the old leadership.” When he left, Ahmed was “frustrated and disappointed.” Two years later, he knew he’d made the right decision: Ahmed was better suited to being an independent critical voice. In the matter of the nomination controversy, he did not seek any help from CAIR, and when the organization offered assistance, Ahmed explained, “I politely declined.”

RELIGIOUS LEADERS RESPOND

Ahmed’s nomination passed the Rules Committee on April 19, 2010; the final decision about Ahmed’s appointment would be made at the City Council meeting on April 27. While many religious leaders spoke against Ahmed at the beginning of the controversy, other key voices would join the discussion, such as Celeste Krueger from the interfaith group OneJax and Andrew Rosenkranz from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Many religious leaders were concerned about the tenor of the discussion, including Rev. Steve Goyer, Rabbi Joshua Lief, and Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner. The board of the Islamic Center of North Florida (ICNF) did not become involved in the controversy, but followed it closely. The largest church in Jacksonville, First Baptist Church, did not take a formal position.³⁰

Celeste Krueger, Executive Director of OneJax

For Celeste Krueger, Delaney’s stand at the April 19 Rules Committee Meeting was an important step towards a more “constructive”³¹ conversation. As Executive Director of OneJax, “an interfaith organization whose mission is to promote respect and understanding among people of different religions, races, cultures and beliefs,”³² Krueger was concerned about how this controversy would impact the community. She observed, “There was no aggression that was overt, but there was a tension that was palpable.” She explained, “[W]e needed to respond quickly and in ways that were constructive.” Krueger brings a gentle pragmatism to her work: a writer and a strategist with training in organizational development, she considers each word and its impact carefully. Just two months earlier, she returned to her hometown to lead OneJax; she worked with the organization in the 80s when it was known as the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) and managed the strategic process when they reorganized as OneJax.

Ahmed was a board member at OneJax, along with other prominent members of the Jacksonville community; it also included Rev. Steve Goyer and Rabbi Joshua Lief, along with clergy from Southern Baptist, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox traditions. When Ahmed was first nominated, Krueger recalled: “We were delighted. It made sense to us.” Yet Krueger’s joy over Ahmed’s nomination would be short-lived. “We went to sleep one night, and the next morning it was happening.” Like many in Jacksonville, her first sign that this would not be a standard nomination process was in early April, when the *Times-Union* reported on a set of unexpected questions the nominee was asked by Council Member Clay Yarborough. The questions covered a range of topics, from gay marriage to whether “Under God” should be removed from the Pledge of Allegiance. Krueger wondered, “‘How are they relevant?’ ‘How does this impact the Human Rights Commission?’” She continued: “I’m interested in what’s underneath the question.” One day after the City Council meeting, Krueger and the

board drafted a letter to the editor of the *Times-Union* expressing “dismay and disappointment” about the City Council’s vote to delay the decision. While the nomination was now moving forward again, there was still much to be done behind the scenes as they worked to correct what she felt was “demonstrably false information.” She was concerned both about the immediate and long-term impact, asking “How do we hold a respectful stance --that means with everyone, even the people we disagreed with-- without alienating and causing more fracture than good?” Within the organization, as well as the larger community, many had memories of a Jacksonville sharply divided by race. Krueger explained, “People here have suffered. And they understand what it means. They don’t want the community to be polarized.”

She recalled, “I’d encounter a colleague or someone in the community who would say, ‘oh, I was at dinner last night with eight or ten of us, and this was the topic. . . . People needed to talk to each other and say what does this mean and who are we?’” Krueger explained that many were “embarrassed” by the proceedings. “And these are strong words, but people were feeling a little bit stunned, like ‘its 2010?’” As troubled as she was by the controversy, Krueger noted: “I was really proud of a lot of people in this community for the way that they really showed up and responded to a challenging and complex set of circumstances that started to move quickly once they started to happen.” For many of those who stood with Ahmed, Krueger understood, “I know they were taking risks.” As for OneJax, Krueger said, “Our hope was that we could help to shape an informed and meaningful conversation”; she added, “. . .without adding gas to the fire.” While Krueger was hopeful, she was also realistic: “We were in the middle of this. We never knew quite what was coming next, because it was moving so fast, and because there were triggers that were unanticipated.”

Rev. Steve Goyer, Riverside Presbyterian Church

Rev. Steve Goyer was increasingly worried about the “rhetoric”³³ surrounding the Ahmed nomination. Goyer, a minister at Jacksonville’s Riverside Presbyterian Church, explained: “It’s scary—and I hate to use that language because that’s what everybody is using to create all of the conflict.” Goyer continued: “As it was expressed to me recently, ‘If we say we are the truth, and they say they are the truth, isn’t it inevitable that there’s going to be a major conflict? Isn’t that the inevitable conclusion?’” He added, “There’s a lot of fear.” Goyer followed the twists and turns of the appointment controversy through Ahmed’s regular blog posts, and joked, “He’s never had an unpublished thought.” Goyer became increasingly angry; however, he hesitated to write a letter to the editor: “As the pastor, when I respond I speak for the church, so I have to be careful-- which I’m not always.”

Although Goyer stands over six feet tall, he is not imposing; his manner conveys both warmth and world-weariness. He became active in interfaith relations as a young minister in Atlanta: “I just always felt like it was part of my calling as a Christian to be a peacemaker and to work towards reconciliation among all peoples. While honoring their faith, not dishonoring my own. It just seemed like a natural extension of ministry, as a reconciler.” Yet this work wasn’t easy: his involvement in a dispute over the Confederate flag while in Atlanta resulted in the repeated stoning of his church’s stained-glass windows for a six-month period. He reflected, “It’s a strange thing, isn’t it, to be a reconciler and a prophetic voice at the same time? Because so often it leads to conflict. Yet somehow I think we’re called to do it.”

Goyer’s interest in interfaith relations deepened during a 2008 overseas trip with a group of Jacksonville’s civic and religious leaders. “Parvez and I, on the Turkey trip, sat in the back of the bus and talked theology the whole time.” As they discussed the importance of reading text in context, and the dangers of extremism in matters of faith, the two became friends. “I trust him. My sense is that he is a reconciler at heart, and sees the

same vision I do.” During their travels, Goyer recalled, Ahmed matter-of-factly mentioned that he might be taken aside by airport security in the U.S. When it happened, Goyer was outraged, but Ahmed calmed him and said, “No big deal, don’t get upset. I go through this every time.” Goyer noted, “He was not as angry as I was, at least outwardly. He’s a better person than I.” Similarly, Goyer observed, in the face of accusation and attacks on Ahmed’s faith and integrity, he didn’t give in to anger or fear, but stayed calm and resolute. At the film screening where they first encountered ACT, Goyer approached some of the protestors. “I just felt compelled to go up and talk to them.” One ACT member identified as Christian during the Q&A. “I said, ‘Let’s talk about Christian values. How do you understand this in relationship to Christ?’ ... He was sort of stunned, he didn’t really know what to say.”

Goyer believed that a key part of the opposition to Ahmed was part of a larger “coordinated effort” fueled by fundamentalist Christians. There were those within the Southern Baptist Convention, Goyer explained, who “promote[d] the issue of the prophecy of Jeremiah and Elijah ... leading up to Armageddon, and the final battle; and of course it is Christians and Jews against Arabs and Muslims. And this is getting traction, this is getting real traction.” He continued, “The fear is that the prophecy becomes real; that we start believing it. My sense is as a church, and as a pastor and a reconciler, we have to speak the truth to that, as I understand it.” For his part, he would work with the interfaith group OneJax, and express his support in sermons and conversations with his parishioners. Yet Goyer noted: “There are 25,000 members at First Baptist Church ... We’re 1,200 at Riverside. And so it is easy to get disheartened.”

Rabbi Joshua Lief, Ahavath Chesed, “The Temple”

Rabbi Joshua Lief, Senior Rabbi at the historic Ahavath Chesed synagogue, has a dramatic flair. Even in conversation, his words have the cadence of a sermon, with thoughtful asides, textual references, and meaningful pauses. The young rabbi, who often wears a bow tie, leads the largest Jewish community in Jacksonville, with more than 2,000 members: the Reform synagogue is often referred to as “The Temple.” Lief explains, “We here at the Temple are quite proud of our 128 year legacy of continuous and very active Jewish participation in life -- religiously as well as civically.”³⁴ Lief noted that being involved in the community as good citizens is a core Jewish value: “The Talmud suggests *Dina D’Malchuta Dina*, ‘the law of the land is the law.’ We are supposed to be good citizens, as Jews, and not segregate ourselves out.”

Unlike South Florida, the Jewish population is relatively small in Jacksonville. “I think there is an assumption that everyone in town is a Christian. The reality is, 98% of the time, that’s a good guess.” Yet Lief is quick to note that there is a high level of acceptance in the larger community. “It’s the case that thirty years ago there were still Country Clubs and Yacht Clubs and neighborhoods where Jews were not welcome. Those have all gone by the wayside. It’s a very welcoming and inclusive community.” Lief, like those who have served at “The Temple” before him, is a member of the Downtown Rotary Club and a fellow board member at OneJax; he knew Ahmed well from many interfaith engagements. In 2008, they participated in an interfaith observance of 9/11 at the Temple. Because it was Ramadan, the Temple arranged for the Muslim community’s evening prayers to take place after the service in the social hall, followed by a shared meal.

At one of their first meetings, Lief and Ahmed discussed his departure from CAIR. “I am no fan of CAIR. I firmly believe them to be apologists for terrorism, and they have made some really despicable statements in the past, which I do not support in any way.” He explained, “And what most people don’t pause to discuss is the fact that Parvez quit. In a very ugly, bitter, public way that was quite the news story a few years ago when he did. He was the national chair and quit!” Lief had been following the controversy over Ahmed’s nomination,

and didn't hesitate to offer his support when others asked. Lief assisted with OneJax's efforts but did not issue a public statement or attend City Council meetings. "Raising our voices and raising our fists and saying 'you're the bad guy', 'no, you're the bad guy,' that's tedious and pointless. I didn't feel that it was my place to be involved in a political appointment question."

After the rules meeting, when it seemed the nomination was moving forward, Lief received an unexpected phone call. Andrew Rosenkranz, Florida Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League based in Boca Raton, called to tell Lief that they had prepared a "strong statement" on the Ahmed nomination. Lief asked, "Strong in what direction?" He was disappointed to learn that the ADL was opposing the nomination, based on Ahmed's "tainted views." Lief explained:

It was particularly disheartening, as a Jew, that the Anti-Defamation League had the misfortune to come out so strongly opposed, and siding with people who I don't find to be reasonable and rational folks. The ACT for America! folks opposed him because he was a Muslim. And anything else is not really the whole truth. There is a strong sentiment, which was sadly expressed by one of our City Council members, that no Muslim should be allowed to hold office in America. ... And that's the position taken by ACT for America! and, terrifyingly, that was the position supported by the ADL albeit tacitly, that somehow he was not a good person, a decent person, and 'oh its not because he's a Muslim, it's because of CAIR and so forth,' and the statements that he's made, which were taken out of context.

Lief told Rosenkranz that he strongly disagreed with the ADL's position. He called to offer Ahmed personal support: "Hang in there, I think you're doing great, just hold on, and let's see what happens." Yet at the Temple, within Jacksonville's Jewish community, and beyond, opinion about Ahmed – and the ADL's response – continued to be strongly divided.

A Letter from the Anti-Defamation League

On April 20, Andrew Rosenkranz emailed Jacksonville's City Council Members to express concerns about the Ahmed nomination; these views were echoed in an April 23rd letter to the editor of the *Times-Union*. Rosenkranz's letter began:

It would seem reasonable to presume that criteria for ruling out potential candidates to serve on the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission would require the omission of those who have publicly defended terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.³⁵

He continued:

Ahmed was the chairman of the Florida branch of the Council on American Islamic Relations from 2002-2005, and he served as chairman of CAIR's national office from 2005-2008. CAIR's credibility promoting "justice and mutual understanding of Islam" is tainted. CAIR was founded by leaders of the Islamic Association for Palestine, a Hamas-affiliated anti-Semitic propaganda organization, and under Ahmed's leadership the group refused to unequivocally condemn by name Hezbollah and Palestinian terror organizations.³⁶

The letter also cited a twenty-page academic paper written by Ahmed:

Ahmed's positions on Hamas and Hezbollah downplay the violent threat they pose. In his March 2007 paper titled "Terror in the Name of Islam - Unholy War not Jihad," Ahmed stated that "the saying 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' is not always accurate, but sometimes it does ring true." He called terrorist attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah "understandable but not justified."³⁷

The letter, which included additional allegations, concluded by asking that the information provided by the ADL to the City Council "be strongly considered in determining whether Ahmed is suitable to sit on the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission."

Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, Jacksonville Jewish Center

Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner is sincere and serious in demeanor. Neatly dressed, his colorful tie matches his yarmulke. Lubliner moved to Jacksonville in 2004 to become Senior Rabbi at the large and influential Jacksonville Jewish Center, established in 1901. The thirty-five-acre campus is home to a thriving Conservative Jewish synagogue as well as a summer camp, day care, and school. In Jacksonville, Lubliner explained, "Religion is very much woven into the fabric of most people's lives."³⁸ He continued, "I think people here respect the fact that you have a faith. It creates a common language of discourse even if the theological terms are not the same. Now that doesn't mean that from a fundamentalist perspective those who aren't saved aren't going to hell. It just means you can actually have a conversation."

Discrimination is not a large issue for the Jacksonville Jewish community; rather, Lubliner explained, it is "mostly issues of ignorance and insensitivity." There isn't significant interfaith dialogue between the dominant group of Southern Baptists and the Jewish community; "those who most want to talk to us are those who most want to convert us." Yet, Lubliner adds, if one sees an Israeli flag flying in Jacksonville, it is as likely to be at an evangelical Christian church as it is at a synagogue. "The evangelical community tends to be very, very pro-Israel."

When Lubliner heard of the controversy over Ahmed's nomination, whom he had met briefly at local leadership events, "My first reaction was that I needed to do some research." He felt it was important to have Muslim representation on the commission, given the size of the Muslim community and what Lubliner sees as "real discrimination where Muslim Americans are concerned." Yet his research left him feeling "ambivalent." Lubliner explained, "I know very little about him and have no reason to impugn him or doubt his integrity. But his affiliation with CAIR was something that was of concern to me." He was troubled by some of CAIR's web links and speakers – even at the Florida branch level. Some made "wholesale condemnations and delegitimizations" of Israel. Lubliner added, "I want to be clear that I'm not always in agreement with Israeli policies or politics. I think it is a very different thing...to say that Israel doesn't have the right to exist."

Lubliner explained, "What was most unfortunate was that the City Council, rather than investigate – it became an issue of him being a Muslim. Not him playing a leadership role at CAIR, and what was it about CAIR that was problematic, and what was his role..." He would've liked to have the questions about CAIR addressed directly and, "I would've liked to hear more about his decision to leave CAIR." But, he observed, most questions didn't deal with matters of substance or fact, "they were more demonstrations of their own ignorance and their own prejudice."

He agreed with the ADL's position, but noted that he wasn't "fully comfortable with some of the material

they quoted to demonstrate Dr. Ahmed's unsuitability for the Human Rights Commission.” Lubliner continued, “For me, the problematic aspect of Dr. Ahmed's candidacy wasn't his remarks ... but rather, his association with CAIR and the fact that the organization has had a track record of supporting noxious organizations and engaging bigoted speakers.” Lubliner emphasized that the ADL has spoken out against Islamophobia: in recent years, the Florida chapter publicly condemned a visit by a noted anti-Muslim speaker at a synagogue. Lubliner respected ADL but was concerned about ACT's involvement: “they don't represent my value system at all.” Many observers were aghast that the ADL could be on the same side as ACT: “Unfortunately, when you walk into the fish shop, you may leave smelling like fish. For some people that was all they could see.”

On April 23, just before Ahmed's nomination came before the City Council, Lubliner offered a sermon to his congregation. He opened with talk of a recent holiday and a local football hero before getting to the heart of the matter: the nomination. He sought, from the start, to clarify his position:

I do not support Dr. Ahmed's nomination to the Human Rights Commission: not because he is a Muslim, God forbid; and not because I believe he condones terrorism or sympathizes with those who resort to violence. Yet that some folks oppose him on these grounds, sadly, has made it impossible for an objective examination of his Ahmed's candidacy. Instead, we have settled on a bogus debate: Those who favor him will tell you that if you oppose his nomination, you must be a bigot; on the other hand, those who oppose his candidacy will tell you that his supporters are, at best, naive; at worst, ready to empower terrorist sympathizers for the sake of political correctness.³⁹

He continued with a review of the facts, including that Ahmed was active with CAIR for years, an organization with “laudable goals.” But he explained that “... CAIR's leadership has maintained links throughout the years with groups that deny Israel's right to exist, including so-called ‘charities’ such as the Holy Land Foundation, whose founders were recently convicted of illegally funneling money to Hamas, a terrorist organization seeking Israel's destruction.” He detailed how some CAIR branches, including the one based in Florida, have invited anti-Semitic speakers and provided links to anti-Semitic websites. Lubliner continued:

I, for one am ready to accept at face value his assertion that he rejects violence, and that his leadership role at CAIR should not imply a personal endorsement of bigotry of any kind. Let him be appointed to the Parks Department, and we could all applaud. Still, would I ever support the candidacy to the Human Rights Commission of a person who belonged to a country club with racist admission policies? Absolutely not! And if I knew that person had played a leadership role in the country club... even if he himself weren't bigot, it would all the more call into question the suitability his candidacy.

Yet he clarified that Muslims face “extensive prejudice in our society”: “I am ashamed of the rhetoric expressed by some residents and political leaders who are willing to completely tar-and-feather a man's reputation because of guilt-by-association, or even worse, when such folks embrace the path of bigotry themselves.” Lubliner continued by quoting from the week's Torah portion, *Parshat Kedoshim*:

You shall not falsify measures of length, weight or capacity in your transactions; you shall have honest balance and honest weights . . . I the Lord am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:32). The rabbis suggest that beyond its context in the world of economics, the connection between this precept and its remembrance of slavery in Egypt is intended to serve as a warning, lest we forget that once upon a time others took unfair advantage of us. To have an honest

balance and honest weight requires that we not engage in the same transgressions as those who sinned against us; it requires that we not demonize others because they are of different faith, race, color, or opinion.

Ahmed's "Saga" Nears its End

April had been a long month for Parvez Ahmed. "I was in 'go-mode' from first thing in the morning to the end of the day." With the ongoing controversy over his nomination, he faced numerous daily inquiries from the media and questions from City Council members. Many nights, Ahmed was up until one or two in the morning. He explained:

I didn't have time to pause and reflect. ... I believe these attacks are misguided, orchestrated, and the actions of some City Council members were inappropriate. Their characterizations [are] misguided. And my response was, it is my obligation to make sure that I do my utmost to answer the questions.

In addition, he continued to update his blog, provide links to news stories, and try to keep things "at a factual level." He posted letters of support from the University of North Florida, the Community Foundation, OneJax, and the NAACP, as well as from citizens, a Baptist minister, and a current JHRC member. Yet when Ahmed learned about the letter from the ADL, he thought, "How do I even respond to this?" Ahmed admired the ADL's trailblazing work against racism and religious bigotry, and felt their position was "contradictory to their mission." He was disturbed by the "selective quoting" from his academic article, which he shared widely. "The main thesis of the paper was that there is no religious justification for terrorism." As he sat down to write a point-by-point response to each claim, he reflected:

How can you judge me based on things that happened before I joined CAIR or after I left CAIR? You can only judge me during my tenure, and also within the context of what I said or what I did, or what the organization said or did during my tenure... You can't say, 'Well, some employee somewhere said something.'

He continued:

For example, the biggest issue that detractors bring up is CAIR and its connection to Holy Land Foundation, a Muslim charity that was convicted on terrorism related charges. The CAIR-HLF connection took place long before HLF was charged with any crime and long before I joined CAIR. Moreover, ADL should be the one to distinguish between individual viewpoints and organizational viewpoints. They are the ones who have pioneered this view... You cannot hold the whole group responsible for the viewpoint of an individual. People who are part of a group do not always agree with the viewpoints of a group. This type of guilt by association is un-American and must be rejected.

Ahmed considered whether he should send an email to City Council or write an editorial but recognized his rising frustration. He was weary of the "back and forth, back and forth." Ahmed saved a draft of the email, but never sent it. On April 23, Rabbi Jack Romberg of Temple Israel in Tallahassee wrote a letter to the City Council, refuting the ADL's position and citing his own interfaith work with Ahmed. Romberg's letter was, for Ahmed, "a moment of hope." Once again, he felt grateful that others were speaking up. "It was not just me trying to refute this."

While opinion on Ahmed's suitability for the Human Rights Commission remained divided, there was a growing sense that he would be confirmed. On April 25, the Times Union featured a full-page editorial supporting his confirmation; on April 26, Mayor John Peyton publicly reiterated his support. In the days before the final vote, however, Council Member Ray Holt announced that he had changed his position after reading Ahmed's academic article cited by the ADL. The commentary on news articles, and emails to City Council, indicated that many still strongly opposed the nomination. Gainesville Pastor Terry Jones, who later became infamous for his plan to burn the Qur'an, was among the many who wrote the council in the final days. Some Jacksonville citizens continued to register their opposition, including one letter to the mayor on April 25, which stated, in part:

Some say there are two types of Muslims: the radical fundamentalist and the peaceful ones. But the "peaceful["] ones are either not living by the teachings of their religion, or they are acting peaceful until they get where they want to go to advance their agenda. I don't trust them at all. ... On the other hand, we are called to pray for them and to witness to them, but that doesn't mean that we let them take over our government and rule us.⁴⁰

As Ahmed looked ahead to the April 27 meeting, he was eager to have some resolution to the "saga," yet he didn't know quite what to expect. Ahmed recalled: "Nerves were frayed, the tensions were high. The rhetoric was at a high pitch and during such periods of shrillness, it is difficult to predict how somebody would vote."

April 27, 2010 City Council Meeting

At 5:00 P.M. on April 27, 2010, the Jacksonville City Council chambers were full. The tension in the room was palpable; it had been building for weeks. Clark had arranged for additional police to be present and had closed public comment: he was prepared to run a "tight ship." Webb and Jones announced how they would vote before the meeting; yet some City Council members remained undecided.

The City Council meeting opened as it always did, with Redman offering the opening prayer. After a few presentations, and a brief performance by a local cheerleading squad, the question of Ahmed's nomination came before the council. Ahmed approached the podium to respond to questions; Redman spoke from a raised dais. He said, "Dr. Ahmed, thank you for being here. I would like to ask you to say a prayer to your God. Could you do that for us here?"⁴¹ The crowd stirred, and shouts rang out. Goyer began to leap out of his seat in anger; the steady hand of a parishioner kept him in his chair. One observer noted: "You could hear the collective gasp of the entire city."⁴² Ahmed stood silently at the podium.

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Parvez Ahmed, unless otherwise noted: Parvez Ahmed, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 13, 2010.

² Parvez Ahmed, "Homegrown Radicals: Complacency is not an Option," *The American Muslim*, February 1, 2010, http://www.theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/homegrown_radicals_complacency_is_not_an_option/, accessed December 2010.

³ Randy McDaniels, “INTELLIGENCE BRIEF PDF,” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 9, 2010, from Misty Skipper [Director of Communications and Press Secretary, City of Jacksonville, Office of Mayor John Peyton] June 14, 2010.

⁴ Randy McDaniels, “Correct Version PDF Intel Brief against Parvez Ahmed for Human Rights Council,” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 9, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

⁵ Anonymous, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.

⁶ “2010 Census Data for Duval County,” March 2011, The Ledger.com, <http://www.ledgerdata.com/census/florida/duval-county/031/>, accessed March 2011.

⁷ All quotes in the section “City Council Meeting, April 13, 2010,” Jacksonville City Council, 2010 Council Video Archive, video file, 4/13/2010, http://media.coj.net/City_Council/Council%204-13-10.wmv, accessed July 2010.

⁸ [Name removed], “RE: Prof. Ahmed appointment to HRC should be blocked,” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 15, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

⁹ [Name removed], ““PARVEZ AHMED ALREADY CRYING THE RACE CARD?????”,” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 15, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

¹⁰ [Name removed], “Jacksonville Human Rights Commission,” e-mail to John Peyton, April 18, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

¹¹ Frank J. Gaffney, Jr., letter to Jacksonville City Council, April 15, 2010, <http://cairunmasked.org/?p=3294> accessed July 2010

¹² Tom Trento, “PARVEZ AHMED – QUESTIONS HE MUST ANSWER,” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 13, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

¹³ Nonie Darwish, “Re: A Letter regarding the appointment of Parvez Ahmed to the Human [R]ights Commission of the City of Jacksonville,” forwarded e-mail from Nonie Darwish, referencing prior email of Ali Sina, to City Council, April 18, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

¹⁴ Parvez Ahmed, “Regarding My Nomination to the JH[RC],” e-mail to Jacksonville City Council, April 13, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

¹⁵ Parvez Ahmed, “My Ordeal with Jacksonville City Council,” April 16, 2010, post on blog “Parvez Ahmed: Advocating for the Common Good” <http://drparvezahmed.blogspot.com/2010/04/i-was-nominated-by-jacksonville-mayor.html>, accessed July 2010.

¹⁶ Clark, Jones, Webb, and Delaney were interviewed for this case study. Redman did not respond to a request for an interview; Yarborough declined. Peyton was not interviewed for this case.

- ¹⁷ All quotes from Richard Clark: Richard Clark, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.
- ¹⁸ City of Jacksonville, “About the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission,” City of Jacksonville official website, <http://www3.coj.net/Departments/Human-Rights-Commission/About-JHRC.aspx>, accessed August 2010.
- ¹⁹ Council on American-Islamic Relations, “Our Vision, Mission and Core Principles,” Council on American-Islamic Relations website, <http://www.cair.com/AboutUs/VisionMissionCorePrinciples.aspx> accessed August 2010.
- ²⁰ ACT! for America, “Frequently Asked Questions,” ACT! for America website, <http://www.actforamerica.org/index.php/learn/frequently-asked-questions> accessed August 2010.
- ²¹ All quotes from Warren Jones: Warren Jones, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.
- ²² All quotes from Jack Webb: Jack Webb, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.
- ²³ Mark Woods, “Jacksonville councilman takes turn at answering questions,” *The Florida Times-Union*, April 17, 2010 <http://jacksonville.com/opinion/blog/400564/mark-woods/2010-04-17/councilman-takes-turn-answering-questions>, accessed July 2010.
- ²⁴ Parvez Ahmed, “Terror in the Name of Islam—Unholy War, Not Jihad,” *Case Western Journal of International Law*, Vol. 39:759, 2007-2008.
- ²⁵ All quotes from John Delaney: John Delaney, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.
- ²⁶ John Delaney, “RE: CAIR – Mr. Parvez Ahmed – The unanswered questions about the Executive Director,” e-mail to [name removed] April 27, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.
- ²⁷ “City Council Meeting, April 19, 2010,” Jacksonville City Council, 2010 Council Video Archive, video file, 4/19/2010- Council Committee as a Whole, http://media.coj.net/City_Council/Council%20Committee%20as%20a%20Whole%204-19-10.wmv, accessed July 2010.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Parvez Ahmed, “A Word of Appreciation,” e-mail to John Peyton, April 19, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.
- ³⁰ Interviews were not conducted with leaders from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Anti-Defamation League, nor ACT! for America for this case study; instead, quotes from public statements and correspondence have been included.
- ³¹ All quotes from Celeste Krueger: Celeste Krueger, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.
- ³² OneJax, “About: History,” OneJax website, <http://www.onejax.org/about/history.asp>, accessed July 2010.

³³ All quotes from Rev. Steve Goyer: Rev. Steve Goyer, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, October 25, 2010.

³⁴ All quotes from Rabbi Joshua Lief: Rabbi Joshua Lief, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.

³⁵ Andrew L. Rosenkranz, "Parvez Ahmed: ADL Challenges Appointment," *The Florida Times-Union*, Opinion, April 23, 2010, <http://jacksonville.com/opinion/letters-readers/2010-04-23/story/parvez-ahmed-adl-challenges-appointment>, accessed November 2010.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ All quotes from Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner: Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.

³⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, "Separating Ahmed from Islam; The Difference Between Principled Rejection and Bigotry," sermon sent via e-mail to author, June 14, 2010.

⁴⁰ [Name removed] "A Muslim for Office" e-mail to John Peyton, April 25, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

⁴¹ "City Council Meeting, April 27, 2010," Jacksonville City Council, 2010 Council Video Archive, video file, 4/27/2010, http://media.coj.net/City_Council/Council%204-27-10.wmv, accessed July 2010.

⁴² Anonymous, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 13, 2010.