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Illinois

Chicago religious leaders urge peace after killing of six-year-old Muslim boy

Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders shook hands, talked and prayed together after killing of Wade Al-Fayoume



Mourners hold candles for Wade Al-Fayoume during a vigil at Prairie Activity and Recreation center in Plainfield, Illinois, on Tuesday. Photograph: Nam Y Huh/AP

Maia McDonald in Chicago

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Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders shook hands, talked and prayed together as they gathered in Chicago to urge unity across divides and denounce hate, while the region continued to reel from the savage killing of a six-year-old Palestinian American boy in an alleged hate crime.

Imams and rabbis had already attended the funeral earlier in the week of Wade Al-Fayoume, who had only recently celebrated his sixth birthday with his family in Plainfield, on the outskirts of Chicago, when the landlord, shouting Islamophobic curses, stabbed the boy and his mother last weekend.

Wadea's mother, Hanaan Shahin, 32, is still in the hospital and was not able to attend her son's funeral.

On Wednesday, religious leaders came together at the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC) to offer condolences and support to the family and call, in a press conference, for an interfaith response - amid the worsening crisis in Israel and Gaza that is also fueling tension, threats and hate crimes overseas.

"We all are shocked by the brutal killing of the six-year-old American Palestinian boy who had done nothing wrong," said Abdulgany Hamadeh, the chair of the CIOGC.

He called for prayer for Shahin's recovery and said: "We also denounce all the hate-inspired speech and demand that the media and elected officials cease to promote text ... that discredits or marginalizes a group of people based upon their race, ethnicity or religious beliefs. This is leading to violence. All faith traditions respect the sanctity of life."

Sarah van Loon attended the gathering as the regional director of the American Jewish Committee of Chicago and said it was vital that people of many faiths come together to support the Muslim community.

"As a Jewish person, I really want to make sure that in this moment, we're talking about Wadea and his family - that we're centering the Muslim and Palestinian communities here," she said, adding that: "We join them in mourning and weeping for this horrific tragedy and for this child's life that was taken far too soon."

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Van Loon called it “sickening” that a child and his mother were targeted for their religion and national origin.

“That type of hate should never exist, certainly not in [Illinois](#), or America or around the world,” she said.

The family’s landlord, Joseph Czuba, 71, was arrested and is charged with first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder, two counts of a hate crime, and aggravated battery with a deadly weapon. He remains in Will county custody.

He lived in the apartment above Wadea’s family and, according to Shahin, had been regarded as a friend and a grandfatherly figure to Wadea, who suspected nothing when Czuba came to their apartment, she told the authorities.

According to court documents, he expressed anger about the Hamas killings in Israel. Despite Shahin [suggesting](#) they pray together for peace, he allegedly shouted: “You Muslims must die!” and attacked the pair. Czuba’s wife, Mary, [told investigators](#) that Czuba frequently listened to conservative talk radio and had become obsessed with the Israel-Hamas conflict [and paranoid](#).

At a Tuesday night vigil in Plainfield, hosted at Wadea’s school and among many of his classmates and friends, hundreds came together to honor his life. He [was described](#) as having enjoyed coloring, playing with toys and loving basketball. A [pro-Palestinian](#) protest in downtown Chicago [held a moment of silence for Wadea](#).

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 Oday Al-Fayoume, the father of Wadea Al-Fayoume, at a vigil service in Plainfield, Illinois, on Tuesday. Photograph: Jim Vondruska/Reuters

At Wednesday’s press conference, Sheikh Tariq Musleh, the outreach director and associate imam at the Mecca Center in Willowbrook, Illinois, attributed Wadea’s death to fearmongering and misinformation.

“I want to invite my fellow Americans to take a step back and ask ourselves, ‘In what world and what faith tradition, and what civil society, could such a heinous crime be acceptable?’. And if your response is that under no such circumstance could this be acceptable, then let it be known that our deafening silence in the face of hate and Islamophobia is exactly what enables such tragedies to take place, both locally and across the world,” Musleh said.

Musleh, like Wadea, grew up in the suburbs of Chicago as the child of Palestinian immigrants and said he hoped Wadea’s loss would prompt people to advocate for a world where “all children like Wadea can have dreams, but not just have dreams, but in fact live long enough to see those dreams come true”.

Syed Shahnawaz Khan, a founder and board member of the Downtown Islamic Center in Chicago, said people should not let their fear lead to tragedies similar to Wadea’s.

“My appeal to all our American brothers and sisters is to be very careful of what they see, and ... do not come to any conclusion without seeing the realities on both sides of the issue. And make sure your children are not seeing this as a normalized behavior of human beings,” he said.

Hood urged people to build alliances “like never seen before” between community organizations.

“We’re going to have to hit our synagogues, our churches and our mosques -

and preach peace," he said.

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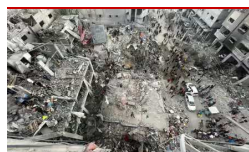
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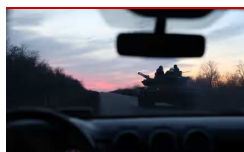
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