

Submitted by Dimitri Lascaris

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## AFFIDAVIT OF SIRAJ SABOWALA

(For the Use and Information of the Executive Committee of Toronto City Council)

(sworn March 20, 2019)

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I, SIRAJ SABOWALA , of the City of Toronto, in the Province of Ontario, SWEAR THAT:

### Introduction

1. I am a resident of Toronto, Ontario. I have resided in Toronto since 1999.
2. I have a degree in electronic engineering and am the owner / managing partner of an IT solutions firm based in North York, Ontario.
3. I am a practicing Muslim.
4. Since 2000, I have been one of the organizers of the annual Al Quds Day rallies held in Toronto, Ontario. As such, I have knowledge of the matters to which I hereinafter depose. Where that knowledge is based on information and belief, I verily believe it to be true.

### Al Quds Day

5. In Arabic, "Al Quds" refers simply to the city of Jerusalem. Al Quds Day is an annual event held on the last Friday of Muslim religious holiday of Ramadan to express support for

Palestinians' right to self-determination and to protest Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and its decades-long occupation of Palestinian territory.

6. East Jerusalem encompasses the third-holiest site in Islam, the Al-Aqsa mosque.
7. It is my understanding that, under the United Nations plan to partition Palestine, which led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Jerusalem was to be placed under an international regime, conferring on it a special status due to its shared religious importance, but that Israel began to occupy West Jerusalem promptly after the creation of the State of Israel. Israel then began to occupy East Jerusalem at the end of the 1967 War, over 50 years ago.
8. Subsequent to the 1967 War, Israel purported to annex East Jerusalem. It now claims sovereignty over the entire city. Israel has been building Jewish-only settlements in East Jerusalem for decades.
9. On its Global Affairs website, the Government of Canada states:

Canada does not recognize permanent Israeli control over territories occupied in 1967 (the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip). The Fourth Geneva Convention applies in the occupied territories and establishes Israel's obligations as an occupying power, in particular with respect to the humane treatment of the inhabitants of the occupied territories. As referred to in UN Security Council Resolutions 446 and 465, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The settlements also constitute a serious obstacle to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace.
10. Attached hereto as **Exhibit "A"** is a copy of a web-page from the Global Affairs Canada website which explains Canadian policy on key issues in the Israeli / Palestinian conflict.

### The Al Quds Rallies in Toronto

11. Al Quds Day rallies have been held in Toronto, other Canadian cities and in cities around the world for many years.
12. Over the years, the size of the Toronto Al Quds Day rally has varied from hundreds of participants to tens of thousands of participants. Typically, a large proportion of the participants are Muslims, but every year, brothers and sisters from the Jewish, Christian and other faiths participate in the Toronto Al Quds Day rally.
13. I became a member of the organizing committee of Toronto's Al Quds Day rally (the "Committee") in 2004. Over time, the size of the Committee has varied from approximately 5-10 members.
14. I have conferred with the other members of the Committee for the rallies held in Toronto in 2017 and 2018 and I have confirmed that their understanding of the facts stated herein is the same as my own understanding of those facts.
15. To our knowledge, no participant in an Al Quds Day rally in Toronto has ever been convicted of or charged by law enforcement authorities with having committed a hate crime. To our knowledge, no participant in an Al Quds Day rally has ever engaged in violence at an Al Quds Day rally. No member of the Committee has ever been informed by a law enforcement official that the Committee or any participant in an Al Quds Day rally is or has been under investigation for the commission of a possible hate crime.
16. In advance of every Al Quds Day rally in which we have been involved, members of the Committee have met with Toronto police to inform the police of our plans for the rally and to help the police to ensure the safety of all those involved in the rally. We have always

found our interactions with Toronto police to be cordial, respectful and productive.

### **Meir Weinstein and The Jewish Defence League**

17. On November 28, 2017, the Executive Committee of the City of Toronto held a meeting at which it considered, among other things, the possibility of restricting in some manner the ability of Al Quds Day supporters to hold rallies on city property. Various people addressed the Executive Committee on that day. One such person was Meir Weinstein, the director of the Jewish Defence League Canada (“JDL Canada”). In his speech to the Executive Committee, Mr. Weinstein began by stating that “I consider myself an expert in Al Quds Day...”. He then proceeded to make various false and inflammatory allegations against participants in the Al Quds Day rallies, such as the false claim that, at Al Quds Day rallies, “crowds are incited to hate Jews...” The video of the Executive Committee’s meeting on that date is available on YouTube and can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SkfsAzdKec>. Mr. Weinstein’s presentation to the Executive Committee begins at around 7:51:05 of that video.

18. In his presentation to the Executive Committee, Mr. Weinstein not only made false and inflammatory allegations against the Al Quds Day rallies, but he also omitted to mention various important facts about his own organization, JDL Canada.

19. First, in 2014, one or more persons who apparently were supporters of JDL Canada assaulted a Palestinian activist at the Toronto Al Quds Day rally.

20. Second, JDL Canada typically conducts a counter-protest at the Toronto Al Quds Day rally. It is common for JDL Canada supporters who participate in these protests to hurl Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian insults at the Al Quds Day supporters.

21. Third, I have learned of a video posted on YouTube featuring Meir Weinstein. As of this date, the video can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F6cW3YhTDA&feature=youtu.be>. That video appears to have been posted on YouTube on June 28, 2017 by No Filter Productions. That video appears to show Mr. Weinstein speaking to JDL Canada supporters just before the commencement of their counter-protest at the Al Quds Day rally held in Toronto in June 2017. At 0:37 of the video, Mr. Weinstein said to the JDL Canada supporters “these people want us dead.” One of the JDL supporters then responded “and we want them dead too.” Rather than object to the statement that “we want them dead too”, Mr. Weinstein then stated “and we want to live.”

22. In the video, Mr. Weinstein then proceeded to make false and inflammatory claims about Islam. For example, he falsely implied that Islam calls for gay persons to be hung. He falsely implied that Islam deprives women of freedom. He falsely claimed that Islam calls for the execution of persons who wish to leave the Muslim faith. In every religion, there are extremists who espouse a twisted version of that religion. Islam is no exception, but mainstream Muslims empathically reject any suggestion that women should be deprived of their freedom, that gay persons should be hung or that the death penalty should be imposed on persons wishing to leave the Muslim faith.

23. In addition, in the video of Mr. Weinstein's speech, a person in the crowd who is listening to Mr. Weinstein can be seen carrying a PEGIDA sign. Wikipedia describes PEGIDA as a "German nationalist, anti-Islam, far-right political movement." According to Wikipedia, in 2015, the founder of PEGIDA resigned after being reported as having posed as Adolf Hitler and having made racist statements on Facebook, but he was later reinstated.
24. Fourth, attached hereto and marked as **Exhibit "B"** is a copy of a January 8, 2018 article published by *Now Toronto* and entitled "Toronto's reputation as a breeding ground for anti-Muslim hate just got worse." According to that article, Yosef Steynowitz of Thornhill, Ontario was charged with a hate crime by police in Washington, D.C. in connection with the savage beating of a Palestinian man in Washington, D.C. in 2017. That article also states that, at that time, Mr. Steynowitz was a member of JDL Canada and that, at the time of the beating, Mr. Weinstein publicly defended the assault.
25. The *Now Toronto* article attached as **Exhibit "B"** also reports that:

Meanwhile, at a City Hall rally in May to protest the federal government's anti-Islamophobia Motion M-103, members of the **JDL physically attacked journalist and activist Kevin Metcalf**, as Metcalf filmed the protest. In the video, JDL members can be heard telling Metcalf, "We're not [REDACTED] around here. You're going to get killed." JDL member Max Bocknek has been charged with assault by Toronto police.

**Certain Allegations Made by Mr. Weinstein and/or Others Against the Al Quds Day Rallies Held in Toronto**

26. Following the Al Quds Day rally held in Toronto in 2017, a U.S.-based organization known as the "American Center for Democracy" ("ACD") published a video which purported to show Arabic-language music emanating from a speaker system at the Al Quds Day rally in Toronto

in June 2017. The Arabic-language music which was purportedly played on that speaker called for violent attacks on Israelis.

27. In advance of the June 2017 rally in Toronto, I and the other organizers requested that a volunteer rent speakers from Long & McQuade in Toronto. We have retained copies of the receipts from Long & McQuade for those speakers. Copies of those receipts are attached hereto as **Exhibit "C"**.
28. After viewing the ACD video, the organizers of the rally consulted with Mr. Saul Bottcher, a resident of Brampton who has substantial expertise in audio equipment. Mr. Bottcher is not affiliated in any way with the organizers of the Al Quds Day rally and advises that he has never participated in an Al Quds Day rally. Mr. Bottcher examined the ACD video and numerous other publicly available videos that were taken at the 2017 rally and which show the speaker in question. Based on his investigation, he concluded with a high degree of confidence that the speaker in question is a WASP 1050UIBT (10" Portable PA System with Wireless Microphone), made by Technical Pro.
29. As can be seen from the receipts from Long & McQuade, which include the model numbers of the rented equipment, the WASP 1050UIBT speaker appearing in the ACD video was not one of the speakers we rented on that day.
30. We do not know who owns, rented or controlled the speaker featured in the ACD video.
31. Finally, if anyone had sought our permission to play that music at the rally, we would have refused, without hesitation, to authorize the playing of that music.
32. The organizers have no recollection of having heard at the June 2017 Al Quds Day rally the Arabic-language music that can be heard in the ACD video. Moreover, none of us authorized

that music to be played at the 2017 Al Quds Day rally in Toronto and none of us had any knowledge of anyone having an intention to play that music at the rally.

33. At the time at which ACD published the video of the 2017 Al Quds Day rally in Toronto, it refused to disclose the source of the video. In the course of his investigation, Mr. Bottcher discovered that the video published by the ACD was hosted on a Google Drive owned by Jonathan Halevi. On October 22, 2017, several days before the ACD published the video, Mr. Halevi was featured in a *Toronto Star* exposé entitled “A Toronto imam was accused of hate-preaching against Jews. But that wasn’t the whole story.” In that article, a copy of which is attached hereto as **Exhibit “D”**, Mr. Halevi was described as a retired lieutenant-colonel and intelligence officer with the Israel Defense Forces.
34. According to the *Star* exposé, Mr. Halevi appears to have mistranslated an Arabic-language video that had been used to condemn an Imam in Toronto. The *Star* also revealed in that exposé that that video appeared to have been doctored.
35. Another criticism that has been directed at the 2017 Al Quds Day rally in Toronto is that the keynote speaker at that rally was Kevin Barrett. B’nai Brith Canada and other pro-Israel groups and individuals have accused Mr. Barrett of being a Holocaust denier. Shortly before the 2017 rally occurred, B’nai Brith launched a petition calling on the Canadian government to bar Mr. Barrett’s entry into Canada. Despite B’nai Brith’s efforts and accusations of Holocaust denial, Mr. Barrett was allowed to enter Canada. Moreover, Mr. Barrett has rejected the accusation that he is a Holocaust denier. A copy of the statement he made in which he categorically rejected this accusation is attached hereto as **Exhibit “E”**.



36. We are not aware of any statement that Mr. Barrett has ever made that could plausibly be claimed to constitute Holocaust denial. Had we ever become aware of evidence that Mr. Barrett had denied the Holocaust, we would have rejected him as a speaker at the Al Quds Day rally.
37. At the Al Quds Day rally in Toronto in 2017, Mr. Barrett gave a speech that lasted approximately 15 minutes. A video of his complete speech was posted on YouTube on June 30, 2017 and remains available for viewing on YouTube. As anyone can see by watching that video, Mr. Barrett said nothing in his speech that could plausibly be characterized as Holocaust denial. In fact, in his speech, Mr. Barrett acknowledged Nazi crimes against the Jewish people and suggested that Germany, due to its crimes against the Jewish people, could have surrendered part of its own territory to give the Jewish people a homeland.
38. Moreover, that video shows that, throughout his speech, members of the Jewish community stood with Mr. Barrett holding a banner that called for justice for Palestinians. The YouTube video of Mr. Barrett's speech can be seen here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo-avbY2Hc>.
39. Another allegation made against the Al Quds Day rallies in Toronto is that some of its participants have worn or displayed the flags of Hezbollah. As anyone who has participated in an Al Quds Day rally can attest, only a handful of persons have been seen wearing or displaying Hezbollah flags at those rallies. This is not a common behaviour at the rallies and the display of Hezbollah flags is neither encouraged nor sanctioned by the organizers. Moreover, we do not know who the persons are who have displayed Hezbollah flags at the

rallies. We, the organizers, have never encouraged or sanctioned the display of Hezbollah flags at the Al Quds Day rallies.

40. Finally, it is extremely difficult if not impossible for our Committee and those persons who volunteer to assist with our rallies to monitor and supervise the conduct of everyone who participates in the rallies.

41. The generalization that participants in our rallies are Hezbollah supporters is false and wholly unsubstantiated.

#### **Statement of Principles Adopted for the 2018 Al Quds Rally**

42. Shortly prior to the Al Quds Day rally held in Toronto on June 2018, the organizers formally adopted a Statement of Principles for the rally and directed that that Statement of Principles be read to the rally's participants just before the speeches began. The principles articulated in that Statement were not new to us as organizers. Those principles have always guided our work as organizers of the Al Quds Day rallies. In 2018, we decided to formalize and articulate the principles that had always guided our rallies.

43. Shortly after the 2018 Al Quds Day rally was held, a video of the reading of our Statement of Principles at the rally was posted on YouTube. That video can be seen here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSbR\\_lQNFss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSbR_lQNFss).

44. As appears in that video, our Statement of Principles includes the declarations that “we oppose all forms of bigotry and racism, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and anti-Palestinian hate speech”, “we oppose Zionism but not Judaism, we reject the claim that Zionism and Judaism are one and the same, we believe that the goals of Zionism are discriminatory and are profoundly inconsistent with the values of Judaism” and “we

condemn in particular all acts of violence against innocent civilians.” These principles are central to our Al Quds Day rallies. We will continue to promote and defend them peacefully.

### Conclusion

45. The Al Quds Day rallies, both in Toronto and elsewhere, are designed to achieve one overarching goal: respect for the human rights of Palestinians and for international law, which the Canadian Government itself acknowledges is being violated by Israel. We the organizers do not advocate for violence. We oppose hatred in all its forms. We believe that the tens of thousands of Canadians who have participated in Al Quds Day rallies seek nothing more than respect for human rights and international law and that they are being unfairly maligned.

46. Accordingly, we will take whatever lawful actions we deem necessary to protect our constitutional rights to free speech and free assembly.

SWORN OR AFFIRMED before  
me in Toronto, in the Province  
of Ontario, this 20<sup>th</sup> day  
of March, 2019.

A commissioner for taking  
affidavits

DIMITRI VASCARIS



Siraj Sabowala

**EXHIBIT "A" TO THE AFFIDAVIT OF  
SIRAJ SABOWALA SWORN MARCH 29 2019**



# Canadian policy on key issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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## Support for Israel and its Security

Canada supports Israel's right to live in peace with its neighbours within secure boundaries and recognizes Israel's right to assure its own security, as witnessed by our support during the 2006 conflict with Hezbollah and our ongoing support for Israel's fight against terror. Israel has a right under international law to take the necessary measures, in accordance with human rights and international humanitarian law, to protect the security of its citizens from attacks by terrorist groups. Canada and Israel enjoy a steadfast friendship and strong, growing bilateral relations in many areas based on shared values, including democracy.

## Support for the Palestinians

Canada recognizes the Palestinian right to self-determination and supports the creation of a sovereign, independent, viable, democratic and territorially contiguous Palestinian state, as part of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace settlement.

Canada recognizes the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the governmental entity in the West Bank and Gaza. Canada also recognizes the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the principal representative of the Palestinian people. Canada continues to support Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and is working with the government led by the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority in terms of much needed reform.

Working with its partners and through the United Nations, its agencies and other organizations, Canada continues to support and respond to the humanitarian and development needs of the Palestinian people. At the Paris Donors Conference in December 2007, Canada announced a commitment of \$300 million over 5 years towards improving Palestinian security, governance and prosperity.

## Support for a Comprehensive Peace Settlement

Canada is committed to the goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, including the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

The 1993 Israel-Palestine Liberation Organization Declaration of Principles continues to provide the basis for a comprehensive agreement based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Canada welcomed the decision of the Palestine National Council to accept UN Security Council Resolution 242 as a basis for peace negotiations as well as mutual recognition by Israel and the PLO in 1993. Canada also strongly supports the Quartet's Road Map, which sets out the obligations of both parties and steps for establishment of a Palestinian state, and the process launched by the Annapolis Conference. Canada also supports the Arab Peace Initiative as a potential basis for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement.

## Status of Jerusalem

Canada considers the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only as part of a general settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute. Canada does not recognize Israel's unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem.

## Palestinian Refugees

Canada believes that a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue is central to a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as called for in United Nations General Assembly resolution 194 (1948) and United Nations Security Council resolution 242. A solution to the Palestinian refugee issue must be negotiated among the parties concerned in the context of a final status peace agreement. This solution should respect the rights of the refugees, in accordance with international law.

Canada has played a prominent role in the search for a viable and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, including through continuing to focus international attention on improving the situation of the more than four million Palestinian refugees.

## Occupied Territories and Settlements

Canada does not recognize permanent Israeli control over territories occupied in 1967 (the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip). The Fourth Geneva Convention applies in the occupied territories and establishes Israel's obligations as an occupying power, in particular with respect to the humane treatment of the inhabitants of the occupied territories. As referred to in UN Security Council Resolutions 446 and 465, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The settlements also constitute a serious obstacle to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace.

Canada believes that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority must fully respect international human rights and humanitarian law which is key to ensuring the protection of civilians, and can contribute to the creation of a climate conducive to achieving a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement.

## The Barrier

Canada recognizes Israel's right to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, including through the restriction of access to its territory, and by building a barrier on its own territory for security purposes. However, Canada opposes Israel's construction of the barrier inside the West Bank and East Jerusalem which are occupied territories. This construction is contrary to international law under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Canada not only opposes Israel's construction of a barrier extending into the occupied territories, but also expropriations and the demolition of houses and economic infrastructure carried out for this purpose.

## Terrorism

Canada condemns all acts of terrorism and terrorists should be brought to justice and prosecuted in accordance with international law. Terrorism must be rejected as a means for achieving political ends. It is counter-productive to reaching a comprehensive, just and lasting peace settlement. Canada equally condemns all forms of incitement.

Canada has listed Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, and other groups as terrorist organizations in accordance with UN Resolution 1373 (2001) and Canadian legislation. The Government of Canada has no contact with these groups.

## United Nations Resolutions on the Middle East

Every year, resolutions addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict are tabled in the United Nations, such as at the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. Canada assesses each resolution on its merits and consistency with our principles. We support resolutions that are consistent with Canadian policy on the Middle East, are rooted in international law, reflect current dynamics, contribute to the goal of a negotiated two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and address fairly and constructively the obligations and responsibilities of all parties to the conflict. Canada advocates a fair-minded approach and rejects one-sided resolutions and any politicization of the issues. Successive Canadian governments have been concerned about the polemical and repetitive nature of many of the numerous resolutions. Canada believes that the United Nations and its member states have a responsibility to contribute constructively to efforts to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict. Canada will continue to examine carefully each of these resolutions as they come forward.

## Jewish Refugees

In March 2014, the Government of Canada officially recognized the experience of Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, who were displaced after 1948. This recognition does not diminish or compete with the situation of Palestinian refugees.

### Date Modified:

2019-03-19

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# Toronto's reputation as a breeding ground for anti-Muslim hate just got worse

And it's the far-right Jewish Defence League leading the descent into paranoia as more hate crimes charges are laid against the Toronto group's members

BY RICHARD SILVERSTEIN , JANUARY 8, 2018 7:58 AM





*Screen shot from video showing JDL Canada members involved in beating of a protestor at AIPIC conference in Washington, DC on March 26, 2017.*

Toronto's reputation as a hotbed of anti-Muslim incitement continues to grow after a U.S. federal district court in Washington, DC formally handed down hate crimes charges against a member of the Toronto-based Jewish Defence League (JDL) last month.

Yosef Steynowitz of Thornhill, was charged with assaulting Kamal Nayfeh, a technical instructor at a North Carolina college, and graduate student Ben Doernberg with wooden poles and repeated kicks during pro-Palestinian protests at last year's AIPAC conference in DC. Nayfeh's bloodied face required nine stitches. The assault against Doernberg caused a concussion. Rami Lubranicki, an American member of JDL, was also charged along with Steynowitz.

The indictment, reads in part, that Steynovitz, "having readily available dangerous and deadly weapons... unlawfully assaulted and threatened Kamal Nayfeh in a menacing manner and intentionally, knowingly, and recklessly caused significant bodily injury."

The document goes on to state that "such criminal act demonstrated the prejudice of Yosef Steynovitz based on the actual or perceived race, color, or national origin of Kamal Nayfeh."

At the time, JDL chief Meir Weinstein alleged that the victims had been the ones who insulted and assaulted JDL members, who had acted in self-defense.

"They found out," says Weinstein in a video posted online shortly after the incident, "that it's not wise to lay not even a finger on any of us. Anyone who's going to try and raise a fist to us, push us and assault us, we would be glad to enforce a citizen's arrest when there's some semblance of cooperation from the aggressor. Unfortunately, we had to resort to a certain level of force, and we made it very clear the days of Jews being attacked and being docile are long over."

There is no evidence, however, that Nayfeh or Doernberg engaged in any acts of violence. The charges against Steynovitz are the latest in a string of incidents involving the Toronto-based group, which has been at the forefront of anti-Muslim protests in the GTA.

Last month, JDL hosted a speech by notorious U.S. blogger and Islamophobe, Pamela Geller.

Local activists had asked the Canadian government to bar Geller from entering the country citing her incendiary musings on Islam and the fact Britain had prohibited a planned visit in 2013 based on her anti-Muslim pronouncements. But her speech at Canada Christian College, a fundraising event for JDL, went ahead amid protests outside. According to the Quebec-based antifa Groupe de recherche sur l'extrême droite et ses allié-e-s, security at the event was provided by members of a number of far-right groups.

Rebel Media "Commander" Ezra Levant, joined Geller on stage after her address for a question and answer period. Video of their exchange is featured on the website of Kevin Johnston, another among the cadre of local Islamophobes in JDL's militant orbit. Johnston, who has been a fixture at anti-Muslim protests in the GTA, was charged with wilful promotion of hate in July "over information published on various social media sites," according to police.

Yet, JDL continues to be given a platform in conservative circles. Weinstein, for example, took part in Toronto Councillor James Pasternak's "administrative inquiry" at City Hall into "a growing trend of hate-infested rallies being held in public spaces" – namely, the annual Al Quds Day rally sponsored by Queers Against Israeli Apartheid at Queen's Park, which had allegedly included chants that were "anti-Semitic and anti-Christian" in the past.

Meanwhile, at a City Hall rally in May to protest the federal government's anti-Islamophobia Motion M-103, members of the JDL physically attacked journalist and activist Kevin Metcalf, as

Metcalf filmed the protest. In the video, JDL members can be heard telling Metcalf, "We're not fucking around here. You're going to get killed." JDL member Max Bocknek has been charged with assault by Toronto police.

In other developments, Twitter has suspended the JDL's account and Facebook suspended the group's profile page for the second time in less than a year in November. Facebook cited its community standards provisions prohibiting "dangerous organizations" engaged in "terrorist activity, organized violence or criminal activity, mass or serial murders or organized hate groups" for its decision.

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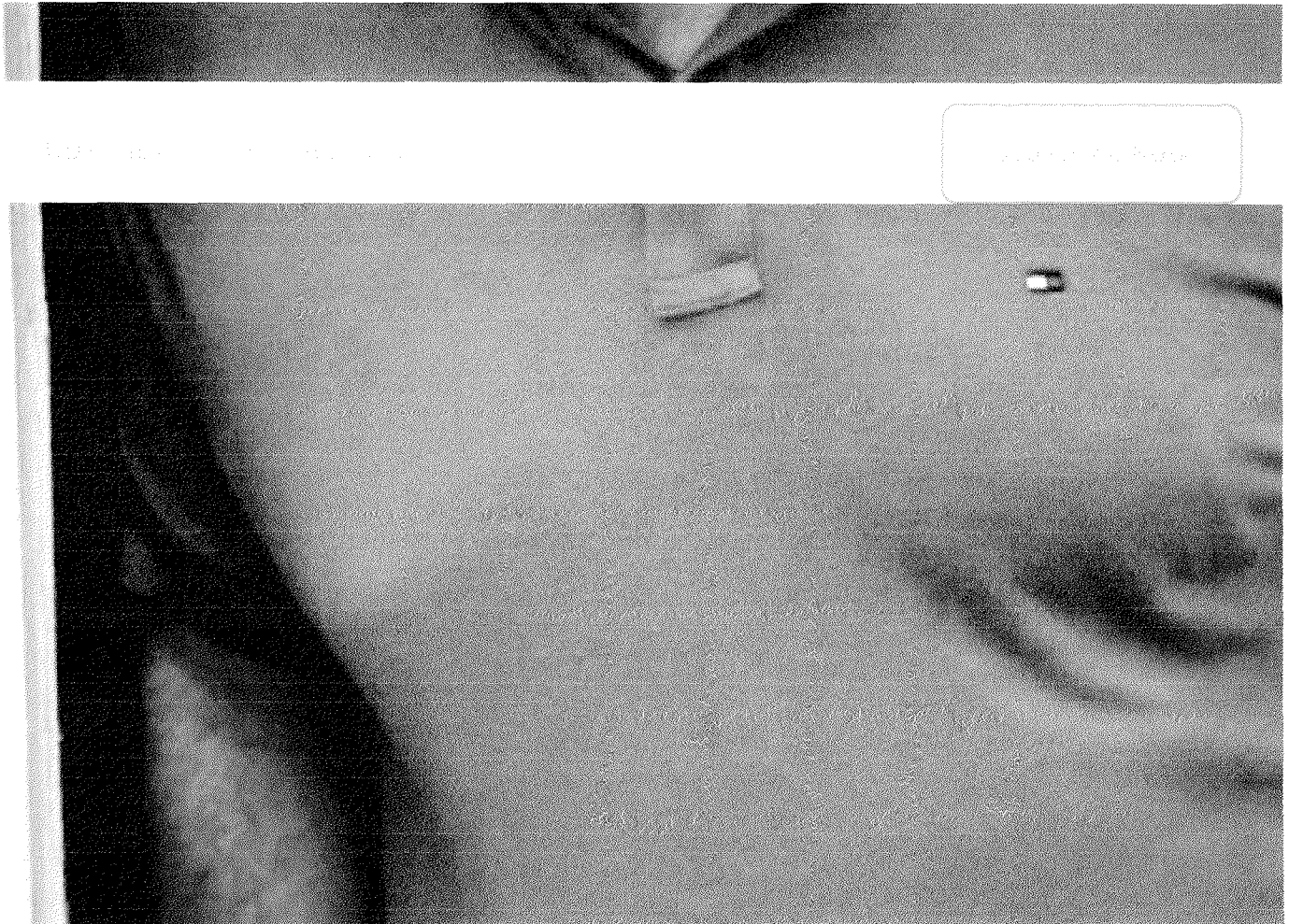
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# A Toronto imam was accused of hate-preaching against Jews. But that wasn't the whole story

Ayman Elkasrawy's controversial prayers sparked outrage and condemnation from many, including members of his own faith. In the aftermath, he reached out to the Jewish community to educate himself and learn from his mistakes. Still, a key question remained unanswered: did he really say what he was accused of saying?

Jennifer Yang Identity and Inequality Reporter  
*Sun., Oct. 22, 2017*

Ayman Elkasrawy got the phone call late on a Sunday night in February. An incredulous friend was on the line, with a strange and troubling question.

“Did you pray for the killing of the Jews?”

The friend sent him an online article about Masjid Toronto, the downtown mosque where Elkasrawy worked as an assistant imam. It included a video: rows of Muslim worshippers standing under fluorescent lights, their eyes closed and hands cupped. At the front of the crowded room was Elkasrawy, dressed in white and praying to God in Arabic.

“O Allah! Count their number; slay them one by one and spare not one of them,” read the article’s translation of his prayers. “O Allah! Purify Al-Aqsa mosque from the filth of the Jews!”

Elkasrawy remembered the scene, filmed during Ramadan eight months earlier. He also remembered praying for Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa mosque, a bitterly contested holy site.

But he was shaken by the English translation. “I was surprised,” he says. “When I (saw) that, I even doubted myself. Did I say that?”

Elkasrawy woke up the next morning feeling calamitously misunderstood. He was bursting with things he wanted to explain, but he also realized he had made serious mistakes, for which he needed to apologize.

“Neither I, Masjid Toronto or the congregation harbour any form of hate towards Jews,” he wrote on Twitter later that day. “And so I wish to apologize unreservedly for misspeaking during prayers last Ramadan ... I sincerely regret the offence that my words must have caused.”

His apology only fanned the flames. Elkasrawy was suspended from his mosque and fired from Ryerson University, where he worked as a teaching assistant. Toronto police opened a hate crime investigation and condemnations rained down, from Parliament Hill to the National Council of Canadian Muslims. Elkasrawy also became a bogeyman in the federal Conservative party leadership race, cited in campaign literature as an example of Muslim extremism.

“We need to clarify what is going on at this mosque,” Meir Weinstein, head of the far-right Jewish Defense League of Canada, told the Toronto Sun. “Is this a den of worship or a den of hate?”

Eight months later, the story is crystallized online as a putative reminder of the hatred that can fester within Canadian society. A Google search for “Ayman Elkasrawy” — once yielding just a smattering of academic papers and social media profiles — now turns up pages of hits that brand him a genocidal anti-Semite.

Offline, however, new layers of the story began to reveal themselves.

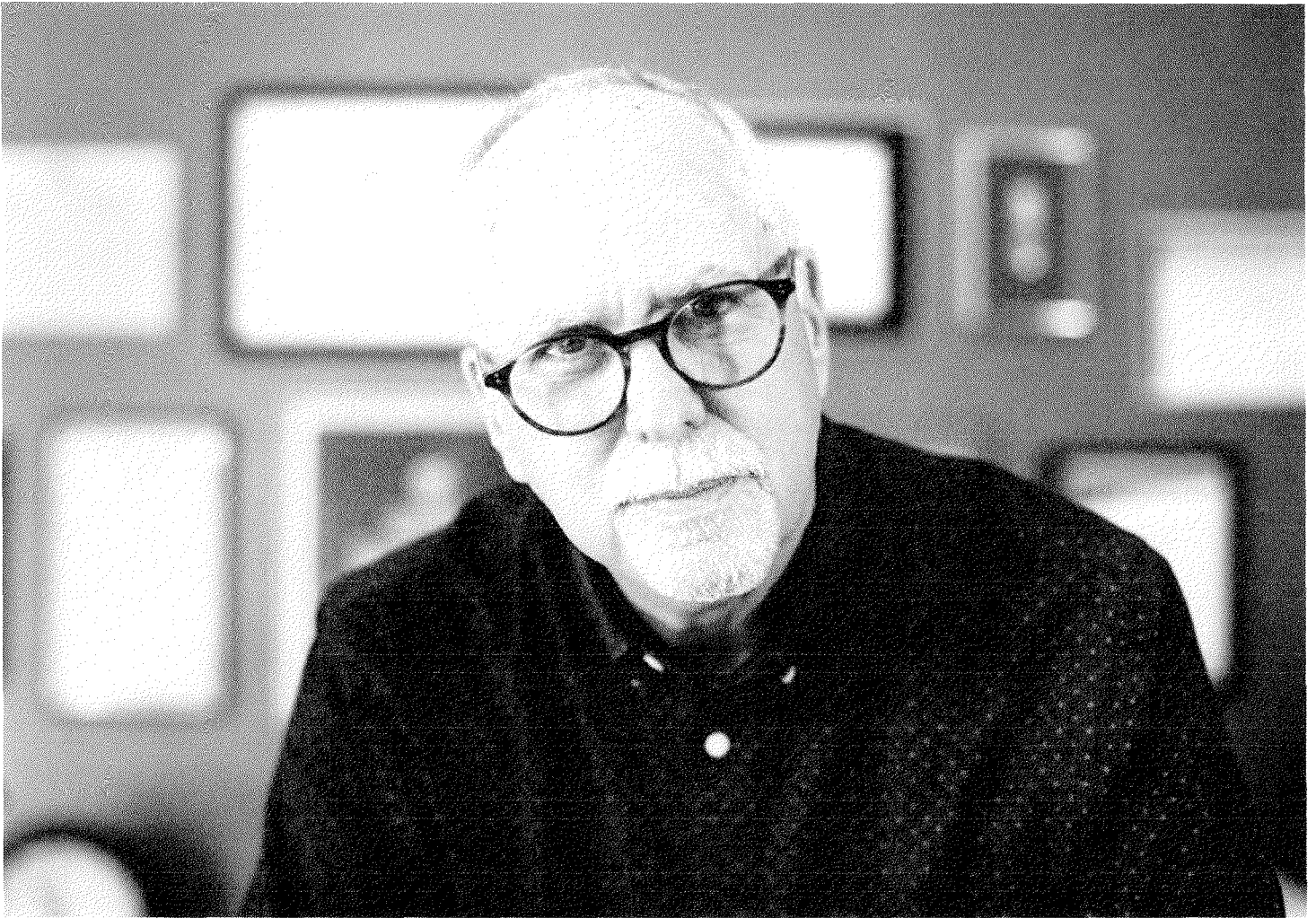
Elkasrawy went quiet soon after his Twitter apology, advised by everyone in his life to stop talking. But a month after the scandal broke, he reached out to a stranger for help.

Bernie Farber is a household name in Toronto’s Jewish community, the former head of what was once Canada’s leading Jewish advocacy group. Both affable and combative, the white-goateed Farber has spent most of his career tackling anti-Semitism. For the past two years, until his retirement in early October, he also ran the Mosaic Institute, a non-profit that promotes diversity.

Farber opened his email one day to discover an unusual request: would the Mosaic Institute help Elkasrawy learn from his mistakes? Farber immediately said yes, assembling a team of experts and planning a cultural sensitivity curriculum.

But after meeting the young imam, Farber was puzzled by the facts of this case. Elkasrawy was always quick to admit he made a serious mistake — it was wrong to pray about “the Jews.” But he also insisted his words were twisted, an explanation he struggled to articulate.

Farber was bothered by the discrepancy between the “quiet, dignified” man he had come to know and someone who would pray for Jewish people to be slain. Over the years, he has developed “almost a sixth sense” for detecting anti-Semites. Elkasrawy did not fit the mould.



At a time when white supremacists are mobilizing across North America, the fight against anti-Semitism has taken on renewed urgency. But this is a story that is far more tangled than it first appeared.

It is about an imam who made hurtful mistakes that he could not adequately explain. But it is also about the slipperiness of language — especially in a climate of viral misinformation, polarized debate and geopolitical conflicts that have found fresh battlegrounds in Canada.

Elkasrawy's prayers were undeniably problematic, but they were also distorted to fit a certain narrative that gave his words added potency amid rising anti-Islamic sentiment.

In a controversy that hinges on his words, a central question was never fully investigated: Did Elkasrawy really say Jews were filth? Did he really call for them to be killed?

According to several Arabic experts contacted by the Star, the answer is no.

"I've learned a personal lesson throughout this entire process," Farber says. "Do not take anything for granted. Not even words."

Ayman Elkasrawy prefers not to speak at all, whenever he can help it.

At about six feet and 285 pounds, the bearded and bespectacled 32-year-old has an understated presence for someone who looms so large. He speaks softly and hesitantly; in the presence of strangers, he tends to fade into the background.

"I'm not so good at being social," he says. "The more you talk, the more you make mistakes."

Born and raised in a devout family in Egypt, Elkasrawy has dual Canadian citizenship through his father, an agronomist who immigrated here in 1976. He spent three summers with his dad in Toronto, "a different planet" in the eyes of a 13-year-old kid from Cairo.

After university, he moved to Canada to continue his education and is now at Ryerson pursuing a PhD in electrical engineering. While he sometimes wears traditional dress at the mosque, at Ryerson he blends easily with the campus crowd — just another grad student riding his Bike Share in jeans, sneakers and a backpack that looks slightly shrunken on his broad frame.

**I'm not so good at being social. The more you talk, the more you make mistakes**

Elkasrawy and his wife, Somaia Youssef, found a religious community in Masjid Toronto (“Toronto Mosque”) on Dundas St. W., located in an old bank building near the bus terminal. The mosque opened in 2002 but did not hire a resident imam until 2015, so it sometimes asked Elkasrawy — who had memorized the Qur’an — to lead prayers or Friday sermons.

He was timid at first, even avoiding eye contact with congregants, but received positive feedback and was officially hired as an assistant imam in 2015. Elkasrawy sees this work as a spiritual duty and found himself spending hours at the mosque nearly every day — not just leading prayers, but also teaching and planning events, such as networking socials for Muslim professionals. “I felt that’s like my second home,” he says.

Over the years, Canada has become home for Elkasrawy as well. But as with many immigrants, an invisible umbilical cord connects him to the part of the world where he was born. His Twitter feed is dominated by Egyptian and Middle Eastern politics. He mostly retweets accounts he follows, including one called “Friends of Al-Aqsa.”

The silver-domed Al-Aqsa mosque is located on an elevated limestone compound in East Jerusalem. The compound — known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif and to Jewish people as the Temple Mount — is Islam’s third holiest site (after Mecca and Medina), and Judaism’s holiest.

Over the past century, the compound has become an explosive flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.





In 2000, a provocative visit by Israeli politician Ariel Sharon sparked clashes that escalated into the deadly Second Intifada. This summer, the mosque was at the centre of some of the worst violence, and biggest demonstrations, Jerusalem has seen in years.

For many in the Muslim and Jewish diasporas, stories about the holy site are front-page news. On June 26, 2016, the latest headlines were about a skirmish between Israeli police and Muslim worshippers.

What people understood about the incident depended in part on the media they consumed. According to the Arab press, Israeli officers “stormed” Al-Aqsa mosque, beating worshippers and deploying tear gas and rubber-tipped bullets. According to Jewish newspapers, “masked Arab assailants” were arrested after hurling rocks, chairs

and slurs at Jewish tourists.

For Muslims, the Al-Aqsa violence was particularly alarming because it broke out during the last 10 days of Ramadan, an especially sacred time in Islam's holiest month. So Elkasrawy decided to include the mosque in his prayers at Masjid Toronto. "I thought maybe this will help, praying together for this place," he says.

It was nearly midnight by the time he finished reciting the Qur'an and began his supplications.

Unlike sermons, which are more like religious lectures, supplications are invocations to God; during prayers, they are recited by imams who face away from the congregation. While made in the highly technical style of Quranic Arabic, and typically in a rhyming scheme, supplications are often improvised.

Elkasrawy spent 10 minutes thanking God and asking for help — for protection from evil and greed, for beneficial knowledge to humanity, for good health, empathy, benevolence and love of the poor.

He then prayed for victimized Muslims around the world. He thought of Syria, a recurring topic of prayer at his mosque, invoking a quote from the Hadith (reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions). He also prayed for Al-Aqsa, repeating a supplication he had found on the internet earlier that day.





Meanwhile, someone was filming. This didn't bother Elkasrawy; prayers are sometimes recorded for worshippers unable to attend. When the mosque posted the video on YouTube, he scanned various parts, curious about his performance. Then he forgot about it.

The video sat there in its corner of the internet, barely seen. The next time Elkasrawy watched it was eight months later, when he got the phone call: "Did you pray for the killing of the Jews?"

On a sunny morning in May, Elkasrawy rode an elevator to the 34th floor of a Bloor St. office tower, where two prominent members of Toronto's Jewish community awaited him.

Dressed in jeans and an electric blue sweatshirt, Elkasrawy sat across a boardroom table from Bernie Farber — the one-time CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress — and Karen Mock, a former director with B'nai Brith Canada and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. He was also joined by his mosque's senior imam and officials from the Muslim Association of Canada, which owns Masjid Toronto.

Everybody was there for Mock's anti-racism workshop, one of five sessions Farber had organized to educate an accused anti-Semite. The mood was friendly and relaxed, with pleasantries and business cards exchanged.



But those abhorrent words loomed over this group of newly acquainted Muslims and Jews: “Purify Al-Aqsa mosque from the filth of the Jews!”

When it comes to Jewish-Muslim relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the ever-present “elephant in the room,” Farber says — even in Canada, where both minorities share the burden of religious discrimination. According to Statistics Canada, Jewish people are the most frequent targets of police-reported hate crimes, while attacks against Muslims are the fastest-growing.

But there is also enormous diversity within both groups, which are sometimes the source of one another’s pain. There is mounting concern over anti-Semitism in certain corners of the Muslim world; meanwhile, Jewish people on the far right are among the loudest voices in the anti-Muslim movement. Israeli-Palestinian debates also have a tendency to slide into accusations of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia.

Farber, who once ran for the provincial Liberals, says Muslim issues have become a divisive topic among Jewish Canadians. He says he has received criticism from right-leaning members of his own community for defending Muslim Canadians and for supporting M-103, the parliamentary motion to recognize and condemn Islamophobia, which prominent Jewish advocacy groups opposed.

But he remains a vocal ally of Canadian Muslims. After the Quebec City mosque shooting in January, he joined people who gathered at mosques to form “rings of peace” across the country — an act of solidarity spearheaded by a Toronto rabbi that was covered by media outlets around the world.

But just two weeks later, that feeling of solidarity crumbled. “Supplications at Masjid Toronto Mosque: Slay them one by one and spare not one of them,” read the headline on a story published by CIJ News, an obscure right-wing website that has since been taken down.

Elkasrawy’s prayers quickly gained widespread coverage, from the Star and Sun to the CBC and the Canadian Jewish News, the country’s largest Jewish weekly. B’nai Brith Canada, a Jewish advocacy group, also wrote about the incident after urging Ryerson to fire Elkasrawy from his job as a teaching assistant.

The imam became a topic of heated discussion around Farber's Sabbath table. "I was very troubled by it," he says. "I was hearing a lot of anger. I was also hearing a lot of 'How could this be? Just last week I was involved in a circle of peace, and now this happens.'"

Farber wasn't exactly surprised, however. This was not the first time an imam had been accused of preaching hate against Jewish people, even in Canada. Elkasrawy's story emerged around the same time as other accusations of anti-Semitism in Canadian mosques. This summer, a Jordanian cleric was also charged by Montreal police after allegedly praying at a local mosque for Jewish people to be killed.



But something about the Elkasrawy case struck Farber as odd, and he was skeptical of the website that broke the story. “I’ve been in this business long enough to know that before judgments are made, you really need to get all the facts,” he says.

So in April, when a mutual friend reached out to Farber on Elkasrawy’s behalf, he was intrigued.

The imam said he wanted to gain a better understanding of Canadian norms and values, in the hopes of learning from his mistakes. Farber — who once helped a repentant neo-Nazi leave her white supremacist organization — agreed to help.

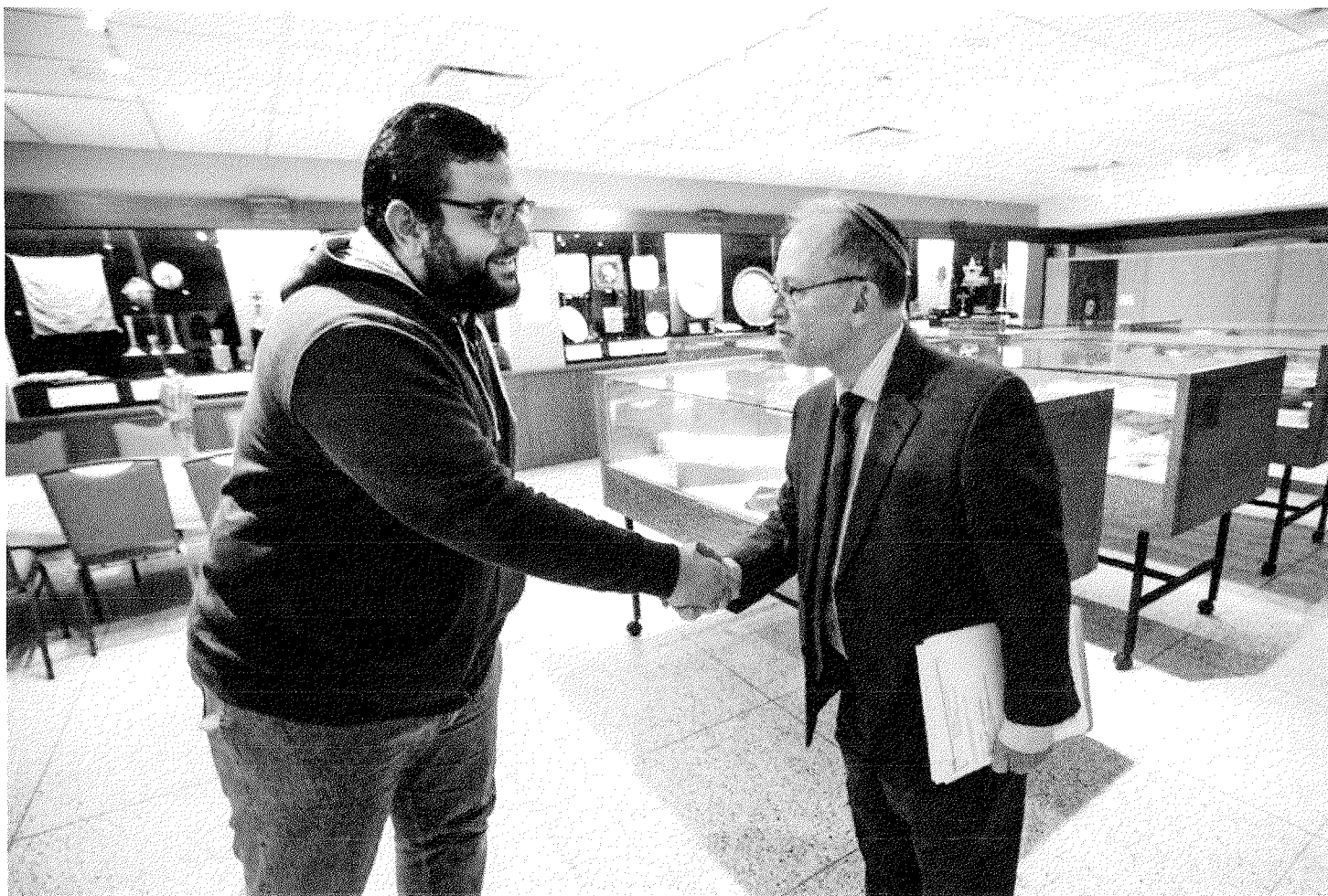
Given the disturbing anti-Semitic prayers Farber had read about in the news, his initial plan was to prescribe intensive anti-racism training. But he changed his mind after meeting Elkasrawy.

“We’re not dealing with a racist or anti-Semite,” he says of his gut reaction. “I really saw a young man who felt beaten down for something that he didn’t quite understand.”

Farber switched gears. He organized five workshops to help Elkasrawy develop a better understanding of Canada’s cultural, legal and human rights landscape. (The workshops were provided at no cost, though the mosque later made a small donation to the charity.)

Elkasrawy learned about anti-racism, hate crime laws and Canada’s human rights framework. He also visited his first synagogue — Beth Tzedec, Canada’s largest Jewish congregation — where he learned about Judaism and discussed interfaith issues with a rabbi and reverend.





Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl did not ask Elkasrawy to explain himself, but he expressed how his language was harmful. “We are concerned about discrimination against Muslims,” he said, as Elkasrawy nodded. “But we are also concerned about extremism that comes out of the Islamic community.

“Our people hear the extremism and when you speak that way, that’s what they hear. They become afraid. And they become angry.”

During each session, Elkasrawy listened intently and occasionally jotted notes. He also asked questions, including one he repeated several times: “How do you speak (clearly)? How do you *tell* things?”

When the program ended, Farber reached a conclusion. “I just do not believe that

Ayman is a hateful person,” he says. “He came in here with an open heart and a real willingness to understand.”

But he still couldn't wrap his head around the words Elkasrawy had been accused of saying, or the imam's muddled attempts to explain himself.

Two things were clear: Elkasrawy was sorry. He also felt misunderstood.

“I made *this* mistake,” he said at one point. “But not *that* mistake.”

Translation is not an exact science. Words are like prisms, refracting different shades of meaning. A good translation is one that captures the right hue.

Elkasrawy's prayers were first translated on CIJ News, a website founded and edited by Jonathan Dahoah Halevi.

Halevi describes himself as a retired lieutenant-colonel and intelligence officer with the Israel Defense Forces, who now researches the Middle East and radical Islam. He learned Arabic in school and university, he once explained to an interviewer.

He has also been a go-to pundit for the now-defunct Sun News Network and its offshoot Rebel News, a right-wing media website that has drawn controversy for its anti-Muslim coverage.



Halevi's writings and statements suggest that he sees himself as a soldier in the information wars — particularly when it comes to allegations against Israel, which he challenges by using “continuous, intensive and thorough” research, [according to a profile](#) on the Economic Club of Canada's website.

This work includes counting “Gaza fatalities in his free time,” according to a 2009 NPR article that described his “macabre hobby.” During the first Gaza war, NPR wrote, Halevi suspected Palestinians of exaggerating their civilian fatalities and spent six months scrutinizing 1,400 deaths listed by a human rights group — checking each name against a terrorist database he personally compiled and “whatever he finds on the internet.”

Halevi has also written extensively about Islam and Muslim Canadians on CIJ News, where his Arabic translations have drawn praise from the “anti-Islamist” blog Point de Bascule. “His knowledge of the Arabic language gives him an advantage when it comes to understanding the ambitions of the enemy,” the Quebec-based blog wrote last year.

On Feb. 18, CIJ News published a story about Masjid Toronto, which included his translation of Elkasrawy's controversial prayers.



Halevi later told the Toronto Sun that he was prompted to dig up the material after reading media coverage of a rally outside the mosque.

The rally was ostensibly to protest the federal Islamophobia motion, but demonstrators brought signs that read “Say no to Islam” and “Muslims are terrorists.” The protest was roundly criticized, including by local politicians who denounced it as an Islamophobic “display of ignorance and hate.”

But in his interview with the Sun, Halevi suggested the real hate was happening *inside* the mosque. “The double standard and hypocrisy was appalling,” he said.

After the story broke, Masjid Toronto took all its videos offline but it was too late; a new, edited clip was posted on YouTube, crediting Halevi with its translation and referencing an extreme anti-Muslim ideology known as “counter-jihad.” The account hosting the clip also mentions “Vlad Tepes Blog” in its video description.

The “counter-jihad” is described by researchers as a loose network of people and groups united by the belief that Muslims are plotting to take over the West. A recent [National Post investigation](#) described Rebel News as a “global platform” for the counter-jihad, and linked Vlad Tepes Blog — regarded as a key website in the movement — to a frequent Rebel News contributor.

Rebel jumped on the story about Elkasrawy’s prayers, which it credited “our friend Jonathan Halevi” with breaking. In a video segment, “Rebel commander” Ezra Levant plays the YouTube clip while imploring his viewers to “look at what the folks inside the mosque were saying.”

“Look at the translation written on the screen,” Levant says in the video, which has now drawn more than 35,000 views. “Here they are talking about Jews — there’s a lot of Jews in Toronto — and how they need to be killed one by one.”

But such stories contained a glaring oversight: this was not at all what Elkasrawy said.

This is the consensus that emerged from five Arabic experts who independently analyzed Elkasrawy’s prayers at the Star’s request. The experts — from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom — are Arabic translators, linguists and university professors with published book chapters, academic papers and textbooks. None of them

knows Elkasrawy.

The experts found that the imam's prayers were not without fault, and many clarified that they do not condone or excuse some of the language he used.

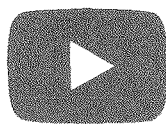
But they also described the initial, widely circulated translation as "mistranslated," "decontextualized" and "disingenuous." One said it had the hallmarks of a "propaganda translation."

The YouTube clip was particularly troubling for Arabic sociolinguist and dialectologist Atiq Hachimi, an associate professor at the University of Toronto.

This is because the clip was digitally manipulated: the first two seconds were cut and pasted from a different prayer Elkasrawy had made two minutes earlier. A slanted translation then transformed this Quranic verse from "Thou art our Protector. Help us against those who stand against faith" to "Give us victory over the disbelieving people."

"It changed their meaning in such a way as to promote the dangerous myths that violent extremism and hate are inherent to Islam," Hachimi said.

U of T professor's take on what imam Ayman Elkasrawy said in controversies...



Elkasrawy also was not referring to Jewish people when he said “slay them one by one,” a line from the Hadith that is often invoked as a cry for divine justice. This line was misunderstood as being part of his prayer about Al-Aqsa mosque; in fact, it was the closing line in a previous supplication that he made on behalf of suffering Muslims around the world, Hachimi said.

As for “Purify the Al-Aqsa mosque from the filth of the Jews,” a more accurate translation is “Cleanse Al-Aqsa mosque from the Jews’ desecration of it,” according to Nazir Harb Michel, an Arabic sociolinguist and Islamophobia researcher at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

The crucial word here is *danas*. Arabic-English dictionaries list several possible definitions — among them “besmirch,” “defile,” and spiritual “impurity” or “filth” — so context is key in determining the appropriate translation. Harb Michel said “no translator worth two cents” would choose the “filth” definition in the context of Elkasrawy’s prayer.

When *danas* is used in reference to a holy place — like Al-Aqsa — the common definition is “desecration,” the experts agreed. “He does not say ‘the filth of the Jews,’” said Jonathan Featherstone, a senior teaching fellow at the University of Edinburgh and former Arabic lecturer with the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

But what did Elkasrawy mean by “desecration”? Again, context is instructive. Days before his prayers, he and his congregants were reading reports of Israeli police deploying tear gas and rubber-tipped bullets inside Al-Aqsa mosque — actions many Muslims would consider to be a desecration of the site, especially during the 10 holiest days of Ramadan.

Elkasrawy now realizes how wrong it was to mention “the Jews,” especially since his intention was to pray for the mosque, not against people.

“If I could say it in a more clear way,” he says, “it would be ‘O Allah, protect the Al-Aqsa mosque from occupation. Or preserve the sacredness of the Al-Aqsa mosque from violation.’”

He said “Jews” is widely used in the Arabic-speaking world to mean “Israeli forces” or “Israeli occupiers,” not as a sweeping reference to all ethnic and religious Jews. But he acknowledges this common usage is problematic. And, he asks, “How is it perceived in my (current) community? It’s something I didn’t take into account.”

“I have never thought of anything against people of Jewish faith,” he says. “In Islam, we believe that no one should be forced into any religion. We cannot hate any people, any group, because of their ethnicity or their religion.”

Halevi declined requests for a phone interview but, in emailed responses, he stood by his original translation of Elkasrawy’s prayers. He did not answer specific questions, including why he chose the “filth” definition, but sent links to various websites and Arabic-English dictionaries.

He also did not answer questions about the source of the digitally manipulated clip, saying only that the original video was available on his website until the mosque deleted its YouTube channel.

But Halevi provided context that he considered important: excerpts from Islamic books that promote praying against disbelievers; translations of violent, aggressive or anti-Semitic statements made by other Muslims; links to CIJ News, which Halevi took down shortly after being contacted by the Star.

“Canadian imams deny any rights of the Jews over the Temple Mount or in (the) Land of Israel/Palestine,” Halevi wrote.

B’nai Brith Canada said two Arabic experts independently verified the original translation before the group urged Ryerson to fire Elkasrawy. B’nai Brith said it also reached out to the imam on Facebook but did not get a response. (Elkasrawy deleted his account shortly after the story broke.)

“Statements like this have been made in many parts of the world and it’s actually been used directly as incitement,” said B’nai Brith CEO Michael Mostyn. “Jewish people have

lost their lives over statements like this.”

Mostyn rejects the linguistic opinions obtained by the Star, in one case accusing an expert of having an anti-Israel bias. But he would not identify his own translators, citing concerns over their safety. The Star’s request to interview them anonymously was also declined.

In response to the Star’s questions, B’nai Brith solicited a third opinion from Mordechai Kedar, an assistant professor with the Arabic department at Israel’s Bar-Ilan University.

In a phone interview, Kedar did not remember being asked to evaluate Elkasrawy’s entire supplications, just the phrase that referred to “Jews” and *danas*. But he said he didn’t need any context to interpret Elkasrawy’s prayers because “when it comes to what Israel is doing, it is the worst meaning of the word.”

“Nobody should give them the benefit of the doubt that they mean something else, because they don’t,” he said. “(They want) to make the mainstream media in the free world believe them that they are the targets, when they are the problem in the whole world.”

Like Halevi, Kedar is a former Israeli intelligence officer and media pundit. His views have also drawn controversy, and Kedar once served on the advisory board for Stop Islamization of Nations — an organization co-founded by the anti-Muslim activist Pamela Geller and designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a U.S.-based civil rights watchdog.

Kedar argued Elkasrawy’s language was “meant to create a religiously charged rage and anger against the Jews.”

“Reacting violently against (Jewish people) in revenge for their deed is almost a required reaction,” he wrote in an email. “You can call it, in one word, terrorism.”

B’nai Brith Canada has not gone so far as to allege verbal terrorism, and said it is glad Elkasrawy has undergone cultural training, but its position remains unmoved: “Mr. Elkasrawy’s message at the mosque was irrefutably offensive and anti-Semitic.”

Farber feels differently. He says Elkasrawy chose his language poorly, especially when

he referred to “the Jews,” and failed to understand the harmful impact of his words.

But he now believes Elkasrawy's prayers were misrepresented to the public. Like many people, Farber accepted the initial translation unquestioningly, but now says “if people were going to take that and ruin lives, we should have been a lot more careful.”

“He said something that's highly charged and highly political and could be anti-Zionist — but it's not anti-Semitic,” Farber says. “And that changes the flavour of this.”

In the rush to condemn Elkasrawy's prayers, Muslim organizations were among the first in line.

“Unacceptable” and “inappropriate,” his mosque said in a statement. “Appalling and reprehensible,” wrote the National Council of Canadian Muslims, the country's largest Muslim advocacy group.



There was much to disapprove of, in addition to the mention of “Jews.” Many Muslim Canadians disagree with praying negatively and feel frustrated when religious leaders speak in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Prayers like “slay them one by one” also have no place inside a Canadian mosque, says Mohammad Aboghodda, a lecturer with the Understanding Islam Academy, an educational charity in Mississauga. Aboghodda was one of the Arabic translators consulted by the Star.

This quote from the Hadith has a specific reference to ancient Islamic struggles but is sometimes used in prayers for divine justice; Elkasrawy says he invoked it on behalf of Syrian people killed and tortured by the government regime or by Daesh (ISIS) terrorists.

But Aboghodda finds this language inappropriate, even if well intentioned — it would be like a priest delivering a Sunday sermon and quoting Bible verses that say “wrongdoers will be completely destroyed.”

“That’s a very common old prayer, but it implies violence that we don’t need,” he says. “I think many young and novice imams go to the old books and just copy these from it.”

These were some of the concerns Muslim groups had in mind when they denounced Elkasrawy’s prayers — public statements that many took as an implicit acceptance of the initial translation. But those statements did not reveal whether the Muslim community thought the translation was accurate, or whether they understood Elkasrawy’s words at all.

How many Canadian Muslims speak Arabic? Contrary to assumption, only about 20 per cent of the world’s Muslims are native Arabic speakers; according to the latest census, 1.2 per cent of Canadians cite Arabic as their mother tongue. Quranic Arabic, which Elkasrawy used in his prayers, is also notoriously complex and difficult to deconstruct.



Hachimi pointed out that several Arabic-language newspapers also clearly relied on English reports of the incident, because when they back-translated the word “filth,” they chose a different Arabic word — *najas* — from the one Elkasrawy used in his prayers.

And who bothered to check the original video? The translation was not verified by the National Council of Canadian Muslims, executive director Ihsaan Gardee confirmed in an emailed statement.

He said the organization is now “deeply troubled” to learn that the widely circulated clip of Elkasrawy’s prayers was manipulated and the translations called into question. But in the fast-moving aftermath of the scandal, he said, the organization “could only respond to what was being reported” — in other words, it reacted to the CIJ News translation.

“Unfortunately, we are living in a time where the very worst is believed about Canadian Muslims — contrary to the reality that the vast majority are contributing positively,” Gardee wrote. “So when a story like this emerges that contains the words of religious leaders speaking in a way that is understood — rightly or wrongly — to be promoting hatred against anyone, it is critical that human rights advocates be quick to condemn such language.”

Officials from the Muslim Association of Canada said their first priority was to reach out to the Jewish community and apologize for their employee’s inappropriate language, which violated the mosque’s stated policies.

But that doesn’t mean they considered the translation to be accurate — they didn’t. “We avoided this detail because a clear position was required so that there will be no confusion of our stand on this,” spokesperson Abdussalam Nakua wrote in an email.

Elkasrawy’s prayers exploded into view at a particularly fraught time.

Only weeks had passed since a gunman stormed into a Quebec City mosque and massacred six Muslim worshippers. The United States had just inaugurated a new president who campaigned on a Muslim travel ban. The acrimonious debate around the Canadian Islamophobia motion had reached a fever pitch, with Liberal MP Iqra Khalid even receiving death threats.

Elkasrawy’s prayers were quickly taken up by politicians. A month after they emerged,



MP Steven Blaney — who was then running for the federal Conservative party leadership — cited Elkasrawy in a campaign email seeking donations to “stand against violence and radicalization.” (“Should Allah kill all the Jews? I don’t think so but frighteningly, some do.”)

## **I feared for the people inside the mosque, that they might be attacked because of this**

Right-wing groups also latched on to the story and Elkasrawy’s picture was used on a poster at a rally against M-103. A hate crimes complaint was filed by the Jewish Defense League, which has been active in anti-Islamic protests. (A local JDL member is himself facing possible hate crime charges in the U.S. in connection with an alleged assault on a Palestinian-American man in Washington, D.C., earlier this year.)

“We’re dealing with a community in fear,” Farber says of Muslim Canadians. “Even if the community itself might feel that ‘Well no, this translation isn’t exactly right ... we don’t want to make people more angry.’ In the end, I’m not particularly surprised that the mosque and others involved said, ‘Let’s shut this down and apologize.’”

Elkasrawy said his first priority after the story broke in February was to apologize to the Jewish community. He worried, too, about further inflaming the situation. “I feared for the people inside the mosque, that they might be attacked because of this.”

He decided to let things calm down before attempting to explain himself. But within days, posters were plastered around Ryerson’s campus, where Elkasrawy had been a teaching assistant on and off since 2008, a job that partially funds his graduate studies.

The posters had a picture of his face and the words “Fire him now” — a demand that was echoed by B’nai Brith Canada. The student who led the postering campaign, Aedan

O'Connor, recently announced on Facebook that she is now working with Rebel Media.



Ryerson and its new president, Mohamed Lachemi, were already under pressure to respond to previous reports of anti-Semitism on campus. A meeting was quickly called between Elkasrawy and the dean of Ryerson's engineering department.

Elkasrawy attended the meeting and brought a more accurate translation of his prayers, assuming this would be a first step in the university's investigation. According to Elkasrawy, his translation was disregarded and Ryerson officials deliberated for about 15 minutes before handing him a two-page termination letter.

Ryerson declined to be interviewed for this story, stating that it does not discuss human resources matters.

For Elkasrawy, this was the moment that killed any hope he had of eventually explaining his side of the story. The YouTube clips, the media coverage, the public statements, his suspension, the police investigation, the termination — it all braided together into a knot that felt impossible to unravel. It all happened in 10 days.

Elkasrawy says he agreed to speak with the Star because “I have nothing to hide.” He has contemplated leaving Toronto or changing careers, but for now, he wants to move forward.

He has returned to his mosque, which conducted its own internal probe into the incident. He has applied, unsuccessfully, for new teaching jobs at Ryerson. And while the hate crime complaint against him remains active, Elkasrawy says he has yet to be contacted by police.

When asked what this experience has been like, Elkasrawy sighs heavily, his eyes drifting to the floor of his modest downtown apartment. He explains in a wavering voice that he has tried to take an Islamic point of view.

“People go through difficult times, hard times, in which they have to be patient and have some forbearance,” he says. “You have to listen to people and learn from this experience.”

He is holding tight to the lessons he’s learned, including those from the Mosaic Institute. Chief among them: when you speak, your meaning has to be clear — not just in your own head or to the people in front of you, but to Canadians of all backgrounds.

“Once the word comes out, even if the person who was hurt later understands your meaning, it will leave something in his heart,” Elkasrawy says. “It will not be the same as before.”



## The translators

The Star consulted five Arabic experts for this story. They are:

- Mohammad Aboghodda, Understanding Islam Academy
- Atiqah Hachimi, University of Toronto
- Nazir Harb Michel, Georgetown University
- Jonathan Featherstone, University of Edinburgh
- Kristen Brustad, University of Texas at Austin