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Muslim Youth Tournament Draws Attention for Some Team Nicknames

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BODY:

They wore knee-length athletic shorts, nylon warm-ups, professional jerseys, ballcaps and ski caps. They played catch, dropped into three-point stances, stutter-stepped and spun past scores of imaginary defenders. They bent their bodies and stretched their muscles in preparation for an all-day flag football tournament at a city park here.

"One-handed! Sweet!" yelled one boy as he snatched a pass out of the air. He held the ball in the face of a friend, who rolled his eyes.

It was a perfectly ordinary scene. Only it wasn't, a fact hinted at by the longer beards and skullcaps, or kufi, that some of the young men wore, and brought home by the news vans, reporters and photographers that had arrived at Heritage Park by 9 a.m. on Jan. 4.

Nearly all of the young men were American Muslims, and for the previous month, because of team logos and names that some of them had selected for the football tournament, they had been accused of everything from insensitivity to supporting terrorism.

They had drawn the attention of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, creating confusion in the local community, and leaving a bunch of football-loving kids to wonder what the fuss was all about.

Staging a Muslim football tournament had been a dream for 18-year-old Sabih Khan, a student at Saddleback College in nearby Mission Viejo, for nearly two years.

Khan's family emigrated to the United States from Pakistan in 1995, and he quickly fell in love with American football. Khan played three seasons at Irvine High School, alternating among linebacker, defensive end and running back. He adopted Oregon and Michigan as his favorite college teams, he said, because they ran the ball.

"The position you play, you stick with it all your life," said Khan, who is 6 feet tall. "I just like teams that grind it out. I don't like the whole passing game. It's useless."

Muslim kids from around Southern California gather for weekend sports tournaments year-round. Khan had been to several of the events and had enjoyed them, but said he thought they could be improved.

"We attended a lot of basketball tournaments," he said, "and there's no refs, nothing. Half the time, people didn't even know who was playing who."

More significant, there were no football tournaments. So this past August, Khan finally took it upon himself to start one. He called it Muslim Football, scheduled it for Jan. 4, 2004, passed out flyers at local mosques, and in October, launched a Web site, <http://muslimfootball.com>.

The controversy began Dec. 7, when the Los Angeles Times wrote about the Web site. To many, the newspaper's report was startling. Though some of the participating teams had chosen names such as "Muslim Football All-Stars" and "Playmakerz," others were called "Intifada," "Mujahedeen" and "Soldiers of Allah."

Intifada is the term the Palestinians use to describe uprising against Israeli occupation. Several recognized terrorist groups associate themselves with the term mujahedeen, which is often translated as "holy warrior."

The team names Intifada, Mujahedeen and Soldiers of Allah were accompanied by logos that were, at the very least, provocative.

Intifada featured a man wearing a military helmet, his face -- save his eyes -- covered by a bandana. The Soldiers of Allah emblem showed a masked man in the act of firing a slingshot, and Mujahedeen's depicted a horse-borne figure in flowing robes, bearing a weapon on his shoulder.

"My initial reaction was I was saddened to see them choose those names because I felt it would just lend credibility to those who feel that Islam is a violent religion," said Bernard King, a retired rabbi who lives in Irvine. "I've spent a lot of time trying to countermand that to some degree."

"What does it say about where their mind-set is?" asked Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. "These kinds of terms, that are so overtly and openly linked to terrorism and murder, they simply don't belong in our communal vernacular. If it's there, something is wrong. Much deeper."

But was there something fundamentally wrong with the boys who had chosen these names for their flag football teams? Or were people simply overreacting, misinterpreting what had transpired?

"A complicated situation has not been helped by the fact that people, both at the media and at the community end, are sort of presenting and interpreting this in different ways," said Irvine councilwoman Beth Krom.

"Even the headline . . . in that original story was, 'Taking the Intifada to the Football Field.' Well, I don't know if a group of kids playing, even with the name Intifada, is taking intifada to the football field. . . . I think things began to roll from there."

An Orange County community of 165,000 people located 40 miles from Los Angeles, Irvine is home to a diverse population that includes thriving Muslim and Jewish communities. As more media picked up on the story, the city's leaders moved to deal with the controversy and bring about a resolution.

Khan acted promptly, too, removing all the logos from the Web site. Soon after, two of the teams, Mujahedeen and Soldiers of Allah, agreed to change their names. "Because of all the attention," Khan said, "we did not want to aggravate anything."

The Intifada team remained undecided about its name. On Dec. 17, three representatives of the team met with a contingent of Irvine's religious, ethnic and political leaders. The team

representatives said none of the team names had been about anything but football. No harm was intended, and the names were not meant to be political statements or endorsements of terrorists.

Khan, who could not attend the meeting but spoke to the officials separately, said the names were similar to calling their squads the Raiders or the Buccaneers, two nicknames that are used by NFL teams. "We used to have a pirate [on the Web site] holding a sword," he said.

King, the retired rabbi who attended the meeting, said: "The students kind of had no idea what they were getting into. To them, it was a macho name to come up with. They didn't realize the ramifications, politically, of the names."

To a degree, that was because of the names themselves.

"These terms are basically very positive terms within the Muslim community and historically speaking," said Sabiha Khan, communications director of the Southern California chapter of the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), who is not related to Sabih Khan. "The popular definitions . . . are twisted. They're no longer what they mean, Islamically speaking."

A number of Islamic leaders in Irvine said mujahedeen does not mean "holy warrior," which is considered a mistranslation, but rather, "one who struggles or strives" either physically or spiritually. Intifada is defined as "uprising," or more literally, "to get another off one's back."

Those were the meanings understood and intended by the boys in the football tournament, Sabih Khan said, although members of the Intifada team, some of whom were of Palestinian heritage, did support the non-violent struggle against Israeli occupation.

In the end, the Intifada team decided to keep its name, a choice that was lauded by CAIR.

"We did ask them to reconsider . . . but I want to make it clear that we supported whichever decision they made," said Sabiha Khan. "We do still live in America. We still have freedom of speech."

Muzammil Siddiqi, director of the Islamic Center of Orange County, had a different view.

"Intifada, even though the word means uprising, there are some associations with terrorism with suicide bombings and all those things," he said. "And our youth should not be involved with this. And they are certainly not involved with that. So they should not be using those words."

On Jan. 2, two days before the games, the Jewish Defense League decided to protest the tournament in response to the decision to keep the name Intifada. Many players' parents wondered whether it was safe to let their kids participate. There were rumors that the event might be moved to another site or cancelled.

But Sabih Khan decided to go through with it. He showed up early that morning at Irvine's Heritage Park, and to his relief, players began trickling onto the fields until they were approximately 150 in number. As they warmed up, the young men threw wary glances toward the parking lot, wondering who might show up to watch them play.

But aside from a half-dozen newspaper and television reporters, the crowd focused on the games themselves. Several blocks away, out of sight of the park's fields, four members of the JDL staged their protest.

Many who came to watch, including 18 year-old Mohammad Shaikh of Irvine, said the entire ordeal had been blown out of proportion.

"The Intifada had the person with the scarf on his face and stuff like that," Shaikh said, speaking

of the original tournament Web site. "I don't know. I guess I can see the other side. . . . I can see how those could be misconstrued. . . . But since this was just a bunch of suburban kids playing football on New Year's weekend, I didn't think it was worth all the controversy."

As the tournament got underway, the Intifada team -- the only remaining part of the original controversy -- drew practically all of the attention. Its members wore black shorts and T-shirts, and across their chests the word "Intifada" was written in a graffiti-like scrawl that suggested a Bob Marley album cover. They, like the rest of the teams participating in the tournament, had been told by Khan not to answer questions about anything, especially the controversy.

Within a few hours, most of the media had left, and the players and their followers remained.

There were parents standing on the sidelines whose football knowledge varied but whose enthusiasm did not.

"Laterals!" cried one of the fathers, shaking his head in amazement. "Look at all those laterals!"

"I don't know the game," confessed another, smiling. "But I'm really enjoying it!"

There were the Irvine Alumni, a team of non-Muslims with a Jewish quarterback, who reached the tournament semifinals.

There were prayer rows that formed just after 1 p.m., more than 50 men and boys and a few dozen women kneeling along a sideline, facing Mecca.

There was Gabe, a 15-year-old son of a Muslim father and Jewish mother from Mission Viejo who played for the Marmelukes. His team had lost in the opening round to Intifada, 44-0.

"They're extremely organized and they're really dedicated," he said. "We're kind of loose."

Intifada rallied for an 18-13 victory over a team named Fourth and Goal in its second game and defeated the Liberators, 28-16, in the semifinals. It lost in the championship game, falling to the South Bay All-Stars, 12-6.

The final whistle sounded just after 9 p.m. Sabih Khan gave the signal, ending the football tournament he had succeeded in carrying out. Because he had refereed more than half the games, including the championship, he never played a down. He said it was fine with him.

"It was great," he said, laughing. "Everything worked out on time. . . . There were no fights. . . . Nothing went wrong. The weather was fine. I was worried about the weather. Even the protesters, they kept their distance and everything. It was a good turnout."

Asked if he would organize another Muslim football tournament, he did not hesitate.

"We don't know exact dates," he said, "but me and the guys are trying to get organized again for, I think, April. And if not then, we're definitely going to have one this summer. End of June, I think. Maybe start of July."