The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)

Background

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is a Washington D.C.-based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with 28 independent chapters around the country. Since its founding in 1994, CAIR has sought to position itself as the leading American Muslim civil rights organization. In recent years, much of its activity has centered on responding to the proliferation of anti-Muslim incidents and sentiment expressed nationwide.

Some of CAIR's current leadership had early connections with organizations that are or were affiliated with Hamas. Hamas is designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) by the United States and is also viewed by the EU as a global terrorist organization.[1]

In addition, some of CAIR's leadership have used inflammatory anti-Zionist rhetoric that on a number of occasions has veered into antisemitic tropes related to Jewish influence over the media or political affairs, or has descended into the vilification of Zionists, which includes the majority of American Jews, who view a connection with Israel as a component of their Jewish identity.[2] ADL defines Zionism[3] as the movement for statehood for the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland, the land of Israel.

CAIR frequently partners with vehemently anti-Zionist and anti-Israel groups like Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and American Muslims for Palestine, many of whose members employ extreme rhetoric and questionable tactics to demonize Zionism and Zionists and disrupt pro-Israel activity.
CAIR and Israel

Although its main organizational mission is upholding the rights of Muslims in the United States, CAIR also comments on international issues, with a particular focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Key CAIR leaders have frequently expressed vocal opposition to Israel and Zionism, claiming at times that Zionism and Zionists are fundamentally racist. (See below: Key CAIR Staff on Israel and Zionism).

Antipathy towards Israel has been a CAIR staple since the group was founded in 1994 by several leaders of the Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP), a now defunct organization that was once described by the U.S. government as part of “Hamas’ propaganda apparatus.” Nihad Awad, who was IAP’s Public Relations Director, became CAIR’s first Executive Director, a position he retains today.[4] IAP was active in the U.S. from 1981 until about 2004, and categorically rejected a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, writing in a December 1989 communique: “The only way to liberate Palestine, all of Palestine, is the path of Jihad...Hamas is the conscience of the Palestinian Mujahid people.”[5] In 1987, immediately following the establishment of Hamas, IAP began to print and distribute Hamas literature, including Hamas communiqués and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

One of the founding board members of CAIR’s Dallas office, Ghassan Elashi, was linked to the Holy Land Foundation (HLF), a Texas-based charity that, according to the U.S. government, became the chief fundraising arm for the Palestine Committee in the U.S. The Palestine Committee was created by Hamas’s parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, to support Hamas. Both HLF and CAIR were members of the Palestine Committee. In 2008, HLF’s five founding officers were convicted on more than 100 criminal counts and sentenced in May 2009 to between 15 and 65 years in federal prison for financing terrorism by funneling more than $12 million to Hamas.[6] According to news reports, evidence presented at the Holy Land Foundation trial demonstrated that other CAIR leaders were also
linked to HLF and Hamas activity in the U.S. As noted above and according to the trial testimony, the Palestine Committee was a U.S. wing of Hamas' parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Palestine Committee was headed by Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzook, who since 1995 had been designated by the U.S. government as a Specially Designated Terrorist.

Throughout the HLF trial, CAIR organized support for the defendants and joined several other organizations, including the Muslim American Society, to form the "Hungry for Justice" coalition to support HLF. Two CAIR leaders acted as media contacts, while Khalil Meek of CAIR's Dallas chapter served as the coalition's primary spokesperson. He described an earlier, related case in the prosecution of HLF as an "Israeli trial tried on American soil."

CAIR was included on a 2007 Department of Justice list of nearly 250 "unindicted co-conspirators" in the HLF case. A federal appeals court subsequently ruled that the government had been wrong to publicly identify CAIR and others on that list and that the list should be sealed. CAIR's name remains on the list.

In response to CAIR's involvement with the Holy Land Foundation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation distanced itself from the organization. In the past, the FBI had interacted with CAIR representatives regarding community outreach activities, civil rights complaints and criminal investigations. However, in 2008, the FBI issued an instruction to its field offices that they should sharply curtail "non-investigative interactions" with CAIR. This instruction was elucidated in an April 2009 letter to the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Homeland Security, in which the FBI explained that it would cease to liaise with CAIR "until [they] resolve whether there continues to be a connection between CAIR or its executives and Hamas." To our knowledge as of this writing, the FBI has not retracted this protocol.

CAIR Executive Director Nihad Awad's repeated statements in support of Hamas also loom over the organization. Awad is quoted as saying during a March 1994
panel discussion at Barry University in Florida (prior to his involvement with CAIR) that “after I researched the situation inside Palestine and outside, I am in support of the Hamas movement more than the PLO.”[15] In its defense, CAIR notes that Awad's statement was made “before CAIR was formed,” and that “Hamas did not commit its first suicide bombing until October 1994.”[16] In 2000, when he was asked about Hamas during an Al-Jazeera interview, Awad refused to condemn what had clearly become a terrorist organization. “We do not condemn, and we will not condemn any liberation movement inside Palestine or inside Lebanon,” Awad said.[17] CAIR has countered by noting that in 2006 Awad stated that he “[does] not support Hamas today.”

Awad also appeared at a rally convened in April 2002 next to antisemitic Imam Abdul Alim Musa, the founder of the extremist group Sabiqun. Among other virulently antisemitic statements, Musa has claimed that the Jews ran the slave trade; that, compared to the what had been done to Native Americans and African Americans the Holocaust was “small potatoes;” that Jews are the enemy of humanity; that Jews control America and that Jews have manipulated Arab leaders into being drunk, broke and engaged in internecine warfare.[18] In the photo below, Nihad Awad is shown next to Musa, delivering a speech under a Hezbollah flag.
More recently, CAIR has supported and advocated for Rasmea Odeh, who was convicted by an Israeli court in 1970 for her role in a 1969 bombing of a supermarket that killed two Israeli students, and who was later released as part of a prisoner exchange. As a member of the Rasmea Defense Committee, both of CAIR’s Midwest chapters (Chicago and Michigan) support the idea that Odeh “is a leading member of Chicago’s Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim communities;” and that she “is a community icon who overcame vicious torture by Israeli authorities...and an example for the millions of Palestinians who have not given up organizing for their rights of liberation, equality, and return.”[19] The Rasmea Defense Committee was active up until September 2017, when Odeh was deported to Jordan.

Although CAIR does not appear to endorse the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement as an official policy, CAIR frequently tweets in support of BDS campaigns[20] including academic and cultural boycotts of Israel. In April 2020, they joined American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) in calling for a boycott of Israeli dates. CAIR has a close relationship with other pro-BDS, anti-Zionist and
anti-Israel groups like JVP and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). Moreover, some of CAIR’s leadership, including Zahra Billoo, Hussam Ayloush and Imraan Siddiqi, have been particularly outspoken in support of BDS.

CAIR Staff Statements on Israel and Zionism

*Nihad Awad*

CAIR’s Executive Director Nihad Awad has made numerous anti-Israel comments, some of which have played into conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the media or U.S. government. During a May 2021 CAIR webinar, Awad stated that “the mainstream media had monopoly over the talking points – [parroted from] the pro-Israel organizations.”[21] In 2014, he claimed that Israel “is the biggest threat to world peace and security.”[22]

At an August 2014 anti-Israel rally in Washington D.C., Awad endorsed a view he attributed to Latin American countries, that Israel is a “terrorist state” because allegedly its official policy is to target innocent civilians and has also said that AIPAC did not promote American values but was a foreign lobby that controls the U.S. Congress. He told the audience “Do not accept Israeli talking points. AIPAC should have its hand off the United States Congress. They have corrupted our foreign policy; they have corrupted our political leaders.”[23] In July 2014, Awad had similarly tweeted: “Israel lobby has corrupted American politicians by skewing US foreign policy to support killing of civilian population in #Gaza...”[24] Also that month, he alleged U.S. policy toward the Palestinians was “driven by the Israel lobby.”[25]

*Hussam Ayloush*

CAIR-Los Angeles Executive Director Hussam Ayloush has a history of problematic rhetoric. During the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas in particular, Ayloush denigrated Zionism and Zionists, including by invoking the
Holocaust and comparing Zionism to the Ku Klux Klan and ISIS. He also intimated Zionist Jews are responsible for the scourge of Islamophobia in the United States:

- May 28 Facebook post: “No person with a conscience can be a Zionist.”[26]
- May 25, 2021: Ayloush tweeted a video he alleged showed “the connection between Zionism, colonialism, and the far-right bigotry.”[27]
- May 21, 2021, speech: Ayloush referred to “the ugly nature and ideology of Zionism and what it brings with it, from apartheid, from murder, from occupation, from racism, from brutality...”[28]
- May 17: “Zionism and Judaism are not equivalent, any more than ISIS and Islam are, or the KKK and Christianity are. Don't confuse violent and bigoted political ideologies with peaceful religions.”[29]
- May 15: Ayloush posted a video of an anti-Israel rally he attended which showed protestors chanting: “Hey hey! Ho ho! Zionism has got to go!”[30]
- May 10 Facebook post: “…the same bigoted Zionists who are assaulting Al-Aqsa and Palestinians are the ones assaulting our Muslim community's rights in America and promoting Islamophobia.”[31]
- May 8, 2021, Facebook post: “Shame on every politician, activist, journalist, or clergy who continues to excuse, justify, defend, or ignore the war crimes committed by the murderous apartheid Zionist regime for the past seven decades. When will your humanity awaken?... Please share with others to remind them that our silence in the past led to genocides and a Holocaust.[32]
- In February 2019, Ayloush implied that denying the Holocaust is morally equivalent to supporting “Zionism and its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.”[33]
- In April 2018, Ayloush tweeted that “Debating apologists for Arab dictators is like debating Zionists about Israel. Both have little functional brain & no morals.”[34]
In November 2018, Ayloush tweeted: “Iran's regime calling Israel a ‘cancerous tumor’ is like the pot calling the kettle black. All the people of that region will be better off once both murderous regimes are terminated.”[35]

Zahra Billoo

CAIR-San Francisco Bay Area Executive Director Zahra Billoo is among the organization's most outspoken anti-Zionists, and she frequently posts her views on Zionism to social media or discusses them in speeches. Of note, during a talk about Islamophobia delivered at American Muslims for Palestine's 2021 Palestine Convention (held November 25-27 in Chicago), Billoo told the audience to “pay attention” to “Zionist synagogues” and other Jewish organizations that represent the mainstream American Jewish community, calling them “enemies.”[36]

- "I also want us to pay attention to the 'polite Zionists,' ... We need to pay attention to the Anti-Defamation League. We need to pay attention to the Jewish Federation[sic]. We need to pay attention to the Zionist synagogues. We need to pay attention to the Hillel chapters on our campuses. Just because they're your friend today doesn't mean that they have your back when it comes to human rights...know your enemies, and I'm not going to sugarcoat that they are your enemies. There are organizations and infrastructures out there who are working to harm you, make no mistake of it. They would sell you down the line if they could, and they very often do behind your back. I mean the Zionist organizations; I mean the foreign policy organizations who say they're not Zionists but want a two-state solution. I'm not a Palestinian myself but it's my understanding that that is laughable, so know your enemies."

When Billoo was criticized for these remarks targeting most of the American Jewish community, CAIR National doubled down and publicly offered unqualified support for Billoo.[37]
Billoo has a long history of engaging in similar rhetoric. In May 2021, Billoo called Zionism “inherently evil.”[38] In February 2019, she tweeted, “Zionism, as a racist ideology, has no place in LGBTQ+ and antiracist movements whose goal is the liberation of all people.”[39] In January 2019, she retweeted, “Liberal Zionists should never be tied to any forms of liberation. Although they may be against the building of Trump’s wall, they remain silent on Israel’s well-financed illegal barrier in the occupied West Bank.”[40]

Billoo has often equated Zionism with racism. In June 2018, she tweeted, “I do indeed oppose Zionism. I see it as racist, just like I do any other ethnic nationalism.”[41] Before posting this, Billoo was scheduled to receive an honorary award from the interfaith organization, People Acting in Community Together (PACT); in the wake of these comments the award was temporarily rescinded. Though Billoo garnered support from her wider community and eventually received the PACT award, she posted about her experience on Facebook, reiterating her original belief: “Everyone was talking about Muslims and Palestine. Everyone was talking about some people’s reasonable belief, including my own, that Zionism is racism.”[43] In October 2018, Billoo reiterated her belief that “pro-Israel work is pro-terror, pro-violence, pro-land theft, and pro-apartheid.”[44]

On a few occasions, Billoo has suggested that Israel is worse than or no different from ISIS and Hamas. In September 2019, Billoo tweeted: “Individuals who leave the United States to volunteer with Daesh [ISIS] and/or the Israeli[sic] Defense Forces are one in the same.”[45] In February 2015, Billoo tweeted that she is “more afraid of racist Zionists who support Apartheid Israel than of the mentally ill young people the #FBI recruits to join ISIS.”[46] In November 2014, Billoo retweeted anti-Zionist activist Kathlyn Gadd in defense of Hamas’ practice of shooting rockets at civilian areas in Israel: “Blaming Hamas for firing rockets at [Apartheid] Israel is like blaming a woman for punching her rapist. #FreePalestine.”[47]

In September 2019, only days after her appointment to the board of the Women’s March and following a series of news articles about Billoo’s extreme anti-Zionism,
the group’s leadership removed her from her post.[48] In a tweet, the Women’s March stated that “some of her public statements [were] incompatible with the values and mission of the organization.”[49]

At American Muslims for Palestine’s annual convention in November 2019, Billoo stated she is “not going to support [Israel’s] right to exist” and that “more polarization is good” in public dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She also announced that henceforth she would apply a “Palestine litmus test to any interfaith spaces” in which she participated, adding “if you want to be in community with me, my people and the Palestinians I work in solidarity with, then let’s have a conversation about how Israel as it exists today is an illegitimate state.” [50]

Salaedin Maksut

Salaedin Maksut, Executive Director of CAIR-NJ, has demonized Zionism and Zionists on several occasions. In an October 31, 2021, post on Facebook, Maksut referred to Zionism and “other racist and oppressive ideologies.”[51] On May 10, 2021, he tweeted: “Israel is a state based on a racist doctrine. Zionism is racism, pure and simple.”[52]

At an anti-Israel rally on May 11, 2021, Maksut played into antisemitic themes about Jewish power and culpability for racism in the United States, remarking to attendees: [53]

- “we have to realize that the same foot and the same knee that is choking the Palestinian people is the same foot and the same knee that is choking the Black and Brown people in this country. The powers that are funding the oppression of the Palestinian people are the same powers that are funding the oppression of minority groups in this country. It is the same money. They are cutting the same checks. They are the same people. They are sitting in the same offices of government.”
He concluded with the chant: "Zionism is racism." Whatever his intent, altogether such rhetoric can be interpreted as suggesting that pro-Israel and Zionist Americans, and by extension the mainstream Jewish community, is the primary cause of racist oppression and brutality in the United States.

Maksut made similar remarks at a rally in July 2020.[54] Faced with criticism, he doubled down in a tweet: “I stand by what I said. ‘In order to defeat this evil that is Zionism, we must realize that the foot on the necks of the Black and Brown people of this nation is the same foot and the same knee that is choking the Palestinian people....”[55]

CAIR and other Anti-Israel Organizations

Jewish Voice for Peace

CAIR often partners with Jewish Voice for Peace, a far left anti-Israel group that promulgates anti-Zionist rhetoric, often spreads false and misleading statements regarding American Jewish communal organizations, and advocates for a complete economic, cultural and academic boycott of the state of Israel.[56] In a recent collaboration, JVP and CAIR were among the co-sponsors of a major anti-Israel protest (along with other groups such as American Muslims for Palestine) in front of the State Department during the May 2021 Hamas-Israel conflict.[57]

Other collaborations have included an October 2018 event cosponsored by CAIR-Austin and JVP-Austin featuring anti-Israel and anti-Zionist activist Kali Rubaii of Friends of Sabeel North America, an anti-Israel Christian activist group.[58] In 2019, CAIR-LA announced JVP as the recipient of its 2019 Champion of Justice Award because of its work “opposing anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bigotry and oppression.”[59]

In May 2018, CAIR-Philadelphia signed onto JVP-Philadelphia’s “Deadly Exchange”[60] petition, which is a JVP-run campaign falsely blaming Israel “for
police brutality, especially against people of color, on American streets,” and targeting ADL for running seminars and trips, which enable American and Israeli police to explore shared security challenges and discuss best practices for countering terrorism.[61] By partnering with JVP in this willful misrepresentation of these police exchanges, CAIR joins JVP in injecting extreme anti-Israeli animus into other important social justice movements, demonizing Israel and detracting from pressing civil rights work.

American Muslims for Palestine

CAIR is closely connected to American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), the leading organization providing anti-Zionist training and education to students and Muslim community organizations around the country. AMP promotes extreme anti-Israel views and at times has provided a platform for antisemitism under the guise of educating Americans about “the just cause of Palestine and the rights of self-determination.”[62] In 2017, Nihad Awad spoke at AMP’s 10th annual conference.

In October 2021, CAIR-Minnesota hosted AMP Chairman, Students for Justice in Palestine co-founder and UC Berkeley lecturer Hatem Bazian for their annual “Challenging Islamophobia” conference.[63] In October 2018, CAIR hosted Bazian at its National Leadership and Policy Conference.[64] On several occasions, Bazian’s claims about Israel have straddled the line between antisemitism and anti-Israel activism. In July 2017, Bazian retweeted an antisemitic post that included an image of man dressed in distinctive Orthodox garments, reading: “MOM LOOK! I IS CHOSEN! I CAN NOW KILL, RAPE, SMUGGLE ORGANS & STEAL THE LAND OF PALESTINIANS *YAY* #ASHKE-NAZI.”[65] The UC Berkeley administration criticized him for cartoons that “crossed the line” into antisemitism.

Although Bazian subsequently apologized, claiming the image “is offensive and does not represent [his] views;”[66] he has continued to occasionally engage in similar rhetoric, which calls the sincerity of his apology into question. In August
2021, he re-tweeted an antisemitic cartoon depicting an Israeli soldier organ harvesting the heart of a deceased Palestinian man.[67] In May 2021, he tweeted: “Zionist Jews are so over taken[sic] and blinded by power, might and control over Palestine that they don’t have the capacity to look in the mirror and ask the question of what role they are playing and how they became a powerful instrument in Western imperialism.”[68]

[5] https://books.google.com/books?id=Min9VpiravsC&pg=PA150&lpg=PA150&dq=%22the+only+way+to+liberate+Palestine,+a
[16] https://www.cair.com/dispelling_rumors_about_cair
[17] https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2004/6/4/%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9
[18] https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/sabiqun-and-anti-semitism-on-campus
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