

REIMAGINING  
**MUSLIM  
SPACES**

# How a Mosque Managed a Crisis:

THE ISBCC RESPONSE TO THE  
BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING



Dear Colleagues:

The goal of our “Reimagining Muslim Spaces” project is to produce research-driven recommendations to enable the development of a mosque that is:

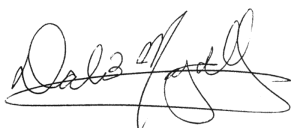
1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

To illustrate how mosques can serve as hubs for hope, ISPU identified four real-life examples of American Muslim institutions doing just that. To illustrate how mosques can create effective and transparent institutions, ISPU examined best practices that have been developed to address governance needs. Rather than simply providing theoretical advice, our researchers interviewed the very people who built these programs and institutions to identify the secrets to their success and the wisdom gained from their struggles. Our case studies cover:

1. **A “Third Space”** with MakeSpace in Washington, DC
2. **A Free Medical Clinic** with the HUDA Clinic in Detroit, MI
3. **A Jobs Center** with The SHARE Center in Lexington, KY
4. **A Civic Engagement Program** with the Muslim Community Association in Santa Clara, CA
5. **Imam Recruitment** with the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) in Boston, MA
6. **Crisis Communication and Management** with the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) in Boston, MA

We hope these case studies will inspire and instruct others working to develop institutions that serve and uplift.

Warmly,



Dalia Mogahed  
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**ISBCC**  
ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF BOSTON  
CULTURAL CENTER



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# Executive Summary

In recent years, the American Muslim community has faced an unfortunate and increasingly common phenomenon of American Muslims perpetrating acts of violence against their fellow Americans. Invariably, after such an attack, links are established between the attackers and a local mosque they attended, however infrequently. Questions are then raised in the media about whether the mosque in question preaches a violent extremist ideology, and American mosques and the broader American Muslim community once again finds itself on the defensive. American Muslims are singled out with calls for them to “condemn terrorism.” For the local mosques of such radicalized attackers, such a situation can only be described as a crisis. Successful navigation of such a crisis requires careful engagement with the media, law enforcement agencies, local government officials, and their Muslim and interfaith communities.

This report examines the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC), the largest mosque in New England, and its effective navigation of the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. By analyzing what ISBCC did, this report aims to provide American mosques with a set of actions that can allow them to successfully manage such crises and emerge as stronger and better-established players in their broader communities. We hope that other American mosques can learn from ISBCC’s experience and be well positioned and well prepared to successfully engage the media and other key players in the unfortunate event of a crisis stemming from the acts of radicalized individuals.

## Lessons Learned

### *Before a Crisis:*

1. **Build strong relationships in the community.** Focus on creating genuine, mutually beneficial bonds with the interfaith community, local government and law enforcement agencies, and the media.
2. **Conduct media trainings for community members.** To build capacity for effective media engagement, invest in the services of a professional communications agency.
3. **Create a crisis management plan and run practice drills.** The aim of a plan is to have preassigned roles and duties for mosque leadership and staff in the event of a crisis, and to identify any potential organizational weaknesses, so that when the organization is the center of national attention, it can react efficiently.



## *During a Crisis:*

1. **Communicate regularly with government and law enforcement agencies.** Communicate with law enforcement in a timely manner, and be genuinely ready to provide information and support. However, take care to balance openness with civil rights protection. Provide staff and community members ample information and support regarding their legal rights and protections.
2. **Seek help and advice from allies and professionals.** Reach out to partners and ask for guidance and assistance, both inside and outside the Muslim community, including requesting a show of public support. Be prepared to invest in the services of professional agencies that can help navigate the crisis, for instance, a communications agency or a public relations firm.
3. **Craft and communicate a clear, coherent, and consistent message to the media.** Highlight American Muslims' identity as Americans, not Others. Expect internal and external pushback on the message, and plan for attacks from both inside and outside the Muslim community, particularly against Muslim leaders and representatives. Prepare a strategy to counter attacks and negative media coverage, and demonstrate community support for leaders. Highlight community members who can effectively humanize the Muslim community in a manner that is relatable for the broader American public.
4. **Create an environment of authentic engagement between the mosque leadership and the community,** such that in times of crises community members best suited to respond can be identified. To genuinely harness the potential of the community, mosque leaders should be able to reach out to community members to, for instance, act as representatives to the media or organize relevant committees.
5. **For effective crisis management and messaging, streamline internal processes and focus on agility.** Small, empowered teams are best suited for meeting the demands of a fast-paced crisis. For example, the ISBCC board of directors essentially decided to stay out of the management team's way and clearly communicated to the mosque leadership that they were available if the leaders needed help, but all decision-making powers were handed over to the mosque leaders.
6. **Provide mental health support for frontline team members.** Leaders who represent Muslims during a crisis are required not only to engage with a deluge of media requests, they also face vicious personal attacks aimed at destroying their reputations and careers. Mosques and Muslim organizations should proactively recognize the potential mental health hazards of this situation, and have counseling and support on hand for these leaders.

## *After a Crisis:*

1. **Seize future opportunities to reinforce the message that was communicated during the crisis.** Proactively plan for relevant events such as anniversaries of the crisis or community memorials to demonstrate with actions the message that was communicated during the crisis. This can include a coordinated media engagement strategy and relevant community and interfaith events.

A terrorist attack on April 15, 2013, targeted the Boston Marathon, an iconic sporting tradition, the world's oldest annual marathon, and one of the world's six major marathons.<sup>1</sup> The attackers detonated two homemade bombs near the finish line of the race, killing three and injuring more than 260 people. By April 18, the FBI had released photographs of the attackers, who were identified as brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, American citizens of Chechen descent. Shortly after the attackers were identified, they got into a gunfight with the police while they were trying to escape. Tamerlan Tsarnaev was killed in the shootout, and once Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was arrested, he admitted that he and his brother had been motivated by a radical extremist Islamist ideology. Tamerlan had begun infrequently attending a *mosque*<sup>a</sup> in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the year leading up to the attack, whereas Dzhokhar had attended that same mosque only once. The mosque in question, the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB), is affiliated with the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) in Roxbury, the largest mosque in New England. The two mosques are owned by the same entity, the Islamic Society of Boston Trust, but are managed as separate organizations. MAS Boston manages the ISBCC, whereas a subset of the ISB Trust manages ISB in Cambridge.

When news was announced that the attackers identified themselves as Muslim and there was a loose connection with ISB, the Boston Muslim community came under unprecedented media scrutiny. The media attention was concentrated on both mosques, but especially on ISBCC, because it is larger and more recognized. The media onslaught faced by both ISB and ISBCC in the aftermath of the attack presents the typical situation faced by any mosque caught up in the aftermath of a domestic terror attack perpetrated by extremist Muslims, and therefore merits deeper examination.

## Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center

Since its inception, ISBCC has had to learn to thrive despite opposition from some vocal quarters. Construction on the site in Roxbury began in November 2002, with a groundbreaking ceremony that was attended by Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston City Councilman Chuck Turner, U.S. Representative Michael E. Capuano, and religious leaders such as Bishop Filipe Teixeira of the Catholic Church of the Americas and *Imam* Talal Eid<sup>b</sup> from the Islamic Center of New England, in Sharon, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> However, the mosque wasn't officially completed until June 2009. Along the way, ISBCC faced many challenges, including financial hurdles, a legal battle, and a media controversy that caused construction to be suspended.<sup>3</sup> ISBCC was accused of financial

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<sup>a</sup> Mosque: A Muslim place of worship.

<sup>b</sup> Imam: A Muslim prayer leader.

improprieties in purchasing the Roxbury site and of having links to Islamic extremist groups. In 2004, the Boston Redevelopment Authority was sued over the sale of land to ISBCC and ISBCC countersued for defamation. It wasn't until February 2007 that the lawsuit against the sale to ISBCC was dismissed and the legal battle came to an end.<sup>4</sup> Construction resumed, and services started in the mosque later that year.

*The resistance ISBCC faced during its inception and construction taught the center's leaders and congregants the critical importance of forging relationships with the local Roxbury community, the city of Boston, and prominent leaders from other faith groups, particularly the Christian and Jewish communities.*

In June 2009, ISBCC held an inauguration ceremony that included an interfaith breakfast, a prayer service, and a ribbon cutting ceremony conducted by Mayor Menino. The public ceremony was attended by a very large crowd of Muslims and people of other faiths (and of no faith) and featured speeches by prominent individuals such as the first Muslim Congressman, U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, and William A. Graham, Dean of Harvard Divinity School.

Today, the 70,000-square-foot cultural center hosts more than 1,500 congregants each Friday and houses a school, a café, and a multipurpose space used by interfaith, educational, religious, and other organizations. ISBCC offers services such as weekly *halaqas*,<sup>c</sup> special programming for converts, free health services, burial services, a food pantry, and courses in English as a second language. More recently, under the new leadership of *Sheikh* Yasir Fahmy,<sup>d</sup> the mosque's senior imam, the center has reorganized its programs to inspire community members to live prophetically—to commit themselves to seeking knowledge (*ilm*), practicing spirituality, building community, and embodying the ethic of service to others.

ISBCC seeks to become a model of civic engagement for the Muslim community. The resistance ISBCC faced during its inception and construction taught the center's leaders and congregants the critical importance of forging relationships with the local Roxbury community, the city of Boston, and prominent leaders from other faith groups, particularly the Christian and Jewish communities. It also taught them the importance of working with others for the common good. A major component of programming at ISBCC today focuses on continuing to develop and strengthen those relationships. ISBCC offers its congregants civics lessons about local government by hosting candidate forums, working through its Neighbors for Neighbors Initiative, and partnering with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization to address the affordable housing crisis in the city.

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<sup>c</sup> Halaqa: A religious study circle.

<sup>d</sup> Sheikh: A religious leader.



## ISBCC Leadership

At the time of the attack, ISBCC was led by Imam Suhaib Webb and Executive Director Yusufi Vali. Imam Webb, who was born and raised in Oklahoma, converted to Islam at age 18 and began his career in education soon after. He earned a bachelor's degree in education while simultaneously receiving training in Islamic studies. After serving as an imam in various communities across the United States, Imam Webb traveled to Egypt to continue his Islamic education at Al-Azhar University. Imam Webb is a *hafiz*<sup>e</sup> and holds several certificates and credentials from traditional scholars in Islamic studies.

Yusufi Vali has served as the executive director of the ISBCC since 2012. Previously, he was a community organizer with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a chapter of the Industrial Areas Foundation. He also worked as a field organizer on the campaign to elect President Obama. Vali is a graduate of Princeton University, a Marshall Scholar, and a Fulbright Scholar. He has a master's degree in Islamic Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, an MSc in Philosophy from the London School of Economics, and a certificate from Boston University in Nonprofit Management and Leadership.

By the time the Boston Marathon bombing happened in 2013, ISBCC had already established itself as a promising player in the Muslim and interfaith community.

## ISBCC Response to the Boston Marathon Bombing

When the two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon, ISBCC immediately went into action, issuing a press release to clarify the organization's clear stance against violence and opening the mosque for anyone seeking shelter, particularly participants in the marathon, some of whom were stranded when the city was declared under lockdown. Importantly, ISBCC leaders proactively reached out to the mayor's office and offered to help in any way they could.

Once the Muslim identity of the attackers and a link with its sister mosque, ISB, had been established, ISBCC stepped up to help ISB, which had a shortage of staff. ISBCC Executive Director Yusufi Vali volunteered to act as the spokesperson for ISB, while Imam Suhaib Webb continued to represent ISBCC. The ISBCC team decided to address the media onslaught head-on, and responded to nearly every media request they received while being careful about engaging with conservative media outlets. At its most intense, media scrutiny lasted two to four weeks, during which up to fifty reporters would arrive at ISBCC and ISB every day. In the four weeks after the bombing, the ISBCC team carried out more than 150 media interviews, and Imam Webb appeared on five major television

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<sup>e</sup> Hafiz: A person who has memorized the entire Quran in Arabic.

networks<sup>5</sup> and three major radio shows.<sup>6</sup> ISBCC also used its relationships in the print media to help produce more than thirty positive articles, which included two front-page features in the *Boston Globe* and a *New York Times* op-ed co-authored by Imam Webb. In addition, to help expand the organization's media engagement, ISBCC hosted a professional media training workshop that was attended by more than thirty community leaders.

During this time, ISBCC staff released more than six press releases condemning the bombings and calling for cooperation with law enforcement agencies. While ISBCC leaders encouraged all community members to fully cooperate with law enforcement officials, they were also careful to ensure that individual legal rights were protected. To this end, in the four weeks after the bombing, ISBCC hosted Know Your Rights Trainings through the New England Muslim Bar Association (NEMBA) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). They also worked with NEMBA, ACLU, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) to set up a free hotline for legal assistance for community members.

ISBCC continued to provide pastoral services, offering prayer and counseling to community members. ISBCC also held a prayer vigil for the victims of the bombings that was featured in the *Boston Globe*, and invited prominent interfaith leaders to the first Friday prayers after the attack. At the Friday prayers, which were covered by the press, each of the Christian and Jewish leaders made strong statements of unequivocal support for the Muslim community. While ISBCC received some hateful messages during the crisis, they were outnumbered by hundreds of emails, letters, and phone calls of support.

By all measures, ISBCC's handling of the media attention can be termed a success. Against the odds, ISBCC generated predominantly positive media coverage and enjoyed strong and public support from the governor and the mayor's office, and powerful interfaith leaders.

## How to Manage a Crisis

Successful navigation of a crisis requires key actions before, during, and after the crisis.

### Before a Crisis

#### ***Build Strong Relationships in the Community***

Perhaps the single most important ingredient in ISBCC's successful handling of the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing was the investments the organization had made in building strong relationships in the community, long before the tragedy happened. Having reliable relationships of trust in the media, local government and law enforcement agencies, and the interfaith and broader local community was vitally

important, because leaders at ISBCC were able to depend on those community partners for help, support, and advice. Crucially, in the immediate aftermath of the attack, when questions were raised on the role of ISB and ISBCC in the radicalization of the Tsarnaev brothers, prominent individuals from these community partners were willing to make public statements and gestures of support that made an immense difference in how the two mosques were being viewed.

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According to Imam Webb:

*The success of how the Boston bombing was handled started before the bombing. There were really, really important community organization and grassroots relationships established with a large number of different communities in the city. We were accessible. We were covered by the media at least once or twice a month. We had strong interfaith relationships. We had strong institutional relationships. I was working with Harvard. Yusufi was [working with] Boston University. We had a decent relationship with the mayor of the city at that time, Menino. I think what is very important for Muslims to understand is that these things do not come out of a vacuum, and it's not just because we're some kind of awesome, religiously blessed community that great things happen. There has to be really, really strong grassroots work in relationship building.<sup>7</sup>*

For ISBCC, partners from each of the categories that follow were critically important.

### **The Interfaith Community**

Immediately after the public learned that the bombers were Muslims, one of the first steps Executive Director Vali took was to arrange a conference call with ISBCC's interfaith allies through the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), whose primary goal is to develop local leadership to fight for social justice.<sup>8</sup> ISBCC had been an active member of GBIO for more than three years. In fact, only a few months before the bombing, Vali and Imam Webb had proactively started an initiative within GBIO at which local clergy members met monthly with the sole aim of developing relationships and getting to know one another better. When Vali reached out to powerful leaders within that group to seek help and advice, they were already well acquainted with Vali, Webb, and other ISBCC leaders, and held them in high esteem.



All prominent local religious leaders responded to Vali's call almost immediately. Among the participants of that first conference was Rabbi Ronne Friedman, senior rabbi at the Temple Israel for the past seventeen years.<sup>9</sup> Founded in 1854, Temple Israel is the largest Reform Synagogue in New England and a strong leader in the Boston Jewish community.<sup>10</sup> Also on the call was Reverend Burns Stanfield, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in South Boston for the last twenty years and current president of the GBIO.<sup>11</sup> In Yusufi's words "these are powerful leaders; we're not talking about just any interfaith folks, these are people with big congregations, and they're political actors as well."<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the call was twofold: to assure the leaders that whereas a link had been established between Tamerlane Tsarnaev and ISB, he clearly "wasn't one of us," and second, to seek the advice of these experienced and influential interfaith leaders on how ISBCC should proceed.<sup>13</sup>

*But I think [this support] was predicated very much on the relationship that had been established and the enormous trust that we felt for Yusufi and the appreciation, the affection we felt for Suhaib Webb.*

*Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Senior Rabbi, Temple Israel*

The response of the religious leaders was immensely helpful. They advised Vali to first and foremost remain in communication with law enforcement agencies and offer them whatever help ISBCC could offer. Importantly, they assured Vali that they would all support ISBCC and help the mosque get through the crisis. This support was crucial, as became evident only a few days later. At the first Friday prayers after the bombing, ISBCC invited interfaith leaders and local community members to the mosque. The event received generous media coverage and went a long way in setting the tone for how ISBCC was viewed during the immediate crisis and afterward.<sup>14</sup>

The investment in authentic engagement with community religious leaders before a crisis struck meant that when ISBCC needed help, it had prominent individuals who were eager to do so.

According to Rev. Burns:

*When Yusufi invited Rabbi Ronne and I, it felt important to be there that day. A number of people from the community were there just to be there. It was an important time to be publicly supportive. It felt important to do it; it also felt natural to do it. These were people we had [met with and with whom] we had relationships. And I'd worked with Yusufi for a number of years, as have other colleagues. Yusufi is an excellent organizer, and excellent organizing involves building relationships.<sup>15</sup>*

Rabbi Ronne expressed similar concern and support for the Muslim community:

*We had active concern for what might happen in relation to ISBCC or to the Muslim population after the Marathon bombing. We wanted to do whatever we could possibly do to show support. So, I called Yusufi and I said, “You guys are going to have to let us know what you need and what you think might be helpful. [...] We want you to know you’re not on an island alone out there.”<sup>16</sup>*

Such warm support, however, cannot be expected without substantial efforts in relationship building. According to Rabbi Ronne:

*[The Friday prayer after the bombing] was an opportunity to let folks know both that we were concerned and that we rejected any attempt on [the] part of anyone to impose a guilt by affiliation. But I think [this support] was predicated very much on the relationship that had been established and the enormous trust that we felt for Yusufi and the appreciation, the affection we felt for Suhaib Webb.<sup>17</sup>*

Organizations may face hurdles in establishing genuine interfaith relationships. It is thus imperative to have an open and flexible approach to relationship building, one that seeks to mitigate conflict. For ISB (not ISBCC), for

*[O]nce an effort is made to navigate hurdles in building relationships, the rewards are manifold.*

instance, an earnest interfaith effort after 9/11 ran into trouble, and the relationship with Temple Israel remained dormant until Imam Webb and Vali revived it. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, several interfaith services were held around Boston, including at Temple Israel and Trinity Church. Back then, ISB did not have the space to hold a large interfaith service, so in lieu of the service, ISB invited Temple Israel and Trinity Church to work on joint projects with ISB. However, before this could be organized, one of the leaders from ISB was reported to have made some anti-Jewish and anti-Israel remarks. No real effort was made to clarify or rectify the situation, and some members of the Jewish community expressed reservations about the intentions of some in the Muslim community. Relations with Temple Israel remained complicated until a concerted effort was made by the ISBCC team many years later, who built on the work that had begun by ISB.

However, once an effort is made to navigate hurdles in building relationships, the rewards are manifold. The Marathon experience made Reverend Burns realize how important it is to keep working on strengthening interfaith bonds. Reverend Burns teaches a seminary class that trains future leaders in community organizing. Whereas earlier he used to take his class to visit only a synagogue to meet Jewish leaders, he now also regularly brings his students to ISBCC to meet Muslim leaders. This kind of engagement and relationship building engenders benefits that extend beyond the immediate local community and establishes American Muslims in the mainstream American religious and societal fabric.

## Local Government and Law Enforcement Agencies

Because of the Islamophobia ISBCC faced during its inception, from early on ISBCC learned the importance of establishing strong bonds with local government and law enforcement agencies. ISBCC's groundbreaking ceremony in November 2002 was attended by Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston City Councilman Chuck Turner, and U.S. Representative Michael E. Capuano. Then in 2009, Mayor Menino participated in ISBCC's official inaugural ceremony. The ceremony was also attended by other prominent government representatives such as U.S. Representative Keith Ellison. Later, in 2010, ISBCC organized more than 1,100 Muslims to meet with Governor Deval Patrick, who made a commitment to visit three other mosques in Massachusetts.<sup>18</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, ISBCC witnessed the dividends from the investment in these bonds. Even as there were voices from the political right accusing local mosques of playing a role in the Tsarnaevs' radicalization, local government and law enforcement agencies displayed unflinching public support for Boston's Muslims. Governor Patrick said that his first priority after the bombing was to keep the Boston community united, and to ensure that Muslims were not scapegoated:

*To me, [it was important] that we turn to rather than on each other. We've seen lots of examples, in recent times and through history, frankly, where the acts of one or two were used by some to extrapolate conclusions about whole groups of people and how destructive that is or can be. I wanted to make sure that it didn't happen here.<sup>18</sup>*

So deep and uniform was the support for Muslims from government and law enforcement agencies that Yusufi Vali and the ISBCC leadership team felt comfortable focusing their limited time and resources on managing other challenges such as the media. Other than maintaining regular contact with law enforcement officials, ISBCC did not need to substantially engage with them because they were all on the same page. Still, ISBCC did not take support from local government and law enforcement for granted; one of the first steps ISBCC took after the bombing was to call the offices of the governor and the mayor to assure them that ISBCC would assist in any way it could. Unsurprisingly, such support can be traced to proactive relationship building and engagement before a serious tragedy tests community bonds.



According to Governor Patrick:

*I've had other interactions with [ISBCC] over the years and with leadership there. They have joined with other faith leaders at other times around very, very constructive things that were important for the community. I have every reason to believe that they stepped up in this case as well.<sup>20</sup>*

As Governor Patrick highlights, relationship building goes beyond mere verbal affirmations and requires active participation in projects that benefit the wider community, not just American Muslims. It is also a long-term process. Proactive relationship building began while ISBCC was still in the initial planning and development stages. Through ISB and the work of Bilal Kaleem, the Muslim community joined GBIO.<sup>21</sup> MAS Boston, the organization then charged with completing the center, was seeking opportunities to help rebuild the support for it. In turn, GBIO was seeking opportunities to broaden its base, especially with diverse congregants in the inner city. Bilal joined the board of GBIO and began rallying the Muslim community around issues that affected them. After building relationships with the other board members and key rabbis and ministers, they began working directly with the governor and members of the legislature on the issue of universal health care.

Another example of involvement by ISBCC is the BRIDGES (Building Respect in Diverse Groups to Enhance Security) initiative, a group of law enforcement and community leaders who meet monthly to discuss concerns and issues. The group was established by Muslim and Sikh communities after 9/11 with the aim of developing access and relationships among community leaders and members of government and law enforcement. The issues discussed at BRIDGES meetings are not limited to national security; rather, they cover whatever is concerning the communities at the time, such as civil rights, citizenship, and law enforcement. U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz is a part of BRIDGES. After the Marathon bombing, Ms. Ortiz worked with the FBI to oversee and provide legal support for the investigation of the attacks. Once Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was arrested, Ms. Ortiz was in charge of leading the prosecution.

The ongoing relationship ISBCC had with Ms. Ortiz's office proved to be immensely helpful. After the attack but before the identity of the bombers had been established, Ms. Ortiz preemptively extended her support to the Muslim community and asked them to reach out to her if indeed it did turn out that the attackers were Muslims. This is precisely

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what ISBCC did. When ISBCC leaders shared their concern that ISB and ISBCC could be held responsible, the U.S. Attorney's office connected ISBCC with the Public Information Officer and tasked that office with finding professional help and guidance for ISBCC to manage media.

During and after the attacks, Ms. Ortiz was publicly vocal about her support for the Muslim community. Expressing her views on people using the acts of a few radicalized individuals to demonize an entire community, Ms. Ortiz said:

*When people engage in horrific crimes and criminal activity and use religion to justify their actions, I don't buy that. I think it's just a cop out that individuals use, individuals who I think in their heart are acting criminally for perhaps a variety of other reasons. It could be for political ideologies, extremist views, it could be because they want to influence the way people think about foreign policy and what we should or should not be doing in other parts of the world. But there's nothing that [sanctions that] in Islam that I'm aware of and that I've learned.<sup>22</sup>*

Ms. Ortiz stressed that her understanding of Islam came from her engagement with the Muslim community:

*I've educated myself from many of the folks I have met and the events that I've engaged in that led me to believe that there's nothing that's not peaceful about Islam. And so, when people say, oh if you're a Muslim that means you must be a terrorist. It's like, wow, that's not an educated view or a knowledgeable view of what Islam is all about. You really don't know about it. I just think that it's unfortunate that that message sometimes gets lost.<sup>23</sup>*

Ms. Ortiz is also of the opinion that relationship building is the single most important step a Muslim mosque or center can take to counter negative voices. The aim should be to become a known entity within the broad community, so that there is no mystery or suspicion around what the mosque or center is. According to Ms. Ortiz:

*The more that [a Muslim organization] engages with a variety of other institutions and partners and establishes those relationships and its own reputation, then the more it can fall back on. Because when people are saying, "well, this is what we think is happening over there," not only can they say "no, that is not what we stand for; this is who we are. Look at what we've done." But then also, "go talk to so and so at this institution, go talk to so and so in that community." They also have reliable folks and other representatives [who] will speak on their behalf.<sup>24</sup>*

Making an effort to become a positive, known entity with law enforcement and government officials and the broader community was one of the key elements of ISBCC's effective management of the Marathon bombing crisis and its aftermath.

## The Media

Another key element of ISBCC's success was the positive way it managed the intense media scrutiny after the bombings. According to Yusufi Vali and Imam Webb, this too can be traced to the healthy relationships that ISBCC and its leaders had established with the media long before the attacks. These relationships were instrumental in enabling ISBCC to shape the narrative around the role of the two mosques in the lives of the bombers.

*According to both Imam Webb and Mr. Vali, to create a relationship of trust, Muslim organizations must realize that the media is not by default against Muslims. Although media outlets seek dramatic events and sometimes sensationalism, they are, after all, run by human beings. A good media strategy requires treating journalists with respect and generosity*

In fact, one of the first steps Imam Webb took after the attack, even before the identity of the bombers was revealed, was to call his contacts in the media and offer to keep them abreast of developments. The aim was to preemptively establish contact and trust with the media in case the attackers turned out to be Muslim. Again, having an open channel of communication with major media outlets requires prior efforts and investment. For instance, Mr. Vali had a good relationship with the *Boston Globe's* religion reporter, Lisa Wangsness, which he established when Ms. Wangsness spent weeks shadowing Imam Webb and visiting ISBCC while writing a profile piece on him. This experience allowed ISBCC to trust Ms. Wangsness and to open the doors of ISBCC to her, which in turn, allowed her to be receptive to working with ISBCC again. This relationship proved to be vital in ensuring that ISBCC received generous and positive coverage both during and after the bombings.

According to both Imam Webb and Mr. Vali, to create a relationship of trust, Muslim organizations must realize that the media is not by default against Muslims. Although media outlets seek dramatic events and sometimes sensationalism, they are, after all, run by human beings. A good media strategy requires treating journalists with respect and generosity, and appealing to their kindness. Second, to foster those relationships, leaders from Muslim organizations should reach out to journalists with potential stories. Stories need not be related only to religion or national security; in fact, Imam Webb encourages community members to highlight the vibrant cultural aspects of American Muslim life. These could include highlighting activities at the local Muslim Student Association, or describing how Syrian refugees are assimilating in the United States.



Third, to augment key relationships, community leaders should make sure that if they have an interesting story, they should contact their most valued contacts first. Journalists who can be trusted because mosque leaders may have had a previous good relationship with them in the past should be given priority when disseminating stories or information.

These steps can allow Muslim organizations to establish honest, clear relationships with the media that are critical in successfully steering through a potentially problematic situation.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Offer Media Training for Community Members***

One crucial element of crisis preparedness is to train community members to effectively engage with the media. This can be accomplished by hiring a professional communications agency, such as ReThink Media, which ISBCC hired. ISBCC had to organize such a training during the height of the Marathon bombing crisis when it became clear that the existing team was stretched too thin to meet all the media requests. Individuals who have not had effective media training can cause more harm than benefit, despite their good intentions. This is why both Imam Webb and Yusufi advise all mosques and Muslim organizations to proactively invest in having a sophisticated engagement with the media. If these types of education sessions are held regularly for congregation members, the organization will have a ready supply of individuals who have been professionally trained to persuasively engage with the media in a crisis and on day-to-day issues that affect American Muslims.

### ***Create a Crisis Management Plan and Run Practice Drills***

Unfortunately, incidents that involve radicalized individuals attacking Americans and that mire the local Muslim community in controversy are on the rise. Rather than sit back and hope it doesn't happen to them, Imam Webb and Yusufi advise mosque leaders, particularly in large metropolitan cities, to have ready a thorough crisis management plan, the aim of which is to have preassigned roles and duties for mosque leaders and staff in the event of a crisis.

In addition to having a clear plan in place, mosques should run regular crisis management practice drills to ensure that all team members are familiar with how the organization's plan should be implemented. Moreover, practice drills allow organizations to identify weakness in their plans and to proactively address them. Radicalized Muslims who commit terror attacks are a reality that American Muslims must face head on. The best strategy is to be well prepared for such unfortunate emergencies.

## During a Crisis

### *Communicate Regularly with Government and Law Enforcement Agencies*

One of the first steps Yusufi Vali took after the bombing and before it was clear the bombers self-identified as Muslim was to call the offices of the governor and the mayor to offer help. In addition, ISBCC repeatedly encouraged all their community and congregation members to provide any help or information that might aid the investigation. During the crisis, ISBCC released more than six press releases that called for utmost cooperation with law enforcement agencies. In the first Friday prayers after the bombing, Imam Webb reiterated the same message to his congregation in his sermon. The first Friday prayers were attended by more people than usual, including many guests outside of the Muslim community, and it was also covered by the media. This helped to publicly magnify ISBCC's stance of openness and cooperation with government and law enforcement agencies.

Any delay in sharing information can be perceived negatively. For example, three days after the bombing, when the FBI released photographs of the suspects, someone from ISB contacted Yusufi Vali to tell him that he recognized the men in the photographs. Even though he recognized the grave implications for ISB and ISBCC, Yusufi's advice was that the gentleman should immediately contact the FBI. Additionally, it is important for an organization to go beyond verbal affirmations and to proactively step up to help. After the Tsarnaev brothers had been identified, they got into a gunfight with the police as they attempted to flee. While the dramatic events were unfolding, Imam Fenny from ISB contacted the FBI and police, and offered to mediate between the attackers and the police. The FBI did not take him up on the offer, but his offer demonstrated the sincerity of ISB's pledge to help law enforcement officers.

However, Mr. Vali and Imam Webb stress that it is important to balance openness and cooperation with self-protection when engaging with law enforcement officials. Soon after the bombers had been identified, Mr. Vali proactively reached out to the FBI to share whatever information he had. But before speaking with the agents, he consulted with lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and had a lawyer present with him during his meeting with the agents. Similarly, while ISBCC encouraged congregation members to come forward with any information they had, they also took care to educate members about their legal rights and protections. Despite the ongoing crisis, ISBCC held Know Your Rights training sessions through the New England Muslim Bar Association (NEMBA) and ACLU for the local Muslim community. ISBCC also worked with NEMBA, ACLU, and CAIR to set up a free hotline for legal assistance for the community.

## ***Seek Help and Advice from Allies and Professionals***

Yusufi Vali and Imam Webb also reached out to their Muslim and non-Muslim allies to seek advice and help. These included their friends in the interfaith community and the media. The aim was to take these contacts into confidence and reinforce the relationship of trust by giving them a full account of the events from their perspective, rather than leaving allies wondering whether a connection existed between the attackers and ISB and ISBCC. In doing so, ISBCC effectively tapped into a valuable resource of advice and contacts that extended beyond the usual bounds of the Muslim community. In addition, actively seeking help and advice catalyzed a renewed pledge from these partners to show support for ISBCC. ISBCC was then able to capitalize on these offers to publicly demonstrate that it is a well-recognized and well-respected member of the local community.

Soon after the Tsarnaev brothers had been identified, ISBCC was contacted by ReThink Media, a professional communications agency that played a crucial role in helping ISBCC identify and communicate a clear and consistent message to the media throughout the crisis. Yusufi Vali and Imam Webb's advice to other Muslim organizations is to enlist a professional communications agency as soon as possible, even if the organization must pay for the agency's services. In their opinion, the investment is well worth the return.

## ***Craft and Communicate a Clear, Coherent, and Consistent Message to the Media***

ISBCC emerged out of the Marathon bombing crisis as a stronger community player and political actor. One of the keys to this success was the clear, coherent, and consistent message that ISBCC communicated to the media and the public. In the month after the attack, the ISBCC team responded to more than 150 interview requests. Imam Webb gave more than fifty interviews himself, including popular shows on major TV and radio networks. In each interaction, the ISBCC team stayed on course with a clear, well-defined message.

ISBCC's media message had three central themes: first, to highlight the identity of the Muslim community as equal Bostonians and insisting that Muslims should not be expected to speak or act any different from the rest of the grieving city. Second, to use the media attention to introduce ISBCC to the wider community and the country as an organization that is committed to its American Muslim identity and a practice of Islam that thrives within the cultural and legal contours of the United States. And third, the actions of the attackers did not represent Islam, and the attackers were not a part of the American Muslim community.

Effective communication of this three-pronged message was presented on two fronts. First, within the ISBCC team, coming to an agreement about the message and preparing to communicate that message to the media. Second, training congregants on the ISBCC talking points and how to speak to media representatives (during the crisis, ISBCC organized two media trainings and trained more than thirty community members in proper media engagement).

ISBCC has had the experience of unfriendly media outlets randomly asking to interview someone outside the mosque and then misconstruing that person's words. In addition, having several people readily available who had been trained in media relations also helped to lessen the responsibilities that were being shouldered by Mr. Vali and Imam Webb.

*“People fail to recognize—and sometimes even the Muslim community gets caught up in this—that we’re Muslim but we’re also Bostonian and we’re a part of the city.”*

*Yusufi Vali, Executive Director, ISBCC*

To successfully communicate the message, an organization must demonstrate its values, not just tell what its stance is. For example, to highlight their identity as Bostonians, ISBCC opened its doors to provide shelter to anyone during the crisis and ISBCC verbally pledged to help law enforcement officials with the investigation, and acted on that pledge by proactively sharing information and encouraging congregants to do the same.

### **Highlight American Muslims' Identity as Americans**

Early on, ISBCC leaders decided not to give in to public demands to condemn terrorism because it would mean treating American Muslims as outsiders. Instead, in its media message, ISBCC chose to focus on its congregants' identity first and foremost as Bostonians and an equal part of a city that was grieving. ISBCC consciously resisted attempts, no matter how subtle, to be categorized as anything other than American and Bostonian. ISBCC leaders made a concerted effort to break from the dichotomous stereotype of American Muslims as victims of backlash on one hand, or perpetrators, sympathizers, or enablers of the attack on the other. According to Vali:

*People fail to recognize—and sometimes even the Muslim community gets caught up in this—that we’re Muslim but we’re also Bostonian and we’re a part of the city. So, when something like this attack happens, you feel like any other Bostonian: you fear for your own safety and the safety of your family, your community, and your city. The whole dynamic of what the attack means for Muslims comes in after that, the whole terrorism angle [comes later].<sup>26</sup>*



Vali and Imam Webb made it a point to effectively communicate this nuanced view to the wider American public. Vali stressed the importance of not giving in to the media's expectation of American Muslims fitting stereotypes in this way:

*The first thing that we had to do was realize and own the fact that we're Bostonians and that when the media came to us for messaging, we were not going to speak as "the Other" that was either victimized or was part of the perpetrators, but we were*

*going to speak as Bostonians. So, when a reporter would come and ask, "How are you guys really feeling, are you really concerned about the backlash?" We'd say "Well, you know we're sad and we're grieving for our city." Because that was what we were doing. We were stunned that something like this could happen to the symbol of our city. So, we really tried to speak authentically from our Boston identities on how we were feeling at that moment.<sup>27</sup>*

*"We are going to speak as Bostonians. We are going to say that we're sad, that we're so deeply saddened by what's happened and we're angry that someone could do this to our city. This implicitly condemns terrorism, but it doesn't force us to be 'the Other'."*

*Imam Suhaib Webb, former Senior Imam, ISBCC*

There was pressure on ISBCC to condemn terrorism, even from sympathetic organizations that offered help and services. But Imam Webb was adamant not to be forced to condemn terrorism when such condemnations were not expected from non-Muslim Bostonians. According to Yusufi Vali:

*Imam Suhaib was the one who said, "We are going to speak as Bostonians. We are going to say that we're sad, that we're so deeply saddened by what's happened and we're angry that someone could do this to our city. This implicitly condemns terrorism, but it doesn't force us to be 'the Other'."<sup>28</sup>*

For Imam Webb, presenting Muslims as authentically American comes down to language. Often, American Muslims inadvertently use the language of us and them, which isolates Muslims from the rest of America.

According to Imam Webb:

*A problem with the Muslim community to this day, is that when they get in the media, they tend to use the us and we dialect: We as American Muslims, or We as Muslims. We [at ISBCC] decided to avoid the language of they and stick to iyyaka na'budu, which [translated from] the Qurān<sup>f</sup> [means] we worship Allah together. So, we spoke through the voice of Boston; we would say “We mourn with the city as Bostonians.” We wouldn’t say as Muslims or American Muslims. We purposely adopted an ethos [that] avoided using any type of language that would partition ourselves from other people.<sup>29</sup>*

In addition to highlighting the local and American identity of Muslims, Imam Webb and Vali made an effort to ensure that the language of their message was something the public could understand. To make their points, they relied on universal principles rather than technical Islamic concepts. They realized if they got too technical the media would turn to other sources, potentially interviewing other experts, some of whom hold predominantly negative views of Islam. Instead, they focused their messaging on ideas such as mercy, peace, equality, engagement, and compassion.

### **Expect Challenges and Pushback**

Communicating this nuanced message did not come without its challenges. Imam Webb recalls an incident when he was invited to appear on National Public Radio’s show *On Point*, hosted by Tom Ashbrook, recorded in front of a live audience. During the interview, Ashbrook asked Imam Webb, “Please help us understand why someone from your community would do this?” Imam Webb responded that the two attackers were not a part of his community, and he shouldn’t be expected to explain their actions. When Mr. Ashbrook resisted the idea, Imam Webb asked him how he would explain the words and actions of radical and hateful people like the ones at Westboro Baptist Church (a church widely recognized as a hate group that targets the LGBT community, Muslims, Catholics, and Jews, among others), or the white supremacist serial killer and cult leader from the 1960s, Charles Manson. When Imam Webb clearly told Mr. Ashbrook, “These people [the Marathon attackers] are not our community. They are criminals,” he received a standing ovation from the audience.

*“We mourn with the city as Bostonians.” We wouldn’t say as Muslims or American Muslims. We purposely adopted an ethos [that] avoided using any type of language that would partition ourselves from other people.*

*Imam Suhaib Webb, former Senior Imam, ISBCC*

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<sup>f</sup> Qurān: Central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.

In a reference to this pushback from the media, Imam Webb says it was a struggle to explain that radicals like the Tsarnaev brothers fall far outside the mainstream Islam practiced by American Muslims, and that Muslims did not sympathize with their motivations:

*The challenge was trying to acknowledge the fact that within strands of Islam outside of the mainstream, there are people who are freaking insane. I know no more about these people than [many people], and separating ourselves from the assumptions of the media that somehow like we're boys with these guys, like we "get it." It was a challenge having to undermine the notion that somehow, we were implicitly involved or that we sympathized with this, that we understood or had some kind of inside information. My job was to continually report to them the idea that we are also victims, right? We're on the victims' side of this in the sense that we weren't killed, but we're citizens of the city. This is an iconic event, the Boston Marathon, that many of us attend.<sup>30</sup>*

The challenges were not limited to external forces. ISBCC also had to manage some resistance to the message from within its own community. For example, one major theme in ISBCC's message stressed that the Tsarnaev brothers did not represent mainstream Islam, that the Islam practiced by most American Muslims is rooted in mercy, compassion, and peace. Some community members took issue with this categorization and complained that ISBCC should not have made this distinction, since it implied that there is another version of Islam *not* rooted in mercy, compassion, and peace. Their view was that the radical extremist Islam is not Islam, and ISBCC should not use the categorization of mainstream versus fringe or extreme. ISBCC leaders had to then clearly explain their stance and viewpoint to their own community as well. Thus, in communicating its message, ISBCC had to balance talking both to multiple internal and external audiences.

*It was a challenge having to undermine the notion that somehow, we were implicitly involved or that we sympathized with this, that we understood or had some kind of inside information.*

*Imam Suhaib Webb, former Senior Imam, ISBCC*

## Expect and Plan for Attacks from People on the Far Right

ISBCC's experience shows that no matter how well prepared or well thought out an organization's message, it will still come under attack from extremists both inside and outside the Muslim community. It is therefore extremely important for an organization to have a strategy to protect and support their leaders and spokespersons, since it is those individuals who are at the frontlines in crisis and most exposed to vicious attacks. For Imam Webb, the very visible and prominent representative of ISBCC, the attacks and the fallout were particularly ruthless. ISBCC resisted all attempts to be put on the defensive because of the actions of two radicalized Muslims, insisting that Muslims are as American as anyone else. This earned them the ire of the American right-wing media. Additionally, after the attack, Imam Webb refused to hold funeral services for the attackers. Predictably, this brought on the wrath of extremist Muslims, who launched a brutal, hateful online campaign against Imam Webb.

Fox News, for example, targeted Imam Webb, running a three-part special on him. The coverage included allegations that Imam Webb had met with the Tsarnaev brothers, that he knew al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki, that he was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a jihadist, and that ISBCC was "a terrorist factory," an accusation that stings to this day. Such allegations were picked up (and in some cases later retracted) by other news outlets. Imam Webb also had many invitations to speak at events that were revoked. The most obvious one was when President Obama came to Boston for an interfaith service at a local church two days after the attack. Imam Webb was scheduled to speak at the major event as a representative of the Muslim community. However, the night before, he was informed by the governor's office that he would not be speaking; despite being the imam of the largest mosque in New England and having represented the Boston Muslim community on national media, Imam Webb was replaced by another, much lesser-known Muslim leader. To this day, no clear explanation has been provided for the change.

In the entire difficult experience, what stuck out most for Imam Webb was how little support he received from his fellow Muslims. In many instances, leaders of the Jewish community spoke up to defend Imam Webb, while Muslims, nationally and locally, remained silent. According to Imam Webb:

*When people want to destroy your career, or come after you in a way that Fox News did with me, it was really the Jewish community that supported me more than the Muslim community. Muslims have to think about strategically creating defense mechanisms when it comes to dealing with the media, when the media can really have a detrimental impact on peoples' lives.<sup>31</sup>*



It was clearly a difficult realization for Imam Webb that despite the size of his congregation, or how well regarded he was in the community, when push came to shove, he was left to defend himself alone. Imam Webb says of the experience:

*The Muslim community had nothing to say, even in Boston. Basically, it felt like you're a fighter and you're getting hit and beat, and you turn around and your manager's gone. And then someone from the crowd throws a chair and hits the guy on the head. And that was somewhat shocking because I thought that Boston would have been a little bit more used to the potential of Islamophobes after what happened with [the inception and construction of] the mosque. [...] It was a very lonely place to be.<sup>32</sup>*

Imam Webb has clear ideas on how, in the future, leaders and communities can show support to a Muslim representative under attack in the media. The obvious first step is for prominent local and national Muslim leaders to publicly denounce allegations being made against the individual in question. Second, community leaders should galvanize

*[W]hen the biased media comes after Muslim leaders, the community needs to be ready with a strategy to show robust support and to unequivocally counter all baseless accusations.*

their congregations to protest the accusations and demonstrate support for the leader. For instance, to counter the Fox News special on Imam Webb, a protest of even 60 or 70 people (a small number, considering the size of the congregation) would have sent a message through which community members publicly vouch for someone who leads them in prayer. Third, individuals should directly engage with the media by writing op-eds and letters to the editor expressing their concern about the character assassination of a valued Muslim leader, highlighting all the positive things he has accomplished in the wider community. These and many other common-sense ideas can be tailored to fit a community's needs and capacity, but the larger point remains: when the biased media comes after Muslim leaders, the community needs to be ready with a strategy to show robust support and to unequivocally counter all baseless accusations.

## **Highlight Community Members**

When the entire Muslim community is coming under attack as sympathizing with or enabling terrorists and criminals, it is important to spotlight voices and stories that demonstrate Muslims' American identity in a manner that is relatable to the wider public. For ISBCC, this lesson was learned in a most powerful way a year after the bombing tragedy, when the ISBCC team launched a concerted media campaign around the anniversary of the event. As part of the campaign and to highlight the Muslim

community as Bostonians, ISBCC decided to spotlight some Muslims who were running in the marathon. As part of its marathon anniversary coverage, the *Boston Globe* featured a Muslim runner on its cover page.

This incident also lends support to Imam Webb and Vali's earlier point that Muslims must not view the media as an enemy, and investments in relationships (such as ISBCC's relationship with a reporter at the *Boston Globe*) pay off huge returns. After an attack, a mosque or a Muslim organization should seek ordinary congregation members who can articulately and passionately defend their identity as an American and a Muslim through their own personal stories. Once such individuals are identified, they should be given support and training to write well, and to publish on widely read platforms. For example, as part of the marathon anniversary coverage, ISBCC congregation members published nine op-ed articles across the country.

The fact that the ISBCC team was able to successfully transmit its message despite opposition is a testament to their remarkable management of an event that could have easily irreparably damaged the institution's hard-earned reputation. The adeptness of ISBCC is not lost to outside observers. According to Rabbi Ronne from Temple Israel:

*With ISBCC, there is the emergence of a Muslim organization with a much, much more sophisticated sense of how to operate in the United States, or in this case in the City of Boston. I mean, I watch with a sense of real appreciation for how quickly that's emerging. One of the things that happens too often in an interfaith environment is [that] people expect other groups to have achieved the same level of sophistication without the same experience. I think the level of sophistication ISBCC is obtaining now is quite remarkable for just how young both ISBCC is and also how young the Muslim community is in the United States.<sup>33</sup>*

### ***Streamline Internal Processes and Focus on Agility***

When crisis hits, time is of the essence in getting the message out. Despite ISBCC's efficient management of the post-marathon narrative, Vali wishes that the team had been able to act faster.<sup>34</sup> Any mosque or organization leadership faced with a similar situation must prioritize agility and fluidity over bureaucracy and streamline organizational processes as much as possible. Ideally, streamlined procedures should have been established in the organization's crisis management plan, and even if they have, the key is to remain flexible. At ISBCC, as soon as it became clear that the attackers self-identified as Muslims, mosque leaders started crafting a media message and strategy. Still, they were taken aback by the sudden and intense media attention.

Imam Webb recalls his experience:

*The night that it was announced [that the attackers were Muslim], I was going to an interfaith gathering. I basically got swarmed by what could only be considered a media paparazzi, [reporters] literally following me, “Imam! Imam! Imam!” I mean, I felt like I was Zayn Malik or something, and I had reunited with One Direction.<sup>35</sup>*

Intraorganizational management must be efficiently handled. The ISBCC Board of Directors chose to stay out of the management team’s way. Vali and Imam Webb count this decision as one of the major reasons for their success, since it allowed them to act with speed when the situation required. In addition, keeping the crisis management team small and its management flexible meant greater readiness and adaptability to developing events.

### **Provide Mental Health Support for Front-Line Team Members**

Crisis management in a hostile environment can take a massive toll on the leaders who represent the community. They are required not only to engage with a deluge of media requests, they also face vicious personal attacks aimed at destroying their reputations and careers. All of this takes place in the backdrop of a genuine local and national tragedy in which innocent victims have been killed by individuals calling themselves Muslims. Muslim spokespersons and representatives must process their own emotions while performing demanding and stressful tasks at breakneck speed.

Mosques and Muslim organizations should proactively recognize the potential mental health hazards of this situation and have counseling and support on hand for leaders. In addition, leaders must be given the time and space to process the information and heal.

According to Vali:

*I wish that I had fully mourned the marathon bombing. As soon as the bombing happened, I kind of went into strategy mode and thinking about what does this mean for our community, etcetera, and trying to organize. But I wish I had taken 20 minutes to walk outside and just mourn what had happened because I don’t think I or even Imam Suhaib fully mourned what happened.<sup>36</sup>*

Having mental health resources to help leaders navigate the situation is crucial because such an experience can leave long-term scars. Vali explains:

*Every time since then whenever there are [terrorist] attacks around the world and I have to write a press statement, I physically feel how I felt during the marathon bombing when I first found out that the [attackers] were Muslim. I feel that. And interestingly, after I'll do the work of writing the statements, for a day or two I just feel super down. I couldn't figure it out, it kept on happening and then I realized it's basically a little form of [post-traumatic stress].<sup>37</sup>*

In retrospect, Vali wishes both he and Imam Webb had taken some time off to recover after the initial intense media onslaught had subsided.

## After a Crisis

Effective crisis management does not end with a crisis, just as it does not begin with a crisis. An organization must remain on the lookout for any future opportunity that will allow it to emphasize its American Muslim identity and its place as a key community player. For ISBCC, the most obvious opportunity arose on the first anniversary after the attacks. The marathon would be the focus of national attention. ISBCC proactively planned to leverage the occasion to reinforce the positive message it had communicated during the crisis and to counter any damage caused by some in the media.

Taking advantage of future events is important for several reasons. First, it enables the organization to plan far in advance, providing the chance to carefully craft a strategy and assemble a team, unrushed by the demands of incessant media scrutiny. Second, the messaging is not driven by external events; that is, it is not reactive. Not being in a crisis allows the organization much more latitude in developing the message it wants to send, thereby creating space for genuine proactivity and creativity. According to Yusufi, the real success of ISBCC's management of the marathon crisis cannot be fully measured without considering how well the team used the anniversary to demonstrate and build upon their message:

*Effective crisis management does not end with a crisis, just as it does not begin with a crisis.*

*[During] the marathon crisis we were telling people that we were Bostonians, in the anniversary we showed them how we were Bostonians.<sup>38</sup>*



To do this effectively, the ISBCC team started planning a strategy for media engagement months in advance. The team identified a few key goals they wanted to achieve around the marathon anniversary, which included:

1. To defend local Muslim institutions, specifically the ISBCC and the ISB Cambridge mosque, and the Muslim community writ-large from potential backlash through an intentional media and civic engagement plan;
2. To use the media attention to project a progressive vision of Islam and Muslims in America and of one Boston standing together;
3. To expand the local Boston Muslim community's capacity to communicate with the media through trainings; and
4. To deepen or to build relationships with political, interfaith, community, and media leaders so that they serve as allies for the Muslim community in countering discrimination, stereotyping, or profiling.

ISBCC put in a far more concerted and organized effort into messaging around the anniversary compared with the bombing crisis itself. ISBCC acquired a grant from the Proteus Fund specifically for these efforts. ISBCC hired a full-time media consultant for a three-month contract and established a team of twenty Muslim leaders. As a result, ISBCC successfully met most of the goals it had set for itself. Leading up to and during the marathon anniversary, ISBCC generated significant positive coverage, including two stories and one editorial in the *Boston Globe*, a cover story feature on three Muslim runners, two national news feature stories in the *Washington Post* and *New Yorker Online*, eight op-eds written by Muslims and published across the country, a television spot, and a radio interview. In addition, ISBCC held and participated in several well-attended community and interfaith events, all centered around ISBCC's initial message of inclusion and peace.

Building on the lessons ISBCC learned during the marathon crisis, ISBCC worked to ensure that no fewer than twenty Muslim leaders were quoted in stories about the anniversary of the bombing. The reason was to protect against smear campaigns aimed at Muslim leaders. During the crisis, ISBCC was heavily reliant on only two personalities, Yusufi Vali and Imam Webb. If either of these individuals had been successfully maligned, the organization would have suffered immensely. Thus, having numerous leaders voicing the same message makes it difficult for some in the media and other forces to completely smear the organization; even if some leaders are targeted, others can remain unharmed, leaving the organization's reputation intact.

# Lessons Learned

## *Before a Crisis:*

1. **Build strong relationships in the community.** Focus on creating genuine, mutually beneficial bonds with the interfaith community, local government and law enforcement agencies, and the media.
2. **Conduct media trainings for community members.** To build capacity for effective media engagement, invest in the services of a professional communications agency.
3. **Create a crisis management plan and run practice drills.** The aim of a plan is to have preassigned roles and duties for mosque leadership and staff in the event of a crisis, and to identify any potential organizational weaknesses, so that when the organization is the center of national attention, it can react efficiently.

## *During a Crisis:*

1. **Communicate regularly with government and law enforcement agencies.** Communicate with law enforcement in a timely manner, and be genuinely ready to provide information and support. However, take care to balance openness with civil rights protection. Provide staff and community members ample information and support regarding their legal rights and protections.
2. **Seek help and advice from allies and professionals.** Reach out to partners and ask for guidance and assistance, both inside and outside the Muslim community, including requesting a show of public support. Be prepared to invest in the services of professional agencies that can help navigate the crisis, for instance, a communications agency or a public relations firm.
3. **Craft and communicate a clear, coherent, and consistent message to the media.** Highlight American Muslims' identity as Americans, not Others. Expect internal and external pushback on the message, and plan for attacks from both inside and outside the Muslim community, particularly against Muslim leaders and representatives. Prepare a strategy to counter attacks and negative media coverage, and demonstrate community support for leaders. Highlight community members who can effectively humanize the Muslim community in a manner that is relatable for the broader American public.
4. **Create an environment of authentic engagement between the mosque leadership and the community,** such that in times of crises community members best suited to respond can be identified. To genuinely harness the potential of the community, mosque leaders should be able to reach out to community members to, for instance, act as representatives to the media or organize relevant committees.
5. **For effective crisis management and messaging, streamline internal processes and focus on agility.** Small, empowered teams are best suited for meeting the demands of a fast-paced crisis. For example, the ISBCC board of directors essentially decided to stay out of the management team's way and clearly communicated to the mosque leadership that they were available if the leaders needed help, but all decision-making powers were handed over to the mosque leaders.

6.

**Provide mental health support for frontline team members.** Leaders who represent Muslims during a crisis are required not only to engage with a deluge of media requests, they also face vicious personal attacks aimed at destroying their reputations and careers. Mosques and Muslim organizations should proactively recognize the potential mental health hazards of this situation, and have counseling and support on hand for these leaders.

### *After a Crisis:*

1.

**Seize future opportunities to reinforce the message that was communicated during the crisis.** Proactively plan for relevant events such as anniversaries of the crisis or community memorials to demonstrate with actions the message that was communicated during the crisis. This can include a coordinated media engagement strategy and relevant community and interfaith events.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/sports/Boston-Marathon>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://pluralism.org/profile/islamic-society-of-boston-cultural-center/>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://pluralism.org/landscape/boston/islam/>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://pluralism.org/profile/islamic-society-of-boston-cultural-center/>
- <sup>5</sup> CNN (Piers Morgan and News), MSNBC (Andrea Mitchell), ABC (ABCNews), BBC News and CSPAN.
- <sup>6</sup> NPR/WBUR (*Here and Now* and *On Point*) and WGBH (Jim Braude and Margery Eagan).
- <sup>7</sup> Suhaib Webb, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, August 24, 2016.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.gbio.org/about-gbio>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.tisrael.org/our-rabbis-cantor/rabbi-ronne-friedman/>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.tisrael.org/our-history/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.gbio.org/leadership>
- <sup>12</sup> Yusufi Vali, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, August 3, 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> Telephone interview with Yusufi Vali.
- <sup>14</sup> Lisa Wangsness and Meghan E. Irons, "Boston Muslims Gather, Saddened and Shaken," *Boston Globe*, April 27, 2013, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/27/boston-muslims-gather-for-friday-prayer-saddened-shaken-indignant/pRkx8sa7R8AmvtVSwhHhOWJ/story.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> Burns Stanfield, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, August 18, 2016.
- <sup>16</sup> Ronne Freidman, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, July 25, 2016.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Jonathan Saltzman and Travis Andersen, "Yours Is a Peaceful Faith," *Boston Globe*, May 23, 2010, [http://archive.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/05/23/at\\_muslim\\_forum\\_patrick\\_vows\\_action\\_to\\_combat\\_prejudice](http://archive.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/05/23/at_muslim_forum_patrick_vows_action_to_combat_prejudice).
- <sup>19</sup> Deval Patrick, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, July 27, 2016.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Yusufi Vali, "From Public Marginalisation to Public Recognition: The Importance of Relationships - Part I" in *A New Covenant of Virtue: Islam and Community Organising* (London: Citizens UK, 2012), <http://www.theology-centre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Islam-and-Community-Organising-V3-singles.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> Carmen Ortiz, telephone interview by Afif Rahman, July 26, 2016.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Telephone interview with Suhaib Webb.
- <sup>26</sup> Telephone interview with Yusufi Vali.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Telephone interview with Suhaib Webb.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Telephone interview with Ronne Freidman.
- <sup>34</sup> Telephone interview with Yusufi Vali.
- <sup>35</sup> Telephone interview with Suhaib Webb.
- <sup>36</sup> Telephone interview with Yusufi Vali.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.





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