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Opinion

2006-10-20

L.A. Times violates journalistic ethics in Anaheim City Council election coverage

By Steven Emerson

Normally, a race for a seat on Anaheim's City Council garners little attention beyond Anaheim. But this year, one candidate is drawing some outside attention.

Bill Dalati, a Syrian-born insurance agent, is running for a spot on Anaheim's City Council. His candidacy has come under scrutiny because of his association with a controversial organization with known links to the Hamas terror group and his participation at a virulently anti-Israel rally this past summer.

But the Los Angeles Times has been singularly trying to portray the criticism of Dalati, made by Republican Shawn Steel, as racist and unsubstantiated.

On July 29 of this year, during the war between Israel and Hezbollah, which was set off by Hezbollah's July 12 cross-border raid and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, Dalati attended an anti-Israel rally in Anaheim. In its coverage of the City Council race, the Associated Press reported that Dalati referred to the event merely as an "anti-war rally." And the L.A. Times reported on Oct. 9 that Dalati "defended his association with the rally protesting the Israel-Lebanon conflict," quoting him as saying, "I'm not against Jews or Christians ... I don't support Hezbollah. I just don't believe wars solve any issues; love does."

But the situation is not nearly as innocuous as the L.A. Times and Associated Press would have one believe. The

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Anaheim protest was about anything but "love." The rally was not merely "anti-war" and the attendees were not merely "protesting the Israel-Lebanon conflict." The event in question was billed by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, one of the sponsors of the demonstration, as a "Rally Against U.S.-Israeli Terror in Palestine & Lebanon," hardly a neutral, let alone credible "anti-war" sentiment.

Although the rally drew little mainstream media attention, what little coverage there was whitewashed the content of the demonstration, giving cover for the AP, the L.A. Times and Dalati himself to downplay the nature of the event.

Fortunately, a participant at the rally created a slideshow of the demonstration, posted on YouTube, which shows various demonstrators carrying such signs as "Israel Likes Killing Kids," "Killing Kids Is Not Self Defense" and "End the U.S.-Israeli War," as well as the more typical signs seen at various anti-Israel protests, such as "Stop Israeli War Crimes" and "\$134 Billion US Taxes To Israel -- Enough."

Whatever one thinks of American foreign policy and support for Israel, the July rally cannot be fairly described either as simply "anti-war" or just "protesting the Israel-Lebanon conflict."

There were no signs indicating any disapproval of Hezbollah's actions -- the capture of Israeli soldiers -- which started the war, nor were there any signs indicating any disapproval of Hezbollah's indiscriminate shelling of Israeli towns with Katusha rockets (packed with scrap metal and ball bearings to cause as much damage to humans as possible), nor any condemnation of Hezbollah's use of civilians as human shields in Lebanon. There were no signs indicating any disapproval of the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by Palestinian militants and no calls for Hamas -- now the majority in the Palestinian government -- to moderate its stance rejecting the existence of Israel to help pave the way for peace.

Yet, the L.A. Times again came to the defense of Dalati on Oct. 13, in falsely describing this rally in evenhanded terms as a "rally protesting the Israel-Lebanon conflict."

In the original story on Dalati, the L.A. Times also refers to Dalati's support of and association with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), describing the organization as it often describes itself: "the largest Muslim civil rights group in the country" and stating uncritically that CAIR is "largely viewed as a mainstream organization." In the second L.A. Times story, the newspaper drops any pretension of reportorial objectivity in its embrace of CAIR: "The largest Muslim civil rights group in the country, CAIR is widely viewed as mainstream and helps the FBI in combating terrorism."

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While CAIR may call itself the "largest Muslim civil rights group" in America, the Times completely ignores CAIR's well-documented history of extremism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, as well as its origins in a now-defunct group, the Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP), an organization that was a losing defendant in a \$156 million civil judgment related to the Hamas murder of an American citizen. In the case, the judge noted that there is "evidence that IAP provided material support to Hamas."

Similarly, during a 1994 speech at Florida's Barry University, CAIR Executive Director Nihad Awad stated, "I am in support of the Hamas movement." Awad was the public relations director of IAP before founding CAIR. And this is what Awad said six years later, on Oct. 28, 2000, in a Washington, D.C., anti-Israeli rally: "Brothers and sisters, we are at least 8 million people, but there are 265 million people in this country who have been deceived, who have been misinformed, who have been intimidated by a small group of people who have been hijacking the political process."

Additionally, several CAIR officials have been convicted on terrorist-related charges. One of them, Randall "Ismail" Royer, CAIR's former communications specialist, trained to fight with Lashkar-e-Taiba, a designated foreign terrorist organization, against Indian forces in the disputed territory of Kashmir. Royer pled guilty to weapons and explosives charges and was sentenced to 20 years in prison in the notorious "Virginia jihad" case.

A founding board member of CAIR-Texas, Ghassan Elashi, is in even greater legal trouble than Royer. Elashi was convicted on a variety of charges in July 2004, including violating the Libyan Sanctions Regulations, and he was found guilty in April 2005 of a Hamas-related money laundering conspiracy, handling money of top Hamas official, the Damascus-based Musa Abu Marzook. Elashi is awaiting his sentencing for both convictions (Elashi's brother, Bayan, was sentenced to seven years in prison on Oct. 11, 2006, for his role in laundering money for Hamas). And Ghassan Elashi is still awaiting another trial, slated to begin in 2007, for his leadership role in the Hamas-linked "charity," the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, a Texas-based organization shut down in 2001 for allegedly funneling millions of dollars to Hamas.

CAIR has defended Marzook, participating in his legal defense fund when he was arrested in the United States, as well as including his arrest in its annual catalog of hate crimes against Muslims. CAIR's defense of, and links to, anti-Semitic individuals is also unfortunate and extensive.

CAIR officials have defended radical Egyptian cleric Wagdy Ghoneim, who at a May 24, 1998, CAIR co-

sponsored rally at Brooklyn College in New York, led the audience in a song with the lyrics: "No to the Jews, descendants of the apes."

Ghoneim gave numerous speeches in the United States calling for suicide bombings. Hussam Ayloush, CAIR's Southern California director quoted in the L.A. Times article, was one of Ghoneim's staunchest defenders, calling Ghoneim's decision to forgo fighting deportation proceedings for overstaying his visa and voluntarily leave the United States "a dent in our civil rights struggle," and "[t]he whole Muslim community today is under a microscope of scrutiny. Committing a mistake that would invite a slap on the wrist for anyone else could lead to prison or deportation for a Muslim."

At the time, Ghoneim had already been denied entry into Canada because of his links to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, CAIR officials have also vigorously defended Palestinian Islamic Jihad operative Sami al-Arian, who has referred to Jews as "monkeys and pigs."

As for CAIR helping the FBI in counterterrorism, consider this exchange in Los Angeles on Sept. 7, 2006, in a press conference featuring various Islamic groups, including CAIR, and a representative of the FBI, Warren Bamford. A reporter asked Bamford whether the dialogue with the Islamic groups helped in the investigations the FBI was conducting. "At this time, I don't have any specific recollection of any times that it has helped our investigations." In point of fact, CAIR actively obstructs FBI investigations by issuing warnings against talking to the FBI and portraying the war on terrorism as a "war against Islam."

Dalati was also criticized by a rival candidate for endorsing former Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.). McKinney espoused virulent anti-American and anti-Israeli conspiracy theories, so much so that even fellow Democrats repudiated her. But the L.A. Times simply referred to McKinney as "a liberal Democrat who has been critical of President Bush and the Iraq War." This makes McKinney sound mainstream, the equivalent of describing David Duke as "critical of U.S. foreign policy."

Dalati may understandably want to whitewash CAIR's extremism, the rally in which he participated and Cynthia McKinney's record. But given the ability to check the veracity of such claims, the L.A. Times' embrace of this revisionist history is a violation of all journalistic ethics. The L.A. Times has the resources to research the organization but instead choose just to parrot its propaganda.

Dalati's characterization of the July 26 Anaheim rally as merely "anti-war," however, is cause for concern, and his candidacy is rightly drawing a higher level of scrutiny and attention than the average race for a seat on Anaheim's