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Civic leaders condemn attack on Calif. Muslim candidate

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ANAHEIM, Calif. - A powerful Republican Party operative who earlier this week accused a Muslim City Council candidate of supporting Islamic extremists on Thursday challenged the Syrian-born man to a debate on his views of Hezbollah and the Middle East.

The challenge from former state GOP chairman Shawn Steel came the same day that more than a half-dozen elected officials and civic and religious leaders rallied behind the candidate, Belal "Bill" Dalati, on the steps of City Hall.

A letter Steel wrote accusing Dalati of helping sponsor an anti-Israel rally and associating with "zany left wing groups" has circulated on the Internet since early this month. The letter was posted on OC Blog, a politically conservative site, by former state Sen. John Lewis, who is a consultant for Councilman Bob Hernandez, one of Dalati's opponents in the nonpartisan race. The post was titled "Something Scary in Anaheim."

On Thursday, Dalati's supporters gathered at City Hall to offer him support and condemn Steel's comments.

"We call on all Californians to reject attempts to spread fear of Islam and Muslims by falsely labeling Arab-American and Muslim-American candidates as extremists," said Hussam Ayloush, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "It is disturbing to see a public official exploit the growing anti-Muslim feeling in our society."

Steel's comments have generated heated debate in chatrooms and in Little Gaza, the ethnic core for many of Orange County's Arab-Americans, who numbered more than 24,000 in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. They have also angered elected officials.

"It's up to us as community leaders to stand up and say this is wrong, we shouldn't tolerate this," said Councilman and Mayor Pro Tem Richard Chavez. "This city is a very diverse city and to bring race into it and try to divide the city is a very wrong thing to do."

Steel was unapologetic for his earlier comments and reiterated his belief that Dalati, 41, was "consorting with extremist organizations."

"He spends more of his waking hours worrying about Palestinian martyrs, about supporting Hezbollah against Israel and America and imposing Sharia law than he does about more mundane, city-oriented issues," Steel said. "It's not secret, he's made no attempt to hide it."

Steel said Dalati's supporters were intentionally misconstruing his concerns about the candidate to cloud the issue.

"They're using the race card shamelessly," he said. "It's not fair and it's not accurate and they're hiding his political beliefs."

Dalati, who became a U.S. citizen in 1987, said Steel had not contacted him about a debate. He said he was inclined to refuse.

"I've got to concentrate on my campaigning," he said. "Why can't he meet with me, talk with me and get to know me before calling for a debate?"

In his letter, Steel said an organization called the Arab-American Broadcasting Co. helped sponsor an anti-Israel rally in Anaheim at the height of the war between Israel and Hezbollah. The company shares an address with Dalati's insurance business. Steel also accused Dalati of close associations with "extreme groups."

Dalati, an insurance agent, called the July 29 event an anti-war rally and said the Arab-American Broadcasting Co. was now inactive. He denied ties to Hezbollah or any fundraising activities for them.

"The bottom line is that I want the opportunity to serve, to give back to a community, to a country that's given me so much," he said. "I would appreciate being treated fairly on the basis of my abilities and the quality of my issues - not based on my heritage and my religion."

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