



CIVIL RIGHTS AND MUSLIM ADVOCACY GROUPS CALL ON COLLEGE DEMOCRATS TO STAND WITH NOURHAN MESBAH AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIC ATTACKS

November 10, 2021

To the CDA National President, CDA National IDEA Director, and members and leaders of the CDA National Council:

The undersigned civil rights and Muslim advocacy groups write to express our serious concerns over the College Democrats of America’s (CDA) treatment of Vice President Nourhan Mesbah; the resolution by CDA’s National Council requiring her to apologize and undergo training from organizations with a history of antagonizing Muslims and people of color; and, for encouraging and tolerating an environment hostile toward Muslims within the organization.

On September 22, 2021, Nourhan Mesbah was elected Vice President of the CDA by a popular vote of CDA members. Nourhan is the first Muslim-American woman to hold a national executive position at CDA. Since declaring her candidacy on September 4, 2021, Nourhan, a first-year law student, has been the target of a campaign aimed at smearing her reputation and attempting to push her out of her leadership position within the CDA. An offensive tweet she

posted in 2016¹ when she was 13 as an immigrant from North Africa, and for which she has candidly apologized, has become the particular focus of this campaign. The threats, harassment, and smears directed at Nourhan unfortunately echo the experiences of other Muslim women in leadership positions across college campuses and at the national level.

Soon after Nourhan declared her candidacy, on September 13, 2021, Jewish on Campus, a group that has targeted activists for Palestinian rights with false antisemitism accusations and misinformation,² posted on Instagram, listing Nourhan's CDA position at the time and calling her out for "a history of tweeting antisemitic canards about Jewish power and control."³ On Sept. 17, 2021, StopAntisemitism.org, an organization that has doxxed and harassed advocates for Palestinian rights,⁴ tweeted a screenshot of Nourhan's childhood tweet alongside her image and called her an "antisemitic bigot."⁵ That same day, the CDA Jewish Caucus issued a statement accusing Nourhan of antisemitism and calling for her to drop out of the race and resign as CDA Director of Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA).⁶ Over half a dozen media articles repeated the antisemitism accusations based on Nourhan's childhood tweet and amplified the calls for her resignation.⁷

In response to the outcry over her childhood tweet, Nourhan issued a public apology.⁸ Nourhan stated that she "acknowledges the impact of [her] words and sincerely apologizes for the hurt caused." She committed herself to listening to the needs and concerns of all communities and promised to "foster a community in CDA committed to inclusion." Despite Nourhan's apology for the harm caused by the statement she made as a 13-year-old, the attacks against her continued and intensified.

Both before and since her apology, Nourhan has been the target of cyberbullying and online harassment, with strangers sending vulgar messages and threatening her physical safety. Some of these hateful messages threaten Nourhan with statements such as "ur done"⁹ and "you better grow eyes behind your hijab."¹⁰ Public posts also included racist and Islamophobic slurs, with one social media comment calling Nourhan a "jihadist."¹¹ She has been accused of maintaining antisemitic views on the basis of one childhood tweet and for interacting on social media at that

¹ During a 2016 presidential debate, Nourhan tweeted, "i blame this debate on the yahood," which translates to "I blame this debate on the Jews."

² See Ben Sales, *Did a pro-Palestinian campus group actually call for the 'defunding' of Hillel*, JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY (Aug. 4, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3bFgyZh>.

³ See Jewish on Campus (@jewishoncampus), INSTAGRAM (Sept. 13, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3k7EhWO>.

⁴ See, e.g., *Palestinian CUNY Law Student Viciously Harassed*, Palestine Legal (Aug. 20, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BNtWFA>.

⁵ See StopAntisemitism.org (@StopAntisemites), TWITTER (Sept. 17, 2021, 10:12 PM), <https://bit.ly/302WCNP>.

⁶ See College Democrats of America Jewish Caucus, *Antisemitism from the College Democrats of America IDEA Director and Vice Presidential Candidate Nourhan Mesbah*, MEDIUM (Sept. 17, 2021), <https://bit.ly/2ZRtUQ9>.

⁷ See, e.g., Aaron Bandler, *College Dems Jewish Caucus Call on VP Candidate to Resign, Accuse Her of Being "Prejudiced Against Jews"*, JEWISH JOURNAL (Sept. 18, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3EKyNZV>; Alex Nester, *College Democrats Leader Under Fire For Anti-Semitic Tweets*, THE WASHINGTON FREE BEACON (Sept. 29, 2021, 4:00 PM), <https://bit.ly/3mL1L5V>; Ammon Jakony, *College Democrats Leader Under Fire For Anti-Semitic Tweets*, SEAL GROUP USA (Sept. 29, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BJXAeL>.

⁸ See College Democrats of America, *Statement from Vice President Nourhan Mesbah*, FACEBOOK (Sept. 23, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3weUkqw>.

⁹ This message is on file with Palestine Legal.

¹⁰ This message is on file with Palestine Legal.

¹¹ This message is on file with Palestine Legal.

time with another person who made antisemitic comments,¹² without any further evidence that she has made or holds antisemitic views in the five intervening years.

Rather than responding to this Islamophobic campaign and standing firmly with Nourhan, the CDA has legitimized the attacks against her. CDA chapters and federations including at American University,¹³ George Washington University,¹⁴ Florida College Democrats,¹⁵ Texas College Democrats,¹⁶ and Ohio College Democrats¹⁷ released public statements calling on Nourhan to resign and demanding an investigation. Their statements claim Nourhan's apology was "sub-par," "substandard," and an "attempt to cover up the situation." Ohio's CDA chapter threatened to "file impeachment articles with the National Council" if Nourhan did not resign.

In response, the CDA's new Director of IDEA announced an investigation into the impact of recent events, citing extraordinary circumstances for making public what would normally be a confidential report, including potential recommendations for impeachment.¹⁸ The conduct of the investigation itself raises serious procedural concerns, not only that Nourhan has not been given an opportunity to participate or tell her side of the story, but also that it appears to be conducted without oversight or transparency. The National Council of the CDA voted to censure Nourhan, called on her to apologize again, and required that she go through an individualized training on antisemitism, specifically referencing the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), organizations with a history of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian actions.¹⁹

The ADL has a legacy of supporting racist policing and colonialism and of surveilling and silencing social justice activism.²⁰ The ADL has consistently worked to shut down Arab-American and Muslim community organizing and distance those communities from their elected representatives.²¹ The ADL has promoted blatantly false information about Islam, Muslims in the Middle East, and the aims of the Palestinian rights movement.²² Because of this problematic history and the harm the ADL causes to communities of color, social justice groups representing a diverse range of communities have called on progressive groups to stop collaborating with the ADL.²³

¹² See *College Democrats of America Jewish Caucus Decry Antisemitic Comments From National Org VP Candidate*, ALGEMEINER (Sept. 19, 2021, 6:08 PM), <https://bit.ly/3CNECoY>; Ethan Fine (@FineEthan), TWITTER (Sept. 22, 2021, 10:39 PM), <https://bit.ly/31y6Xlt>.

¹³ See Whitney Powers (@whitneypowow), TWITTER (Sept. 24, 2021, 2:23 PM), <https://bit.ly/3mKRUNh>.

¹⁴ See Whitney Powers (@whitneypowow), TWITTER (Sept. 25, 2021, 6:13 PM), <https://bit.ly/3bHz2bH>.

¹⁵ See Florida College Democrats (@collegedemsfl), INSTAGRAM (Oct. 3, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3mKcEEQ>.

¹⁶ See *Statement from the Texas College Democrats*, TEXAS COLLEGE DEMOCRATS (Sept. 29, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BLE7dl>.

¹⁷ See College Democrats of Ohio (@CollegeDemsOhio), TWITTER (Sept. 26, 2021, 12:50 PM), <https://bit.ly/3q5k4or>.

¹⁸ See Jeremy Ward (@JTCW_15), TWITTER (Sept. 28, 2021, 7:24 PM), <https://bit.ly/3BMLukU>.

¹⁹ This resolution is on file with Palestine Legal.

²⁰ See The ADL is not an ally., #DROPTHEADL, <https://bit.ly/3COHSjZ> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021).

²¹ See Emmaia Gelman, *The Anti-Defamation League Is Not What It Seems*, BOSTON REVIEW (May 23, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3q6iIto>.

²² See Elly Bulkin & Donna Nevel, *Follow the Money: From Islamophobia to Israel Right or Wrong*, ALTERNET (Oct. 3, 2012), <https://bit.ly/3nS9deA>. The head of the ADL recently admitted that the ADL helped fuel anti-Muslim racism in 2010 by opposing the construction of an Islamic center in Manhattan. See Jonathan A. Greenblatt, *ADL head: On NY Islamic center, we were wrong, plain and simple*, CNN, <https://bit.ly/3mLdBwR> (last updated Sept. 5, 2021).

²³ See *Open letter to progressives: The ADL is not an ally.*, #DROPTHEADL (Aug. 2020), <https://bit.ly/3q4Geak>.

The AJC also has a history of attacking social justice advocates,²⁴ including by supporting legislation that targets the constitutionally protected right to engage in political boycotts for Palestinian rights and pushing for a harmful definition of antisemitism that demonizes criticism of Israel.²⁵

Requiring Nourhan, a visibly Muslim woman, to attend a training by organizations with a history of undermining social justice movements and communities of color, including Muslim communities, raises doubts about the CDA's commitment to anti-racist principles.

The resolution and the investigation reflect the CDA's disregard for Nourhan's safety and well-being in the face of threats and smears against her identity and reputation over a statement made when she was a child. The CDA has taken no action to support Nourhan in response to the hateful messages she is receiving now on both her personal and CDA-affiliated social media accounts. The message that the CDA is sending to Muslims like Nourhan is clear: Muslim safety is secondary, and Muslims will be disproportionately punished for their mistakes, even those made during childhood.

The undersigned organizations are concerned about the campaign against Nourhan because our communities and the clients we serve have often been the targets of the same groups that are attacking Nourhan. The harassment campaign against Nourhan is not just about her childhood tweet, but is part of broader efforts aimed at blacklisting progressive Muslim and Arab leaders and targeting advocates for Palestinian rights across the country; it is rooted in Islamophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism. The tactics of this campaign often involve harassing people because of their political speech on Israel, trawling the internet for derogatory content about them, and attempting to ruin people's reputations and careers for inappropriate statements that they made as kids or that are taken out of context and misrepresented.²⁶ They also use "guilt by association" tactics to blacklist individuals. For example, a profile about one individual may contain information about the alleged actions or statements of another individual, even when there is little to no connection between them.

Targeted harassment websites, including StopAntisemitism.org, fuel these cyberbullying and doxxing campaigns against student leaders, organizers, and individuals who express support for Palestinian rights by using false or twisted accusations of antisemitism or support for terrorism.²⁷

²⁴ See American Jewish Committee (@AJCGlobal), TWITTER (Aug. 11, 2021, 12:50 PM), <https://bit.ly/3mKQHWa>.

²⁵ See Laura E. Adkins, *How to lie with statistics, antisemitism edition*, THE FORWARD (Oct. 27, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3CLVs7K> ("We as an organization certainly believe that anti-Zionist rhetoric and speech should be treated as antisemitic in every respect." [an AJC spokesperson] said.); BDS, AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, <https://bit.ly/303myZH> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021) ("We spearhead anti-BDS legislation at all levels of government and rally elected officials to reject the boycott movement.").

²⁶ In 2020, student leader Ahmad Daraldik was elected the first Palestinian-Muslim student senate president at Florida State University. Immediately after, Ahmad faced a cruel and bigoted harassment campaign attempting to shame him for sharing his experiences as a Palestinian. Anti-Palestinian groups, and an app with ties to the Israeli government, seized on social media posts he made as a child living in Palestine and more recent posts reacting to his experience under Israeli occupation. See *Pal Legal to Dep't of Ed.: Investigate Anti-Palestinian Racism at Florida State*, PALESTINE LEGAL (Apr. 13, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3nZ76pt>.

²⁷ See, e.g., *Palestinian CUNY Law Student Viciously Harassed*, PALESTINE LEGAL (Aug. 20, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BNtWFA>. Other websites involved in this campaign include Canary Mission and BDS Report. See *University Faculty Condemn Canary Mission Blacklist*, JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE, <https://bit.ly/3GPoKon> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021); Alex Kane, "It's Killing The Student Movement": Canary Mission's Blacklist of Pro-Palestine Activists Is Taking a Toll, THE INTERCEPT (Nov. 22, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3k7yGQc>; *About Us*, BDS Report, <https://bit.ly/3EGnPTC>.

Many of the individuals targeted by these websites are Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim.²⁸ Advocates for Palestinian rights are the most common targets, illustrating that the primary motivations of these sites are political: to shield Israel from criticism and to blacklist young, progressive, Arab, Muslim, and other leaders in order to stunt their careers. These websites specifically target individuals at their schools and workplaces, publicizing their accusations to university administrations, employers, and licensing bodies, and even law enforcement agencies.²⁹ The goal is to silence and intimidate individuals and make them vulnerable to additional attacks.³⁰ Activists have reported they have been expelled, fired, and punished as a result of harassment efforts.³¹

For example, Nerdeen Kiswani, a CUNY Law student and chair of Within Our Lifetime–United for Palestine, a Palestinian-led community organization that builds support for Palestinian freedom in New York City, is regularly targeted by cyberbullying groups who have used smear campaigns and false accusations of antisemitism to vilify her activism.³² In 2020, StopAntisemitism labeled Nerdeen their “Anti-Semite of the Year,” following a character assassination campaign falsely accusing her of threatening violence.³³ StopAntisemitism has offered incentives, including awarding Amazon gift cards, to participants who cast votes in its “Anti-Semite of the Year” contest. Dr. Fidaa Wishah was fired from her position at a children’s hospital amid a global pandemic after StopAntisemitism targeted her online for her political views and falsely accused her of antisemitism.³⁴ The site also smeared the reputations of IfNotNow co-founder Simone Zimmerman for her criticism of Israel and Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) for introducing a bill that would prohibit U.S. taxpayer funding to be used for the military detention of children by any country, including Israel.

Congresswomen Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) are prime examples of this larger effort to ostracize and harass Muslim women in politics. Both have been unfairly labeled antisemitic for their criticism of Israel.³⁵ This summer, three Republicans in the House of Representatives introduced a resolution baselessly accusing Rep. Tlaib, Rep. Omar, and others of “inciting anti-Semitic attacks across the United States.”³⁶ One representative characterized their references to Israel’s apartheid policies and Rep. Tlaib’s opposition to Israel’s violation of Palestinian rights as “[a]ttacks . . . against Jews” that “have led to antisemitism.”³⁷ These campaigns intended to drive Muslim women out of their leadership positions are fueled by misogyny, racism, and Islamophobia, and exploit genuine concern about antisemitism to target these individuals because of their political views.

²⁸ See, e.g., *Canary Mission: JVP Statement and Resource Guide*, JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE (Oct. 8, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3bFL2dF>.

²⁹ See AGAINST CANARY MISSION, <https://bit.ly/3D1KsTX> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021).

³⁰ See COMM. ON ACAD. FREEDOM, MIDDLE EAST STUDIES ASS’N OF N. AM., EXPOSING CANARY MISSION: A RESOURCE FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY LEADERS, <https://bit.ly/3k5RrUa> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021).

³¹ See *2020 Year-in-Review: The Movement Will Not Be Canceled*, PALESTINE LEGAL, <https://bit.ly/3o1FakH> (last visited Nov. 4, 2021).

³² See *Palestinian CUNY Law Student Viciously Harassed*, PALESTINE LEGAL (Aug. 20, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BNtWFA>.

³³ See *id.*

³⁴ See @StopAntisemites, TWITTER (June 23, 2021, 2:51 PM), <https://bit.ly/3wfEuw5>.

³⁵ See *I’m Not Anti-Jewish: Rep. Rashida Tlaib Answers Pointed Questions From Detroit Jewish News*, DEADLINE DETROIT (July 16, 2020, 4:45 PM), <https://bit.ly/3COiDhI>; Peter Beinart, *It’s Time to Name Anti-Palestinian Bigotry*, JEWISH CURRENTS (July 16, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3mLOADp>.

³⁶ Marc Rod, *Republicans will seek to censure the Squad in a new resolution*, JEWISH INSIDER (June 14, 2021), <https://bit.ly/2Ygn2La>.

³⁷ Marc Rod, *Deutch links colleagues’ anti-Israel rhetoric to recent antisemitic violence*, JEWISH INSIDER (June 4, 2021), <https://bit.ly/2ZSab2r>.

As an organization that claims to “respect differences of perspective and belief” and be “the party of inclusion” and that declares that diversity “is not our problem— it is our promise,” the CDA must extend those values to its Muslim members, including Nourhan.

We call on the CDA to recognize that the campaign to disproportionately punish Nourhan is fueled by anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice and to stand firmly behind Nourhan in the face of this Islamophobic harassment. In particular, we demand that the CDA National President, National IDEA Director, and leaders and members of National Council take the following actions:

1. Investigate and take corrective action to address anti-Muslim discrimination, including but not limited to the treatment of Nourhan Mesbah, engaged in or tolerated by CDA, its chapters, and members;
2. Reverse the requirement for Nourhan alone to undergo antisemitism training led by organizations with a problematic history and instead require all members and state leaders of the CDA National Council to undergo training on antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of bigotry by organizations that believe in equality and human dignity for all, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, or International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network;
3. Issue a public apology to Nourhan for failing to support her and stand firmly with her in the face of these attacks; and
4. Ensure that this statement is shared with all CDA chapters and members.

Signed,

Adalah Justice Project
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
American Muslims for Palestine (AMP)
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)
Florida Palestine Network
ICNA Council for Social Justice
Jewish Voice for Peace
National Students for Justice in Palestine
Palestine Legal
US Campaign for Palestinian Rights
Virginia Coalition for Human Rights
Young Muslims