

Harvard returns Arab leader's gift: Funds intended for Islamic studies

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After more than a year of debate and negotiation, Harvard Divinity School has agreed to return a gift from a leader of the United Arab Emirates, at the Arab nation's request. Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan had given a \$2.5 million gift, which the school accepted in 2000, to establish a professorship of Islamic religious studies at the school.

A group of students and professors had complained in March 2003 to Dean William A. Graham, a scholar of Islam, about the UAE-based Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up, which was named for the sheikh and which critics said featured anti-Semitic writings and anti-American material.

In the wake of the comments, and the report of an independent researcher hired by the school to look deeper into the center's activities, divinity school officials considered whether to return the gift.

But in August 2003, citing activities that "starkly contradicted the principles of interfaith tolerance," the UAE announced that it was closing the Zayed Center, and Harvard put the gift on hold while discussions were held on whether the professorship could still be funded by it.

Finally, on July 26, the school announced that the donor had withdrawn the gift and asked that it be returned, which Harvard agreed to do. "Harvard remains strongly committed to advancing the understanding of Islam," said a statement from the divinity school on the matter. To that end, the school is pursuing funding for two faculty appointments in Islamic studies. *-Religion News Service*