



**Testimony for the House Judiciary Committee
HB763 Commission on Hate Crime Response and Prevention – Membership – Alterations
March 26, 2024 FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS**

Senate Committee on Judicial Proceedings
2 East
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chairman William C. Smith:

I write as the Director of MEF Action, a project of the Middle East Forum, to testify in support with amendments of House Bill 763 – Commission on Hate Crimes Response and Prevention – Membership and Sunset. MEF supports this legislation with strong reservations and calls on the Senate Committee on Judicial Proceedings to amend the bill to include language prohibiting members of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) from serving on Maryland’s Commission on Hate Crimes Response and Prevention (“the Commission”).

MEF is an activist think tank committed to advancing American interests in the Middle East and countering extremist groups here at home. To this end, we partner with Muslim reformers and other communities to counter the influence of groups such as CAIR, which falsely claim to represent mainstream and moderate Muslim voices.

HB0763 was originally written “for the purpose of removing the representative of the Council on American–Islamic Relations Maryland Office from the Commission on Hate Crime Response and Prevention.” The bill called for CAIR to be replaced by “two representatives from the Muslim community.” This was a mistake, as Muslims deserve the same organizational support as other groups. Instead of addressing this oversight, the House Judiciary Committee voted to remove institutional representation for all protected classes that are guaranteed a seat on the Commission.

In doing so, the Maryland General Assembly is prepared to send a message that institutional representation is the problem with the Commission – not the conduct of CAIR and its Maryland office director. During a period of exponential growth in bias incidents and hate crimes, especially those impacting the Jewish American community, elected officials must be clear that acts of bigotry will be swiftly and unequivocally condemned.

Although HB0763 effectively removes CAIR-Maryland Director Zainab Chaudry from her

appointed position on the Commission, the Senate Committee on Judicial Proceedings should introduce an amendment that formally blocks CAIR from serving on the Commission.

First, Ms. Chaudry's past statements have undermined the Commission's mandate to safeguard protected classes from hate crimes and discrimination. The committee is likely aware that Chaudry compared Israel to Nazi Germany and denied Hamas atrocities, statements for which the CAIR-Maryland Director has refused to apologize. Yet, members of the Senate have probably not heard about a December [Facebook post](#), in which Chaudry cited the Hamas-controlled Gaza media office's claims that Israel was exhuming the bodies of dead Palestinians and harvesting their organs, a classic antisemitic smear. Likewise, the Senate may be unaware that Chaudry [celebrated](#) Houthi terrorist attacks on international shipping.

CAIR's problems are institutional and extend well beyond the conduct of Ms. Chaudry. In December, the White House publicly disavowed CAIR after its founder and senior-most leader Nihad Awad said he was "happy to see" the events of Oct. 7, when Palestinians broke out of the "concentration camp" of Gaza. During testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, CAIR officials summarily dismissed concerns over these remarks, arguing that Awad's statement was taken out of context. They pointed to an op-ed that Awad wrote in response to the fallout over his offensive speech, in which he speciously claimed that he wasn't celebrating the Hamas massacre, but was referring to the "average Palestinians who briefly walked out of Gaza and set foot on their ethnically cleansed land in a symbolic act of defiance..."

Of course, there were no documented acts of civil disobedience on Oct. 7. To accept this justification is to whitewash the brutal slaying of over 1,200 innocent Israelis, including American citizens. CAIR's attempts to excuse and justify Awad's hateful commentary before the House Judiciary Committee, based on this false reimagining of Oct. 7 as a non-violent act of protest, is a textbook example of the evasive and deceitful conduct that characterizes CAIR's public activities.

Most alarmingly, CAIR was listed as an unindicted co-conspirator in a landmark terror finance trial in 2007, which resulted in a 65-year prison sentence for Ghassan Elashi, a senior CAIR official from Texas. Hamas has since bartered with the lives of hostages kidnapped on Oct. 7 in exchange for Elashi's release. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates designated CAIR as a terrorist group in 2014 due to its ties to the global Muslim Brotherhood, a violent Islamist movement that includes Hamas.

State legislatures in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida have each passed resolutions condemning CAIR and urging local and state entities to suspend all contact with the nonprofit. Last month, U.S. Rep. Summer Lee withdrew from a CAIR event in Pennsylvania after facing a bipartisan backlash for associating with the Islamic group.

There are many appropriate options among Maryland's Muslim community to replace CAIR on the Commission. MEF recommends that legislators and the attorney general consider Zainab Al-Suwaij of the American Islamic Congress (AIC) as a potential representative of the Muslim community. AIC was founded to combat negative stereotypes targeting Muslim Americans,

focusing on hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims, and Ms. Al-Suwaij has served on a government commission dealing with hate crimes prevention.

MEF supports HB0763 but encourages amendments that retain the original language of the bill, maintaining institutional representation that includes the Muslim community, and permanently barring CAIR as a permanent member of the Commission. We hope you will consider these facts and take a principled stand against bigotry and extremism.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Baird
Director of MEF Action
Middle East Forum