



Council on American-Islamic Relations

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Top Internet Disinformation About CAIR

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has a record of exemplary social and political activism stretching back to 1994. The organization is arguably the most visible and public representative of the American Muslim community.

Because of CAIR's high profile and very public record of principled advocacy of civil liberties, interfaith relations and justice for all people, a small but vocal group of anti-Muslim bigots has made CAIR the focus of their misinformation campaign. Internet hate sites then recycle these attacks using a template-like style without verifying the authenticity of the information.

This document summarizes the most common of these attacks and offers a fuller picture of these issues for your evaluation.

Internet Disinformation #1: CAIR is "the Wahhabi lobby," a "front-group for Hamas," a "fund-raising arm for Hezbollah," or "...part of a wider conspiracy overseen by the Muslim Brotherhood..."

CAIR was born out of a desire on the part of its founders to "concentrate on combating anti-Muslim discrimination nationwide." The organization's advocacy model—work closely with media and provide direct services to local Muslim communities—was developed when Nihad Awad and Ibrahim Hooper worked as community activists.

In a March 14, 2007 *New York Times* article, Michael Rolince, a retired F.B.I. official who directed counterterrorism in the Washington field office from 2002 to 2005, said, "Of all the groups, there is probably more suspicion about CAIR, but when you ask people for cold hard facts, you get blank stares."

The article also reported, "Government officials in Washington said they were not aware of any criminal investigation of the group. More than one described the standards used by critics to link CAIR to terrorism as akin to McCarthyism, essentially guilt by association."

CAIR is not is "the Wahhabi lobby," a "front-group for Hamas," a "fund-raising arm for Hezbollah," "...part of a wider conspiracy overseen by the Muslim Brotherhood..." or any of the other false and misleading associations our detractors seek to smear us with. That we stand accused of being both a "fundraising arm of Hezbollah" and the "Wahhabi lobby" is a

significant point in demonstrating that our detractors are hurling slander not fact. Hezbollah and the Salafi (Wahhabi) movement represent diametrically opposed ideologies.

CAIR's origin story is simple. In the February-March 2000 edition of "The Link," a newsletter published by Americans for Middle East Understanding, Nihad Awad wrote the following:

"After the Gulf War was over, I was offered a job with the Islamic Association of Palestine (IAP) as their public relations director. Since many Americans had been exposed to only one side of the story, my responsibility was to explain the Palestinian experience to the public and the media. In this effort I worked closely with IAP president Omar Ahmad.

"Omar, however, had the insight to realize that the central issue facing the Muslim community in the United States was not being addressed. The core challenge, that of stereotyping and defamation, was having a devastating effect on our children and paralyzing adults from taking their due roles in civic affairs.

"Omar suggested to me that we leave IAP and concentrate on combating anti-Muslim discrimination nationwide. He proposed that I move to Washington, D.C., where any effective national effort would have to be based, while he tried to raise seed money for the project.

"I contacted my friend Ibrahim Hooper, a professional journalist and communications genius, and tried to persuade him to move to Washington and join the project.

"Omar's vision and concern for Muslims in America coincided with Ibrahim's and my desire to take up the task. Ibrahim and I had worked together for years to help our local community reach out to its neighbors and we understood that individual initiatives were essential, but that they would never be as effective as a coordinated national effort.

"So the three of us took a chance."

Internet Disinformation #2: The organization condemns terrorism and extremism in a broad sense, but at the same time the group is laying groundwork for anti-American extremism.

CAIR's advocacy model is the antithesis of the narrative of anti-American extremists. Indeed, our track record of success solidly repudiates extremist arguments that Muslims cannot get fair treatment in our nation.

CAIR advocates for American Muslims through the media, government and all legal, traditional avenues available to public interest groups. CAIR staff and volunteers proactively train our

community in strategies to improve grassroots ability to take their due roles in civic affairs and redress grievances.

Our moral position is clear. We unequivocally condemn terrorism. Any group that hurts civilians deserves condemnation. As recently as January, 2009, CAIR's vigorous condemnation of violence committed in the name of Islam was acknowledged by the United States Institute of Peace in its report "*Islamic Peacemaking Since 9/11.*"

We are proud of our principled advocacy for just and peaceful resolutions to conflicts even when that advocacy requires stances that are not viewed as politically correct.

In truth, however, condemnations alone do not solve problems. That is why CAIR's moral position, which is prompted by the basic Islamic principle that no one has the right to take innocent life, is backed by action. CAIR has its sent staff to Baghdad to appeal for the release of a kidnapped American journalist; produced anti-terror public service announcements in English, Arabic and Urdu; coordinated an Islamic anti-terror religious ruling (*fatwa*); raised money for rebuilding churches in the wake of Middle East violence and called on Islamic religious leaders to deliver anti-terror messages in their sermons.

CAIR has condemned specific terrorist actions against Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Americans, Spaniards, Turks, Israelis, Saudis, Russians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Iraqis, British, and so on.

CAIR has condemned specific terrorist groups by name. On 3/11/2009, the 5th anniversary of the tragic Madrid attacks, CAIR issued a statement saying, "We unequivocally condemn all acts of terrorism, whether carried out by al-Qa'ida, the Real IRA, FARC, Hamas, ETA, or any other group designated by the U.S. Department of State as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organization.'

In 2007, CAIR Executive Director Nihad Awad joined 137 other Muslim leaders and scholars from around the world in sending a first-of-its-kind open letter designed to promote understanding between Muslims and Christians worldwide. The letter, entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," was sent to Pope Benedict XVI, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and more than 20 other Christian leaders. Awad is also an original endorser of the Amman Message and its three points of tolerance.

See A Common Word Between Us:
<http://www.acommonword.com/>

See the Amman Message:
<http://www.ammanmessage.com/>

Anti-American extremists are well aware of our rejection of their views. Following CAIR's criticism of remarks by an extremist leader, a German blogger noted that some within the

“jihadi community...issu[ed] angry rants about the apparent treachery of American Muslims, including specifically the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).”

We find that our detractors prefer to nitpick—to give a facetious example: ‘You did not condemn terror against Brazilians, ergo you must support it’—rather than acknowledge our resoundingly clear words and deeds.

To allow ourselves to focus on promoting a more positive society rather than writing a specific condemnation of every group or addressing murderous behavior toward every ethnic and religious group on the planet, we have adopted a simple, comprehensive message: “We condemn terrorism whenever it happens, wherever it happens, whoever commits it. Period.”

Internet Disinformation #3: Rather than praise the conviction of the perpetrators of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, CAIR or Nihad Awad deemed it “a travesty of justice.”

This is a lie; no evidence substantiating this falsehood has ever been offered. No CAIR document or official ever made such a statement. CAIR obtained hard copies of relevant editions of the Muslim World Monitor, the publication in which Awad is alleged to have made this remark. Awad never wrote or spoke the comment or anything like it. In addition, he was not the editor in chief of Muslim World Monitor as CAIR’s detractors claim.

CAIR has never dealt with this case other than a one-paragraph mention in the 1996 CAIR report on Muslim civil rights in which CAIR quoted attorney Stanley Cohen as saying that he thought “. . . the case against his client is political rather than criminal.”

Internet Disinformation #4: CAIR receives foreign money.

CAIR’s operational budget is funded by donations from American Muslims.

While the majority of CAIR’s financial support comes from American Muslims, CAIR is proud to receive the support of every individual--whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or of another faith background--who supports the organization’s mission of promoting justice and mutual understanding. This willingness to accept support from foreign nationals exists as long as there are no “strings” attached to the bequest.

The U.S. government, corporations and many other non-profit organizations--such as the American Red Cross--routinely receive money from foreign nationals.

CAIR is frequently criticized for receiving \$500,000 from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of the world’s richest men. That money was donated specifically to CAIR’s Library Project, a program designed to distribute a set of books on Islam, the majority of which were written by non-Muslim academics, to libraries so that people can learn more about Islam.

According to *Forbes* magazine, Bin Talal's Kingdom Holding "...contains his investments in well-known companies such as Citigroup and News Corp., as well as Four Seasons Hotels and Fairmont Hotel management companies, among many others." (Forbes, 3/05/2008)

News Corp. is headed by Rupert Murdoch and is the parent company of Fox News Channel.

If CAIR is taken to task for bin Talal's donation to us, so should these companies be taken to task for accepting his money.

CAIR was proud to receive that donation to help further efforts to eradicate ignorance and misinformation about Islam.

Internet Disinformation #5: CAIR Executive Director Nihad Awad publicly declared support for Hamas at Barry University in Florida in 1994, saying: "I'm in support of the Hamas movement."

CAIR detractors—such as Steven Emerson and Daniel Pipes—selectively recycle this and other incomplete statements to assert their pre-fabricated conclusions.

In response to a direct question from an audience member about social programs in the occupied territories, Awad said, "I'm in support of the Hamas movement more than the PLO." This excerpt was lifted from a longer answer in which Awad also stated: "There are some radicals. We are not interested in those people."

This statement was made in March 1994, before CAIR was formed. Hamas did not commit its first suicide bombing until October 1994. The United States subsequently identified Hamas as a specially designated terrorist in January 1995.

Thus, Awad's remarks came seven months prior to Hamas' first suicide bombings and nine months before the organization received the specially designated terrorist label from the government. (Awad's response to suicide bombings: "My position and CAIR's position is extremely clear - we condemn suicide bombings" Associated Press, 9/22/2006)

Awad and CAIR have consistently denounced violence by Hamas, Israel and other groups and advocated peaceful and negotiated resolutions to conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Internet Disinformation #6: The labeling of the organization as an unindicted co-conspirator in a trial in Dallas, TX implies that CAIR was somehow involved with criminal activity.

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals and other courts have unequivocally held that the public naming of unindicted co-conspirators in pre-trial proceedings violates the Constitutionally protected due process rights of the uncharged parties.

This unjust designation implies to the public that those listed are somehow involved in criminal activity; it negatively impacted CAIR's ability to conduct proactive relations with government officials and law enforcement agencies on civil rights issues. (See #9 below for one example.)

In May 2007, the Department of Justice publicly named 307 individuals and organizations as "unindicted co-conspirators" (UCC) in a filing associated with the first Holy Land Foundation trial, which ending in a hung jury.

The UCC list includes three of the largest American Muslim organizations - The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA, the largest Muslim organization in America), The North American Islamic Trust (NAIT, the largest Muslim endowment/trust in America) and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (the largest Muslim civil liberties group in America).

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals previously held that designating an individual as an unindicted co-conspirator violates the Fifth Amendment's liberty and property protections, as such a designation does not afford the designee the opportunity to defend his name. See *In re Edward S. Smith*, 656 F.2d 1101, 1107 (5th Cir. 1981). The court held that "no legitimate governmental interest is served by an official public smear of an individual when that individual has not been provided a forum in which to vindicate his rights." *Id* at 1106.

Making the UCC list public contradicts the Justice Department's own guidelines, which indicate that such lists are to remain sealed to prevent the unfair labeling of those who are not facing any criminal charges.

The Justice Department's manual for prosecutors says: "In all public filings and proceedings, federal prosecutors should remain sensitive to the privacy and reputation interests of uncharged third-parties." The guidelines further state that when co-conspirator lists must be filed in court, prosecutors should seek to file them under seal.

No legitimate reason for the necessity of publicly filing the names of UCC's has ever been offered, but government sources have acknowledged that it was a legal tactic.

In August 2007 Newsweek reported, "According to one senior law-enforcement official (who asked not to be named talking about an ongoing case), the listing of ISNA, CAIR and other groups as 'unindicted co-conspirators' was largely a tactical move by the government." (Newsweek, 8/08/2007) A June 2008 ACLU press release also reports, "The prosecutor also acknowledged that the public labeling was simply a 'legal tactic' intended to allow the government to introduce hearsay evidence against HLF later at trial."

Three federal prosecutors asked by the *Los Angeles Times* about the practice of publicly naming unindicted co-conspirators called it "improper" and "unfair."

Internet Disinformation #7: Former CAIR employees and board members have been arrested, convicted, deported, or otherwise linked to terrorism-related charges and activities.

The short answer to this is guilt by association. CAIR has hundreds of board members and employees and thousands of supporters. It would be illogical and unfair to hold CAIR responsible for the personal activities of all these people.

For example, when Aldrich Ames (CIA) and Robert Hanssen (FBI) admitted to being spies for foreign governments, it did not automatically associate the CIA or FBI with being complicit in any of these criminal activities. Currently, former members of US Congress are serving jail time and others are under the cloud of ethical suspicion. Does such behavior by members of Congress while in office incriminate the entire U.S. Congress?

The acts of a person done outside the scope or duration of his or her employment, and without the employer's knowledge, have no legal bearing on the employer.

CAIR believes that anyone who is found guilty of committing a crime, especially one that furthers terrorist motives, should receive a fair, objective trial and, if found guilty, be punished to the fullest extent of the law. CAIR would never compromise its principles, both American and Islamic, in the furtherance or assistance of any illegal endeavors.

McCarthy-like attempts to portray CAIR as guilty by association with certain individuals evoke memories of attempts to smear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a communist or womanizer.

The smears normally involve the following individuals: Ismail Royer, Dr. Bassem El-Khafagi, Rabih Haddad, and Ghassan Elashi.

ISMAIL ROYER

In January 2004, Royer pled guilty to weapons charges. He did not plead guilty to any charge of "terrorism." Any criminal action to which he pleaded guilty was done when Royer was no longer employed with CAIR and it was certainly not at CAIR's direction.

BASSEM EL-KHAFAGI

El-Khafagi was never an employee of CAIR and was never convicted on terrorism charges. According to the Associated Press (AP) article announcing his plea, federal officials stated that he was charged with writing bad checks in February and June of 2001. El-Khafagi was an independent contractor for CAIR, effective November 2, 2001. The actions of which he was accused occurred before any relationship with CAIR had commenced and without any knowledge by CAIR's of any wrongdoing on his part. Writing bad checks is a criminal offense, not terrorism. Surely if there had been strong evidence of terrorist activities, the Justice Department would have vigorously pursued those avenues and not allowed him to plead guilty to non-terrorism related charges.

RABIH HADDAD

Haddad was never an employee of CAIR, was “deported for overstaying his tourist visa” and was “never charged with a crime.” He was never an employee or associate of CAIR. His only association with CAIR was as a speaker at a single CAIR chapter event. He was not a “CAIR fundraiser,” as is sometimes claimed.

GHASSAN ELASHI

Elashi was never an employee or officer of CAIR. The fact that Elashi was once briefly associated with one of our more than 30 regional chapters has no legal significance to our corporation since any actions he took were outside the scope and chronology of his association with one of our chapters.

Internet Disinformation #8: The FBI severed relations with CAIR in October 2008

Shortly before the end of the Bush administration, FBI offices contacted many CAIR chapters stating that they were suspending some ties between the Washington-based civil rights and advocacy group and FBI field offices.

The letters also stated that the FBI will continue to work with CAIR on civil rights issues impacting American Muslims.

A number of anti-Muslim Internet sites have promoted the story as a means to smear CAIR. However, these same sites have been forced to admit that the Bush administration’s policy has not been fully accepted by local FBI officials.

According to WorldNetDaily.com, a site many argue adopts a significant anti-Muslim tone: “F.B.I. sources, however, say the new policy has not been uniformly followed since it was put into effect late last summer. They say there is still political resistance to the rule, which has generated complaints from some in the Muslim community.” (1/30/2009)

CAIR is a civil rights and advocacy group that often challenged Bush administration policies. It is not surprising that we would be targeted in a purely political move by those in the previous administration who sought to prevent us from defending the civil rights of American Muslims.

This campaign of smears and misinformation is an unfortunate legacy of the Bush administration’s misguided and counterproductive efforts to marginalize mainstream American Muslim organizations.

The true losers under this unfortunate policy are those FBI officials who will have their access to the mainstream American Muslim community restricted by the Bush administration’s directive that prevents them from taking part in the many public activities such as town hall meetings and diversity workshops sponsored by CAIR chapters.

We hope the FBI will not be perceived as turning back the clock on the civil rights movement to a time when those who defended civil liberties were targeted, as was the case with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It should be noted that even if the Bush administration's politically-motivated policy remains in place, CAIR chapters nationwide will continue to work with local law enforcement agencies and the FBI on issues related to our core mission of defending the civil rights of all Americans.

Going forward, we will do our utmost to work with the new administration to ensure that public officials and representatives of law enforcement agencies hear the voices of American Muslims.

We look forward to returning to normal relations with law enforcement now that there is a new administration.

Conclusion

CAIR is a high-profile organization that represents a minority in the United States that is often treated as suspect and frequently subjected to discrimination. We recognize that this very public profile, along with our community's current struggle to find full acceptance in our nation's pluralistic landscape, will draw the ire of nativists, bigots and those who seek to profit from the Islamophobic "fear industry."

CAIR board chairman and South Carolina State Senator Larry Shaw summed up the truth of the organization's mission when he issued the following statement in March, 2009:

"CAIR exists to uphold the right to liberty that Americans are guaranteed under the Constitution. We will challenge any attempts to erode constitutionally-protected liberties. We will also continue to work to ensure that American Muslims play a positive and productive role in our society.

"In carrying out our mission of promoting justice and mutual understanding, we honor and will continue to learn from groups who have faced similar challenges, including African-Americans, Asian-Americans and many others.

"CAIR embraces the cultural and religious pluralism that is a hallmark of America and repudiates any misuse of Islam to falsely justify violence or intolerance.

"We look forward to partnering with the Obama administration to help defend civil liberties and to project to the world the best of our nation's universal, constitutional and pluralistic values of freedom and justice."

We realize that many people and entities are subjected to the misinformation campaign about CAIR. It is our hope that those who seek the truth and are willing to evaluate the full picture share these responses with interested individuals and entities.

For more information, please visit www.cair.com.