

J^{VP}-NAI

The JVP Network Against Islamophobia Newsletter

Issue No. 1. January 2014

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Welcome to the first issue of a newsletter about a new JVP project—the JVP Network Against Islamophobia or J^{VP}NAI (pronounced Jay-Nay).

We hope this project will provide support and resources for chapters and groups that are now—or are considering—organizing against Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. We will be developing online resources and facilitating the sharing of letters, press statements, and other materials developed by individual chapters and groups and their allies. We want to help build connections between JVP chapters (and other groups working on these issues), so that we can share effective strategies for challenging Islamophobia in our local communities and develop our thinking together.

The J^{VP}NAI newsletter will contain regular updates about work against Islamophobia that our groups and coalitions we are a part of are doing across the country. It will also include interviews on challenging Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism from individuals with a range of perspectives. We see everything included in the newsletter as directed toward activism and designed to make our work as meaningful and effective as possible.

Let us know if you have questions, comments, or suggestions. Your feedback will be invaluable as we plan for future newsletter issues.

-- Elly Bulkin, Stefanie Fox, and Donna Nevel, J-NAI Conveners

What JVP Chapters Have Been Doing to Challenge Islamophobia

A NOTE ON JVP AND PAMELA GELLER

Four of the five JVP chapters whose anti-Islamophobia work we describe below share a common experience: each was part of a coalition to protest the ads placed on buses or at train stations placed by anti-Muslim, pro-settler ideologue Pamela Geller. Geller co-founded two groups, Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA) and the American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), that the Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled as “hate groups.” The most common ad read: in large text, “Support Israel” and “Defeat Jihad”; and in smaller text, “In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man.” Numerous Muslim, interfaith, and social justice organizations have denounced the Geller’s ads. As Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of JVP, has said, “Pam Geller’s targeting of an entire religious community as a means of drumming up support for Israel, regardless of its actions in the occupied territories, is cynical in the extreme.”

THE BAY AREA

The Bay Area chapter has been represented on a student speech working group and a Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) legal defense initiative for solidarity activists. Those targeted by university officials and pro-Israel groups are often Arab and Muslim, including those in Students for Justice in Palestine and the Muslim Student Association. The chapter has also supported a successful campaign, led by Arab and Muslim groups, to encourage the city to take a more proactive stand against Islamophobia. The chapter has also been part of the coalition that formed in 2012 when the Geller ads were posted on San Francisco buses. Because the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) was trying to equate Geller’s ads with various end military aid to Israel ads—characterizing both as “hate speech”—the chapter made clear its advocacy for Palestinian rights and emphasized that JCRC did not represent “the Jewish community.” The chapter has also supported a successful campaign, led by Arab and Muslim groups, to encourage calling on the city to take a more proactive stand against Islamophobia, resulting in Geller ad proceeds being donated towards a study of the impact of Islamophobia on the Bay Area Muslim and Arab communities, and an official proclamation condemning the Geller ads.

LOS ANGELES

JVP-LA provided courtroom and other support for the Irvine 11, [Muslim students charged as criminals for interrupting a 2010 political speech on their campus by Michael Oren, Israeli Ambassador to the United States](#). JVP-LA organized an interfaith event last fall



JVP Director of Advocacy, Sydney Levy, leading a workshop on Islamophobia in LA with Taher Herzallah of American Muslims for Palestine.

on Islamophobia and, most recently, sponsored a program examining Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. For more on the work of the Los Angeles chapter, see the interview in this newsletter with Estee Chandler of JVP and Taher Herzallah, one of the Irvine 11, now working with American Muslims for Palestine (AMP).

NEW YORK CITY

JVP-NYC is one of three groups (with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and Jews Say No!) that formed the Jews Against Islamophobia Coalition (JAIC) in 2010 right after there was an attempt to stop the building of a mosque in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. As part of its work to challenge Jewish institutions and organizations that promote Islamophobia, JAIC organized demonstrations against the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance (NYC) to protest its leaders’ opposition to Park51 and the building of a “Museum of Tolerance” on the site of an ancient Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem. It has organized in coalition with CAIR, Muslim Consultative Network, Arab American Association of New York (AANY), DRUM, and many other groups to oppose the NYPD’s anti-Muslim surveillance program and the

Geller subway ads ("[In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad](#)"). JAIC has also responded to other forms of Islamophobia as they arise, and has organized community panels on Islamophobia (a three-part series with two featuring members of the Muslim community, as well as other impacted communities, and one being a roundtable on Jewish responses to Islamophobia). [It consistently puts out press and other public statements with its positions.](#)

WASHINGTON DC METRO

The DC Metro chapter co-led an anti-Geller ad coalition with the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) on anti-Islamophobia and anti-Arab discrimination issues. The coalition collected endorsements from 127 local DC area and international organizations, and sent letters to DC elected officials and the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority. Several rallies were held at DC and Maryland area Metro stations. The effort succeeded in gaining local mainstream and international media attention. Since then, the DC Metro chapter has continued to work with CAIR and ADC, including contributing to the publication of an [opinion piece on Islamophobia by CAIR in the Baltimore Sun](#). In addition, the chapter held meetings with Congressional representatives for the suburbs surrounding DC in Maryland and Virginia between August and December 2013, during which we raised issues related to Palestine-Israel, as well as our commitment to speaking out against Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiments.

WESTCHESTER COUNTY, NY

In August 2012 the Westchester chapter joined a broad coalition that organized a press conference and wrote a public statement in opposition to the posting of anti-Muslim ads at Metro-North's local commuter rail stations. As an outgrowth of this work, the chapter helped form the Westchester Coalition Against Islamophobia in the summer of 2013. WCAI is made up of people from a variety of faith traditions and community organizations. It held a June 2013 public program on "Islamophobia: from State-Sponsored Policies to Hate Speech and Physical Attacks" at which Alan Levine and Donna Nevel from the Jews Against Islamophobia Coalition in New York City spoke. WCAI has adopted the following mission statement: WCAI is a grassroots coalition of concerned citizens who, through education and community engagement, oppose bigotry and

discrimination against Islam and Muslims and defend the civil rights of all.

WCAI focuses on raising public awareness of Islamophobia and building public officials' readiness to respond to incidents of discrimination against Muslims and Islam. Its representatives have spoken at a meeting of a local Rotary Club, and it has co-sponsored a talk at a Roman Catholic church. A 2014 presentation is scheduled in a Methodist church, and WCAI is hoping to sponsor talks in two Presbyterian churches. A sympathetic Westchester town supervisor offered to help WCAI organize three different overtures to public officials: the county's Human Rights Commission, municipal officials who meet monthly, and his town's Policy Advisory Board. For the first session, which will be with the Human Rights Commission, WCAI will recruit Muslims who have experienced specific incidents of prejudice and discrimination to testify. WCAI's Muslim members, one a recent appointee to the Commission, will be key in finding individuals comfortable about speaking out.



JVPers and allies protest Islamophobic ads in Westchester County.

Let us know what your chapter or group is doing—or considering doing—to challenge Islamophobia. J-NAI@JVP.org.

INTERVIEW WITH ESTEE CHANDLER, JVP LOS ANGELES

What was your first experience like working against Islamophobia with JVP?

JVP-LA launched at the end of October 2010. The Irvine 11 demonstration had happened earlier in the

STORIES & STRATEGIES: TWO ORGANIZERS SPEAK OUT

year. [The Irvine 11 are Muslim students from UC Irvine who were charged as criminals for protesting at a speech on campus by Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren.] When I first heard about it, I thought, “That was really rude! Was that the most effective way to protest?” Then I looked at other instances where people had no voice in a particular conversation and I got a better understanding of the situation. I saw



JVP Los Angeles members and interfaith partners at a press conference

how the Muslim students were treated differently from Jewish and Christian activists. In the United States, rude is not a crime.

In February 2011, my name, photo and personal information appeared on a wanted poster (which was left at my home) claiming I was wanted for “treason and incitement against Jews.” Within a couple of days of that, national JVP asked our chapter to do an Irvine 11 action. Following that action, and after being in court for much of the trial to support the Irvine 11, I got a broad understanding of the issues surrounding the case. I was proud to be able to be out talking publicly about the case when the judge issued a gag order and the Irvine 11

couldn't speak publicly for themselves. My initiation into the world of Muslims and Islamophobia in America was the realization of how different their lives were from mine. “Protesting while Muslim” is like “driving while Black.”

My initiation to this work wasn't through responding to Pamela Geller, but through meeting the Irvine 11 and their families and lawyers—I was impressed that they were such exceptional young people. I had met Taher Herzallah [one of the Irvine 11] the day after JVP-LA launched. Today, three years later we are working together on an interfaith congressional outreach project, which is going really well. I've been invited to speak at events for AMP, and he's spoken at JVP-LA events. JVP-LA has also established relationships with the local CAIR (Council for America-Islamic Relations) and MPAC (Muslim Public Affairs Council), as well as other Muslim and Christian groups.

What has your more recent anti-Islamophobia work with JVP been about?

We have a tight interfaith community that is committed to opposing Islamophobia. We're able to respond quickly when needed. When Pamela Geller came out for an event for the ZOA (Zionist Organization of America) at the Jewish Federation building, we quickly put out a joint interfaith statement, and the event was actually canceled. JVP-LA and LA Jews for Peace were the two Jewish groups involved.

The Irvine 11 legal appeal process is in progress now. Sadly, I read an article in which some Jewish organizations were quoted saying that they believe the verdict should stand. [[The American Jewish Committee, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and National Jewish Fund submitted a friend-of-the-court, or amicus, brief to the Orange County Superior Court appeals panel.](#)]

We were part of an action in Los Angeles outside the Museum of Tolerance, which was sponsored in New York City by Jews Against Islamophobia, a coalition of Jewish Voice for Peace, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, and Jews Say No! In April 2011, when the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in New York City was honoring the Freedom Riders on the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides, we protested at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles at the same time as the New York City protest. [The Simon Wiesenthal Center had opposed the building of the Park51 Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan and was building a new

“Museum of Tolerance” on the site of a historic Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem, over strong opposition from relatives of those buried there and others. The April 2011 Los Angeles protest was sponsored by Jewish Voice for Peace- Los Angeles, CODEPINK, BDS-LA for Justice in Palestine, LA Jews for Peace, and the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California.]

Last November we did an interfaith presentation on Islamophobia. We did a lot of outreach in hopes of growing the movement. About 125 people came to the event. We wanted to bring people of faith and conscience together based on things they could agree on—civil rights and human rights. Rabbi Haim Beliak, who’s on the JVP Rabbinical Council, and Reverend James Lawson, who mentored Martin Luther King, Jr., were guest speakers, as was JVP-LA’s great friend Shakeel Syed, Executive Director of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California.

This summer, Sydney Levy, Director of Advocacy for JVP, and Taher Herzallah, Western Representative and Campus Organizer for AMP, did a program on Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Their presentation examined what Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are, are not, how they are similar and different, and how anti-Semitism is sometimes used to thwart Palestinian solidarity work.

Are there specific challenges you've experienced working with groups in the Jewish community?

I was never part of a Jewish community before I joined JVP. I was raised in a secular home by an Israeli father and an American mother. We didn't do religion; we didn't do politics. I feel like I'm an outsider whenever I go to a synagogue. My affiliated friends tell me that I should go to synagogues and speak to people, but I really feel like an outsider in those spaces. It is not that I am not interested in talking to them, but I believe that there are much better messengers to speak to those communities than me.

Aside from LA Jews for Peace, I haven't worked with any Jewish community groups here in LA. I honestly don't feel welcome in any Jewish community outside of JVP. Except for a meeting with Rabbi Lisa Edwards of Beth Chayim Chadashim, the local LGBT synagogue in LA, I've done little outreach to the organized Jewish community. The few conversations I have had with Jewish clergy I have met at events have left me feeling that they really do not want to talk about Israel or Palestine.

The ADL didn't respond to the wanted poster. Where was the Jewish community when I was threatened? Someone from JStreet here in LA did offer any needed help, and Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's Executive Director, issued a statement, which didn't mention me personally but did refer to JVP activists who had been threatened.

We are in contact with two local rabbis, Leonard Beerman and Haim Beliak, who are both on the JVP Rabbinical Council. JVP-LA launched at Workmen's Circle, and they have let us use their space when we've asked.

Have you or others made any attempts to enlist the Workmen's Circle's co-sponsorship of events or public support against Geller?

I have not. It is a good idea to see if they would sign on next time we need to do a statement about Geller.

What do you see as your role in challenging Islamophobia?

My role is to be a pebble in a pond. When people like me go to an Iftar [the evening meal that breaks the Ramadan fast] or to an event at a mosque or church and discuss these issues, it sparks people's curiosity, it gives them hope.

Do you have any suggestions for Jews organizing against Islamophobia who want to be stronger allies to the Muslim community?

I'd encourage groups to forge relationships with interfaith communities and work on projects jointly. Our Interfaith Congressional outreach project is forging relationships with eight or nine members of Congress. We are

meeting with our congressional representatives as part of a group of people that looks like America -- not just 2%. We're not just taking a "Jewish position" -- we are Jews, Muslims, Christians, agnostics and constituents all taking a moral position.

Rachel Roberts said something great when we were delivering the 3,000 signatures on the petition in support of the Irvine 11 activists. She said, "Imagine how different it would have been for Jews 100 years ago if other ethnic, religious and groups had spoken out!"

INTERVIEW WITH TAHER HERZALLAH, one of the Irvine 11 and currently the National Campus Coordinator of American Muslims for Palestine (AMP).

What was your first experience like working with JVP (as one of the Irvine 11)?

Estee came to support us during the Irvine 11 trial process. We had support from groups like CAIR, the National Lawyers Guild, and the Islamic Shura Council, but JVP added a Jewish voice. JVP started a website to bring people together to support us. It was really powerful, because it showed that there was a lot of support from various segments of the community nationwide.

What has your more recent work with JVP been about?

More recently we've been working with JVP as part of an interfaith delegation to congressional representatives. Mainly we've been talking about the inclusion of Israel in the Visa Waiver Program, but also we talk about U.S. aid to Israel.



Taher Herzallah, National Campus Coordinator for AMP

How do you see the relationship between Islamophobia and Israel politics?

They are significantly integrated. Pro-Israel groups actively promote Islamophobic rhetoric, funding, media and hysteria. They put out statements that are very Islamophobic. People who fund settlers also fund the Tea Party, who is very Islamophobic. American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) has put out a publication, [The Zionist-Islamophobe Network](#), which is on our website.

Are there specific challenges you've experienced working with Jewish groups?

We don't actively pursue work with the Jewish community as a matter of strategy, but we have phenomenal relationships. Our relationships with Jewish groups develop out of solidarity with programs and campaigns we are doing. Besides JVP, we've done a collaborative project on a national campaign with IJAN (International Jewish Anti-Zionists Network). [The 2001 Never Again for Anyone Tour, also co-sponsored with the Middle East Children's Alliance, included several speakers: Holocaust survivors Hajo Meyer and Hedy Epstein; Deir Yassin massacre survivor Dawud Assad; and Osama Abu-Irshaid, AMP board member.]

Do you have any suggestions for Jews who want to be stronger allies to the Muslim community?

It's hard for people to recognize privilege, including Jewish privilege, among people doing Palestine solidarity work. This affects the movement negatively—when some voices speak louder than others. We need to recognize

that work in the U.S. is secondary to work in Palestine. I'm a Palestinian, but I'm not living under occupation, but as a matter of circumstance, the occupation lives in me.

Islamophobia runs deep, sometimes unconsciously, in the movement. Sometimes people in the progressive movement use the rhetoric of the far right and may label something "Islamist" or "too radical." This came up a lot during discussions of the Arab Spring, with some activists holding the same notions about Islam as the right-wing. They had the same ideas about Muslim activists and Islam in politics and had misunderstandings of Sharia. For example, when a young Muslim man may have a different opinion from a young Jewish woman, the man may be automatically labeled as misogynist by the other side. As a result, certain voices get muted. A next phase of our work in the student movement is to deal with these attitudes.

Learning More about Islamophobia

[Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America](#), published in 2011 by the Center for American Progress (CAP), is a valuable resource for anti-Islamophobia activists and for those who are looking for an overview of the complex interrelations among the different parts of this network. It provides extensive information about donors to the Islamophobia network, grassroots organizations, the religious right, right-wing media, and political players. One caveat: Like many mainstream groups, CAP, which the right-wing has attacked at times for being "anti-Israel," avoids any discussion in this report of the relation between the anti-Muslim ideologies and militant pro-Israel politics.

[Follow the Money: From Islamophobia to Israel Right-or-Wrong](#), by Elly Bulkin & Donna Nevel (Alternet, October 12, 2012) translates two overlapping ideologies into dollar figures. Following the money trail of the seven largest funders of eight of the most prominent groups in this country's Islamophobia network (as identified in *Fear, Inc.*), the authors found financial links between these funders and U.S. (and, in some cases, Israeli) groups that have both an Islamophobic worldview and take an Israel right-or wrong position, including support for the Israeli government's expansionist settlement policy. The article makes clear that the nexus between hardline Israeli politics and Islamophobia is as strong as the "Islamophobia network in America." The funders and the individuals and groups that they back overlap in various ways—as board members, on speakers' bureaus, and as the leaders of Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian smear campaigns. This money-Islamophobia-Israel network matters, in part, because of its impact on—and strong relationship with—state policies and institutions. In addition to furthering a rabidly anti-Muslim climate, its members help bolster the state-sponsored Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian policies adopted and promoted by the U.S. government.

[Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and Its Impact on American Muslims](#) (2013) documents the effects of a New York City Police Department's secret post-9/11 program that has "mapped, monitored and analyzed American Muslim daily life throughout New York City, and even its surrounding states." Drawing on interviews with 57 American Muslim in New York City, *Mapping Muslims* illustrates how this program suppresses religion, stifles speech and association, sows suspicion, severs trust in law enforcement, and impedes "speech, religiosity and community dynamics on college campuses." (The overwhelming majority of those interviewed chose to be anonymous.) It also describes Muslim community responses to the NYPD program and makes recommendations for policymakers and community members and groups. The Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition (MACLC), Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility (CLEAR) and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) produced this report.

Want to learn more? An annotated J-NAI resource list on Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism will be posted soon.

For more information about the **JVP Network Against Islamophobia**,
contact J-NAI@jvp.org.