



AMERICAN MUSLIMS FOR PALESTINE

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# The Great Islamophobic Crusade

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Nine years after 9/11, hysteria about Muslims in American life has gripped the country. With it has gone an outburst of arson attacks on mosques, campaigns to stop their construction, and the branding of the Muslim-American community, overwhelmingly moderate, as a hotbed of potential terrorist recruits. The frenzy has raged from rural Tennessee to New York City, while in Oklahoma, voters even overwhelmingly approved a ballot measure banning the implementation of Sharia law in American courts (not that such a prospect existed). This campaign of Islamophobia wounded President Obama politically, as one out of five Americans has bought into a sustained chorus of false rumors about his secret Muslim faith. And it may have tainted views of Muslims in general; an August 2010 Pew Research Center poll revealed that, among Americans, the favorability rating of Muslims had dropped by 11 points since 2005.

Erupting so many years after the September 11th trauma, this spasm of anti-Muslim bigotry might seem oddly timed and unexpectedly spontaneous. But think again: it's the fruit of an organized, long-term campaign by a tight confederation of right-wing activists and operatives who first focused on Islamophobia soon after the September 11th attacks, but only attained critical mass during the Obama era. It was then that embittered conservative forces, voted out of power in 2008, sought with remarkable success to leverage cultural resentment into political and partisan gain.

This network is obsessively fixated on the supposed spread of Muslim influence in America. Its apparatus spans continents, extending from Tea Party activists here to the European far right. It brings together in common cause right-wing ultra-Zionists, Christian evangelicals, and racist British soccer hooligans. It reflects an aggressively pro-Israel sensibility, with its key figures venerating the Jewish state as a Middle Eastern Fort Apache on the front lines of the Global War on Terror and urging the U.S. and various European powers to emulate its heavy-handed methods.

Little of recent American Islamophobia (with a strong emphasis on the "phobia") is sheer happenstance. Years before Tea Party shock troops massed for angry protests outside the proposed site of an Islamic community center in lower Manhattan, representatives of the Israel lobby and the Jewish-American establishment launched a campaign against pro-Palestinian campus activism that would prove a seedbed for everything to come. That campaign quickly — and perhaps predictably — morphed into a series of crusades against mosques and Islamic schools which, in turn, attracted an assortment of shady but exceptionally energetic militants into the network's ranks.

Besides providing the initial energy for the Islamophobic crusade, conservative elements from within the pro-Israel lobby bankrolled the network's apparatus, enabling it to influence the national debate. One philanthropist in particular has provided the beneficence to propel the campaign ahead. He is a little-known Los Angeles-area software security entrepreneur named Aubrey Chernick, who operates out of a security consulting firm blandly named the National Center for Crisis and Continuity Coordination. A former trustee of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which has served as a think tank for the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a frontline lobbying group for Israel, Chernick is said to be worth \$750 million.

Chernick's fortune is puny compared to that of the billionaire Koch Brothers, extraction industry titans who fund Tea Party-related groups like Americans for Prosperity, and it is dwarfed by the financial empire of Haim Saban, the Israeli-American media baron who is one of the largest private donors to the Democratic party and recently matched \$9 million raised for the Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces in a single night. However, by injecting his money into a small but influential constellation of groups and individuals with a narrow agenda, Chernick has had a considerable impact.

Through the Fairbrook Foundation, a private entity he and his wife Joyce control, Chernick has provided funding to groups ranging from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and CAMERA, a right-wing, pro-Israel,

media-watchdog outfit, to violent Israeli settlers living on Palestinian lands and figures like the pseudo-academic author Robert Spencer, who is largely responsible for popularizing conspiracy theories about the coming conquest of the West by Muslim fanatics seeking to establish a worldwide caliphate. Together, these groups spread hysteria about Muslims into Middle American communities where immigrants from the Middle East have recently settled, and they watched with glee as likely Republican presidential frontrunners from Mike Huckabee to Sarah Palin promoted their cause and parroted their tropes. Perhaps the only thing more surprising than the increasingly widespread appeal of Islamophobia is that, just a few years ago, the phenomenon was confined to a few college campuses and an inner city neighborhood, and that it seemed like a fleeting fad that would soon pass from the American political landscape.

## Birth of a Network

The Islamophobic crusade was launched in earnest at the peak of George W. Bush's prestige when the neoconservatives and their allies were riding high. In 2003, three years after the collapse of President Bill Clinton's attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue and in the immediate wake of the invasion of Iraq, a network of Jewish groups, ranging from ADL and the American Jewish Committee to AIPAC, gathered to address what they saw as a sudden rise in pro-Palestinian activism on college campuses nationwide. That meeting gave birth to the David Project, a campus advocacy group led by Charles Jacobs, who had co-founded CAMERA, one of the many outfits bankrolled by Chernick. With the help of public relations professionals, Jacobs conceived a plan to "take back the campus by influencing public opinion through lectures, the Internet, and coalitions," as a memo produced at the time by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company stated.

In 2004, after conferring with Martin Kramer, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the pro-Israel think tank where Chernick had served as a trustee, Jacobs produced a documentary film that he called "Columbia Unbecoming." It was filled with claims from Jewish students at Columbia University claiming they had endured intimidation and insults from Arab professors. The film portrayed that New York City school's Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures as a hothouse of anti-Semitism.

In their complaints, the students focused on one figure in particular: Joseph Massad, a Palestinian professor of Middle East studies. He was known for his passionate advocacy of the formation of a binational state between Israel and Palestine, as well as for his strident criticism of what he termed "the racist character of Israel." The film identified him as "one of the most dangerous intellectuals on campus," while he was featured as a crucial villain in *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, a book by the (Chernick-funded) neoconservative activist David Horowitz. As Massad was seeking tenure at the time, he was especially vulnerable to this sort of wholesale assault.

When the controversy over Massad's views intensified, Congressman Anthony Weiner, a liberal New York Democrat who once described himself as a representative of "the ZOA [Zionist Organization of America] wing of the Democratic Party," demanded that Columbia President Lee Bollinger, a renowned First Amendment scholar, fire the professor. Bollinger responded by issuing uncharacteristically defensive statements about the "limited" nature of academic freedom.

In the end, however, none of the charges stuck. Indeed, the testimonies in the David Project film were eventually either discredited or never corroborated. In 2009, Massad earned tenure after winning Columbia's prestigious Lionel Trilling Award for excellence in scholarship.

Having demonstrated its ability to intimidate faculty members and even powerful university administrators, however, Kramer claimed a moral victory in the name of his project, boasting to the press that "this is a turning point." While the David Project subsequently fostered chapters on campuses nationwide, its

director set out on a different path — initially, into the streets of Boston in 2004 to oppose the construction of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center.

For nearly 15 years, the Islamic Society of Boston had sought to build the center in the heart of Roxbury, the city's largest black neighborhood, to serve its sizable Muslim population. With endorsements from Mayor Thomas Menino and leading Massachusetts lawmakers, the mosque's construction seemed like a *fait accompli* — until, that is, the Rupert Murdoch-owned Boston Herald and his local Fox News affiliate snapped into action. Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby also chimed in with a series of reports claiming the center's plans were evidence of a Saudi Arabian plot to bolster the influence of radical Islam in the United States, and possibly even to train underground terror cells.

It was at this point that the David Project entered the fray, convening elements of the local pro-Israel community in the Boston area to seek strategies to torpedo the project. According to emails obtained by the Islamic Society's lawyers in a lawsuit against the David Project, the organizers settled on a campaign of years of nuisance lawsuits, along with accusations that the center had received foreign funding from "the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia or... the Moslem Brotherhood."

In response, a grassroots coalition of liberal Jews initiated inter-faith efforts aimed at ending a controversy that had essentially been manufactured out of thin air and was corroding relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities in the city. Jacobs would not, however, relent. "We are more concerned now than we have ever been about a Saudi influence of local mosques," he announced at a suburban Boston synagogue in 2007.

After paying out millions of dollars in legal bills and enduring countless smears, the Islamic Society of Boston completed the construction of its community center in 2008. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, nothing came of the David Project's dark warnings. As Boston-area National Public Radio reporter Philip Martin reflected in September 2010, "The horror stories that preceded [the center's] development seem shrill and histrionic in retrospect."

## The Network Expands

This second failed campaign was, in the end, more about movement building than success, no less national security. The local crusade established an effective blueprint for generating hysteria against the establishment of Islamic centers and mosques across the country, while galvanizing a cast of characters who would form an anti-Muslim network which would gain attention and success in the years to come.

In 2007, these figures coalesced into a proto-movement that launched a new crusade, this time targeting the Khalil Gibran International Academy, a secular Arabic-English elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. Calling their ad hoc pressure group, Stop the Madrassah — *madrassah* being simply the Arab word for "school" — the coalition's activists included an array of previously unknown zealots who made no attempt to disguise their extreme views when it came to Islam as a religion, as well as Muslims in America. Their stated goal was to challenge the school's establishment on the basis of its violation of the church-state separation in the U.S. Constitution. The true aim of the coalition, however, was transparent: to pressure the city's leadership to adopt an antagonistic posture towards the local Muslim community.

The activists zeroed in on the school's principal, Debbie Almontaser, a veteran educator of Yemeni descent, and baselessly branded her "a jihadist" as well as a 9/11 denier. They also accused her of — as Pamela Geller, a far-right blogger just then gaining prominence put it, "whitewash[ing] the genocide against the Jews." Daniel Pipes, a neoconservative academic previously active in the campaigns against Joseph Massad and the Boston Islamic center (and whose pro-Likud think tank, Middle East Forum, has received \$150,000 from Chernick) claimed the school should not go ahead because "Arabic-language instruction is

inevitably laden with Pan-Arabist and Islamist baggage.” As the campaign reached a fever pitch, Almontaser reported that members of the coalition were actually stalking her wherever she went.

Given what Columbia Journalism School professor and former New York Times reporter Samuel Freedman called “her clear, public record of interfaith activism and outreach,” including work with the New York Police Department and the Anti-Defamation League after the September 11th attacks, the assault on Almontaser seemed little short of bizarre — until her assailants discovered a photograph of a T-shirt produced by AWAAM, a local Arab feminist organization, that read “Intifada NYC.” As it turned out, AWAAM sometimes shared office space with a Yemeni-American association on which Almontaser served as a board member. Though the connection seemed like a stretch, it promoted the line of attack the Stop the Madrassah coalition had been seeking.

Having found a way to wedge the emotional issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict into a previously New York-centered campaign, the school’s opponents next gained a platform at the Murdoch-owned New York Post, where reporters Chuck Bennett and Jana Winter claimed her T-shirt was “apparently a call for a Gaza-style uprising in the Big Apple.” While Almontaser attempted to explain to the Post’s reporters that she rejected terrorism, the Anti-Defamation League chimed in on cue. ADL spokesman Oren Segal told the Post: “The T-shirt is a reflection of a movement that increasingly lauds violence against Israelis instead of rejecting it. That is disturbing.”

Before any Qassam rockets could be launched from Almontaser’s school, her former ally New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg caved to the growing pressure and threatened to shut down the school, prompting her to resign. A Jewish principal who spoke no Arabic replaced Almontaser, who later filed a lawsuit against the city for breaching her free speech rights. In 2010, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled that New York’s Department of Education had “succumbed to the very bias that the creation of the school was intended to dispel” by firing Almontaser and urged it pay her \$300,000 in damages. The commission also concluded that the Post had quoted her misleadingly.

Though it failed to stop the establishment of the Khalil Gibran Academy, the burgeoning anti-Muslim movement succeeded in forcing city leaders to bend to its will, and having learned just how to do that, then moved on in search of more high-profile targets. As the New York Times reported at the time, “The fight against the school... was only an early skirmish in a broader, national struggle.” “It’s a battle that has really just begun,” Pipes told the Times.

## From Scam to Publicity Coup

Pipes couldn’t have been more on the mark. In late 2009, the Islamophobes sprang into action again when the Cordoba Initiative, a non-profit Muslim group headed by Feisal Abdul Rauf, an exceedingly moderate Sufi Muslim imam who regularly traveled abroad representing the United States at the behest of the State Department, announced that it was going to build a community center in downtown New York City. With the help of investors, Rauf’s Cordoba Initiative purchased space two blocks from Ground Zero in Manhattan. The space was to contain a prayer area as part of a large community center that would be open to everyone in the neighborhood.

None of these facts mattered to Pamela Geller. Thanks to constant prodding at her blog, Atlas Shrugged, Geller made Cordoba’s construction plans a national issue, provoking fervent calls from conservatives to protect the “hallowed ground” of 9/11 from creeping Sharia. (That the “mosque” would have been out of sight of Ground Zero and that the neighborhood was, in fact, filled with everything from strip clubs to fast-food joints didn’t matter.) Geller’s activism against Cordoba House earned the 52-year-old full-time blogger the attention she apparently craved, including a long profile in the New York Times and frequent cable news spots, especially, of course, on Fox News.

Mainstream reporters tended to focus on Geller's bizarre stunts. She posted a video of herself splashing around in a string bikini on a Fort Lauderdale beach, for instance, while ranting about "left-tards" and "Nazi Hezbollah." Her call for boycotting Campbell's Soup because the company offered halal — approved under Islamic law (as kosher food is under Jewish law) — versions of its products got her much attention, as did her promotion of a screed claiming that President Barack Obama was the illegitimate lovechild of Malcolm X.

Geller had never earned a living as a journalist. She supported herself with millions of dollars in a divorce settlement and life insurance money from her ex-husband. He died in 2008, a year after being indicted for an alleged \$1.3 million scam he was accused of running out of a car dealership he co-owned with Geller. Independently wealthy and with time on her hands, Geller proved able indeed when it came to exploiting her strange media stardom to incite the already organized political network of Islamophobes to intensify their crusade.

She also benefited from close alliances with leading Islamophobes from Europe. Among Geller's allies was Andrew Gravers, a Danish activist who formed the group Stop the Islamicization of Europe, and gave it the unusually blunt motto: "Racism is the lowest form of human stupidity, but Islamophobia is the height of common sense." Gravers' group inspired Geller's own U.S.-based outfit, Stop the Islamicization of America, which she formed with her friend Robert Spencer, a pseudo-scholar whose bestselling books, including *The Truth About Muhammad, Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*, prompted former advisor to President Richard Nixon and Muslim activist Robert Crane to call him, "the principal leader... in the new academic field of Muslim bashing." (According to the website Politico, almost \$1 million in donations from Chernick has been steered to Spencer's Jihad Watch group through David Horowitz's Freedom Center.)

Perfect sources for Republican political figures in search of the next hot-button cause, their rhetoric found its way into the talking points of Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin as they propelled the crusade against Cordoba House into the national spotlight. Gingrich soon compared the community center to a Nazi sign next to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, while Palin called it "a stab in the heart" of "the Heartland." Meanwhile, Tea Party candidates like Republican Ilario Pantano, an Iraq war veteran who killed two unarmed Iraqi civilians, shooting them 60 times — he even stopped to reload — made their opposition to Cordoba House the centerpiece of midterm congressional campaigns conducted hundreds of miles from Ground Zero.

Geller's campaign against "the mosque at Ground Zero" gained an unexpected assist and a veneer of legitimacy from established Jewish leaders like Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham Foxman. "Survivors of the Holocaust are entitled to feelings that are irrational," he remarked to the New York Times. Comparing the bereaved family members of 9-11 victims to Holocaust survivors, Foxman insisted, "Their anguish entitles them to positions that others would categorize as irrational or bigoted."

Soon enough, David Harris, director of the (Chernick-funded) American Jewish Committee, was demanding that Cordoba's leaders be compelled to reveal their "true attitudes" about Palestinian militant groups before construction on the center was initiated. Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Los Angeles, another major Jewish group, insisted it would be "insensitive" for Cordoba to build near "a cemetery," though his organization had recently been granted permission from the municipality of Jerusalem to build a "museum of tolerance" to be called The Center for Human Dignity directly on top of the Mamilla Cemetery, a Muslim graveyard that contained thousands of gravesites dating back 1,200 years.

## Inspiration from Israel

It was evident from the involvement of figures like Gravers that the Islamophobic network in the United States represented a trans-Atlantic expansion of simmering resentment in Europe. There, the far-right was storming to victories in parliamentary elections across the continent in part by appealing to the simmering anti-Muslim

sentiments of voters in rural and working-class communities. The extent of the collaboration between European and American Islamophobes has only continued to grow with Geller, Spencer, and even Gingrich standing beside Europe's most prominent anti-Muslim figure, Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, at a rally against Cordoba House. In the meantime, Geller was issuing statements of support for the English Defense League, a band of unreconstructed neo-Nazis and former members of the whites-only British National Party who intimidate Muslims in the streets of cities like Birmingham and London.

In addition, the trans-Atlantic Islamophobic crusade has stretched into Israel, a country that has come to symbolize the network's fight against the Muslim menace. As Geller told the New York Times' Alan Feuer, Israel is "a very good guide because, like I said, in the war between the civilized man and the savage, you side with the civilized man."

EDL members regularly wave Israeli flags at their rallies, while Wilders claims to have formed his views about Muslims during the time he worked on an Israeli cooperative farm in the 1980s. He has, he says, visited the country more than 40 times since to meet with rightist political allies like Aryeh Eldad, a member of the Israeli Knesset and leader of the far right Hatikvah faction of the National Union Party. He has called for forcibly "transferring" the Palestinians living in Israel and the occupied West Bank to Jordan and Egypt. On December 5th, for example, Wilders traveled to Israel for a "friendly" meeting with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, then declared at a press conference that Israel should annex the West Bank and set up a Palestinian state in Jordan.

In the apocalyptic clash of civilizations the global anti-Muslim network has sought to incite, tiny armed Jewish settlements like Yitzar, located on the hills above the occupied Palestinian city of Nablus, represent front-line fortresses. Inside Yitzar's state-funded yeshiva, a rabbi named Yitzhak Shapira has instructed students in what rules must be applied when considering killing non-Jews. Shapira summarized his opinions in a widely publicized book, *Torat HaMelech*, or *The King's Torah*. Claiming that non-Jews are "uncompassionate by nature," Shapira cited rabbinical texts to declare that gentiles could be killed in order to "curb their evil inclinations." "There is justification," the rabbi proclaimed, "for killing babies if it is clear that they will grow up to harm us, and in such a situation they may be harmed deliberately, and not only during combat with adults."

In 2006, the rabbi was briefly held by Israeli police for urging his supporters to murder all Palestinians over the age of 13. Two years later, according to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, he signed a rabbinical letter in support of Israeli Jews who had brutally assaulted two Arab youths on the country's Holocaust Remembrance Day. That same year, Shapira was arrested as a suspect in helping orchestrate a rocket attack against a Palestinian village near Nablus.

Though he was not charged, his name came up again in connection with another act of terror when, in January 2010, the Israeli police raided his settlement seeking vandals who had set fire to a nearby mosque. One of Shapira's followers, an American immigrant, Jack Teitel, has confessed to murdering two innocent Palestinians and attempting to kill the liberal Israeli historian Ze'ev Sternhell with a mail bomb.

What does all this have to do with Islamophobic campaigns in the United States? A great deal, actually. Through New York-based tax-exempt non-profits like the Central Fund of Israel and Ateret Cohanim, for instance, the omnipresent Aubrey Chernick has sent tens of thousands of dollars to support the Yitzar settlement, as well as to the messianic settlers dedicated to "Judaizing" East Jerusalem. The settlement movement's leading online news magazine, *Arutz Sheva*, has featured Geller as a columnist. A friend of Geller's, Beth Gilinsky, a right-wing activist with a group called the Coalition to Honor Ground Zero and the founder of the Jewish Action Alliance (apparently run out of a Manhattan real estate office), organized a large rally in New York City in April 2010 to protest the Obama administration's call for a settlement freeze.

Among Chernick's major funding recipients is a supposedly "apolitical" group called Aish Hatorah that claims to educate Jews about their heritage. Based in New York and active in the fever swamps of northern West Bank settlements near Yitzar, Aish Hatorah shares an address and staff with a shadowy foreign non-profit called the Clarion Fund. During the 2008 U.S. election campaign, the Clarion Fund distributed 28 million DVDs of a propagandist film called *Obsession* as newspaper inserts to residents of swing states around the country. The film featured a who's who of anti-Muslim activists, including Walid Shoebat, a self-proclaimed "former PLO terrorist." Among Shoebat's more striking statements: "A secular dogma like Nazism is less dangerous than is Islamofascism today." At a Christian gathering in 2007, this "former Islamic terrorist" told the crowd that Islam was a "satanic cult" and that he had been born again as an evangelical Christian. In 2008, however, the *Jerusalem Post*, a right-leaning newspaper, exposed him as a fraud, whose claims to terrorism were fictional.

Islamophobic groups registered only a minimal impact during the 2008 election campaign. Two years later, however, after the Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives in midterm elections, the network appears to have reached critical mass. Of course, the deciding factor in the election was the economy, and in two years, Americans will likely vote their pocketbooks again. But that the construction of a single Islamic community center or the imaginary threat of Sharia law were issues at all reflected the influence of a small band of locally oriented activists, and suggested that when a certain presidential candidate who has already been demonized as a crypto-Muslim runs for reelection, the country's most vocal Islamophobes could once again find a national platform amid the frenzied atmosphere of the campaign.

By now, the Islamophobic crusade has gone beyond the right-wing pro-Israel activists, cyber-bigots, and ambitious hucksters who conceived it. It now belongs to leading Republican presidential candidates, top-rated cable news hosts, and crowds of Tea Party activists. As the fervor spreads, the crusaders are basking in the glory of what they accomplished. "I didn't choose this moment," Geller mused to the *New York Times*, "this moment chose me."

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printed by The American Muslims for Palestine, 2010

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