Muslim groups raise funds to repair desecrated Jewish cemetery

by Ashley Lisenby

February 22, 2017

UNIVERSITY CITY, Missouri — The damaging of dozens of headstones at a Jewish cemetery spurred Muslim groups to raise thousands of dollars to help with repairs.

A crowdfunding campaign started by social justice activists Linda Sarsour, of New York City, and Tarek El-Messidi, of Cincinnati, raised more than $20,000 within a few hours to help the Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery after up to 200 headstones were toppled during the weekend. As of early Wednesday (February 22), the campaign had raised more than $55,000.

Mufti Asif Umar of the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis condemned the desecration as "a horrific and disgusting act of vandalism, which cannot be tolerated."

The Missouri Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Imam Council of Metropolitan St. Louis, which represents 18 Islamic centers in the city, also denounced the vandalism.

"We want the Jewish community to know that the Muslim community stands with you in solidarity as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and hate in general is on the rise in our nation," said the council's leader, Djilali Kacem.

A statement released by the council echoed concerns over bigotry against religious groups in an "ever polarized nation."

Faizan Syed, executive director of the Missouri Council on American-Islam Relations, said relatives of many of his friends were buried at the cemetery. The vandalism was not only a threat against the Jewish community but "against all faiths and the values we hold dear as Americans," he said.

Council members posted on social media late Tuesday that they would join in cleanup efforts at the cemetery Wednesday, followed by an interfaith vigil.

The Muslim advocacy group also offered a $5,000 reward for information related to the series of bomb threats to Jewish community centers across the country early this week.

Other religious groups were also helping raise money for repairs at the cemetery and many political leaders denounced the desecration.

In University City, council members said they would not tolerate hateful and hurtful acts in the community. People can donate to the cemetery through the website or the Jewish Federation of St. Louis.

Gov. Eric Greitens called the vandalism a "despicable act," saying of vandals "from their pitiful act of ugliness, we can emerge even more powerful in our faith."

He is expected to visit the cemetery Wednesday to help with cleanup.

During a visit Tuesday to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, President Trump denounced anti-Semitic acts and said "it's going to stop and it has to stop."

Trump said the threats to Jewish communities and centers were a "painful and sad reminder of the work that still must be done to root out hate and prejudice and evil."

He has drawn criticism in the past for not rejecting anti-Semitic groups that support him.