

The Business of Islamophobia

By Margaret Sarfehjooy

A positive view of Muslims would hinder the multibillion dollar Islamophobia industry that promotes fear as part of the U.S. “War on Terror.”

Part I: The Attack on CAIR-MN

With offices in the U.S. and Canada, the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has worked to promote a positive image of Islam and Muslims in America since its establishment in 1994. It is America’s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy group. Because Minnesota is home to the largest Somali diaspora in the U.S., much of it in Minneapolis/St. Paul, the state’s CAIR office is often involved with advocacy for people of Somali origin—hearing complaints, advising them of their rights, and helping to resolve issues of harassment, discrimination, and bias.



Man with Briefcase. 50 ft. aluminum-plated sculpture by Jonathan Borofsky, Ft. Worth, Texas.

photo: Jim Peirpert

Somalis in the Twin Cities have complained of FBI harassment ranging from being stopped at random on streets, in shopping malls, and campus libraries; stalked at mosques; interviewed without translators or access to lawyers; and having their legitimate businesses raided and shut down, their employment threatened, and airline boarding passes denied without due process.

It was in the nature of these kinds of concerns that earlier this year, a distraught Somali man came to CAIR-MN for help, stating that two FBI agents threatened to withhold his asylum application and defame him in the Muslim community if he didn't agree to be an informant for them. He said that despite his repeated requests for an attorney, the agents continued to try to coerce and intimidate him, and

ultimately they caused him to lose his job after they had followed him conspicuously and photographed him at his job site. CAIR requested that a special agent with oversight investigate the actions of the agents for improper behavior.

On January 30, the CAIR-MN (Minnesota) office issued a press release announcing that it welcomed the FBI's response to their request to investigate the threatening tactics alleged to have been used by the two agents.

However, just two days after the press release was issued, two FBI agents appeared unannounced at the home of Lori Saroya, the executive director of CAIR-MN, stating that they were conducting "community outreach." Subsequently, CAIR-MN's attorney called the agents and asked if they were assigned to "community outreach"; he admitted that they were not.

The American Civil Liberties Union commented: "Once again it appears FBI agents are improperly exploiting the goodwill established through community outreach programs as a method of gaining access to community members for investigative purposes. Trained FBI investigators know that showing up unannounced at someone's home is intimidating, and they could have contacted Ms. Saroya by telephone or at her office to set up an appointment if the true purpose was a simple 'meet and greet' with a member of her household." 1

The Wall Street Journal (www.wjs.com) picked up the story and reported that on February 13, 2013, in a letter to Attorney General Holder, CAIR National Legal Director Nadhira Al-Khalili wrote: "The FBI has a well-documented history of using community outreach methods as a means to coerce, threaten, and intimidate members of the Muslim community. Given the above facts, it is difficult for us to reach any conclusion other than that [the agent's] visit was prompted by what the field office may have perceived as negative media attention. Further, we believe reasonable people can conclude the visit was an attempt to intimidate a highly regarded community leader."

Lori Saroya has served in civic organizations including the Minnesota Alliance on Crime, the Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights Task Force, and the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs. For her work with CAIR-MN, Saroya received the St. Paul Foundation's Facing Race Ambassador Award twice. She also received the 2011 Rising Star St. Catherine University Alumni Award in the areas of social justice and community advocacy. She was named one of the 2012 Ten Outstanding Young Minnesotans by the Minnesota Jaycees. In 2011, CAIR-MN was awarded the "2011 Mission & Excellence Anti-Racism Award" from the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and MAP for Nonprofits.

But, while CAIR receives respect and accolades from many community leaders in Minnesota and nationwide, the organization has endured years of accusations and threats from those who make a living off the concept of Islamophobia. A positive

view of Muslims hinders the multibillion dollar industry that profits from promoting fear of Muslims as part of the U.S. “War on Terror.”

Zaytuna College, located in Berkeley, California, is the first Muslim liberal arts college in America; Dr. Hatem Bazian, the co-founder, stated that “those who are working on Islamophobia believe that the more hatred we have of Muslims here, the more that we have reflexive hatred of Muslims abroad, thus authorizing or making the need for military action and the death and destruction [of Muslims abroad] more palatable to us without having to think we are actually killing humans.”²

Part II: The Industry

The always-expanding surveillance industry receives billions of dollars from the Department of Homeland Security. The Washington Post discovered what amounts to an alternative geography of the United States, a “Top Secret America” hidden from public view and lacking in thorough oversight. Some 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States.³

Private counterterrorism training firms capitalize on plentiful public grant funding. G.W. Schulz, an investigative journalist who tracks homeland security spending, notes that “agencies can apply for a dizzying array of federal grant programs, often without notifying local government officials about how grant funds are spent.”⁴

One training firm, Security Systems International, or SSI, uses alarmist rhetoric about Muslim organizations and also boasts that its “homeland security training in Israel” is the only privately operated trip of its kind that receives funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.⁵



Man With Briefcase sculpture reflected in window of office building across the street.

photo: Jim Peirpert

David Gaubatz, who was SSI's "star speaker" at the company's 2010 convention, infiltrated the CAIR national office by sending in five researchers to work undercover for six months, three of them women who wore Muslim garb. Gaubatz directed his associates to act "Sharia compliant," such as having the men grow beards, but not mustaches. Gaubatz also sent an individual pretending to be blind into CAIR. Gaubatz's son, Chris, posed as a Muslim-convert intern using the name "David Marshall," and removed thousands of documents that provided the material for Gaubatz's subsequent book against CAIR, *Muslim Mafia*. 4

This is the same David Gaubatz who claimed that he personally found sites with weapons of mass destruction within Iraq when he was an agent with the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations in 2003,⁶ and who recently claimed on his counterterrorism radio program that many Muslims join the U.S. military to kill fellow soldiers.⁷ SSI's founder, Henry Morgenstern, was a featured speaker at a 2006 Minnesota symposium on Terrorism and Emergency Preparedness, which was attended by 479 participants from 200 agencies. 4

It is likely that a number of the participants were employees of fusion centers. CAIR, the ACLU, and former Congress members Cynthia McKinney and Bob Barr have all expressed deep concerns about the practices of fusion centers—77 regional intelligence-gathering centers created by the Department of Homeland Security after September 11, 2001. The Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, in a 107-page report released in October 2012, stated that Homeland Security has spent up to \$1.4 billion funding fusion centers that have produced "useless" reports while at the same time collecting information that may have violated federal privacy laws on the innocent activities of American Muslims. 8

The subcommittee's review of draft reports by DHS officials at fusion centers included a report on a list of reading suggestions by a Muslim community group, "Ten Book Recommendations for Every Muslim." Another report was on a U.S. citizen who was appearing at a Muslim organization to deliver a daylong motivational talk and a lecture on positive parenting.

The fusion center network, in short, has become one of the many funding conduits for the multibillion dollar national security industrial complex. After compiling such a scathing report on fusion centers, the congressional subcommittee only made mild recommendations for changes.

The Islamophobia industry also includes think tanks, foundations, entertainment moguls, training "experts" who advise local police, and frequently the mainstream media—all of which perpetuate the "Muslim as terrorist" and "Muslim to be feared" myths so that the American public will continue to feel the need to be protected.

Creating a perception of Muslims as "the other," to be feared and mistrusted, enables the military/security/industrial complex to thrive. However, the spread of Islamophobia creates conditions that provoke racial attacks against innocent people. Especially troubling is an increase in the harassment of Muslim children in Minnesota schools—Facebook threats, name-calling, derisive language, physical attacks—causing a hostile environment that affects students academically and emotionally. CAIR-MN says it plans to continue working toward finding positive solutions to these racially charged incidents. CAIR-MN Executive Director Lori Saroya recently announced that CAIR-MN is launching a new program that will include community dialogues on shared civil rights experiences among minority communities in Minnesota.⁹ It appears that a threatening visit by the FBI is not going to stop her.

1. German, Mike. "Is the FBI's Community Outreach Program a Trojan Horse?" ACLU. (February 15, 2012)
2. "Between Militarism & Extremism: The Excluded Middle." Zaytuna College, Berkeley, California. YouTube (Recorded September 17, 2012)
3. Priest, Dana & Arkin, William. "Top Secret America." The Washington Post. (July 19, 2010)
4. Cincotta, Thomas. "Manufacturing the Muslim Menace." Political Research Associates. (2011) Attended by 479 participants from 200 agencies.
5. "Profiles: Henry Morgenstern." Right Web: Tracking militarists' efforts to influence foreign policy. Institute for Policy Studies (September 16, 2009)
6. Elliot, Justin. "Meet The Man behind the Intern Spy Wars: Muslim Mafia Author Dave Gaubatz." TPM Media. (October 15, 2009)
7. "Many Muslims Join US Military to Kill Fellow Soldiers, Says 'Terrorism Expert.'" Loonwatch. (July 11, 2012)

8. Isikoff, Michael. "Homeland Security 'fusion' centers spy on citizens, produce 'shoddy' work, report says." NBC News. (October 2, 2012)
9. "CAIR-MN Seeks Mediation, Training to Resolve Racial Issues at School." CAIR-MN Press Release. (February 18, 2013)

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