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Pair offers ways to combat hate

The father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl and an expert on Islam lecture together at USM.

By *ELBERT AULL, Staff Writer*

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Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

Professor Judea Pearl, left, father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl, and Akbar Ahmed, an authority on Islam, visit USM Monday.

It would take just three years to change a generation of Muslims abroad, but the effort needs to start with a strategic shift in places like Washington.

And it would have to end with foreign aid money going toward schools and books instead of guns and tanks.

So said an expert on modern Islam Monday night during a forum on Muslim-Jewish relations at the University of Southern Maine in Portland.

"Millions of kids are being trained in exactly the same madrassas that existed before 9-11," said Akbar Ahmed, an Islamic studies professor at American University in Washington, D.C.

Ahmed talked about the roots of extremism – in some cases the madrassas, or schools, attended by children in Pakistan, his former home – during an appearance with Judea Pearl, the father of a reporter who was kidnapped and murdered by Islamic militants in Pakistan's largest city.

The two men have been holding public conversations for nearly five years in an effort to build bridges between Muslim and Jewish communities at what both men say is a crucial time.

They cited a recent Pew Research Center study that revealed deep hostility between Muslims and the Western world.

The 2006 study found that Westerners view Middle Eastern and Asian Muslims as violent, intolerant fanatics, while the Islamic world sees the West as "selfish, immoral and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical."

The findings come as the U.S. fights Islamic extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about to turn 60 years old.

But the two men said they see some signs of hope. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, who met with Pope Benedict in Rome late last year, recently invited a group of rabbis to his country for an interfaith dialogue.

The move – lambasted by many radical Muslim clerics – is significant because Saudi Arabia is the home of two of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina.

"It's definitely going to lead to a change of climate," Pearl said.

Pearl's son, Daniel, was kidnapped and executed in Karachi, Pakistan, while reporting for the Wall Street Journal in early 2002.

Judea Pearl, a native Israeli and computer science professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, launched the Daniel Pearl Foundation to promote cultural understanding after his son's death.

Pearl's foundation has provided journalism scholarships to campers who attend Seeds of Peace, the lakeside retreat in Otisfield that brings teenagers from both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict together in Maine in hopes of sparking lasting peace in the Mideast.

Ahmed, the former high commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain, has written several books on Islam and is one of the religion's most recognizable moderate voices.

The two men became friends after Daniel Pearl's death and started speaking at forums together in 2003.

They said they decided to take their talks to different audiences nationwide to serve as a model for frank but respectful discussion between Jews and Muslims at a time when television networks in the West frequently pit shouting talking heads from each side against one another, and Arab television network Al Jazeera gives a prominent voice to Muslim clerics who represent the most extreme, violent fringes of their religion.

"We came here to communicate ... not to win an argument," said Pearl.

More than 700 spectators packed into USM's Hannaford Lecture Hall and two remote sites to watch the two-hour event, organizers said.

Ahmed's call for more foreign aid for education struck a chord with Alex Stevens, a senior political science and economics major at USM.

Stevens said money for education is the best way to reach out to parts of the world that view American foreign policy as "anti-Islam."

"Really, what it comes down to is education," he said.

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