

San Francisco Officials Condemn Group's Bus Ads as Anti-Islamic

San Francisco city buses began carrying political ads on Monday denounced by several municipal leaders as anti-Islamic, racist messages that unfairly depict **Arabs** and **Muslims** as groups defined by extremism and **violence**.

But rather than seek to bar **San Francisco's transit agency** from accepting the paid ads and risk a court fight over **free speech rights**, city officials said they would instead mount a public service campaign preaching tolerance and peace.

The **bus ads** were paid for by the **American Freedom Defense Initiative** (AFDI), the same group behind a similar campaign in San Francisco and New York last year that referred to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a war "between the civilized man and the savage."

"Support the civilized man," those ads implored. "Support Israel. Defeat Jihad."

The founder of AFDI, Pamela Geller, is a New York-based blogger and commentator whom the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks U.S. hate groups, describes as "the anti-Muslim movement's most visible and flamboyant figurehead."

The latest series of ads, posted on San Francisco's so-called Muni buses, picture such figures as al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and convicted Times Square would-be car bomber Faisal Shahzad with quotes that essentially equate the Islamic concept of jihad, or holy struggle, with militant violence.

Geller, who spoke by telephone with Reuters, defended her ads, denying they were motivated by bigotry.

"Truth is hate now?" she asked. "My point is to raise

awareness of the greatest threat that this nation and that freedom lovers face. The purpose of our ads is to show the reality of jihad and the root causes of terrorism from the words of jihadists themselves.”

Parallels Drawn to Anti-Semitism

But Scott Wiener, a member of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors who described himself as the city’s only elected Jewish official, said the AFDI was engaged in the same type of vilification long found in anti-Semitic tracts.

“The history of the Jewish people is the history of stereotyping and caricature,” he said. “We as a community have to stand arm-in-arm against this awful message,” he told a news conference at City Hall.

Some critics of the ads say a case could be made for the city to refuse to carry such messages on its buses on the grounds they violate the Metropolitan Transportation Agency policy against running “false, misleading or deceptive” advertising.

But MTA spokesman Paul Rose said doing so would likely embroil the financially beleaguered agency in a costly and possibly futile legal fight.

A federal court last year ruled that AFDI’s “civilized man and the savage” messages were constitutionally protected forms of speech, forcing New York City’s transit authority to carry the posters.

“While some courts have found that these ads may have First Amendment privilege, that doesn’t mean we can’t condemn them,” said San Francisco Board of Supervisors President David Chiu, a former civil rights lawyer.

District Attorney George Gascon added, “We’re here to send a clear message that San Francisco won’t tolerate Islamophobic bigotry.”

The transit agency plans to counter the AFDI ads with public service messages from its own “peace campaign,” featuring

expressions of respect and tolerance from the likes of the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi and former South African President Nelson Mandela.

Rose said the peace campaign posters would run on 100 of Muni system's fleet of 800 buses, compared with 10 buses for which AFDI paid about \$5,000 to carry its ads.

Moreover, Chiu said he would seek Board of Supervisors approval for a bill to earmark the \$5,000 from Geller's group to pay for a study of the effect of discrimination against Arab and Muslim communities since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on America.

Some people, however, remain worried that AFDI's messages are helping to foster a climate of intolerance while leaving Arabs and Muslims, particularly young people, feeling vulnerable.

"We are really concerned that Arab and Muslim children have to ride these buses," said Zahra Billoo, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in the San Francisco Bay Area. "What is the trickle-down effect on our schoolyards of the hate messaging that's polluting our public transit?"

Reporting by Ronnie Cohen; Writing by Steve Gorman; editing by Cynthia Johnston and Paul Simao.

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.