



**Khizr Khan, father of fallen U.S. Capt. Humayan Khan, speaks in 2016 as his wife, Ghazala, stands by his side. Khizr Khan spoke recently at an anti-extremism summit. AP files**

#### INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Extremism and violence require constant vigilance



**Doug Kindschi**

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I was recently invited to attend a summit on "Communities Overcoming Extremism: The After Charlottesville Project." This effort established by the Anti-Defamation League is in partnership with other organizations, such as the Justice & Society Program of the Aspen Institute, the National Immigration Forum and the Fetzer Institute.

The summit, chaired by Mike Signer, the former mayor of Charlottesville, included other national leaders, such as former Sen. John Danforth, Fetzer President Bob Boisture and Meryl Chertoff of the Aspen Institute.

In August 2017, white supremacists came to Charlottesville ostensibly to protest the taking down of confederate statues. Yet as they marched, one of the chants was "Jews will not replace us." It was not clear what this had to do with the confederate statue issue, but what was clear was the hatred for Jews and every other group that did not fit their very prejudiced and racist idea of who should be acceptable in our country. The protests led to the injury of nearly three dozen victims, and the violent death of 32-year-old paralegal and civil rights activist Heather Heyer by a self-declared neo-Nazi, who last week was convicted of murder.

The "After Charlottesville Project" seeks to build capacity at the local and national levels to "combat the rise of extremism, intolerance and political violence" in cities and communities across the country and to empower these communities.

Johnathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the ADL, stated the goal at the project initiation last August: "To fight back against those who brought their message of hate to Charlottesville, we now seek to marshal all of our community resources, from city hall to corporate boardrooms to community organizations, in order to equip every community in America with the necessary skills to reduce community intergroup tensions and overcome any hate and extremist event."

The ADL, founded in 1913, was a response to an increasing climate of anti-Semitism and bigotry. It sees its mission as not only to protect the Jewish people but also "to secure justice and fair treatment for all." Its ultimate goal "is a world in which no group or individual suffers from bias, discrimination or hate."

What a tragedy then that only two months following the announcement of this project combating extremism and a year after the Charlottesville riots, this same hatred expressed itself in the killing of 11 Jews in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. The gunman shouted, "All Jews must die" in the shooting, the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history.

It is also an irony that the Pew Research Center had earlier reported its study on how warmly the U.S. public views various religious groups. Jews were the most highly rated by the overall public. A signif-

icant positive shift also was reported regarding the rating of Muslims, which went from a positive 40 to 48 in a three-year period. It is also notable that knowing someone from one of the faith groups affects one's attitude. For example, good feelings about Muslims is reported at the 56 level for those who know a Muslim compared to 42 who do not know any Muslims.

Attitudes are slowly becoming more accepting of all religious groups, but the threat of extremism and violence continues.

Signer said, "Our great nation must be fully equipped to overcome hate, political violence and extremism. I am committed to sharing learning from last year's events in Charlottesville as part of this national effort, bringing together key public and private leaders ... to increase our collective capacity to stand up against hate."

Sharif Azami, program officer at the Fetzer Institute, provided further insight into the project's potential impact, stating that "[t]his initiative will not only seek methodologies for how cities across America can be better prepared to respond to hate crime and violence, but will also invite conversations around bridge building and healing."

The highlight of our time together at the summit was the talk by Khizr Khan, the "Gold Star Father" of Captain Humayun Khan, who was killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq in 2004. He shared how he "fell in love" with the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence when he read them as a student in Pakistan. He had lived under dictators and repressive regimes and knows what it is like not to have the freedom we enjoy. But he warned that if it is not freedom for all, then it is jeopardized for all.

Khan warned that our freedom is bought by sacrifice, and noted that the signers of the Declaration of Independence were likely signing their own death warrants if the revolution had not been successful. His home is in Charlottesville, where he witnessed last year's riot. He told us about a letter from a soldier who urged that we must continue to speak against hatred and extremism. It was the same message he received from survivors of the Holocaust urging that he "continue to speak out."

He told us how following the announcement of the Muslim travel ban, it would break his heart when small children would ask him, "Will we be thrown out of here?"

Speaking out has been a personal mission for him, and he challenged us to defend liberty whenever it is attacked, saying, "Liberty requires vigilance and sacrifice."

However, Khan is not giving up hope. His faith in the values of this country is even stronger. He concluded, "I have seen the sunrise on the other side of the mountain."

Interfaith understanding and acceptance continues to be the challenge for us all, as we unite to combat the extremism and violence that threaten us.

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