Time to stand back, take a deep breath
By Randy Lewis
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Last Saturday, UC Irvine celebrated its 39th commencement. Approximately 6,000 students were awarded degrees – the largest graduating class in the history of the university. Hundreds of participating students chose to adorn their commencement robes with festive regalia. Included in this colorful display were braided cords, medallions, tiaras, balloons, feathered boas, serapes, US Marine Corps sashes, fraternity and sorority letters, an image of the Lady of Guadeloupe, and flowers – thousands of flowers – most of them fragrant leis.

As has been reported widely in the media, about 30 students (1/2 of 1 per cent of the graduates), who are members of the Muslim Student Union, wore green stoles. Each stole bore Arabic script on one side that read, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger,” and on the other side read “God, increase my knowledge.” The students stated that the stoles were an expression of faith and a call for unity and that similar stoles had been worn last year without incident.

Due to a barrage of media attention and misinformation, these green stoles with white Arabic script brought national attention to the UC Irvine campus. The reaction of some was that these stoles with their Arabic calligraphy represented something so vile that the university was obligated to either ban them from the ceremony or, at minimum, to issue a statement denouncing them as hateful. They suggested that the script contained subtext or could be interpreted to suggest a linkage to the terrorist group Hamas. Others went so far as to label UC Irvine’s commencement as “graduation jihad” and the stoles as “suicide sashes.”

After careful review and considerable consultation, Chancellor Ralph Cicerone in a letter to faculty, students, and staff made it clear that UC Irvine “is a public university with people from diverse backgrounds who enjoy the rights and protection of the 1st Amendment. Our history includes the free expression of political and nonpolitical ideas, no matter how controversial.”

These rights are regarded as vital to the university; they are a hallmark and strength of all great educational institutions. And while at times some may perceive these rights as tested – even abused – they are rights our Constitutional fathers meant to be broad and lenient. Indeed, it has often been said that the first amendment is intended to protect the least popular of thoughts, not the most popular.
Many dismissed the controversy that played out at UCI as a “tempest in a teapot.” They said it was a war of words or perhaps a contentious clash of semiotics. I would suggest that this issue is symptomatic of a larger enigma. The Israeli-Palestinian controversy, and how it has been portrayed in the media, has polarized people to such an extent that the embroidered script on a graduation stole can serve as a lightning rod for controversy. When misunderstandings reach this level, it is time to step back and take a deep breath. Yes, it is often extremely difficult to respect different opinions, or to realize they may contain a measure of truth. But the ability to listen to often-unpalatable opinions is the cornerstone of a democratic society.

If we are to go beyond the current standoff (whether in the Middle East or at UC Irvine), people on both sides of this controversy need to abolish two things from their seemingly entrenched positions: that they alone understand the problem and that the other side is dead wrong.

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