

# The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)

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## 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.

However, at times the organization's positions and work have been shadowed by early connections between some of CAIR's top leadership and organizations that are or were affiliated with  [Hamas](#). Hamas has long been associated with seeking the complete elimination of the State of Israel and with suicide bombings that have targeted civilians, and is designated a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) by the United States. Hamas is also viewed by the EU as a global terrorist organization.<sup>1</sup> In addition, over the years many in CAIR's leadership have expressed, and in a number of cases continue to express, anti-Zionist rhetoric. This has included statements that demonize American supporters of Israel who believe that a connection with Israel is an essential part of their Jewish identity.

CAIR also 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 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. In 2017 and 2018, approximately 25% of its international affairs-related press releases addressed issues pertaining to Israel and Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> While CAIR's official statements avoid vilifying the state of Israel in the strongest terms, key CAIR leaders have frequently expressed vociferous opposition to Israel and Zionism, claiming at times that both are fundamentally racist, and often calling Israel "an apartheid, racist state."<sup>3</sup> (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.<sup>4</sup> IAP was active in the U.S. from 1981 until about 2004, and categorically rejected a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli 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."<sup>5</sup> 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](#) and continues to this day to call for the destruction of the State of Israel and the murder of Jews).

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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,<sup>8</sup> who since 1995 had been designated by the U.S. government as a Specially Designated Terrorist.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> CAIR has countered by noting that in 2006 Awad stated that he "[does] not support Hamas today."

Not only has Awad expressed support for Hamas, he has also appeared at a rally convened by the ANSWER coalition, an anti-Israel activist organization, on April 20, 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 Rasmia 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 Rasmia 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."<sup>19</sup> The Rasmia 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 has tweeted in support](#) of BDS campaigns multiple times since 2013, including supporting academic and cultural boycotts of Israel. Most recently, 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, Dawud Walid and Imraan Siddiqi, have been particularly outspoken in support of BDS.

## **CAIR Staff Statements on Israel and Zionism**

### *Nihad Awad*

In addition to his comments about Hamas, CAIR's Executive Director Nihad Awad has made numerous anti-Israel comments, some of which relied on conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the government. In his social media activity, Awad often uses the hashtag #ApartheidIsrael, comparing the situation in Israel to the South African Apartheid.<sup>20</sup> He has also claimed that Israel "is the biggest threat to world peace and security."<sup>21</sup> In a September 2010 interview with Egyptian Daily, Awad stated, "There is no doubt that the pro-Israel organizations have worked extensively over the years in promoting a culture of hostility towards Islam, supporting anti-Islam activists, holding receptions for them, assisting and funding them."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup>

### *Hussam Ayloush*

CAIR-Los Angeles Executive Director Hussam Ayloush has a history of problematic tweets. In November 2018 he 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."<sup>24</sup>

Some of Ayloush's tweets on Zionism are also problematic; they generally label the diverse array of supporters of Israel as unrepentant racists or engaging in Nazi-like tactics. In February 2019, Ayloush implied that denying the Holocaust is morally equivalent to supporting "Zionism and its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians."<sup>25</sup> In a May 2018 tweet, he referred to "Zionist racism."<sup>26</sup> In April 2018, Ayloush tweeted that "Debating apologists for Arab dictators is like debating Zionists about Israel. Both have little functional brain[sic] & no morals."<sup>27</sup>

### *Dawud Walid*

In January 2019, Dawud Walid, the Executive Director for CAIR-Michigan, used an article on the resurgence of street food in Tel Aviv to deny Israel's historic claims to the land of Israel. Walid tweeted that "Zionist occupiers started off illegally settling land, and now they steal others' cultural dishes and lie that they originated them."<sup>28</sup>

In October 2018, Walid posted an article describing how the Omani Sultan, Qaboos bin Said al Said, welcomed Netanyahu to the "22 Arab states club," commenting "Unfortunately for Palestinians, none of the Arab regimes care about them for real. They're more concerned about standing with their British, American & Israeli masters."<sup>29</sup>

In August 2018, Walid alluded to conspiracies of Jewish control to explain bigotry against Muslims in the U.S., retweeting, "85% of US Islamophobia is a result of Zionists feeling insecure in their apartheid settler project & thus throwing inhuman sums of money & media influence at anything Muslim."<sup>30</sup>

### *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. 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup>

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.”<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> In October 2018, Billoo reiterated her belief that “pro-Israel work is pro-terror, pro-violence, pro-land theft, and pro-apartheid.”<sup>36</sup>

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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup>

In September 2019, following a series of news articles about Billoo’s extreme anti-Zionism, the Women’s March leadership removed her from the board of the organization. In a tweet, the Women’s March stated that “some of her public statements [were] incompatible with the values and mission of the organization.”<sup>39</sup>

Zahra Billoo’s anti-Zionism reached even higher levels of intensity in November 2019 when she said at the annual convention of American Muslims for Palestine

that 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.” Billoo also belittled the security concerns which inform Israel’s policies regarding the Palestinian conflict, saying, “Israel’s safety isn’t really a priority for me when it is stealing land and killing people.”<sup>40</sup>

## **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.<sup>41</sup> Recent collaborations include 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.<sup>42</sup> More recently, 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.”<sup>43</sup>

In May 2018, CAIR-Philadelphia signed onto JVP-Philadelphia’s “Deadly Exchange”<sup>44</sup> petition, which is a JVP-run campaign falsely blaming Israel “for police brutality, especially against people of color, on American streets,” and targeting the Anti-Defamation League for running seminars and trips, which enable American and Israeli police to explore shared security challenges and discuss best practices for countering terrorism.<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup>

In October 2018, CAIR hosted AMP Chairman, vocal BDS supporter and Students for Justice in Palestine co-founder, Dr. Hatem Bazian, at its National Leadership and Policy Conference.<sup>47</sup> Bazian is an anti-Israel, anti-Zionist activist whose claims about Israel have straddled the line between antisemitism and anti-Israel activism. He is a lecturer at University of California, Berkeley, 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.”<sup>48</sup> The UC Berkeley administration criticized him for cartoons that “crossed the line” into antisemitism and Bazian subsequently apologized, claiming the image “is offensive and does not represent [his] views.”<sup>49</sup> Nihad Awad also spoke at AMP’s 10th annual conference in 2017.

1 <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>;  
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/terrorist-list/>

2 [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases](https://www.cair.com/press_releases)

3 <https://twitter.com/ZahraBilloo/status/1096557519869140992> 4

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5 <https://books.google.com/books?>

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6 <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-judge-hands-downs-sentences-holy-land-foundation-case>

7 <https://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2009/11/despite-ban-holder-to-speak-to-cair-linked-group-022707>

8 [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/images/asset\\_upload\\_file142\\_36171.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/images/asset_upload_file142_36171.pdf)

9 <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=76>

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/25/us/25charity.html>

11 <https://www.nysun.com/national/america-says-it-will-retry-holy-land-foundation/65036/>

12 <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2010/11/06/judge-ruled-prosecutors-should-not-have-publicly-released-holy-land-unindicted-co-conspirators-list/>

13 <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2013/e0707r.pdf>

14 <https://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2009/11/despite-ban-holder-to-speak-to-cair-linked-group-022707>

15 <https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/local-advocacy-group-lobbied-against-israel-during-gaza-conflict/>

16 [https://www.cair.com/dispelling\\_rumors\\_about\\_cair](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>
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- 30 <https://twitter.com/hwmaqbul/status/1027194591852875776>

- 31 <https://twitter.com/ZahraBilloo/statuses/1096557622067486720>
- 32 [https://twitter.com/huzaifashahbaz\\_/status/1084672790785998849](https://twitter.com/huzaifashahbaz_/status/1084672790785998849)
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48 <https://twitter.com/wherepond/status/892079717880344577>

49 <https://forward.com/fast-forward/389464/uc-jewish-students-call-for-action-against-professor-over-antisemitic-tweet/>